

The Big Welsh Society?

Hannah Johnson

The UK Government's concept of a 'Big Society' aims to encourage civic participation and give communities more power over their local services. How will this initiative impact on the voluntary sector in Wales?

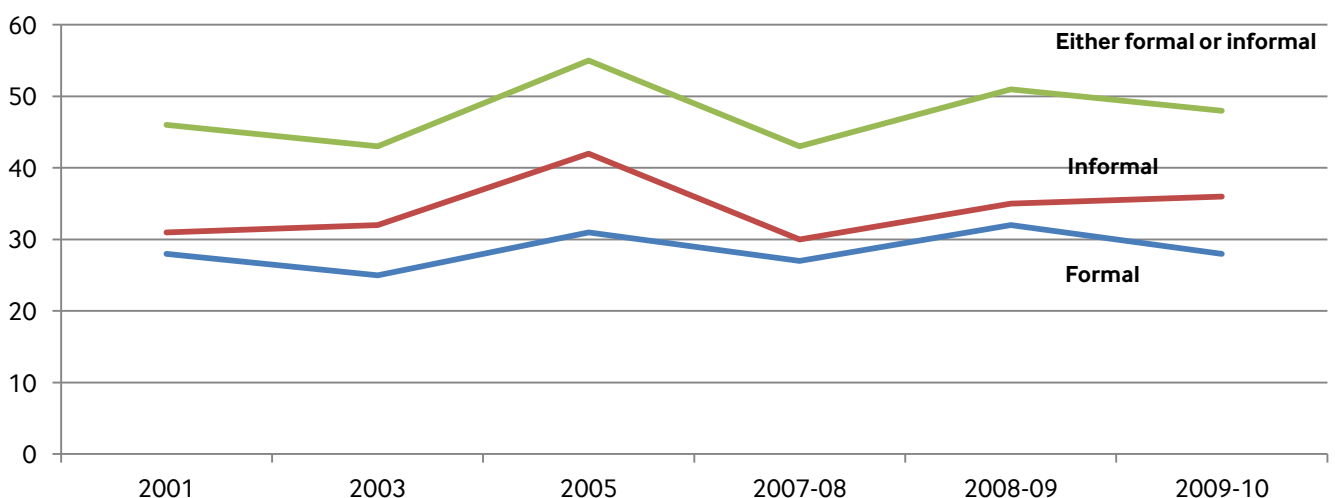
The UK Government's Big Society initiative has been promoted as a change of culture and a new approach to civic participation and the voluntary sector. However, it has been argued that the traditions of community action, mutual aid and co-operation are part of the social and cultural history of Wales. Although most of the primary Big Society schemes are England-only, there are likely to be consequences for the Welsh voluntary sector. Increasingly divergent approaches to the co-ordination and funding of the voluntary sector in England and Wales could mean that the concept of the Big Society takes root in very different ways in the two countries.

The former Welsh Government made it clear that they had no plans to undertake any Big Society initiatives, stating that putting people and communities at the heart of public services was already at the core of their programme for public service improvement.

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They countered the Big Society idea with proposals that included opportunities for volunteering and community involvement such as Gwirvol and Communities First, involving young people in the democratic process through Funky Dragon and engaging citizens with Local Service Boards to design joined up services. Despite this, volunteering levels in Wales have generally stayed the same for nearly ten years; do these figures indicate that a new approach is needed in order to encourage civic participation in Wales?

Percentage of people in Wales volunteering in the last 12 months



Source: Welsh Government

Alignment or divergence?

The main elements of the UK Government's Big Society proposals are:

- **community empowerment:** giving local councils and neighbourhoods more power to take decisions and shape their area;
- **opening up public services:** enabling voluntary organisations, charities, social enterprises, and employee-owned co-operatives to compete to offer public services; and
- **social action:** encouraging and enabling people to play a more active part in society.

Is the Welsh third sector equipped to compete with England-based organisations for public services contracts?

The principles of civic participation and community empowerment that are at the heart of the Big Society resound strongly in Wales. However, is the Welsh third sector equipped to compete with England-based organisations for public services contracts?

