Barnet's Big Society

a practical perspective from local government

Councillor Lynne Hillan

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LONDON BOROUGH

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ISBN 978-0-9569055-0-5

About Barnet

The Place

Barnet prides itself on being "a successful London suburb". Its attractiveness as a place to live has recently led to it becoming the most populous borough in London. A high birth rate and inward migration pattern will see the borough continue to grow over the coming decade.

Major redevelopments, notably the Brent Cross Cricklewood scheme in the south of the borough, and major regeneration to the west, will bring areas of high quality new housing to the borough. However, one third of the borough will remain as green space.

As with many suburbs, Barnet is very popular with residents and is a place where many people aspire to live. Eighty per cent of current residents say they are happy to live here. The borough has very high performing schools, good connectivity into central London, and this, along with green space, has meant that it is a popular area with families.

The People

The borough has very well established ethnic and religious communities. It is the second most religiously diverse in the UK and the 20th most ethnically diverse. Community cohesion is given great importance by the public sector, statistical evidence suggests successfully, with the borough scoring highly in surveys as a place where neighbours' values are respected.

Barnet also has a very altruistic community, heavily involved in doing things for others. Just over a quarter of Barnet residents volunteer once a month, compared to just a fifth of the wider London

population. There are over 800 active local voluntary and community organisations in the borough.

In many ways, Barnet is middle England. But it demonstrates what a diverse, tolerant and rapidly changing place middle England is.

The Challenge

Two years ago, Barnet Council recognised that the years of increasing financial investment in public services could not last. The council recognised that citizens' expectations were changing and what residents wanted from services was developing in ways the state did not fully understand. Financial investment alone was not making any substantial change to deep-rooted problems such as reducing household waste or changing the lives of those residents living with multiple deprivations.

The coalition Government's emphasis on the 'Big Society', localism and devolution provides councils with more opportunities than ever before to provide local leadership, and encourage citizens to share responsibilities as well as opportunities.

The One Barnet programme addresses these issues. It encompasses the need for a relentless drive for efficiency, a properly joined up public sector and a new relationship between citizen and state.

We will provide a more sophisticated customer-centred service, will provide information and services in a more convenient manner, and will offer residents more choice. In return, we expect residents to do what they can for themselves, their families and the community. The public sector will support residents to access our services but they will be responsible for making the most of what is offered.

The public sector in Barnet must spend every pound as efficiently as possible. This may mean providing services in different ways and certainly means the council and its partners need to reorganise internally. It also means recognising the value of our residents' time. To be truly efficient we must meet their needs as quickly and effectively as possible

We believe that democratic accountability is at the heart of serving residents successfully. The council, led by democratically elected members, has a key leadership role across the local public sector, and, as a consequence, will look to work with the public, voluntary and private sector partners to deliver more joined-up services, and to develop more efficient ways of supporting our work.

At the heart of the One Barnet programme is one clear aim – to become a truly citizen-centric council ensuring that our residents can

lead successful and independent lives. We want to build a council that effectively supports people when they most need our help, and gets out of their way when they don't.

The Author

Lynne Hillan has held several cabinet roles in Barnet Council. She was the Leader of the Council from December 2009 to May 2011 when she stepped down due to ill health.

Foreword by Mike Freer MP

Lynne Hillan and I worked closely on the development of the One Barnet programme which explored how future local government services will need to be transformed to meet the changing needs of residents.

This was underpinned by a commitment to openness and greater community involvement. This pamphlet shows just how Lynne put this commitment into practice during her time as leader of Barnet Council.

Introduction

Since David Cameron introduced the term 'Big Society', there has been a lot of debate about what it does – and doesn't – mean. This pamphlet focuses on the concept of the Big Society in its widest definition – the rebalancing of the relationship between citizen and state with more power and responsibility for outcomes devolved to citizens and communities.

Thus far, discussions about the Big Society have spent an unhealthy amount of time debating 'is it just a fig leaf for cuts?' Consequently, that debate is not covered in any detail here – our aim is to refocus the discussion on the sound reasons for developing a Big Society approach, above and beyond issues of public finance.

The argument this pamphlet puts forward is that a Big Society approach is both the right thing to do philosophically, and can deliver better outcomes for citizens and communities. In particular, this pamphlet looks at the role that councils could and should play in the Big Society, and at the practical ways that we in local government can develop and benefit from the Big Society.

