

What the Lottery has got in mind for us all



LOTTERY FUNDED

The Big Lottery Fund has been progressively extending its influence over the pattern of local voluntary sector activity, using its funding clout to shift assumptions and reshape the way the sector operates. Here in this new paper, *'Building Capabilities: BIG's map of our future'* Adrian Barritt from Adur Voluntary Action casts a critical eye over these manoeuvrings.

Building capabilities: BIG's map of our future

BIG, the Big Lottery Fund, is using its considerable clout to influence future patterns of local voluntary action. This can be traced through several threads: *Big Society*, *Big Local*, *Big Assist* and *Building Capabilities for Impact and Legacy*.

The story however starts with a Cabinet Office consultation on proposed policy directions for the Big Lottery Fund, which consultation closed a year ago. The local voluntary sector was being softened up for its new brand image as deliverer of the "Big Society", and government wanted the Big Lottery on board. Then in December 2011 the Big Lottery issued a discussion document called *Building capabilities for impact and legacy*, which received the princely response of 172 online responses, 92 of which came from infrastructure bodies, 30 from so-called "frontline" groups and 40 from "others". The results of this government-friendly consultation have just been issued by the Big Lottery as evidence to support a new policy direction, *Building Capabilities for Impact and Legacy* (November 2012). This presents a framework with which anyone who wishes to secure *BIG* (and, one suspects, future coalition government) support – either as service provider or consultant/supporter – will need to comply.

Big Society is ably dealt with by Anne Power's recent report *The big society and concentrated neighbourhood problems*, (British Academy, 2012), though we shall see that it hovers behind us like the skeleton at the food bank. Power demonstrates that *Big Society* is inextricably bound up in the policy agendas for *Small State*, and points out the probable downside of this for many people. Whilst it is not the Lottery's fault that *Big* (like *local*) is rapidly becoming a code word that requires careful thought before use, notice the strange synchronicity in choice of the term "*Big*" for both *Big Society* and *Big Lottery Fund* (let alone *Big Local* and *Big Assist*). *Big Local* looks very like *BIG's* effort to harmonise its activities with the government's Localism Act. One interesting facet of the Localism agenda is the way in which it has studiously sought to develop its own delivery mechanisms and short-circuit established structures, such as local government and the local voluntary sector. Hence, we have the *Big Society Network*, the *Community Organisers*, and the *right to challenge*, all introduced concurrently with the financial casting adrift of shiploads of long-established national organisations active in this field, and the worst squeeze in memory on

local government and the local voluntary sector. But the key point about *Big Local* is that it is tightly controlled so as to deliver resourcing directly to local communities, by-passing local strategic partnerships (of course, they were cast adrift too), local authorities and local support and development organisations. *BIG* compiled a hit list of areas that had been failing to meet their own targets for receipt of funding applications, and decided directly to target those where need seemed greatest (through their agents *The Community Development Foundation*) and by setting up a *Local Trust*. Hence they have been approaching local authorities and local support organisations in these areas, and asking them to suggest localities of greatest need, and submit statistical or other evidence. The final selection is by *BIG* who then appoint consultants to begin work in the chosen locality. Their brief is direct engagement with local people and groups, and oversight of a new structure to manage delivery of some £1m of *Big Local* funds over a decade.

Who is able politically to turn away such a sum of money, whether in agreement with the delivery mechanism, or not? But in *Big Local's* dodging of existing structures, we can sense a worrying trend, a subliminal reflection of the ideology that local government has "failed"; a sidelining of locally accountable support and development organisations; a growing chasm between "frontline" *delivery organisations* and the rest – as if an army were merely its front line troops, and logistical back-up was unnecessary.

Big Assist represents direct intervention in the culture and socio-economic structure of the world of local voluntary action. *Big Assist* is again side-lining existing support and development organisations. The argument is in the public domain, and it follows the line that *BIG* is unable to fund support and development as it has tried to in the past (viz, *BASIS*, *Transforming Local Infrastructure*, etc) and will now focus its efforts of enabling local groups directly to purchase the support they require.

How are *BIG* proposing to create this new marketplace? *BIG* can use their muscle as funders of local voluntary action to exert stronger control over how groups that they fund obtain *support* – and where *BIG* tread, others are sure to follow (government of course are there already). Local support and development organisations *register* with *BIG* in order to obtain (sic) *consultancy support, training, peer to peer learning, sharing knowledge online, sponsored visits and mentoring, coaching, e-learning and events programmes including on-line events*. Only in this way, argue *BIG*, can local support and development groups become *more efficient, effective and sustainable and better able to adapt to the current and future operating environment*. How do support and development groups obtain this "support"? Unfortunately it's back to the truck shop, the school uniform ticket or food bank. We all receive *vouchers* from *Big Assist* which are to be used to purchase support from any supplier *registered and approved by Big Assist*. As one might have anticipated, a registered supplier can be a private business.

Groups receiving funding support from *BIG* will, by invitation or special selection, also receive vouchers or funds to be spent with *BIG* accredited suppliers. This will enable them to purchase support or development resources from the supplier of choice. Now, there is nothing inherently wrong in this, indeed it has been happening for years amongst organisations with the resources to purchase support. But as always, the rub lies in the questions being asked, the answers offered, the cultural backdrop and structural implications. In fact, in the alternative visions for a future for local voluntary action, that *BIG* (which after all is staffed by bright, committed people) is failing to grasp.

