

Urban river corridors and sustainable living agendas

Director's view

The URSULA team would like to wish everyone a happy new year! This coming year will be an important one for us, as the project gathers momentum and we continue to disseminate our findings. By the time you read this, we will have begun interviewing our panel of experts to decide whether our visualisations and models are succeeding in aiding the decision-making process. There are a number of papers in preparation, and a busy conference season waits in the spring.

We held our own successful conference in November 2010, and the main part of our newsletter is taken up with the commentary on this. You will find this on the following pages, written by some of our newest researchers. We already have arranged the date for our final conference, which will be held in



Sheffield at the Mercure Hotel St Pauls on 17 November 2011, so put the date in your diary now – we would love to see you there.

We continue our programme of seminars. We welcome speakers each month, and subjects so far have ranged from urban morphology, SUDS, and the nature and practice of river restoration. You will find the full programme on our website, and are very welcome to attend any of the talks.

As we start a new year with the associated hopes and resolutions we all make, we thought you would like to be reminded of the beauty that rivers can give us within the urban setting, and how important they can be for our quality of life in our towns and cities.

These pictures of the Rivelin Valley were taken just before Christmas, and show the river just three miles from the centre of Sheffield within the City boundary. It's a spot well-loved by local people, and it's easy to understand why.

URSULA enters its last year with real hopes of making a difference to the way we use and view the rivers in our urban areas, and will continue to provide a series of talks to organisations to roll out our findings and solutions after the project comes to a close. Do keep an eye on our website and come to our conference in November to check on our results.

David Lerner is Director of the URSULA research consortium, funded by EPSRC

The Big Society: will it mean anything for urban river

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Big Society at the URSULA Conference 2010

"Big Society", endorsed as a cornerstone of government policy, is an incessant media sound-bite and has clearly struck a chord with the British public. Gathered to discuss a future vision of urban river corridors at the URSULA Conference in Sheffield, November 2010, Big Society featured in several presentations. Despite the term's common usage, however, attempts at definition were conspicuously absent. Neither were definitions particularly forthcoming from conference attendees, who were equally at a loss as to its exact meaning.

This is a perplexing situation. Government is promoting Big Society as an alternative to top-down state control, giving the general public more influence in decision-making. It is hailed as a progressive solution that promises to compensate for the belt-tightening of government bodies such as the Environment Agency and offer novel benefits above and beyond conventional river management. And yet, even as the state is being actively cut back, few of those who will be co-ordinating and implementing Big Society actually know what it is or how it will function.

So what does Big Society mean? A brief post-conference opinion survey of a selection of speakers and attendees resulted in a variety of interpretations of what Big Society will mean for managing the water environment (Box 1). The diversity of interpretations may be due to the ambiguity of the government's stated aim "to create a climate that empowers local people and communities, building a big society that will take power away from politicians and give it to people," (Number 10 Downing Street, 2010).

The lack of a clear and consistent understanding of Big Society emphasises the need to understand how it could best influence future management of urban rivers. To provide a basis for further discussion and research, we suggest some thoughts on how Big Society might work, as well as the challenges that must first be overcome. In doing so we hope to raise debate on the implications of Big Society and the measures and strategy its implementation requires, so that urban river communities (all stakeholders) will be fully aware of the advantages and opportunities it may bring.

- Big Society is nothing new in principle, but its formalised recognition may enable and empower communities to take a more active role in identifying environmental problems and finding solutions.
- Views and values of all stakeholders are included in local decisions, to protect the environmental commons for the good of everyone.
- There is a policy intention for more decisions to be taken at local scales, through local government, NGOs (or similar), and free association of stakeholders.
- Localism will mean an increasing role for people and groups to get involved in flood risk management solutions.
- Experts and decision makers will be obligated to work to enable society to implement its own solutions.
- Big Society is about self-governance approaches – bringing less bureaucracy but also reduced accountability.
- Local people may know what is best for their local river, but Big Society may result in negative implications elsewhere in the catchment.
- Society will increasingly shoulder the burden of financing local river management.
- The public voluntary sector will be expanded to compensate for loss of funding.

