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RECONTEXTUALISING THE BIG SOCIETY: FROM CENTRAL IMAGINARIES TO LOCAL 'REALITIES'

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ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF HEALTH, SOCIAL CARE AND EDUCATION

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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The Big Society was conceived of in Conservative Party documents and speeches in 2009 and announced as a driving ambition of the new coalition government in May 2010. The Big Society represents an imagined future; a vision for change; an answer to the problem of 'broken' Britain. The idea has been criticised, its theoretical and ideological underpinnings have been widely examined, and its prospects for changing British society have been scrutinised. Despite all this there remains a need for research which explores the various ways in which ideas relating to the Big Society are defined, explained and put into practice, particularly at the level of local government. This is the contribution that my thesis seeks to make.

My research is based on a simple premise; that the imagined Big Society at a central government level is potentially incompatible with the lived experience of society at a local level. Local government authorities, as the beneficiaries of decentralisation as power is supposedly passed to them from central government on its way to local communities and people, must be considered as influential mediators with significant causal powers. An integrated dialectical relational and discourse historical approach to Critical Discourse Analysis enables me to explore representations and recontextualisations of the Big Society during the development of localism – arguably a policy response to the Big Society - at Cambridgeshire County Council.

I have developed an empirically based critique of the Big Society in its own terms at a local government level and conclude that the Big Society has failed to be realised in Cambridgeshire. I interpret this as being largely due to four key incompatibilities: (1) the 'age of austerity'; (2) the unrealistic representations people and communities in the imagined Big Society; (3) the differences evident between the representation of local government in the imagined Big Society and the complexities of local government in Cambridgeshire; and (4) the unrealistic representation of local government freed from central government control.

Key words: Big society; localism; local government; critical discourse analysis; policy analysis

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1. Introduction

But before I get into the details, let me briefly explain what the Big Society is and why it is such a powerful idea…

(David Cameron, July 2010)

1.1.   The (Imagined) Big Society

In 2009 the Conservative Party published a Green Paper which called for a radical 'new programme of political decentralisation to revitalise democracy and strengthen community life' which would be realised through a 'five-pillar strategy' to shift power from central government to local communities. In the annual Hugo Young Memorial Lecture of the same year, the Leader of the Conservative Party David Cameron described his ambition as creating a transition within Britain from 'big government to big society' (Cameron, 2009b). In March 2010 and just before the announcement of the 2010 general election, the Big Society plan was officially unveiled in the Conservative Party's *Building a Big Society*. This document placed the building of a Big Society firmly 'at the heart of the Conservative Party's vision for change (Conservative Party, 2010a:1). After the formation of the coalition government following the general election of May 2010, Cameron and Clegg jointly announced the Big Society at a conference on 18th May. Despite being forced to re-launch the policy on a number of occasions, David Cameron remained dogged in his assertion that the Big Society was his 'absolute passion', stating that it would 'get every bit of [his] passion and attention over the five years of this government' (Cameron, 2011).

In short, the Big Society represents an imagined future; a 'vision for change'; an answer to the problem of 'broken Britain':

> The Big Society is a society with much higher levels of personal,
> professional, civic and corporate responsibility; a society where people come
> together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their
> communities; a society where the leading force for progress is social

responsibility, not state control.

(Conservative Party, 2010a: 1)

The Big Society is an imaginary in the sense that it is a projection of a 'possible world'. Furthermore it is an imaginary that serves as an object of governance (Farrelly, 2010) for the coalition government and David Cameron especially. Discourses are an important concept for this thesis and, briefly, I understand discourses as 'particular ways of representing part of the world' (Fairclough, 2003: 26). In specific relation to the focus of my research, discourses representing the Big Society are 'imaginaries - representations of how things might or could or should be' (Fairclough, 2003: 207). I elaborate in much greater detail on my understanding of discourses in Chapters Three and Four.

1.2.   The Imagined Big Society as a Research Problem

The Big Society has provoked much academic interest in the months and years since its announcement. Notably, the majority of academic literature has critiqued the Big Society theoretically, ideologically or simply via opinion and commentary pieces (e.g. Alcock, 2010; Kisby, 2010; Evans, 2011; Hunter, 2011; Taylor, 2011; Albrow, 2012; Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012; Sullivan, 2012; Buser, 2013; Clarke and Cochrane, 2013; Corbett and Walker, 2013). The importance of such theoretical and ideological critiques is not in question here. My argument is that a policy that set out to 'completely recast the relationship between society and the state' (Cabinet Office, 2010c: 8) and to shift the balance of power from within Whitehall to 'the man and woman on the street' (Cameron, 2010) requires a critique based on empirical evidence. As recently as 2013 Buser (2013: 15) identified a persisting need for 'research which uncovers the various ways in which these notions [decentralisation, engagement and empowerment] are defined, explained and put into practice' in relation to contemporary issues of governance and democracy in England.

Local government have an undoubtedly important role to play in the imagined Big Society, not least because they represent the mediating level of governance between Whitehall and 'the man and woman on the street', those to whom the coalition government profess to want to pass power. Despite this they are largely suppressed in Conservative Party and coalition government representations in

favour of local communities and local people. Hunter (2011: 14) acknowledges the paradoxical nature of this apparent contradiction:

> Paradoxically, for the Big Society to prosper the role of government is critical. The most ardent enthusiasts in the third sector acknowledge that without government support at local and national levels, their future would be a precarious one and many would not survive.

Local government were hit particularly hard by the Spending Review of October 2010. Whilst the entire public sector faced spending and budget cuts, local government seemed to face some of the toughest. The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) saw a 26% reduction in funding from 2011-2015 (Cmnd-7942, 2010: 50). The severity of the cuts was supposedly mitigated by the coalition government's commitment to decentralisation and liberalisation:

> Councils have long argued that with more freedom and flexibility, they would be much better equipped to become more efficient and effective in delivering local public services. This settlement delivers that freedom and flexibility, as part of the new government's decentralisation agenda.
> (Eric Pickles MP, 2010)

The importance of local government was further emphasised in July 2010 when David Cameron announced the recruitment of four local councils (Eden Valley, Windsor and Maidenhead, Sutton and Liverpool) to act as 'vanguard communities' of the Big Society; 'the great training grounds of change… the first territory on which real and ultra local power is a reality – and the Big Society is built' (Cameron, 2010). Much of the Localism Act (2011) too focuses on local government, providing them with 'new freedoms and flexibility' (DCLG, 2011: 4) to aid the coalition government in their attempt to shift power from central government to local communities.

What exactly the Big Society means to local government authorities and the role and position of local government authorities within the Big Society has been largely unknown but often speculated upon. Some academic literature has argued that, immediately following the announcement of the Big Society, there was no real attempt to address this question by either Cameron or his coalition government (e.g. Cox, 2010; Sullivan, 2012; Szreter & Ishkanian, 2012; Szreter, 2012). Lowndes and

Pratchett (2012:31) however, argue that the Big Society and local government reforms are 'intrinsically linked', evidenced by the overlap of Big Society and localism policies.

Despite all the theorisation and speculation there remains little in the way of academic literature that draws on empirical evidence at a local government level to provide a critique of the Big Society in its own terms. I was not convinced that the Big Society would deliver the shift in the balance of power between central government and localities that was imagined. Neither was I convinced that the Big Society really was the answer to supposedly 'broken' Britain. My research is therefore based on a simple premise; that the Big Society as it is imagined at a central government level is potentially incompatible with the lived experience of society at a local level. The potential incompatibilities between representations of the imagined Big Society and representations of local 'realities' in Cambridgeshire are thus my focus for analysis as I aim to develop an empirically based critique of the Big Society in its own terms, via exploration of the potential incompatibilities between the imagined Big Society and the lived experience of society at the level of one specific local authority: Cambridgeshire County Council.

1.3.   Cambridgeshire County Council: A Mediating Role

I based my research at Cambridgeshire County Council. The setting was beneficial in both logistical and contextual terms. I have been based in Cambridge throughout the period of this research and thus the County Council and related research settings were easily reached. Furthermore, Cambridgeshire County Council were quick to respond to the Big Society in policy development terms. Despite an initial and emphatic rejection of terminology relating to the Big Society, it seemed clear to me that they were following the government's Big Society and related localism agenda in a number of ways: making a commitment in their 2011-12 Integrated Plan to become a 'genuinely local council' who wanted to 'hand power for decision making, budgets and service provision to the most local level possible'; setting up the Localism and Community Engagement Board to oversee the development of localism at the County Council; and commissioning a number of pilot projects to allow them to test their ideas for localism.

My multiple embedded case study design involves one primary case and two 'embedded units of analysis' (Yin, 2009: 63). Cambridgeshire County Council and more specifically the Localism and Community Engagement Board represent my primary case. I chose the two embedded cases from amongst the pilot projects that were being undertaken by the Council at the time of my data generation in order to test their ideas for localism. The first is a Community Led Planning pilot which involved the County Council, a Parish Council and a third sector organisation. The second is an Area Committee Participation pilot which involved the County Council and one of the County's five District Councils. The two pilot projects that I selected enabled me to explore my research questions (see Chapter Three) across three tiers of local government in Cambridgeshire but in which the pilot objectives were broadly similar and both of which fed directly into Cambridgeshire County Council's development of localism. I did not intend the cases to be comparative but rather complementary in my exploration of the research questions.

As I argued earlier in this chapter, local government authorities as the beneficiaries of decentralisation as power is supposedly passed to them from central government on its way to local communities and local people must be considered increasingly influential in terms of their causal powers. That is, what happens in terms of policy development at a local authority in response to the Big Society, must to some extent impact on the potential realisation (or not) of the Big Society in that locality.

1.4.   Critical Discourse Analysis and the Big Society

I position myself and this research within a critical realist ontology (Bhaskar, 1989; Archer, 1995; Sayer, 2000; Hruby, 2001: 57). This ontology necessitates an understanding that social actors' representations of the imagined Big Society and subsequently of localism at Cambridgeshire County Council are both fallible and questionable. Similarly it is important to note that my own understandings and interpretations of literature and data as presented throughout this thesis must all be considered from the same critical perspective. That is to say, my own understandings and interpretations are constructed, shaped and constrained by the discourses available to me and the contextual factors that influence me.

The aim of critical realism is to explain 'social processes and events in terms of the causal powers of both structures and human agency and the contingency of their effects' (Fairclough, 2010: 355-6). In this research study I aim to explore the potential incompatibility of the imagined Big Society with local 'realities' in Cambridgeshire via the analysis and interpretation of the County Council's development of localism, entailing therein the causal powers of both structures (e.g. Cambridgeshire County Council, district councils, parish councils) and human agency (e.g. councillors and officers).

Critical discourse analysis (CDA), influenced by critical realism, offers a theoretical perspective by which the development of localism at Cambridgeshire County Council in relation to the coalition government's Big Society programme and related Localism Act (2011) can be explained:

> Social actors within any practice produce representations of other practices, as well as of their own practice, in the course of their activity within the practice. They 'recontextualise' other practices…that is, they incorporate them into their own practice, and different social actors will represent them differently according to how they are positioned within the practice. Representation is a process of social construction of practices, including reflexive self-construction – representations enter and shape social processes and practices.
> (Fairclough, 2001: 123)

Given that policies, in getting people to do things, need to give information about who needs to do what, how it needs to be done and why it needs to be done (Muntigl, 2000: 146), it follows that both the imagined Big Society and Cambridgeshire County Council's development of localism must represent the actors and actions central to their social practices. I have therefore focused on actors and the actions in which are represented as partaking within my critical discourse analysis of the data generated during my fieldwork at the County Council. The actors which I have interpreted as being central to the imagined Big Society are: central government, local government, communities and people. My position is that dominant central government discourses of devolvement and decentralisation of powers from a central to a local level are unrealistic at best and misleading at worst; in effect creating a myth of empowerment in order for local government

authorities to aid social cohesion in a time of potential unease and unrest given particularly the economic climate and so called 'age of austerity'.

There are several different scales of social practice involved in the introduction and development of the Big Society. The Big Society was conceived of at a party political level from 2009; commitments regarding the Big Society were made in the coalition government's Programme for Government document in 2010; the Localism Bill of 2010 became the Localism Act in 2011; and Cambridgeshire County Council began to develop their 'localism' policy after the announcement of the Big Society was made in May 2010. Each of these is representative of a different scale of social practice. Across different scales there are different social actors, positioned in different ways in relation to the Big Society who each make representations of the Big Society. If representations 'enter and shape social processes and practices' (Fairclough, 2001: 123) then representations of the Big Society, made by different social actors in different institutional settings, would impact on the realisation (or not) of the imagined Big Society.

CDA, and more specifically an integrated dialectical relational and discourse historical approach to CDA (Wodak and Fairclough, 2010), has enabled me to explore in this thesis representations and recontextualisations of the Big Society within the development of localism at Cambridgeshire County Council. I use the concept of recontextualisation to address both the 'transference' of discourses relating to the Big Society through political spheres and from one institution to another and the progression, development or recurrence of discourses relating to the Big Society over the time during which my data was generated. Recontextualisation entails the 'rearrangement of the elements of the practice, in a way determined by the purpose of the context into which it is recontextualised…The deletion of elements of the practice not 'relevant' to the purposes of the context into which it is being recontextualised…The addition of elements, notably purposes for, evaluations of, and legitimations (or delegitimations) of the social practice or elements of it…[and] the substitution of elements' (van Leeuwen, 1993: 204).

CDA offers a theoretical perspective by which I have been able to compare and contrast developing representations and recontextualisations of localism at Cambridgeshire County Council with discourses representing the imagined Big Society in government and Conservative party documents and speeches. In this

way I have been able to develop an empirically based critique of the Big Society in its own terms at a local government level.

1.5.   Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is structured into eight sequential chapters of which this is the first. In Chapter Two I conduct an exploration and construct an understanding, through the available literature, of the political context in which the Big Society was developed and in which this research subsequently took place. I examine the literature on the Big Society and the Localism Act to explore some of the rhetoric, thinking and ideologies related to them according to government sources and academic texts. Given the centrality of local government to the thesis, this chapter considers the role and positioning of local government as it has developed under the coalition government and in relation to the Big Society. The lack of representations in the literature as to the actualities of policy development, responses and organisational positioning at the level of specific local government authorities are underlined and the contribution of this research in providing an empirically based critique of the Big Society in its own terms is made clear.

In Chapter Three I set out my research questions and briefly situate them within the theoretical and methodological framework that I explore in detail in Chapter Four. In the second part of this chapter I describe and explore the research design and methods of data generation that I used in order to develop answers to my research questions. In brief, I employed a longitudinal multiple embedded case study design. With my focus on the recontextualisation of discourses, the contextual focus that case studies enabled was not only beneficial but helpful in illustrating and providing access to the recontextualisations of discourses representing actors within the Big Society. Each chosen case sheds light on these recontextualisations throughout the development of localism at Cambridgeshire County Council. The longitudinal aspect of the research design – implying the investigation and interpretation of change over time and of processes in social contexts (Saldana, 2003; Smith et al., 2004; Bryman, 2008) - allowed me to trace the developing recontextualisations of discourses over the course of a year, consistent with the temporal length of the pilot projects. I began my fieldwork in May 2011 and completed it in early June 2012. In the chapter I also discuss my experience of selecting cases for inclusion and

negotiating access to the research settings. This includes reflexive discussions on the building and maintenance of relationships with key gatekeepers who ultimately proved vital in ensuring a consistently successful and positive year of data generation.

Methods of data generation are then documented and discussed. Methods include: documentary analysis of public and grey literature from Cambridgeshire County Council and each of the related pilot projects as well as from central government and the Conservative Party relating to the development of localism or the Big Society respectively; observations of meetings and events internal to Cambridgeshire County Council as well as those integral to each of the selected pilot projects; and semi-structured interviews which I conducted at three points throughout the twelve months of data generation; at 6 – 8 weeks; at 7 months, and at 12 months. Interviews were undertaken with actors considered central to the development of localism within Cambridgeshire County Council or to one of the pilot projects. The chapter includes discussion of ethical issues, reflexivity, and participant recruitment as well as practical decisions that I made and my justifications for those decisions.

In Chapter Four I explore in turn the theoretical and methodological frameworks within which my research was developed and which I believe has enabled me to develop a critique of the Big Society in its own terms, exploring the potential incompatibilities between the imagined Big Society and the 'realities' of society as represented at Cambridgeshire County Council. In the first section I explore my ontological positioning in relation to the theories of critical realism and social constructionism as well as my interpretivist epistemology. In the second section I explore the concept of discourse as I understand it for this research study - in relation to Critical Discourse Analysis and consequently my methodological approach to CDA; specifically a combined discourse-historical and discourse-relational approach (Wodak, 1996; 2001; Fairclough, 2001; 2003; 2010; Wodak and Fairclough, 2010). I discuss the refinement of my approach in relation to the subdivisions of discourse, most specifically 'discourses' which constitute the main focus for my analysis. Within discourses the analytical categories of social actions and social actors are key. I will also discuss the importance of a focus on context and, in relation, the concept of recontextualisation. These concepts relate specifically to my analytical framework and this chapter includes an exploration of my approach to analysis and the analytical categories which I applied to my data.

In Chapter Five I present an exploration of the research settings in which my fieldwork was carried out. The county of Cambridgeshire and particularly Cambridgeshire County Council, where my research project first began, are introduced. Cambridgeshire County Council's initial response to the government's Big Society is then explored via analysis of documents published in the period after the announcement of the Big Society in May 2010 and prior to the start of my fieldwork in May 2011. The County Council's initial development of localism and my eventual involvement in the three chosen case studies is detailed. Each of the case studies is explored in turn, relating the background and details of each case, the partners involved, and the settings in which the policy or the pilot was developed.

In Chapter Six I relate my interpretations of the analyses I carried out in order to develop answers to the research questions set out in Chapter Three. In the first section of the chapter I relate my interpretations of the analysis of the imagined Big Society as represented in Conservative Party and coalition government documents and speeches between February 2009 and December 2010. This takes into account a timeframe that includes the build up to the general election of 2010, the general election itself, and the first few months of the coalition government's term in office. This analysis allows me to construct an interpretation of the Big Society in its own terms. In the second section of the chapter I relate my interpretations of the analyses of the recontextualisations and representations of discourses representing actors central to the imagined Big Society throughout the development of localism in Cambridgeshire between 2011 and 2012. This section focuses initially on my primary case study – Cambridgeshire County Council and specifically the Localism and Community Engagement Board. The section will then focus on my first embedded case study – the Community Led Planning pilot; and finally on my second embedded case study – the Area Committee Participation pilot. The third and final section of this chapter summarises, compares and contrasts the discourses representing actors considered central to the imagined Big Society with recontextualisations of discourses representing those same actors in my analysis of Cambridgeshire County Council's development of localism within and across each of my three case studies. I focus particularly on any inconsistencies or tensions that are apparent either within or across each of the scales of social practice evident in the imagined Big Society or the development of localism. Finally, I discuss whether and if so how these recontextualisations might constrain or enable the potential realisation of the imagined Big Society in Cambridgeshire. In this discussion I seek

to achieve the overall aim of my research: the development of an empirically based critique of the Big Society in its own terms.

In Chapter Seven I discuss the results of my empirical research as well as the theory and methodology of the study in relation to relevant literature, structuring my argument across three main sections. Each section serves to illustrate and further develop a specific argument: firstly the importance of the focus of this research on the level of local government as a vitally important mediating force; secondly the four key incompatibilities that I will argue have contributed to the failure to realise the imagined Big Society in Cambridgeshire; and thirdly the appropriacy of the approach and methodology that I have taken to this research. I draw in this chapter not only on literature which I present initially in Chapter Two as part of my literature review and exploration of the policy context underpinning the conception and development of the Big Society, but also on more recently published literature relating to the Big Society, localism and local government. This is particularly exciting as it highlights the situation of my own research in a wider emergent and contemporary field of policy related research.

Ultimately I argue that the Big Society (in its own terms) has failed to be realised in Cambridgeshire. I interpret this as being due largely to four key incompatibilities:

1) the 'age of austerity';
2) the unrealistic representations of two social actors considered central to the success of the Big Society – people and communities;
3) the differences in evidence between the representation of local government in the imagined Big Society and the complexities of local government in Cambridgeshire; and
4) the notion of local government freed from central government control.

In Chapter Eight I conclude and summarise my thesis, revisiting the research questions, describing the strengths and weaknesses of my research study, and discussing the original contribution to knowledge that I seek to make.

2. The Big Society, Localism and Local Government

We share a conviction that the days of big government are over; that centralisation and top-down control have proved a failure. We believe that the time has come to disperse power more widely in Britain today; to recognise that we will only make progress if we help people to come together to make life better. In short, it is our ambition to distribute power and opportunity to people rather than hoarding authority within government.

The Coalition's Programme for Government (Cabinet Office, 2010c: 7)

Any despotism is preferable to local despotism. If we are to be ridden over by authority, if our affairs are to be managed for us at the pleasure of other people, heaven forefend that it should be at that of our nearest neighbours.

John Stuart Mill (Mill, 1977 [1862])

2.1. Introduction

My research took place in a unique political context. The first coalition government since the Second World War had, since their formation and in a so called 'age of austerity', introduced a range of initiatives and policy agendas which affected local government in some way. Most pertinent to my research were the Big Society and the Localism Act of 2011. My aim in this research is to develop an empirically based critique of the Big Society in its own terms at a local government level. Cambridgeshire County Council is my primary research setting. As such, the discussion and exploration of the constructed role and positioning of local government in relation to the Big Society and the Localism Act will be the focus of this chapter.

Government policy documents and speeches relating to the origination and announcement of the Big Society constitute the main focus for my consideration of the policy context whilst relevant academic commentaries and texts are drawn upon to further my explorations in relation to local government. This academic literature was collated as a result of searches that I carried out by combining the search terms 'Big Society' and 'localism' with 'local government'. It was necessary for me to

include specifically literature that relates local government with these key coalition policies as, when I did not, the results of my search were wide ranging and far beyond the scope of this thesis. I note for instance the substantial body of academic literature relating specifically to volunteering and the Big Society (e.g. Alcock, 2010; Mohan, 2011; Mycock and Tonge, 2011; Pharoah, 2011; Ockenden et al., 2012), as well as to planning and the Localism Act (e.g. Bishop, 2010; Holman and Rydin, 2013; Jacobs and Manzi, 2013; Pugalis and Townsend, 2013). I further note and acknowledge the value of literature that relates to the ideological or theoretical underpinnings of the Big Society (e.g. Alcock, 2010; Glasman, 2010; Jordan, 2010; Kisby, 2010; Evans, 2011; Taylor, 2011; Albrow, 2012; Sullivan, 2012; Corbett and Walker, 2013). Equally I note the body of literature relating specifically to 'new localism' (e.g. Corry and Stoker, 2002; Pratchett, 2004), a policy movement which pre-dated localism under the Conservative Party and, subsequently, the coalition government. Whilst it can be argued that, with a different focus, any of these bodies of literature could be relevant to my study, the finite scope of my project demands a specific focus: the development of an empirically based critique of the Big Society in its own terms at a local government level. This required me to restrict the boundaries of my inclusion criteria to enable a focus on academic literature that considered the role and positioning of local government as it was constructed under the coalition government and in relation to the Big Society.

A definition of local government is advanced by Wilson and Game (2011: 37) who describe it as:

> A form of geographical and political decentralisation, in which directly elected councils, created by and subordinate to Parliament, have partial autonomy to provide a wide variety of services through various direct and indirect means, funded in part by local taxation.

This definition hints at the complexity of local government, and I readily acknowledge that such complexities have been the subject of much research and academic literature (e.g. Stoker, 1991; Lowndes, 1996; Stewart 2000; Leach and Percy-Smith, 2001; Pratchett, 2004; Pratchett and Leach, 2004; Stoker, 2004; Chandler, 2007; Lowndes and Sullivan, 2008; Wilson and Game, 2011). The publication in 2011 of Wilson and Game's fifth edition of 'Local Government in the United Kingdom' is itself testament to this complexity and the existence of local government in a 'state of apparently perpetual motion' (Wilson and Game, 2011: 15)

which has warranted the re-writing and re-publishing of this book five times in the last twenty years.

In England, many areas have two tiers of local government, namely county councils and district, borough or city councils. Other parts of the country have one unitary tier of local government which provides all of the local services (GOV.UK, 2013). Cambridgeshire has a two tier local government system with a County Council and five District Councils. According to GOV.UK (2013) county councils are responsible for services across a whole county such as education, transport, planning, fire and public safety, social care, libraries, waste management and trading standards. District Councils cover a smaller area than county councils and have responsibility for services such as rubbish collection, recycling, council tax collection, housing and planning applications. Within Cambridgeshire there are also hundreds of parish councils. Parish councils, which are elected by their local communities, operate at a level below district councils and have a wide range of powers relating to local issues, such as allotments, play areas, community centres, street lighting, car parks, grants to help local organisations and consultation on neighbourhood planning. Parish councils can also issue fixed penalty fines for such things as graffiti, litter and dog fouling (ibid).

Such a description further emphasises the undoubted complexities within local government in the UK. Indeed bodies of literature can be found in relation to such specific issues as locally elected councillors (e.g. Lee, 1963; Budge et al., 1972; Corina, 1974; Newton, 1976; Jennings, 1982; Gyford, 1984), public policy making (e.g. Dorey, 2005; Bochel and Duncan, 2007; Hill, 2009; Wilson and Game, 2011), and the effectiveness of town and parish councils (e.g. Ellwood and Nutley, 1992; Pearce and Ellwood, 2002; Jones, 2007; Derounian, 2011). Nonetheless, for the purpose of this chapter my focus is on (1) the political context in which the Big Society was created; and (2) the role and position that are constructed for local government within that context.

2.2.   Local Government and the Coalition

Local governance was seen as a key area for reform by the coalition government in their early policy announcements. In a document entitled 'The Coalition: our

programme for government' (Cabinet Office, 2010c), Prime Minister David Cameron and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg cite building a new economy, unlocking social mobility, redistributing power from central to local governments and communities, and increasing transparency as the main points in their programme for partnership government. They state that, 'wherever possible, we want people to call the shots over decisions that affect their lives' (Cabinet Office, 2010c: 7). Claims that the programme 'offers the potential to completely recast the relationship between people and the state: citizens empowered; individual opportunity extended; communities coming together to make lives better' (Cabinet Office, 2010c: 8) emphasise the apparently radical nature of what it seems they want to achieve.

A concern with local government is nothing new for central governments. Wilson (2003: 317) notes that 'Central-local relations have been of particular interest since the Labour Party came to power in 1997' in an article in which he argues that for all the participation that local government actors do, they are lacking in influence: 'the plurality which characterises sub-central governance does not reflect a pluralist power structure.' In this section of the chapter and in order to better understand the national policy context for local government then, I will first briefly explore and discuss the New Labour legacy, drawing on a mixture of government texts and academic references to do so. I will then move on to explore the two main coalition policies in relation to local government reform and which seem to represent the pinnacle of the coalition government's ambition for British society: the Big Society and the Localism Act (2011).

2.2.1. The New Labour Legacy – A Brief Discussion (1997 – 2010)

David Cameron's (2009b) verdict on Labour's 1997 manifesto declaration that "Local decision-making should be less constrained by central government, and also more accountable to local people" is as follows:

> they have completely failed to live up to this pledge. In 2007 the Ministry of Justice published a 'Governance of Britain' green paper which (correctly) stated that, "power remains too centralised and too concentrated in government hands.

As it happens, ten years after UK local government was described as 'hypercentralised' by European standards (Loughlin, 2001, ch. 2), the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Select Committee still considered England to be 'one of the developed worlds most centralised democracies' (House of Commons, 2009, para. 9). In this respect then, David Cameron was not alone in his belief. So what exactly is the legacy upon which Cameron's reaction – building the Big Society – is based? An understanding of this may well be significant to gaining a greater insight into the underlying motivations and intentions of this purportedly new policy.

In May 1997, Tony Blair's recently rebranded New Labour swept to an uncompromising election victory. One Guardian journalist hailed the victory, in the immediate aftermath, as 'the people's victory'; one in which the UK electorate, in 'bringing in the centre-left, despatched the right into outer darkness with a conclusiveness that has never been done to it in time of prosperity and peace' (Young, 1997: 10). Rawnsley, in an article written for The Observer in May 1997, presented the victory as 'an immense opportunity' for the new Cabinet 'to redefine the terms of political debate and recapture the language of political exchange'. This excitement was indicative and reflective of what was described by Coates (2000: 2) as a key and distinctive theme of the New Labour leadership: 'New Labour coming into power promised to modernise Britain, and to re-energise it (to make the country 'young' again)'. The Labour Party manifesto, 'New Labour, New Life for Britain' (Labour Party, 1996) set out the party's new Third Way approach to policy and their 'vision of the future based on a re-articulation of the language of community and citizenship, reciprocity and responsibility, justice and fairness' (Newman, 2001: 1). New Labour's 'Third Way' was 'neither Thatcherite nor old Labour' (Coates, 2000: 3) and was to set them somewhere between 'the market individualism of neo-liberalism and the collectivist, state-centred approach of Labour governments of the past' (Newman, 2001: 1).

The 1997 Labour party manifesto was based on their own 'distinctive' understanding of how modern nations work; that is, they work well 'if they are based on a dynamic economy and a developed civic society' (Coates, 2000: 11). The two go together and each are enhanced by policies which recognise that 'the role of government has changed: today it is to give people the education, skills, technical know-how to let their own enterprise and talent flourish in the new market place' (Blair, 1997). This alludes to what is set out clearly in the 1997 manifesto with regard to the 'over-

centralisation of government and lack of accountability' that was 'a problem in both governments of left and right'. New Labour pledged their commitment to 'the democratic renewal of our country through decentralisation and the elimination of excessive government secrecy' (Labour Party, 1996).

In an analysis of local government as one of 'three key aspects of the government machine', Burch and Holliday (2000: 65) state that 'the diagnosis was that local authorities had become too constrained by central government and needed to be made more accountable to local people.' Indeed, a 'new localism' rhetoric was evident throughout the most recent Labour administration (Corry and Stoker, 2002; Local and Regional Government Research Unit, 2005; Morgan, 2007). They promised a 'double devolution': a transfer of power from the centre to local government and from local government to neighbourhoods, signifying empowerment and a new community politics (Atkinson, 2010).

Stoker (2004: 48) cited New Labour's desire to 'make politics work again at the local level' as crucial, and summarised New Labour's three key themes in relation to their local government agenda as 'performance management, democratic renewal and 'joined-up partnership working'. There is a balance to be sought in New Labour's programme between 're-building state capacity' and establishing the basis for 'a devolution of power within the state'. Stoker's (2004: 53) interpretation is as follows:

> The rebuilding of state capacity, then, stretches from a simple determination to make the government machine (and its agencies) work more effectively, through an interest in a longer-term re-engineering of public bureaucracies and the means of service delivery, to a political commitment to a decentralised politics.

In a discussion of New Labour's modernisation of governance and policy making, Newman (2001: 6) foregrounded the issues of discourse, ideology and culture, understanding the extent to which New Labour drew on 'the languages of democracy, citizenship, society, community, social inclusion, partnership, public participation' as 'an attempt to reinstall 'the social' in public and social policy'.

The extent to which New Labour were successful in achieving their electoral mandate of 1997 is a debatable and contested area. Cameron's Big Society is one specific policy which, it is argued, sets the coalition government's programme for

government apart from that of New Labour and about which, as stated at the beginning of this section, Cameron and his Conservative Party are particularly emphatic in their critique. The implications 'for the size of the state and for the allocation of responsibility between individuals and the state' (Bochel, 2011: 20) mark a departure for Britain from social policy under New Labour to social policy under David Cameron's coalition government but the distinction is perhaps not as clear as Cameron may have been attempting to portray. I will now move on to look at the key policies relating to local government that have been proposed by the coalition government since their parliamentary term in office began, specifically the Big Society and the Localism Act (2011).

2.2.2. Key Coalition Policies: The Big Society

Origins and Building Blocks

Cameron's leadership campaign of 2005 was notable for his apparent desire to modernise the party, appearing to suggest a break from traditional Thatcherite politics (Bochel, 2011) and turning to more socially liberal and inclusive policies with a greater emphasis on social representation within both the party itself and within parliament (Denham and O'Hara, 2007).

A large part of Cameron's attempt to distance the Conservative party from their 'nasty party' image and move them towards a new 'compassionate Conservatism' (Bochel, 2011) lay in the idea of 'broken Britain'; an idea which seems to owe much to Cameron's predecessor, Iain Duncan Smith. After standing down from his position as leader of the Conservative party, Iain Duncan Smith established the Centre for Social Justice which, in 2006, produced a report called *Breakdown Britain* (Social Justice Policy Group, 2006). This was followed shortly after by the publication of a subsequent report entitled *Breakthrough Britain* (Social Justice Policy Group, 2007). Breakdown Britain (2007: 13) was structured around what the Social Justice Policy Group called the 'five pathways to poverty' which they understood to be 'family breakdown', 'educational failure', 'economic dependence', 'indebtedness' and 'addictions'. The reports highlighted the importance and value of charities and community groups in addressing these problems but suggested that state provision could be seen as having replaced their role. The response to this – 'a perceived need for a smaller central state, with more significant roles being

played by many of the organisations of civil society' (Bochel, 2011: 15) – marked the beginning of what was to become the 'Big Society'.

The Conservative Party's localism paper, *Control Shift:* Returning Power to Local Communities, Policy Green Paper No.9 (The Conservative Party, 2009) called for a radical 'new programme of political decentralisation to revitalise democracy and strengthen community life' which would be realised through a 'five-pillar strategy' to shift power from central government to local communities:

1. Giving local communities a share in local growth;
2. Freeing local government from central control;
3. Giving local people more power over local government;
4. Giving local people more ability to determine spending priorities;
5. Removing regional government.

In the annual Hugo Young Memorial Lecture of the same year, Cameron set out why such a strategy was necessary, arguing that 'the recent growth of the state has promoted not social solidarity, but selfishness and individualism'. It was in this same speech that the term 'Big Society' first made a public appearance (Evans, 2011; 164), with Cameron describing his ambition as being that of creating a transition 'from big government to Big Society' (Cameron, 2009b). Quoting Phillip Blond, director of ResPublica and identified as the 'driving force behind David Cameron's Big Society agenda' (Hennessey, 2010; Kisby, 2010), Cameron used the speech as an opportunity to assert that:

> the state ... has dispossessed the people and amassed all power to itself ... This centralisation of power has made people passive when they should be active and cynical when they should be idealistic. This attitude only makes things worse - the more people think they can't make a difference, the more they opt out from society.

Blond (2010: 80) alleged that Britain was facing a 'fallout from twin crises – one economic and one social' and it seems to particularly be this 'social crisis' which the Big Society was designed to address. Drawing on an emotive rhetoric of damage, crisis and ill health with not much short of seeming zeal, zest and enjoyable abandon (the section from which these quotes come is entitled 'Resuscitating society'), Blond recognises the need for individual will in reversing this trend and

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restoring social capital, whilst asserting the need for 'bold political leadership and a radical new localism that puts power in the hands of associative groups' (ibid). Blond (2010) calls this 'renewed, radical, social-reform agenda centred on communitarian civic conservatism based on older, pre-Thatcher traditions' (Lewis 2012: 180), 'red Toryism'.

The answer for Cameron seemed to lie in reducing the role of the state to one which would see it 'directly agitating for, catalysing and galvanising social renewal' in order to help create the Big Society – Cameron's alternative to big government (Cameron 2009b).

In March 2010 and just before the announcement of the 2010 general election, the Big Society plan was officially unveiled in The Conservative Party's *Building a Big Society*. This document placed the building of a Big Society firmly 'at the heart of the Conservative Party's vision for change (The Conservative Party 2010a: 1) and described the Big Society itself as a 'positive alternative to Labour's failed big government approach' (ibid). The document outlined how the Conservative Party would develop the Big Society agenda by focussing on three areas (The Conservative Party, 2010a: 1):

1. Public Service Reform

   - enabling social enterprises, charities and voluntary groups to play a leading role in delivering public services and tackling deep-rooted social problems
   - creating a Big Society Bank, funded from dormant bank accounts, to leverage private sector investment and provide finance for neighbourhood groups, charities, social enterprises and other non-governmental bodies

2. Empowering communities to address local issues

   'These policies will give new powers and rights to neighbourhood groups: the "little platoons" of civil society – and the institutional building blocks of the Big Society' (The Conservative Party, 2010a: 1)

   - enabling parents to start new schools

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- empowering communities to take over libraries and parks, etc that are under threat
- giving neighbourhoods greater control over the planning system
- enabling local residents to hold the police to account in neighbourhood beat meetings

3. Bringing about a lasting culture change to support the work of neighbourhood groups, charities and social enterprises

   - encouraging mass engagement and social action projects by:

     • developing the National Citizen Service for 16 year olds to enable them to develop the skills needed to become responsible and active citizens;
     • transforming the civil service into a 'civic service' by making regular community service a key element in staff appraisals; and
     • launching an annual national 'Big Society Day' to celebrate the work of neighbourhood groups and encourage more people to take part in social action projects.

Lewis (2012:190) is clear that the Big Society 'is undoubtedly central to the agenda for rolling back the state as part of the neo-liberal restructuring of welfare services', whilst according to Evans (2011: 165), the Big Society is the Conservative Party's 'response to the central claim of their election campaign — that we are living in 'Broken Britain'.

Of relevance here is literature that discusses the concept of 'community' as it is used in politics and policy making. Taylor (2003: 37-38) argues that:

Politicians and policy makers – in seeking ways to work with a particular set of people identified as living in the same place or having characteristics in common – tend to confuse descriptive and normative meanings of community. They assume that common location or interests bring with them social and moral cohesion, a sense of security, and mutual trust. But they also tend to go a step further and assume that norms will be turned into action: that is, that community can be turned into agency, with people caring

for each other, getting involved in collective enterprises and activities, and acting together to change their circumstances.

I argue that this sounds remarkably similar to David Cameron's representation of communities within these documents developing and introducing the Big Society. Perhaps David Cameron was attempting to use the idea of community to lend credence and credibility to the Big Society, to combat so-called 'broken Britain' by 'importing moral cohesion' (Taylor, 2003: 49) and to aid in the decentralisation agenda as a response to New Labour's creation of a 'big state'.

Announcement and Ambition

David Cameron and Nick Clegg jointly announced the Big Society initiative at a conference on 18th May 2010 after reaching their historic agreement to form a coalition government following the election of 2010. In a document entitled 'Building the Big Society' (Cabinet Office, 2010a) the new government asserted their desire to:

> give citizens, communities and local government the power and information they need to come together, solve the problems they face and build the Britain they want. We want society – the families, networks, neighbourhoods and communities that form the fabric of so much of our everyday lives – to be bigger and stronger than ever before. Only when people and communities are given more power and take more responsibility can we achieve fairness and opportunity for all.

In the coalition's Programme for Government document (2010c: 8), the jointly agreed upon nature of the initiative is emphasised through the affirmation that:

> …when you take Conservative plans to strengthen families and encourage social responsibility, and add to them the Liberal Democrat passion for protecting our civil liberties and stopping the relentless incursion of the state into the lives of individuals, you create a Big Society matched by big citizens.

Despite it being made to sound so easy and borne of common sense, Cameron has been forced to defend and relaunch the Big Society on a number of occasions. He nonetheless remains adamant of his 'passion' for building it and it remains 'at the

very heart of the government's agenda – rhetorically if not always in practice' (Szreter & Ishkanian, 2012: 2). The Big Society has often been labelled as rhetoric in academic texts (e.g. Alcock, 2010; Kisby, 2010; Stott, 2011; Taylor, 2011; Albrow, 2012; Szreter & Ishkanian, 2012). That is not to say that these authors do not see the potential for the Big Society to have some impact or effect on society, more often it is merely that the idea requires more concrete definition and committed implementation if it were to do so. Hunter (2011: 13) alludes to the lack of definition attributed to the Big Society in his assertion that:

> Much of the appeal (and conversely the scepticism) surrounding the Big Society concept lies in its slipperiness and vagueness. It can mean what you want it to mean, although it generally seems from recent public opinion surveys that few people have much of a clue.

Despite its undoubted ill-definition in the immediate aftermath of the 2010 election, the Big Society programme did encompass a range of possible initiatives, some of which were broadly outlined by the Prime Minister in his Big Society speech delivered on 19th July 2010. These possible initiatives ranged 'from devolving budgets to street-level, to developing local transport services, taking over local assets such as a pub, piloting open-source planning, delivering broadband to local communities, generating their own energy…' In this same speech Cameron announced that Eden Valley, Windsor and Maidenhead, Sutton and Liverpool were to be the four 'vanguard communities' of the Big Society. The communities were described, rather ambitiously, as 'the great training grounds of change… the first territory on which real and ultra local power is a reality – and the Big Society is built.' However, this was undermined when Liverpool pulled out of the pilot just seven months later, claiming that government cuts were threatening the future of many local volunteer groups and hindering the council in supporting their communities to achieve the visions of the Big Society. This prompted a re-launch of the Big Society initiative in a speech made by David Cameron on 14th February 2011 in which he described the Big Society as his 'absolute passion' and asserted that it was going to continue to 'get every bit of [his] passion and attention over the five years of this government'.

