

10th April 2012

The Big Society

Ward(s): All

Portfolios: Cllr Z Ali – Communities and Partnerships

1.0 Executive Summary:

- 1.1 This report discusses the Big Society agenda. It highlights in the first instance the Coalition Government's thoughts on a Big Society and then focuses on the three key themes of Community Empowerment, Opening up Public Services and Social Action. Drawing on local examples the report seeks to explore with members of the Community Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel their thoughts on the Big Society and, if appropriate, how it might be further developed, through existing (for example Area Partnerships) and potentially new initiatives.

2.0 Recommendations:

That:

- 2.1 **The Panel consider the report, comment on the Big Society in Walsall and provide their thoughts on progressing the agenda as appropriate in the borough.**

3.0 Reasons for scrutiny

- 3.1 This report is being brought to the Panel at the request of the Chair, Councillor Louise Harrison, to discuss with Scrutiny the Big Society agenda and the challenges/opportunities it presents. Scrutiny has previously considered the Big Society on 22nd February, 2011 and 7th April, 2011. This paper seeks to reconsider this area with a view towards exploring the potential for further development.

4.0 Background Information

Overview of the Big Society

- 4.1 The Big Society theme features prominently in the Coalition Government's legislative programme which is evidenced through, for example, the Localism Act (November, 2011) and Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act (as informed by Policing in the 21st Century: Reconnecting Police and People, chapter five of which focused on "Tackling Crime Together").
- 4.2 The Big Society agenda seeks to help people come together to improve their own lives. The agenda includes the transfer of power from Whitehall to communities.

There are three key parts to the Big Society agenda:-

1. Community empowerment

2. Opening up public services
3. Social action

Detail

- 4.3 Scrutiny has previously considered the Big Society agenda on 22nd February, 2011 and 7th April, 2011. This paper seeks to reconsider this area with a view towards exploring the potential for further development.
- 4.4 Those previous meetings established an understanding of what the Big Society is and considered a range of connected areas such as the Council's Working Smarter, programme, asset transfer and Area Partnerships.
- 4.5 This paper considers the three key parts referenced at paragraph 4.2 and seeks a wider discussion with Scrutiny on the opportunities and challenges presented by these themes. In the first instance a current example of where Walsall Council and potentially the Council's partners are delivering against a thematic area is provided, which is then followed by a question for consideration/debate by the Panel.

(a) Community Empowerment

- 4.6 The Government is seeking to achieve community empowerment through local councils and neighbourhoods having more power to take decisions and shape their area. A recent example of this can be found in Mossley where £1 million of funding (over approximately ten years) from the Big Lottery is being targeted towards this North Walsall Area Partnership locality, as part of the Lottery's Big Local initiative.
- 4.7 As one of one hundred and fifty areas around England, Mossley residents are being given the opportunity to make a large and lasting difference to their community. Big Local is about bringing together all the local talent, ambitions, skills and energy from individuals, groups and organisations who want to make their area an even better place to live.
- 4.8 Big Local is being run by Local Trust, which is working with the Big Lottery Fund and a range of partners, providing expert advice and support for residents. In Mossley Big Local has only just arrived and the Area Partnership Manager is working with local Members to "kick start" the initiative. This will involve seven key steps:-
 1. Getting people involved
 2. Exploring a Big Local Vision for the area
 3. Forming a Big Local Partnership
 4. Creating a Big Local Plan
 5. Delivering a Big Local Plan
 6. Collecting the evidence – assessing the impact of activities
 7. Reviewing the Big Local Plan and Partnership
- 4.9 Future reports on Big Local will be made available via the North Walsall Area Partnership.
- 4.10 The Mossley Big Local initiative is one example of community empowerment but there are others locally and nationally. One area of interest for the Scrutiny Panel might be Neighbourhood Plans which, through the Localism Act, 2011 enable local people via designated neighbourhood forums (and in other instances parish/town councils) to establish general planning policies for the development and use of land in a neighbourhood. These are described legally as 'neighbourhood development plans'.

