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The Big Society, what's the Big Idea?

Last Friday and Saturday I had the opportunity to visit three outstanding examples of the voluntary sector in East Hampshire. The first was the Citizens' Advice Bureau's AGM. Immediately after that I visited the Alton & Bordon branch of Home Start and met some of the volunteers, and the families they've helped. Then came the reopening of Petersfield's excellent youth centre, the King's Arms, after a devastating fire.

Three very different organisations, three great examples of the voluntary sector at its best; amazing volunteers, strong leadership, a clear sense of purpose and a practical approach.

In East Hampshire, the 'Big Society' is already alive and well.

Many people still ask 'what do we mean when we talk about a big society?' We mean exactly these kinds of initiatives - communities coming together, helping each other, meeting the needs they see around them. Not because a Government department told them to, not because a quango published a report on it, but because when they see a job to be done they are willing to roll up their sleeves and help.

There are a tremendous number of people up and down the country who would like to do more, who want to get involved. The challenge the Government faces is how to convince them that they can.

We have reached a point where you now need criminal background checks to organise a car pool - people have become so used to being told they can't help, or being so manhandled by process when they insist on trying that they have lost their initiative. We have to win them back.

Lord Young is reviewing, root and branch, the 'health and safety' culture that has grown up around us. We are finding ways to set charities free and bring new people into volunteering.

The National Citizen Service is one such way. It will give young people the chance to see what a difference they can make in their local community, helping them realise they have a big part to play in our society. We can do more to encourage volunteering from within the civil service. Many private sector companies already encourage and support volunteering, and more can be stimulated to.

Voluntary organisations need funding, too. All funding streams of course are under pressure, but the value and unique capabilities the sector brings needs to be recognised.

The Big Society Bank will take money from dormant bank accounts and put it to good use for social benefit.

The Big Society agenda is an exciting programme. It is a big motivating factor for many of the new MPs in Parliament. Whereas getting the public finances sorted is something we *have to do*, building and strengthening the Big Society is a big part of what we *want to do*.