Building the Big Society was depicted as 'the responsibility of all departments of government, and the responsibility of every citizen too' (Cabinet Office, 2010a: 1). Nonetheless, it is often portrayed in academic literature very much as 'David

Cameron's core intellectual idea' (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012: 30) rather than an initiative of the collective. Additionally there are ministers and departments who, in reality, are likely to play a key role in the development and possible realisation of the Big Society.

Nick Hurd (MP) is the Minister for Civil Society and leads the Office for Civil Society (OCS). The OCS work 'across government to translate the Big Society vision into practical policies and to deliver a radical change in the relationship between citizen and state' and 'support Ministers in their commitment to:

- make it easier to run a charity, social enterprise or voluntary organisation;
- get more resources into the sector and strengthen its independence and resilience; and
- make it easier for sector organisations to work with the state.'

(Cabinet Office, 2010b)

The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) is also central to the Big Society programme. The description of DCLG's role on their public facing departmental website (DCLG, 2013) reads:

> We work to move decision-making power from central government to local councils. This helps put communities in charge of planning, increases accountability and helps citizens to see how their money is being spent.

From a government perspective at least, the Big Society remains very much a part of their mandate. Like it or loathe it, rhetoric or policy, Cameron made it clear that the Big Society would remain at the heart of the coalition government's programme for government throughout their term in office. The role that local government is imagined to have within the Big Society and how local government authorities respond to the Big Society remains to be seen but will be explored via empirical evidence generated at Cambridgeshire County Council throughout this thesis.

2.2.3. Key Coalition Policies: The Localism Act (2011)

The Localism Act (2011) is intended to 'create opportunities and demand for the three key principles of the Big Society' (Lowndes & Pratchett, 2012: 31), identified in government literature as empowering communities, opening up public services, and

promoting social action (Cabinet Office, 2010c: 3). It is also intended to provide the legislation to deliver on the promised shift of power from central government to local communities. In these respects then, the Localism Act is not only linked to but also vitally important for the realisation of the Big Society.

In contrast to the apparently rhetorical nature of the Big Society, the coalition government were very quick to introduce new legislation around the related localism agenda. The Localism Bill (2010) was announced in the Queen's Speech at the opening of their first Parliament on the 25th May 2010 and had its first reading on 13th December 2010.

Eric Pickles, the newly appointed Minister for Communities, made an early statement in which he announced his three key priorities for local government as 'localism, localism and localism' (Wilson and Game, 2011: 394). The Localism Bill (2010) was able to provide evidence of concrete action to support this rhetoric in the form of the legislative framework designed to achieve the shift of power from central government to local authorities and communities. In November 2011 the Bill was passed, granted Royal Assent, and became an Act. The decisive and quick enactment of the Bill signals, according to Lowndes and Pratchett (2012: 26), 'a very different type of relationship between central and local government.' Before I explore this relationship further, I will briefly explore the measures by which the Act is supposed to be able to achieve this shift of power so seemingly central to the coalition government's plans.

Much of the Act (2011) focuses on the provision of 'new freedoms and flexibility for local government' (DCLG, 2011: 4) in an attempt to shift power from central government to local communities. This essentially entails the abolition of several functions and processes by which central government were able to regulate the activities and decision making of local authorities, in favour of 'freeing councils to go about their business in a way that suits their local circumstances' (DCLG, 2011: 7). More specifically, the proposals included the following initiatives (DCLG, 2011: 4-7):

- A 'general power of competence' is intended to give 'local authorities the legal capacity to do anything that an individual can do that is not specifically prohibited'. The basic premise is that this power will give councils more freedom to work in ways which will both save money and meet the specific needs of their own local areas

- The abolition of the Standards Board which previously regulated the behaviour of elected councillors in favour of codes to be drawn up by individual local authorities
- A clarification of the rules on predetermination in order to encourage councillors to 'play an active part in local discussions' without becoming 'liable to legal challenge as a result'
- Greater control over local business rates in order to help and support the growth of local economies
- Referendums to be held in the largest cities outside London to decide whether or not they wanted to have an elected mayor. The Coalition Government believe that 'elected mayors would help strengthen the governance' of cities

All of this removal of top-down regulation in the name of freedom and flexibility, even if it were to have the effect promised by the coalition government, cannot alone be enough to ensure that the promised shift of power is achieved (DCLG, 2011). As Keohane (2011) notes, 'the government has done a good job when it comes to increasing councils' negative liberty … it is to the question of councils' positive liberty that ministers should now turn their minds'. Presumably in order to address this imbalance, the Localism Act (2011) also includes a number of initiatives which are designed to pass new rights and powers directly to communities and individuals, for instance (DCLG, 2011: 8-10):

- The community right to challenge gives 'voluntary and community groups, parish councils and local authority employees the right to express an interest in taking over the running of a local authority service'. The idea is supposed to make it easier for local groups with 'good ideas' to put them forward and 'drive improvement' in their own local services. However, even if a challenge was accepted by a local government authority, it still only grants the community group or individuals the right to bid in a procurement exercise. There is no guarantee that they will win the bid and seemingly no requirement for authorities to assist communities in the procurement process.
- The community right to bid will allow community groups the time to develop bids and raise money to bid to buy community assets if and when they come on the open market, thereby supposedly helping to protect local amenities such as village shops and pubs.

- The right to veto or approve excessive council tax rises at their own local level rather than at the level of central government.

As Lowndes and Pratchett (2012: 28) note, 'at face value these reforms promise to renew local democracy by making local authorities and other bodies more accountable and responsive to the communities that they serve.' In this regard the Localism Act does appear to go some way to delivering on the promises associated with localism. Nevertheless, the impact of the reforms on local government authorities and on the relationship between central and local government cannot possibly be judged without empirical research at the level of local government authorities. It also cannot be explored further without revisiting the age of austerity and the positioning of local government under the coalition government in light of these key policies. In the next sections of this chapter I will therefore endeavour to do both.

2.2.4. Local Government and the Coalition: A New Central-Local Relationship?

In the coalition government's Programme for Government document, Cameron and Clegg claimed that their policies offer 'the potential to completely recast the relationship between people and the state: citizens empowered; individual opportunity extended; communities coming together to make lives better' (Cabinet Office, 2010c: 8). The question then must be, what is the position of local government in this new relationship and what is their role (if they have one) in developing it? Some academic literature has argued that, in the immediate aftermath of the announcement of the Big Society, there was no real attempt to address this question by either David Cameron or his coalition government (e.g. Cox, 2010; Sullivan, 2012; Szreter & Ishkanian, 2012; Szreter, 2012). Lowndes and Pratchett (2012:31) however, argue that the Big Society and local government reforms are 'intrinsically linked' as evidenced by the overlap of Big Society and Localism policies and legislation.

The 'freedoms and flexibilities' as well as the powers being devolved to local governments and local communities can be seen as indicative of a government wishing to empower communities and instil within them the principles and actions of civic responsibility (Lowndes & Pratchett, 2012). However there has also been much criticism of the Big Society and related Localism policies, not least in the political

realm. The coalition has been accused by the Labour Party of 'cynically attempting to dignify its cuts agenda, by dressing up the withdrawal of support with the language of reinvigorating civic society' (Ed Miliband MP cited in Watt, 2010). Academics too have been critical of localism. For instance, in an article that discusses the 'geographies of localism', Clarke and Cochrane (2013: 14) claim that the coalition government's localism tends 'to overestimate the extent to which contemporary localities are coherent and autonomous – or the extent to which they can be made to be so'. This undermines the government's claims that devolvement and decentralisation to a local level are the answer to the problem of 'broken' Britain.

Lowndes and Pratchett (2012) argue that the relationship between civil society and the state is a defining feature of the coalition government's policies, and note with particular criticism its 'zero-sum concept' in contrast to New Labour's 'positive-sum concept'. They define 'zero-sum' as that whereby 'more 'society' involvement equates to less 'state' activity' (2012: 32); thus highlighting the coalition government's emphasis on decentralisation and devolvement of powers, freedoms and responsibilities over state intervention, monitoring or even, to some extent, assistance in implementing the principles of the Big Society. Drawing in the issue of spending cuts and the 'age of austerity', Lowndes and Pratchett (2012: 38) conclude their article with assertions that the coalition government's 'proposed retreat from the trend to centralism … may be as much the corollary of savage public spending cuts and the need to externalise the responsibility for performance failure as the outcome of a principled commitment to more autonomous local government'. There certainly seems to be a tension between the policies evident in the Localism Act and in government documentation relating to the Big Society, and the spending cuts to local government services.

It has been evidenced in research on UK local government that an active and well functioning civil society tends to be allied with a vigorous local council (Lowndes et al., 2006). Given that the development of the Big Society arguably necessitates the support and mobilisation of local government authorities in regard to their communities, and given the coalition government's infliction of spending cuts on local government and their seeming mistrust of local government, a successful realisation of David Cameron's imagined Big Society must surely be called into question.

2.3.   The Political Context: An Age of Austerity

In his party conference speech of 2009, David Cameron (2009a) asserted that the age of irresponsibility had to give way to the age of austerity; that this was the only way in which to deal with the debt crisis that consumed Britain from 2007 onwards. The part that the economic crisis had to play in shaping the political climate for the 2010 election can neither be denied nor overemphasised. No matter who won the election in May 2010, the incoming government had to address the budget deficit and plan to resolve Britain's considerable national debt. This debt was brought about by a combination of the global financial crisis, the UK's decision to deal with the banking crisis by nationalising several banks rather than see them collapse, and Labour's increase in public spending post 2007 in an attempt to deal with the economic downturn (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012).

This section of the chapter will explore the context of austerity and how this shaped the political landscape in the lead up to, throughout, and beyond the 2010 election. I will look at the new coalition government and how they came to be elected, as well as exploring the impact of the Spending Review of October 2010 on local government.

2.3.1. The 2010 Election

In a discussion of the use of localism in political discourse, Clarke and Cochrane (2013: 11) assert that 'it's meaning is often purposefully vague and imprecise' and that it 'is often intentionally associated, confused or conflated with local government, local democracy, community, decentralisation, governance, privatisation, civil society, etc. for political effect'. This is considered by the authors to be 'part of what makes localism such an attractive concept capable of being mobilised by all three of the UK's main Westminster-oriented political parties' (ibid). Certainly all three of these main parties cited in their manifestos the economy, the strengthening of society, and the political system as the primary challenges that faced Britain at the time of the general election in 2010 (Conservative Party, 2010b; Labour Party, 2010; Liberal Democrats, 2010). Each of the parties however, differed in the policies and pledges that they set out in order to meet and overcome these challenges.

In response to the economic crisis, the Labour Party (2010: 4) pledged not to 'cut spending this year, but instead support the economy to ensure recovery is established'. The Liberal Democrats (2010: 14) declared that they would be 'straight with people about the tough choices ahead'. According to their manifesto (ibid), if they were to cut spending too soon, 'it would undermine the much needed recovery and cost jobs'. Instead therefore, their working assumption was that the economy would 'be in a stable enough condition to bear cuts from the beginning of 2011-12.' The Conservative Party (2010b: 7) on the other hand, cited the need for 'urgent action to reduce debt' and pledged to 'provide an emergency Budget within 50 days of taking office to set out a credible plan for eliminating the bulk of the structural current budget deficit over a Parliament'. These cuts would begin almost immediately in 2010 - 2011.

There seemed to be general agreement amongst the three main parties about the need for society in Britain to be strengthened. All parties stressed the important role of the third sector 'in delivering public services and the need to improve the contractual basis for this with longer-term funding (Alcock, 2010: 380). Other themes shared by the main parties included the encouragement of volunteering and donating, both through corporations and workplace agreements and in wider society. There was also a shared emphasis on the importance of smaller, community-based organisations working alongside larger more service-focused charities, and recognition that community groups and organisations had a vitally important role to play in promoting and supporting community empowerment. However, there were also large areas of disagreement, particularly between the Labour and the Conservative parties.

The Conservative's election campaign of 2010 centred around the idea of 'broken Britain', citing the Big Society as the answer to the country's problems that were brought about and made worse by the previous New Labour government (Evans, 2011). Accordingly, the Conservative Party's Manifesto (2010b: 37) presented the Big Society as the alternative to big government, stating that it would offer:

> a society with much higher levels of personal, professional, civic and corporate responsibility; a society where people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their communities; a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control.

Labour directly refuted the notion of 'broken Britain' in their manifesto: 'Our society is not broken; it is strong in many different ways' (2010: 5). They also directly refuted the Conservative Party's desire to create a smaller state, emphasising their 'belief that it is active, reforming government, not absent government, that helps make people powerful' (2010: 3).

In terms of the Big Society and related policies, the Liberal Democrats did not seem to have as much to say as the other main parties in the run up to the general election. Nonetheless, the Liberal Democrat's 'longstanding commitment to the promotion of community-based social action (Alcock, 2010: 380) did seem to correspond relatively favourably with Conservative Party promises relating to the building of a Big Society.

In terms of local politics and the role of local government specifically, all three main parties differed in their policies. The Liberal Democrats' election manifesto cited their commitment to hand power back to local people and local communities. This commitment is consistent with classic liberal traditions which see the individual as the starting point but understand the community as the setting within which each individual develops their sense of interdependency and responsibility to others (Greaves and Lishman, 1980: 3). The Labour Party, meanwhile, placed local government at the heart of their renewal of the local political system, identifying them as being 'at the forefront of tackling the major challenges our society faces' (2010: 9.4) and promising to strengthen local government and increase local democratic scrutiny. The Labour Party clearly supported the devolvement of power, but saw local government authorities as taking a leading role rather than a supporting one. This is in direct contrast to the Conservative Party, whose manifesto paints a picture of a party adamant that power should be passed, where possible, down to individuals in order to try and ensure 'collaborative democracy' (2010b: 73):

> Our plans to reform public services, mend our broken society, and rebuild trust in politics are all part of our Big Society agenda. These plans involve redistributing power from the state to society; from the centre to local communities, giving people the opportunity to take more control over their lives.

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, local government make very few appearances in the Conservative Party manifesto and their campaign seemed indicative of a suspicion

of local government and a preference to bypass them where possible. Where this did not seem possible, greater transparency was advocated and a series of measures were set out which would give 'democratically accountable local government much greater power to improve their citizens' lives' (2010b: 75).

In the 'age of austerity', whoever was elected in the 2010 general election would have had to resolve their policies and pledges with the economic climate and national debt. As it was, two parties – the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives also had to contend with reaching a coalition agreement that was satisfactory to each of them.

2.3.2. A New Coalition Government

The results of the general election in 2010 were inconclusive. After the vote on Thursday 6th May, none of the parties had achieved the 326 seats needed for an overall majority. The Conservative Party won the largest number of votes with 36.1% and the largest number of seats with 306 but still remained 20 seats short of a majority. This resulted in a hung parliament and the start of five days of coalition talks between the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats. On the 12th May the coalition was approved by the Liberal Democrat's Parliamentary party and Federal Executive and the coalition government was formed. This was the first coalition since the Second World War and the first ever between the two parties.

Sir Malcolm Rifkind MP (2011: viii) cited the economic climate - the 'age of austerity' - as being of central importance to the formation of the coalition government:

> …one cannot understand the coalition government, or its policy platform, without grasping the scale of the economic challenge. The deficit it now seeks to close is not only the Coalition Government's number one priority, but also its very reason for being.

If this is indeed the case then I must consider the economic climate as central to my (and the Conservative Party's) consideration of the Big Society and related Localism policies.

2.3.3. A New Coalition Government in an 'Age of Austerity'

Once in power, the newly elected coalition government summarised their apparently dire economic position thus:

> The coalition government inherited one of the most challenging fiscal positions in the world. Last year, Britain's deficit was the largest in its peacetime history – the state borrowed one pound for every four it spent. The UK currently spends £43 billion on debt interest, which is more than it spends on schools in England.
> (Cmnd-7942, 2010: 5)

The coalition government took the decision to address the deficit almost immediately through an emergency budget on 22nd June 2010, just seven weeks after taking office. The budget (HM Treasury, 2010) predicted weak growth in the UK economy and that national debt would peak at around 70% of GDP (gross domestic product) in 2013/14. In the 'tough but fair' budget designed to address the 'emergency' which Britain faced, the coalition government identified the state as one of the main culprits. In his budget speech, Mr. Osborne (2010) claimed that 'the state today accounts for almost half of all national income' and asserted that this was 'completely unsustainable'. In order to deal with this the coalition government proposed fast and hard cuts to public services, announcing £30 billion of spending cuts over a four year period (HM Treasury 2010: 2). On 20th October 2010 the government's Spending Review was presented, the aim of which was to eliminate structural debt by 2015. The review announced further cuts to public spending, bringing the total up to £81 billion. Included in the Spending Review were estimated public sector job cuts of 490,000 by 2014-15, with average cuts of 19% to government departments and a further £7 billion being cut from the welfare budget.

2.3.4. Local Government in an 'Age of Austerity'

Local government were hit particularly hard by the Spending Review and emergency budget, with the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) seeing a 26% reduction in funding from 2011-2015 (Cmnd-7942, 2010: 50).

The age of austerity that David Cameron had first spoken about in his party conference speech of 2009 seemed to have become a reality for local government

authorities in the face of the Spending Review of October 2010. The coalition government planned to cut spending and budgets across the entire public sector but local government certainly seemed to face some of the toughest cuts; only the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills faced cuts on a similar scale. As Lowndes and Pratchett (2012: 24) highlighted, demands on local services and the payment of benefits was likely to increase following the October 2010 Spending Review, and yet 'the funding (and the staffing) for these same services will be cut by more than a quarter'. How local councils would choose to try and deal with these issues would surely play a major part of any policy development at a local level in a political context such as this.

It is important to note that the Spending Review was not solely preoccupied with cuts and austerity measures. Whilst cuts and austerity messages did dominate in terms of its driving principles, they were not the only messages present within it. The Review claimed to be 'underpinned by a radical programme of public service reform, changing the way services are delivered by redistributing power away from central government and enabling sustainable, long term improvements in services' (Cmnd-7942, 2010: 8).

In a letter sent to all of the Local Authority leaders in England on 20th October 2010 Eric Pickles, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, wrote:

> Councils have long argued that with more freedom and flexibility, they would be much better equipped to become more efficient and effective in delivering local public services. This settlement delivers that freedom and flexibility, as part of the new Government's decentralisation agenda.

Clearly then, the Spending Review was defined by its cuts and austerity measures but, for local government particularly, it was framed also as an opportunity in line with the 'Coalition principles of increasing freedom and sharing responsibility' (Pickles, 2010). The context for local government is thus 'one dominated by austerity and cutbacks, but supposedly mitigated by the coalition government's commitment to liberalisation and decentralisation in relation to communities' (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012: 25). These commitments were to be potentially realised within the Big Society and via the legislation contained within the related Localism Act (2011). Whether the imagined Big Society could be realised at a local

government level remains to be seen and constitutes the focus for analysis in my research.

2.4. Summary

In this chapter I have discussed and explored the constructed role and positioning of local government in relation to two of the coalition government's key policies – the Big Society and the Localism Act (2011). I have focused on the political context within which the Big Society and the related Localism Act were developed, and explored some of the literature on the Big Society and related Localism Act of 2011, particularly in relation to some of the rhetoric, concepts and debates related to them, their origins and their situations at the time at which this project began. This has entailed exploration and discussion of some of the literature relating to aspects of the political context which were pertinent to the context in which these policies were developed, including the argument regarding 'broken Britain' in the build up to the general election of 2010 and the so-called 'age of austerity'. Given the centrality of local government to my thesis, I have considered throughout this chapter the role and positioning of local government in relation to the Big Society.

In my next chapter I will set out my research questions, situate them within my wider research project and discuss my research design and methods of data generation.

3. A Critique of the Big Society in its Own Terms: Research Questions and Data Generation

3.1. Introduction

In the first section of this chapter I will set out and discuss the research questions which I designed to enable me to develop a critique of the Big Society in it own terms at the level of Cambridgeshire County Council. I will briefly situate them within my theoretical and methodological framework but I will not discuss this framework in any depth. That discussion will take place in Chapter Four. In the second part of this chapter I will describe and explore my research design and the methods of data generation that I used in order to develop answers to my research questions.

I developed and refined my research questions throughout the study and in relation to the development of my theoretical framework and my analytical work as it was carried out. Thus my research questions, as with my entire methodology, were developed in an iterative and cyclical fashion. My research questions draw from and depend on my theoretical framework as much as my theoretical framework draws from and depends on my research questions. It is therefore impossible to separate the development of my research questions from the development of my theoretical framework or, for that matter and as will be explored in the second half of this chapter and in Chapter Four, from the development of my methodology. As Wagenaar (2011: 259) sees it, the setting up of dialogue between theory and the world is the 'single most powerful heuristic in interpretive research'. This dialogue is present throughout my research project; each research process is a reflexive, concurrent and cyclical one that informs the design and undertaking of each one of the others, for instance theoretical development, the refinement of research questions, data generation, writing, further data generation, analysis, and so on (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Dörnyei, 2007; Bryman, 2008; Yin, 2009; Wagenaar, 2011).

The complexity of research development is, in some regards, reminiscent of what Wagenaar (2011: 242) calls the 'messy qualities of public policy'. The complexities of policy development in local government and central-local government relationships for instance, both implicated in this research study, are too dense for me to address in this thesis. I have at least partially addressed this problem by

refining the focus of the study through development of my research questions and methods of data generation.

At an early stage of initial analyses of central government documentation relating to the origination, development and announcement of the Big Society, two points of interest emerged which would go on to heavily inform the development and progression of this research study. Firstly, the initial premise set out previously - that the Big Society is potentially incompatible with the lived experience of society at a local level – and secondly, the important role that local government authorities would surely play in any attempts to realise the imagined Big Society. This role was discussed in Chapter Two and will be further discussed throughout the thesis. My own interest in critical discourse analysis (CDA) led me to consider the importance of discourse as a factor in the potential realisation of the Big Society at the level of a local government authority:

> CDA sees discourse – language use in speech and writing – as a form of 'social practice'. Describing discourse as social practice implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s), which frame it: the discursive event is shaped by them but it also shapes them. That is, discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned – it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it.
> (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 258)

The Big Society, if successfully realised, would 'free' local government from central government control, ensure the devolvement of powers to 'the man and woman on the street', and create more responsible citizens who are less dependent on government authorities (see Chapter Six for a more detailed analysis of the imagined Big Society). As such, it has the potential to transform the structures and practices of local government. CDA would allow me to explore representations and recontextualisations of the Big Society within the development of localism at Cambridgeshire County Council, offering a theoretical perspective by which I could compare and contrast these developing representations and recontextualisations with discourses represented in the coalition government's imagined Big Society:

Social actors within any practice produce representations of other practices, as well as of their own practice, in the course of their activity within the practice. They 'recontextualise' other practices…that is, they incorporate them into their own practice, and different social actors will represent them differently according to how they are positioned within the practice. Representation is a process of social construction of practices, including reflexive self-construction – representations enter and shape social processes and practices.

(Fairclough, 2001: 123)

The Big Society was developed at a party political level from 2009; commitments regarding the Big Society were made in the coalition government's programme for government document in 2010; the Localism Bill of 2010 became the Localism Act in 2011; and Cambridgeshire County Council began to develop their 'localism' policy after the announcement of the Big Society was made in May 2010. Each of these is representative of a different scale of social practice. Across different scales there are different social actors, positioned in different ways in relation to the Big Society who each make representations of the Big Society. David Cameron imagined it to be the answer to the problem of 'broken Britain' and has referred to it as his 'mission in politics' (Cameron, 2011); Ed Milliband labelled the Big Society as 'a 'failure' and a return to the Thatcherite policies of the 1980s' (BBC, 2011); Philip Blond described it as 'the most important innovation in British politics for decades' (Blond, 2011); and Kisby (2010: 490) feared that 'at worst, it is dangerous, a genuine belief that charities and volunteers, rather than the state, can and should provide numerous, core public services'. If representations 'enter and shape social processes and practices' (Fairclough, 2001: 123) then representations of the Big Society such as these, made by different social actors in different institutional settings would impact on the realisation (or not) of the imagined Big Society.

Given the differing structures and social practices apparent in my research study as I trace the imaginaries of the Big Society as they are recontextualised throughout Cambridgeshire County Council's development of 'localism' (see section 3.4.2. for details of my research design), the theorisation of contexts must also be considered as important to my analysis.

As I have argued, local government authorities, given the freedoms granted to them in the name of the Big Society and their importance in mediating between representations of policy at a central government level and the lived experience in their own localities, must be considered as increasingly influential in terms of their causal powers (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.
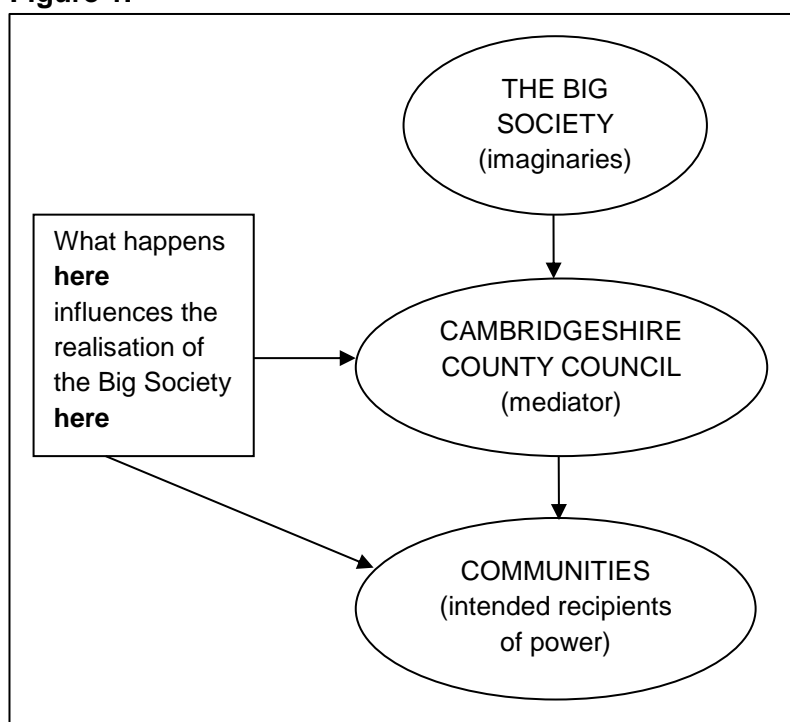
This position was one from which I could develop a much needed empirically based critique of the Big Society in its own terms, exploring whether, and if so how, it could be successfully realised at a local level. In order to develop this critique I needed to find out both what the representations of the imagined Big Society were at a central government level and what the representations of this imagined Big Society were at the level of Cambridgeshire County Council during their development of localism – arguably a policy response to the coalition government's Big Society.

3.2.   Research Questions

My primary research aim has been to develop an empirically based critique of the Big Society in its own terms at a local government level. In order to achieve this aim

I needed firstly to define the Big Society in its own terms. I did this by exploring what the representations of the Big Society were at a central government level, hence:

1. What discourses are drawn on in official government and Conservative Party documents and speeches relating to the imagined goals of the Big Society?

   a) How are social actors and social actions represented in these discourses?
   b) What are the contexts in which these social actors and social actions are represented?
   c) To what extent are representations of these social actors and social actions consistent?

In my analysis of central government documents (see Chapter Six) I identified a number of actors who I interpreted as being central to the imagined Big Society. These actors, evident to some extent in the following summarisation of my interpretations of the imagined goals of the Big Society, were central government, local government, communities, and people:

- *Society* will be civically responsible and independent of *the state*; engaged with and proud of their *communities*; and take opportunities to share the balance of power with *the state*.
- Power and responsibility will be decentralised from *central government* to *local government* and from *local government* to *communities*, *neighbourhood groups* and *individuals*.
- The role of *the state* will be to galvanise, catalyse and encourage *communities* and *individuals*, etc. to fulfil their role in the Big Society. It is a role of empowerment and facilitation rather than provision.

Having interpreted the Big Society in its own terms I was then able to begin an exploration of how discourses that represented these specific actors within the imagined Big Society were recontextualised at a local level. With Cambridgeshire County Council's development of localism as my primary research setting, I developed the following research questions, each relating to a specific method of data generation:

2. What discourses representing the Big Society, government, local government, communities, and people are drawn on in official County Council documents relating to their initial response to the Big Society between May 2010 and May 2011?

    a) How are social actors and social actions represented in these discourses?
    b) What are the contexts in which these social actors and social actions are represented?
    c) To what extent are these representations of social actors and social actions consistent?

3. What discourses representing the Big Society, government, local government, communities, and people do County, District and Parish Council members, Council officers and third sector community organisation workers involved in the development of localism in Cambridgeshire draw on in reflective, semi-structured interviews and in relevant meetings and events?

    a) How are social actors and social actions represented in these discourses?
    b) What are the contexts in which these social actors and social actions are represented?
    c) What aspects of these representations of social actors and social actions change over the course of a year? What are the reasons for change and the contexts related to the changes?
    d) What aspects of these representations of social actors and social actions are consistent or inconsistent?

Finally I undertook to develop a critique of the Big Society in its own terms via analysis of the representations and recontextualisations of discourses representing the actors imagined to be central to the Big Society within the County Council's development of localism:

4. What aspects of these representations of social actors and social actions are consistent or inconsistent across central government and County Council documents and across interviews and observations undertaken with County, District, Parish and third sector organisation actors over the course of a year?

A full discussion of my theoretical and methodological framework including an exploration of the concepts of discourse, recontextualisation, context, and social actors and actions as I understand them within Critical Discourse Analysis can be found in Chapter Four. In the remainder of this chapter I will explore and discuss my research design and the methods of data generation that I used in order to try and develop answers to my research questions.

3.3.   Research Design

Critical discourse analysis methodologies do not advocate typical research designs or collectively agreed upon methods for the generation of data. I therefore tried to develop a research design and methodology of data generation which would be most suited to answering my research questions. This design is a longitudinal multiple embedded case study design; fusing the features of case study research and longitudinal research within an interpretive qualitative framework. The methods of data generation and the data best suited to answering the research questions can only be qualitative, semi-structured interviews, observations and documents - both official publications and internal government papers.

3.3.1. Interpretive Qualitative Research

At a basic philosophical level, qualitative research can be most usually related to an 'intrepretivist and constructionist' account of the nature of society (Bryman, 2008: 13). As Wagenaar (2011: 72) argues: 'it is sometimes overlooked that qualitative research is, in method, analytical thrust and explanatory logic, a full-blooded interpretive approach'. Within qualitative research it is accepted that representations can only ever be partial insights; that society is understood differently by different people depending on their individual experiences and interpretations (Flick, 2002; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Cresswell, 2007; Bryman, 2008). It is an idiographic, descriptive and interactive model in which notions of objective truth are often challenged (see Chapter Four for more detail).

Qualitative research has many critics and defining it can be highly problematic. Denzin and Lincoln (2005: 6-7) commented that 'qualitative research is difficult to define clearly. It has no theory or paradigm that is distinctly its own. … Nor does qualitative research have a distinct set of methods or practices that are entirely its own'. I do not believe that this is problematic in my research study, merely that it gives me the opportunity to develop a set of methods for data generation that best suit the aim of my study and the specific research questions under consideration.

A further criticism commonly levelled at qualitative research is that it lacks the potential for generalisability; a trait which is often taken for granted in quantitative and positivist research which produce empirical, quantifiable data that is easily and apparently objectively validated. But it is less often the case in qualitative research that the goal is the creation of generalisable data and, if it is, then middle-range generalisability can often be achieved via comparison of a number of case studies, for instance. When generalisability is not the main goal, it is more often the case that qualitative researchers aim to 'study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 3). Engaging with this criticism in earnest unfairly requires qualitative researchers to construct their understandings and definitions of qualitative methodologies within the boundaries of positivist scientific understandings of research. Given the interpretive nature of my research study within the specific setting of Cambridgeshire County Council's development of localism, my preoccupation is not with the generalisation of results but with achieving an understanding of the norms that are arrived at by processes that serve to constitute and (re)structure the imagined Big Society in Cambridgeshire.

Qualitative research is often also criticised in relation to the issue of validity. Due to its inherently subjective and interpretative nature, qualitative research requires validity to be attained through the quality of the researcher and the transparency of their methods and analysis as much as through the quality of the data itself. Triangulation – using more than one method or source of data in the study of social phenomena (Bryman, 2008: 379) – 'reflects an attempt to secure an in depth understanding of the phenomenon in question' whilst accepting that 'objective reality can never be captured' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 5). In a brief discussion of triangulation, Atkinson and Delamont (2005: 832) highlight its recognition of 'the multiplicity and simultaneity of cultural frames of reference – spoken, performed, semiotic, material, and so forth – through which social events and institutions are

possible'. Such recognition is necessary in order to lend validity to an interpretive approach. However it can be argued that even triangulation is not enough to adequately enhance the validity of my research and it for this reason that I turn to crystallisation (Richardson, 1997; 2000).

Crystallisation was proposed by Laurel Richardson (1997; 2000) and is a deliberately 'transgressive' form of validity. Richardson (1997: 166) states that transgressive forms permit social scientists to 'conjure a different kind of social science … [which] means changing one's relationship to one's work, *how* one knows and tells about the sociological'. Such validity is achieved not through following the 'traditional' assumption that there is a 'fixed point or an object that can be triangulated' (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005: 963) but through recognition that 'there are far more than 'three sides' by which to approach the world' (ibid). Rather than triangulation then, Richardson proposes crystallisation as 'the central imaginary for "validity":

> Crystallisation, without losing structure, deconstructs the traditional idea of "validity"; we feel how there is no single truth, and we see how texts validate themselves. Crystallisation provides us with a deepened, complex, and thoroughly partial understanding of the topic. Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know.
> (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005: 963)

Such an approach to validity sits well with my development of a critique of the Big Society in its own terms. Developing an understanding and interpretation of the local authority's own representations and recontextualisations of the Big Society and of localism requires an acceptance of multiple truths and the recognition that each text (understood as any form, whether spoken or written, of communication and reflected in my data in the form of interview transcripts, observation notes and published or un-published documents) generated within my research study can be validated in a number of ways dependent on varying interpretations brought to bear by different individuals, groups or institutions. I will therefore consider the notion of crystallisation as the most appropriate form of validity on which to draw throughout this research, and this will be reflected upon throughout the remainder of this chapter and in Chapter Four.

Despite all of the criticisms outlined above, I believe that it is qualitative research which is most suited to exploring the 'world of lived experience' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 8) and the dynamics of social structures and practices. The nature of this study - explorative and focused on interpretations, relationships and processes rather than counting and measurement - as well as my own theoretical interest, constitute important justifications for my use of a qualitative and interpretive methodology in this research study – critical discourse analysis (e.g. Wodak, 1996; 2001; Fairclough, 2001; 2003; 2010; Wodak and Fairclough, 2010). CDA will be explored in more detail in Chapter Four.

3.3.2. A Longitudinal Multiple-Embedded Case Study

There are many who present case study research as a strategy of inquiry, a methodology or a comprehensive research strategy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Cresswell, 2007; Yin, 2009). There are others (e.g. Stake, 2005) who state that case study research is not a methodology but a choice of what is to be studied. The relationships between interpretivism and case study research and critical discourse analysis and case study research are not necessarily easy ones to reconcile; by defining case study research as it is in the literature I shall set out why and, importantly to what extent, I am making use of this design for my research.

In the qualitative paradigm specifically, case study research can be defined as:

> 'an approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audio visual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes'
> (Cresswell, 2007: 73).

The emphasis is very much on the setting or the context of the case or cases being studied (Lofland and Lofland, 1995; Stake, 1995; Marshall and Rossman, 1999; Yin, 2009) and the high pertinence of such contextual conditions to the phenomenon of study. With my focus on the recontextualisation of discourses, a contextual focus is not only beneficial but vital. A case study design was helpful to me in illustrating and providing access to the recontextualisations of discourses representing actors within

the Big Society. Each chosen case would shed light on these recontextualisations throughout the development of localism at Cambridgeshire County Council.

Whilst longitudinal research is usually equated more or less exclusively with quantitative research (Bryman, 2008), it is a design that is also relevant to qualitative research. A longitudinal research design is one which implies the investigation and interpretation of change over time and of processes in social contexts (Saldana, 2003; Smith et al., 2004; Bryman, 2008).

Longitudinal qualitative research is often used in interview-based research studies in which the aim is to investigate change or processes over time (Smith et al., 2004). Longitudinal research also fits well with a case study design, particularly when the researcher is a participant of an organisation for a period of months or years as I was during the fieldwork stage of my research project. Whilst I acknowledge that one year isn't a long period of time when compared with many longitudinal studies, Bryman (2008: 57) specifically states that longitudinal research can take place over a period of months or years. Equally, my inclusion of retrospective documentary analysis focusing on government documents from 2009 onwards and in relation to the origination of the Big Society mean that my analysis spans a total of three years.

There are a number of challenges inherent in longitudinal research, some of which I encountered throughout my period of data generation. The first challenge is the volume of data that is generated within a longitudinal research design and the associated resource intensive nature of the fieldwork and subsequent analysis. I undertook a total of 45 semi-structured interviews and observed 55 different meetings or events relevant to each of my case studies during my year of data generation. The second challenge is the possibility of participant attrition, especially when conducting a number of interviews over a period of time. Interviewees may change jobs, move house or simply lose interest in the research project. This issue can be minimised through the maintenance of positive relationships with key informants and gatekeepers and I was lucky in that I experienced participant attrition with only one participant as a result of the local elections of May 2012. A related problem can be that of addition as interviewees are recruited to the overall sample at a later date upon identification via observations and conversations with key informants. In my case I recruited one additional interviewee after I had conducted

the first of my three sets of interviews based on ongoing observations and suggestions from key gatekeepers.

Despite using a case study design to 'bound' the context of my research to a necessary extent and to provide an important contextual focus to aid with my integrated DHA-DRA approach to CDA (Wodak and Fairclough 2010), I have not adhered strictly to all of the remaining 'major conceptual responsibilities of the qualitative case researcher'. These are identified by Stake (2005: 459) as the selection of phenomena, themes or issues; the seeking of patterns of data to develop the issues; triangulation; and the development of assertions of generalisations about the case. I have instead employed a longitudinal, multiple-embedded case study design within an interpretive epistemology (Wagenaar, 2011) and utilising a critical discourse analysis methodology (Wodak, 1996; 2001; Fairclough, 2001; 2003; 2010; Wodak and Fairclough, 2010). I drew on a number of methods of data generation which are commonly but not exclusively used in case study research and which I believed best suited the aim of my research. These methods will be discussed later in the chapter (see Section 3.4).

3.3.3. Research Settings: Selecting Cases and Negotiating Access

My multiple embedded case study design involves one primary case and two 'embedded units of analysis' (Yin, 2009: 63). In case study research, the importance of choosing the case or cases to be studied cannot be overestimated (Patton, 1990; Vaughan, 1992; Yin, 2009) as the researcher attempts to achieve 'the greatest understanding of the critical phenomena' possible (Stake, 2005: 450). In accordance with my interpretivist approach, choosing the cases for investigation was not an isolated experience and, as recommended by Ritchie et al. (2003), the outcomes of these negotiations and attempts to gain access to study sites are treated as important sources of data in themselves. This information was useful not only during the data generation phases of the research but was also used reflexively during my analysis of the data and in writing up my interpretations of the analysis.

After making initial informal, face to face contact with key gatekeepers at Cambridgeshire County Council via one of my supervisors I secured agreement for the use of the local authority and more specifically the Localism and Community Engagement Board as my primary case. It was further agreed that I would conduct

an unstructured observation at a Localism and Community Engagement Board meeting to further inform the design and development of my research focus and questions. This observation in turn facilitated a face to face meeting with Liz, another key gatekeeper and a County Council officer. Liz had responsibility for overseeing many of the pilot projects that were being carried out under the jurisdiction of the Localism and Community Engagement Board as a key part of their policy development and in order to test out the effectiveness of their ideas for localism (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2011a).

At the meeting with Liz she described to me each of the pilot projects in turn. I then considered carefully the potential for each of the pilot projects to be an embedded case within my multiple embedded case study. This consideration was aided by continued exploration and discussion through an inductive process of written and face to face negotiations with my two key gatekeepers – Liz and John. These negotiations resulted in the selection of two embedded cases which were considered to be illustrative of the County Council's development of localism and which it was considered logistically viable to include in my research. The selected cases were chosen from amongst the pilot projects that were being undertaken by Cambridgeshire County Council at the time.

