

# Preparing for the Big Society

## A survey of the third sector by CommunitySense

October 2010



**CommunitySense**  
communitysense

T: 020 7371 5718

E: [enquiries@communitysense.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@communitysense.co.uk)

W: [www.communitysense.co.uk](http://www.communitysense.co.uk)

# Introduction

## About this research

In August 2010 CommunitySense launched a research project to investigate how well prepared the third sector is to deliver the Big Society. The research identifies current barriers, key concerns and highlights what support is needed to facilitate the Big Society.

More than 40 executive and senior professionals from a range of third sector organisations participated in the survey. This short report provides an overview of initial findings together with comment and analysis from iQ.



iQ is the research and market intelligence division of regeneration consultancy CommunitySense. iQ provides in-depth assessment and analysis for regeneration professionals, drawing on primary research to improve understanding and encourage a course of action.

This report can be downloaded at [www.communitysense.co.uk](http://www.communitysense.co.uk)



020 7371 5718



enquiries@communitysense.co.uk



www.communitysense.co.uk

## Research findings at a glance...

1. Building social capital is recognised as a central theme of the Big Society. However, there are real concerns within the third sector that the Big Society will be a cost saving policy.
2. Limited financial resource is considered a key potential barrier to supporting the Big Society.
3. Thinking entrepreneurially will be essential if the third sector is to take full advantage of the multi-faceted scope of the Big Society agenda in an environment where traditional funding support is becoming increasingly scarce.
4. The third sector is more likely to advocate a strategic and advisory function within the Big Society rather than seek to adopt a service delivery role exclusively.
5. To enable organisations to target their available resources most effectively, further guidance on the priorities of the Big Society will be required.
6. Cuts to existing third sector support infrastructure has served to increase demand from organisations for a clear mechanism of support to be embedded in the Big Society agenda.
7. There is a definite appetite among organisations in the third sector for environmental sustainability to be positioned as a key component of the Big Society.

## The Big Society

The Big Society was a central theme in the Conservative Party's 2010 general election manifesto. The flagship policy focuses on the decentralisation of power from the state to society by a variety of initiatives designed to empower citizens to address local issues and ultimately strengthen their community.

In view of the Big Society agenda, the following "ideologies" present themselves:

### 1. Societal Empowerment

To put more power and responsibility into the hands of individuals, local communities and neighbourhoods in order to give people the opportunity to take more control over their lives.

### 2. Greater Citizen Participation

To encourage people to take an active role to take part in and improve their local communities

### 3. Decentralisation of Power

A significant paradigm shift of power from the state to society

### 4. Integration of the Third Sector

To generate and unite more community organisers, neighbourhood groups, volunteers, mutuals, co-operatives, charities, social enterprises and small businesses.

### 5. Greater Access to Government Data

To ensure all government data is openly published; to achieve fairness and honesty.

