

Councillor Briefing

Community leadership – Culture as the cornerstone of Big Society

This briefing highlights how Elected Members can ensure culture and sport are at the heart of building Big Society.

Overview

Councils are not only responsible for the services they deliver; they are required to provide 'community leadership' in their local authority area as a whole by working with other agencies. Councillors are in the front line of community leadership.

Culture and sport has the largest involvement of adult volunteers than any other service type or category. Building links between generations, cultures and backgrounds culture and sport plays a significant role in civil society. As such, with appropriate support, the sector offers a resilient, independent partner for local authorities in the delivery of cultural provision.

Why it matters

The Localism Bill and Big Society agenda seek to shift power from central government into the hands of individuals, communities and councils. Culture and sport can play an influential role in shaping a strong sense of society and improving people's lives. However, given the scale of reductions in local authority settlements, this may mean significant cuts to non-statutory cultural services are implemented without fully considering the range of options available.

In their role as community leaders, Councillors can highlight the contribution of culture and sport and drive forward initiatives that encourage the involvement of civil society organisations. Civil society organizations can broadly be defined as independent, self governing, non-governmental organisations that are values driven and invest their surpluses to further social, environmental or cultural and sporting objectives.

Key Messages

- Cultural services are a powerful mechanism for encouraging people to participate and volunteer; both activities help to create active, engaged citizens and strong communities.
- Culture and sport can help a council and its Councillors to fulfil their role as community leaders.
- Involving civil society organisations aligns with Government thinking and can provide a cost effective solution for some areas of cultural provision.
- Reach out to voluntary and community sector providers to involve them in the development and delivery of services that matter most.

Background

Big Society will radically recast the relationship between the state and charities, social enterprises, voluntary and community groups. The Government wants to enable civil society to shape bottom up services where expensive state provision has failed. The three core components detailed in **Building a Stronger Civil Society – A Strategy for voluntary and community groups, charities and social enterprises**¹ are:

- Empowering communities
- Opening up public services
- Promoting social action

The strategy recognises the special ability of voluntary and community organisations to mobilise and support people and seeks to harness this to find better solutions to social problems.

The **Localism Bill**² seeks to shift power from central government into the hands of individuals, communities and councils and will have implications for locally funded cultural services. Aiming to empower communities to do things their way – the bill will give local groups a number of rights including a 'community right to buy' that will allow communities to bid for ownership and management of community assets that face closure.

To support this key policy reform other flagship initiatives are planned such as the Big Society Bank, which will help finance social enterprises, charities and voluntary groups; the training of 5,000 new community organisers; and the creation of a National Citizen Service programme.

The challenge for local authorities is to think more deeply about the culture and sport organisations in their area and to consider how they can be supported to play an even more influential role and have greater involvement in the provision of services.

Your next steps

- Find out more about the value of volunteering in your locality and what work is delivered in partnership with civil society organisations.
- Discuss with fellow Councillors and Officers how further collaboration with, or devolvement and transfer of service provision, to civil society organisations can be encouraged.
- Consider how your authority can help build capacity amongst culture and sport organisations so that they can contribute more to delivering outcomes for local communities.
- A range of advice is available to help local authorities respond to the current financial pressures whilst protecting frontline services www.culture-first.com/support/guidance

¹ www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/building-stronger-civil-society.pdf, Oct 10

² <http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2010-11/localism/documents.html>