

# Volunteers show little enthusiasm for the Big Society, research says

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People who are carrying out the aims of the Big Society – those doing voluntary work – show little enthusiasm for the Prime Minister's idea, new research says.

The British Sociological Association's annual conference in London was told today [Wednesday 3 April 2013] that research had found half of those doing voluntary work expressed a negative view of the Big [Society](#), and only one in eight were in favour of it.

Dr Rose Lindsey and Dr Sarah Bulloch, of the Third Sector Research Centre at the University of Southampton, asked 62 people who are involved in voluntary work for their written opinions, as part of the Mass Observation social research project. Of these 31 were hostile to the Big Society, eight approved of it and the rest expressed no opinion. Few said they could do more volunteering.

Dr Lindsey told the conference that the 62 writers were either engaged in formal voluntary work with schools, hospitals, community groups or [charities](#), or in additional work helping family, friends or [neighbours](#) regularly. (Writing for the Mass Observation itself is not classed as voluntary work in this respect).

She said that among those who were hostile to the idea of the Big Society were:

- A 45-year-old man, who wrote: "Apart from being rightly lampooned for its vagueness, it feels exactly like the kind of thin and un-thought through idea that would come out of a Party obsessed with PR. Cameron's personal championing of it as a 'new way of thinking' is interesting in that, even after winning the election, it's obvious he can't even get his own Party to support the idea. Behind such a weak concept, I think there's also a more sinister side to the 'Big Society'; the idea that we should cut back and replace state run and taxpayer-financed institutions with voluntary work."
- A 68-year-old man wrote: "Cameron's 'big idea' of launching the 'Big Society' was small-minded in failing to acknowledge (and support financially) the enormous amount of voluntary work already being provided in, by and for communities right across the country."
- A 30-year-old woman wrote: "I think the idea in itself isn't new – but the notion that it's the answer to reducing the public sector wage bill is new."
- An 82-year-old man wrote: "Do communities have enough power to manage their own needs? Not without the support of their local authority. The council has to make cuts. So the C.E. [Chief Executive] talks in terms of closing the libraries, removing school crossing patrols etc. The police authority has to make savings so chief constables talk in terms of fewer bobbies on the beat. No amount of voluntary effort will address such issues. It is a form of political blackmail."

The 62 volunteers were part of a wider group of 'observers' from across the UK invited to write their thoughts on the Big Society for the Mass Observation project, which aims to record everyday life in Britain using a panel of volunteer observers who write diaries or replies to questionnaires.

Dr Lindsey told the conference: "The primary ground on which the Big Society agenda is criticised is that it is a political stunt. Some of these observers argued that the agenda is meaningless and lacking in clarity, or a guise for shifting responsibilities away from government.

"Observers also feel the agenda is nothing new – that the community engagement it calls for is already taking place. These accounts show frustration at a perceived lack of government recognition of the work that is already going on, both formally and informally."

The hostility to the Big Society was found among people who voiced anti-Coalition views but also among many who did not, the researchers found.

Some writers were more positive, saying that the Big Society idea could reduce bureaucracy associated with government being involved in local affairs, strengthen communities, and encourage individuals to take more responsibility for their own needs.

However, when asked if they were able to do more to help others, only a few of the writers said they could.

Dr Lindsey told the conference: "The majority of observers showed little desire or capacity to take on additional voluntary work. Some identified being too stretched by their informal caring commitments, such as looking after partners with ill-health or baby-sitting for family members. Others felt that existing voluntary work or paid employment already took up enough time. Some felt they should be paid for such work, or simply did not want to volunteer. "

One woman wrote: "Working for the public sector, I am also doing more work than I am supposed to and do lots of overtime to get things done. As there is no hope that I will ever be financially recompensed for this, it

is a kind of voluntary work. But this is the situation that lots of people find themselves in – public and private sector, which is why it is so ridiculous to demand that people do more."

Dr Lindsey said that the writers "were not a representative sample of the British public but rather represent an engaged section of the population, willing to write about their views and understandings of subjects like the Big Society. Even among this engaged group there is little desire to take on extra voluntary work. And the majority do not believe that their communities have the capacity to take on sustained responsibility – none were fully confident about their communities being able to provide for all of their needs.

"One of the potential implications of this finding might be that if social need increases as a result of government spending cuts, individuals may be more likely to prioritise helping those they know, over becoming engaged in wider community initiatives."

Provided by British Sociological Association

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