



NAVCA members and the Big Society

Executive Summary

With the Government's plans for the Big Society beginning to take shape, we surveyed NAVCA members to gauge their understanding, expectations and reservations about the proposals. They are generally positive about the Big Society principles and exhibit a genuine interest in contributing in practical ways. However, the fairly high proportion of 'don't knows' may well reflect a lack of clarity in the proposals and our members' own uncertainty about the Government's intentions. What is clear is that NAVCA members see local support and development organisations as integral to the Big Society.

This report summarises the key issues which came out of the research.

Big Society and opportunities

NAVCA members expressed a mixture of enthusiasm and trepidation about the Big Society. While 78% believe that the Big Society presents opportunities, a number are concerned that it may divert resources from existing highly valued local activity in a desire to do something different.

There is a strong feeling amongst NAVCA members that the Big Society is simply a reaffirmation of the voluntary and community action that they have supported for decades, something that most considered to merit some recognition. Nevertheless, most consider it to be a real opportunity for people to take their future into their own hands and reinvigorate local communities.

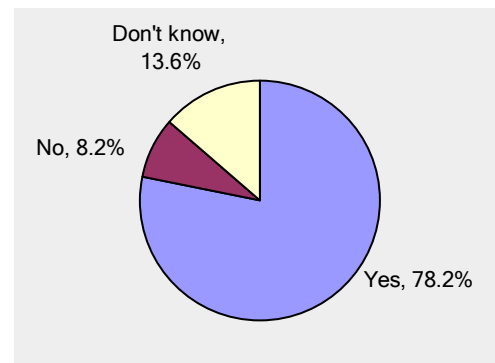


Figure 1 - Do you think the Big Society presents opportunities to promote and support voluntary and community action that will help communities through hard times?

Role of NAVCA members in reform of the planning system

A significant majority of NAVCA members see themselves playing a fundamental role in giving helping local people exert greater control over the planning system. Many are already experienced in supporting local neighbourhood groups and are well placed to offer the skills and insight that will empower people grasp the opportunity.

Indeed, this goes to the very heart of the work of NAVCA members and their history of supporting community development at this level is unrivalled.

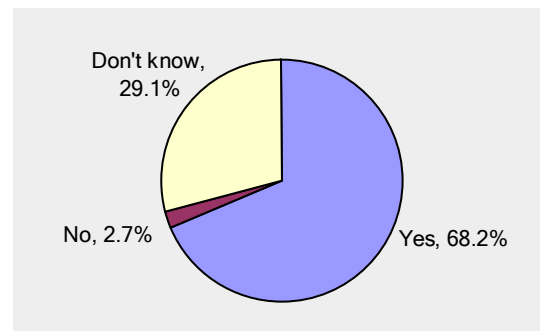


Figure 2 - Is there a role for NAVCA members in the reform of the planning system to give neighbourhoods more say?

Involvement in supporting the saving of threatened local facilities

The overwhelming majority of NAVCA members would like to have a direct role in supporting local charities and community groups to save threatened local facilities. Many point out that acting as an advocate for local communities is already a central element of their work.

A number of respondents make the point that not all local facilities should necessarily be saved from closure. As with other aspects of the Big Society, it is crucial that decisions about closure or preservation should draw upon the expertise and knowledge of the organisations closest to the frontline most able to identify the benefit of particular facilities to local communities.

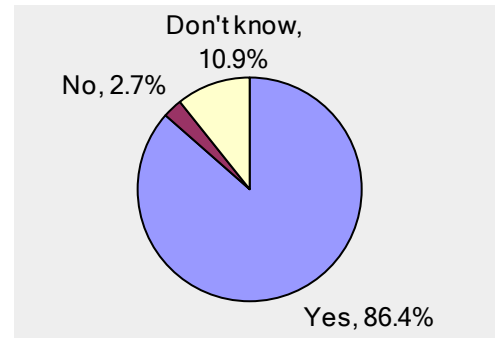


Figure 3 - Would you like to be directly involved in supporting local charities and community groups to save threatened local facilities?

Involvement in supporting communities' bids to take over local state-run services

Over two-thirds of NAVCA members would like to be involved in supporting local charities and community groups to help communities bid to take over local state-run services. While many are already engaged in this kind of activity, a number are concerned that local groups' capacity to take over public services will require considerable investment in time and money, particularly in the most disadvantaged communities.

There is also concern among members about the Government's motives and aspirations for this area of the Big Society. If the goal is to use this as a cost-cutting exercise then there is a danger of replacing paid professionals with uncoordinated, unregulated and untrained volunteers.

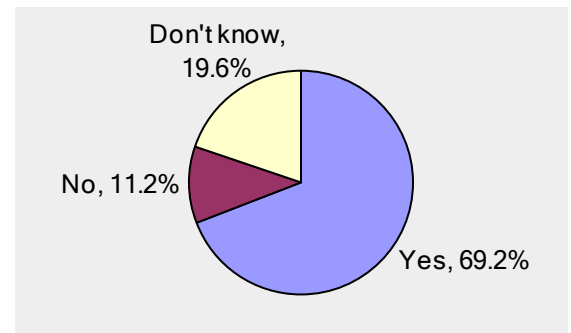


Figure 4 - Would you like to be directly involved in supporting local charities and community groups to help communities bid to take over local state-run services?