The local context

In our increasingly globalised world, society can and does exist across multiple planes – globally, nationally, regionally and locally. Therefore, we should be careful not to imply at any point that there is any single entity that constitutes 'society'. This point is illustrated particularly well by a recent event in Barnet. Late last year a Pakistani national was killed in the borough. Within hours there were politically motivated riots on the streets of Karachi as a direct result. The individual was directly connected to society in Barnet as well as in Pakistan – amply demonstrating that there are societies straddling and transcending national boundaries. But the individuals within those societies also interact with society in

their locality – people have multiple identities and are part of many different societies. Thus, whilst some elements of the Big Society will take place within a national or even international context, it most obviously exists in a local context. This means that the practice of developing and nurturing the Big Society must take account of the local context to be successful. In thinking about how to develop the Big Society in Barnet, we have therefore been cognisant of the population we have.

Located north-west of the capital, touching Camden on its inner boundary and Hertfordshire to the north, Barnet is London's most populous borough with nearly 350,000 residents. Many of our residents are relatively affluent, well-educated and have professional jobs. However, in common with other London boroughs, there are areas of entrenched deprivation, mainly concentrated around the borough's western boundary. There are also many older residents at risk of isolation and in need of more support.

Barnet is also very diverse. Over a third of our residents were born outside the United Kingdom and Barnet is the second most religiously diverse borough in the country. There are strong connections within many of the religious and ethnic groups, and strong traditions of community support within many of those groups.

Given our demography, Barnet should be a place for the Big Society to flourish – and indeed there are already around 1,000 local voluntary and community organisations in the borough. Our residents are keen volunteers – around a fifth volunteer once a month, whilst 70% agree that people 'pull together' to improve their local area and a quarter said they had got together with other people to do something to improve their local area in the last year.[1]

The changing role of government

At its heart, a debate about the Big Society must be about the relationship between citizen, community, state and other institutions (whether voluntary, professional or other) – although the Big Society itself can and does exist beyond the state.

Our argument is that the state only exists to serve society, and therefore its only legitimacy comes from continuing to effectively serve that society. Those countries where the state has stepped outside that role find it much harder to justify their actions – as the ongoing wave of

1 Barnet Residents Perception Survey 2010/11 (to be published soon)

revolution and upheaval across parts of the Middle East shows. Those national Governments who don't have the foundation of democratic legitimacy have engineered a position of superiority over their citizens on the basis that they (the apparatus of government) are needed to tackle an allegedly overwhelming threat from an outside force (which usually takes the form of aggression from a foreign state or states, or global economic pressures). When those 'dangers' have reduced or where those Governments have shown themselves to be patently incapable of meeting their side of the bargain with their citizens, upheaval has resulted.

And sentiments of mistrust in government are not limited to the Middle East; they are present in the UK too. British reserve means that we do not take to the streets in order to overthrow Governments, but waning confidence in all levels of public administration is perceptible. Citizens in the UK have demonstrated their growing alienation from the state through declining trust ratings, low levels of voter turnout at elections and the resurgence of a variety of protest movements.

This amply demonstrates why the state needs to continually re-examine its relationship with citizens to assess whether it still has legitimacy. Even if government were not minded to do this before, the past couple of years have provided enough shocks to prompt it. The Parliamentary expenses scandal, in itself a significant factor, can also be interpreted as symbolising the extent to which the relationship between citizens and the state had deteriorated. The national fiscal position is another key factor. The deficit is of sufficient scale not only to disable any chance of the Government being able to buy its legitimacy but also to ensure that the only alternative to cutting what people really value is to ask some challenging questions about the way that public services and society interact and work together.

Over the last few years we have seen the size of the state increase significantly and step into an ever increasing number of areas of a citizen's life. The deal that government seemed to be offering was to say 'citizens, give us more money and we will solve all your problems'.

Partly this has been driven by ideology. The Labour administration believed that the centralised state was best placed to take decisions about how to do an enormous range of things – from determining who should be allowed to look after your children after school, to deciding how many houses should be built in your area, to the planned introduction of identity cards.

There was also a tacit collusion in this deal between a number of different institutions. Public sector professionals were increasingly drawn into the system. Hospital consultants and GPs were given huge pay rises. The workforce in schools increased substantially; increasing the number of people with a vested interest. In the north east, for instance, the public sector has become the dominant employer.