Box 1. Interpretations of Big Society and what it means for urban river management, selected from contributions from conference speakers, delegates and researchers.

So why not jump straight in?

Before addressing the implications and potential opportunities of Big Society, it is necessary to identify and understand the challenges and possible conflicts facing its application. This was a key focus of the URSULA Conference.

One of the principal conflicts relates to questions of scale. In developing a vision for urban river management, integrated catchment-scale management is ultimately essential, but urban river corridors in particular often necessitate piecemeal, opportunistic initiatives. This problem raises the dilemma of whether to tackle a single issue over the whole catchment or aim to resolve all issues locally. There is also an inevitable conflict of long-term planning and vision versus a short-term requirement to demonstrate results. Will the development of a collaborative masterplan be sufficient to integrate the fragments and ensure spatial and temporal joined-up thinking?

The issues have repercussions for Big Society bring further challenges:

- Conventional hierarchies of power need to adapt so that they have capacity to develop effective partnerships with communities and experts, providing a framework for collaboration through which everyone can contribute equitably. Urban environments with their many stakeholders will truly test the adaptability of conventional planning institutions.

- The diversity of different languages used by technical groups, the public and indeed experts in different fields can create misunderstanding, and is a barrier to engagement and participation.
- Big Society may empower communities to take action themselves, but experience suggests that ill-informed, single issue action can have negative consequences, such as weir removal causing bank collapse and stream clearance destroying natural habitats. Big Society may exacerbate this small-scale, fragmented approach by focusing on local issues. Alternatively, this argument could be illustrating the power shuffle facing experts and non-experts; to empower society, knowledge should be shared and not guarded as a commodity.
- When working with communities, expectation management is important. To generate participation and motivation, aspirations must be raised but kept grounded in something that is achievable and feasible. Otherwise communities might feel misled by what is delivered.

Consequently, Big Society may be especially difficult in urban environments. Firstly, finding win-win scenarios is easier said than done; is scientific evidence sufficient and can it be communicated clearly enough to all participants of Big Society? Secondly, complex urban river corridors have many stakeholders and multiple interests; might a fully participatory approach stifle and stall the action it seeks to enable?

corridor management?

It has potential!

Big Society is likely to act on two key aspects of river corridor management: planning and implementation (Figure 1). Firstly, it may go beyond the existing top-down consultative planning approach for water management which engages with stakeholders, but sometimes too little too late. Instead, more emphasis would be put on involving interest groups in contributing to a debate on the challenges and opportunities for urban river corridor enhancement. This will inform the development of a fully participatory 'masterplan', open for all to contribute to and provide feedback on, which sets out a democratic future vision of the urban water environment. Co-ordination is required to integrate stakeholder interests with advice from experts (in science, decision-making and planning, the community, etc.) to provide a technical underpinning and strategic overview. The creation of community masterplans requires innovation to develop social, environmental and economic "win-wins", whilst recognising and minimising the trade-offs.

Secondly, Big Society could offer an opportunity to capture voluntary sector motivation and goodwill in the implementation of the masterplans. This would probably be achieved through many long-term, small-scale, integrated initiatives. Capitalising on shared expertise and community spirit was an underlying theme of many of the talks at the URSULA Conference, and in this sense Big Society can be seen as a continuation of other concepts, such as "self-governance", "bottom-up" and "community engagement". Indeed, it could be argued that Big Society is nothing new, but we suggest that the recent mainstream acceptance of Big Society may enable widespread reconsideration of the ways in which conventional decision-making, expertise and institutions enable and make use of "society" to improve urban rivers.

A recipe for Big Society

Though we are in the position to raise more questions than we can answer at this stage, we are able to suggest some possible ways forward for Big Society and its future role in the implementation of urban river corridor management.

