



**September 2010**

## **Rural Economies Intelligence Report: The Big Society**

### **Background to evidence**

In the course of preparing CRC's previous Rural Economies Intelligence reports for Ministers, we received substantial evidence and commentary about the state of rural economies from organisations across civil society. These organisations have been an important voice providing information about the impacts of economic change on rural households and businesses. With the adoption of the Government's Big Society philosophy, we believe that it is important to understand the economic circumstances, the potential and concerns of rural civil society itself. Accordingly, this is the focus of this Rural Economies Intelligence report, and a complementary fuller report to be published on our web site this month.

This summary report is drawn from our Call for Evidence, issued in early August, in response to which we received over 50 submissions. These are listed and profiled at the end of this paper. Between them, the submissions demonstrate the diversity, strengths and challenges of civil society organisations working to support people, businesses and communities in **rural** England to become more sustainable, and release more of their potential contribution to wider economy and society.

When read together, the submissions demonstrate and often emphasise that the concepts behind *Building the Big Society* are being widely practiced across rural England. There is heartening evidence of activities, innovation and commitment. Many responders detail their desire, need and efforts to do more. But the submissions also illustrate the resource, relationship, and operational challenges that civil society faces, especially when seeking to support vulnerable and detached people in rural areas.

### **Messages from civic society bodies operating in rural areas**

- The first and overriding evidence demonstrated in these submissions is that the principles behind the Government's Big Society are already well embedded and practiced in many rural communities.
- Despite difficult challenges and economic circumstances facing many responding civil organisations, their submissions provide evidence of ambition, innovation and hope that the Big Society will provide a valuable policy vehicle to attract a new respect and support for initiatives and organisations working with local and vulnerable communities. Their frustrations often arise from their experience of greater need and desire to help

### **Impacts of cuts and economic conditions**

- For the majority of these organisations, cuts in income are real, current and in some cases have brought the organisations to the brink of closure. Reported funding cuts have originated directly from central government programmes, from local authorities and parish/ town councils, and from some charitable foundations and private providers. Others report that delivery contracts have been cut short; some refer to promised grants from principal local authorities that have not materialised, others again that fees and funds from members and the public have fallen because of the subdued consumer economy.
- For some charities/ social enterprises providing social or health services, decline in income has resulted from fewer referrals from social services and other public sector

bodies. Other bodies report that such referrals are increasing, because public sector providers can no longer fund all their demand. They report that such transferred referrals have not always been accompanied with the payments to match the costs of delivery.

- It is clear from responses that funding cuts have travelled down the supply line. As cuts are announced, or in-year budgets are clawed back, by central departments and principal authorities some of the funding cuts and clawbacks are being passed down directly down the line to community and other organisations. Deliverers report facing consequential fund recovery, grants being withheld and SLAs being curtailed. For smaller and grassroots organisations particularly making swift adjustments appears much more difficult than for larger organisations with diverse and secured income.
- Organisations operating across counties or regions, e.g. Rural Community Councils and Social Enterprise Networks, or those based in urban centres, e.g. Citizens Advice Bureaux report several instances of outreach services to rural areas being withdrawn whilst urban provision is protected. For example, provision of home debt and other advice to elderly less mobile rural residents, and employability and advice outreach programmes to neighbouring villages and rural communities within the same district are withdrawn or planned for closure, affected by lower income to meet higher travel time and costs for small numbers of dispersed clients. Respondents report concern that such withdrawal to centres of concentrated and larger demand will increase.

### **Importance of volunteers**

- Most of the respondent civil society bodies rely on a higher proportion of volunteers than part or full time paid staff. An overwhelming message from these organisations is that volunteers aren't free, and they ask that public sector bodies promoting the Big Society initiative grow to understand this fact. Indeed increasing requirements for training, supervision, regulation and volunteers' expectations mean that a structured and funded framework is needed to manage these volunteers.
- Many of the submissions report that the recession and current economic climate has resulted in higher demand for services, especially from vulnerable groups. It has also led in several instances to increased numbers of volunteers or would-be volunteers, some of whom are using it to improve their employability.

### **Future fears**

- The fear of future funding cuts is widespread both from infrastructural and representative groups and from those with time-limited delivery contracts. This includes the larger organisations and bodies who are part of a network that receive central and multi-year funding. Many are aware and express concerns that 2011 may result in fewer contracts, and less funds from government sector bodies. But the responses regularly express fears and forecasts that the most vulnerable locations and groups will feel the greatest impact of reduced resources

### **Relationships between civil society and public sector organisations**

- It is clear that several civil organisations enjoy and value the support of their local authorities and regional government. Others commented that coverage of the Big Society has encouraged a new interest from their local authorities. However, several more voiced the concern that some councils are seeing the Big Society as an opportunity/justification to set up their own social enterprises and organisations to deliver their services that would be otherwise be threatened.
- They ask that all public sector bodies approach their development of activity for the Big Society by seeking out and exploring how to work with their existing civil society organisations rather than presuming the need for setting up new organisations and infrastructure. Business associations and NGO also asked that public bodies avoid creating new, competing activity that undermines existing income streams, e.g. business training or marketing.