The formulation of my multiple embedded case study was therefore finalised as:

Primary case:	The Localism and Community Engagement Board at Cambridgeshire County Council
Embedded case 1:	Community Led Planning pilot
Embedded case 2:	Area Committee Participation pilot

Details of each of the three case studies including the background, governance and settings will be explored in Chapter Five. For now I simply emphasise that the two pilot projects selected enabled my exploration of the research questions across three tiers of local government in Cambridgeshire but in which the pilot objectives were broadly similar and both of which fed directly into Cambridgeshire County Council's development of localism. The cases were not intended to be comparative but rather complementary in exploration of the research questions.

The process described above is illustrative of the importance of 'connections' in gaining access to research settings as an unknown or 'outside researcher' (Lofland

and Lofland, 1995; Bryman, 2008). Continuing access to each of the selected cases was also heavily dependent on my cultivation of good relationships with the key gatekeepers – not only those encountered initially but also those related specifically to each pilot project. A gatekeeper who is reluctant to grant a researcher access to one or more research sites has the power to block access to any number of key participants (Reeves, 2010). It has therefore been extremely helpful to me that initial contact with the primary gatekeeper was instigated through my supervisor who also has a friendship and positive working relationship with the individual and was therefore able to vouch for me and ensure the development of a friendly and positive relationship from the start. Researchers have often found that having personal contacts related to the study population or site allows for much easier negotiation of access (Duke, 2002; Bryman, 2008). This positive and personalised initial contact had a positive ripple effect on subsequent negotiations with both initial and secondary gatekeepers, enabling me to quickly and easily gain formal access to the primary case site and to establish a close and supportive working relationship with both key gatekeepers:

- Initial gatekeeper: John - has overall responsibility for the development of the local authority's localism policy
- Secondary gatekeeper: Liz - oversees the progression of most of the pilot projects

These relationships, and particularly that which I developed with Liz, proved to be extremely helpful in successfully facilitating and negotiating access to each of the pilot projects selected as the two embedded cases. This is illustrative of the importance of rapport as a mechanism for the maintenance of positive and beneficial research relationships (Funder, 2005; Reeves, 2010) but it is also illustrative of the importance of the recognition of 'power differentials between researchers and formal gatekeepers' (Reeves, 2010: 322). Whilst such power differentials can clearly have negative consequences for the researcher in both logistical and emotional senses (Harris, 1997; Funder, 2005), the effect can also be a positive one, as has been my own experience in this research. The support offered to me by both the primary and secondary gatekeepers meant that they came to act as 'sponsors' as well as gatekeepers and, to a great extent, 'key informants' throughout the course of subsequent fieldwork (Whyte, 1955). In this triple role they have not only facilitated my access to each of the cases, but they also developed an appreciation of and interest in my research which enabled them to direct me to

meetings, events and individuals that may have been relevant to my research and helpful to the progress of my study (Bryman, 2008).

Such a jointly designed project lends itself perfectly to the interpretive approach to which I adhered however it is not without potential risks. Developing 'an undue reliance on the key informant' (Bryman, 2008: 409) for example could lead to an interpretive account biased towards a reality as understood by that informant to the exclusion of others. To guard against this it was imperative that I developed and maintained good relationships with all of my contacts thereby allowing them all the possibility to act as informants and enabling me to best interpret the representations of the participants both individually and collectively. This required reflexivity, on my part, throughout the entire project, including but not limited to the period of data generation. By reflexivity I mean a reflectiveness of the influence caused by my own biases, values, decisions and mere presence on the data and the investigation which I carried out (Bryman, 2008). The issue of reflexivity will be addressed in more detail later in the chapter with specific regard to the methods of data generation and, later in the thesis, the methods of data analysis and the process of writing up my interpretations.

3.4.   Data Generation

Dornyei (2007: 37 – 39) makes an important point regarding the 'nature of qualitative data', stating that 'because the common objective of all the different types of qualitative methods is to make sense of a set of (cultural or personal) meanings in the observed phenomena, it is indispensable that the data should capture rich and complex details.' In other words, qualitative research is primarily concerned with achieving 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) rather than identifying causal relationships, and delving into 'the unique, idiosyncratic meanings and perspectives constructed by individuals (…) who live/act in a particular context' (Cho and Trent, 2006: 328). The methods of data generation that I used in this research study were ones which I believed could capture such 'rich and complex details' (Dornyei, 2007:39) and which were best suited to answering the research questions set out in Section 3.2.

The exact length of time dedicated to data generation was determined largely by contextual factors. Each of the pilot projects ran for one year and began formally in April 2011. I therefore took the decision to undertake a prolonged period of data generation to coincide with the length of the pilots. This was impinged upon slightly by the time it took to gain ethical approval from the appropriate panel and I therefore commenced data generation in May 2011 to continue for one year until approximately the end of May 2012. My last data was actually generated in the first week of June 2012.

I used three complementary methods of data generation: documentary gathering, observations and interviews (see Table 1 for an overview of the data generation process), each of which I will now explore and discuss in turn. It is important within my interpretive epistemology that the generation of data proceeds 'hand in hand with data analysis and theory development, the one shaping the other in a dialectical manner' (Wageaar, 2011: 247). Data analysis and generation are not separate and discrete elements of a project but 'simultaneous and continuous processes' (Bryman and Burgess, 1994: 217). As such they have been carried out concurrently in my research; emergent themes have fed back into subsequent stages of data generation thus enabling my research to follow participants' interpretations and perspectives as closely as possible. This has allowed for my initial insights and interpretations into the data in the context of my own knowledge, assumptions and research objectives to have fed into the continuous, interpretive and iterative development of my data generation methods and, more specifically for example, each of the interview schedules. Each set of semi-structured interviews was therefore listened to, notes made and transcribed immediately or as soon as possible after they took place.

Table 1: Methods of Data Generation

Method	Date Undertaken	Settings
Documentary gathering	May 2011 – June 2012	1. Cambridgeshire County Council 2. Conservative party 3. Coalition government
Initial unstructured observations	May 2011	1. Localism and Community Engagement Board 2. Community Led Planning

		pilot
		3. Area Committee Participation pilot
Semi-structured observations	June 2011 – June 2012	1. Localism and Community Engagement Board 2. Community Led Planning pilot 3. Area Committee Participation pilot
Semi structured interviews (set 1)	June – July 2011	1. Localism and Community Engagement Board 2. Community Led Planning pilot 3. Area Committee Participation pilot
Semi structured interviews (set 2)	November – December 2011	1. Localism and Community Engagement Board 2. Community Led Planning pilot 3. Area Committee Participation pilot
Semi structured interviews (set 3)	May – June 2012	1. Localism and Community Engagement Board 2. Community Led Planning pilot 3. Area Committee Participation pilot

3.4.1. Documents

Through specific negotiations with my primary and secondary gatekeepers I secured written permission from Cambridgeshire County Council for access to any documentation and any meetings, subject to client confidentiality and participant agreement, that were considered by the gatekeepers and 'key informants' discussed earlier as being relevant to a) the local authority's development of localism; and b) each of the pilot projects that constitute the second and third cases

in my research study. The collection and analysis of public and grey literature from the local authority continued for the duration of my data generation period and informed any decisions I took regarding the choice of observation sites as well as the design of interview schedules and, to a lesser extent, the selection of interview participants.

I also collected publicly available Conservative Party and coalition government documents relating to the Big Society programme and the Localism Act that were relevant to the aims and objectives of this research (e.g. Cameron, 2009b; 2010; 2011; Conservative Party, 2009; 2010a; 2010b; Cabinet Office, 2010a; 2010b; 2010c).

3.4.2. Observations

Observational methods are particularly suited to the study of complex social processes and relationships such as those involved in the development of a policy within a County Council. Indeed the value of observation in qualitative research is widely supported in the literature (e.g. Lofland and Lofland, 1995; Marshall and Rossman, 1999; Angrosino, 2007; Yin, 2009). Observations have been characterised as 'the fundamental base of all research methods' in the social and behavioural sciences (Adler and Adler, 1994: 389) and can facilitate the exploration of 'human meaning and interaction' from the viewpoint of the insider and emphasise the importance of the 'here and now of everyday life situations and settings as the foundation of inquiry and method' (Jorgensen, 1989: 13). For these reasons, my choice to undertake observations as one of the methods of data generation in this research was particularly valid. Observing meetings and events internal to Cambridgeshire County Council as well as those integral to each of the selected pilot projects has yielded valuable information on the interpretations and representations shared, constructed and rejected by members, officers and relevant partnership workers as well as the complex ways in which they work together to discuss issues and make decisions to further the development of localism or of one or other of the specific pilot projects respectively. The inclusion of observational data has facilitated the capture of some of the context in which localism was developed and in which recontextualisations of discourses representing actors central to the imagined Big Society were represented. This is as opposed to the

comparatively artificial setting of an interview in which there is a chance that participants are able to put on a 'performance' (Angrosino, 2007).

Data generated from observations has continuously fed into my development of the research project overall; particularly guiding the structure and design of the interviews but also presenting me with opportunities to continue to work to maintain the necessary levels of rapport and acceptance in order to allow me to continue to generate data and gain as comprehensive an understanding as possible of the contexts and contextual conditions involved in each of my selected case studies.

Structured observation usually involves the recording and counting of pre-determined categories of behaviour and is described by Gillham (2008: 19) as being 'as accurate as a questionnaire is of what people think'. I considered structured observation to be too restrictive and unsuitable for my exploratory and interpretive study. I decided instead to combine an initial period of unstructured observation with a further, much longer period of what gradually became semi-structured observation. Semi-structured observations can be defined as those which begin with relatively specific questions or areas of inquiry but in which data collection is done in a less systematic or pre-determined way (Gillham, 2008). These stages of observation have been referred to as a 'funnel' (Spradley, 1980) because of the gradual narrowing and directing of the researchers' attention more deeply into those elements that are emerging as important, interesting or essential. This two-step process also fits with my longitudinal research design.

The initial period of unstructured observation was undertaken in agreement with my primary and secondary gatekeepers in May 2011. This period of observation informed my knowledge of the contexts and settings of the local authority and each of the chosen pilot projects as well as the planning of a further, second period of semi-structured observation. In combination with discussions with key informants, the observations also went some way to assisting in the identification of key contacts and individuals from within the local authority or any of the organisations involved in either of the pilot projects for recruitment to the interviewing stages of my research. Notes from the initial period of unstructured observations were written up and any emerging themes, contradictions or areas of interest which might have suggested further issues to pursue were noted and used to guide subsequent semi-structured observations.

The second period of observations took place at Localism and Community Engagement Board meetings and related events within the local authority as well as at meetings and events related to each of the selected pilot projects. Details of settings, including specific meetings and events that I attended are set out in Chapter Five.

I found negotiations for access to the various meetings and events to be straightforward throughout the period of data generation, due largely to the positive and beneficial relationships that I formed with gatekeepers and key informers. This is particularly pleasing when taking into consideration the highly charged environment of the local authority in the policy context of shrinking public services, budget cuts, redundancies and uncertainties; some of which I explored in Chapter Two. The successful negotiation of access to the identified meetings and events nonetheless required 'ongoing interactional work' (Jorgensen, 1989: 70) and the successful development of rapport in order to maintain participants' trust and cooperation throughout the year of data generation in which there were many internal and external changes and developments.

Ethical Practice in Observations

As I was observing both open and closed meetings, it was necessary for me to take two slightly differing approaches to gaining fully informed consent. For the closed meetings (internal County Council meetings and internal meetings relating to either of the pilot projects) I gained prior and initial consent from the Chair or meeting organiser to attend. All attendees were then made aware of my proposed attendance and sent a copy of the participant information sheet (see Appendix Two) by email or post before the meeting by the meeting organiser or an appropriate individual. Additionally, the Chair of the meetings confirmed that all attendees were happy for the observation to occur at the start of the meeting. In practice it was most often the case that introductions were routinely made at the beginning of a meeting which gave me the chance to explain in person my purpose and role as a non-participant observer and check, in conjunction with the Chair, that there were no objections to my presence as an observer. Should anyone have declined to consent at any stage then I would not have attended or observed the meeting or event. I was refused access to a meeting only once throughout my fieldwork. This was a meeting between the leaders of the County and District councils regarding the Area Committee Participation pilot.

For the open meetings (public meetings and community events which were related to one of the pilot projects), agreement was initially sought from event organisers and thereafter posters, flyers and newsletters were prepared were it deemed necessary by event organisers to use them. Further information was also made available as and when requested. I was not refused access to any open meetings or events; this was unsurprising given the public nature of these meetings and events and the support that I was fortunate to enjoy and the interest that I experienced in my research throughout my period of data generation from meeting organisers, key gatekeepers and other participants.

Reflexivity in Observations

Gold (1958) set out the classic typology of researcher roles, distinguishing four different categories: complete observer; observer-as-participant; participant-as-observer; and complete participant. Neither of the extreme roles ('complete observer' and 'complete participant') would have been suitable for me as the researcher in this research study for various practical and ethical reasons. In terms of gaining access, the 'complete observer' role would have been particularly impractical as permission to observe meetings needed to be sought from all participants in each and every meeting and, equally, my presence at the meetings was overt rather than hidden. The 'participant-as-observer' role would also have been unsuitable for this study as the level of participation that I undertook was deliberately minimal; I did not enter the meetings or events with the intention of deliberately influencing any stage of policy development, although as previously mentioned it was vital that I maintained an appropriate level of reflexivity throughout. My role at the various meetings and events in terms of Gold's (1958) typology was therefore that of 'observer-as-participant'; however this role may be better defined in terms of 'membership'.

Adler and Adler (1994) have identified a continuum of membership types or ways in which researchers can become integrated into the group they are observing in order to enhance the validity of their data. Researchers can adopt 'peripheral', 'active', or 'complete' membership. Researchers who adopt *peripheral* membership 'observe and interact closely with the people under study, and thereby establish identities as insiders, but they do not participate in those activities constituting the core of group membership' (Angrosino, 2007: 55). Given my research questions and the particular

considerations involved, adopting 'peripheral membership' was most appropriate for me during my fieldwork. Any inclusion into the local authority was at a peripheral level only and as a 'non-professional' observer at these meetings I largely retained an 'outsider' role. There were occasions, especially towards the end of my year of fieldwork, when participants actively sought my views, opinions and input into aspects of meetings, especially from an evaluative perspective. This, far from being a problem, is an expected and valuable consequence of my interpretive and critical research design and merely serves to emphasise again the importance of reflexivity both throughout the period of data generation itself and subsequent data analysis and discussions.

As with all observations in social research, there was a risk that my presence as an observer at meetings and events may have disturbed the usual social ecology and therefore have resulted in the production of less naturalistic behaviours (Jorgensen, 1989; Emerson et al., 1995; Angrosino, 2007; Yin, 2009). Several aspects of my research design may have lessened any obtrusive effects brought about by my overt observations. First of all the longitudinal design meant that I regularly attended the same meetings, usually on a monthly or bi-monthly basis. This allowed my observations to become normalised and routine and may have resulted in participants being less conscious of my presence, causing them to exhibit more rather than less normalised behaviours. Secondly, I met with many of the participants of the meetings that I observed through my primary and secondary gatekeepers and key informants and this gave me an opportunity to normalise my presence at the local authority in general and lessen the immediate impact of my observations in specific meetings. Thirdly I tried to use note taking strategies that mirrored those of participants within the meetings. Emerson et al. (1995: 20) state that decisions such as when and where to write field notes are significant and 'can have tremendous import for relations with those in the field.' Given the usually transactional and professional nature of the meetings in which I undertook my second phase of observations, minute taking was not only customary but necessary and most of the participants in attendance seemed well accustomed to making their own notes during the course of the meetings. I therefore felt able to make handwritten observational notes in a notebook during the observations themselves without causing overtly destructive observer effects.

Observational notes

My observational notes provided information on the physical setting in which the meeting or event took place, the individuals in attendance as well as those who were absent (an individual's absence may have an important impact on the meeting and should not be overlooked as a possibility), a description of the physical setting, any materials or objects involved, behaviours, interactions and conversations (Angrosino, 2007: 40). These observational notes were written in a factual manner and contained as near to verbatim descriptions of verbal interactions as possible whilst reflecting nonetheless on the interpretation which would have been unavoidably transposed onto my notes even at this early stage. It is generally agreed upon that one set of notes made during the observations themselves is not adequate for a comprehensive and valid observation and that instead these should be supplemented by, for instance, an expanded set of notes typed up as soon as possible after each period of observation, a fieldwork diary in which any problems or ideas which arise should be recorded and, also, a provisional and continuous record of analysis and interpretation (Jorgensen, 1989; Emerson et al., 1995; Angrosino, 2007; Fetterman, 2010). I undertook to comply with these recommendations by keeping a research diary throughout the period of data generation; typing up observational notes as soon as possible after each observation was complete; and maintaining a document outlining emerging thoughts and findings as I worked through the data generation and data analysis processes.

3.4.3. Interviews

As Wagenaar (2011: 251) asserts, 'deep qualitative interviewing and the systematic analysis of interview data are the core business of interpretive policy analysis.' In accordance with my longitudinal qualitative design, I conducted individual semi-structured interviews at three points throughout the twelve months of data generation; at 6 – 8 weeks; at 7 months, and at 12 months. These interview dates were set to coincide as far as possible with the beginning, mid-point and end of the pilot projects and allow for a temporally progressive exploration of Cambridgeshire County Council's development of localism, arguably in response to the coalition government's Big Society.

A semi-structured interview design is one in which 'the interviewer provides guidance and direction (hence the '-structured' part in the name), but is also keen to follow up interesting developments and to let the interviewee elaborate on certain

issues (hence the 'semi-' part)' (Dörnyei 2007: 136). This allows for the gathering of information on issues and concepts emerging from the documentary analysis, observations and previous interviews as well as on the Big Society as imagined by central government. This approach also enabled me to maintain an interpretive focus and emphasise the 'meaning-making activities' of partners (Guba and Lincoln, 2005: 197). The interview process was thus 'flexible' and the emphasis was very much on 'how the interviewee frames and understands issues and events' (Bryman, 2008: 438).

The nature of the interview encounter and the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee is an important consideration. The understanding of this relationship as a partnership or a collaboration in the production of representations of knowledge is not uncommon in versions of qualitative interviewing that stress the importance of interpretivism and reflexivity (Weiss, 1994; Holstein and Gubrium, 2005; Rubin and Rubin, 2005; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; King and Horrocks, 2010; Wagenaar, 2011) as well as the democratisation of the research relationship (Burr, 1995). This is in contrast to positivists' approaches to data generation which assume that objects and events 'exist independently of people's perceptions and hence there can only be one version that is true' (Rubin and Rubin, 2005: 23). For such positivist approaches the idea that 'there may be several different constructions of the events by participants, each of which is true in some sense' (ibid) is unacceptable. These same principles are integral to social constructionism and critical realism, both of which contribute to my theoretical framework which will be explored in Chapter Four.

Qualitative interviewing requires an acceptance of subjectivity as an integral and indistinguishable part of the interview process. Objectivity is regarded as an impossibility (Burr, 2003) and it is the task of the researcher 'to acknowledge and even to work with their own intrinsic involvement in the research process and the part that this plays in the results that are produced' (Burr, 2003: 152). Given the interpretivist and critical focus of my research, it was important for me to take a reflexive approach to the interviews and to the jointly constructed data that was generated. This reflexivity and constructionist understanding underpins the project, foregrounding the importance not only of the exploration of the interview data but also of the nature of interview encounters and how participants used them to construct meanings and representations.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in order to allow me the opportunity to act in each interview so as to maximise rapport as far as possible (Michell and Irvine, 2008; Reeves, 2010) and to achieve 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973). Each interview took place at a pre-booked meeting room in the relevant local authority or community facilities as appropriate. It was important that participants felt comfortable and at ease in interviews and therefore interview locations were tailored towards the specific needs and familiarities of each of the interviewees.

Ethics, Consent and Participant Recruitment

The fieldwork for this research was designed in line with the recommendations set out in Anglia Ruskin University's (2011) 'Research Ethics and Governance for Human Research' guidelines and in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998). The guidelines stress the importance of obtaining consent that is 'informed and freely given' (2011: 14). Participation in qualitative interviewing, as with any form of social research, is voluntary and it must be recognised that gaining consent from participants 'is ongoing, requiring renegotiation and enabling participants to be aware of their right to withdraw throughout'; it is a 'process' rather than a one-off event (King and Horrocks, 2010: 115). Obtaining genuine consent which is free from coercion can also be particularly problematic in organisational contexts (Oliver, 2003) as they are often characterised by hierarchical power structures and the refusal to participate may have (or be perceived to have) adverse consequences for potential participants. For this reason I attempted to ensure as far as possible that participants were made aware of the independent nature of the research and that recruitment, undertaken by me personally, was based on observations and contact with informants rather than any pressures from primary gatekeepers. However I also recognise that it is impossible to conduct completely 'hygienic research' (Stanley and Wise, 1993) and I cannot account for all of the influences which may have contributed to the construction of my participants' understandings of my research or of their involvement in it.

I used a broadly purposive strategy (Bryman, 2008) to recruit interview participants. A purposive strategy is one which is essentially strategic and entails sampling on the basis of recruiting interviewees who are relevant to the research questions. I based my sampling strategy largely on knowledge gained as a result of the initial period of unstructured observation and on information gained from contact with key

informants. As a result I aimed to recruit interviewees who fell into one of the following three groups:

1) Cambridgeshire County Council officers and members who sat on the Localism and Community Engagement Board or were involved in the development of localism at the County Council in some capacity;

2) Individuals identified as key to the development and progression of the Community Led Planning pilot, either from within the County Council or from relevant partnership organisations specifically involved in the project; and

3) Individuals identified as key to the development and progression of the Area Committee Participation pilot, either from within the County Council or from relevant partnership organisations specifically involved in the project.

As anticipated, one participant was recruited in the intervening period between the first and the second set of interviews as my contextual knowledge of each of the pilot projects increased as a result of further observations and developing relationships with informants and participants. Such flexibility is suitable for an interpretive approach as it allows for and indeed necessitates the synthesis of the researcher's interpretations with those of the participants' rather than requiring the researcher to rely on their own particular interpretation of who it is relevant to interview in order to address the research questions.

As a result of my sampling strategy I successfully recruited the following participants who took place in *all three sets* of interviews:

Primary Case Study (Localism and Community Engagement Board) Interviewees

Name	Organisation	Role
Councillor Smith	Cambridgeshire County Council	Cabinet Member
John	Cambridgeshire County Council	Senior Officer; Programme Sponsor; Chair of the Board
Liz	Cambridgeshire County Council	Officer; Project Manager for several pilot projects

Embedded Case Study 1 (Community Led Planning pilot) Interviewees

Name	Organisation	Role

Liz	Cambridgeshire County Council	Officer; Project Manager for pilot project
Councillor Stone	Parish Council; County Council	Parish Council chair; County Councillor
Sarah	Parish Council	Parish Clerk
Emily	Third Sector Organisation	Community Advisor; pilot lead

Embedded Case Study 2 (Area Committee Participation pilot) Interviewees

Name	Organisation	Role
Rebecca	District Council	Project Champion; Senior Officer
Toby	District Council	Project Support; Officer
Councillor Williams	District Council	Chair of Pilot Area Committee
Joshua	District Council	Project Manager; Senior Officer

I successfully recruited the following participant from within the Area Committee Participation pilot who took place in *interviews set 1 and 2 but who was unable to take part in set 3*:

Name	Organisation	Role
Councillor Osborne	District Council	Executive Councillor

I successfully recruited the following participant who took place *in interviews set 2 and 3*. This interviewee was recruited in the intervening period between the first and second set of interviews:

Name	Organisation	Role
Tom	District Council	Senior Officer; Committee Support

Participants and their roles within each of the case studies are introduced and explored in greater detail in Chapter Five.

The issue of confidentiality and anonymity is one of particular importance and is stressed as such in the 'Research Ethics and Governance for Human Research'

guidelines (Anglia Ruskin University, 2011). Preservation of these principles was a requirement for ethical approval from the university and it was also a specific condition of permission from my research settings that 'all personal data [would] be anonymised as far as possible'. It has been agreed, however, that Cambridgeshire County Council can be named in the research data and any subsequent publications. Confidentiality and anonymity have therefore been fully respected at every stage of the research including recruitment, data generation, analysis, and reporting. In order to protect participants' anonymity, all data has been anonymised as far as possible at the transcription stage and separated from as much identifying information as possible through the assignation of pseudonyms to participants and the use of pseudonyms to protect organisation names, for instance. However it should be recognised that full anonymisation of qualitative research data is impossible. Due to its 'rich descriptions of people and interaction in natural settings' (Holstein and Gubrium, 2005) it is necessarily full of clues to participants' identities. It is not always easy to predict which data will lead to identification, and while every possible safeguard has been put in place it also should be openly acknowledged that there are limitations to how far this can be guaranteed (Wiles et al., 2008). This important caveat was included in the participant information sheet given to potential participants (see Appendix One). Where individuals were unavoidably identifiable in data, I employed a form of respondent validation and sought further consent that the data might still be used for analysis in its current state or whether further methods of anonymisation were required before agreement could be reached.

Interview Transcription

As what is effectively 'the first stage of analysis and interpretation', the process of transcription, far from being just a 'tedious and mechanical' one, is viewed by some as the moment in which the analysts' engagement with the details of talk is most intense (Cameron, 2001: 43). Rather than simply reproducing a verbatim record of conversations or occurrences (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009), transcription involves an unavoidable element of 'interpretation and judgment' (Hammersley, 2010: 562) on the part of the researcher and this must be overtly and reflexively acknowledged. Indeed there is no true, objective transformation from the oral to the written mode (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Errors in transcription are easy to make and can lead the researcher to make invalid inferences from the data (Hammersley, 2010). In order to guard against this, methodological texts often recommend the use of multiple or independent transcribers, or a process of double transcription, as a way

of avoiding these difficulties and enhancing reliability (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). In my own research this has not been possible due to financial and ethical restraints. It was therefore extremely important that I did not treat transcripts as 'sacred and infallible texts' (Hammersley, 2010: 565), but instead that I was and continue to be open and honest in my reflections on their limitations and imperfections as well as the interpretations that I brought to bear on them in the process of transcribing.

3.5.   Summary

In this chapter I have set out my research questions, briefly situating them within my theoretical and methodological framework but not discussing these issues in any depth; the discussion of theoretical issues will be explored in greater detail within Chapter Four. In the second part of this chapter I have described and explored my research design and the methods of data generation that I used in order to attempt to answer the research questions. This has included discussion of ethical issues, reflexivity, and participant recruitment as well as practical choices that I took during the course of my research and justifications for them.

In the next chapter I will set out the theoretical and methodological frameworks within which I developed and carried out my research.

4. Discourse: A Theoretical and Methodological Framework

4.1. Introduction

In this chapter I will explore in turn the theoretical and methodological frameworks within which I developed my research study and which I believe have enabled me to develop an empirically based critique of the Big Society in its own terms, exploring the potential incompatibilities between the imagined Big Society and the 'realities' of society as represented during the development of localism at Cambridgeshire County Council.

In the first section I will discuss my ontological positioning in relation to the theories of critical realism and social constructionism as well as my interpretivist epistemology. In the second section I will explore the concept of discourse as I understand it for this research study - in relation to critical discourse analysis (CDA) and consequently my methodological approach to CDA; specifically a combined discourse-historical and discourse-relational approach (Wodak, 1996; 2001; Fairclough, 2001; 2003; 2010; Wodak and Fairclough, 2010). I will discuss the refinement of my approach in relation to the subdivisions of discourse, most specifically 'discourses' which are the main focus for my analysis (for research questions see Chapter Three). I then explore the representation of social actors and social actions within 'discourses'. I will also discuss the importance of a focus on context and, in relation, the concept of recontextualisation. These concepts relate specifically to my analytical framework and so I will also set out my approach to analysis and the analytical categories which I applied to my data.

4.2. A Theoretical Framework

4.2.1. Critical Realism and Social Constructionism

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) draws on both linguistic theory and social theory to examine the interplay of ideologies and power relations in discourse. Common to all approaches to CDA is a view of language as a means of social construction; 'language both shapes and is shaped by society' (Simpson and Mayr, 2010: 51).

Social constructionism (Butler, 1990; Gergen, 1999; Hacking, 1999; Fairclough, 2001; Mendoza-Denton, 2002; Burr, 2003; Benwell and Stokoe, 2006; Caldas-Coulthard and Iedema, 2008) is heavily influenced by the philosophical movements of structuralism and post-structuralism and sees knowledge as arising in social interchange and as mediated through language (Gergen, 1999; Hacking, 1999; Burr, 2003; Benwell and Stokoe, 2006). There are a number of different approaches that can be taken to social constructionism and there has long been a debate amongst social constructionists of differing persuasions as to the exact nature or existence of reality.

An extreme, relativist version of social constructionism would hold that there is no reality that exists outside of that which is socially constructed. In other words, all reality is constructed socially and, because no version of reality or facet of knowledge is 'given' or exists objectively, this reality must be constantly reaffirmed, reproduced, performed and maintained if it is to persist in its existence. Even if a form of objective reality were to exist, it would be inaccessible; the only thing individuals would be able to access would be the various representations that serve to depict reality and therefore which cannot be considered as necessarily truthful or accurate (Burr, 2003). One of the main problems with relativism is that it doesn't allow for an explanation of how, without the existence of any reality outside of our thinking of it, any one individual can understand or relate to any other individual given that we each come from our own individually different experiences and cultures. Realism, on the other hand, considers there to be some form of external world or reality that exists independently of any representations that are made of it, no matter how accurate or truthful these representations may be (Searle, 1995).

I do not dismiss entirely the possibility of an existence of a reality external to social construction, yet nor do I uncritically accept that representations of any such reality are accurate and truthful. Therefore I position myself and this research within a critical realist ontology. Critical realism is most commonly associated with the work of Bhaskar (Bhaskar, 1989; Archer, 1995; Sayer, 2000). The critical realist position is succinctly described by Hruby (2001: 57) as the belief that 'there is a coherent and dependably consistent reality that is the basis for our sensations, even if our sensations do not resemble the causative phenomenal bases, or "onta" that prompt them, or demonstrate the same presumed cohesion or consistency'. So critical realists recognise the fallibility of any representations of an external reality and are critical of an individual's own ability to know this reality with any absolute certainty.

This includes my own ability as a researcher, and I am aware that I 'must avoid the 'epistemic fallacy' of confusing the nature of reality with [my] knowledge of reality' (Fairclough, 2010: 355).

Following critical realism, I assume a 'stratified ontology' which sees 'processes/events and structures as different strata of social reality with different properties' (Fairclough, 2010: 355). Fairclough (ibid) goes on to detail the distinction that is drawn between the 'real', the 'actual' and the 'empirical':

> the 'real' is the domain of structures with their associated 'causal powers'; the 'actual' is the domain of events and processes; the 'empirical' is the part of the real and the actual that is experienced by social actors. The 'actual' does not in any simple or straightforward way reflect the 'real': the extent to which and ways in which the particular causal powers are activated to affect actual events is contingent on the complex interaction of different structures and causal powers in the causing of events.

Furthermore critical realism asserts that 'mediating entities' in the form of 'social practices' are 'necessary to account for the relationship between structures and processes/events' (Fairclough, 2010: 355). Social practices are defined by Fairclough (ibid) as:

> …more or less durable and stable articulations of diverse social elements, including discourse, which constitute social selections and orderings of the allowances of social structures as actualisable allowances in particular areas of social life in a certain time and place. Social practices are networked together in distinctive and shifting ways. Social fields, institutions and organisations can be regarded as networks of social practices.

In my research then, Cambridgeshire County Council and specifically the 'social fields' involved in each of my three case studies can be regarded as 'networks of social practices'. The importance of this in relation to my research questions and focus will be explored in greater detail later in the chapter.

Social constructionism often presupposes or necessitates a critical view of taken for granted knowledge, hence its heavy influence by post-structuralism and its oppositional stance to positivism and positivist approaches. Hacking (1999: 6) terms this 'against inevitability' and elaborates the point as follows:

Social constructionists about X tend to hold that:

(1) X need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. X, or X as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable.

This point is illustrative of the starting point or crux of social constructionism as I understand it for the purpose of this research – that X (the Big Society) was shaped and brought into existence by social and cultural events and historical specificity; all of which could potentially have been different and thus have resulted in a different social construction.

A principle assumption within social constructionism regards the constructive force of language. Language not only describes but also constructs the concepts, ideals and beliefs to which it refers; it is actively engaged in the construction of society. As Wagenaar (2011: 186) discusses, a strong constructionist claim may ascribe to language the power to reform undesired reality. He proposes that, following this line of thought, a fourth constructionist presupposition could be added to Hacking's (1999: 6) original three:

(4) One important way to reform X is to give it a different name

There is some merit and weight behind such a proposition, especially when I consider that Cambridgeshire County Council attempted to distance their own policy development from central government rhetoric by rejecting the term 'Big Society' in favour of 'localism' (see Chapter Five for localism related documentation and Chapter Six for interpretations of my data analysis). However there is a problem with accepting this proposition in its entirety and that is that this can lead to social reality being almost entirely reduced to language (Wagenaar, 2011: 186). The trouble with this reduction of social reality to language is that it doesn't necessarily leave enough room for the consideration of the social dimension of language – la langue (Saussure, 1974). It also does not take into account the dialogical engagement of language with the 'barely articulated, and not completely articulable, understanding that somehow is required for people to be able to talk about and grasp the world as a stable, orderly affair' (Wagenaar, 2011: 189). As Wagenaar discusses, there are various thinkers who have pointed in this direction. For instance the concept of 'background understanding' was formulated by Wittgenstein and developed by Taylor (1995: 168); Gadamer developed the concept of 'pre-

understanding' (1976); Bourdieu developed his concept of habitus (1977); and Shotter developed the concept of a 'lower plane' of conversational interactions (1993: 18).

In light of my research drawing on critical realism and making use of a critical discourse analysis methodology, it is useful for me to acknowledge Fairclough's (2010: 46) contention of the concept of background knowledge. Fairclough's (ibid) argument asserts that 'the concept of BGK reduces diverse aspects of the 'background material' which is drawn upon in interaction – beliefs, values, ideologies, as well as knowledge properly so called – to 'knowledge'.' The problem with this is the implication of 'knowledge' – that facts can be known and can be transparently and straightforwardly related. But, as Fairclough (ibid) goes on to convey, 'ideology' involves 'representations of 'the world' from the perspectives of a particular interest' and 'cannot be reduced to 'knowledge' without distortion'. Ideology therefore may be of greater importance than 'background knowledge' in consideration of the interconnectedness of language, discourse and power.

Importantly for my theoretical framework then is the recognition that language is not the be all and end all of reality construction. As I will suggest in this thesis with reference to the potential realisation of the Big Society, saying something (no matter how 'passionate' about it David Cameron might be) does not make it so.

Accordingly, my critical realist ontology necessitates an understanding that any representations made by social actors are both fallible and questionable. CDA will be addressed in far greater detail in the next section of this chapter but it seems appropriate to point out at this juncture the interweaving of my ontology with my chosen methodology, specifically in this instance the version of CDA developed and advocated by Fairclough (1995; 2001) who is himself a critical realist. CDA offers a theoretical perspective by which the development of local government policy in relation to powerful government rhetoric surrounding the Big Society programme and related Localism Act (2011) can be explained:

> Social actors within any practice produce representations of other practices, as well as of their own practice, in the course of their activity within the practice. They 'recontextualise' other practices…that is, they incorporate them into their own practice, and different social actors will represent them differently according to how they are positioned within the practice.

> Representation is a process of social construction of practices, including reflexive self-construction – representations enter and shape social processes and practices.
>
> (Fairclough, 2001: 123)

The aim of critical realism is to explain 'social processes and events in terms of the causal powers of both structures and human agency and the contingency of their effects' (Fairclough, 2010: 355-6). In this research study I aim to explore the potential incompatibility of the imagined Big Society with local 'realities' in Cambridgeshire via exploration of the County Council's development of localism, entailing therein the causal powers of both structures and human agency.

4.2.2. Interpretivism and Interpretative Policy Analysis

Interpretivism 'may be defined as the view that comprehending human behaviour, products and relationships consists solely in reconstructing the self-understandings of those engaged in creating or performing them' (Fay, 1996: 114). This is a broad definition which states that interpretive explanations must 'capture the conceptual distinctions and intentions of the agents involved' (Fay, 1996: 114). I have attempted to do just that in my research via the methods of data generation discussed in Chapter Three.

An interpretive approach focuses on the 'meaning of actions and institutions' (Wagenaar, 2011: 14) rather than attempting to uncover a supposedly objective truth as advocated by traditional approaches to policy analysis that 'are conducted under the assumption of positivist-informed science: that it is not only necessary but also actually possible, to make objective, value-free assessments of a policy from a point external to it' (Yanow, 2000: 5). This is particularly appropriate given the lack of direction provided by the government as to how specific policies should be constructed and the subsequent lack of consistency of local authorities' responses to the coalition governments' Big Society and related Localism Act (2011).

Mumby and Clair (1997: 184) emphasise the importance of interpretation, particularly in an organisational context, with regard to the exercise of power. If, as they suggest, power is exercised through interpretive frames that are incorporated by workers as part of their organisational identity (ibid), then this could be

particularly relevant for officers and members within the research settings in which my fieldwork was undertaken. The way in which officers and members interpret, represent and recontextualise the identified discourses representing key actors and actions within the imagined Big Society may reveal an important insight into the potential incompatibilities between central government's imagined Big Society and local government 'realities'.

Interpretive policy analysis is all about representations (Freeman, 2012). Policy makers create policies through representation. They represent problems, solutions, versions and accounts. They make claims and justifications by means of any one of the many possible forms of communication. They intervene through representation. In this way interpretive policy analysis fits perfectly with a critical realist ontology and a critical discourse analysis methodology – both of which emphasise the importance of the representations of social actors and actions in recontextualising discourses representing the imagined Big Society.

My aim in drawing on an interpretivist epistemology is not to provide direction or prescription as to the rights and wrongs of Cambridgeshire County Council's development of policy in relation to the Big Society but to provide reflection, by focusing on interpretation, of the recontextualisations of discourses representing the imagined Big Society throughout the policy development process. In order to do this I needed to draw on and make use of a methodology that could be interwoven with my ontological and epistemological frameworks justifiably and that would enable me to achieve the aim of my research and to answer the research questions set out in Chapter Three. Critical discourse analysis, with its critical realist underpinnings (Fairclough, 1992; 1995; 2001), its assumptions regarding discursive power relations and the focus it allows on context (Wodak, 1996; 2001; Reisigl and Wodak, 2009), seemed to me to be a justifiably appropriate choice.

4.3.   Critical Discourse Analysis

In a persuasive argument for recognition of the importance of CDA to policy analysis, Wagenaar (2011: 158) declares that:

…it offers a sophisticated and well-developed theory of discourse, which, among other things, clearly articulates the relation between text and social practice.

CDA, associated as it mainly is with the names of Fairclough (1989; 1992; 1995; 2001; 2003; 2010), Wodak (1996; 2001), van Dijk (1998; 2005; 2008) and Chouliaraki (1999), has been developed in recent decades as 'a way of understanding 'how societies work and produce both beneficial and detrimental effects, and of how the detrimental effects can be mitigated if not eliminated' (Fairclough, 2003: 203).

CDA evolved formally in the 1990s as 'a perspective applied by a network of scholars with shared political concerns about social inequalities in the world' (Baxter, 2010: 127). The 'critical' aspect of CDA means that CDA has, at its core, a committed emancipatory agenda. Wodak and Meyer (2009: 7) describe CDA as wanting 'to produce and convey critical knowledge that enables human beings to emancipate themselves from forms of domination through self-reflection.'

As discussed in Chapter Three, two points of interest heavily informed the development and progression of this research study. Firstly, the initial premise that the Big Society is potentially incompatible with the lived experience of society at a local level; and secondly, the important role that local government authorities would surely play in any attempts to realise the imagined Big Society. Assuming that CDA provides researchers with the 'tools for examining the imaginaries that serve as the objects of governance' (Farrelly, 2010: 104), CDA must therefore allow me to consider the importance of discourse as a factor in the potential incompatibility of the imagined Big Society with the lived experience of society at the level of a local government authority by exploring representations and recontextualisations of key actors within the Big Society throughout the development of localism at Cambridgeshire County Council.

4.3.1. Perspectives on CDA: An Integrated Approach

Given that 'CDA has never been and has never attempted to be or to provide one single or specific theory' and subsequently 'neither is one specific methodology characteristic of research in CDA' (Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 5), it is necessary to

briefly outline the differing perspectives on CDA before discussing in detail my own perspective with which I chose to address my research questions – a combined discourse-historical and discourse-relational approach (Fairclough, 2001; 2003; 2010; Wodak, 1996; 2001; Wodak and Fairclough, 2010).