Training a generation of community organisers

NAVCA members have mixed feelings about the proposal for 5,000 new community organisers. There is a firmly held view that community involvement needs to be grown organically by communities and not externally imposed. The prevailing view is that the organisers should build

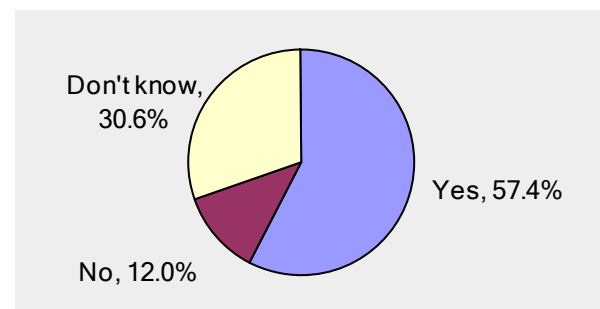


Figure 5 - Do you welcome the proposal to train a generation of community organisers?



upon existing arrangements in order to avoid unnecessary competition for the limited resources available.

A clearer definition from the Government of the community organisers' remit would help NAVCA members identify how they can help to integrate them into existing local community development activity. The high number of 'don't knows' reflects the lack of clarity about how the community organisers fit with existing activity.

There is a strong belief amongst members that the community organisers should be recruited and organised through existing local development organisations and deployed through existing frontline groups. This is another sign that members believe the Big Society should build upon existing knowledge and expertise within voluntary and community organisations.

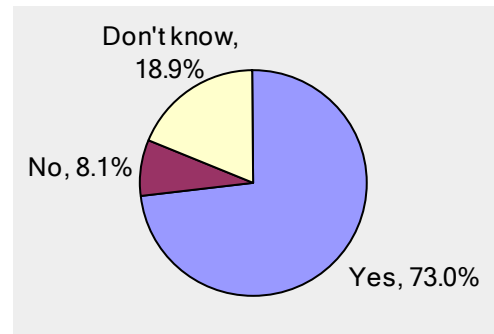


Figure 6 - Would you like to be directly involved in recruiting, training and supporting these new community organisers?

National Citizens' Service and NAVCA members

There is some concern about how this proposal would be delivered and its relationship with other activity.

There is also considerable concern that the National Citizens' Service does not represent true volunteering and that the Government may try to make it compulsory. It was widely felt that such a move would be detrimental to the scheme.

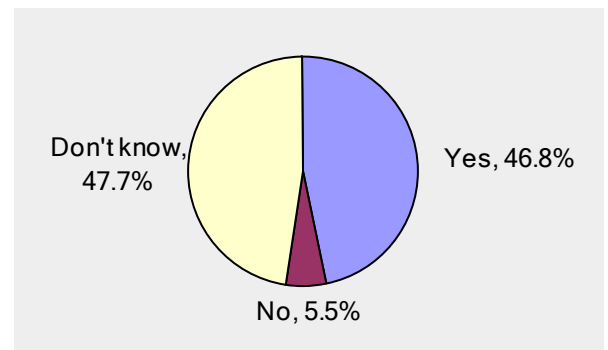


Figure 7 - Should NAVCA members play a part in implementing the new National Citizens' Service?

With the respondents almost equally divided on the topic, there is a strong desire to see the specifics of the proposal and details of the funding to support the activity. The large number of "don't know" responses reflects the uncertainty that still surrounds the National Citizens' Service.

Since the survey was undertaken, the Government has invited organisations to express interest in running the National Citizens' Service.



Development support for creating mutuals, cooperatives, charities and social enterprises

The majority of NAVCA members say that they are currently in a position to provide development support to people who wish to create and expand mutuals, cooperatives, charities and social enterprises. Some do this as part of their day-to-day work, but there is concern that as funding cuts begin to bite this activity will suffer.

For those not already engaged in this activity, there is a feeling that it may become yet another demand on already stretched resources.

Localism

While there is an awareness and understanding of the Government's localism agenda, there is also some scepticism. The overriding sense is that its success will depend on how it is implemented; there is considerable concern about how the aspirations of localism will be achievable when many local organisations are facing cuts to funding.

Most NAVCA members see the localism agenda as fundamental to the Big Society. However, they are also clear that the only approach that will truly engage local communities and offer the promised benefits is one that responds to communities' needs from the bottom-up.

Helping people and communities exercise greater control over the factors affecting the quality of local life

An overwhelming majority of NAVCA members see a key role for themselves in helping communities exercise greater control over the factors that affect the quality of local life. Indeed, the predominant view is that this is already central to their role. They do this by facilitating community consultation, encouraging voluntary action, enabling campaigning and supporting communities once they have identified their own priorities.