- The submissions provide evidence that new sources of resources are being sought, and new practices and partnerships are being explored or forged to seek efficiencies. Some of the larger organisations - geographically, functionally, financially - have planned or even put in place some response mechanisms to tightened economic circumstances.
- The Big Society is seen by many as providing a great opportunity to do more and engage more agencies in supporting community activity and engagement. Local authorities and Parish and Town Councils are seen as central to the Government's vision. Their submissions affirm that such local councils do see this as a great opportunity, look forward to playing a central role, but will need the resources to do so. They also express concerns that principal authorities will move more delivery down to them, especially some non-statutory functions that such authorities can no longer fund, but without allocating resources to local councils. Under such circumstances it is possible that they would have to raise precepts. For some this would run contrary to their instincts and current approach, as they have been reluctant to raise their precepts because of the impact of the recession and economic climate on household incomes.

### **Profile of respondents**

For this report we received submissions from most types of organisations in civil society and from some local council funders. Several responding organisations have no or only a handful of employees, operate for a single community, or have small and irregular income. We also received submissions from civil society groups and representative bodies at the other end of the spectrum, with nationwide operation, diverse functions from advisory to funding that draw income from a variety of public and private sources. Spatial coverage extends across rural and some urban communities in England, from Amble Development Trust on the Northumberland coast, to Enterprise South West Shropshire supporting the business community around Bishops Castle, to the Rural Community Council for Kent & Medway, to Cultivate a Real Ideas social enterprise working with young people in Cornwall...and places in between.

In scale also their breadth is diverse - from Trustees' managing Swinehead Village Hall in Bedfordshire; a Community Interest Company in Buckinghamshire with 2 people and around 10 volunteers providing therapeutic horsemanship courses for vulnerable and disadvantaged people; a Timebank for 14 villages in rural Cheshire with 2 staff, 9 trustees and 350 members at one end of the spectrum; to Rural Bureaux Network of Citizens Advice Bureau with over 200 CABx across England and Wales, the National Association of Local Councils, whose local councils have an annual expenditure around £500 million, to Remploy Employment Services, a NDPB and on one of UK's leading providers of specialist employment services for disabled people and those experiencing complex barriers to work with over 3,500 local and national employer partnerships, at the other end of the scale spectrum. Their activities contribute particularly to community social and economic action, but environmental activities were also represented from local renewable energy to national environmental management.

Responding organisations similarly display wide variety in the scale and balance of paid employment and volunteers, the sources and security of income and the degree of direct or infrastructural support. Some are contracted to deliver services to central government departments (from DWP, DoH, Legal Services Commission, Business Link, DCSF, PCTs and Defra for example). Others rely on grants from Lottery Funds, central to local government, and local charitable trusts; on fundraising from the public; on rental income from property including community assets; to membership fees.

### **Submissions were received with thanks from:**

- Advice Daventry (CAB in Northamptonshire)
- Afghan Action
- Ashfield Citizens Advice Bureau (Nottinghamshire)
- Amble Development Trust (Northumberland)
- Ash-worth Time Bank, (Cheshire)

- Blackpool Citizens Advice Bureau
- Churches Regional Commission for Yorkshire and the Humber
- Cirencester Housing for Young People (Gloucestershire)
- Citizens Advice North Norfolk
- Community Council for Berkshire
- Dorset Community Action
- Enterprise South West Shropshire, Bishops Castle, Shropshire
- Fenland Citizens Advice Bureau
- Forest of Dean Citizens Advice Bureau
- Herefordshire Council
- Horses Helping People ( Buckinghamshire)
- Lincolnshire Credit Union
- Milecastle Housing Ltd (Tynedale)
- National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs (NFYFC)
- Northumberland Credit Union Ltd
- Pub is the Hub
- Real Ideas Organisation (Plymouth)
- Remploy
- RISE (Southwest)
- Rural Action Yorkshire
- Rural Bureaux Network
- Social Enterprise Yorkshire and the Humber
- South East Rural Towns Partnership
- South Tynedale Railway Preservation Society,
- Swineshead Village Hall (Bedfordshire)
- Tablehurst Farm CSA, Forest Row (East Sussex)
- The Archway Foundation (Oxfordshire)
- The Church of England Archbishops Council (Mission and Public Affairs Division)
- The Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) and FWAG Gloucestershire
- The National Association of Local Councils, including submissions from: Beer Parish Council; Hurley Parish Council; Ivybridge Town Council; Petersfield Town Council; St Martin's Parish Council and Woolfardisworthy West Parish Council
- The Rural Community Council for Kent & Medway, Action with Communities in Rural Kent
- University of Gloucestershire, Department of Natural & Social Sciences
- Volunteer Cornwall
- West Lindsey Citizens Advice Bureau
- West Northumberland Citizens Advice Bureau
- West Sussex County Council
- Workers' Educational Association North East region, Take Part Northumberland Project
- Yorkshire Rural Support Network
- plus comments provided to our website