One dominant area of discourse analysis that I have not drawn on in this study is that developed by van Dijk (e.g. 1998; 2005; 2008). Van Dijk emphasises the cognitive aspects of discourse in his development of a theoretical framework that 'critically relates discourse, cognition and society' (van Dijk, 2008: 87). In this theory, van Dijk (2008: 88) conceptualizes power as control: 'groups have (more or less) power if they are (more or less) able to control the acts and minds of (members of) other groups'. This conceptualisation enables van Dijk (2008: 9) to assert the following:

> Those who control discourse may indirectly control the minds of people. And since people's actions are controlled by their minds (knowledge, attitudes, ideologies, norms, values), mind control also means indirect action control.

Such a perspective could be unproblematically applied to my research study if I were investigating the application of localism specifically, rather than exploring the discourses representing the imagined Big Society and the lived experience of society through the development of localism at Cambridgeshire County Council. In the former imagined scenario I could conceivably embrace the suggestion that the presentation of belief as knowledge by elite groups may work ideologically in manipulating some people into accepting such belief as knowledge (van Dijk, 2005). However, as beliefs about the nature of the Big Society and localism are not presupposed given that they themselves are under construction and it is this construction which I will partly be exploring, I do not believe that this particular approach to CDA could be appropriately applied in my research.

In this study I follow Wodak and Fairclough (2010) in integrating aspects of both Fairclough's dialectical relational approach (DRA) to CDA and Wodak's discourse historical approach (DHA) to CDA. Wodak and Fairclough (2010:19) explored 'processes and relationships of recontextualisation between higher education and other EU policy fields' throughout the implementation of the Bologna Process in two EU member states, Austria and Romania. They integrated the two approaches by 'introducing recontextualisation as a salient critical discourse analysis category and

explaining its relationship to other categories within a discourse-analytical approach to (or 'point of entry' into) transdisciplinary research on social change' (ibid). The relevance to my research of an integrated approach in which the researchers 'focus and trace the specific context-dependency and discourse-historical trajectory of recontextualised elements on a micro-level which emphasizes the context-dependent complexity of recontextualisation processes' (Wodak and Fairclough, 2010: 23), thus integrating the DRA and DHA approaches to CDA, is striking for reasons which I will expand upon in the following sections.

In this integrated approach I draw heavily on CDA as theorised by Fairclough (Fairclough, 1989; 1992, 2003; Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999) which embraces the social dialectical aspect of discourse and which is grounded in the philosophy of critical realism. In a discussion of 'what counts as CDA and what does not', Fairclough (2010: 10) suggests that the defining characteristics of CDA research are:

1. it is not just an analysis of discourse (or more concretely texts), it is part of some form of systematic transdisciplinary analysis of relations between discourse and other elements of the social process
2. it is not just general commentary on discourse, it includes some form of systematic analysis of texts
3. it is not just descriptive, it is also normative. It addresses social wrongs in their discursive aspects and possible ways of righting or mitigating them.

Underlying this version of CDA is a theory of language as social practice that Wagenaar (2011: 159) describes as 'sophisticated'. This theory is one which I touched upon earlier with regard to the importance of language in social constructionism. It is one in which discourse is viewed as important, but not more so than anything else or at the expense of anything else and is in contrast to traditional views of discourse, such as that which pays 'relatively little attention to the question of who says what, when, why, and with what effects' (Lemke, 1995: 21). Discourse, therefore, does not produce social practices; it is merely one element in the process of the production of social practices. As Farrelly (2006: 83-4) puts it, 'CDA does not see social life as reducible to discourse, but as being one real element of social life'.

Fairclough conceptualises an approach to CDA that has 'three basic properties: it is relational, it is dialectical, and it is transdisciplinary' (2010: 3). CDA is relational in as

much as 'its primary focus is not on entities or individuals … but on social relations' (Fairclough, 2010: 3); an understanding of discourse can only be arrived at 'by analysing sets of relations' (ibid). Fairclough understands these relations as 'dialectical': '[d]ialectical relations are relations between objects which are different from one another but not … discrete, not fully separate in the sense that one excludes the other' (ibid). CDA is thus not an analysis of discourse itself but of the 'dialectical relations between discourse and other objects, elements or moments, as well as analysis of the 'internal relations' of discourse' (Fairclough, 2010: 4). It is this cross-cutting analysis that gives rise to its 'transdisciplinary' nature. Following Fairclough (2010: 356-7) then, my concern in this research is with:

> …the relationship and tension between pre-constructed social structures, practices, identities, orders of discourse, organisations on the one hand, and processes, actions, events on the other. People with their capacity for agency are seen as socially produced, contingent and subject to change, yet real, and possessing real causal powers which, in their tension with the casual powers of social structures and practices, are a focus for analysis. Discourse analysis focuses on this tension specifically in textual elements of social events.

CDA is understood as ''oscillating' between a focus on specific texts and a focus on 'the order of discourse', the relatively durable social structuring of language which is itself one element of the relatively durable structuring and networking of social practices.' (Fairclough, 2003: 3). The ontology that this is based on is a critical realist one.

Dialectical-relational CDA focuses especially on two dialectical relations: 'between structure (especially social practices as an intermediate level of structuring) and events (or between structure and action, structure and strategy) and, within each, between semiotic and other elements' (Fairclough, 2010: 232). With my focus on the representations of the Big Society during the development of localism at Cambridgeshire County Council it seemed appropriate to make use of a perspective on CDA which explores the relations and tensions between structure and events. Events in the form of actions and strategies are prevalent throughout the policy development process and I required a methodology which would allow me to interpret these complex relations as they progress and develop throughout this process. However I also needed a way of focusing on 'structure (especially social

practices as an intermediate level of structuring)' (ibid) in order to situate social events in relation to this structure and on context and the linking or chaining of events and texts across time and space.

As Wodak and Fairclough (2010: 21-22) elaborate:

> In so far as discourse analysis focuses on texts in researching relations between discourse and other elements or moments of social change, the theoretical and methodological challenge involves simultaneously addressing (a) relations between discourse and other social elements or moments (i.e. 'mediation'), and (b) relations between social events/texts and more durable, more stable or institutionalized, more abstract levels of social reality: social practices and social structures. Moreover, since events and texts are linked to, affected by and have effects on other events and texts in different places and at different times, a further challenge is developing ways to address (c) broadly spatial and temporal relationships between events and texts (i.e. 'intertextuality'; Kristeva, 1986; Fairclough, 1992).

My research analytical focus lies in the connection between (b) ('relations between social events/texts and more durable, more stable or institutionalized, more abstract levels of social reality: social practices and social structures') and (c) ('broadly spatial and temporal relationships between events and texts') (ibid). Again I turn to Wodak and Fairclough (2010: 22) for guidance:

> One approach to (b), relations between social events, social practices and social structures, focuses on dialectical relations between structures/practices and strategies. Social events (and texts) are contingent upon and shaped by structures and practices and their semiotic moments, languages and 'orders of discourse', but they are also deployments of social agency and the strategies of different agents and groups of agents which are directed at shaping (reproducing or transforming) structures and practices and may, contingently, have such effects…Within this approach, the focus needs to be not only on individual events (and texts) but also on chains of events (and chains of texts), and on the effects of agency and strategy in shaping events (and texts) over time…This connects (b) to (c), spatial and temporal relationships between texts as elements of events.

Given the differing structures and social practices apparent in my multiple-embedded case study (central government, Cambridgeshire County Council, [xxx] District Council, [xxx] Parish Council, third sector organisation) and the nature of the study in tracing the imaginaries of the Big Society as they are recontextualised throughout Cambridgeshire County Council's development of 'localism', the theorisation of contexts 'becomes crucial' to my dialectic analysis (Wodak and Fairclough, 2010: 22). In a persuasive argument for the importance of the inclusion of context in CDA research, Oberhuber and Krzyzanowski (2008: 191-2) state that:

> Only through detailed contextual knowledge can the specific texts studied and questions asked be evaluated properly as to the role they play in an organisation. A failure to achieve such a contextualisation of discourse may, on the other hand, lead to the analysis yielding results which are artificial, since it does not incorporate the actual significance of discourse in the daily life of an organisation.

In order to capture elements of progression as localism is developed at the County Council over the course of a year and also to explore the potential incompatibilities of the imagined Big Society with local 'realities' via local government representations and recontextualisations of discourses representing actors imagined to be key within the Big Society, I draw on aspects of Wodak's 'discourse-historical approach (DHA) to CDA (Wodak, 1996; 2001; Reisigl and Wodak, 2009), particularly the approach to analysis which is based on a four level concept of 'context' (Wodak, 2001: 67):

1. the immediate, language or text-internal co-text and co-discourse (e.g. the specific government documents representative of the imagined Big Society)
2. the intertextual and interdiscursive relationship between utterances, texts, genres and discourses (e.g. between government documents, council documents, interviews with policy actors, and meetings)
3. the extra-linguistic social variables and institutional frames of a specific 'context of situation' (e.g. Cambridgeshire County Council)
4. the broader socio-political and historical context, which discursive practices are embedded in and related to (e.g. the budget cuts, austerity measures, traditions of central and local government relations).

This four level concept of context was used by Wodak and Fairclough (2010: 25) to 'analyse in detail why some policies succeed when recontextualised in specific national/ regional/local contexts while others are doomed to fail.' This justification bears striking resemblance to my research focus: an exploration of the potential incompatibilities of the imagined Big Society with local 'realities', specifically represented during Cambridgeshire County Council's development of localism between 2011 and 2012.

4.3.2. The Concept of Discourse

As I have noted throughout this discussion, CDA does not reduce social life to discourse but understands discourse as one real element of social life. As such discourse cannot be separated from other elements of social life except through analysis such as that which I carried out as part of this research project.

Discourse has been defined in a number of different ways across different social science disciplines and it is therefore important that I set out exactly how I understand discourse for the purpose of this research and within my combined DRA-DHA approach to CDA. A popular definition of discourse within various approaches to CDA – as combining both language and social practice – states that:

> CDA sees discourse – language use in speech and writing – as a form of 'social practice'. Describing discourse as social practice implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s), which frame it: the discursive event is shaped by them but it also shapes them. That is, discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned – it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it.
> (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 258)

In order to further elucidate the concept of discourse I base my discussion on the work of Fairclough (e.g. 2001) in considering language as a form of social practice. The implications of this consideration are threefold: firstly language is not an entity

that is somehow separate from society; the relationship between the two is 'internal and dialectical' (Fairclough, 2001: 19). When people use language they do so in ways which are dependent on the social context in which they are situated at any one time; language is thus socially determined. But the social context in which they use language is also affected by the language that they use; language thus has social effects. The leader of Cambridgeshire County Council, for example, would speak differently to their family within their family home than they would to their Cabinet members during a Cabinet meeting. The language that they use might be the same, but the specific way in which they use it changes and this change is contingent upon social influences. Furthermore, their use of language both within their family home and during a Cabinet meeting will have constitutive effects, helping either to maintain or to change the status quo. Language is thus 'not merely a reflection or expression of social processes and practices, it is a *part* of those processes and practices' (Fairclough, 2001: 19). That is not to say that language is equal to society; language is merely 'one strand of the social' (ibid).

The second implication of considering language as a form of social practice is that 'language is a social process' (ibid). Following Fairclough (2001: 20) I will understand a text (a text can be either written or spoken) to be 'a product of the process of text production'. Discourse on the other hand refers to 'the whole process of social interaction of which a text is just a part'. A text must be both produced and interpreted, and people bring to bear their own experience, values, beliefs and knowledge of language on these processes of production and interpretation. Therefore whilst discourse analysis must include analysis of texts, it must also include analysis of productive and interpretive processes. These processes are socially determined and this relates to the third implication of considering language as a form of social practice: 'that it is conditioned by other, non-linguistic, parts of society' (Fairclough, 2001: 20). The ways in which people produce and interpret texts are determined by the beliefs, values, assumptions and perspectives on society that they bring to bear on those texts, whilst those beliefs, values, etcetera are themselves shaped by social conditions.

The implication then for seeing 'language as discourse and as social practice' is a commitment 'not just to analysing texts, nor just to analysing processes of production and interpretation, but to analysing the relationship between texts, processes and their social conditions, both the immediate conditions of the

situational context and the more remote conditions of institutional and social structures' (Fairclough, 2001: 21).

In arguing for the contribution that discourse can make to political studies, Farelly (2010: 99) defines the concept of discourse within CDA as 'an aid to understanding the way we, as societies, tend both to organise and to be organised by our use of language.' The Big Society is a concept represented by texts that have been produced by the Conservative Party and, since May 2010, the coalition government. Arguably it is an attempt by central government to organise society in a way that best suits the political and social contexts as they understand them, based on their beliefs, values and assumptions. Cambridgeshire County Council are arguably organised by the Big Society in as much as it pervaded their policy discussions and deliberations in the immediate aftermath of the 2010 election and in their subsequent development of localism. Within the social practice of local government, discursive moments representing the Big Society have the potential to either reproduce or transform the structures in which they are situated. Similarly, discursive moments representing aspects of society specific to Cambridgeshire have the potential to either reproduce or transform understandings of the Big Society and, consequently, responses to the Big Society.

4.3.3. Orders of Discourse

As elaborated in the previous discussion, I follow Fairclough (2010: 74) in understanding the relationship between social structures and social events as being 'mediated by social practices, which control the selective actualisation of potentials.' Each level of abstraction corresponds to a semiotic dimension:

- Social structures: semiotic systems (languages)
- Social practices: orders of discourse
- Social events: texts (including talk, 'utterances')

An order of discourse is defined by Fairclough (2010: 74) as 'a specific configuration of discourses, genres and styles (see section 4.3.4. for definitions of , genres and styles), which define a distinctive meaning potential'. In other words orders of discourse are 'filtering mechanisms' which dictate what meanings can possibly be realised in texts within a particular social context. One broad example of an order of

discourse within my research would be the decision making processes in place within Cambridgeshire County Council. In this example the leader of the Council has the authority to choose his or her Cabinet members who, collectively, are responsible for the day to day running of the Council. The Council are able to delegate responsibility for the development of particular policies or the delivery of specific services to officers who are answerable to the elected members. The meaning potential available to officers within a policy development process is therefore restricted by the order of discourse which dictates that it is members who ultimately define and are responsible for the direction of Council policy.

4.3.4. Discourses, Genres and Styles

Within Fairclough's dialectical relational approach to CDA semiosis is a particularly important concept:

> The term semiotics is often used to refer to the general study of meaning making (semiosis), including not just meanings we make with language, but meanings we make with every sort of object, event or action in so far as it is endowed with a significance, a symbolic value, in our community.
> (Lemke, 1995: 9)

Semiosis relates to other elements of social practices and events in three ways: 'as a facet of action; in the construal (representation) of aspects of the world; and in the constitution of identities' (ibid). The three semiotic (discourse-analytical) categories that correspond to these are genre, discourse and style.

Following Fairclough (2010) I will understand genres as semiotic ways of acting and interacting, for example a news reader will act in a particular way, drawing on a particular set of genres that is distinctive to news reading. Styles are 'identities, or 'ways of being', in their semiotic aspect' (Fairclough, 2010: 232). Discourses act semiotically to construct and present aspects of the world in a particular way depending on the perspectives or positions of the group or social agents who are representing them. As Farrelly (2010: 100) notes, 'an analysis of change over time in political studies might draw on the way CDA sees the interaction of the three [semiotic categories]'. This was certainly a possibility for my research however, given the situation of my research within the first year of the development of

localism in response to the Big Society and my focus on the local government authority as a mediating force, I considered that a focus solely on discourses and specifically the recontextualisation of discourses was satisfactory. It would be difficult for me to analyse genres or styles as enactments or inculcations of the Big Society given that the policy response to the Big Society was at a developmental stage and given my focus on the potential incompatibilities of the imagined Big Society with representations of local 'realities' in Cambridgeshire.

4.3.5. Discourses

Discourses are understood by Fairclough (1992: 3) as 'the linguistic way in which part of the world is represented and construed in a text, for example social relations, objects or places'. The conceptualisation of discourses as not only representing but also construing hints at the critical realist sense in which discourses are real; that is, they have effects upon social practices and thus upon the world. Although I am separating discourses from other elements of discourse and thus examining them in isolation in an analytical sense, discourses are in fact inseparable from social practices.

As well as being representations of 'how things are and have been', discourses can also be 'imaginaries - representations of how things might or could or should be' (Fairclough, 2003: 207). The Big Society is an imaginary in this sense – a projection of a 'possible world'. Discourses representing the Big Society (see Chapter Six) 'imagine possible social practices and networks of social practices - possible syntheses of activities, subjects, social relations, instruments, objects, space-times, values, forms of consciousness' (ibid). The potential incompatibilities between these imagined discourses and discourses representing local 'realities' in Cambridgeshire constitute the focus for my analysis.

In this analysis of discourses an understanding of texts is key. As discussed previously, Fairclough distinguishes in his dialectical-relational version of CDA between language as a social structure, orders of discourse as part of social practices, and texts as social events (Fairclough, 2003: 24). Texts are understood as entities produced in social events; 'one way in which people can act and interact in the course of social events is to speak or to write' (Fairclough, 2003: 21). As entities, it is then possible to analyse texts for the combination of discourses that are represented therein.

Discourses, 'as ways of representing aspects of the world - the processes, relations and structures of the material world, the 'mental world' of thoughts, feelings, beliefs and so forth, and the social world' (Fairclough, 2003: 124), are complex both in their representations and in what they are representing. Texts, on the other hand, are complete in as much as they have been produced and they exist as an entity; they are finite and bounded. This contradiction means that no text, no matter how exhaustively and elaborately analysed, can ever contain all possible manifestations of a discourse. This is an important point which it was vital that I considered throughout my analysis of the generated data.

Importantly, different discourses can appear in the same texts. It is in response to this aspect of discourses that the concepts of intertextuality and interdiscursivity have been developed within CDA. Intertextuality can be understood as the ways in which texts 'draw upon, incorporate, recontextualise and dialogue with other texts' (Fairclough, 2003: 17). Interdiscursivity, meanwhile, necessitates an understanding that texts draw on a 'particular mix of genres, of discourses, and of styles' (Fairclough, 2003: 218). The analysis of the interdiscursivity of a text thus entails analysis of 'how different genres, discourses or styles are articulated (or 'worked' together) in the text' (ibid). As Farrelly (2006: 96) points out:

> …that texts and discourses are not equal one to the other has implications for analysis: in analysing discourses via texts, criteria for how a discourse is manifest cannot rely on presence in a text.

There are plenty of examples in my data of government documents representing the Big Society (see Chapter Six) and in my analysis of Cambridgeshire County Council's initial response to the Big Society (see Chapter Four, section 4.3.1.) of local people and communities represented in such a way as to suggest that they will be active within the Big Society whilst being represented passively in the grammar. In these instances there are two different discourses present in the text: people as active and powerful actors; and people as passive recipients of government ideas being implemented in a top-down fashion.

Another important consideration of discourses is that they are always partial representations of aspects of the world:

Different discourses are different perspectives on the world, and they are associated with the different relations people have to the world, which in turn depends on their positions in the world, their social and personal identities, and the social relationships in which they stand to other people.

(Fairclough, 2003: 124)

This again relates to my critical realist ontology in that no representation of an external reality is infallible and no individual can know this external reality with absolute certainty. Individuals make representations of reality as they understand it dependent on their own partial and specific contextual knowledge, beliefs, values and assumptions.

Due to the fact that our engagement with the material world or external reality is dependent upon the meaning that is given to this material world or external reality by the discourses that represent them, it therefore follows that any successful realisation of the imagined Big Society must be based largely on the domination of the discourses that represent it. Linking the notions of social constructionism and discursive power, Fairclough (2001: 76) discusses the generation of common sense as that which is 'in large measure determined by who exercises power and domination in a society or social institution.' Any discourse for which the ultimate objective is dominance can be understood, in the words of French anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu (cited in Fairclough, 1989: 91) as 'recognition of legitimacy through misrecognition of arbitrariness'. It is this that Fairclough (2001: 76) refers to as the naturalisation of a discourse or discourse type; a discourse type becomes so dominant that it successfully dominates other discourses to the extent that they are 'more or less entirely suppressed or contained' and the dominant discourse is no longer perceived as one of several ways of understanding the social world but as the only way of understanding the social world – as the norm. If the Big Society is to be successfully realised in Cambridgeshire then it needs to be understood as 'the norm' by those who develop policies in relation to it. In my research then, that is actors associated with Cambridgeshire County Council's development of localism and those involved with the pilot projects being carried out in order to test the Council's ideas for localism.

With my research focus largely on mediation at the local government level, and with 'the processes and relations of mediation' largely being 'processes and relations of recontextualisation' (Fairclough, 2010: 78), recontextualisation is thus a key analytic

concept in my study. I use the concept of recontextualisation to address both the 'transference' of discourses relating to the Big Society through political spheres and from one institution to another and the progression, development or recurrence of discourses relating to the Big Society over the time during which my data was generated. Recontextualisation is defined by van Leeuwen (1993: 204) as follows:

> The *practical knowledge* of a social practice, the knowledge of how to perform as a participant of that practice, is knowledge in an 'unrepresented' state. As soon as the practice is represented (taught, described, discussed etc.) it is recontextualised.

This recontextualisation, according to van Leeuwen (1993: 204), entails the 'rearrangement of the elements of the practice, in a way determined by the purpose of the context into which it is recontextualised…The deletion of elements of the practice not 'relevant' to the purposes of the context into which it is being recontextualised…The addition of elements, notably purposes for, evaluations of, and legitimations (or delegitimations) of the social practice or elements of it…[and] the substitution of elements'.

In terms of my integrated DRA-DHA approach, recontextualisation is important in the following way:

> Recontextualized practices, discourses and so forth enter into this complex social dynamic specific to the recontextualizing context, and whether and in what form they achieve the sort of dominance or hegemony which enables their operationalisation depends not only on the 'recontextualizing principles' identified by Bernstein, but also, as argued by Fairclough (2006), how they are taken up within particular strategies and figure within contestation between strategies. The complex relations between scales in processes of policy development, implementation and recontextualization are characterized by 'antinomies' identified by Wodak and Weiss (2004, 2007), between homogenization and heterogenization, globalization and fragmentation, and so forth (cf. Figure 1; Gannon, 2008). This means that accounts of policy implementation and recontextualization across scales requires theorization and analysis of social processes, relations and dynamics on these different scales and levels (trans-national, national, specific fields and organizations, etc.) to account for differences in timing,

pace, degree and forms of implementation between countries, fields, organizations and so forth.

(Wodak and Fairclough, 2010: 24)

In my research recontextualisation is apparent in the transference by Cambridgeshire County Council of coalition government and Conservative Party discourses representing actors considered central to the imagined Big Society agenda into their subsequent development of localism. This focus on recontextualisation is important if I am to develop a critique of the Big Society in its own terms, based on empirical evidence at a local government level.

This discussion of the characteristics of discourse sets out their relevance to my research study and how I can justify a focus on discourses as my primary analytic concept. Nevertheless there are further detailed elements of discourses that I need to define in order to clearly explain my analytical methodology.

4.3.6. Social Actors and Social Actions

Discourses, genres and styles are semiotic elements of discourse which can be differentiated; similarly there are elements of discourses which can also be differentiated. Policies, in getting people to do things, need to give information about who needs to do what, how it needs to be done, and why it needs to be done (Muntigl, 2000: 146). More specifically, the imagined Big Society represents the actors imagined to be central to its successful realisation and the actions in which they are imagined to engage. In order to address the recontextualisation of discourses that represent the imagined Big Society within the development of localism at Cambridgeshire County Council, focusing on who is imagined to do what and why this should be done in the particular context is necessary. I will therefore follow Fairclough (2003) and van Leeuwen (1993; 1995; 1996; 2008) in taking the categories of discourses to be social actors and actions. These analytic categories will be combined with an analysis of context, following Wodak's DHA approach to CDA (Wodak, 1996; 2001; Reisigl and Wodak, 2009).

Van Leeuwen's framework for analysis is based on Bernstein's concept of recontextualisation (Bernstein, 1990). Van Leeuwen (2008: 5) takes the view 'that all texts, all representations of the world and what is going on in it, however

abstract, should be interpreted as representations of social practices'. The texts produced by central government and the Conservative Party that introduce and develop the Big Society then, can be interpreted as representations of an imagined social practice. The texts produced by local government actors in the development of localism at Cambridgeshire County Council between 2011 and 2012 can be interpreted as representations of social practices as they are in Cambridgeshire at that time. In as much as the development of localism can be understood as a response to the Big Society, these representations can be further understood as recontextualisations of central government imaginaries within a localised context.

In developing a critique of the Big Society in its own terms, it is necessary for me to ascertain what the 'terms' of the Big Society are imagined to be by those who constructed it. One aspect of discourses relating to the Big Society is the representation of social actors; another is the representation of social actions. Certain people are represented as being involved in the social practice that is the imagined Big Society. Equally certain actions are represented as part of the social practice that is the imagined Big Society. If the Big Society is to be successfully realised in Cambridgeshire then it follows that these same people and the actions in which they are imagined to be involved must be similarly represented in discourses relating to the development of localism. This is what I mean to explore via the concept of recontextualisation and via comparison of discourses representing these key actors and the actions in which they are represented as being involved between central government imaginaries and local government 'realities'.

4.3.6.1. Social Actors

I use van Leeuwen's (2008) framework for the analysis of social actors. Van Leeuwen (2008: 23) describes his framework as 'a *sociosemantic* inventory of the ways in which social actors can be represented'. The emphasis on 'sociosemantic' is particularly important as it allows me to analyse the representation of social actors taking into account both sociological categories and linguistic categories through which representations of actors are realised. Van Leeuwen (2008: 23) cautions against a focus solely on linguistic categories: 'if critical discourse analysis, e.g. in investigating agency, ties itself too closely to specific linguistic operations or categories, many relevant instances of agency might be overlooked.'

Van Leeuwen's framework for categorising social actors has been criticised by academics who have applied it previously (e.g. Farrelly, 2006) and, as such, I engaged with these criticisms before I applied the framework itself. These concerns stem from what exactly it is that I am analysing and how I understand the concepts of discourse and texts. As discussed previously, my focus is on the analysis of texts only in as much as they are entities produced in social events and thus the empirical artefacts that I use to develop a critique of the Big Society in its own terms. Texts cannot contain all possible manifestations of a discourse but different discourses can be mixed within the same text. As Farrelly (2006: 280) notes, 'this possibility is not recognised in the van Leeuwen framework as it has criteria for categorising social actors which rest on inclusion in a text.' It was particularly important that I bore in mind this point of incompatibility whilst applying van Leeuwen's framework to my data.

A specific criticism of van Leeuwen's framework can be illustrated with reference to his category of exclusion:

> Representations include or exclude social actors to suit their interests and purposes in relation to the readers for whom they are intended. Some of the exclusions may be "innocent", details which readers are assumed to know already, or which are deemed irrelevant to them; others tie in closely to the propaganda strategies of creating fear and of setting up immigrants as enemies of 'our' interests.
> (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 28)

This definition considers 'representations' as having 'interests and purposes' and, as such, it is representations that choose which actors to include or exclude within the discourse. In my data it is not representations but social actors who have 'interests and purposes'; social actors are not devoid of agency but are considered to have and to apply causal powers to the representation of social actors within the imagined Big Society or the development of localism in Cambridgeshire. Following Farrelly (2006: 101-102) I also take issue with the use of 'innocent': 'the point is that 'innocence' is not a sound criterion for a critical interpretation. It is the potential impact and implications of the discourses that are significant.'

Farrelly takes specific issue with one of Van Leeuwen's categories of exclusion: backgrounding. Backgrounding is defined by Van Leeuwen (2008: 29) as:

The excluded social actors may not be mentioned in relation to a given action, but they are mentioned elsewhere in the text, and we can infer with reasonable (though never total) certainty who they are.

I agree with Farrelly's (2006: 102) contestation of the concept that 'the centrality of a given action is crucial and must be analysable from the text'. If I cannot analyse from the text the relation between an actor and a given action, then I cannot infer any relation at all, even if the actor is mentioned later in the text. Textual categorisation must be based on analysis of texts as empirical artefacts and not analysis of supposition and inference in relation to the texts. In looking to resolve this issue I follow Farrelly (2006: 280):

This is a small, but important difference which I resolved for the purposes of my analysis by altering the criteria for categorising social actors to rest on the combination of social actors being represented with social action: a social actor could be backgrounded in terms of one action, such as 'questioning', but included in the same text in terms of another action, such as 'turning-up', for example.

In Table 2 I set out the analytical categories relating to social actors that I applied in my analysis along with a brief definition of each category from the literature (Van Leeuwen, 2008).

Table 2: Social Actors

Category	Description
Inclusion and exclusion	'Representations include or exclude social actors to suit their interests and purposes in relation to the readers for whom they are intended' (p. 29)
Suppression	'There is no reference to the social actor(s) in question anywhere in the text' (p. 29)
Backgrounding	'The excluded social actors may not be mentioned in relation to a given action, but they are mentioned elsewhere in the

	text, and we can infer with reasonable (though never total) certainty who they are.' (p. 29)
Activation	'Activation occurs when social actors are represented as the active, dynamic forces in an activity' (p. 33)
Participation	A sub-category of activation is 'realised by "participation" (grammatical participant roles), the active role of the social actor in question is most clearly foregrounded.' (p.33)
Circumstantialisation	A second sub-set of activation is realised through 'circumstantialisation, that is, by prepositional circumstantials.' (p.33)
Passivation	Passivation occurs 'when they are represented as "undergoing" the activity or as being "at the receiving end of it' (p.33)
Subjection	'Subjected social actors are treated as objects in the representation, for instance, as objects of exchange (immigrants "taken in" in return for the skill or money they bring).' (p.33)
Beneficialisation	'Beneficialised social actors form a third party which, positively or negatively, benefits from the action.' (p.33)
Genericisation	Social actors 'can be represented as classes' (p.35)
Specification	Social actors 'can be represented as specific, identifiable individuals.' (p.35)
Assimilation	'Social actors can be referred to …as groups' (p. 37)
Aggregation	A subset of assimilation – 'quantifies groups of participants, treating them as statistics' (p. 37)
Collectivisation	A subset of assimilation - does not

	quantify groups of participants (p.37)
Impersonalisation	'Social actors can also be impersonalised, represented by other means, for instance, by abstract nouns or by concrete nouns whose meanings do not include the semantic feature "human".' (p. 46)
Objectivation	A subset of Impersonalisation – 'Objectivation occurs when social actors are represented by means of reference to a place or thing closely associated either with their person or with the action in which they are represented as being engaged.' (p. 46)
Abstraction	A subset of impersonalisation – 'Abstraction occurs when social actors are represented by means of a quality assigned to them by and in the representation.' (p. 46)

4.3.6.2. Social Actions

I also use van Leeuwen's framework (2008) for the categorisation of social actions. The same criticism regarding the understandings of discourse and text apply to this framework as they did to the framework for the analysis of social actors.

In Table 3 I set out the analytical categories relating to social actions that I applied in my analysis along with a brief definition of each category from the literature (van Leeuwen, 2008).

Table 3: Social Actions

Category	Description
Material and semiotic	'Social action can be interpreted as *material* or *semiotic*, as 'doing' or as 'meaning', in other words, as action which has, at least potentially, a material

	purpose or effect or as action which does not.' (p. 59)
Transactive	A subset of material actions – it involves 'two participants, the "actor", the "one who does the deed", and the "goal", the "one to which the process is extended" (Halliday 1985: 102-5). The goal, according to Halliday, must be a "thing", that is "a phenomenon of our experience, including, of course, our inner experience or imagination – some entity (person, creature, object, institution or abstraction); or some process (action, event, quality, state or relation)" (1985: 108).' (p. 60)
Instrumental transactions	'actions which affect other kinds of "things"' (p. 60). 'In instrumental transactions, the goal may be either human or non-human. In other words, instrumental transactions represent people as interchangeable with objects, for instance, through verbs like "use", "transport", "destroy", "carry", etc.' (p. 61)
Behavioural	'…semiotic action can involve an additional dimension, the very dimension which makes it semiotic: it can convey meanings. When semiotic action is *behaviouralised*, this dimension is not represented, and semiotic action is treated as similar to other forms of action, divested of its ability to reach beyond the here and now of the communication situation, its ability to represent the "then" and the "there", to

	remember the past and imagine the future.' (p. 61)
Activation and deactivation	'Actions and reactions can be *activated*, represented dynamically, or *deactivated*, represented statically, as though they were entities or qualities rather than dynamic processes.' (p. 63)
Agentialisation	'Actions and reactions can be *agentialised*, represented as brought about by human agency' (p. 66)
De-agentialisation	Actions and reactions can be '*deagentialised*, represented as brought about in other ways, impervious to human agency – through natural forces, unconscious processes, and so on.' (p.66)
Eventuation	'In the case of *eventuation*, an action or reaction is represented as an event, as something that just 'happens', without the involvement of human agency. The question "by whom?" cannot relevantly be asked in connection to it.' (p. 66)
Existentialisation	'An action or reaction is represented as something that "simply exists". The action…itself is objectivated and fills the slot of the "existent" (the entity predicated to exist) in "existential clauses", clauses which assert the existence of something and frequently begin with "there" ("there is…", "there exists…", Halliday, 1985: 130). Alternatively, existentialisation is realised in objectivated ways, e.g. through nominalisations like "existence"' (pp. 67-8)
Naturalisation	'…an action or reaction is represented

	as a natural process by means of abstract material processes, such as "vary", "expend", "develop", etc. which lick actions and reactions to specific interpretations of material processes – to discourses of rise and fall, ebb and flood; of birth and death, growth and decay; of change and development and evolution; of fusion and disintegration, expansion and contraction.' (p. 68)
Generalisation	'Different representations may *generalise* actions and reactions to different degrees' (p. 68) 'Texts which are mainly concerned with legitimising or delegitimizing actions and reactions tend to move high up on the generalisation scale, including only the names of episodes of whole social practices.' (p. 69)
Abstraction	*'Generalisation* can be seen as a form of *abstraction*; they abstract away from the more specific micro-actions that make up action. Other forms of abstraction abstract qualities from actions or reactions.' (p. 69)

4.4.   Recontextualising the Big Society: A Framework for Analysis

The research questions that I outlined and discussed in Chapter Three require me to focus on the recontextualisations and representations of discourses representing government, local government, communities, and citizens relating to the imagined Big Society throughout the development of 'localism' at Cambridgeshire County Council. My analytical categories as discussed throughout this chapter are thus:

- The representations of social actors and actions in discourses identified (van Leeuwen, 2008);
- Interdiscursive and intertextual analysis of the shifting combinations of discourses within and between texts; and
- The application of the 'four levels of context' (Wodak, 2001: 67) in order to situate these discourses within and between social structures/practices and social event/strategies:

1. the immediate, language or text-internal co-text and co-discourse (e.g. the specific government documents setting out the imagined goals of the Big Society);
2. the intertextual and interdiscursive relationship between utterances, texts, genres and discourses (e.g. between government documents, Council documents, interviews with policy actors, and observations of relevant meetings and events);
3. the extra-linguistic social variables and institutional frames of a specific 'context of situation' (e.g. Cambridgeshire County Council);
4. the broader socio-political and historical context, which discursive practices are embedded in and related to (e.g. the budget cuts, austerity measures, traditions of central and local government relations, etc.).

The stages of my analytic approach are summarised in Figure 3.

It is important to remember that my approach to analysis is a reflexive, iterative and cyclical one. Although I refer to 'stages' I do not understand any one stage to be singular, standalone or unrelated to any other stage or indeed to the theory or methodology informing the research or the research questions themselves. It is also important to point out that throughout the process of data analysis my own reflexivity and contribution to the generation of interpretations and representations of the data were considered. Despite applying methods of analysis which could be said to enhance the validity of the research, my own interpretation remains a systematically arrived at interpretation. The strength of my approach lies in my acknowledgement of and engagement with my own reflexivity and my transparent detailing of the process I have undertaken in order to arrive at the interpretations that I will subsequently present in this thesis.

Figure. 3: Stages of Analysis

Stage 1: Categorise data into major comparison groups:
    a. Central government
    b. Local government

Stage 2: Code central government data to mark social actors and social actions

Stage 3: Categorise social actors and social actions in central government data using van Leeuwen's categories (2008)

Stage 4: Apply 'four levels of context' (Wodak 2001: 67) to coded and categorised central government data

Stage 5: Subdivide local government data:
    a. Primary Case Study (Cambridgeshire County Council)
    b. Embedded Case Study 1 (Community Led Planning pilot)
    c. Embedded Case Study 2 (Area Committee Participation pilot)

Stage 6: Select extracts from local government data based on representation of actors considered central to the imagined Big Society (see Chapter Three):
    a. Central government
    b. Local government
    c. Communities
    d. Individuals / citizens / people

Stage 7: Code local government data to mark social actors and social actions

Stage 8: Categorise social actors and social actions in local government data using van Leeuwen's categories (2008)

Stage 9: Apply 'four levels of context' (Wodak 2001: 67) to coded and categorised local government data

Stage 10: Compare representations across:
    a. Time
    b. Tiers of local government
    c. Central and local government

4.5.   Summary

In a persuasive argument for recognition of the importance of CDA to policy analysis, Wagenaar (2011: 158) declares that:

it offers a systematic procedure for analyzing texts as windows upon (the struggle between) ideologies and social practices. Well-executed critical discourse analyses are able to reveal the hidden contradictions and tensions that flow from structural power differentials in everyday policy initiatives.'

This research study aims to develop an empirically based critique of the Big Society in its own terms and to explore the potential incompatibilities between the imagined Big Society and the 'realities' of society during the development of 'localism' at Cambridgeshire County Council between 2011-2012. In order to do this I use a combined DRA-DHA version of CDA (Wodak and Fairclough, 2010).

In this chapter I have discussed my ontological positioning in relation to the theories of critical realism and social constructionism as well as my interpretivist epistemology. I have defined and discussed the concept of discourse as I understand it for my research study - in relation to my combined discourse-historical and discourse-relational approach to CDA (Wodak, 1996; 2001; Fairclough, 2001; 2003; 2010; Wodak and Fairclough, 2010). Discourse is a vital element of the social practices of the imagined Big Society and of the development of localism within Cambridgeshire County Council. I have discussed the refinement of my approach in relation to the subdivisions of discourse, of which 'discourses' form the main focus for my analysis. Within discourses the analytical categories of social actions and social actors are key. In relation, the importance of a focus on context and the concept of recontextualisation was discussed. Ultimately I set out my analytical categories and the framework which I applied in this research study.

In the next chapter I will explore the research settings in which my fieldwork was carried out, relating the background and details of each case, the partners involved, and the settings in which localism or either of the pilot projects was developed.

5. The Big Society in Cambridgeshire (?): A Multiple Embedded Case Study

5.1. Introduction

In this chapter I will explore the research settings in which I carried out my fieldwork. I will begin by introducing the county of Cambridgeshire and particularly Cambridgeshire County Council, where my research project first began. I will explore Cambridgeshire County Council's initial response to the government's Big Society via analysis of documents published in the period after the announcement of the Big Society in May 2010 and prior to the start of my fieldwork in May 2011. I will follow the County Council's initial development of localism and detail my eventual involvement in my three chosen case studies:

- Cambridgeshire County Council and the Localism and Community Engagement Board;
- the Community Led Planning pilot; and
- the Area Committee Participation pilot.

I will then explore each of these case studies in turn, relating the background and details of each case, the partners involved, and the settings in which the policy or the pilot project was developed.

5.2. Cambridgeshire and Cambridgeshire County Council

Cambridgeshire is situated in East Anglia, bordering the counties of Lincolnshire to the north, Norfolk to the northeast, Essex and Hertfordshire to the south, and Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire to the west.

Cambridgeshire is made up of five Districts:
- Cambridge City Council
- East Cambridgeshire District Council
- Fenland District Council
- Huntingdonshire District Council

- South Cambridgeshire District Council

Cambridgeshire County Council is a democratically elected body consisting of sixty nine councillors who are each elected for a period of four years. Between 2009 and 2013 the Council comprised forty two Conservative councillors, two Labour councillors, twenty three Liberal Democrat councillors, one UKIP councillor and one Green Party councillor. At the time of my fieldwork the Council was Conservative led.

From June 2001 Cambridgeshire County Council has used the Council leader and Cabinet model of democratic arrangements for their decision making, see Figure 2 (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2013a: 2).