4.11 ***Members' views on these and other community empowerment initiatives/opportunities are sought.***

(b) Opening up Public Services

4.12 The Coalition Government is seeking to open up public services by enabling, through public service reform, charities, social enterprises, private companies and employee-owned co-operatives to compete to offer people high-quality services. An example of this in Walsall is the future development of a Healthwatch service which, through the Health and Social Care Act, 2012 is required to be delivered through a social enterprise.

4.13 Local Healthwatch, launching in April 2013, will:

- represent the views of people who use services, carers and the public, on the Health and Wellbeing boards set up by local authorities
- provide a complaints advocacy service from 2013 to support people who make a complaint about services
- report concerns about the quality of health-care to Healthwatch England, which can then recommend that the Care Quality Commission take action

4.14 Having noted this example, there may be other existing or new services the Council and its partners consider viable for delivery through these alternative routes. ***Members' views on opening up public services through, for example, social enterprise-type models are sought.***

(c) Social Action

4.15 Social action seeks to encourage and enable people to play a more active part in society. Under social action the Government is encouraging and enabling people to play a more active part in society. For example, the Community First initiative is designed to encourage people to get involved in their communities. This is similar to the Big Local initiative described under community empowerment and demonstrates how interconnected these three themes of the Big Society are.

4.16 The Community First fund provides small grants to certain communities in the country, based on the degree of disadvantage. Community First is described as a drive to boost local social action within the Government's Big Society agenda. Panels have been established within Walsall for ten local areas which will look at projects within the area and then decide which ones to submit to the Community Development Foundation for approval. The key priorities of Community First are supporting local projects that improve the quality of life for local people, promote a sense of ownership, increase the number of neighbourhood groups whilst revitalising existing groups, and introduce a new approach to funding projects aimed at helping neighbourhoods to play a leading role in regenerating their area.

4.17 ***The Panel may feel there are many more examples of social action in Walsall or further opportunities, perhaps through Area Partnerships, to develop such activity. Members' views and thoughts are requested.***

4.18 It is proposed that Members' thoughts/feedback to the questions posed could usefully inform the further development of the Big Society in Walsall and in particular the development of Area Partnerships and associated Area Plans. Feedback will therefore be considered within this context and used as appropriate, within these arrangements

and within other strategic settings. For example, the further development/refresh of the borough's Sustainable Community Strategy.

5.0 Background papers:

- 5.1 Localism Act, 2011
- 5.2 Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act, 2011
- 5.3 Health and Social Care Act, 2012

6.0 Resource and legal considerations:

- 6.1 Action on the Big Society agenda potentially has significant resource and legal implications. These would need to be appraised against any potential future projects related to this activity.

7.0 Citizen impact:

- 7.1 The Big Society agenda is citizen-focused, seeking to create a climate that empowers local people and communities. Such an approach is based on local people solving local problems with much reduced intervention from the State. This is therefore a fundamental shift which impacts on the citizen.

8.0 Environmental impact:

- 8.1 How the environment is managed, sustained and improved fits with the Big Society agenda and over time it may be a number of environmental services are delivered through Big Society initiatives. For example, volunteer park wardens, environmentally-focused social enterprises, etc.

9.0 Performance management:

- 9.1 Like all initiatives, delivery against Big Society aspirations will require appropriate performance management arrangements to be in place. The way performance management takes place and who with will be dependent on the circumstances related to any proposed initiative.

10.0 Equality Implications:

- 10.1 There is no Equality Impact Needs Assessment associated with this report. Appraisal of any individual projects should take place as required.

11.0 Consultation:

- 11.1 The Community Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel's views on the Big Society are sought through this report. This will help inform any future consultation work that may be required.

Contact Officer:

John Leach
Head of Communities & Partnerships
01922 654022
leachj@walsall.gov.uk