And arguably citizens also colluded in perpetuating this mirage. The expanding economy and increasing personal incomes meant people had less motivation to challenge the state's strategy. It also meant people had fewer qualms about paying the state to do a wider range of things than before. Indeed, the debt-funded expansion of the public sector was matched by a debt-fuelled consumer boom.

But, as the Government discovered, there was a flip side to this approach. As the Government tried to solve more problems it got drawn further and further into the detail. And the more it got drawn into the detail, the more it made itself accountable for that detail. It got to the point where the Prime Minister was expected to be able to answer questions about individual schools at Prime Minister's Questions.

When it turned out that politicians couldn't solve everything, the public, unsurprisingly, held it against them. This approach has tainted the whole relationship between government and the public. Satisfaction ratings have gone down significantly for local government, even as service delivery has improved. In 2008/09 – the last year for which there are national figures – satisfaction with local government was at 45%. In Barnet, satisfaction levels are at 51% (although when asked whether they think the council is doing a good job, 71% of residents agree).[2] Although about two thirds of citizens agree that they trust local government, there are very low trust ratings for national government, with only 36% of people saying they trusted Parliament in 2010 (up from 29% in the wake of the expenses scandal in 2009).

It's clear that the balance is wrong in the current relationship between citizen and state.

One example of this is the case of Ofsted trying to overturn an agreement made between two policewomen who were working mothers. They had a reciprocal childcare agreement because they worked different shifts. Ofsted stepped in and said that the arrangement needed to be regulated. Sensible people everywhere were appalled and even the Government recognised that the regulator had gone too far. For many, that was the high watermark of the previous approach to public services.

2 Barnet residents survey 2010/11

That relationship – where society ceded more responsibility and more money to the state – has another downside. The greater the role that the state plays in our lives, the more people will believe that there is no need for them to make any contribution to society at all.

This can be amply illustrated with another story from Barnet. The council's Cabinet made a decision to remove live-in wardens from sheltered housing, to move services in line with those provided across much of the country. At the time, the headline in our local paper was 'The neighbours '**forced**' to care' and covered a story about a group of residents expressing concern that this sort of decision might mean they had to periodically check if their elderly or vulnerable neighbours were well and safe – the sort of neighbourly behaviour that used to be commonplace.

In reviewing our services to older people in their homes, it became clear that one of the things that these residents most valued was regular personal contact – something that friends and neighbours are undoubtedly better placed to provide than the state. This sort of common decency was once wide spread and used to be completely normal – indeed it would be a poorer society that did not believe it should support its more vulnerable members through basic neighbourliness. But it is interesting to note that the media angle on the story was to immediately direct its criticism at a public institution for failing to step in, rather than raising any concerns that the community may have become too reliant on state support.

In many areas, the state essentially provides a safety net service – for instance ensuring that an elderly resident who falls over is able to contact an emergency operator to get some help. But society itself has to contribute more than that. Human interaction is fundamentally built on a model of give and take. We assume, broadly, that people give to society when they can – whether through taxes, acting as school governors, or organising into 'friends of parks' groups. In return society supports its more vulnerable members, or those who need some help at a particular time. It's not just about providing a safety net to ensure peoples' basic safety – it's about enabling people to continue to gain societal benefits, such as friendship and social contact, even when they are less able to contribute in return.

So the question of what the Big Society is has to be about more than just who delivers public services. It is fundamentally about the balance of power between society and state. If the state takes all the responsibility, it sucks in all the power too – as the Ofsted example above demonstrates.

Of course, even if we wanted to continue with the previous relationship, there is the big question of money. The level of savings local authorities – along with much of the rest of the public sector – are being asked to make means that we have to look at doing things differently. And we can't afford to spend lots of money to achieve that. Reaching for the cheque book cannot be the only answer. Indeed in the current financial position, we need a very good reason to consider it at all. Moreover, it would be irresponsible to suggest that this is merely a blip and that 'normal' funding levels will return in a few years.

Big Society and local government

It is clear that there are both practical and strategic reasons for taking a more 'Big Society' approach and local government has an important role to play in that.

This can usefully be demonstrated by the experience of a group of residents in Barnet. A couple moved into a new house. Wanting to get to know their new neighbours, they put on a barbeque for the street. It was very successful and those present decided they wanted to do the same thing on a larger scale. The ward councillor got involved because the process of applying for a road closure to enable the

Royal Wedding street party in Harman Drive

resulting street party to happen was quite complicated, but we made it work in the end.