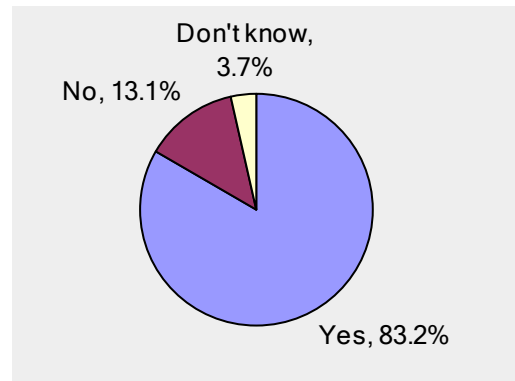


Figure 8 - Are you currently in a position to provide development support to people who wish to create and expand mutuals, cooperatives, charities and social enterprises?

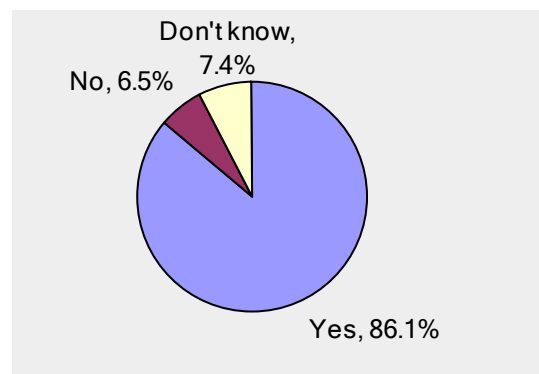


Figure 9 - Are you aware of the Government's localism agenda?

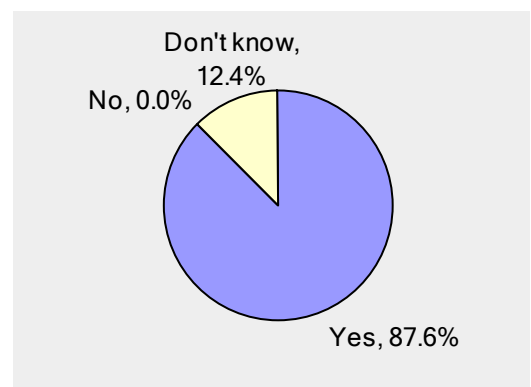


Figure 10 - Is there a role for NAVCA members in helping people and communities exercise greater control over the factors that affect the quality of local life?

It is also felt that NAVCA members can offer help in representing the views and voices of communities in local partnerships, something that many NAVCA members already do.

Helping residents' groups instigate local referendums

A good portion of the respondents believe there is a role for NAVCA members in helping residents' groups instigate local referendums on local issues. However, it was felt that this role may be a difficult one when issues become politicised. There was also a concern about available resources for this activity.

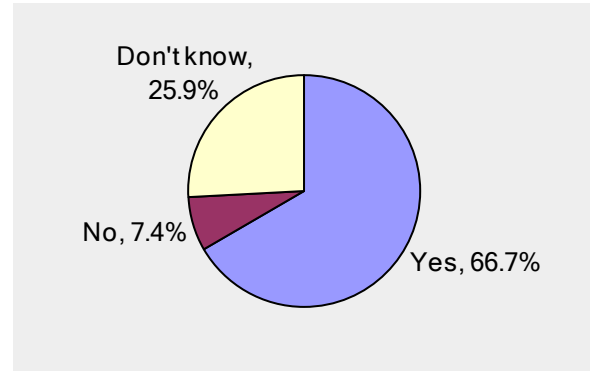


Figure 11 - Do NAVCA members have a role in helping residents' groups instigate local referendums on local issues?

Big Society Bank's priorities

NAVCA members' priorities for the Big Society Bank are:

- Supporting and building upon the current voluntary and community sector infrastructure
- Providing resources for support and development of organisations to support grassroots activity
- Funding the existing network of organisations to make the Big Society happen
- Creating greater stability for voluntary and community organisations
- Recognising the importance of grants as well as loans

There is a widely held view that the sector's existing infrastructure is well placed to support the Big Society proposals. Indeed most consider it core to their work. Many express the view that the Big Society Bank has a crucial role to play in ensuring that communities have access to local support and development services that are rooted in the local community.

This word cloud reflects the most widely used expressions.





Community First Fund priorities

NAVCA members' priorities for the Community First Fund are similar to those for the Big Society Bank. However, there was a clear theme running through the responses of supporting community enterprises, groups and organisations to deliver grassroots programmes. Key priorities were:

- Grassroots community action
- Funding for organisations that support charities and community organisations
- Small grants to encourage and enable local groups to start-up
- If the Big Society Bank prioritises support structures then the Community First Fund should focus on small local delivery activity

Again, key words from the responses are illustrated below.



In what other ways can NAVCA members support the Big Society?

NAVCA members expressed a strong desire to use their knowledge and experience of developing and supporting local community and voluntary action to help build the Big Society. Our members have built up a great deal of specialist knowledge and in many ways they already are the foundations of the Big Society.

Members are also keen to help build the confidence of local people so that they can harness their own skills and knowledge to improve their local areas. NAVCA members see partnership and collaboration as central to this.

As the Big Society narrative develops NAVCA members can play a strong role in ensuring that it builds upon past successes, channelling the goodwill and experience that already exists in the community.