

The Big Society

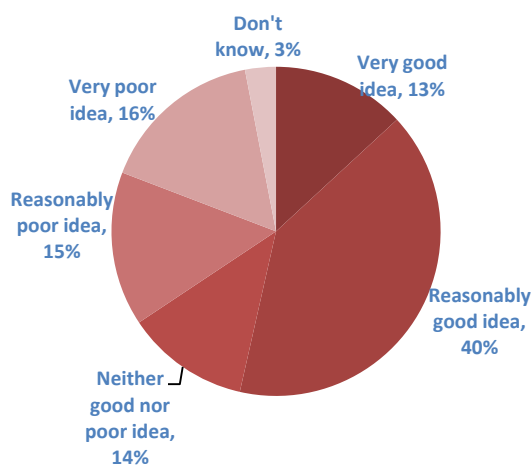
This report summarises the latest research with the YouGovStone ThinkTank of influential people. 942 leading UK individuals completed the online survey between May 25th and June 1st 2011. The ThinkTank includes 'influentials' from politics, business, media, academia, arts, public sector and beyond.

General verdict

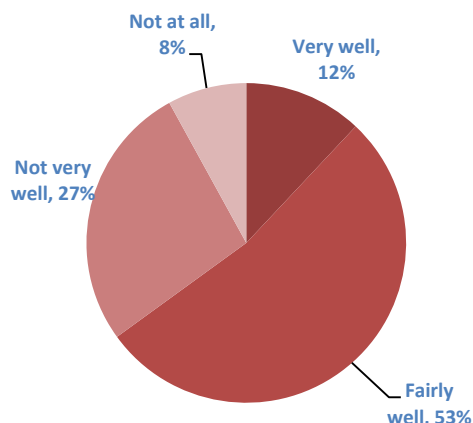
Half our sample (53%) of UK 'influentials' think David Cameron's "Big Society" is a good idea, and two thirds (65%) say they understand the concept, but only a quarter (26%) believe it will succeed. Responses are split along party lines, with 79% of Tory-supporting 'influentials' thinking it is a good idea, compared to 26% of those who would vote Labour and 66% of LibDem supporters.

Regardless of how good an idea the Big Society may be, just 8% of those polled think the Government has done a good job defining and communicating the "Big Society" vision. 43% of all respondents are worried that the policy is merely a fig-leaf to hide Tory cuts and moves towards smaller government. Only a third (34%) expect it to have a positive effect on the public's view of the Conservative Party.

Which of the following best reflects your view of the "Big Society" policy?



How well, if at all, would you say you understand the "Big Society" policy?