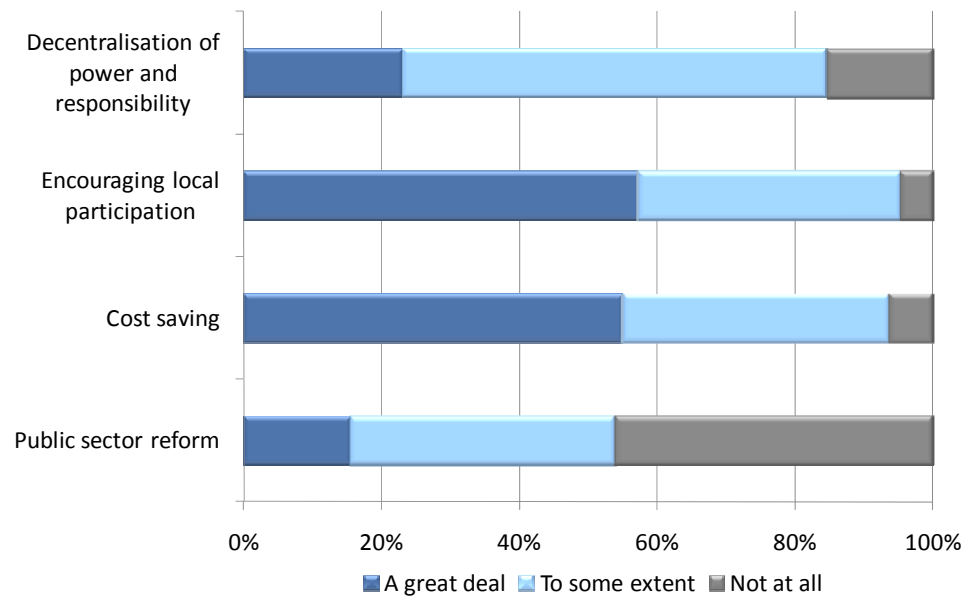


# Research Findings

## Interpretation: Meaning

**CommunitySense comment:** Building social capital is recognised as a central theme of the Big Society; a majority of third sector organisations believe the Big Society to mean giving individuals and communities real power to implement positive change in their area. However, 94% of respondents also interpret the Big Society to be a form of cost saving policy. Further guidance outlining the priorities for the Big Society could serve to address underlying concerns within the third sector regarding this issue of Government cost saving.

### What do you understand the Big Society to mean?



Source: CommunitySense

#### Context

The Big Society is intended to facilitate a shift of power away from politicians and towards local people. Unsurprisingly, the majority of respondents considered the Big Society to mean encouraging local participation, and almost three quarters recognise this agenda to include decentralisation of power and responsibility – a key Government aspiration for the Big Society.

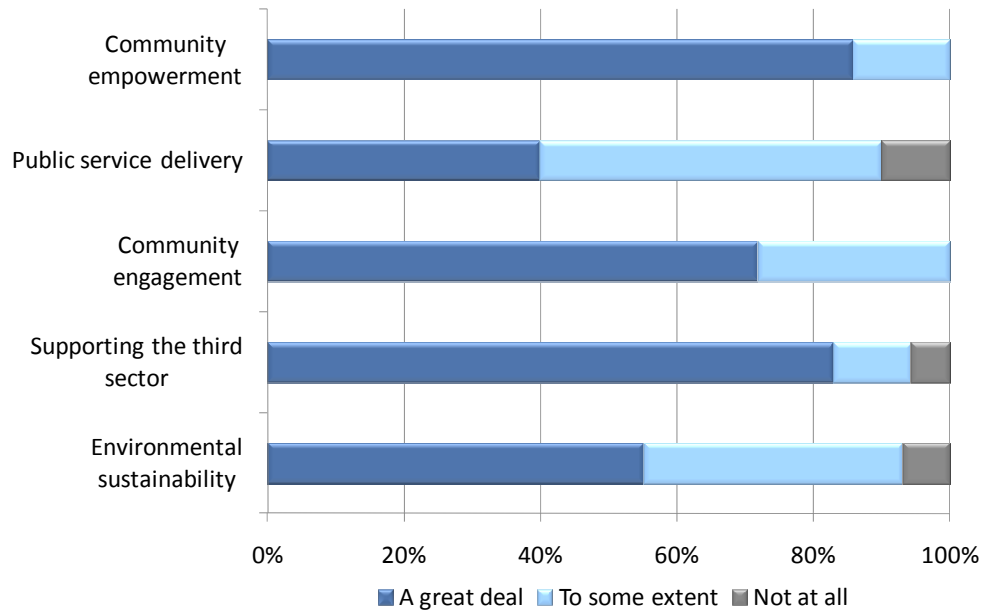
#### Cost saving

Of particular interest is the result showing that 94% of those sampled interpret the Big Society to be a form of cost saving policy. Several respondents identified concerns about reducing financial resources for the third sector and whether the Big Society would be completely detached from Government-led cost saving in local service delivery. This feedback may suggest that there is a need to clarify the priorities of the Big Society to address underlying concerns about cost saving and help broker the support of third sector.