The voluntary sector in Wales

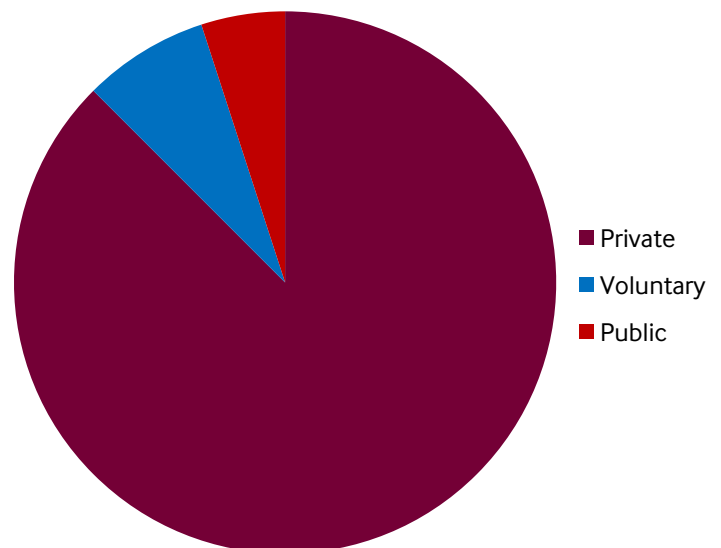
The Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) estimates that there are around 30,000 third sector organisations and groups in Wales, including 8,475 registered charities. Over 90 per cent of these organisations are classed as local, branches or projects. There are over 50,000 paid posts in the third sector, which is equivalent to 2.6 per cent of all employees in Wales. A recent WCVA survey found that 49 per cent of organisations felt that their situation would deteriorate over the next twelve months as a result of the recession, and 87 organisations reported that a total of 295 posts were 'at risk'.

Equipped to deliver?

While the UK Government would like to see charities taking over the operation of public services, there has been concern that England-based, private sector prime contractors are likely to see the greatest benefit from this approach.

The Department for Work and Pensions recently released a list of prime contractors that will deliver its Work Programme across the UK, and 88 per cent of these were private companies, largely based in England.

Work Programme contracts won, by sector



Source: DWP

However, the Work Programme will offer subcontracting opportunities to third sector organisations in Wales. There are a number of new initiatives emerging that could add to the Welsh third sector's capacity to deliver public services and make the role of small organisations in service delivery more important.

An example of this is when consortiums of charities, social enterprises and other third sector organisations work together to bid for large public sector contracts on behalf of civil society organisations. In Wales, this could be particularly important for small and medium sized organisations that want to bid for contracts, but do not have the capacity; by working in a consortium with other small organisations they are more likely to be able to compete for, and deliver, large contracts.

In 2010 the Welsh Government announced the £13 billion **Community Economic Development Programme**, which aims to encourage organisations in south east Wales to become less dependent on grants and better equipped to tender for procurement contracts.

The Big Society ripple effect

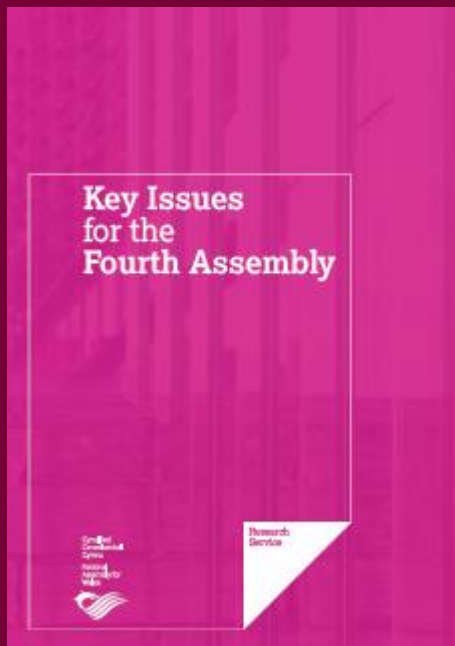
There are some Big Society initiatives that could directly benefit Welsh voluntary organisations.

The Big Society Bank, which is due to launch this year, will make loans and provide investment capital for the UK voluntary sector. In England, money from private dormant bank accounts will be put into the Big Society Bank for English voluntary organisations, but in Wales the dormant accounts money is being used to support young people and tackle climate change.

UK banks are contributing £200 million of funding for the Big Society Bank, which will be available to voluntary organisations across the UK, including Wales.

It remains to be seen how civil society in Wales will respond to the Big Society, but it is likely that third sector organisations will have to change their approach to service provision, with diminished resources, more service users and higher expectations.

Article taken from Research Service publication



Key Issues for the Fourth Assembly

This document has been specially prepared for Assembly Members by the Research Service. It sets out some of the key issues likely to matter to Members during the Fourth Assembly.

[Key Issues for the Fourth Assembly](#)

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Research Service
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
CF99 1NA

Email: **Research.Service@wales.gov.uk**

Twitter: **[@NAWResearch](https://twitter.com/NAWResearch)**