Figure 2.
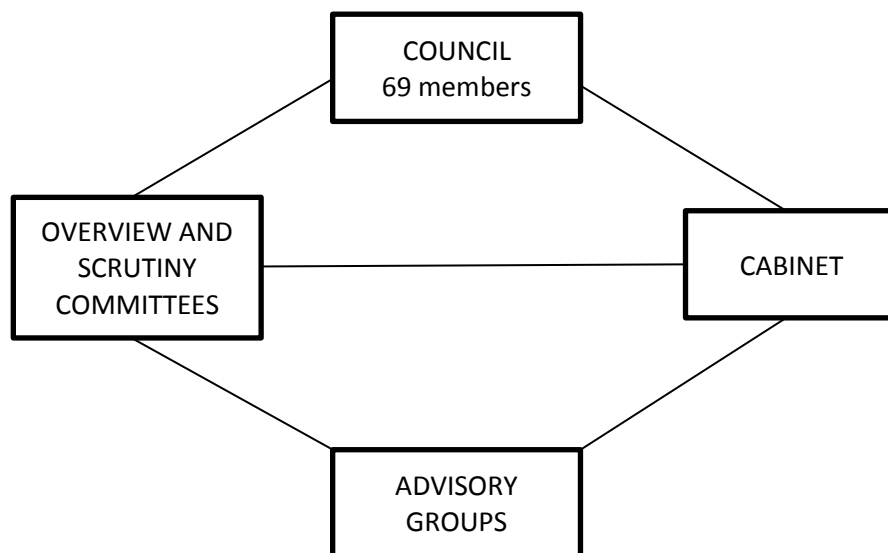
Within this model the Council retain responsibility for the Council's overall spending, budget setting, council tax and major policies, whilst the everyday running of the Council is the responsibility of the Cabinet who in turn may delegate responsibility to Council officers (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2013b). Council officers are responsible for running the services that the Council provides. They 'carry out the policies of the Council and provide a high standard of public service at all times' (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2013b).

At the centre of the Council's executive arrangements is the Cabinet. The Cabinet is made up of nine County Councillors. The Cabinet is responsible for making

recommendations to the Council on issues that fall under their jurisdiction. Once the Council have agreed a policy framework then the Cabinet have the power to decide any issue which falls within that framework (ibid). The leader of the Council, who is appointed by the full Council, is in charge of the Cabinet and appoints the other eight Cabinet members. Each Cabinet member has their own specific area of responsibility or 'portfolio'.

The Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committees are an 'important part' of their democratic arrangements (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2013b: 4). The key function of these committees is described as holding 'the Executive to account by scrutinising decisions before they are implemented (known as "call in") and scrutinising the efficiency and effectiveness of implemented policies (known as "performance review")' (ibid). Representatives from all of the political parties within the Council make up the Overview and Scrutiny Committees but they do not include Cabinet members.

5.3.   Primary Case Study: Cambridgeshire County Council

Cambridgeshire County Council, specifically the teams, boards and actors involved with the development of localism at the County Council, represent my primary case study in this research project. I will begin this section by exploring Cambridgeshire County Council's initial response to the government's Big Society via analysis of documents published in the period after the announcement of the Big Society in May 2010 and prior to the start of my fieldwork in May 2011. This analysis fulfils the requirements of an answer to my second research question:

2. What discourses representing the Big Society, government, local government, communities, and people are drawn on in official County Council documents relating to their initial response to the Big Society between May 2010 and May 2011?

   a) How are social actors and social actions represented in these discourses?
   b) What are the contexts in which these social actors and social actions are represented?

c) To what extent are these representations of social actors and social actions consistent?

I will continue by describing the role, make up and objectives of the Localism and Community Engagement Board who had responsibility for overseeing the development of localism. I will introduce the relevant partners and actors involved in the Localism and Community Engagement Board and describe the settings in which meetings and events took place.

5.3.1. Cambridgeshire County Council and the Big Society: An Initial Response

In this sub-section I explore Cambridgeshire County Council's initial response to the government's Big Society via presentation and discussion of my interpretations of documents published in the period after the announcement of the Big Society in May 2010 and prior to the start of my fieldwork in May 2011. The data presented in this section has been analysed in accordance with the analytical framework presented in Chapter Four. Thus I have coded the data to mark social actors and actions; categorised the coded social actors and actions using van Leeuwen's (2008) framework (see Chapter Four, section 4.3.6.); and applied Wodak's (2001: 67) 'four levels of context' to the coded and categorised data. Owing to a lack of space in the thesis, I will present only my interpretations of the results of my analysis rather than the analysis in full. For an example of a full analysis see Chapter Six, Section 6.1.1.

'A genuinely local council'

Cambridgeshire County Council published their 2011-2012 Integrated Plan in 2011, setting out why a new plan was needed, what their strategic priorities were for 2011-12, and summarising their planned activity for the period. The document is designed to communicate the Council's plans to the public.

The Integrated Plan included a broad commitment to work as a local Council:

> Over the next five years, our commitment is that we will be a genuinely local council
> (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2011a: 14)

The extract represents a promise as to how the County Council will work in the future – as a 'genuinely local council'. It hints at a relationship between the Council and their local communities but does not represent communities in any specific way. There is no detailed representation of how the Council intend to 'be a genuinely local council'. Later in the document another extract does go some way to providing more detail as to how the Council intend to achieve their imagined status as a 'genuinely local council'. It particularly details their approach to decentralisation:

> We want to hand power for decision making, budgets and service provision to the most local level possible. For example, when spending or service decisions are made about children, young people or adults who need some extra support, this will take place at the most local level possible, with them, their families and their communities at the heart. We will work closely with GPs, schools, health colleagues, district councils and other partners, through a network of community-based services.
> (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2011a: 14)

Here the County Council are represented as having a desire to see future decisions made at a local level. This desire is tempered by the acknowledgement of possibility and impossibility in terms of the level to which powers can be devolved. Partners are represented as passive and their participation is subject to the County Council's actions. No detail is given as to how exactly the Council will achieve a close working relationship with the partners represented or indeed how families, communities and people about whom the Council are making decisions will be 'at the heart' of the process.

Another extract further expands on the Council's commitment to be 'a genuinely local council', this time detailing how they will work and develop their relationship with local communities:

> We will listen to and engage with the aspirations of communities, and ensure sound democratic processes, robust scrutiny, and fair and transparent elections. We will help people to get involved in their local area and take on services in areas where we have to cut back.
> (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2011a: 14)

Here the County Council are represented as active and influential. The use of the auxiliary verb 'will' indicates that the represented actions are imagined future actions. Communities are imagined to have aspirations and are also represented as existing and cohesive units. People are represented as recipients of the Council's help and are imagined, upon receiving this help, to become involved in their local area and take on services. There is an assumption that people have the time, inclination and necessary skills to undertake such actions.

Central government are not included in the extract; they are suppressed but can be said to be present in terms of its immediate context. In representing the Council as having to 'cut back' on certain areas the extract hints at the involvement of central government via the budget cuts imposed on local government as part of the Spending Review of 2010 (Cmnd-7942, 2010).

'Our Approach to Localism'

A briefing document was prepared by a senior officer for the senior management team and Cabinet members at Cambridgeshire County Council in July 2010 (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2010a). The document outlined how officers proposed to take forward a 'Localism agenda' following initial discussions held immediately after the election in May 2010. This extract details what had been agreed by the County Council to date:

> It has been agreed that in Cambridgeshire Localism must be applied through mainstream budgets and that while we encourage local flexibility this should occur within a County framework.
> (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2010a: 2)

Cabinet are represented here as active and powerful within the County Council; their decisions dictate the progression of localism within the authority. The action of encouraging local flexibility is active but restrained by the condition that local flexibility must occur within a County framework. The modal verb 'should' represents the constraint. The 'county framework' is not defined and as such remains flexible.

A further extract sets out a suggested approach to localism on which the senior management team and Cabinet members are invited to comment and give their approval:

we would assert the need to adopt the following approach:

- Test out the devolution of specific decisions and services to local communities through delivery of a small number of innovative pilots
- Develop our work with Parish Councils
- Improve communications and information-provision throughout the Council
- Strengthen what we already do to deliver localism

(Cambridgeshire County Council, 2010a: 2)

Within the suggested approach communities are represented as recipients of specific services and decisions which may be devolved through a small number of pilot projects. Parish councils are represented as important partners with whom the County Council must develop their working relationship if they are to pursue localism successfully.

A later extract from the same document contextualises the policy environment in which the County Council are developing their localism agenda, ultimately framing it as an opportunity for them to develop localism in a way that is best suited to their needs:

> …this is not an easy area to work in particularly at this time of cutbacks and it is relatively brave and innovative to do this with mainstream budgets – pursuing this agenda will therefore require firm leadership. There is unlikely to be direction from Central Government as to what expectations there are in relation to localism other than "get on with it". This creates an opportunity to develop localism in a way that is right for Cambridgeshire.
> (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2010a: 6-7)

Particular reference is made to the budget cuts imposed on local government and the subsequent savings that Cambridgeshire County Council need to make. The discourses of opportunism and creativity are identifiable, as is the discourse of confusion or uncertainty as to exactly what central government expect with regard to localism.

'Localism is in line with our commitment to devolve'

A policy briefing was prepared in December 2010 (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2010b) to inform County Council officers and members about developments related to the Localism Bill (2010) that were considered to affect Cambridgeshire and the County Council.

This extract favourably aligns the coalition government's 'principle of localism' with the Council's own commitment to become a 'genuinely local council':

> The principle of localism is in line with the Council's commitment to devolving decision making, commissioning and the running of some services to local level, where people are best placed to decide which services they need. As a result, the Bill will generally be welcomed as a means of providing the Council with further freedom to pursue its localist ambitions. (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2010b: 1)

The extract seems to suggest that localism is not new in Cambridgeshire and that the current political context is inconsequential to their way of working. Nonetheless it is acknowledged that the Council will welcome the Localism Bill as a means of providing them with 'further freedom' to pursue their 'localist ambitions'.

5.3.2. The Localism and Community Engagement Programme

Once the Council had agreed that a programme around localism would be developed at Cambridgeshire County Council the officers were then tasked with developing a programme brief. The first draft of a programme brief for the newly agreed Localism and Community Engagement Programme was written in February 2011. Five subsequent drafts were composed between February and May 2011, at which point I was given access to the document, the purpose of which was to define the programme objectives and outcomes as:

- Developing a governance structure which gives local communities real influence
- Making the best use of buildings to deliver localism

- Enabling communities to plan their own future
- Exploring new ways of working to inform our future work on localism
- Enable individuals and communities to take local ownership of transport issues and solutions
- Working with communities to build their capacity to deliver localism
- Developing social markets
- Communicating effectively to different audiences to enable localism to happen
- Equip members and officers to help deliver the localism agenda.

(Cambridgeshire County Council, 2011b: 3)

No detail is provided as to how any of these actions might be developed. An action of particular interest is represented in the objective 'making the best use of buildings to *deliver* localism' (my emphasis). This representation suggests that localism is something that can be delivered.

Communities and individuals are passive beneficiaries of the Board's actions in enabling, giving and working with them to achieve their objectives. However they are also imagined to become active in working with the Council, taking ownership of services and even delivering localism. Members and officers at the County Council are also represented as benefitting from the Programme's actions in equipping them to help deliver the localism agenda. This suggests a discourse of creativity and new ways of working with which not all members and officers might currently be familiar or comfortable.

5.3.3. Settings: The Localism and Community Engagement Board

The Localism and Community Engagement Board was to be the main setting for fieldwork undertaken in relation to this primary case study. The Localism and Community Engagement Board was created in order to 'oversee progress across all projects and make key programme decisions' (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2011b: 11). The Board was specifically tasked with 'providing visible leadership and commitment to change', 'providing overall direction and control of the programme', and 'scrutinising projects to ensure they are justifiable, achievable and affordable' (ibid).

The Board was due to meet every eight weeks and the first meeting took place in February 2011. Meetings took place at designated meeting rooms in one of the County Council's main office buildings. Membership of the Board included twenty two officers from across the Council's five directorates and a further eight corresponding members including two Cabinet members, five senior officers and one representative from Cambridgeshire Constabulary. Meetings tended to last approximately two hours and were generally very well attended. Agendas were sent out a few days prior to the meeting and tended to be extremely full given the wide remit of the Board.

The Board was chaired by the programme sponsor. This sponsor was John, a senior officer at the County Council and one of my research participants and key gatekeepers. According to the Programme Brief (2011b: 12), the programme sponsor is 'ultimately accountable for the programme, supported by the Programme Board' and has 'the responsibility to ensure that the programme is achieving its objectives'. There was also a programme manager who was authorised to 'run the programme on a day-to-day basis within the limits and constraints set by the Board' (2011b: 13) and several project managers who were authorised to run projects under the localism programme and tasked with ensuring that the project team 'produced the required products/deliverables on time, within budget and to agreed quality and standards' (ibid). Liz, another of my research participants and key gatekeepers, was one of these project managers and had responsibility for several of the programme's pilot projects.

The Board oversaw a number of pilot projects designed to test the Council's ideas for localism. In March 2011 a document was presented to the Board which provided an update on eleven 'localism pilots' that had begun as early as September 2010 (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2011c: 1). I chose two of these pilot projects to be the embedded case studies for my research project.

5.3.4. Interviewees

Within this primary case study I recruited the following interviewees:

Name	Organisation	Role
Councillor Smith	Cambridgeshire County Council	Cabinet Member
John	Cambridgeshire County Council	Senior Officer; Programme Sponsor; Chair of the Board
Liz	Cambridgeshire County Council	Officer; Project Manager for several pilot projects

5.4. Embedded Case Study One: The Community Led Planning Pilot

5.4.1. Background

This one year pilot project was based primarily in one Cambridgeshire village. The objectives of the pilot project were summarised in a County Council document that outlined the project's business case:

> The community led planning strand will enable new approaches to community engagement and planning using interactive and visual methods. There is a particular wish to involve young people who are often inspired to get involved through multi media approaches. The aim is to use methods that are based around less jargon, reducing the written word and encouraging engagement outside meeting structures. The work will build a new Community Plan that communicates visually what [pilot village's] forthcoming challenges will be. It is hoped that this leads to the realisation of collective ownership over the challenges, enabling improved self-organisation by the community and increased dialogue with key partners. (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2011e: 2)

The main stakeholders in the pilot project were:

- Cambridgeshire County Council;
- The District Council within which the pilot village was located;
- The pilot village's Parish Council; and
- A third sector organisation based in Cambridgeshire.

Of the main stakeholders it is worth noting specifically the situation of the Parish Council. The Chair of the Parish Council at the time of my research was also a District Councillor and a County Councillor. He therefore had a potentially greater influence within the pilot project than other parish council Chairs might have had. It is worth bearing this in mind throughout the discussion of my interpretations of the data that I present in Chapter Six.

The third sector organisation had been successful in bidding for funding which would support the development and delivery of the project. In a proposal drafted by the third sector organisation in January 2011 they described the work that they planned to undertake, setting out the broad objectives of the pilot and describing the projected representations of actors in the pilot village as a result of the project:

> This proposal sets out a programme for community engagement activities in [pilot village], through which it is hoped a wider range of community members will become involved and empowered to take forward the delivery of public services.
> (Third Sector Organisation, 2011: 2)

In this extract the community, community members and the pilot village itself are imagined to benefit from the pilot in terms of becoming empowered to deal with the perceived outcomes of localism – namely having to take forward the provision of service delivery themselves. The extract represents the third sector organisation's 'hope' that community members will become active and more involved in their community and specifically the delivery of public services.

This second extract represents the 'key collaborators' in the project. Notably, communities and local people are missing from the list:

> The key collaborators in this work are Cambridgeshire County Council, [xxx] District Council and [pilot village] Parish Council who are keen to start to see the devolution of powers to a local level and to look at ways of co-producing local services. [xxx] a Cambridgeshire charity that supports young people to be active in their communities, would also be a partner.
> (Third Sector Organisation, 2011: 2)

The document also set out the 'expected outcomes' of the project:

1.   A wider range of community members engaged so they have an understanding of the new localism powers and what this means for their community.

2.   A wider range of community members involved in the production of a new Community (Neighbourhood) Plan that will allow the community to shape its local area using new localism powers.

3.   The Parish Council developing its role in overseeing and delivering local service provision.

4.   Cambridgeshire County Council and [xxx] District Council developing their role in working alongside the community in transforming services through co-production and possible decentralisation of local funding.

(Third Sector Organisation, 2011: 2)

The pilot project was launched at an event held in the village's church in early March 2011. Presentations were given by each of the project's main partners: the Parish Council, the County Council, the District Council and the Third Sector Organisation. The presentations introduced and discussed localism, the Big Society and the pilot project itself. Approximately seventy residents attended the launch event; this was considered by attendees at the first steering group meeting that I observed following the launch event to have been a favourable turnout

5.4.2. Governance

The progress and development of the pilot project was overseen by a steering group consisting of representatives from each of the projects' main partners bar one - the District Council. So the steering group consisted of representatives from the County Council, the Parish Council, the third sector organisation and the charity working with young people. The steering group met approximately every eight weeks and was most often chaired by Liz, the County Council officer who acted as the Council's project manager for this pilot project.

5.4.3. Settings

I observed a total of six steering group meetings over the course of the year. Each of these meetings took place at the Parish Council's meetings rooms within the pilot village. I also observed a number of events and related meetings throughout the pilot project. These are detailed in the table below:

Event/meeting name and venue	Date	Participants	Summary
Community Fair – Village Hall	16th May 2011	• 15 community groups on stalls • Third sector organisation • Young People's charity • County Council (Liz) • Parish Council	The event was held to encourage existing groups to engage with each other and with the Parish Council leading to potential involvement in the pilot.
One Day in [pilot village] – Village playing fields and wider village	28th July 2011	• Third sector organisation • Young people's charity • County Council (Liz) • Approximately 50 residents	Residents were given a camera and a question sheet and asked to walk around the village and take photos to answer the questions about what they did and didn't like in the village.
Action Day (follow up from photography event) – Village Hall	16th August 2011	• Third sector organisation • County Council (Liz) • Parish Council • Approximately 25 residents	Residents were asked to look at the photos and note down the issues they thought were most important, along with actions to be taken and how this could be achieved.
Stakeholder meeting – Village Hall	8th September 2011	• Third sector organisation • County Council (Liz) • Parish Council • Approximately 24 residents	An opportunity for the Parish Council to engage with representatives from existing community groups to try and encourage

			participation with themselves and the pilot project. An introduction of the Neighbourhood Challenge competition.
Pilot Evaluation meeting – Cambridgeshire village	28th March 2012	• Third sector organisation • County Council (Liz) • Parish Council • Representatives from other pilot villages • Independent research company conducting the evaluation	Attendees were asked to consider the relative successes and failures of the pilot project in their village.

5.4.4. Interviewees

Within this case study I recruited the following interviewees:

Name	Organisation	Role
Liz	Cambridgeshire County Council	Officer; Project Manager for pilot project
Councillor Stone	Parish Council; County Council	Parish Council chair; County Councillor
Sarah	Parish Council	Parish Clerk
Emily	Third Sector Organisation	Community Advisor; pilot lead

5.5. Embedded Case Study Two: The Area Committee Participation Pilot

5.5.1. Background

This one year pilot was led by one of Cambridgeshire's District Councils with whom Cambridgeshire County Council worked in partnership. Officers and members from

the County Council had been involved in a programme of workshops and meetings held by the District Council to develop the pilot initially.

The District Council has four 'areas' and each 'area' has its own Area Committee. The councillors who represent the wards within each particular area are committee members for that area. County Councillors for that area can be invited by the Area Committee to be non-voting co-opted members. Area Committees are encouraged to involve other partners such as representatives from the police, health services and residents' groups in meetings but they cannot be co-opted as members onto the committee. According to the Council's constitution, Area Committees have the following purposes:

- To make decisions concerning executive and regulatory functions of the Council which have been delegated to them;
- To consider issues which affect their area;
- To act as a consultative body in respect of the interests of their area;
- To provide a forum for local residents to raise issues about their area;
- To facilitate themed discussions about issues of concern locally. Examples might include issues concerning crime and anti-social behaviour, traffic management/ congestion, public transport, health or education.

The District Council's Project Initiation Document (District Council, 2011: 3) set out the aims of the pilot and the projected outcomes for the project:

The Leader made a decision at Strategy and Resources on 5 July, to develop a Pilot for the area covered by [xxx] Area Committee to trial approaches to increase community empowerment and local participation in decision-making to:

- Enable local people to agree local priorities for their area
- Increase participation and involvement by residents in the work of the Council and partners
- Improve local services by making them more responsive to the priorities of local people
- Strengthen the role of elected members within their local constituencies and provide opportunities for their development
- Strengthen local communities

The project assumes there is no additional resource. It will require elected members and officers to think and work differently. It has the potential to radically change the way we work.

Ideas being trialled as part of the pilot project included:

- Different ways of setting up meetings – instead of committee members sitting at the front of the meeting room in a single line and behind desks, they were asked to sit on round tables, spread out amongst the attendees. It was hoped that this would increase and encourage participation of residents in the meetings.
- A community forum element of the meeting during which residents could discuss with Councillors and other attendees a particular issue considered to be of importance to the community.
- Designing meeting agendas according to local priorities. These local priorities would be ascertained via a community consultation exercise.
- Devolving more decisions and potentially budgets to the level of Area Committees.

In terms of this last point, the County and District Councils were working together to decide which powers could be devolved to the pilot Area Committee. The District Council were hopeful that the County Council might consider devolving some County level functions to the Area Committee.

The main stakeholders of the pilot project were:
- The District Council
- The County Council
- The pilot Area Committee

5.5.2. Governance

The progress and development of the pilot project was overseen by an Officer Project Team and a Member Working Group. The Officer Project Team met roughly every six weeks but they did not meet over the summer holiday period of 2011 or the Christmas period of the same year. Meetings were attended by the project champion, Rebecca, who also chaired the meetings, the project manager, Joshua,

the project support officer, Toby, the head of service lead for the pilot Area Committee, Tom, and five other supporting officers. On occasion the County Council officer involved with the pilot, Liz, was also in attendance.

The Member Working Group tended to meet within two weeks of the most recent pilot Area Committee meeting. The group comprised each of the four Area Committee chairs and the leader of the District Council. The meetings were chaired by Rebecca and tended to be used by officers to feed back to members on the progress of the pilot and to get a steer as to the direction in which they would like the project to proceed.

5.5.3. Settings

Over the course of the year I observed seven Area Committee meetings within the pilot area. Six of these meetings took place in a school hall within the area. The other meeting took place in a local community centre as it was bigger and it had been considered that this particular meeting would elicit a bigger attendance.

I observed six Officer Project Team meetings and five Member Working Group meetings throughout the year. These meetings all took place in offices within the District Council building.

I also attended a meeting in July 2011 that took place between four County officers and one District officer to discuss how the Councils could work together within the pilot project and particularly addressed the issue of devolution. The meeting took place at Cambridgeshire County Council. Additionally I attended a community event in June 2011 which formed part of the pilot project's community consultation exercise, a pilot review meeting between two District Council officers and one County officer that took place at the District Council in May 2012 and, just a few days later, an internal pilot review meeting at the County Council.

5.5.4. Interviewees

Within this case study I recruited the following interviewees:

Name	Organisation	Role

Rebecca	District Council	Project Champion; Senior Officer
Toby	District Council	Project Support; Officer
Councillor Williams	District Council	Chair of pilot Area Committee
Joshua	District Council	Project Manager; Senior Officer
Councillor Osborne	District Council	Executive Councillor
Tom	District Council	Senior Officer; Committee Support

5.6. Summary

In this chapter I have explored the research settings in which I carried out my fieldwork. I have introduced and described my primary case study and each of the two embedded case studies in turn, detailing the background and aims of each project or policy development as well as the governance structures, key partners and settings.

In the next chapter I will relate and discuss the representations I have developed as a result of my critical discourse analysis of the imagined Big Society as represented in Conservative Party and coalition government documents and speeches between February 2009 and December 2010. This analysis forms the 'terms' within which I subsequently develop a critique of the Big Society. I will then discuss my interpretations of the analysed data relating to the development of localism at Cambridgeshire County Council. Finally I will seek to discuss any apparent incompatibilities between the imagined Big Society and the realities of localism in Cambridgeshire.

6. Recontextualising the Big Society: From Central Imaginaries to Local 'Realities'

In this chapter I will set out and discuss the interpretations that I have developed based on the results of the analyses I carried out in order to develop answers to the research questions set out in Chapter Three. The analyses were carried out according to the stages of analysis set out and discussed in Chapter Four, using van Leeuwen's (2008) frameworks for the analysis of social actors and social actions and drawing on Wodak's (2001: 67) 'four level concept of context' in order to situate identified discourses within and between social structures/practices and social event/strategies. The proviso discussed in that section is, of course, applicable here: my approach to analysis was a reflexive, iterative and cyclical one. Although I refer to 'stages' I do not understand any one stage to be singular, standalone or unrelated to any other stage or indeed to the theory or methodology informing the research or the research questions themselves.

I provide an exemplar analysis in Section 6.1.1. in order to illustrate the analytical process more fully. For the remainder of the section however, I am unable to present my full analysis. This is largely a result of the lack of space in my thesis and I have thus chosen to present only the results and my interpretations of these results. Given my interpretive approach to this research this is not entirely unexpected and I fully acknowledge my discussion to be just that; a discussion of the interpretations that I have brought to bear on this data as a result of the analysis that I carried out.

In the first section of the chapter I discuss my interpretations, based on the results of my analysis, of the imagined Big Society as represented in Conservative Party and coalition government documents and speeches between February 2009 and December 2010. This takes into account a timeframe that includes the build up to the general election of 2010, the general election itself, and the first few months of the coalition government's term in office. This analysis fulfils the requirements of an answer to my first research question:

1. What discourses are drawn on in official government and Conservative Party documents and speeches relating to the imagined goals of the Big Society?

a) How are social actors and social actions represented in these discourses?

b) What are the contexts in which these social actors and social actions are represented?

c) To what extent are representations of these social actors and social actions consistent?

This analysis allows me to construct an interpretation of the Big Society in its own terms.

In the second section of the chapter I discuss my interpretations of the analyses of the recontextualisations and representations of discourses representing actors considered central to the imagined Big Society during the development of localism in Cambridgeshire between 2011 and 2012. This section will focus initially on my primary case study – Cambridgeshire County Council and specifically the Localism and Community Engagement Board. I will then focus on my first embedded case study – the Community Led Planning pilot; and finally on my second embedded case study – the Area Committee Participation pilot. This analysis fulfils the requirements of an answer to my third research question:

3. What discourses representing the Big Society, government, local government, communities, and people do County, District and Parish Council members, Council officers and third sector community organisation workers involved in the development of localism in Cambridgeshire draw on in reflective, semi-structured interviews and in relevant meetings and events?

a) How are social actors and social actions represented in these discourses?

b) What are the contexts in which these social actors and social actions are represented?

c) What aspects of these representations of social actors and social actions change over the course of a year? What are the reasons for change and the contexts related to the changes?

d) What aspects of these representations of social actors and social actions are consistent or inconsistent?

In the third and final section of this chapter I will summarise, compare and contrast the discourses representing actors considered central to the imagined Big Society with recontextualisations of discourses representing those same actors in my analysis of Cambridgeshire County Council's development of localism within and across each of my three case studies. I will focus particularly on any inconsistencies or tensions that are apparent either within or across each of the scales of social practice evident in the imagined Big Society or the development of localism. These tensions or inconsistencies may be indicative of contradictions and thus incompatibilities between the imagined Big Society and local 'realities' in Cambridgeshire. Finally, I will discuss whether and if so how these representations and recontextualisations might constrain or enable the potential realisation of the imagined Big Society in Cambridgeshire. In this way I will seek to discuss the answers to research questions 1-3 as set out in Chapter Three and address question 4:

4. What aspects of these representations of social actors and social actions are consistent or inconsistent across the government and Council documents and across interviews and observations with County, District, Parish and third sector organisation actors over the course of a year?

In this discussion I seek to achieve the aim of my research: the development of an empirically based critique of the Big Society in its own terms at a local government level.

6.1.   The Imagined Big Society

This discussion focuses on the results from my analysis of extracts from Conservative Party and coalition government documents and speeches relating to the development and introduction of the Big Society between February 2009 and December 2010, specifically:

- Control Shift: Returning Power to Local Communities, Policy Green Paper No.9 (The Conservative Party, 2009)
- Hugo Young Memorial Lecture (Cameron, 2009b)
- Building a Big Society (Conservative Party, 2010a)

- Building the Big Society (Cabinet Office, 2010a)
- The Big Society Speech (Cameron, 2010)
- Decentralisation and the Localism Bill: An Essential Guide (DCLG, 2010)

Each extract presented and discussed in this section of the chapter has been analysed in accordance with the stages presented in Chapter Four, section 4.4., page 96, specifically the stages relating to the analysis of central government documents (stages 1 – 4). Thus I have coded the data to mark social actors and actions; categorised the coded social actors and actions using van Leeuwen's (2008) framework; and applied Wodak's (2001: 67) 'four levels of context' to the coded and categorised data.

6.1.1. Exemplar Analysis

I will fully present this first extract as an example of the analysis I carried out in accordance with the stages for analysis presented in Chapter Four.

In accordance with my analytical framework, I initially coded the central government data to mark representations of social actors and social actions in the texts. This initial coding revealed that a small number of actors were consistently and heavily represented in the imagined Big Society: central government, local government, communities and local people. I thus present my interpretations in this section of extracts which represent these key actors and the actions in which they are imagined to be involved.

In February 2009 the Conservative Party published a Green Paper entitled 'Control Shift: Returning Power to Local Communities'. A Green Paper is a consultation document which a party will use to gather opinions and reactions to their ideas for new policy or legislation. This particular Green Paper outlined the Conservative Party's proposed new programme of decentralisation and 'five pillar strategy to shift power away from the central state and firmly back to local people' (2009: 2).

An extract of particular interest represents the Conservative Party's projected vision of Britain and summarises the part that communities will have to play in the imagined Big Society:

This is a different vision of Britain, one where power is shared and communities are once again trusted to be in charge of their own destinies.

From this extract I was able to identify that the predominant discourse was a vision for the future which included a Conservative Party that would share power, communities who were represented as passive beneficiaries of this empowerment, and communities who were not currently trusted to take responsibility for themselves.

In accordance with Stage 3 of my analytical framework, the two tables below illustrate the categorisation of the social actors and actions identified in the extract using van Leeuwen's (2008) categories (see Chapter Four, section 4.3.6. for the full list of categories used in the analyses and descriptions of each category).

Social Actions	Categorisations	Social Actors	Categorisation
Power is shared	Action: Material: Non-transactive + Activation + Agentilisation + Abstraction: Generalisation	(Central government)	Excluded: Suppression
		(Local government)	Excluded: Suppression
		(Communities)	Excluded: Suppression
trusted to be in charge of their own destinies	Action: Material: Transactive: Instrumental + Activation + De-agentialisation: Eventuation + Abstraction: Generalisation	Communities	Passivation: Beneficialisation + Participation + Impersonalisation: Objectivation + Specification: Assimilation: Collectivisation
		(Central government)	Excluded: Suppression

Combining the results of this categorisation with my analysis of the 'levels of context' in which these discourses were produced allows me to develop an

interpretation of this extract, as I have done for all of the extracts and data analysed throughout my research project.

Perhaps most importantly, the social actors that are included in this extract are imagined – they are actors that are represented as being a part of the Conservative Party's vision for the future rather than actors that currently exist. Of these imagined actors communities are beneficiaries of citizen action and often form the circumstances for such action. Central government are suppressed in this extract. The social action 'power is shared' is non-transactive. But power cannot just 'be shared' – it must be shared by someone and with someone. The wider text allows me to assume that the actor doing the sharing is central government, or at least the imagined version of central government should the Conservative Party win the upcoming election. The suppression of central government as an actor is interesting and adds to the illusion of citizens as active and the state as inactive. However I know that this cannot be the case for the reason stated above: for power to be shared it needs an actor to do the sharing; central government is that actor.

The circumstances represented in this extract contribute to a discourse of an imagined future contrasted with a current situation in which communities are not trusted. The discourse seems to relate to a past in which communities were once trusted to look after themselves and to which society should now return. Overall this extract is a powerful projection of a positive future but it lacks detail as to how this projected future might be realised.

Following this exemplar abstract I will proceed in this section by presenting simply the data and my interpretations of the data developed through my application of the analytical framework that I set out and discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

6.1.2. Data and Interpretations

This second extract from the Conservative Party's Green Paper represents a statement of intent with regard to the relationship between central and local government:

We will free councils from the central and regional bureaucracy which drives up our council tax, and ensure local services are delivered according to local need, not the requirements of distant government officials.

Here the Conservative Party are represented collectively as an active and empowering actor who collectively intend to 'free' local councils should they be elected to govern the UK in the forthcoming general election of 2010. Councils are thus imagined to benefit from the Party's actions. It is further imagined that, if elected to govern, the Conservative Party would 'ensure that local services are delivered according to local need' rather than according to the will of central government officials. This is perhaps contradictory given that it is the Conservative Party themselves who will be doing the ensuring. All of the actions represented here are abstracted, meaning that no detail is given as to how they will be achieved. They are vague promises for an imagined future, the realisation of which is dependent on the outcome of the general election. Nonetheless, the imagined future is represented as one in which 'local need' rather than 'government officials' determine the delivery of local services. This is particularly interesting when I consider that 'local need' is itself an abstracted actor; who or what represents local need is unexplored by the Conservative Party and left open for debate and deliberation. The extract hints at an imagined rebalancing of power between central government and local councils in favour of local councils, with the Conservative Party acting as the benevolent benefactor of power. The issue of decentralisation hinted at here is further explored in the following extract which outlines the Conservative Party's intent to transfer the balance of power from central government to local people:

3. Giving local people more power over local government

We will put more power in the hands of local people and make councillors more accountable to their citizens. We want people to be able to see clearly, and exercise real influence over, what their elected representatives are doing with the power they are trusted with.

In this extract the Conservative Party are active and powerful in their imagined role as the governing party. Their objectives are represented as giving power to local people and making councillors accountable to residents in their localities. Local people are therefore imagined to benefit positively from government actions as

power is devolved to them from the centre. Local government councillors are imagined to be accountable to local people rather than central government and in this way can also be considered as beneficiaries of the Conservative Party's intent to empower local people but, rather than benefitting positively, they are represented as negative beneficiaries. As in the previous extracts, actions here are abstracted and generalised; no detail is given as to how the Party intend to put more power into the hands of local people or indeed how they intend to make councillors more accountable to local people.

The representations of local government in this extract are perhaps contradictory to the representations in the previous extract in which the Conservative Party promised to free local councils from central government control. A local council surely cannot be 'made' more accountable by a political party who profess to want to free them from central government control. Nonetheless, the extract is representative of the passing of power from central government to communities, missing out local government in the process.

Later in 2009, on the 10th November, David Cameron made a speech at the 6th annual Hugo Young memorial lecture in which he set out the Conservative Party's approach to tackling poverty and what he called the 'inhibiting … size, scope and role of government in Britain'. In the speech Cameron described the beginnings of a process by which the Big Society would be created. He talked about the importance of the state in terms of encouraging and enabling citizen action and responsibility:

> The first step must be a new focus on empowering and enabling individuals, families and communities to take control of their lives so we create the avenues through which responsibility and opportunity can develop.

The Conservative Party, represented in their imagined role as the elected government of the UK, are active and influential. They are imagined as empowering and enabling people in order to create possibilities for the development of responsibility and opportunity. These actions, as most actions in these documents and speeches are, are abstracted and generalised; no detail is given as to the form which they will take.

The use of the intensive process 'must be' is particularly interesting here. It is indicative of a need for these actions to take place; it leaves the audience with little

doubt that there is no other choice in terms of a way forward. If 'broken' Britain is to be fixed then this is the only solution. The use of the modal 'can' is also interesting in that it serves to hedge any apparent certainty that these actions which 'must' take place will in fact develop the responsibility and opportunities which they are imagined to do.

Individuals, families and communities are represented as passive beneficiaries of the imagined government's actions which will subsequently render them active in taking control of and being more responsible for their own lives. There is a suggestion, albeit only implied, that people are currently dependent on the state or on government for their wellbeing and that this is unsustainable.

In expanding on the previous extract, Cameron presented in his speech an imagined vision of the future Conservative-led state and its role in actively creating the Big Society:

> the re-imagined state should not stop at creating opportunities for people to take control of their lives. It must actively help people take advantage of this new freedom. This means a new role for the state: actively helping to create the Big Society; directly agitating for, catalysing and galvanising social renewal.

Interestingly here the state itself is abstracted; it is unclear who is meant to be included in this representation but it might be assumed that local government as well as central government are included given the representations in previous extracts of the role that local government are imagined to play in encouraging and being accountable to their local citizens. People, impersonalised and generalised, are passive beneficiaries of the state's actions. They are imagined to take advantage of their new freedoms, but only as a result of the state helping them to do so. As in other extracts, the state's imagined actions here are abstracted and generalised. Though activated in the imagined Big Society, it is not clear exactly what the actions of agitating for, catalysing and galvanising really entail.

Just four months after David Cameron made this speech a document entitled 'Building a Big Society' was published by the Conservative party. The document describes the policies which it was promised that the Party would pursue in order to build the Big Society were they to win the general election of May 2010. The

document was published as part of a conference on the Big Society at which David Cameron and eleven members of the Shadow Cabinet set out their 'vision for change', their representation of the imagined future that they aspired to create if elected to govern:

> The Big Society is a society with much higher levels of personal, professional, civic and corporate responsibility; a society where people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their communities; a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control.

This extract represents a positive image of society but, just like the other extracts discussed previously, it offers no detail or substance as to how the Big Society might become more than a projected 'vision'. Perhaps most interestingly here, the extract represents an imagined future in which the state is not responsible for progress; that responsibility has shifted to people. It is a positive image of a Big Society run by people, for people and with a much smaller role for government to play in social progress. People are thus represented as active and influential, and with the power to positively change their own situations and those of their community. Perhaps more interestingly however is that people are impersonalised and generic; no differentiation is made between different people in different communities or different circumstances. Communities, which are represented as the passive beneficiaries of people's actions, are also not differentiated but generalised and objectivated. In this way, the document fails to acknowledge or take into account the potential differences that exist between different communities and different people.

By the end of May 2010 and following the general election the Conservative Party had formed a coalition government with the Liberal Democrat Party. In the same month the Cabinet Office published a document entitled 'Building the Big Society' which outlined the coalition government's programme of policies to support the building of the Big Society.

In the document the Big Society was represented as a shared ambition of the two parties newly in coalition government with one another:

We want to give citizens, communities and local government the power and information they need to come together, solve the problems they face and build the Britain they want.

This extract represents the desires of the coalition government in building the Big Society but lacks any detail as to how the realisation of these desires will be achieved. In this way the extract is consistent with every other extract presented in this section in which actions are, for the most part, abstracted and generalised.

Given that this is an extract from a document published by the coalition government in power rather than by the Conservative Party hoping to be elected to govern, the use of modal verbs is particularly interesting. Whereas in Conservative Party pre-election documents modal verbs typically used included 'must', 'should' and 'will', the verb phrase in this extract is 'want to'. This is indicative of a government that has now been elected, thus meaning that there is less need to for promises to be made and statements of intent to be believed.

Citizens, communities and local government are all represented as passive beneficiaries of the coalition government's desires to devolve power and information to them. In this way the extract represents an imagined society in which central government aren't solely responsible for the strength and success of society, but rather citizens, communities and local government are jointly responsible for building the society that they want. The extract represents the coming together of the beneficiaries of central government devolvement as the only way in which to successfully build the society they want. Local government must work with communities and citizens if the Big Society is to be successfully realised. As in all of the previous extracts, communities are represented here collectively and without distinction. This continuous representation seems to assume that communities are both identifiable and relatively stable. Local government too are collectively represented; no distinction or specific representation is made between differing tiers of local government, different political parties within local authorities, or the many different policy development processes, localised issues and individual actors that make up any one specific local council.

Communities are further represented in this next extract which sets out the government's vision for the future of society and outlines vaguely the roles that people in that society will play:

We want society – the families, networks, neighbourhoods and communities that form the fabric of so much of our everyday lives – to be bigger and stronger than ever before. Only when people and communities are given more power and take more responsibility can we achieve fairness and opportunity for all.

The extract asserts that fairness and opportunity for all can only be realised in one way – through the devolvement of power and the taking of responsibility. As I have repeatedly found, people and communities are represented as passive beneficiaries of government's devolvement of power. They are generalised and collectivised. For society to be fair it is stated that people and communities must not only be given power but must also be active in taking responsibility for themselves. Again this hints at a representation of society as currently being too dependent on the state.

Having officially launched the Big Society at a press conference in May 2010, in Liverpool on 19th July 2010 David Cameron delivered a speech on the Big Society. He described building the Big Society as his 'great passion' and used the speech to set out what the Big Society is and how the government planned to make it a reality. Part of the speech included launching the four vanguard communities which would be at the forefront of developing and trialling ideas for the Big Society.

During the speech, Cameron spoke about the Big Society in terms of a 'huge culture change':

The Big Society is about a huge culture change…where people, in their everyday lives, in their homes, in their neighbourhoods, in their workplace…don't always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face …but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities.