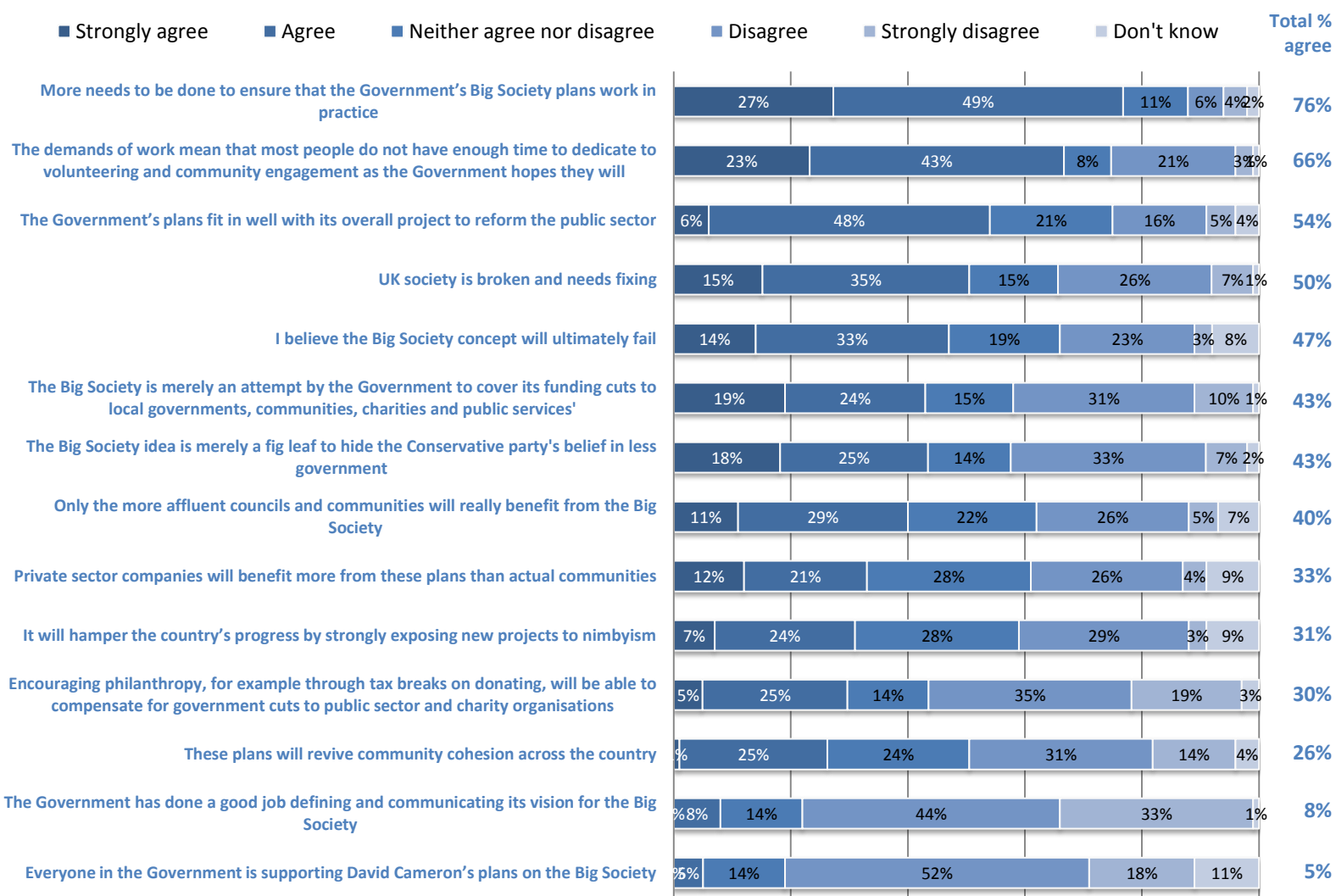


On the whole, the panel is quite positive towards the Government's Big Society policy. Over half think it is a good idea, but a third does not. Respondents working in the charitable sector (59%) are most positive whilst those in the public sector are the least positive (45%).

65% claim they understand the policy either very well (12%) or fairly well (53%) but a third say they just don't get it. This contrasts sharply with YouGov's research amongst the general public in February this year, when only 24% stated they understood the Big Society well, and nearly three quarters did not. It is the communication of the policy that has let the project down in the eyes of many with only 8% of our panel believing the Government has done a good job in defining and communicating its vision.

Concerns

With a more detailed view, the panel is negative. Not only does it think the policy has been badly communicated but 70% don't believe the whole Government is supporting it and three quarters (76%) think more needs to be done to ensure the plans will actually work in practice. There is also widespread concern about the hope there will be a large increase in volunteering and community engagement to support the Big Society, with 66% believing the required levels will be unlikely to materialise. This concern rises to 74% amongst those who work in the charitable sector. Respondents were also asked if tax breaks to encourage philanthropy would compensate the expected shortfall in funding for charities and other publicly funded bodies and only 30% thought they actually could.



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Part of a larger plan?

Respondents certainly see the Big Society concept as part of the coalition Government's bigger plans to reform the public sector, with 54% agreeing and just 21% disagreeing. 43% believe this bigger plan is all about cuts and the same number believe the idea is just to use the Big Society policy to hide the Conservative Party's belief in smaller government (rising to 83% amongst Labour voters but only 26% of LibDems).

Likely Success and Impact

While 47% of those surveyed expect the policy to fail (just 26% don't, rising to only 46% of Tory voters), there are a number of areas where respondents feel there will be success. 46% think it will reduce the costs of funding local services, 44% think it will reduce the size of government, and 42% think it will actually increase civil society and civil engagement. 40% also think it will empower local communities and boost democracy, while 36% believe it gives David Cameron a standout policy. A third think it will soften the Conservative Party's image as a whole while just 19% see no 'successes' at all.

The belief amongst 50% is that Britain is 'broken' and needs fixing (rising to 72% of Tories) but if restoring community cohesion is at the heart of the Big Society policy then only 26% expect that it will revive such cohesion across the country. There is also concern amongst 40% of respondents that only more affluent councils and communities will really benefit, something 67% of Labour supporters are worried about. 31% also worry that it will lead to a rise in NIMBYism which will hamper the development of new projects.