Big Assist is an attempt to strengthen local voluntary action by use of a market delivery framework. This framework, taken to its extreme, would compell all local voluntary groups to try to become *social enterprises*, buying and selling services between one another, competing for service delivery contracts from the shrinking public sector, competitively chasing local businesses for support, badgering the public with ever more invasive appeals, and certainly devoting growing amounts of time to *marketing and tendering*. *BIG* could have looked closely at this scenario, and made a stand against it. Instead they have chosen to perceive it as an inevitable map of the future. *Big Assist* ignores the potential for use of a co-operative model to develop local voluntary action, or the possibilities of a model within which local support and development organisations revert to their roots, as the democratic expression of the needs, and mutual aid capacities, of their members. *BIG* by default are choosing *not* to help local voluntary sectors to work together.

The final nails are hammered home into this coffin for the corpse of co-operative, independent local voluntary action (and locally-accountable CVSs) by *Building Capabilities for Impact and Legacy*. Capability? Whatever happened to “capacity”? Could it be that “capacity” is a measure of volume whilst “capability” comes close to “fit for purpose”? If so, then what about “*Big*”? But let’s draw the final nails and peer into the coffin.

Building Capabilities for Impact is described as an “approach” rather than a funding programme. It aims to establish a culture within which:

Frontline voluntary organisations will be encouraged to think about what kinds of support they need in order to develop their skills...when applying for funding, once they have received a grant from us, and in planning for the future after their grant finishes.

And within which:

Infrastructure organisations and other support providers will need to consider how they can make the services they provide attractive, responsive and high quality so that frontline voluntary organisations choose to spend the extra resources which they get through Building Capabilities on paying for these services.

On the face of it, there’s nothing exceptional in this. Groups will be encouraged to consider their support needs, and to try to get these met. But *BIG* seem to have given up on trying to identify or support specific categories of support and development organisations, such as RCCs and CVSs, even though many local authorities continue to recognise these. It will up to all organisations who wish to provide support to compete with any other “supplier” who registers and enters the *BIG* market place, including commercial concerns. In effect, this means that anyone who can convince *BIG* that they are able to offer one or more support services from a list will register.

The true ideology is revealingly exposed by the wording of the paragraph quoted above, which says “*so that frontline voluntary organisations choose to spend the extra resources which they get through Building Capabilities*”. *BIG* are acting as *de facto* brokers in trying to create a market, because what they mean is not that frontline organisations *choose* to spend extra resources. They will be *compelled to spend these according to BIG’s conditions*, the only choice being with which *Big*-accredited provider to spend them. Hence, what *BIG* could have written is that all organisations who wish to offer support services will be pressed (because of *BIG*’s size and clout) to compete in the marketplace that *BIG* is

creating. We can expect the conditions hedging such competition to be increasingly tightened by accreditation and similar mechanisms.

So what will this mean? BIG deny that they are trying to write a strategy for the whole voluntary sector, and one can accept this. However, the position they are taking feeds certain particular trends, and one needs to question their awareness of these. As competition tightens, this will mean growing numbers of mergers and takeovers, continued loss of local accountability, and the death of small or medium sized support and development organisations. The connection between CVSs and RCCs and their localities will be fractured, as they become progressively larger, and as Trustees no longer feel linked to places. The option of a co-operative, genuinely locally-owned model for mutual aid, self help, support and development will be lost, as increasingly large commercial and social enterprise corporations fight it out between themselves for *BIG's* development funding. Many of the large charitable foundations could well to be drawn into the same game, and the new "suppliers" will quickly position themselves to take local authority contracts to deliver development. Let us make no mistake, *deliver* is the word, because these future services will not be *owned* by local voluntary action communities

This paper has not taken the view that BIG are deliberately malevolent, but rather, that they are failing to think independently of government, the corporate world, and several long-dead economists. The losses to the local voluntary and community sector that will stem from this model of under-development may be vast, and particularly in the spheres of campaigning and community development. The landscape in ten years time could be very different, because virtually all significant cash flows within the voluntary sector will be part of an economy whose rules are controlled in increasing detail by the public sector, a few merged-up national charities, and *BIG*. The term "under-development" is used to describe this pattern, because it refers to those effects of international aid which are frequently exploitive of the recipient country. There is a strong case to be made that the effects of *BIG's* plans for local voluntary action, on top of the Coalition Government's, and fuelled by the position taken by NCVO and other nationals, are both destructive and exploitive. In a comparatively short time, the local voluntary action world that we know could be left something of a wasteland.

How might localities respond to these looming challenges, which can be crystallised as the human struggle of co-operation against competition. In areas where there are established CVSs and RCCs, the message is simple. They should use all means of communication at their disposal to raise awareness of the potential effects of *BIG* and government policy. Community forums and networks need to discuss the issue, and collectively decide whether, and how, to respond. One immediate response might be to strengthen local co-operative structures, so that local support and development organisations become more truly owned and controlled by their participants and users. The way is then opened up for local voluntary sectors to take steps towards agreeing roles and responsibilities: effectively, for morphing into locally sustainable mutual aid co-operatives.

This is an organisational version of the individual-based "time bank", an organisational model within which everyone both gives and receives. In many areas there is a long way to go, because the sector is small and there are few even medium sized organisations. Groups are small enough to have few needs or desires to grow, but too small to be able to offer support to anyone else. As funding for "infrastructure" becomes tighter, the support and development organisation gradually becomes its membership, supporting one another and

thinking through problems together, trading together – for sure, with BIG’s help if available. Considering the alternative, this looks a rewarding and worthwhile challenge. Probably one of the first actions would be to begin fund raising to launch a CVS.

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