Within a few months they had created much closer links as a local community and were attempting to get the younger residents together to help with older residents' gardens and heavy shopping. They had encountered difficulties when the older residents, wanting to contribute something, had offered to start some babysitting for those with young children but had been informed they would need insurance and CRB checks.

Those residents needed very little assistance from the council to create a more resilient local community, which could provide support to its more vulnerable members, and vulnerable families. They were seeking some practical help to streamline the process of closing the road. Then some information about what they needed to do to make the babysitting circle work. That's not expensive help to give – but it does mean thinking differently about how local government sees its role. It means enabling things to happen, rather than doing them.

The Big Society in practice

So, the big question for the Big Society is how do we inculcate this fresh vision of how councils and citizens should interact – how do we in the local government sector make the Big Society happen?

We believe that, to do this, there are three key areas for action:

- firstly, setting a clear strategic direction and ensuring that people understand it
- secondly, we need to put this strategy into action, ensuring that the concepts of the Big Society are built into new approaches to policy and service development
- thirdly, putting in place practical tools and support mechanisms.

1. Setting the strategic direction

Barnet took a decision some time ago that we needed a fundamental review of how to deliver services to our residents in the future. In 2008 we set up the 'Future Shape' programme to look at just that. There were seven main strands to the work – including looking at assessment processes, how we provided customer services, how successfully we

dealt with complex issues like chaotic families, and the best ways to bundle and deliver a range of other services – such as street-based services.

Following on from this, we identified three key drivers for looking at how we should do things differently.

- firstly, we anticipated the significant reduction in public sector funding
- secondly, we looked at some of the really challenging problems we were facing. For example, we have families living in multiple disadvantage where successive generations tend to experience the same apparently intractable problems
- thirdly, the decline in public satisfaction in local authorities – in Barnet, we saw public satisfaction in us as a council decline by eight percentage points over eight years. This was despite our improving performance against objective measures – such as the amount of litter on the streets, or outcomes in adult social services. Consequently, we concluded that our previous approaches to these sorts of problems were not bearing fruit. We recognised that we don't know all the answers and don't have all the solutions. And that we shouldn't bear all the responsibility. This was particularly highlighted by the work we did with families in multiple disadvantage on a housing estate. We found that one family had contacts from 31 different parts of the public sector over the course of a year, seeking information about the family. Only five of these contacts produced anything new. The rest were for the public sector's administrative convenience.

Moreover, those agencies working with the families – although each staffed with hard-working, dedicated people – were not collectively supporting those families to make real progress in their lives. This was not because they had not been trying hard enough, but because the interventions from the various parts of the public sector were focussed on achieving what **they** thought best – a range of distinct corporately determined goals particular to each agency – rather than responding to the aspirations of those families.

So, we have now adopted a strategic aim of developing a new relationship with citizens. This is a relationship where we are clearer about what the deal is – what we will do, and what we will expect citizens to do.

Future Shape has grown into our One Barnet programme, a plan for the whole of Barnet's public sector which aims to embed this new relationship in all that we do. It includes projects to improve the transparency of the council's decision making, deliver services in new ways and reshape services around the customer.

Supporting those aims, one of the key objectives of our corporate plan is 'sharing opportunities and sharing responsibilities'. Barnet is a successful place and we believe that everyone should be able to share in that success. However, we recognise that some people need more support than others. At the same time we do expect people to take the opportunities offered, and to 'put something back' in exchange for that support.

Many of our performance targets and improvement initiatives this year are aimed at achieving this objective. This means that the overall strategic aim – a new relationship with citizens – is embedded into our service delivery. As we improve our strategic planning processes, and establish a clear line of sight between the corporate plan and our officers' personal objectives this will continue to embed the Big Society as a way of working into everything we do.

2. Putting strategy into action

The second area for action is to implement this strategy through policies and service developments. There is little point in having a strategic objective if it's contradicted by your policies or the way you deliver services. Below are two practical examples of how we are changing services in Barnet in line with our One Barnet programme.

Example One: Housing list changes

We have recently reviewed our housing allocations policy to ensure that we are providing support for those who most need it.

