

# big-societyecclestone

## The Big Society: Can a Government change behaviour?

### No, getting people to change behaviour is never that simple

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"Questions about how to create the much-vaunted 'big society' have come under fire this week, with criticism that government does not appear to understand that public spending cuts will stop people volunteering to take on roles once paid for and run by the state.

In public debate about how to change behaviour in the 'big society', volunteering is seen as key. As well as carrying out unpaid activities in areas such as health, leisure and welfare, increasing the number and range of voluntary roles aims to encourage the spread of attitudes and behaviours associated with self-help, resilience and altruism. The goal is not only to get people to be more pro-active and responsible for their own health, education, leisure and housing, but also to help others do this as well.

Of course, the state has always tried to change its citizens' behaviours. Whether getting us to stop smoking or avoid Chlamydia, join the army, become a volunteer, stay on in education, the state uses an array of tactics. From information campaigns to scare tactics, to target-setting, tax breaks, promises of deferred gratification, punishments or softer sticks, public services, charities and volunteer organisations try to get us to do the right thing for ourselves and others.

But as any psychologist, doctor, teacher or social worker knows, getting people to change behaviour is far from easy. Education and awareness campaigns cost a great deal of tax-payers' money but are all-too often ineffective. Appeals to enlightened self-interest can also be hit and miss. And even when something stares us in the face as the right thing to do or the right way to think for the sake of our own health or welfare, or for the sake of others, we often avoid it. Simply trying to appeal to intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, self-interest - enlightened or otherwise or to the idea that we will make rational and informed choices are never going to be enough.

The University's Policy Commission, in partnership with the think-tank DEMOS, is exploring the ways in which the Coalition government is trying to change behaviour. As well as looking at the effectiveness of familiar strategies, consultations with local authorities, youth organisations, charities and other services show much interest in the 'co-production' of public services as a way of encouraging people to participate actively in design and delivery. And, continuing the work of the previous government, the Coalition's Behavioural Insight Team is looking to behavioural psychology and neuroscience for better insights about how we behave and for clever targets and psychological tactics to 'nudge' people in the right direction – see Will Leggett's discussion opposite.

Amidst current concerns about how to encourage more volunteering, and the mantras of co-production and nudge, changing behaviour and attitudes is much more than merely a practical or technical question about effectiveness. There are also ethical questions about how far individuals and communities should choose what and whether to change, behaviours that remain the legitimate concern of the state, and questions about the fine lines between overt and covert tactics, and between benign intervention and potential manipulation."

The next [Birmingham Policy Commission \(/research/impact/policy-commissions/public-services/index.aspx\)](#) workshop on 'changing behaviour' is at the University on 17 February. Kathryn Eccleston's inaugural lecture 'Developing emotional well-being: progressive social policy or state intrusion' is at 5.15 on 10<sup>th</sup> March, in the Business School, contact [k.r.wright@bham.ac.uk](mailto:k.r.wright@bham.ac.uk) (<mailto:k.r.wright@bham.ac.uk>)