This extract represents the imagined relationship between society and the state in the Big Society; a relationship in which society is far more independent from government. It represents in some detail the actions of people in society but, unsurprisingly, it lacks detail as to how these actions will come about.

The extract also sets out the roles that imagined people will play in the imagined Big Society. These imagined people are represented as active but are impersonalised and generalised. They are active in helping themselves and their communities. The extract thus assumes a bond between people and their communities and that people will have the time, opportunity and inclination to want to help their communities. Interestingly, the extract stops short of stating that people *will* help themselves and their communities. Instead it states that people will *feel able* to help themselves and their communities. Although a subtle difference, it is indicative of a recognition that not all people will be active in the way that the government imagines and that all they can do is imagine people to feel that they are able to help, should they be inclined to do so. In this way, people are represented as individually responsible for their own actions. The government, in the imagined Big Society, will provide the opportunities but it is up to people to take up these opportunities and make use of them for the benefit of themselves and their communities.

The extract seems to hint at a belief that people are currently too dependent on the state; turning too often to central government or a collectively represented local government and their officials for help and for answers to their problems. In the imagined Big Society, people are represented as being independent of the state. This second extract from Cameron's speech represents decentralisation and the role that the government will play in empowering people in society. It briefly mentions local government but emphasises that the transfer of power should go beyond this level:

> We must push power away from central government to local government – and we shouldn't stop there. We should drive it down even further…to what Phil Redmond has called the 'nano' level…to communities, to neighbourhoods and individuals

In this extract the use of the modal verb 'must' ensures that the action of pushing power away from central government is represented as not simply desirable but as necessary. The government are represented as active and powerful, with an obligation to devolve power to local government. In this sense, local government are collectively represented as a passive beneficiary of the imagined government's actions. But local government are not represented as the desired endpoint for the devolution of power. That desired endpoint takes the form of communities, neighbourhoods and individuals.

Decentralisation is more clearly defined and discussed in a document entitled 'Decentralisation and the Localism Bill: An Essential Guide'. The document was published by the coalition government on 13th December 2010 and called for 'a radical shift of power from the centralised state to local communities', describing 'the six essential actions required to deliver decentralisation down through every level of government to every citizen' (2010: 2). The guide focuses particularly on the Localism Bill (2010); the legislation designed to deliver these changes.

This particular extract is of interest because it defines the role that local authorities will play in the shift of power:

> Local authorities have two vital roles. They will be the beneficiaries of decentralisation as power is passed to them through the Localism Bill and they will have a vital role in passing power to communities and individuals.

Local authorities are again collectively and objectively represented both as passive beneficiaries of government in devolving power to them, and as active organisations in devolving power to communities and individuals. In both cases local authorities are passive – their actions are prescribed by central government. Interestingly, central government themselves are backgrounded in this extract. It is not they who will pass the power to local authorities but the Localism Bill. Their active status can be inferred but is not explicitly stated. As in other extracts, local authorities are represented as a point of mediation between central and local government but not as the intended recipient of devolved powers; the intended recipients are communities and local people. Also notable again are the lack of representations of any of the complexities of local government authorities such as political parties, tiers of local government working together within one locality, and individual actors. The simplified and collective representation of local government allows the coalition government to gloss over any potential difficulties that such complexities might cause for local authorities in their mediating role.

6.1.3. Summary

It is clear that the Big Society is a creation of the Conservative Party and an idea about which David Cameron is passionate: [the Big Society] 'is going to get every bit

of my passion and attention over the five years of this government' (Cameron, 2011). The dominant discourse representing the Big Society in Conservative Party and central government documents is that of a positive vision for the future contrasted with the representation of a society that is currently 'broken': 'the recent growth of the state has promoted not social solidarity, but selfishness and individualism' (Cameron, 2009b). The Big Society is thought to be the answer to society's problems: a 'positive alternative to Labour's failed big government approach' (Conservative Party, 2010a). There is a perceived need to rebalance power and responsibility between the state and its citizens: 'only when people and communities are given more power and take more responsibility can we achieve fairness and opportunity for all' (Cabinet Office, 2010a).

As discussed in Chapter Four, discourses are not only capable of representing 'how things are and have been'; they can also be 'imaginaries - representations of how things might or could or should be' (Fairclough, 2003: 207). In this sense the Big Society is an imaginary – a projection of a 'possible world'. Discourses representing the Big Society 'imagine possible social practices' (ibid). Based on my interpretations of the data the imaginaries of the Big Society can be summarised as follows:

1. Society will be civically responsible and independent of the state; engaged with and proud of their communities; and take opportunities to share the balance of power with the state.

2. Power and responsibility will be decentralised from central government to local government and from local government to communities, neighbourhood groups and individuals.

3. The role of the state will be to galvanise, catalyse and encourage communities, individuals and entrepreneurs, amongst others, to fulfil their role in the Big Society. It is a role of empowerment and facilitation rather than provision.

Within this imagined Big Society, several social actors are represented as being central to its realisation. They are central government; local government; communities; and local people.

Central government are represented time and time again as active and powerful in enabling, devolving and creating the Big Society. Their role is portrayed as facilitating and enabling rather than looking after and providing. Decentralisation is a discourse which dominates the documents in relation to central government. Finally, they are represented consistently as powerful, albeit that this representation as the holder of power is sometimes suppressed. It is central government who hold the power and have the ability to devolve or centralise that power as they see fit.

Local government are collectively and objectively represented as a mediating force; a necessary level through which power must pass in order to reach people and communities. Specific tiers, political parties and actors' roles are not represented in any of these extracts, thus simplifying what is an undoubtedly complex level of governance in the UK. The role of local government is unclear but unavoidable. Representations sometimes seem to place them as subordinate to local people and it is often inferred that power should pass through them but not remain with them. Local government are represented as powerful providers of local services with little accountability to local people; rather they are more accountable to central government. Local government are imagined to have an enabling and empowering role; freed from central government control they will be accountable to local people and work with those local people to redress the imbalance of power that currently exists in society.

Communities are represented consistently as passive beneficiaries of powers as they are devolved to them by central government. They are represented as being dependent on the state for their continued wellbeing but are imagined to be self-sufficient and cooperative within the Big Society. Importantly, they are imagined to become passive beneficiaries of the people that live within them rather than of the state. Finally, communities are represented collectively and are identifiable and specifiable. No differences are represented as exising between one community and another.

Individuals, people and citizens meanwhile are all representations of those people who exist outside of government organisations. For the sake of this discussion I will refer to all of the above as 'people' or 'local people' except when it is made abundantly clear in a representation that another meaning is intended. People are represented as being currently dependent on the state for their wellbeing; this is considered not to be ideal. People are represented as passive beneficiaries of the

government's intended devolvement of power; it is imagined that people will share the balance of power and responsibility more equally with the state. People are imagined to be active, engaged with their communities and inclined to want to help their communities were they given the opportunity to do so. They are imagined not to need the state so much and to be more able to help and look after themselves. Interestingly, in all of the extracts, people are represented as passive but imagined to be active.

These are the imaginaries of the Big Society as I have interpreted them; this is the Big Society in its own terms.

6.2.   Localism and Local 'Realities' in Cambridgeshire

In this second section of the chapter I will discuss my interpretations of the data from each of the case studies relating to the development of localism in Cambridgeshire between 2011 and 2012. Each discussion will focus initially on representations and recontextualisations of the Big Society. Having interpreted the actors central to the imagined Big Society as central government, local government, communities and people, the section will then focus on the recontextualisations and representations of discourses representing each of these actors and the specific contexts in which the representations were constructed. I will focus firstly on the Big Society, then on central government, local government, communities and, finally, local people.

As in the previous section, data presented in this section of the chapter has been analysed in accordance with the stages presented in Chapter Four, section 4.4., specifically the stages relating to the analysis of local government data (stages 5 - 9). Thus I have sub-divided local government data into each of the three embedded case studies, selected extracts from local government data based on representation of actors considered central to the imagined Big Society as discussed in the previous section, coded the data to mark social actors and actions; categorised the coded social actors and actions using van Leeuwen's (2008) framework; and applied Wodak's (2001: 67) 'four levels of context' to the coded and categorised data. The data presented here was generated in interviews and during observations of key meetings and events (see Chapter Three, Section 3.5. for details of data

generation). For the purpose of this section and owing to a lack of space in this thesis, I will present only my interpretations of the data based on this analysis. I will present firstly my interpretations of the data from the primary case study: the County Council and the Localism and Community Engagement Board. I will then present my interpretations of the data from each of my embedded case studies in turn: the Community Led Planning pilot and the Area Committee Participation pilot.

6.2.1. Primary Case Study: The County Council and the Localism and Community Engagement Board

This first sub-section will focus on the developing response of Cambridgeshire County Council to the coalition government's Big Society and associated localism agenda within my primary case study: Cambridgeshire County Council. The section is based on my analysis of interviews undertaken with actors at the County Council who were involved with developing the localism agenda internally to the organisation, including overseeing the localism pilot projects. These actors are:

- Councillor Smith – a Senior Cabinet Member
- John - the senior officer who oversaw the development of localism at the County Council; and
- Liz - the officer overseeing the development of the pilot projects.

This discussion will be situated within the relevant and timely context of the policy development process which I will endeavour to relate based on my analysis of documents and observations that I undertook at relevant meetings and events at the County Council during my fieldwork and thus the development of localism.

The Big Society (Localism)

The County Council were consistently and collectively dismissive of the Big Society but embracing of localism, evident in documents, meetings and events that I observed, and interviews that I conducted. The dominant discourses representing the Big Society in interviews with County Council actors were those of confusion due largely to a lack of clear definition at a central government level and negative connotations attached to it due to its over politicisation and use as a political mantra in the recent general election:

Cllr Smith:	we don't use… we don't use the term big society
Laura:	why not?
Cllr Smith:	we don't like it… we think it's a cliché. We don't understand what it really means and we'd much rather get away from that political mantra of whatever the big society is to talk about localism. So we don't <u>ever</u> use the big society

The emphatic nature of Councillor Smith's representation was not lost on officers working with localism:

Liz:	there's been a real um… definite steer from both management here and cabinet members <u>not</u> to use the term big society just because of some of the negative connotations that have started to become attached to it

The hierarchy of power within the County Council is made clear in this extract. It is management and Cabinet members rather than officers who possess the power and influence to dictate the development of localism and the Council's response to the Big Society.

The negative representations of the Big Society served as justification for the Council's actions in rejecting the terminology in favour of 'localism'. Nevertheless it seemed very clear to me that they were following the government's Big Society and related localism agenda in a number of ways: making a commitment in the 2011-12 Integrated Plan to become a 'genuinely local council', setting up the Localism and Community Engagement Board and commissioning a number of pilot projects to allow them to test their ideas for localism. On more than one occasion in documents, interviews and observed meetings localism was represented as a policy that could be applied or an agenda that could be delivered:

we would assert the need to (…) strengthen what we already do to deliver localism
(Cambridgeshire County Council, 2010a)

In this respect localism was abstractedly represented as a tangible outcome. Localism was also represented by interviewees and meeting attendees as promoting opportunism and creativity at the County Council; qualities which seemed to be welcomed particularly by officers but which were considered to be unusual in a local government authority:

> John: one of the things I think if I talk to friends and one of the things that has been bad about local authorities is you you're not allowed to think … and you're not allowed to develop ideas and the one thing again about the big society and um this area of localism … is that it's enabled ideas to flourish whereby um…well in my view it has… it's enabled ideas to flourish whereby … yeah it started there but it doesn't mean to say it's where it's gonna end up

In my first interview with Liz we discussed the different interpretations of localism and what it meant to her and to the County Council. Liz acknowledged that there was no single agreed definition of localism and represented the County Council collectively and objectively as having actively spent a lot of time discussing it:

> Liz: I think there's a huge amount of very different interpretations of what it means…we've spent a lot of time discussing this as an organisation…um and we're seeing it as perhaps having three strands around public (.) sector reform >public service reform< um and::: uh (.) community empowerment and then social action… which kind of helps me just crystallise it in my head but it does mean a wide variety of different things

Certainly this was also my experience in several of the Localism and Community Engagement Board meetings that I observed throughout my fieldwork. The defined actions settled upon by the County Council (public service reform, community empowerment and social action) were abstracted and generalised. The actions themselves are taken from central government documents on localism and, as such, I argue that the County Council are represented as working in a way that is consistent with central government thinking. When I asked Councillor Smith about this apparent consistency I got a very different response. He stated that the government's themes around localism meant nothing to him. Furthermore he

represented himself as being actively involved in the running of the Council in direct contrast to David Cameron who was most definitely not involved in running the Council. It seemed to suggest to me a rejection of central government imposition on local government; a potentially interesting finding.

By the midpoint of my fieldwork localism was being represented by interviewees and observed participants in Localism and Community Engagement Board meetings as a key way of working at the County Council; it was said to have a political mandate, an agreed definition, and a developing sense of direction. Each of these discourses seemed to imply connotations of increasing control and increased structuring of an initially undefined and potentially creative policy development process. I encountered a specific example of this at the Localism and Community Engagement Board meeting that I observed in late July 2011 when discussions centred largely on the performance management of the board. Officers at the meeting remarked on the perceived tension in the organisation between 'wanting to do things quickly and wanting to do things right'. A greater emphasis on management and structuring of the Board's work seemed indicative to me of a context shifting from one dominated by excitement, confusion and possibility, to one more concerned with structure, organisation and frameworks. Nonetheless it was pointed out at the meeting that within localism there was both 'an opportunity to be creative' and 'a political mandate to do things differently'. The balance between creativity and structure seemed to be an evolving one as localism continued to develop.

At the same meeting the localism update document entitled 'Taking Localism Forward' was also discussed. The document was intended to update members and officers on the progress of localism as overseen by the Board. It was stated that the Cabinet were keen to give a clear definition of localism in order that they could secure buy in across the organisation and clear up any lingering sense of confusion. Localism at this point was defined in the document as 'the devolution of power and resources to the lowest appropriate level'. What is most interesting here is the representation of the passive beneficiary of devolution as 'the lowest appropriate level'. This is in contrast to the definition provided in the Council's Integrated Plan 2011-12 which stated that the beneficiary of devolution would be the 'lowest possible level'. Whilst both beneficiaries are impersonalised and abstracted, the discourse of appropriateness is a new addition to localism at the County Council. The action of devolution is deactivated and objectivated as well as abstracted. It is

not clear how devolution will take place or even if it will. It is only stated that devolution defines localism.

At a Localism and Community Engagement Board meeting that I observed in early September 2011 the emphasis on structure and control seemed even greater. Discussions regarding the addition of a senior Cabinet member to the Board highlighted to me the growing interest in the programme from more influential actors within the Council. One senior officer remarked that it was 'inevitable' that members should increasingly expect to be involved. The next Board meeting was held towards the end of November 2011 and was significant in as much it was the first to be attended by a senior Cabinet member following the discussions at the September meeting. Before the meeting formally began the member remarked on the number of people in attendance and asked whether this was justifiable. The membership and chairing of the Board was subsequently considered and discussed in the meeting. Some officers expressed their concern about the size of the Board and its efficiency in terms of decision making and taking decisions forward. It was agreed during the meeting that a balance needed to be achieved between corporate ownership and taking actions forward in smaller groups. The feeling of the Board seemed to be one of impatience; the attending member remarked that the Council should 'not continue to struggle with defining localism and Big Society' but should 'get on with it'. The Chair of the Board agreed with this sentiment. The frustration seemed palpable and I perceived there to be considerable desire amongst attendees for localism related work to be more practical and for the Board to start to see some more tangible developments relating to localism.

Following changes made to the Localism and Community Engagement Board in light of its alleged inefficiency, the Board meeting that I observed in February 2012 was the first to be held with a revised and smaller membership in attendance. The Chair commented at the beginning of the meeting that the previous style meetings had been good for creating cross-organisational ownership but that the aim of the new style Board was to ensure a more targeted and focussed approach to community engagement and localism. It seemed to me that control and structuring were being further applied to localism whilst creativity and broad ownership across the whole organisation were being sacrificed in the name of efficiency.

In my final set of interviews I asked each participant whether they felt that localism was still at the heart of the Council's work as it had been considered to be one year

ago. Despite clearly representing localism as remaining at the heart of the Council's work and as unlikely to 'shift' or become less important to the Council, John also suggested that it was still unclear what localism meant for the County Council.

> John: the old integrated plan it's there - its part of the strategic framework which is not gonna change. You know everything has got localism through it… you know leadership, localism and investing. So this is the twelve thirteen plan – it's not gonna shift. The argument's been won in a funny sort of way so I don't think that's going to go away. Um… its then almost defining what you do with that. Uh and yeah, I think yeah that's perhaps the biggest challenge now - ok so that's what it says… what does that mean?

Furthermore, the Council were represented by John as still not 'outsourcing anything' or 'devolving decision making'. This is particularly significant as these are both actions which were represented as epitomising localism and were identified as objectives for localism in County Council documents prior to the beginning of my fieldwork. Localism related actions that the County Council were engaged in seemed to be restricted to officers 'working in a more local way'. The interviewee himself questioned whether that alone was enough, admitting that he did not know the answer. Councillor Smith, in his answer, represented localism as 'largely irrelevant' and therefore not something to particularly worry about in policy terms. He considered that localism had survived because of its definition as 'a bit of common sense thinking', something that he felt he could 'live with'. Importantly, localism was represented as having had little influence on the behaviour of the Council beyond the application of 'local common sense' and in this way his answer was consistent with John's. Liz, in her interview, represented the Council as having been resistant in coming round to 'seeing things in a different way'. She referred to the Council as a 'big ship' which was 'taking ages to turn round', thus representing the slow and cumbersome nature of the changes which were perceived to be required if the organisation were to work successfully with localism.

By the endpoint of my fieldwork in June 2012 then, localism remained a core part of the County Council's work but was still represented as confusing and hard for both officers and members to understand. On occasion localism was represented in comparison with and even rejected in favour of community engagement because community engagement was considered to be easier to understand and work with.

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This was most evident in the decision of the Localism and Community Engagement Board to revisit the Council's community engagement strategy rather than continue to try and work out what localism might mean for Cambridgeshire County Council.

Central Government

In interviews with County Council actors as well as in meetings that I observed central government were largely suppressed. In an interview with Councillor Smith he represented central government via specific and personal representation of David Cameron in order to stress the distinction that could and must be made between central government and Cambridgeshire County Council:

> Laura: Are the three themes that David Cameron's talking about…does it mean anything to you in the county council?
>
> Cllr. Smith: No. And and and I'm sure people around here could probably…start chatting about it but it doesn't mean anything to me . Basically because remember David Cameron doesn't run this council - we do!

It was a distinction about which he seemed very passionate and which could go some way to explaining the lack of central government representation in County Council documentation relating to localism.

One rare and specific representation of central government came in an interview with Councillor Smith at the endpoint of my fieldwork. In the interview Councillor Smith represented central government and specific government actors abstractedly as contradictory:

> Cllr. Smith: I think what <u>has</u> happened, interestingly, is some confusion creeping in now on messages from government on localism….so for example, on the one hand the government is promoting localism, and on the other hand we have Eric Pickles, Secretary of State, telling district councils how often to empty their bins…we've also got Eric Pickles and others uh… incredibly incensed that we as a local council have chosen to put up our council tax…ok so that flies in the face of, um, party politics it would appear…and I've been on the

receiving end of all kinds of hassle and flack for it…but there's something about the schizophrenic behaviour there…because you either want things to be decided at the local level and be accountable…but only if we're told like small boys to do it in a certain way…I don't want to be up against fighting my own party but it doesn't seem to be a consistent message or a consistent thing so we can't be surprised then when others in organisations question what is localism really about?

Here, central government were perceived to be both promoting localism whilst, at the same time, dictating to local councils what they could and could not do with regard to such issues as council tax and waste collection. This is an important finding as it directly contradicts the representation of an imagined local government freed from central government control as part of the coalition government's decentralisation agenda and in relation to the Big Society. It is a finding that will be further discussed in relation to the literature in Chapter Seven.

Local Government

After analysis of interviews and observations during the development of localism I was able to clearly perceive that 'local government' is, in each of my three case studies, distinguishable by tiers, organisations and specific actors. This is different to the collective representation of local government as one single actor by central government.

When represented collectively during my fieldwork at Cambridgeshire County Council, local government were a passive beneficiary of central government's actions:

Cllr. Smith: I certainly have a feeling that we're being used as a tap which can be turned on or turned off without people necessarily understanding the consequences of where we're going with this. I don't think government understand the consequences.

The role of local government was represented as working to strengthen community capacity and to facilitate community engagement and involvement:

> Liz: we've identified a need to work with those communities and build social capital so there's very much a kind of capacity building issue for staff and at the moment we're debating how we go about doing that

Local government were considered by all of my interviewees to have a significant influence on people's lives and to have the knowledge, ability and capacity to make strategic and balanced decisions more successfully than local people:

> Cllr. Smith: just because local people want something it doesn't make it right…we have to put traveller sites somewhere and nobody wants a traveller site… so if you were to only rely upon the local community to vote whether you want a traveller site in your community or not I'll tell you now the answer will be no… and yet it's a local issue affecting local people…so how do you deal with that then? So it's not necessarily common sense that everything should be devolved down to the local people it has to be wider than that sometimes…

When distinguished in observed meetings and in interviews, representations of local government included specific officers and members as well as officers and members collectively, the Localism and Community Engagement Board, the County Council, and specific internal departments and teams.

It was clear to me from observations of Board meetings as well as from interviews with officers involved in the development of localism that the active Community Engagement Team made up of County Council officers had a prominent role in developing the policy. Officers however were collectively and consistently represented both in interviews and in meetings that I observed as passive beneficiaries of any decisions taken by the Executive Cabinet:

> Liz: the community engagement team are kind of I suppose acting as a hub in terms of trying to change the culture of the organisation to a

degree…so we're uh… both doing some kind of innovative activities such as the pilots but then also working with service directorates because it's not just about a very small team of people doing something it's about gaining the steer from our members which we kind of… are getting quite strongly now that localism is the way we want to go

This is not surprising given the structure of the Council but it nonetheless consolidated my initial interpretation of localism as a passive beneficiary of the actions of the Executive Cabinet; it is the Executive Cabinet and not the officers with whom the balance of power at the County Council lies.

Of particular interest were the contradictory representations of officers. Whilst officers represented themselves as having an integrally important part to play in the positive development of localism, Councillor Smith represented officers as being potentially problematic in Council processes:

Cllr. Smith: there is now a protocol about how member engagement should take place… I've had endless tantrums about why does that local member not know about this first? It's now easier for staff to consult a local member earlier than it is to have the finger pointed at them by me later…so that's affecting cultural change… I'm starting to feel that's happening…feedback from my own members is that they feel better consulted…they feel better involved locally as local champions…so that's good

This might explain and is certainly consistent with his desire to ensure that Cambridgeshire was a 'member-led council'. Indeed members were represented collectively as vital to the success of localism. They were imagined to act as local champions and, as such, any poor engagement with members was considered representative of poor engagement with the local public.

Councillor Smith was specifically and individually represented as influential and active within the County Council in both interviews and meetings that I observed. As such his apparent lack of interest in the Localism and Community Engagement

Board could have been instrumental in its eventual disbandment after my period of data generation had come to an end. The Board was represented as active by the officers that I interviewed but as largely ineffective by Councillor Smith:

> Laura: at the last localism and community engagement programme board meeting - long title for a meeting!
>
> Cllr. Smith: and usually inversely proportionate to its effectiveness but there you go
>
> Laura: [nervous laughter] um uh… so the deputy leader was in attendance which I believe is now going to be a regular thing … is that indicative of the members greater buy in or…?
>
> Cllr. Smith: probably not… it's much more likely to be the case that I don't want to do it

It was further represented as lacking in efficiency as a decision making body by both members and officers as evidenced in the Board meetings that I observed and discussed previously. This was put down largely to its size, something that had initially been considered as a positive sign of interest and buy in to localism across the organisation.

By the end of my fieldwork Cambridgeshire County Council were being specifically, objectively and abstractedly represented in interviews as a slow and cumbersome organisation that tended to take a long time to make or implement any changes:

> Liz: I think people see that that's the direction we're being pushed but have we actually come round to seeing things in a different way? No. Not yet. I think that's part of what we're saying is our…. is kind of the …the change that needs to be made both in terms of acting locally and in terms of working with rather than doing to communities… and I think there is that kind of metaphor about big ships and taking ages to turn round [laughter]

The Council were represented as having learnt a lot but not having put anything into practice. Neither were the Council yet outsourcing or devolving anything despite a year of discussing, planning and debating these actions. These representations, made in interviews, were consolidated by my observations of meetings at the County Council. The Council were not necessarily represented as passive in these

respects; it is more that they were represented as actively resisting the changes and embracing the status quo. Interviewees told me that County members remained similarly unmoved by localism and the intended or expected changes. Whilst Councillor Smith remained consistently active and influential he did not seem to use his influence to promote localism, prioritising instead saving money and protecting service provision where possible:

> Cllr. Smith: of all my priorities my biggest priority is adult social care and the budget deficit…so in terms of my leadership and where I'm going I'm all over that like a rash um…but do I feel like this council is in danger of failing because it doesn't have localism high enough up the agenda? No. Am I worried that we could fail the people of Cambridgeshire because I can't sort the adult social care budget out? Yes.

Councillors in general were collectively represented as important to the potential success of localism but as remaining active in their dislike or disengagement with the programme. This had the effect of stalling any positive development or impact that localism might have had on the organisation and in their localities.

In contrast to members, officers were collectively represented as working in ways that were more consistent with localism:

> John: the officers are working in a more local way

In this respect they were necessarily represented as active - and certainly most meetings that I observed were heavily attended by officers but rarely attended by members - but for the most part officers were represented as passive beneficiaries of the actions of Council members. Ironically whilst it was the officers who were active with regards to localism, it was the members with whom the balance of power and influence lay. Thus the officers' actions were largely irrelevant given that many members were not perceived to be keen to work with and develop localism further.

Communities

Communities were represented by Cambridgeshire County Council consistently and throughout the entirety of my fieldwork as passive beneficiaries of the Council's

actions. Unlike the Conservative Party or the coalition government who constantly represented communities collectively, Cambridgeshire County Council distinguished between different communities; specifically and most often those that were active and able and those that were lacking in social capital or disadvantaged in some way. Communities in Cambridgeshire were represented as differing in terms of capacity and appetite for localism; they had differing needs and could not be considered collectively.

I noted in observations and thus followed up in interviews a prominent discourse of concern particularly from the perspective of officers around the inequality existing between different communities in Cambridgeshire and the potential for localism to increase that inequality. In an interview with John he described Cambridgeshire as 'a hugely mixed bag':

> John: Cambridgeshire particularly is a hugely mixed bag because you've got…it's almost like two communities really … there really could be no more different communities than [town name] and Cambridge in my view … it is just like chalk and cheese…um… one at the hub of the international world…intellectually…technologically…and the other still struggling to make the nineteen fifties… isolated…rural…and so therefore you've got these…you really do have a huge gap between bits of this county

In this way the County Council were represented as a passive beneficiary of the county's different communities in having to deal with their very different needs. John gave no clue as to how the Council intended to deal with these differential needs, only indicating that localism might be useful in helping them to do so.

When I asked Councillor Smith whether he had any concerns regarding these perceived differences in the capacity of communities to take on opportunities under localism, his response was emphatic:

> Cllr Smith: and what's wrong with that? That's life. We call it the postcode lottery when we're trying to knock it but, you know, so what? That's how it is isn't it, it's life. You know we'll treat…we need to treat people fairly but life isn't fair and nor should we pretend it to be and nor should we try and make it!

Councillor Smith seemed to be suggesting that it was not the Council's job to try and make life fair. This perspective was acknowledged by officers working on the development of localism but they did not necessarily agree, preferring to believe that there must be some role for the County Council in helping communities to build their capacity and take advantage of the opportunities available to them within localism:

Liz: it's something that's been flagged up a lot. So we're saying at this early stage we've got to this point and it's becoming abundantly clear and not unexpected that that's happening and that there are communities that if they're to get involved … we've identified a need to work with those communities and build social capital. So there's very much a kind of capacity building issue for staff and… at the moment we're debating how we go about doing that

Interestingly the action of being flagged up is deagentialised, perhaps because Liz was aware that these concerns were not necessarily shared by all members in the authority. The Council, collectively, were represented as having been active in identifying a need to work with less able and active communities but there was no representation of actions in terms of this work actually going ahead. Indeed the action of 'debating how we go about doing that' was activated, indicating that it was currently undecided how the Council should go about building social capital in their less able communities. Throughout this extract, communities and particularly less able communities were represented as passive beneficiaries of the ongoing discussions. Whether or not they might become able to take on any opportunities related to localism may have depended on whether or not the Council would enable and encourage them to do so. These discussions were often prominent in meetings and events relating to the development of localism that I observed, perhaps indicative of the high level of concern apparent from officers at the County Council.

Communities continued to be generally and collectively represented as passive and inactive throughout the entirety of my fieldwork. They were passive beneficiaries of the actions of local government authorities in providing them with services and they were passive beneficiaries of the thinking of David Cameron in imposing localism upon them. When discussing communities in Localism and Community Engagement Board meetings some were abstractedly represented as not wanting help and were

in turn specifically represented as being beyond the reach of the County Council in trying to engage or empower them. Interestingly some villages, specifically those in the south of Cambridgeshire, were abstractedly and collectively represented as active and thus compared more favourably with the imagined communities represented in the Big Society.

Local People

People were considered unlikely to make sensible or strategic decisions that would benefit anyone other than themselves. According to Councillor Smith:

> Cllr Smith: most people out there don't care either. What they want is good services. They want to be heard when they speak, listened to...which is just good management
>
> Laura: do you think they are at the moment or do you think that's something that needs working on?
>
> Cllr Smith: um…most people haven't got anything to say actually…to be fair. Of course you've got the detractors who moan and complain…that's <u>normally</u> the pressure groups in particular…of one particular form or another. Most people um… apart from paying their council tax have very little interaction with the Council I would suggest

'Most people' are passivated and subjected here and are represented as not caring about localism but simply wanting to be listened to when they speak and to receive good services. Furthermore, 'most people' are represented as passive and having nothing to say anyway. It is only 'the detractors' who are represented as being active in moaning and complaining about the work of the Council. This is a potentially important finding as it could suggest that there is little point in investing money or other scarce resources in attempting to increase the engagement and participation of communities when they 'don't care' anyway. It could be interpreted as particularly important given that it was a senior member that made these representations and given the power and influence that I know senior members to have within the Council.

People continued to be represented predominantly as passive beneficiaries of the actions of the County Council and other tiers of local government throughout my

fieldwork. When people were represented as active, it was most often in terms of actively not wanting to take on the delivery of services or activities which were currently the responsibility of the County Council. Compounding these representations were representations made by County Council actors of local people as often not being the 'right' people to take local decisions. So even if people did want to be active and take on decision making and service delivery, they may not have been considered the right people to take those decisions by the County Council and thus may even have been denied this opportunity:

> John: it's about people being able to decide what they want. The issue is that might actually mean poorer outcomes for people
>
> Laura: mmm
>
> John: uh um so uh how can I put it? If you give a budget to the people of [town name] and they're told here's your money, spend it on what you like! They could decide we're gonna spend… what we actually want is a really <u>good</u> system for young people. So we're not gonna spend anything on roads
>
> Laura: mmm
>
> John: so invariably the outcomes for roads will be poor

People are represented here collectively and generically as not having the ability to think strategically and for the benefit of all. The outcomes of localism are therefore perceived as being potentially unsatisfactory for communities if they are allowed to make decisions for themselves as the government imagine them to do.

There was a dominant discourse evident throughout my data generation which suggested that people generally weren't interested in getting involved, had very little to say and very little appetite for taking up opportunities that may have been offered to them within localism. Amy, an officer involved with the Community Led Planning pilot, considered localism as essentially 'rewriting the contract that people feel they have' with society:

> Amy: it is basically rewriting the contract that people feel that they have with local society isn't it. You pay your taxes because you feel that you will be provided with services and the infrastructure for you to carry on with your life … and I think that's why people feel they pay taxes. People would rather pay someone to do it than do it

themselves. And I also think the things that we do are un-sexy…they're not the things that people want to help with

Local government authorities are personally and collectively represented as 'the infrastructure that holds the rest of the country together'. If this is the case, then surely it becomes risky to start devolving services from the level of local government to the level of local communities. Especially given that 'people' are represented as not wanting to help in the delivery of the 'un-sexy' things that local government authorities do.

All of the participants at the County Council were in general agreement in their representations of local people as passive and uninterested in localism or in getting involved with their local authority, their parish council, or even their community. This is an important finding and is in direct contrast with the imagined representations of people within the Big Society.

6.2.2. Embedded Case Study One: The Community Led Planning Pilot

This second sub-section will focus on the developing response of Cambridgeshire County Council to the coalition government's Big Society and associated localism agenda within the Community Led Planning pilot. I will discuss my interpretations of data generated in interviews with actors involved with the Community Led Planning pilot. These actors are:

- Councillor Stone - the Chair of the Parish Council (also a District Councillor and a County Councillor)
- Sarah - the Parish Clerk
- Abigail - the County Council officer who was involved particularly in the Time Banking element of the pilot; and
- Emily - the community advisor working for the third sector organisation who played a key part in running the pilot in consultation with the Parish Council and the County Council

This discussion will be situated within the relevant and timely context of the policy development process which I will endeavour to relate through discussion of my

analysis of documents and data generated in observations of meetings and events that are relevant to the pilot project.

The Big Society (Localism)

Sarah, a Parish Clerk for the pilot village, represented 'a lot of parish and town councils' as having been active in doing localism for years. This representation of localism as nothing particularly new was made by several interviewees. According to Abigail, for instance, localism is 'kind of just re badging something that's already been there'. Abigail represented 'a lot of people' as having been 'put off' by the government spin around the Big Society. The Big Society was represented as a policy that had done little so far to galvanise people and communities into the actions imagined by central government and the Conservative Party. In fact the Big Society was perceived to have done more to put people off than it had to galvanise people into action.

Throughout the pilot project actors often represented localism as requiring a partnership approach between the Parish Council and the community:

> Cllr. Stone: we need to demonstrate as a parish council how we will help
>   to make things happen…not just thrust it at people and say
>   get on with it. I think it's got to be a partnership approach

This relationship was represented as being of vital importance to the potential success of any localism activity within the parish and was often a topic for discussion in steering group meetings throughout the pilot project. It is further important evidence of the unrepresented complexities of local government within the coalition government's imagined Big Society.

By the end of the pilot project growing concerns regarding issues such as unemployment, budget cuts and threats to public services were considered to take precedence over localism and it was therefore difficult for any of my participants to see how localism could progress in Cambridgeshire. Furthermore localism was represented as requiring a culture change both from communities and from local authorities:

Cllr. Stone: I think its slow to happen for two reasons…upper tier authorities like the county council have been very used to providing a service and deciding what that service should be because we feel we're best placed to know these things and actually in some respects that's true…but there are occasions when it's not true…so for an authority like the county council it's about letting go…but also the reverse is true…a lot of communities are actually not that willing to take things on and take responsibility

This culture change had been spoken about at the beginning of my fieldwork and, given that it was still represented as a requirement at the end of my fieldwork, it didn't seem that any change had yet occurred. Interviewees also expressed concerns as to how localism related activities might be implemented in all of Cambridgeshire's two hundred and fifty villages given the amount of resource that had been put into just one village throughout the pilot project:

Emily: now that's another thing you could say about localism is [laughter] is you know is [laughter] how could you do that? How could you do it? We could do it for four villages but we can't do it for the other two hundred and fifty and change the approach every single time

Perhaps localism in this context of austerity and budget cuts was considered too resource intensive to be successful. This is an important finding which I will return to discuss both later in this chapter and in relation to relevant literature in Chapter Seven.

Central Government

Representations of central government were rare throughout this pilot project; they were never mentioned in meetings related to the pilot project and they were rarely mentioned in interviews. Central government's presence could be perceived through representations of the Big Society but there were few examples of overt government representation. The focus was very much on the local level and the role that central government had to play at that level in relation to my research seemed fairly small. On the rare occasion that they were represented, central government were

considered to be potential passive beneficiaries of society's actions; if society started to do more to help themselves then the government would have to do less and would thus benefit.

Local Government

As within my primary case study, representations of local government throughout the pilot project were distinguishable by tiers, organisations and even specific actors. Sub-representations included those tiers of local government and associated organisations involved in the pilot project: the County Council, the Parish Council, the district councils collectively, and the third sector organisation. On occasion representations were also made of specific individuals who were considered to be particularly influential and vital to the potential success of the pilot project and perhaps localism more widely.

Differing tiers of local government seemed to be represented as having important yet distinguishable roles to play in the development of localism. Councillor Stone represented the future County Council abstractedly as 'an enabler' and 'a facilitator'. Abigail however represented the County Council personally and collectively as 'still doing what we always traditionally do' which is helping communities to do what the County Council consider to be a priority rather than what the community want to do. When I asked Abigail whether, without this input and activity from the County Council, anything would happen within communities in line with localism, Abigail responded by representing the Big Society as something that does already happen and 'community groups all over the shop' as 'doing all kinds of brilliant things'. However, Abigail conceded that 'a government body', subjected but agentialised, must be active in framing such activity in order to give it the governance and structure recognised by central government. Here then, Abigail seemed to be representing two different versions of the Big Society: that which the government imagine and which is only recognised if it's activities are framed by familiar governance and structure; and the Big Society which already exists but which exists informally, within communities, and with little if any governance or structure framing it.

Emily represented parish, district and county councils collectively and objectively as passive beneficiaries of the government's actions in devolving the responsibility for localism down to their levels. She pointed out the contradiction in this; that village

members who are active and influential in electing their usually non-political parish council were now being asked to deliver an essentially political message:

> Emily: the <u>bizarre</u> thing is that it's now going down to county councils district councils and parish councils… and a parish council is elected by the members of that village… it's not… it's not a <u>political</u> organisation particularly is it? You know you might have a chair who happens to be a district councillor who happens to have stood blah blah blah blah but…you know theoretically it's <u>not</u> a um …a political organisation… but <u>they're</u> the ones being asked to <u>deliver</u> this essentially political message!

Emily also discussed the importance of the relationship between parish and district councils within localism from the perspective of the third sector organisation. She represented parish councils collectively as passive beneficiaries of both localism and the actions of district councils within localism. 'Some district councils' were collectively and abstractedly represented as being 'less keen than others' to start devolving powers to parish councils or local communities. Other district councils were represented abstractedly as 'much more positive about encouraging parish councils to give it a go and get involved'. Others still were represented abstractedly as unsure 'where they're going and exactly how enthusiastic they're gonna be about this localism' and were considered not to be communicating with their parish councils at all with regard to localism. The consequences of these actions were that 'some parish councils' were perceived to be 'a bit scared' and 'genuinely not sure where they stand at the moment'. These complex and turbulent relationships between different tiers of local government seemed constitutive of a potential barrier to the successful realisation of the Big Society in Cambridgeshire and yet more evidence of the underrepresentation of the complexities of local government in the imagined Big Society.

Emily also discussed what she thought her own third sector organisation's role might be in localism. Largely the third sector organisation was represented as active. They agentialised the actions of 'gearing up' and 'doing some work on it' in order to 'lead and support [parish councils] through this process'. These parishes were represented as passive beneficiaries both in terms of being 'given more

powers' and in terms of being led and supported through the process by the actions of the third sector organisation.

Given the key roles that tiers of local government seem to have to play in the Big Society, relationships between these tiers must therefore be important. In my interview with Sarah, she discussed her representation of the County Council as unwilling to devolve any powers in the form of decision making or budgets to the level of parish councils. She represented the County Council as actively 'not willing to let go of them' where 'them' refers to County Council powers. The County Council were also represented as active in not understanding enough about how town and parish councils work:

> Sarah: I also think that they have not enough understanding of how parish and town councils work… we work under the same legislation um and I think they have a total misunderstanding of that

The Parish Council were represented as a passive beneficiary of the County Council's actions, especially their actions relating to their decisions regarding the devolvement of powers. By not understanding how parish councils work and by being unwilling to devolve powers to the level of parish councils, the County Council were represented as constituting a major barrier to the potential realisation of localism and the Big Society in the pilot village. Their actions were considered to be disadvantaging the village community via the Parish Council.