Under the previous model, anyone could sign up for a place on our housing register – need was not a criteria for entry. People viewed it as a waiting list. Once on the list they felt they would slowly rise towards the top.

In time therefore it became a large list of some 17,000 people who in many cases simply wished to live in Barnet, rather than a list of local people in need. It included people who lived comfortably elsewhere, sometimes in social housing in other boroughs and even, in one memorable example, Cyprus.

Once on the list there was an illusion of control as each person was allocated a number of points based on their need. Many of the people who were eligible to bid each time we published a list of homes simply did not have the required points score to rise to the top of the list and in all likelihood would never reach the points total required to receive a property. This obviously made dissatisfaction with the system an inherent feature.

We were wasting their time and wasting our own money in keeping a large and expensive-to-maintain list.

Our new housing allocations policy will focus on the people in real need of assistance. It will therefore deal with far fewer people – around two or three thousand at any one time. As a result of our more targeted approach, we have also been able to free up resources to give those people who remain on the list far more help to actually find a suitable home. This policy of greater support at the coal-face is an integral part of the One Barnet programme.

So, in private sector parlance, under the new system an agent shows you a series of properties in your price range. You then select the one that most meets your needs. Previously you would have rather randomly submitted on-line applications with little reference to your price range.

Cannon's Court, Stonegrove

As part of this new model, we also propose giving residents greater priority in getting a home if they take part in some work of community benefit. This was a very popular idea – both with people on the list and current residents of social housing. They understood the deal: that we had a role in the provision of social housing; and they had a role in a successful society.

Two key things came through in our consultation and pilots which we have been able to act upon. Firstly, if people weren't going to get social housing they would rather we told them, instead of encouraging them to keep bidding for properties that they weren't going to get. They wanted us to be honest so they could be realistic.

Secondly, our perception of a property is often different from the people on our books. Two 'hard to let' properties come to mind. In one a student nurse chose a property that we had struggled to let because it was appropriately priced for her income - for her, price was the main criteria. Another property that we had struggled to fill was snapped up by a young mother because of the proximity to her own parents – for her the key criterion was the location of her wider support group. In the previous bidding system both of these properties would have been viewed by the council as 'problem properties' and therefore would probably have been used as last resort housing rather than offered as a choice.

Example Two: Family intervention and Community Coaches

Working effectively with troubled families is one of the most challenging areas for public services. One of the things we were very keen to do as part of our work in developing our One Barnet programme was to gain an understanding of where we were spending our money. We know that some families and individuals are much heavier users of public service resource than others. For instance, an issue such as unemployment does not just impact on the individual, but can also lead to a myriad of problems for the whole family, which ultimately leads to many costly interventions. The difficult question then is where and when can we most profitably invest public resources?

We know that if we can provide early support of the right type to those individuals and families there is much less cost later. The average cost of a child in care in Barnet, for instance, is £50,000 a year. So if we can intervene early enough to prevent the creation of the sort of circumstances that, in our experience, frequently leads to a

Community coaches

child needing to be put into care, we can save very substantial sums in years to come and, most importantly, improve the life chances of that child.

In the past, in many cases, a wide variety of solutions have been imposed on these families from the various silos of different public services. We have been working hard to deliver a more joined-up approach. For example, we are expanding our successful Family Intervention Project. This provides families in need of the greatest support with just one point of contact who can develop a relationship of trust with them, more effectively mediate between the family and the range of involved public services, and ensure that they get the services they need. This is funded by a community budget with contributions not just from the council, but also its partners – results so far show that the savings gained from this type of approach can be both rapid and dramatic.

We are also developing a new service called Community Coaches. The 'Community Coaches' service aims to provide a small amount of support to make sure the community can support itself, developing greater community resilience.

We recognised that we needed to take a new approach to developing the service. So we have been 'prototyping' this new approach – i.e. developing the ideas and modifying the design as

we move through the process. The intention behind prototyping is to continue to reshape the model until we have a design that we know will work (or conclude that the design won't work, and stop), and then we can roll out the service with confidence.

The project has been focused on developing training for individual volunteers to work as coaches, supporting others from their local community to identify their aspirations and life goals, and work out how these aims can be achieved. The coaches themselves also benefit - gaining new skills and benefiting from the experience of volunteering.