Experience from the proto- Big Society Mersey Basin Campaign (www.merseybasin.org.uk) and other projects point towards the need for certain individuals to take driving roles, providing collaborative leadership and vision. Despite the presence of all other ingredients, the role of

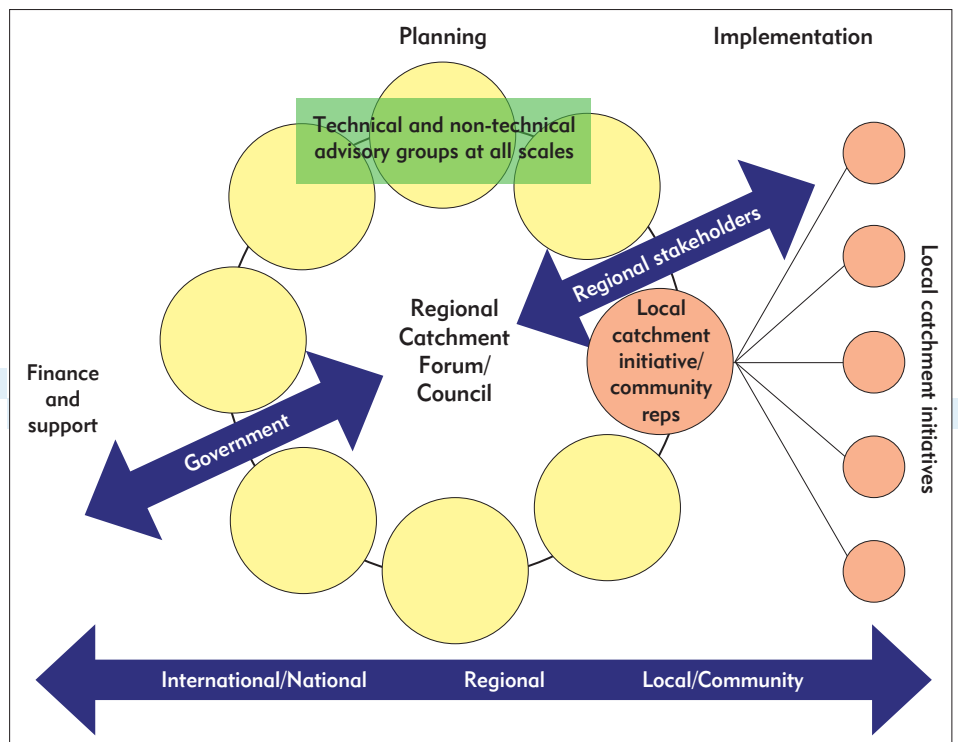


Figure 1. How Big Society might work in urban river management, based on lessons from the Mersey Basin Campaign, adapted from Wright and Bendell (2004).

motivated individuals may be a key catalyst for success, but the question is how to empower these individuals to provide the momentum to makes things happen.

This leadership or co-ordination could come from conventional decision makers such as the Environment Agency, but these institutions must first adapt to become more approachable and efficient at participating in a Big Society. Alternatively, and perhaps better, the leadership role may fall to new organisations with the function of catalysing participation and co-ordinating inputs from a range of individuals and organisations including the Environment Agency and Local Authorities (Figure 1). Although creating more "institutions" is logically counter to Big Society, "forums" or "partnerships" such as the Tweed Foundation or Mersey Basin campaign may be able to co-ordinate democratically. In either case, there remains a need for a strategic role to hold together the diverse and fragmented interest groups involved in river corridors.

Expertise, and its effective communication, will remain vital to present the best evidence and

strategy to achieve a Big Society masterplan for urban rivers. Experts must clearly demonstrate the costs of inaction and the benefits of action in terms that everyone can understand. As Mark Everard suggested in his conference presentation, ecosystem services, a relatively simple expression of multiple interacting ecosystem derived costs and benefits to human welfare, may become a key communication language. Further, dissemination of successful applications of Big Society to decision makers and the community is vital if the most is to be made of lessons learnt.