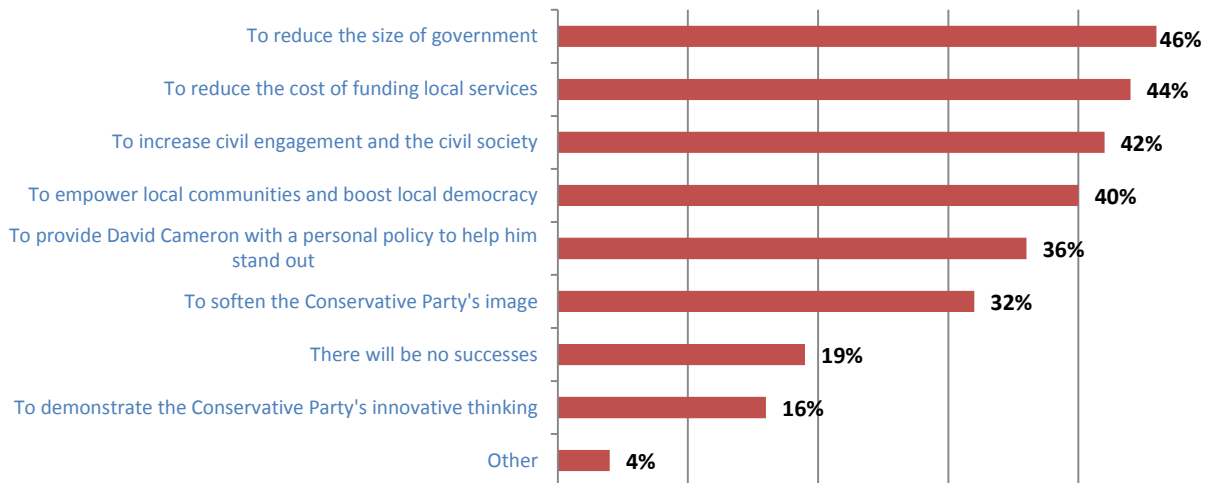
Certainly the policy is not a unifying one within government, because only 5% think that everyone in the Government is supporting the Big Society, regardless of which party they tend to support.

One of the policy's strongest elements is supposedly about empowering users of local services. This is something 80% of respondents support but only 45% think the policy will actually achieve.

Organisational benefit

19% of respondents work for organisations that they believe should be able to take on work which will be transferred away from government bodies under Big Society plans. Of this group, just 12% don't believe they will ever take on work in this way, showing that many organisations do seem to already be benefitting (21%) or expect to benefit in the future (50%) as part of this potential sea-change in service provision (the remaining 17% aren't sure).

The following list shows some reasons put forward by commentators as to why David Cameron wanted to introduce the "Big Society" idea. What, if any, do you feel are likely to be its main successes?



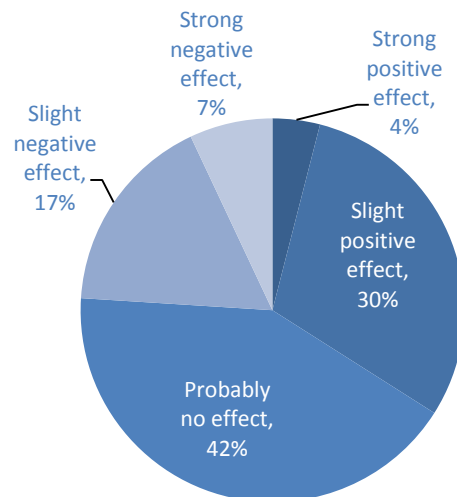
One third (34%) of those polled think the Big Society policy will have a generally positive effect on the Conservative Party itself. 42% think it will not affect the Party at all, while the remaining 24% expect it will be negative. Tory supporters have higher expectations, with 53% expecting a positive effect and 40% of LibDems also think it will rub off well on David Cameron's party, compared to only 15% of Labour voters.

Summary

The Big Society policy is welcomed by many 'influentials', particularly Tory supporters, and it has been a practical success for some already. The complaint to date is that the concept has been very poorly communicated and the fear for half the sample is that the idea will ultimately fail.

There is very strong support amongst those polled for greater empowerment of local communities, but only coalition voters think the Big Society is the way to do it. Hampered by concerns about volunteering and more traditional Tory policies being at its heart, this policy has won over many 'influentials' but leaves many others feeling sceptical.

Which of the following best describes your view about the effect of the 'Big Society' concept will have on the Conservative Party over the next few years?



YouGovStone's ThinkTank is a group of over 4,000 influential individuals who take part in regular online surveys. Predominantly UK based, these leaders in their field are drawn from sectors including politics, business, media, the public sector, academia and NGOs.

YouGovStone now regularly surveys with MPs, CEOs and other groups of high level decision makers in the UK and internationally. If your organisation needs to know what influential people think, then please contact Oliver Rowe, YouGovStone's Research Director on +44 (0)207 012 6032 or email oliver.rowe@yougovstone.com