I discussed the issue of the parish council system with Councillor Smith in relation to the County Council's consideration of devolving decision making or budgetary powers to the level of parish councils. His criticism of parish councils was stark:

> Cllr. Smith: what we don't want… I don't think…is to have a bunch of daft decisions being made by:: five or six people on a parish council who are not actually elected because there's no one that stands against them…whereas actually if you talk to the people in their parishes they're saying they're a bunch of weirdos…because most people in their normal lives don't want that… what normal people… local people do want is common sense decisions made in their localities

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Here Councillor Smith represented parish councils as being full of people who are not actually elected because there is no one that stands against them. They agentialise the action of making 'a bunch of daft decisions', something that Councillor Smith is keen to avoid. People in parishes, meanwhile, were abstractedly and collectively assumed to believe that parish councillors are 'a bunch of weirdos' whom they don't want to be making daft decisions on their behalf. Instead, they were perceived to want common sense decisions to be made in their localities. Furthermore, Councillor Smith stated that consulting with parish councils could not be considered as consulting with local people and thus parish councils could not be considered representative of their parishioners. Councillor Smith's representations of parish councils could be important in allowing me to interpret the County Council's apparent reluctance to devolve powers to the level of parish councils and are certainly striking in terms of evidencing again the complexities of local government which were underrepresented in the coalition government's imagined Big Society.

The pilot village Parish Council were collectively and abstractedly represented as 'a more proactive Parish Council' who wanted to positively benefit their community in relation to localism. However when I discussed the interest and engagement of the parish councillors with Sarah, the Parish Clerk, she described the Parish Council collectively as 'blank' and represented councillors as not fully understanding the pilot project and not wanting to take on any of the extra work or commitment that localism might require:

> Laura: and what about your parish councillors (.) how do they feel about the
> localism act and (.) I suppose separately the pilot and the act and…
> Sarah: would you like an honest opinion?
> Laura: yes! [laughter]
> Sarah: [laughter] blank<
> Laura: oh really?
> Sarah: yep… we have a localism working party (.) I can send an email out
> asking people to attend something to do with this pilot or localism
> and not one email I'll get back (.) other than [name] and Councillor
> Stone who might be too busy and we hope that somebody else can
> attend …cause he and I deliberately stand back from some of it …
> not one email… but that is the frustration you know…and Councillor

Stone said please answer emails… cause they'll answer everything
else!

This representation was consolidated by data generated through my observations of meetings and events at which Parish Council members other than Sarah and Councillor Stone were rarely present. Sarah appeared to find this situation frustrating and this seemed indicative of how a disengaged parish council could act as a barrier to the success of the pilot, let alone localism more generally.

When I asked Councillor Stone about the relationship between the Parish Council and their community, his answer was less than positive. He represented the relationship as being predominantly 'them and us', with a few members of the community actively considering the Parish Council to be separate from the community. Councillor Stone himself however strongly denied that there was a divide between the two. He represented the Parish Council abstractedly as 'part of the community' and as acting for the benefit of the community. In his attempts to deal with the perceived division between the Parish Council and the community, Councillor Stone represented himself individually and personally as active but acknowledged that the problem continued to exist. Councillor Stone was often represented specifically and personally as especially influential and active within the pilot village. He was represented, above all others, as being active in trying to get the community on board with the pilot project and in trying to improve relations and communication between different community groups and between the community and the Parish Council. One way in which he did this was to set up the first of a series of stakeholder meetings between community group leaders and members of the Parish Council. I observed a planning meeting for the first stakeholder event at the beginning of September 2011. Councillor Stone's comment at the planning meeting that 'if this doesn't work then we're stuffed' is indicative of the desperation which he appeared to feel to improve community and Parish Council relations. At the resulting stakeholder event the total attendance was twenty four. The activities seemed to spark interest and discussion amongst attendees but I could not know whether any of this would translate into tangible outcomes and improved relationships.

Rather than assuming or hoping that the majority of the community would become involved of their own accord, Councillor Stone asserted that 'the only way localism will work' would be if the Parish Council were active in presenting opportunities and

demonstrating the benefits of those opportunities to their community. The Parish Council was represented as agentialising a number of other actions with regard to localism: pointing out opportunities to their community; being honest with their community; promoting opportunities to their community; and demonstrating to their community how they would help them to be successful under localism. Interestingly, his representations do require the community to be active but they imagine that the community will need to be prompted, encouraged and enabled by the Parish Council. In this respect, communities are represented as passive beneficiaries of the actions of their Parish Council. They are certainly not represented as ready, willing and able to take on localism themselves straight away and without any help or support. Councillor Stone also imagined that the County Council would need to be active in supporting parish councils and communities to succeed under localism, recognising that community engagement and support is 'actually quite resource intensive' and therefore the County Council would need to provide some of that support in the future if they wished for localism to succeed.

In an interview with Emily, the parish council system collectively was represented as requiring a major overhaul if it was to be fit for current purpose:

> Emily: if there's one thing needed I think you need some kind of major overhaul of the parish council system I really do…they <u>need</u> a big overhaul and you can't do it without them because no matter what you do it <u>can't</u> be done because <u>ultimately</u> when it comes down to it …whatever you say you're gonna do as a local group you <u>need</u> the buy in you <u>need</u> the say so because eventually you've gotta take whatever plan you've got <u>to</u> the parish council and if you've antagonised them from the very beginning they're gonna go [slaps hand on desk] and chuck it out

The system here was represented as being outdated and ineffective, especially given the power and influence that they supposedly hold within their communities. If current parish councils are ineffective and unable to deliver on localism, then this could be a major barrier to the successful realisation of localism and the Big Society in Cambridgeshire.

Communities

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The specific village in which the Community Led Planning pilot took place was represented predominantly as passive. Despite the Parish Council Chair clearly stating that the community needed to start providing their own services if they were not to lose them, the community remained passive beneficiaries of the actions of the District and County Councils throughout my fieldwork. Furthermore they were also passive beneficiaries of the actions of their own Parish Council and the actions of the small number of active residents who were involved in the running of existing community groups and initiatives.

The planned activities and events that took place throughout the pilot project were designed to increase levels of participation and interest within a community that was already considered as possessing relatively high levels of skill and capacity when compared with other Cambridgeshire villages:

> Emily: pilot [village name] are obviously quite interested they're one of your more active communities aren't they with… with a reasonable… quite a lot of social capital so they're obviously looking at this localism um … opportunity and and thinking to themselves… we want to get geared up for this we want to get <u>ready</u> … so that when this bill comes in we know where we're at … we know what our community wants … we know what the priorities are and we can strike while the iron's hot if you like and make the most of the opportunities

Despite these high levels of activity the village was also represented as being unwilling to act unless there was a need for them to do so, for instance a threat to a service in the village:

> Emily: the pilot village didn't actually have any particular threats to the village at the time and I think the village has demonstrated that it's perfectly capable and has got the skills and capacity in that village to deal with things like that if it needs to … but if it doesn't need to then it doesn't see the point in doing it for that for the sake of it

So despite them possessing the necessary skills and capacity to act should they feel the need, they were nonetheless represented predominantly as inactive and as passive beneficiaries of the actions of the Parish Council and the third sector

organisation in providing opportunities for them within the pilot project. These representations were borne out to some extent in observations of organised events where attendance levels were consistently lower than expected and levels of engagement were frequently disappointing for the organisers. The community were active only in their apparent reluctance to get involved in localism related activities. There was little sign of the active community imagined by the government as taking on responsibilities and activities within the imagined Big Society.

The Parish Council Chair had a slightly different and more positive outlook on the future of community interest and engagement. He described how less active communities would be inspired by other, more active communities to better themselves and in order not to be disadvantaged:

Cllr. Stone: if other communities don't take those opportunities up they will start to see a two tier system of local communities…these are the people that are active in their community…the snow's clear outside their shops… uh you know they've lowered their speed limit they've got somebody reporting their highways issues so their potholes get done quicker… um… we haven't done any of those and so we're not as good so… you know um ….after a couple of years they'll perhaps pop up and say well perhaps we need to do that as well

Active communities were imagined here to prosper under localism, whereas inactive communities were imagined to become passive beneficiaries of an emerging two tier system of local communities in which the more active communities would serve as an inspiration and a motivating factor for less active and thus presumably less successful communities.

Local People

For the most part people at this specifically local level people were represented as inactive and unwilling to participate in local council activities. In my observations of events held during the pilot project for instance I consistently found that attendance levels were lower than hoped for or expected. People were collectively represented as selfish and largely reluctant to contribute to society beyond paying their taxes. In

my interview with Emily, the third sector representative, she was often sceptical about the desires of people and communities to take on the sort of activities and responsibilities that are imagined within the Big Society. People were generically and collectively represented as not wanting to deliver a range of services, specific examples of which Emily gave as collecting their own rubbish, looking after their own old people and looking after people with mental disabilities. When people were willing to act it was perceived to be largely in their own interests or in the interests of a specific group rather than in the interests of their wider community. Councillor Stone represented people, collectively and generically, as being used to having things done for them:

> Cllr. Stone: I think in modern society people are so used to having things done for them…uh we're slightly spoilt if I'm honest … so a lot of people think well I pay my taxes why should I bother doing anything? You've got to be pretty community spirited to want to do things and very open minded to want to help the whole community rather than just in one particular area

This representation was made in relation to his discussion of 'community groups' actively ignoring the identified priorities of the community when putting in bids for the pilot's incentive competition. The competition was intended to make people think about how they could use the money within their own group to benefit not just themselves but also their wider community, addressing one or more of the community priorities identified previously in the pilot project. This seems to be a clear example of a contradiction between central government imaginaries and local realities in the context of the Big Society.

Slightly less critical representations of people considered that they may have been put off participating in localism related activities by the negative political connotations evidenced in representations discussed earlier in this chapter. Councillor Stone represented 'members of the public' collectively and abstractedly as being actively resistant to localism due to them perceiving localism as being all about 'cost shunting'. Councillor Stone also acknowledged that local people were being asked to do more with the council actively 'asking local people to be involved because government or local authorities will no longer do it'. He dismissed the importance of attaching blame for this to any one particular actor, be it local government, central government or bankers. Instead he pragmatically asserted that

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'as a nation, we can no longer afford for everything to be done for us' and therefore people, collectively and generically represented, are going to have to become active in trying to provide some things that may have previously been done for them, for themselves within their own communities.

For the most part, people were represented as passive beneficiaries of the actions of the third sector organisation and of the local government authorities that provide their local services. The questionable relationship between people in the pilot village and their Parish Council may have had some impact on people's willingness to get involved. Residents, for instance, were represented as active in not wanting to attend Parish Council meetings and therefore they were unlikely to be in the right place at the right time to enable them to take advantage of the opportunities that their Parish Council or the third sector organisation were providing for them within the pilot project. People's unwillingness to get involved with their Parish Council was also apparent in Parish Council numbers. Through interviews and observations I identified a concern regarding their numbers of members; they seemed to find it difficult to attract or persuade residents to take up any vacant position on the Parish Council.

Emily considered that the government had been wrong to believe that the world was 'full of this untapped potential' and that most people simply do not have the time to volunteer and take on extra responsibilities within their communities. These representations of people are themselves representative of a significant finding in my research; they are indicative of a incompatibility with central government representations of imagined people within the Big Society. This incompatibility will be revisited later in the chapter and in Chapter Seven in relation to relevant literature.

6.2.3. Embedded Case Study Two: The Area Committee Participation Pilot

This third and final sub-section will focus on the developing response of Cambridgeshire County Council to the coalition government's Big Society and associated localism agenda within the Area Committee Participation pilot. I will relate my interpretations of data generated in interviews undertaken with actors involved with the Area Committee Participation pilot. These actors are:

- District Councillor Williams - the Chair of the pilot Area Committee;
- District Councillor Osborne - a Senior District Council Member;
- Toby - a Strategy Officer involved in the running of the pilot;
- Rebecca - a Senior Officer who acted as Director Lead for the pilot;
- Joshua - a Senior Officer who worked in Community Development; and
- Tom – a Senior Officer who assisted in meeting and agenda organisation throughout the pilot

I will also relate my interpretations of data generated in observations of meetings and events that are relevant to the pilot project as well as through documentary analysis.

The Big Society (Localism)

The District Council - a Liberal Democrat led authority who were heavily involved in this second embedded case study - were less keen than the County Council to align their work with national policy. District Council actors often represented the Big Society in interviews as being nothing new for them or the people in their District; they were often adamant that they had been working in ways consistent with but unrelated to the Big Society for years. In later interviews throughout my fieldwork the Big Society and localism were often suppressed. The focus seemed to be solely on the pilot itself and specifically Area Committees and area working. This seemed indicative of a Council who did not believe that their work was aligned with the national policy agenda.

Despite this apparent distancing of their own work from the national agenda, the District Council did make it clear that they were committed to devolving decisions to a local level:

Rebecca: there's a commitment to devolve decisions where appropriate to the most … to a local level…and I think what our councillors are… are concerned about is doing it in a way that means we've thought through how those decisions will be taken and clarity of the process

A discourse of appropriateness in relation to devolvement is clearly apparent here. The representation of communities is largely suppressed. They perhaps become visible in representation of 'a local level' but this can only be supposition. As 'a local level' is abstracted it is not clear what is meant by it and to exactly what level the interviewee is referring. It can also be inferred from the activation of councillors that they are the ones who will make the final decisions regarding if, how and to what level decisions will be devolved.

Joshua represented the action of 'running the pilot' as being beneficial to 'the Executive' in helping them to decide how far they wanted to go with regard to devolving powers and decision making to a local level. It seemed that the issue of devolvement was a work in progress; no decisions had yet been made. By the end of the pilot project it had become clear to me that the changes made were smaller than at first hoped for or anticipated:

> Rebecca: there are changes to the ways in which we will do things I think but I think the changes are smaller … than at first anticipated…so I don't think it's a kind of radical change… I think it's more of a kind of evolution … which is actually more in keeping with the way that the council tend to do things I think… and so I think it started out as a kind of aspiration for radical change but it's become more of an evolution I think

In this way changes were considered by participants to be more in keeping with the way that the District Council were perceived to do things; in an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary way.

In my interview with Toby we discussed the progress and development of the pilot over the twelve months of my fieldwork. It was collectively hoped that the pilot project would have had a transformative effect on the organisation; however the actors involved are represented as not having 'transformed anything really'. This is put down to the influence of members who are collectively represented as not having 'bought into the approach'. Certainly at the meetings that I observed changes were limited to the format and set up of the meetings and didn't extent to increased levels of participation or the realisation of devolved powers at the specific level of the pilot Area Committee.

By the end of the pilot project the Council's focus seemed to be shifting towards making savings as a result of central government budget cuts, thus bearing overt similarities to the changing priorities of the County Council. One interviewee discussed the future development of the Council's community engagement and localism related work in the context of the financial savings that needed to be made over the next three years:

> Joshua: one of the challenges for us as a council is we've got to find significant savings over the next three years … and localism and proper community engagement isn't cheap … it's a lot more expensive than not doing it… and so … we've got some prioritising to do if we're going to take this forward and engage people more and… so um … I don't know it'll be interesting to see what happens

In this respect the Council were collectively and objectively represented as a passive beneficiary of the cuts made to local government budgets by the coalition government. Localism and 'proper community engagement' were considered as resource intensive by interviewees and because of this the Council were represented as needing to be active in terms of prioritising their work streams and resource placements if community engagement was to continue and develop beyond the scope of the pilot project. Represented like this, localism as well as the District Council became a passive beneficiary of the budget cuts. The officers that I interviewed all seemed uncertain as to what the future would hold with regard to the development of community engagement. All that one officer could say was that they must 'wait and see'.

Central Government

As in the other case studies, representations of central government in both interviews and meetings that I observed throughout the pilot project were rare. The focus was always very much on the local level and on local government actors and organisations at the level of communities. This is consistent with the findings from each of my other two case studies.

Local Government

As in each of the other case studies 'local government' was distinguishable by tiers, organisations and even specific actors. Sub-representations included the District Council, the County Council, elected Council members and Council officers.

The District Council were represented as a naturally evolving Council who had been actively devolving services, working locally and helping communities for the last ten years or more. The Council were subjectively and objectively represented by officers as an 'evolutionary' rather than a 'revolutionary' organisation. This abstracted representation goes some way to explaining why some officers represented the Council as causing them frustration in 'not being serious' about routing everything through Area Committees despite the initially 'revolutionary' objectives of the pilot project. Frustration was also evident in Officer Project Team meetings via representations made by officers of the District Council as not having resolved the issues around the capacity of Area Committees and their subsequent ability to take on the extra workloads being trialled within the pilot project. The District Council were represented often in interviews as active: in targeting disadvantaged communities, doing a lot of community engagement work outside of Area Committee meetings, wanting to devolve decision making powers to Area Committees both from themselves and from the County Council and, in a related action, engaging with the County Council through the pilot and trying to set up a meeting between the leaders of the two Councils to discuss possible devolvement, amongst other things.

The pilot required the buy in and engagement of the County Council if the objective of getting County Council decisions devolved down to the level of Area Committees was to be achieved. The County Council however were represented as reluctant to devolve power to the level of District Councils. Despite being represented as active in asking the County Council to devolve decisions to the level of Area Committees, the District Council were a passive beneficiary of the County Council's interest in the pilot and their decisions regarding devolvement. The County Council were represented by District Council actors as largely disagreeing with the District Council's beliefs and ways of working:

> District Cllr. Williams: I mean politically it's very difficult because the county is led by the conservatives there are no conservative representatives in this district… and so there's …this this this kind of tension

Collectively they were imagined to be enthusiastic about localism and the potential for devolving decisions to a more local level but they were also represented as active in stalling the devolvement of decision making to the pilot Area Committee. This action of stalling came in the form of offering to talk about devolving decisions but not actually delivering anything concrete. These actions were largely frustrating for the District Council who were represented as having to wait and see; they had little power or influence over the County Council and their decision making process.

In an interview with Liz, a County Council officer, in which we discussed this issue she represented the County Council as having been active and positive in their development with regard to the pilot:

> Liz: there is still … some movement forwards in terms of the fact so for example the last meeting happened while I was on holiday but the councillors who were due to meet were having a pre and post meeting with the leader to talk about what could be achieved … what the local people want from that meeting and what the county could actually have some effect on … which I think is a step forward because yeah …it's kind of looking at what we as a county council can do um … but there is still a big tension particularly around um::: <u>district</u> councillors wanting to see specific things devolved for the committee to decide upon and the county being <u>less</u> keen on that

She activated District councillors in wanting the County to devolve specific things down to the level of Area Committees, and she activated the County Council in not wanting to do so. This decision, as with most decisions, was represented as lying with County Council members and Councillor Smith's representation of the District Council was far from positive:

> Cllr. Smith: in the [district council] they have all sorts of odd ideas … and that's because they're party members of the district council … and by nature that's parochial … and therefore they don't <u>see</u> the bigger impact or the bigger need… and I don't know what their budget is … thirty or forty million pounds? A year? You know we spend a <u>billion</u> … you know the quantum is … it's a

magnitude bigger almost …um so you get some really odd decision making processes

District councillors were collectively and abstractedly represented by him as being naïve about the realities of decision making. The inference seemed to be that the County Council and their own councillors were more adept and sensible in terms of making decisions for their localities than the District Council were. Councillor Smith wasn't keen on devolving powers or decisions to the Area Committee level, instead preferring to reinforce the role of County councillors within the Committees. I observed this reluctance in a meeting that Councillor Smith held with County Councillors who sat on the pilot Area Committee prior to the Area Committee meeting in September 2011. At this meeting Councillor Smith stated his intention to strengthen the role of County Councillors within the Area Committee but refused to be drawn on the issue of devolvement. In interviews with Councillor Smith Area Committees themselves were objectively represented as largely irrelevant and serving the interests of a few self-serving individuals only. In short, they were not represented as a good example of localism. Councillor Smith activated himself in having 'wisely' chosen not to attend one of the pilot Area Committee meetings; an action which is indicative of his attitude towards the pilot and therefore potentially also towards the requested devolved decisions.

Liz represented the County Council as having been active in hoping 'for something that we didn't really expect' from this pilot project. Overall the project was represented by involved County Council actors as having 'not been very successful' and as not having created much in the way of new learning.

District Council officers meanwhile seemed to be far more positive about their relationship with the County Council. By the end of the pilot project Rebecca represented County officers as engaging in meaningful discussions and participating to a positive end rather than just turning up 'to be seen that you are there'. This certainly seemed to be a positive outcome of the pilot in terms of the working relationships between differing tiers of local government in Cambridgeshire. Toby was also positive about the growing interest and engagement of the County Council. He represented County Council actors as believing that 'the forum approach' is only engaging if people have the potential to influence real decisions or spend real money. In this respect, Toby argued, the County Council seemed to be coming round to the District Council's way of thinking. The District Council were

represented as actively 'drawing the County Council in' and therefore the County Council were represented as passive beneficiaries of the District Council's actions and the development of the pilot project. These representations are particularly compelling given the contrasting representations evident in interviews and observations within the County Council.

Locally elected Council members were represented as active and influential within the District Council. Decisions were made by councillors and the direction of the Council's work depended on those decisions. Joshua discussed the different views that he perceived Council members to have with regard to devolvement:

Joshua: there is a whole spectrum of views across councillors as to … how things should operate … so there's some who think that they are elected therefore … they should make decisions … and if we devolve decisions and if we get more participation then um what tends to happen is you get a few people who have very fixed ideas coming forward … so if you make decisions based on their views then is that representative or not? You know actually what you're doing you could argue is you're just doing what a very small group of people want you to do … whereas the councillors have a democratic mandate … they've been voted in by a large proportion of the community so um… so there's that view … but there are some that believe in localism … or devolvement … but believe in it because of the participation … and the engagement and that actually that's really good … so the outcome … the outcome might be that lots of people get really involved … so that actually is worth doing just for that… and there are others that think that it's important to devolve the decisions but that actually it's still the councillors that should make those decisions it's just that if they're made in area committees it's easier for people to attend and the decisions are more relevant to that locality … so I do think there's a spectrum and I guess part of what we're trying to do through the pilot is help councillors … well see if councillors will come together round a collective view

He distinguished between three types of councillor, each of which were represented collectively and abstractedly: those that believe that because they are elected they therefore have a democratic mandate and should make decisions on behalf of their communities; those that believe in localism or devolvement because of the potential for increased levels of participation and engagement; and those that think it is important to devolve decisions to a level where the public can have some involvement but that the councillors should be the ones making the decisions. The combination of active councillors and the differing views that these active councillors held with regard to devolving decisions and with regard to the pilot more widely, meant that progress was sometimes slow and decisions contested.

Despite their levels of activity and influence, councillors were also represented as passive beneficiaries of the pilot both positively in terms of it helping them to make decisions with regard to devolvement, and potentially negatively in terms of it meaning that they must work in a different way and conduct their meetings using a different format. In terms of potentially taking some decisions in partnership with their communities, some members were represented as being actively uncomfortable.

The Chair of the pilot Area Committee was represented as having been active throughout the pilot in driving it forwards:

> District Cllr. Williams: I mean this is not me bragging or anything< but I did put a lot of effort into trying to get it to a different plane … and … you know I think there is huge potential there but I haven't yet to sense somebody to continue to champion that

Given that he had stepped down from that role by the end of the pilot project, interviewees were concerned that the new Chair may have had a potentially negative impact on any decision to be taken regarding the continuation of the piloted approach. The Area Committee meeting that I observed in May 2012 was chaired by an interim Chair and his agenda management and timekeeping skills were severely below the standards that had been set previously. This resulted in important community focused items being dropped from the agenda, causing several disgruntled members of the public to leave.

Collectively, members were represented as active in their reluctance to take the pilot project any further following its completion:

> Toby: um but the difficulty we have with our review that we're presently preparing … so the final review kind of pulling out some of the lessons learned … members don't seem to be too keen on taking forward the approach

Members were abstractedly represented as being drawn to the status quo – 'back behind the tables'. This reluctance was most clearly demonstrated during my observations of Member Working Group meetings when Chairs of the other Area Committees were able to voice their concerns and reservations about taking on the recommendations from the pilot project in their own Area Committees. This caused some frustration amongst officers who, in contrast to members, represented themselves as 'aspiring to push boundaries' and as being active in doing all that they could to 'make things happen'. Nonetheless they were essentially passive beneficiaries of the actions of members who made the decisions about the future of the pilot.

Officers and particularly community development officers were represented as active in consulting with the community as part of the pilot project. They were also represented as active in terms of continuing their work in trying to guide or persuade members of the decisions that needed to be taken. Moreover it was officers who were represented as active in positively developing the relationship between the District and County Councils. Despite their active state they were consistently represented as collectively passive beneficiaries of the actions of their members with whom the decision making powers and the influence lay. In my final set of interviews officers were waiting to hear whether, following the local elections of May 2012 the District Council's new leader would want to work to convince members to partake in the new and more collaborative styles of meetings or not. At the end point of my fieldwork the interviewees and the Council still seemed to be working out what was happening as a result of the local elections and simply did not seem to know.

Essentially the future of the pilot was dependent on the appetite of District Council members for taking it forward. Communities and local people were largely suppressed in favour of the members and officers. The focus seemed very much to be internal to the Council rather than on their communities and localities. Once

again this finding of complexities and tensions at differing levels within and between local government authorities is striking particularly in its evident contrast with central government's representation of a simplistic and uncomplicated local government through which power would be passed on its way to communities and local people in the imagined Big Society.

Communities

Throughout the pilot project communities were represented as possessing a variety of capacities and skills. It seemed that communities could not easily be represented collectively as they often were in central government documents and speeches. This finding is consistent with my findings relating to the representations of communities as diverse and differentiated in each of my other case studies.

Communities and community groups were represented consistently as passive beneficiaries of the pilot project and therefore of the actions of the District Council. Community groups were also represented as having a tendency to be quite fragile:

> District Cllr. Williams: I think the big risk is that [hhh] in (.) >in a society like [name] we have a lot of people working in… in the voluntary sector in one way or another and community groups and and in in in voluntary agencies and charities… and uh… in … in a sense they're … they're already painfully stretched … and uh … there's an issue of capacity to take on as it were … new components I mean the … the the the current discussion about the future of the library service … is is is one example … I mean do community groups have the capacity to significantly … you know take on a significant role in delivery of you know … really important um … key public service like like a public library?

The implication of this was that even if they showed an interest in and enthusiasm for taking over local services, they would be unable to cope with the practicalities of running a service and therefore to even offer them the chance to do so might be foolish.

In my interview with Joshua he suggested that communities could be represented in at least two different ways – as those that have 'the skills the time the money' and as those that have 'quite high deprivation'. The abstracted representations served to illustrate the differences between communities in terms of capacity. Those communities considered to have the necessary capacity were represented as at least potentially active in wanting to take control. In terms of those communities with high deprivation levels meanwhile, Joshua asked 'have people there got the capacity and the skills to take that on board?' This question served to illustrate his uncertainty about the ability of less affluent communities to take on the opportunities that may have been offered to them as part of the pilot project.

Rebecca represented communities 'with a strong sense of community' such as those found in more rural parish councils as passive beneficiaries of localism in the sense of being able to take advantage of the opportunities that may become available to them. More urban communities, because they are less well defined, were represented as lacking this 'strong sense of community' and as therefore being less likely to be able to take advantage of the opportunities within localism as easily. Again these findings regarding the representations of communities as passive beneficiaries of localism and of their local councils across all tiers of local government are consistent with findings in each of the case studies presented previously in this chapter.

Local People

People were generally represented as falling into one of two categories: active and interested, or inactive and uninterested. Consistent with central government representations, people generally were imagined to be potentially active even though they may not necessarily have been represented as active at the specific point in time. Whilst people were represented subjectively as having a right to be involved in decisions about issues that affect them, they were also represented as passive; as not realising that they have an interest in something unless they are prompted. Rebecca represented people as being active insofar as they get 'interested and preoccupied' with issues when things aren't working well, but otherwise as being passive. In other words they would only become active when something went wrong with a service or an issue came about which they felt particularly passionate about. My observations of Area Committee meetings

consolidated this finding; the best attended meetings were those which focused on contentious local issues such as library closures or transport issues.

People were prompted to engage via the opportunities afforded to them by the activities within the pilot project. Councillor Osborne represented himself personally and individually as having been 'quite agreeably surprised' by the return rate for the postcards sent out as part of the pilot's community consultation activity. The successful community consultation was exemplified as one way of ensuring that the benefits of the pilot were felt by all community members even if they didn't attend the Area Committee meetings.

People were also represented as passive beneficiaries of the physical changes that had been made to the Area Committee meetings. The pilot working group had been active in changing the format of the meetings in order to try and make them more consultative and welcoming to members of the public. Councillor Williams described the changes as:

> …trying to establish much greater equality between the councillors and the residents attending the meetings in terms of them contributing to a discussion.

The meetings were represented as benefitting from this increased equality in that they were perceived to have become 'more pleasant' to be at. Furthermore it was hoped by Councillor Williams that at least 'some people' were benefitting from the changes in terms of 'getting something out of it', an action which was noticeably abstracted and generalised. Despite the efforts of the actors involved in changing the format of the meetings, it was nonetheless recognised that meetings would not appeal to everyone. Toby represented the Council collectively and personally as 'recognising that not everyone wants to engage'. Interestingly, those individuals that did regularly attend committee meetings were labelled as 'usual suspects'. This was not an isolated representation; it is one that was made by several research participants. The 'usual suspects' or 'hardy perennial community activists' were represented as having been active in 'working the system' for a long time. Rebecca represented the District Council or perhaps the pilot working group more specifically as having the job of ensuring that 'the usual suspects' didn't dominate meetings, become too closed and cliquey, or cause other attendees not to attend again in the future. Thus, even those members of the community who had taken up the

opportunity to attend the meetings and had engaged in the processes being trialled as part of the pilot project were represented negatively.

Interestingly, as the pilot project developed, representations of people were at times bound up with the issue of potentially devolved decisions:

> District Cllr. Osborn: in general terms our view is that um … the other pillar is an important ingredient to making people think it's worth their while to come along because of what is really being decided… and um … a lot of <u>those</u> things are still really to filter through … so um I would hope that that would make a change on the engagement side as well

It was imagined that more people would actively attend Area Committee meetings were decisions to be devolved to that level; the implication being that people's interest and subsequent participation would be influenced by the powers and influence that they themselves have at their disposal. Given that neither the District Council nor the County Council had devolved the decisions and powers that it was initially hoped would have been devolved by the end of the pilot project, it becomes understandable that levels of attendance at meetings remained low and both Councils were disappointed by the achievements of the pilot overall.

6.3. From Central Imaginaries to Local 'Realities': A Comparative Discussion

In this third and final section of the chapter I will summarise, compare and contrast my interpretations of the discourses representing actors considered central to the imagined Big Society with my interpretations of recontextualisations and representations of discourses representing those same actors as a result of my analysis of Cambridgeshire County Council's development of localism within and across each of the three case studies. I will argue as a result of this comparative discussion that four key incompatibilities have thwarted the potential realisation of the imagined Big Society in Cambridgeshire:

1. Local government as collective and compliant versus local government as complex and potentially obstructive;
2. Central-local government relations: imagined freedom versus realities of control;
3. Unrealistic expectations of people and communities; and
4. The Big Society in an 'age austerity'.

6.3.1. Cambridgeshire County Council and ~~the Big Society~~ Localism

It is clear that the Big Society is a creation of the Conservative Party and an idea about which David Cameron is passionate: [the Big Society] 'is going to get every bit of my passion and attention over the five years of this government' (Cameron, 2011). The dominant discourse representing the Big Society in Conservative Party and central government documents is that of a positive vision for the future contrasted with the representation of a society that is currently 'broken': 'the recent growth of the state has promoted not social solidarity, but selfishness and individualism' (Cameron, 2009b). The Big Society is perceived to be the answer to society's problems: a 'positive alternative to Labour's failed big government approach' (Conservative Party, 2010a). There is a perceived need to rebalance power and responsibility between the state and its citizens: 'only when people and communities are given more power and take more responsibility can we achieve fairness and opportunity for all' (Cabinet Office, 2010a).

I identified a rejection of the Big Society terminology in interviews with actors involved in all three of my case studies; all indicated a preference for localism but they did so to differing extents. The County Council, a Conservative led authority, were dismissive of the Big Society but embracing of localism. Their policy development seemed to be consistent with the government's Big Society and related localism agenda in a number of ways: making a commitment in the 2011-12 Integrated Plan to become a 'genuinely local Council', setting up the Localism and Community Engagement Board, and commissioning a number of pilot projects to allow them to test their ideas for localism. The County Council were also represented by the District Council as having been active in adopting the localism 'brand' following the 2010 election. The District Council themselves however were less keen to align their work with national policy. This finding bears out Buser's (2013: 15) assertion that:

it is likely that those policy-makers, civil servants and planners, local governments, neighbourhood activists and voluntary groups directly involved with the Big Society and localism would express conflicting understandings about the democratic opportunities and challenges ahead.

As with my interviewees, Buser (ibid), attributes much of this conflict to party political differences and the conflation of these differences as a result of the coming together of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties in the first coalition government since the Second World War.

6.3.2. Central Government: A New Central-Local Relationship?

The decisive and quick enactment of the Localism Bill in 2011 as well as the plethora of rhetoric around decentralisation and localism seemed indicative of 'a very different type of relationship between central and local government' (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012: 26). However, in County Council documents outlining their initial response to the Big Society, central government were rarely represented. In County Council interviews and observations too central government were largely suppressed. In interviews and observations undertaken in both pilot projects representations of central government were also rare. The focus was very much on the local level and the role that central government had to play at that level in relation to my research seemed fairly small. One noteworthy representation of central government involved them being mistaken in their belief that there were a lot of active local people upon whom they could call to enact the Big Society. Whilst interesting, this representation nonetheless tells me very little about the relationship between central and local government.

The suppression of central government is perhaps unsurprising given that my research was situated in a localised context. Nonetheless, it could also be indicative of the previously discussed rejection of central government's terminology relating to the Big Society and of the political differences in existence between the various tiers of government. The representation of central government as contradictory by Councillor Smith at the County Council was particularly striking; it could be indicative of central government themselves acting as a barrier to the successful realisation of the Big Society in its own terms given that decentralisation was a dominant discourse in representations of their imagined role. As one participant

pointed out in an interview, this was also contradictory to the promise that local government authorities would be given more freedom and control over their own decision making.

Lowndes and Pratchett (2012: 38) asserted that the coalition government's 'proposed retreat from the trend to centralism … may be as much the corollary of savage public spending cuts and the need to externalise the responsibility for performance failure as the outcome of a principled commitment to more autonomous local government'. Certainly there seems less evidence based on my analysis and interpretation of these case studies of 'a principled commitment to more autonomous local government' than there is evidence to suggest that the impact of budget cuts on local government authorities is representative of the greatest incompatibility between the imagined Big Society and local 'realities' in Cambridgeshire.

6.3.3. Local Government: More Complex than First Imagined

Local government were represented collectively in the imagined Big Society as a compliant and mediating force through which devolved power needed to be passed on its way to local communities and people. This underrepresentation of local government as a complex and elaborate tier of government with a multitude of political persuasions and locally motivated concerns in the imagined Big Society is not surprising; local government were equally underrepresented in much of the Conservative Party literature in the build up to the general election of 2010:

> Our plans to reform public services, mend our broken society, and rebuild trust in politics are all part of our Big Society agenda. These plans involve redistributing power from the state to society; from the centre to local communities, giving people the opportunity to take more control over their lives.
> (Conservative Party, 2010b: 37)

The circumstances of devolvement are most interesting here: 'from the state to society' and 'from the centre to local communities'. In neither circumstance is the mediating level of local government represented. By the time that the new coalition published their 'Programme for Government' document (Cabinet Office, 2010c),

local government were more overtly acknowledged as a necessary level of mediation in the proposed decentralisation of powers. In the Localism Act (2011) their mediating role was cemented in legislation; much of the Act focuses on the provision of 'new freedoms and flexibility for local government' (DCLG, 2011: 4) in an attempt to shift power from central government to local communities. As Lowndes and Pratchett (2012: 28) noted, 'at face value these reforms promise to renew local democracy by making local authorities and other bodies more accountable and responsive to the communities that they serve.' In this regard the Localism Act (2011) did appear to go some way to delivering on the promises represented in the rhetoric around localism. Nonetheless, local government were never more than collectively represented throughout; specific tiers, actors and political parties were all excluded.

My empirical research in Cambridgeshire has enabled me to identify representations of local government tiers, politics, budgets, meetings, and much more which are both manifold and complex and which go some way to illustrating incompatibilities between the imagined Big Society and local 'realities' in Cambridgeshire, particularly in relation to the decentralisation of power. Of specific note were the representations of the roles of Council members and Council officers in each of my case studies. These roles were not represented in central government documents or speeches and that is despite local councillors being the elected representatives for local areas and thus presumably unavoidably implicated in any localism policy.

Parish councils are a specific tier of local government that were rarely represented in the imagined Big Society but that were often represented during the development of localism in Cambridgeshire. Parish councils in general were represented collectively and objectively as passive beneficiaries of the Localism Bill and of the actions of higher tiers of local government. They were imagined as becoming more powerful as a result of the Localism Bill, but some parish councils were abstractedly represented as being scared and confused about what was happening or was likely to happen in the future. Parish councils were represented as being vital to the success of localism, evidence which supports the claim from previous research on local government that an active and well-functioning civil society tends to be allied with a vigorous local council (Lowndes et al., 2006). However the parish council system was objectively represented as being outdated and ineffective with some parish councils being abstractedly represented as unwelcoming and traditional; it

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was considered that the system would require a major overhaul if it was to be fit for current purpose.

In the literature, parish councils along with town councils are rarely mentioned in relation to the Big Society despite being the most local form of government in England. When parish councils are mentioned it is often in relation to town or neighbourhood planning (e.g. Gallent, 2013; Valler et al., 2012). A rare example of a discussion relating parish councils to the Big Society and the related Localism Act outside of planning was evident not in a peer reviewed journal but in a blog post on the London School of Economics website (Derounian, 2011). In the blog post Derounian discusses the notion of 'parish, town and community councils [as] genuinely democrat vehicles for translating fine words about localism into reality'. The few available examples of such literature are reflective of the lack of representation in the imagined Big Society of the relationship between the tiers of local government and of parish councils specifically.

A further illustration of the complexity of local government that was glossed over in the imagined Big Society relates to the imagined devolvement of power through tiers of local government to the level of communities. The representation of the County Council as intending to devolve some powers to a more local level was contested by the Parish Clerk who maintained that the County Council were unwilling to devolve powers to parish councils. The Clerk also represented the County Council as lacking an understanding of how parish councils work. The representation of parish councils by a County Councillor as being likely to be wasteful with any money that may be devolved to them is indicative of this reluctance to perform their part in the decentralisation of power that seems central to the imagined Big Society. Throughout my fieldwork the predominant representations of people were as passive beneficiaries of the actions of the County Council and other tiers of local government. When people were represented as active, it was most often in terms of actively not wanting to take on the delivery of services or activities which were currently the responsibility of the County Council. Compounding these representations were representations made by County Council actors of local people as often not being the 'right' people to take local decisions. So even if people did want to be active and take on decision making and service delivery, they may not have been considered the right people to take those decisions by the County Council and thus may even have been denied this opportunity.

The imagined role of local government as a collectively enabling and empowering level through which power must necessarily pass on its way to communities and local people is simply not borne out during the County's development of localism within the focus of my research. Despite making an initial commitment to devolve services and budgets where possible to a local level, control was gradually exerted over time and justifications made as to why devolvement should not take place. The County Council were unwilling even to devolve power to the level of other local government tiers such as district and parish councils, let alone to the level of communities and local people. The complexity of local government as evidenced in my research and the negative impact that such complexities appear to have had on the development of localism within Cambridgeshire seems indicative of a huge incompatibility between the imagined Big Society and local 'realities'.

6.3.4. Re-Writing the Contract that People Feel they Have with the State

In the coalition government's Programme for Government document (2010c: 8) the Big Society and related Localism agenda were described as offering 'the potential to completely recast the relationship between people and the state'. One County Council officer involved with the Community Led Planning pilot recontextualised this representation in terms of localism, stating that 'it is basically rewriting the contract that people feel that they have with local society' (Amy – County Council Officer). This change in the 'contract' that people feel they have with either the state or society is heavily related to the representations of people and communities and the roles in which they are imagined to engage within the Big Society. Whilst central government discourses represented people as passive but imagined them to be active, discourses evident throughout my research do occasionally imagine people to be active but predominantly represent them as passive, unwilling, and uninterested in localism or localism related activities. If the representation of people as being used to having things done for them is taken as a starting point, then it becomes understandable that people are also represented as not knowing how to do the things that they are being asked or expected to do and, perhaps most importantly, as not being interested in getting involved with the local government authorities such as parish councils that are attempting to engage them. Even those people that clearly are willing, interested and involved are represented in a negative light; they are 'usual suspects', motivated by selfish means, or simply not the 'right'

people to make sensible decisions on behalf of their communities. Most of these representations of local people are thus indicative of a contradiction between local people as they are imagined to be and to act within the Big Society, and local people as they represented in Cambridgeshire.

The imagined Big Society might represent people as active citizens delivering services for themselves and their communities, but the representations at a local level are of people that don't want to get involved in service delivery or community initiatives. It is the Parish Council, the District Council, the County Council and the third sector organisations that are represented as active, not the local people.