A two-way interaction with government is also needed; Big Society may necessitate political pressure, to ensure local motivation and collaboration is effectively supported by long-term financial commitment. Further, support must come from regulators to ensure existing legislation is enforced, as it is unrealistic to expect everybody to voluntarily comply in unanimous goodwill. Such an assumption is illustrative of possibly over-optimistic expectations of Big Society, and there are other glaring "elephants in the room" to consider.



Figure 2 "Elephant in the room" – if Big Society is to be made the most of, we cannot afford to neglect the big and difficult questions, as perhaps has been done in the past.

Elephant in the room?

There are undoubtedly many positive changes that Big Society could bring to the planning and implementation of urban river corridor management. If these are to be realised, funding is still vital. Grassroots organisations can make use of the voluntary sector for community engagement and small interventions, such as stream clear-ups or biodiversity surveys. However, funding will be required for training and larger objectives such as installing a fish pass or regenerating the urban river corridor, where professional expertise may be needed. And yet, at a time when Big Society is being pushed politically, charitable funding and community work is being cut across the country (e.g. Toynbee, 2010). Mark Turner, of the Mersey Basin campaign, acknowledged at the conference that it remains to be seen whether the initiatives in the Mersey Basin will continue now that the 25 year financial commitment from the government has finished.

Another implicit assumption of the Big Society is the willingness and capacity of communities to take part in management of urban river corridors. With parallel Big Society movements likely in education, safety, health etc, will people have time and resources to contribute much more than they do already, and if so, how and why? The future of projects like the Mersey Basin may indicate the future for other Big Society visions of urban rivers. What is certain, however, is that we must not neglect to address these difficult questions, which are clearly exacerbated in urban environments. To ignore the challenges of money and for experts and non-experts to assume expectations of each

other's roles would be to fail to truly capitalise on a more democratic and involved society to improve urban river corridors (Figure 2).

Is this vision merely a fleeting glimpse?

For urban river corridors, Big Society may help to deliver better integrated catchment management at different scales. This seems to be a natural progression from community action groups and participation in local projects. However, Big Society has the potential to make better, more formalised use of an inspired and motivated voluntary sector in planning, funding and implementing river management. This could potentially be a more efficient and effective approach to urban water management, so long as expertise is accessible to the public and voluntary sectors, and that there is trust between society on the one hand, and experts on the other. It is not clear how Big Society will manage with lack of funding, but if it does become more than just rhetoric, we feel it could certainly influence the current balance of public, private and voluntary input in urban river management.

Final thoughts

The URSULA Conference asked whether there is a vision for the future of urban river corridors, and we can agree that one does exist – successful examples and key components seem to be well understood by speakers and delegates alike. The question now is how to implement this vision, which in the urban context is especially fraught with challenges. Big Society provides

potential for the public and voluntary sectors to take a greater role in managing the water environment, and purports to offer a new era of sustainable participatory working. This offers a more democratic approach to the management of urban river corridors which in itself may be sufficient moral imperative to justify its implementation.

We must accept that the concept of Big Society has arrived, and we must rise to the challenges it brings if we are to make the most of it. Perhaps Big Society may not ever be a realisable goal, but is more like an ideal, and something to continuously strive towards in the management of our urban river corridors.

We anticipate 2011 may bring answers to questions we have raised about what Big Society means for urban river management, through CIWEM's Annual Conference (April) and the next URSULA Conference (November).

Note

We thank speakers and delegates from the URSULA Conference as well as researchers at the Catchment Science Centre, University of Sheffield, for their input. However, the opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of others within the organisation. The URSULA project is investigating the hypothesis that there are significant social, economic and environmental gains to be made by integrated and innovative interventions in urban river corridors. For more information, please visit www.ursula.ac.uk. The presentations from the URSULA conference can be viewed at www.ursula.ac.uk/news/index.php?id=70.

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