While we have not yet formally launched the service, the signs are promising. One of the most interesting findings so far is that, when asked what would motivate them to do this on a longer-term basis, the volunteer coaches did not say that they wanted to be paid; but rather suggested that they would like to gain a recognised qualification, so that they could also achieve more in their own lives.

There are two main practical lessons to be learnt from this experience. First, as you revisit policies and services, ask whether they are supporting the development of the Big Society – and if not, challenge them. Second, find new and innovative ways to develop policies, involving the community itself.

3. Developing practical tools and mechanisms

The third and final key area for action is in developing practical tools and support mechanisms for the Big Society.

The voluntary and community sector is widely recognised as a critical part of the Big Society. The on-the-ground expertise and the sheer variety of skill sets that a charitable organisation brings to the table, as illustrated in the case study below, need to be both cherished and harnessed, and the council has an important role to play in providing practical support to facilitate this.

Case Study: Community Action Networks (CANs)

Taking intelligence on anti-social behaviour and crime hotspots, Community Action Networks start with a meeting between statutory, voluntary and housing agencies, plus faith groups involved in the chosen area. This is led by the community groups and not by the council, police or other public sector agency. Having teamed up, they book a mobile facility like the Rolling Base or SWITCH (Barnet Community Project's mobile skate park). A weekly session such as a sporting activity or computer gaming session provides a catalyst for young people and adults to foster a relationship. Meanwhile, volunteers go door-to-door asking what people want, where they want it and if they are willing to help. A community event such as a barbeque or a football match draws in more people. Volunteers are recruited to form a Community Action Network (CAN) to meet and plan a programme for the area, set about raising funds and then delivering the programme.

To date there are three Barnet CANs, including one at Hale on the Meads, an area where there has been concerns about youth behaviour and BNP activity. A year after the initial barbeque, the community is continuing to play football on the green and has cleared the local park. The police report that call outs and levels of anti-social behaviour (ASB) in the area have fallen dramatically.

Barnet Council is funding a 'Big Society Innovation Bank' of £200,000 a year for the next three years to help voluntary and community groups to support the Big Society from the bottom up. We have also tried to develop practical tools which support residents in engaging with each other. Below are two examples of how this has been implemented.

Example One: Pledgebank

Firstly, we have been working with My Society, a not for profit organisation, to develop Barnet Pledgebank. In the past, My Society has been responsible for developing some well recognised web tools, such as 'Fix my Street', which connects people with the public sector in more transparent ways.

Pledgebank allows users to set up pledges and then encourages other people to sign up to them. A pledge is a statement of the form 'I will do something, if a certain number of people will help me do it'. The creator of the pledge then publicises their pledge and encourages

Barnet Pledgebank publicity

people to sign up, with a certain number of signatories needed within a given timeframe in order for the pledge to be implemented.

Pledgebank has been designed to assist residents in organising their own projects, from mobilising a group of neighbours to paint over graffiti, to setting up computer classes in their area, or helping to keep pavements in their street free from snow and ice. Other features include a facility to automatically generate and then print off flyers to publicise the pledge and encourage others to get involved. Since the entire concept is based on the simple principle that the person making the pledge will work to make it happen 'but only if' a number of other people commit to do so as well, it transfers power into the hands of the people.

It is still early days but we are beginning to see interesting examples of how the state could interact with citizens. Interestingly, people seem happier to respond to council pledges rather than those of their neighbours. For example, when the council made computers available in one of our libraries on the condition that residents would give IT lessons, the target for teachers was quickly met. There are now plans to set up a further bank of computers in another library. Perhaps residents like 'the deal' with the council that Pledgebank represents?

Perhaps residents also still see the council as service provider rather than enabler – there seems to be a tendency to think that the

council will do the promotional work for them – but this is slowly changing. It seems to work best when an event spurs residents into action. When snow fell last winter some residents offered to supervise grit bins if other residents committed to helping to spread the grit on pavements. We have also found Pledgebank to be a useful model for galvanizing communities to support street parties, with the council providing insurance if three people sign up to organise a party. This led to 54 street parties being held in Barnet for the Royal Wedding in April and ten parties celebrating the Big Lunch.

We believe that there is a real willingness among residents to get out there and organise all sorts of projects for the good of the community. Pledgebank allows for these good intentions to be turned into reality.

Example Two: Youth Services

We know that we cannot afford to carry on funding youth services in the way that we currently deliver them. So we have been asking ourselves what the best way is to ensure that the majority of young people in Barnet, who don't need intensive support from the council, will still get the services that enrich their lives.

