

“The Big Society” and the Church of England

The Synod is asked to Take Note of the report, GS1804, prepared by the Mission and Public Affairs Division, which will be sent to members electronically.

The context of the report is set out in the note below.

1. “The Big Society” figured in Conservative policy at the General Election and has been adopted by the coalition government. It is essentially a “portmanteau idea” embracing a variety of ideas and initiatives.
2. The Big Society is an approach to policy which embraces
 - reduction of bureaucracy,
 - empowerment of local communities,
 - devolution of power, and
 - strong social bonds sustained by voluntary action.
3. The church has already initiated several opportunities to engage with the government on The Big Society. These include a debate in the House of Lords on 15 June 2010 which I initiated, and the invitation from the College of Bishops to hear from Baroness Warsi and Lord Wei (both of whom have leading roles for the government on The Big Society) on 15 September. MPA staff have been in conversation since before the election with politicians and thinkers who are now putting The Big Society ideas into practice.
4. Notwithstanding a number of unanswered questions, the church should be promoting synergy between its own social vision and aspects of The Big Society thinking by the government. This is a chance to “shift the dominant narrative” about the role of religion in public life.
5. The Annexe to GS1804 contains details of a practical proposal in which government funding would support action by the Church of England to enhance social cohesion in carefully designated areas of the country.
6. Discussion with Conservative politicians before and after the Election encouraged MPA staff to develop proposals for publicly funded partnerships designed to improve social cohesion, particularly in multi-religious environments. Detailed proposals have been put to Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) officials and accepted as part of their bid in the Government’s Comprehensive Spending Review. These proposals, entitled *Being Neighbourly – by Faithful Inter Action*, build creatively on our established *Presence and Engagement* work.

7. The outcomes of the Comprehensive Spending Review were announced on 20 October 2010. Ministers and staff at DCLG now have the task of determining which programmes in their plan will go ahead. We expect to hear whether or not *Being Neighbourly* has the go-ahead soon after Synod meets. In the meantime, Synod is invited to note the proposals and to consider them as an example of how the church can, at national level, pursue its mission in alignment with The Big Society
8. *Bing Neighbourly* is only one possible area of synergy between The Big Society and the church's mission and ministry. There is potential to link the Big Society thinking to issues about the use and support of church buildings and the place of church schools within education policy. Much outworking of The Big Society will take place at local level and it is important that dioceses and parishes are alert to the issues involved when forming partnerships with statutory bodies so that best practice is promoted and the church's autonomy is preserved.
9. **Synod is invited to Take Note of the report, *The Big Society and the Church of England* (GS1804). The debate will help steer future discussions with Ministers and others as the policy implications and partnership possibilities of The Big Society unfold.**

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