## Interpretation: Key issues

**CommunitySense comment:** A focus on ‘community’ is widely perceived to be at the heart of the Big Society, particularly around community engagement and empowerment. A majority of third sector organisations would like clear mechanisms of support rooted in the Big Society agenda to allow them to respond to increasing demand for their services and growing financial pressures. Evidence suggests that there is an appetite among third sector organisations to support environmental sustainability as a key component of the Big Society.

### What key issues would you like the Big Society to address?



#### Community

There is strong support among respondents for the Big Society to focus on community, namely through empowerment and engagement activities. More than 86% of third sector organisations considered the issue of community empowerment to be central to the Big Society, and is viewed by many to be an essential pre-requisite if local people are to acquire more responsibility and control.

#### Third sector support

The Big Society is also seen as an important vehicle for supporting the third sector, with over 80% of respondents indicating that they would like clear mechanisms of support established as a key priority. Our research suggested that the perceived need for support for the third sector is particularly high owing to increasing financial constraints coupled with a desire among practitioners to be best positioned to respond to the demands of the Big Society agenda.

#### Sustainability

Over 93% of third sector organisations indicated that they regarded environmental sustainability to be a key issue that should be addressed through the Big Society.

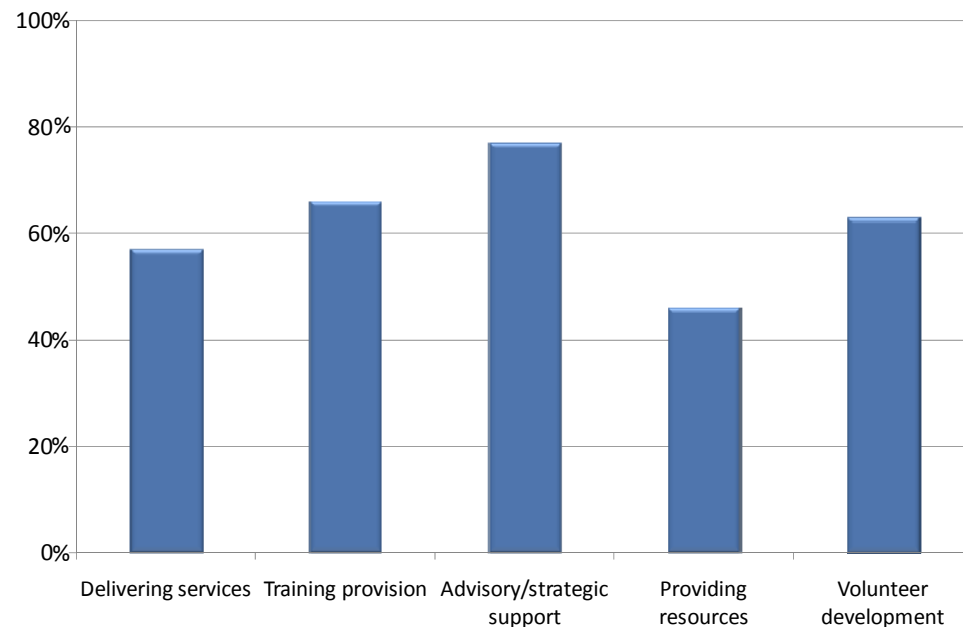
Embedding a clear environmental focus in the Big Society could provide an important means to encourage communities to adopt a local approach to delivering the sustainability agenda.

Source: CommunitySense

## Supporting the Big Society

**CommunitySense comment:** Results suggest a tendency for third sector organisations to advocate a strong strategic and advisory function within the Big Society. Whilst training provision and volunteer support are considered integral to the overarching community empowerment theme of the Big Society agenda, there is less appetite to adopt a service delivery role exclusively. This could be connected to a perceived need for further support, including financial support.