The Big Society has to be the answer to this. We know that there are already people keen to do more, but it is not always easy for community-led groups to take on the sorts of activities we are talking about. Too often they find the state getting in their way.

We need to change the way we work to respond to this. For instance, the youth support service will be continuing and developing its work with partners to enable young people to access a range of activities and services, including sports and arts, community volunteering, training and work opportunities. Partners include young people themselves, parents/carers, and the voluntary and community sector.

Our Practitioners Events act as a hub for those already working with young people, whether volunteers or professionals, to come together to share ideas and resources, and stay updated with the latest training, and local or national developments. This helps us to continue to improve the quality of support which is offered to the Barnet youth population.

We plan to increase the range of our successful training events, bringing local expertise into easily accessible venues, ensuring that everyone who needs it can access training on health and safety, child protection and other areas where local gaps exist for play and youth provision.

Case Study: Grahame Park Youth Centre

This youth centre exemplifies the partnership approach which the new youth support services will be developing and growing.

The centre is home to a number of different youth support community organisations which use the building as the hub for their activities and provision of opportunities for young people. Catch 22, the national charity dedicated to working with young people who find themselves in difficult situations, has a local project on the Grahame Park estate, which is based in the youth centre. It shares the centre with Paiwand, a local refugee charity which runs a weekly youth meeting for isolated young refugees and asylum seekers, offering activities from football to film-making, weekend trips and discussion groups. Both these projects have made use of the skills of our youth support team to complement both weekly clubs and holiday activities. Catch 22, working with Barnet Homes and a council youth arts worker ran a creative arts project on the estate in the school holiday. Paiwand worked with our worker to facilitate a weekly film club which led to young refugees making a film which they submitted to the London-wide Cine Club competition. The centre also hosts the office base of our Youth Offending Service, and other youth club meetings on various nights of the week. Artsdepot, a local charity supported by the council has been working with young people at Grahame Park on Friday nights on creative arts activities.

We now want to build on and develop the centre's role as a hub where local community organisations can meet and deliver even more opportunities for local young people in the west of the borough.

Working in partnership with Barnet's vibrant voluntary youth sector, our new youth support service will build on the Practitioners' Events, ensuring we extend our support and advice for community groups. We will ensure that individuals and groups have the help they need to set up as charities or social enterprises that provide opportunities for young people.

As well as facilitating a networking 'hub', with training events and support for community organisations, we also want to ensure that the borough has a 'hub' for practical help, such as equipment and other resources. Whether a group needs to borrow table tennis equipment, or a marquee for the local festival, we will make sure that groups can get the help they need. The key lesson to be drawn from the case study below is that community groups may not need much by way

of financial support if they can continue to benefit from some of the expertise, skills sets and resources of the council. There a lot of things we can do that don't require substantial sums of money but have a big impact on the community.

Conclusion

This pamphlet has illustrated that there are many sound reasons, both philosophical and practical, for developing a Big Society approach for local government. The Big Society provides an opportunity for a vital rebalancing of the relationship between citizen and state, both in terms of expectations and finances.

There are a number of different ways to make the most of this opportunity.

The Barnet recipe is to:

- set a clear strategic direction and ensure everyone understands it
- ensure that each service you run considers whether there is a Big Society approach that can be taken. And challenge the services to look at new ways of facilitating improvements, so that people don't get stuck in the same old ways of thinking
- deliver practical tools and support mechanisms that the community can use. The key thing to remember is that there already is a Big Society out there. Our challenge is to redefine the relationship between state and society, and to connect citizens and services in a way that allows us to come through our current financial challenges, not with fewer services but with better services

Our experience in Barnet is that by setting a clear strategic intent, we are opening the way for innovation in our service provision to support the Big Society. We have also learnt that there are many practical steps that can be put in place to support the Big Society, and complement this strategic approach. Through our development of web-based initiatives like Pledgebank we are putting responsibilities back into the hands of citizens – and providing the tools to help them exercise those responsibilities. Also, the development of our youth services is bringing the community back to the heart of young people's lives.

In essence, the Big Society is about putting society back in the

driving seat. Everyone has a responsibility to do their bit to make it work, and local government is uniquely placed to act as a catalyst to make it happen.

Barnet's Big Society

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