### How can your organisation support the Big Society?



Source: CommunitySense

#### Strategic support

Almost 80% of respondents indicated that they could facilitate an advisory/strategic support role. A number of respondents identified the importance of providing development support to communities to ensure that they have the capacity to understand and respond to the opportunities afforded through the Big Society.

The strategic presence of the third sector in supporting the Big Society is likely to form a valuable foundation for further guidance and development services targeting local communities, e.g. community scale commissioning support.

#### Targeted services

Examples of further targeted support services include training provision and volunteer development, identified by more than two thirds of respondents. Services such as this were broadly seen to be integral to the community empowerment theme of the Big Society, as well as equipping individuals with the skills needed to implement positive change in their area.

#### Resource provision

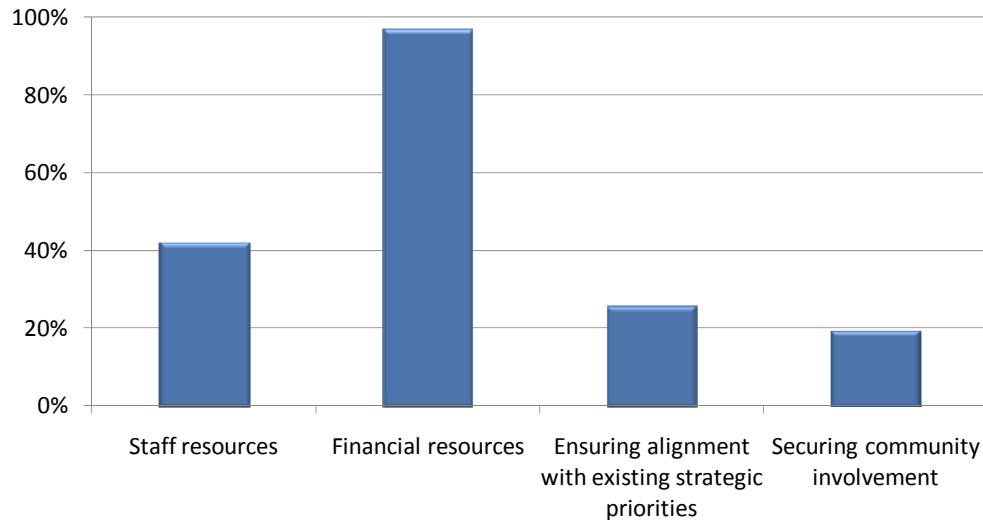
A little over 55% of those sampled would seek a delivery-focused role within the Big Society. The result supports wider feedback from third sector organisations suggesting a bias of input towards a strategic and advisory function, with many respondents indicating wanting further support, including financial support, to enable them to play an active part within the Big Society.

Within this context a number of organisations did not consider themselves to be best placed to provide resources to support Big Society activities within their area. A number of respondents did suggest however that they could facilitate the distribution of Big Society Bank resources among local community groups.

## Going Forward: Barriers

**CommunitySense comment:** Many third sector organisations view financial resources as a key potential barrier to supporting the Big Society. In the current environment, where significant cuts to public funding are scheduled, setting out a clear role for the third sector within the Big Society would allow organisations to manage available resource and think entrepreneurially in delivering services that offer greatest value for money.

### What are the potential barriers to your organisation supporting the Big Society?



Source: CommunitySense

#### Resources

Financial resources were seen as a significant potential barrier to supporting the Big Society by over 95% of respondents. A number of organisations highlighted the competing issues facing the third sector including reductions in funding and increasing demand for their services from communities affected by the economic downturn. This serves to set a challenging context within which third sector organisations will be required to utilise resources most efficiently in order to meet the support requirements of individuals from priority groups and ensure the Big Society is to be genuinely inclusive.

#### Infrastructure

A number of respondents highlighted concerns about cuts to existing third sector infrastructure organisations and what effect this may have on their ability to support the Big Society. Such cuts, coupled with wider financial restrictions affecting the third sector, have led some organisations to believe they may face staff resource issues which could serve to impede their support of the Big Society.

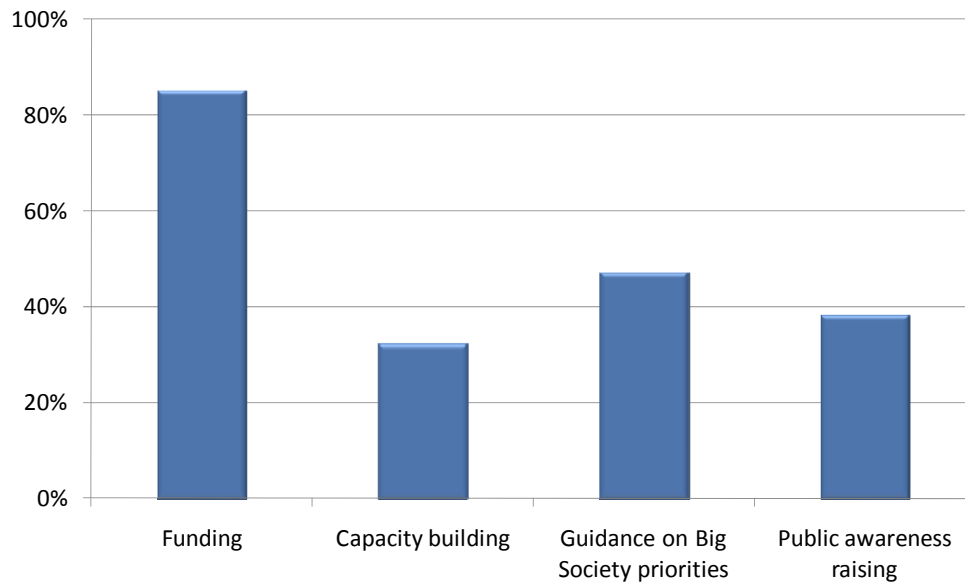
#### Community involvement

Only 18% of respondents considered securing community involvement to be a barrier overall, reflecting a high level of confidence and demonstrating how well engaged many third sector organisations are with their respective local communities.

## Going Forward: Support needs

**CommunitySense comment:** It will be essential for third sector organisations to position themselves to take full advantage of the multi-faceted scope of the Big Society agenda in an environment where traditional funding support is becoming increasingly scarce. For the third sector to target their available resource most effectively, further guidance on the Big Society priorities will be required and complemented with wider public awareness raising activity.

### What additional support would you need in order to deliver the Big Society objectives?



Source: CommunitySense

#### Funding

85% of third sector organisations surveyed would want additional funding to help deliver the Big Society objectives. Indeed, funding support featured prominently in the general feedback received requesting more support and guidance for the third sector to help deliver the Big Society.

It will be essential for third sector organisations to position themselves to take full advantage of the multi-faceted scope of the Big Society agenda in an environment where traditional funding support is becoming increasingly scarce.

#### Guidance and awareness

Just under half of respondents indicated a preference for further guidance on the Big Society priorities, re-enforcing feedback about the need for greater understanding of the type of role the third sector can adopt in supporting the Big Society.

In addition to the provision of further guidance surrounding the Big Society, around 40% of those sampled considered public awareness raising to be a key support mechanism. In particular, this related to a perceived need to increase the wider public's knowledge of the Big Society agenda, its priorities and how individuals can be supported to effect change in their area.

#### Capacity

Although a majority of third sector organisations consulted were not immediately concerned about their capacity, around a third of respondents did regard capacity building as a valuable area of support that could aid their delivery of the Big Society objectives. Wider concerns about the reduction in third sector support infrastructure could lead to capacity building becoming a higher priority for organisations in the future.





020 7371 5718



enquiries@communitysense.co.uk



www.communitysense.co.uk



London

Newcastle

Plymouth