Recontextualisations of discourses representing communities were consistent with central government representations in one way: as being currently dependent on the state for their continued wellbeing. Where contradictions began to emerge was in representations of communities as they are imagined to become within the Big Society. Communities becoming self-sufficient, cooperative and dependent on the people living within them rather than on their local authorities or on central government simply did not happen. Some community level activity was already in place when my fieldwork began, and it was often for this reason that the government's representation of the Big Society was criticised or rejected. But certainly any increase in that level of engagement and participation leading towards a cooperative or partnership approach to service delivery amongst other things, was not evident in any of the case studies included in this research.

When represented collectively communities in Cambridgeshire were considered to be passive beneficiaries of the actions of third sector organisations and local government authorities, often specifically in terms of providing opportunities for them within localism. However localism itself was not considered to be anything new; instead it was represented as a label for something that had been going on in communities for years. Localism was also considered to be potentially off putting for communities given its heavily political connotations and perhaps unavoidable relation to the Big Society.

Unlike the Conservative Party or the coalition government who constantly represented communities collectively, in my research distinctions were often made between different communities; they had differing needs and differing appetites for localism and could not always be considered collectively. Differentiation between

communities in Cambridgeshire was specifically and most often made between those that were considered active and able and those that were considered to be lacking in social capital or disadvantaged in some way. There was also an identifiable discourse of concern that localism would be divisive and create further inequality amongst these differing communities. This is a concern that was discussed by Coote (2010: 17):

> Essentially, the responsibility that is being shifted is for dealing with risks that are unpredictable and/or beyond the control of individuals on their own, which is often the case with unemployment, poverty, ill-health, and a lack of decent education and housing. These risks are themselves determined by the condition of national and global economies, and by the Government's economic policies.

So called 'capable' communities were often represented as active and as more likely to benefit from localism or at least to be able to act independently of the County Council and therefore be less in need of support than less capable communities. These less capable communities were often represented as needing to be passive beneficiaries of the actions of local authorities in empowering and enabling them if they were not to be subjected to even greater levels of inequality. In an ideological discussion this issue was raised by Corbett and Walker (2013: 11-12):

> …the combined influence of Red Toryism and libertarian paternalism on the big society may induce yet more fragmentation and dislocation within British society, as even minimal sources of financial support for local community action are removed, especially in the poorest areas (Civil Exchange, 2012). This suggests a 'two-speed big society' in favour of the rich and upper classes (Ellison, 2011: 59–60).

This discussion infers heavily that the 'age of austerity' must be considered a detrimental factor to any potentially successful realisation of the Big Society. This constitutes the main point of discussion in the final sub section of this discussion.

6.3.5. Localism: Secondary to Making Savings

As a passive beneficiary of the austerity measures and budget cuts, the County Council's biggest priority was represented as saving money. Cambridgeshire County Council needed to save fifty million pounds in 2011-2012 and a further thirty six million pounds in 2012-13 (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2011a). In this respect, localism was not considered to be a priority. Indeed by the mid-point of my fieldwork, Councillor Smith was insistent that the initial excitement around localism was waning at the County Council and giving way to more sensible and strategic thinking and decision making. This was considered by him to be a good thing as he represented localism as often being nothing more than a distraction from the Council's core business, of which making savings and dealing with the budget cuts to key services were the priorities.

There was also a concern at the County Council about the level of resources required for localism to succeed. Officers believed that extra resources, if only in the form of officer time, were needed. Councillor Smith, however, disagreed: as localism was considered to be nothing more than a way of thinking and a change of philosophy, no extra resources were required. I most clearly observed this at an internal Cambridgeshire County Council localism event held in October 2011 when, in a question and answer session with Councillor Smith, officers directly confronted him with their concerns.

A related debate focused on the role that the County Council should play in building the capacity of communities that were considered less capable and in danger of suffering under localism. Officers tended to represent the County as having a big role to play in this regard, whereas Councillor Smith tended to disagree. The same financial reasons previously explored were represented as actively constraining the Council's ability to work to build community capacity to enable communities to take up opportunities within localism. The representations of communities as either active and able or inactive and unable are particularly interesting when used as justification within this debate for the county council to not put extra resources into building community capacity. The context here is important. By representing communities as likely to become active and self-sufficient either when they need to or when they are inspired to do so by other more active and therefore more successful communities, local government effectively liberate themselves from any obligation to invest scarce resources or budgets in community development or the building of community capacity to enable communities to take advantage of localism and fulfil their role within the imagined Big Society. The obvious problem to me

seems to be the omission of thought as to how less well off or able communities should develop the necessary skill set, time or capacity to improve themselves to the level of more successful communities. It may be an admirable ideal but it seems unrealistic to rely on such an ideal in policy making and is perhaps a product of the context of austerity in which my research took place.

District Council participants represented both localism and community engagement abstractedly as being resource intensive and, given that their priorities were to save money and cut budgets, this seemed indicative of a barrier to its successful realisation. In this sense, localism itself was represented as a passive beneficiary of the budget cuts imposed on local government by central government. As an organisation the District Council were also represented as passive beneficiaries of the budget cuts imposed on them by central government which required them to make significant savings.

By the end of the Community Led Planning pilot concerns such as unemployment, budget cuts and threats to public services were considered to take precedence over localism and it was therefore difficult to see how localism could progress. Concern was also expressed as to how localism related activities might be implemented in all of Cambridgeshire's two hundred and fifty villages given the amount of resource that had been put into just one village throughout the pilot project.

At the level of communities and with specific regard to the role of parish councils, Councillor Stone was insistent that parish councils needed to continue to have an active role in localism in order that they could subsidise or help to resource any community groups that did want to become active in their community in the future. In this respect then, parish councils are represented as a vital part of the potential success of localism in Cambridgeshire. But this relied on the Parish Council having the funds to allow them to resource voluntary and community groups where necessary which, in turn, relied on District and County Council funding. Essentially, community and voluntary groups can be understood as passive beneficiaries of parish councils and each tier of local government is a passive beneficiary of the tier above them in terms of funding for localism. Local government as a collective whole can be understood as a passive beneficiary of central government in terms of budget cuts and spending reviews. The imagined Big Society may in fact be thwarted by the government's own actions in cutting budgets for local government

authities.

6.4.   Summary

In government literature links are made and remade between the apathetic and disengaged public in the form of communities and the 'broken Britain' in which we supposedly found ourselves in the lead up to the 2010 general election. The Big Society was posited as the only alternative to New Labour's big government and thus as the answer to fixing our 'broken' society. However, a Big Society that is built and an agenda whose plans involve reforming, mending, rebuilding, redistributing and giving seems to me to be more one which is owned by the centre, by the government, by David Cameron even, and in which local people, local communities and local authorities are 'permitted' – perhaps encouraged – to participate through the granting of negative liberties in order to 'fill any gaps left by a retreating 'nanny state'' (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012: 32). A Big Society surely needs to be built by the communities who are the supposed beneficiaries, not given away by the government who created it in response to the 'age of austerity'. And yet people are represented as apathetic and disengaged and communities are represented as having grown accustomed to being able to take for granted provision of services. How, then, can the answer to broken Britain – the Big Society – be realised without some input, some cajoling, some leading from government? Except that local government, and therefore communities, are passive beneficiaries of central government budget cuts which constrain any potential realisation of the Big Society in Cambridgeshire. Local councils simply cannot afford to support their communities let alone their own organisations through the culture change which is deemed necessary for localism to succeed.

I have developed an argument throughout this chapter that four key incompatibilities have thwarted the potential realisation of the imagined Big Society in Cambridgeshire:

1. Local government as collective and compliant versus local government as complex and potentially obstructive;
2. Central-local government relations: imagined freedom versus the realities of control;

3. Unrealistic expectations of people and communities;
4. The Big Society in an 'age of austerity'.

The first incompatibility is in some ways the most obvious: the differences that are evident between the collectively represented compliant local government in the imagined Big Society and the complexities of local government in Cambridgeshire. The representation of a collective local government as a mediating force through which devolved power needs to be passed on its way to local people and communities is almost entirely contradicted by the realities of officers, members, politics, budgets, meetings, and much more. This entails representation of an organisation infinitely more complex and infinitely more disruptive than the one imagined in the Big Society.

In reference to devolvement this incompatibility relates to the second incompatibility: the notion of local government freed from central government control in comparison to Cambridgeshire County Council reprimanded for pursuing their own policy with regard to local issues.

The third incompatibility relates to the unrealistic representations of communities and people as being ready, willing and able to fulfil their imagined roles within the Big Society. Whilst participants acknowledged that some of the County's more wealthy communities may well have the necessary resources and capacity to act if they were required to do so, most communities were not considered capable of doing so. And that is assuming that communities and people would be interested in the first place; the representations made by most participants suggest that they would not.

This third incompatibility then is related closely to the fourth and final incompatibility: the 'age of austerity' in which the Big Society was first conceived. The budget cuts enforced on Cambridgeshire County Council as a result of the Emergency Budget and Spending Review of 2010 meant that they did not have the resources to build the community capacity that they deemed necessary to enable their communities and residents to take on the opportunities and greater responsibilities that they were imagined to take on within the Big Society. Their focus was necessarily on budget cuts and making savings which meant that localism could not be considered a priority.

At the beginning of my fieldwork the 'Big Society' was rejected in Cambridgeshire. By the end of my fieldwork 'localism' was considered to be difficult to define, understand or implement, resource intensive and, perhaps unsurprisingly, less important than making savings in the face of the disproportionately severe budget cuts imposed on local government and local services (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012). In its own terms, the Big Society had failed to be realised in Cambridgeshire. In the next chapter I will discuss the results of my empirical study as well as the theory and methodology of my study in relation to relevant literature in order both to situate my research more clearly within that literature and in order to develop my argument regarding the four key incompatibilities which have thwarted the potential realisation of the imagined Big Society in Cambridgeshire.

7. The Big Society, Localism and Local Government: A Discussion

In the previous chapter I presented my interpretations of the data and findings from the multiple embedded case study in which I explored discourses and recontextualisations of discourses representing actors that I interpreted as being central to the imagined Big Society throughout the development of localism in Cambridgeshire. In this chapter I will discuss the results of this empirical study and, latterly, the theory and methodology of the study in relation to the relevant literature, structuring my argument across three main sections. Each section serves to illustrate and further develop a specific argument: firstly the importance of the focus of this research on the level of local government as a vitally important mediating force; secondly the four key incompatibilities that I argue have contributed to the failure to realise the imagined Big Society in Cambridgeshire; and thirdly the appropriacy of the approach and methodology that I have taken to this research.

I draw in this chapter not only on literature which I presented initially in Chapter Two as part of my exploration of the policy context underpinning the conception and development of the Big Society, but also on more recently published literature relating to the Big Society, localism and local government. This is particularly exciting as it highlights the situation of my own research in a wider emergent and contemporary field of policy research.

In the first section I develop and discuss my argument for the importance of focusing on local government as a mediating level within any potential realisation of the imagined Big Society. Through this section I justify the existence and perceived importance of research such as this in which I seek to achieve the overall aim of my research: the development of an empirically based critique of the Big Society in its own terms at a local government level.

The second section will encompass four sub-sections in which I will address in turn each of the incompatibilities between the imagined Big Society and local 'realities' throughout the development of localism that I established in the previous chapter and that I argue are key factors which contributed to the failure to realise the imagined Big Society in Cambridgeshire. In each sub-section I will discuss the empirical results of the recontextualisations of the Big Society and representations of actors considered central to the Big Society in the development of localism in

Cambridgeshire in relation to the available literature on the Big Society, localism, local government, and other related issues.

I therefore focus in the first sub-section on incompatibility 1: local government as compliant versus local government as complex and potentially obstructive to the realisation of the imagined Big Society in Cambridgeshire. I develop the argument that the complexity of local government was grossly underrepresented in the imagined Big Society and cannot be considered as the simple mediating level through which power can be passed on its way from central government to communities and individuals.

In the second sub-section I focus on incompatibility 2: central-local government relations and the issues of perceived freedom for local councils as part of the Big Society and associated decentralisation agenda versus the actual levels of control that policy makers at Cambridgeshire County Council experienced during the development of localism and reported in interviews that I carried out during my fieldwork.

In the third sub-section I focus on incompatibility 3: the unrealistic expectations of people and communities that were represented by central government in the imagined Big Society as compared to the representations of communities and people within Cambridgeshire throughout the development of localism. I develop the argument that people and communities in Cambridgeshire, based on the representations of them made by participants in this research, do not possess the capacity or appetite required to take on the opportunities and roles imagined for them within the Big Society.

In the fourth and final sub-section I focus on incompatibility 4: the Big Society in an age of austerity. I argue that this is perhaps the most pertinent and destructive incompatibility to constrain any potential realisation of the imagined Big Society in Cambridgeshire.

In the third section I discuss relevant theoretical and methodological issues relating to my research study and in relation to literature which draws on similar methodologies. I argue that the approach I have taken and the methodology I have drawn on have enabled me to develop a much needed empirical critique of the Big Society in its own terms at a local government level.

7.1. A Critique of the Big Society in its Own Terms

The overall aim of my research was to develop an empirically based critique of the Big Society in its own terms. The Big Society has provoked much discussion amongst academics, political actors at all tiers of government and, to a lesser extent, the public. This is interesting; despite essentially being 'an idea about a more civically active society' (Richardson, 2012: 139) and thus the interest of citizens being presumably paramount to its success, the general public are said to 'find it uninformative and boring' (Albrow, 2012: 105). Even Conservative Party MPs have expressed concern; Jo Johnson was reported as saying that it was 'intangible and incomprehensible…odd and unpersuasive' (Beattie, 2011). Despite this lack of interest and apparent concern as to its intangibility and incomprehensiveness the Big Society has been described by David Cameron, the Conservative Party and subsequently the coalition government as the answer to the problem of 'broken Britain' in the so called 'age of austerity'. It remains a 'flagship policy' of the coalition government and a 'passion' of David Cameron's. And yet, as I demonstrated in Chapter Two, there is little empirical research that has been published in relation to the potential realisation of the Big Society. There are plenty of examples of academic literature based on empirical evidence that relate to local government and public participation (e.g. Gyford, 1991; Burns et al., 1994; Stoker, 1997; Lowndes et al., 2001; Newman et al., 2004; Farrelly, 2009) but these articles do not specifically relate to local government and the Big Society. Consequently whilst there are some similarities between them, especially given that the Big Society necessitates consideration of public participation, there are also significant contextual differences which mean that they cannot necessarily be generalised to take into account consideration of the Big Society.

Most published literature on the Big Society takes the form of commentaries and opinion pieces, theoretical arguments based on ideological principles and critiques based on potentialities, supposition or possibility as to what may or may not become of the Big Society (e.g. Alcock, 2010; Kisby, 2010; Evans, 2011; Taylor, 2011; Albrow, 2012; Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012; Sullivan, 2012; Buser, 2013; Corbett and Walker, 2013). In a brief reply to Sullivan's (2012) article, Alcock (2012: 149) offers a useful précis of what he calls one of the 'important contradictions in the

government's promotion of the Big Society' – the contradiction between the Big Society as constructed from the bottom up and the Big Society as imposed from the top down:

> Government might want the Big Society to emerge bottom up, but in promoting or coercing it it is inevitably acting top down. The discourse might suggest that the Big Society is the creation of citizen action, whereas in practice it becomes the creation of government decree.

Whilst such literature and such observations are undoubtedly valuable in guiding research and researchers alike with regard to the Big Society, they do not provide and are not based on empirical evidence as to the responses and recontextualisations of the Big Society at the level where, I argue, its potential realisation is most likely to either be enabled or constrained: the level of local government. Throughout this thesis I have argued that local government authorities, given the freedoms granted to them in the name of the Big Society and their importance in mediating between representations of policy at a central government level and the lived experience in their own localities, must be considered to be increasingly influential in terms of their causal powers. For this reason the mediating level of local government must be recognised as a vital setting in which to carry out much needed empirical research on the Big Society. I have developed these arguments throughout this thesis and I further discuss them here in relation to relevant literature.

In a brief exploration of the general election of May 2010 that I presented in Chapter Two I highlighted the lack of representations of local government in the Conservative Party manifesto or election campaign. The Conservative Party were insistent that power should be passed, where possible, to the level of communities and individuals but made little mention of the role that the intermediate level of local government would have to play (2010b: 73):

> Our plans to reform public services, mend our broken society, and rebuild trust in politics are all part of our Big Society agenda. These plans involve redistributing power from the state to society; from the centre to local communities, giving people the opportunity to take more control over their lives.
>
> (Conservative Party, 2010b: 37)

The Conservative Party campaign seemed to me to be indicative of a preference to bypass local government where at all possible. My interpretation was consistent with Lowndes and Pratchett's (2012: 35) perception as they noted this preference and contrasted it with the preference of the Liberal Democrats in relation to local governance:

> One clear difference between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats is their sense of the 'essence of localism'. Where Conservative ministers are willing to sidestep local councils as they devolve down to communities or other bodies … the Liberal Democrats see strengthening local democracy as freeing local councils from central government control.

As it was, the Conservative Party seemed to get their way over the Liberal Democrats and local government were consistently suppressed in documents and speeches relating to the Big Society in favour of local communities and local people; it was they rather than their local representatives and local authorities who it seems that the Conservative Party wanted to pass power to. And yet, as much academic literature has acknowledged and impressed and as I have argued throughout this thesis, local government must have and indeed do have a vitally important role to play in any such decentralisation of power or in any potential realisation of the imagined Big Society. In an argument particularly pertinent to this point, Hunter (2011: 14) acknowledged the paradoxical nature of the relationship between the Big Society and local government but maintained that:

> …for the Big Society to prosper the role of government is critical. The most ardent enthusiasts in the third sector acknowledge that without government support at local and national levels, their future would be a precarious one and many would not survive.

My own argument is congruent with Lowndes and Pratchett's (2012) insistence of the importance of local government in relation to the Big Society and associated Localism Act (2011) in their article which explores the various initiatives affecting local governance that have emerged from the coalition government following their formation in May 2010. They discuss the arguable dependency of the development of a Big Society on local councils and specifically consider how the coalition's 'distrust of government' is likely to constrain the potential realisation of the Big

Society: 'cutting budgets to local councils, and phasing out local partnerships, is likely to handicap rather than liberate community activism and self-help'. Ultimately, Lowndes and Pratchett (2012: 38) forecast a rather gloomy outlook for localism:

> As the impact of the cuts (along with the wider costs of recession) undermine prospects for all but the most affluent communities, it seems probable that localism will leave the great majority of councils 'not waving but drowning' (Smith 1957).

As much of the Localism Act (2011) focuses on the provision of 'new freedoms and flexibility for local government' (DCLG, 2011: 4) in relation to the coalition's attempt to shift power from central government to local communities, so local government authorities must be considered a mediating level of vital importance to the potential realisation of the Big Society. Whilst Lowndes and Pratchett predict a gloomy and ultimately unsuccessful future for localism and local councils, their prediction is based not on empirical evidence at that level but on ideological, theoretical and contextual analyses.

My own research provides that empirical basis for interpretation, effectively anticipating Buser's (2013) call for research in this field. Concluding an article which explores some of the debates around the Big Society and the development of democratic narratives relating to local government, Buser (2013: 15) suggests a research agenda 'to potentially guide or inform research and analysis of contemporary issues of governance and democracy in England'. Buser considers that the exploration of 'the shifting relationships between individuals, neighbourhoods or communities and the state' and the consideration of 'evolving roles and expectations of participation, civic engagement and democracy in England' should be at the centre of this research agenda. More specifically still, Buser (2013: 16) states that 'area-based or case studies would be particularly valuable in order to consider specific local government responses to localism and engagement' and discusses how studies of both 'vanguard' councils and councils 'not obviously reflected within the government's localism agenda' could contribute equally to the localism and Big Society debates. These are debates which this thesis seeks to contribute to by developing what Buser (ibid) called for (albeit that my research anticipated rather than responded to this call): an empirically based critique of the Big Society in its own terms at the level of a local government authority.

7.2.   Local Government and ~~the Big Society~~ Localism

The Big Society is a society with much higher levels of personal, professional, civic and corporate responsibility; a society where people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their communities; a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control.

(Conservative Party, 2010a: 1)

> We don't use the term Big Society…we don't like it, we think it's a cliché, we don't understand what it really means… we'd much rather get away from that political mantra of whatever the Big Society is to talk about localism
>
> (Councillor Smith, Cambridgeshire County Council)

The recontextualisations and representations of discourses relating to the Big Society that I identified and interpreted in my research and presented in the previous chapter provide some vital empirical evidence to underpin many academic discussions regarding a potential definition for the Big Society. Clarke and Cochrane (2013: 11) assert that the meaning of localism in political discourse 'is often purposefully vague and imprecise' and there is much literature which discusses the Big Society as a rhetorical policy idea that requires more concrete definition and committed implementation if it were to have any sort of effect on society (e.g. Alcock, 2010; Kisby, 2010; Stott, 2011; Taylor, 2011; Albrow, 2012; Szreter & Ishkanian, 2012). The qualities of 'slipperiness and vagueness' that Hunter (2011: 13) attributes to the Big Society are qualities borne out in local government actors' representations of the same policy initiative in each of the case studies that feature in my research.

In a concluding chapter summarising debates around the Big Society and related social policy issues, Lewis (2012: 186) argues that the Big Society is doomed to fail:

> While we might argue from an ethnographic perspective that the Big Society is a reasonably successful mobilising metaphor for policy, it does not provide

the necessary coherence to drive a programme of change. Nor, for the same reasons, does it provide a clear rallying point for critical opposition. As a policy idea, the Big Society is beginning to fragment in more ways than it coheres.

The argument is particularly useful in illustrating the relation that the empirical research I present in this thesis has to the literature relating specifically to the Big Society. The initial response to the Big Society at Cambridgeshire County Council – one of excitement and anticipation for creative and new ways of working – upholds Lewis' (2012:186) argument that 'from an ethnographic perspective … the Big Society is a reasonably successful mobilising metaphor for policy'. In a similar way to this but in an altogether different policy context - New Labour's 'enhanced policy focus on public participation' (Newman et al., 2004: 208) as compared to the coalition government's Big Society – Newman et al. (2004: 208) report how some of the participants from a study undertaken within the ESRC's Democracy and Participation Programme, including local councillors, viewed 'government policy as a positive catalyst for change', whilst others 'spoke of this as creating a climate of compulsion that sometimes had perverse consequences in terms of producing short-term and inappropriate strategies for engaging the public'. The continuing recurrence of discourses evident in meetings observed and interviews undertaken during Cambridgeshire County Council's development of localism that represent confusion and a lack of understanding evidences Lewis' (2012: 186) further claim that 'it does not provide the necessary coherence to drive a programme of change'. Lewis' final point that 'the Big Society is beginning to fragment in more ways than it coheres' is identifiable in different ways in each of my case studies: through the eventual disbandment of the Localism and Community Engagement Board at Cambridgeshire County Council shortly after I finished my year long period of data generation; through the refusal of the County Council to devolve decisions down to the level of Area Committees in the second embedded case study; and through the assertion that it would be almost impossible to replicate the efforts put into the Community Led Planning pilot in all two hundred and fifty or so villages across Cambridgeshire.

In the next four subsections of this chapter I will address in turn each of the incompatibilities between the imagined Big Society and local 'realities' in Cambridgeshire that I established in the previous chapter and that I argue resulted

in the failure to realise the imagined Big Society in Cambridgeshire. In each case I will discuss the incompatibility in relation to relevant literature.

7.2.1. Local Government: More Complex than First Imagined

This sub-section relates to the first key incompatibility that I argue has contributed to the failure to realise the imagined Big Society in Cambridgeshire: the differences that are evident between the simply represented local government in the imagined Big Society and the complexities of local government in Cambridgeshire. Local government were represented collectively in the imagined Big Society as a mediating force through which devolved power needed to be passed on its way to local communities and people. Yet in Cambridgeshire representations were of officers, members, politics, budgets, meetings, and much more. These representations depict an organisation infinitely more complex and disruptive to decentralisation and devolvement than the one imagined in the Big Society.

The complex realities of local government have been the subject of much research and academic literature (e.g. Stoker, 1991; Lowndes, 1996; Stewart 2000; Leach and Percy-Smith, 2001; Pratchett, 2004; Pratchett and Leach, 2004; Stoker, 2004; Chandler, 2007; Lowndes and Sullivan, 2008; Wilson and Game, 2011). The publication in 2011 of Wilson and Game's fifth edition of 'Local Government in the United Kingdom' is itself testament to this complexity and the existence of local government in a 'state of apparently perpetual motion' (Wilson and Game, 2011: 15) which has warranted the re-writing and re-publishing of this book five times in the last twenty years. The very structuring of Wilson and Game's (2011) text hints at the complexity of local government as the authors identify a set of characteristics that they argue serves as a definition for local government in the UK and which 'serves as a reference point' for chapters throughout the book:

> Local government is a form of geographical and political decentralisation, in which directly elected councils, created by and subordinate to Parliament, have partial autonomy to provide a wide variety of services through various direct and indirect means, funded in part by local taxation.
> (Wilson and Game, 2011: 37).

Of course my research, having been carried out in Cambridgeshire and specifically with Cambridgeshire County Council, can in no way claim to be generalisable to the whole of local government in the UK and in this respect differs immeasurably from some of the arguments and debates that can be found in Wilson and Game's book which attend to collective characteristics of local government. Nonetheless the text acknowledges overtly and often that councils 'may, with justification, feel hemmed in by central government dictates and directives, but they have by no means been robbed of all initiative and individuality' (Wilson and Game, 2011: 24). It is this undoubted and undoubtedly important individuality of local councils that my research can in some ways claim to attest and augment. Indeed despite being arguably a response to the Big Society, actors across each of the three case studies in Cambridgeshire consistently represented localism or one or the other of the pilot projects as an individually and locally defined policy, often with little direct relevance to or little inspiration being taken from national policy. In this respect, localism in Cambridgeshire is surely a worthy addition to the examples cited by Wilson and Game which range 'from the momentous and contentious to the almost quirky' but all of which 'have one thing in common':

> They are all examples of local councils deciding freely to do something differently from how it was being done before, different from what other councils are doing, and not merely in response to some central demand or requirement.
> (Wilson and Game, 2011: 24)

Whilst I argue that the development of localism by Cambridgeshire County Council could to some extent be considered as evidence of the individuality of local authorities, it is also worth considering the complexities and individualities that exist within the council. Whilst localism in Cambridgeshire was represented as a collective policy, evidenced particularly by the unusually large and diverse membership of the Localism and Community Engagement Board at the County Council prior to it being slimmed down in early 2012, in reality it was a small number of officers at the discretion and behest of a small number of executive members who took a small number of decisions which would prove influential to a policy whose remit extended to impact upon, potentially at least, all 612,590 residents of Cambridgeshire (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2012: 4). As I identified in the previous chapter, the roles of Council members and Council officers were overtly represented in each of my case studies; specifically the influential roles that certain

Council members played in the development of the policy. The roles of local councillors have been the subject of much academic literature (e.g. Lee, 1963; Budge et al., 1972; Corina, 1974; Newton, 1976; Jennings, 1982; Gyford, 1984) and, as Buser (2013: 8) notes, aspects of the Localism Act were welcomed as 'a strengthening of the ability of councillors to work on behalf of their constituencies'. But despite this the role of local councillors was not represented in central government documents or speeches relating to the imagined Big Society.

In a discussion of what or who constitutes a local councillor, Wilson and Game (2011: 263-266) distinguish three prominent attributes of all local councillors no matter their political allegiances, gender, age, employment status or educational background. They are (1) at least nominally elected; (2) representative of specific geographical localities; and (3) politicians. The point of this discussion is quite simply that there is no such thing as a typical councillor or indeed a typical councillor's job. Despite the roles of local councillors being underrepresented and seemingly simplified in discourses relating to the imagined Big Society, the understanding that 'different councillors will have their differing interests, motivations, skills, aptitudes and opportunities, and they will at least endeavour to spend their inevitably limited time in differing ways' (Wilson and Game, 2011: 272) means that local councillors will invariably 'buy into' localism (the Big Society) to differing extents which, given that they 'have the responsibility for giving strategic direction to the authority and for determining its policy priorities' is likely to have detrimental effects on the progress of policy development. Indeed this was shown to be the case in the development of localism at Cambridgeshire County Council and thus my research can be seen as further substantiating this particular body of literature. The leader's enthusiasm for localism for instance was considered to be a driving force behind the County's commitment to it, whilst gaining and securing the 'buy in' of members both initially and as the policy development progressed, was often a topic for discussion amongst officers at meetings relevant to the development of localism and a concern spoken about in interviews on many occasions.

One particular actor who showed enthusiasm and 'buy in' to localism in Cambridgeshire and who also played a major role in the Community Led Planning pilot was Councillor Stone. Councillor Stone served as a local councillor on more than one tier of local government; he was the Chair of the pilot village's Parish Council as well as a councillor at both a District and a County Council level. The

perspective that occupying such a multitude of seats gave this particular Councillor was considered to be beneficial to his parish, particularly in securing the village's involvement in one of the pilot projects. In this way it is testament to the importance of individual buy in for communities to act successfully within localism. However it also highlights the scarcity of willing volunteers to stand for election as a local councillor at increasingly local levels (Wilson and Game, 2011: 287-8).

The same cannot be said of local councils' un-elected workforces. In 2009 – 2010 county councils each employed an average of twenty four thousand staff meaning that, assuming a person knows twenty employed adults, 'the chances are that one or more of them will work full-time or part-time for a council' (Wilson and Game, 2011: 289-292). Several County and District Council officers were represented as key actors in the development of localism or of one or other of the pilot projects which served as case studies for the research underpinning this thesis. Although not elected, senior managers – it was a senior manager who oversaw the development of localism at Cambridgeshire County Council – nonetheless exercise professional influence, support, advise and monitor politicians, represent the authority's interests externally, and manage staff and resources within the authority (Wilson and Game, 2011: 300). This being the case and being borne out in my research, I surmised that the relationship between officers and locally elected members must be considered vital to the potential success of localism in Cambridgeshire.

This relationship between officers and councillors in the process of policy making at a local government level has been widely addressed in academic literature, as has the policy making process more generally (e.g. Dorey, 2005; Bochel and Duncan, 2007; Hill, 2009; Wilson and Game, 2011). A discussion useful to my thesis and the discussion that I am developing in this subsection can be found in Wilson and Game's (2011: 350) text, particularly in its consideration of 'additional influences on policy-making' which they summarise by stating that:

> Local authorities are political institutions, in both the 'big P' and 'little p' – the partisan and the broader sense of the word. They incorporate a whole range of additional actors and influences that may impinge on policy-making, depending on an authority's traditions, culture, leadership, political balance and so on. The policy process in the real world is complex and changeable. It can be regarded as a series of shifting alliances, forming and re-forming over time and from issue to issue.

In the development of localism at Cambridgeshire County Council, whether or not it really was a policy response to the Big Society, there existed these 'additional actors and influences' that impacted on and influenced the policy development process over the course of the year in which I carried out the fieldwork for my research. Local government may have been imagined to be a collective, simplified and compliant tier of government through which power would necessarily pass on its way to local communities and people, but this representation grossly underestimated the realities of local government in Cambridgeshire in terms of actors, processes, politics and much more that I identified through analysis and interpretation of the data that I generated and have subsequently presented in this thesis.

7.2.2. A Liberated Local Government?

> If there is such a thing as Cameronism, it is giving power away
> (The Economist, 2009: 39)

This sub-section relates to the second key incompatibility that I argue has contributed to the failure to realise the imagined Big Society in Cambridgeshire: the imagined freedoms for local government set out in the 2010 Spending Review and continually reinforced in documents and speeches relating to the coalition government's decentralisation rhetoric versus the control exerted over local government from central government on occasion during the development of localism at Cambridgeshire County Council.

In both interviews and observations with participants involved in the development of localism at Cambridgeshire County Council representations of central government were rare. Central government's presence could be perceived through representations of the Big Society but there were few examples of overt government representation. Therefore a particularly important finding to come from my research is that of the representation of central government as contradictory by one Councillor at the County Council; they were perceived to be advocating localism and decentralisation on the one hand, whilst dictating to the local authority what they could and could not do in relation to several local issues on the other. This apparent contradiction is in stark contrast to the assertion of new 'freedoms and flexibilities'

for local government that Eric Pickles promised in a letter addressed to the Leaders of Local Authorities in England in 2010. In the letter Pickles set out what the Spending Review of 2010 would mean for local authorities. He stated that the Review would give 'significant new powers' to local government:

> Councils have long argued that with more freedom and flexibility, they would be much better equipped to become more efficient and effective in delivering local public services. This settlement delivers that freedom and flexibility, as part of the new Government's decentralisation agenda.
> (Pickles, 2010: 1)

Lowndes and Pratchett (2012:30) agreed that 'a key principle of the Big Society agenda is the transfer of power from central to local government' and argue that 'at face value [the associated] reforms promise to renew local democracy by making local authorities and other bodies more accountable and responsive to the communities that they serve' (2012: 28). However, the discourses of contradiction that I identified in interviews and observations conducted during this research are more consistent with the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Select Committee's assertion in 2009 that England is 'one of the developed world's most centralised democracies' (House of Commons, 2009: para. 9). The Select Committee concluded that three deviations from the European norm – (1) constitutional protection; (2); central government intervention; (3) financial autonomy – serve to 'tilt the balance of power towards the centre' (ibid, para. 38).

As Wilson and Game (2011: 168) point out, 'legislation is the most direct instrument of central control of local authorities' and indeed in the coalition government's Queen's Speech of May 2010 'at least half of the 22 Bills [had] direct implications for local government' (ibid). The possible irony of this at a time when the same coalition government were announcing the Big Society as the answer to the problems of 'broken' Britain and the associated Localism Bill as a flagship policy with its variety of proposed legislation designed to apparently '[loosen] central control rather than [tighten] it' is not lost on the authors (ibid). Throughout the rest of the chapter the authors present and discuss a wide range of powers and influences that central government can and do bring to bear on local government authorities, including but not limited to: statutory instruments 'which can amend or even repeal primary legislation' (2011: 171); circulars which contain 'advice and guidance on how [local councils] should exercise their various responsibilities' (2011: 172); 'specific powers

of ministerial intervention' (2011: 176); any number of means of monitoring and inspecting local councils; and, of course, finance.

In an article which focuses on the Localism Act of 2011 to consider the implications of localism 'for the scope, organisation and mobilisation of economic development interventions' (Bentley and Pugalis, 2013: 257), the authors ask 'are the shackles off for local authorities'? They consider that the General Power of Competence that was afforded to local government via the Localism Act (2011) would suggest that the shackles are indeed off:

> Instead of being permitted to act only where there is a duty or power to do so, lest otherwise they would be acting ultra vires, local authorities are freed to do anything.
> (Bentley and Pugalis, 2013: 263)

The proviso is only that they do not break other laws (DCLG, 2011: 7). Despite these seemingly enabling and shackle releasing powers however, Bentley and Pugalis (2013: 270) note in their concluding remarks that initial analysis:

> …highlights the contradiction between a new grammar of localism and the insidious centralist tendencies; the uneasy relationship between centralised powers, conditional decentralisation and a fragmented localism.

In the coalition government's Programme for Government document (Cabinet Office, 2010c) policy and legislative plans for local government were set out:

> The government believes that it is time for a fundamental shift of power from Westminster to people. We will promote decentralisation and democratic engagement, and we will end the era of top-down government by giving new powers to local councils, communities, neighbourhoods and individuals.

Pickles, during the Queen's Speech forum on 10th June 2010, spoke about 'taking power and pushing it as far away from Whitehall as possible'. These policy and legislative intentions combined with an impassioned message about the decentralisation of power from Whitehall to far more localised levels depicts local government as one beneficiary of power but certainly not as the only beneficiary and perhaps not even as the main beneficiary. This is not surprising and findings

from this research regarding the representation of local government in coalition party documents and speeches relating to the Big Society bear out this assertion. As Wilson and Game (2011: 398) surmise, 'pushing power 'as far away from Whitehall as possible' did not necessarily mean to local councils. They could be part of the control framework too, and, if necessary, they had to be bypassed.' It is not local government but communities and people – 'the man and woman on the street' – who are represented as beneficiaries of power through the coalition government's decentralisation agenda in relation to the Big Society. In my research it is not Cambridgeshire County Council who feel empowered by central government; actors are very aware that the discourse is one of the decentralisation of power beyond local government to communities and local people. This is perhaps most clearly evident in Cambridgeshire County Council's commitment set out in their Integrated Plan of 2011-2012 to 'be a genuinely local council'; handing 'power for decision making, budgets and service provision to the most local level possible'.

A specific example in my research of the representation of central government control being exercised over local government was evident in an interview with one of the County Councillors during a discussion of what he called the 'confusion creeping in now on messages from government on localism':

> so for example, on the one hand the government is promoting localism and on the other hand we have Eric Pickles, Secretary of State, telling district councils how often to empty their bins. We've also got Eric Pickles and others incredibly incensed that we as a local council have chosen to put up our council tax
> (Councillor Smith, Cambridgeshire County Council)

Wilson and Game (2011: 397) discuss this very issue themselves, depicting Pickles as 'telling local authorities how to organise their refuse collection by ordering the withdrawal of Audit Commission guidance encouraging fortnightly collections in the interests of recycling.' Despite claiming that the guidance had been a 'diktat imposed from the centre' and thus presumably depicting himself as some sort of revolutionary for overturning it, his actions were nothing short of dictatorial themselves. What my study adds to this debate is empirical evidence at the level of a local government authority to underpin the existing discussions published in relevant literature such as this.

7.2.3. Community Capacity and Individual Engagement: Unrealistic Expectations?

This sub-section relates to the third key incompatibility that I argue has contributed to the failure to realise the imagined Big Society in Cambridgeshire: the unrealistic expectations represented by the coalition government of the capacity and desire of people and communities to take on the roles imagined for them within the Big Society.

Communities and people were represented consistently by the coalition government as the intended beneficiaries of power as part of central government's decentralisation agenda; it is imagined that people and communities will share the balance of power and responsibility more equally with the state. Communities are also imagined to be self-sufficient and cooperative within the Big Society whilst people are imagined to be active, engaged with their communities, and inclined to want to help them if given the opportunity to do so. However, during my research in Cambridgeshire these imaginaries simply were not borne out. Some community level activity was already in place when my fieldwork began but certainly any increase in that level of engagement and participation leading towards a cooperative or partnership approach to service delivery, amongst other things, was not evident in any of the case studies. Furthermore, the coalition government represent communities collectively and as identifiable and specifiable within the imagined Big Society; no differences are perceived to exist between one community and another. In my research however distinctions *were* made between different communities; specifically and most often those that were considered active and able and those that were considered to be lacking in social capital or disadvantaged in some way. Communities in Cambridgeshire were represented as differing in terms of capacity and appetite for localism; they had differing needs and could not be considered collectively.

I identified through my research that neither in central government's representations of communities in the imagined Big Society nor in Cambridgeshire County Council's representations of their own specific local communities during the development of localism was the meaning of community addressed. Whilst in this thesis I cannot engage with a full discussion of the differing concepts of community as they are represented in differing policies and political debates, I will nevertheless endeavour to briefly situate this discussion in relation to some of the relevant literature on the

subject. In the 2003 text 'Public Policy in the Community' Taylor suggests that the 'set of ideas' associated with community 'were used so freely and imprecisely by their advocates that they ran the risk of becoming almost meaningless' (2003: 34). Whilst Hillery (1955) advanced nearly one hundred definitions of community, Taylor (2003: 34) identifies 'at least three general senses in which 'community' is used:

1. Descriptive:
   a) A group or network of people who share something in common or interact with each other;
2. Normative:
   a) Community as a place where solidarity, participation and coherence are found;
3. Instrumental:
   a) Community as an agent acting to maintain or change its circumstances;
   b) The location or orientation of services and policy interventions.

Furthermore, in specific relation to the concept of community as it is used in politics and policy making, Taylor (2003: 37-38) argues that:

> Politicians and policy makers – in seeking ways to work with a particular set of people identified as living in the same place or having characteristics in common – tend to confuse descriptive and normative meanings of community. They assume that common location or interests bring with them social and moral cohesion, a sense of security, and mutual trust. But they also tend to go a step further and assume that norms will be turned into action: that is, that community can be turned into agency, with people caring for each other, getting involved in collective enterprises and activities, and acting together to change their circumstances.

If this sounds remarkably similar to David Cameron's representation of communities within the Big Society then I argue that is because it *is* remarkably similar:

> We want society – the families, networks, neighbourhoods and communities that form the fabric of so much of our everyday lives – to be bigger and stronger than ever before. Only when people and communities are given more power and take more responsibility can we achieve fairness and opportunity for all.

(Cabinet Office, 2010a: 1)

David Cameron was attempting to use the idea of community to lend credence and credibility to the Big Society, to combat so-called 'broken Britain' by 'importing moral cohesion' (Taylor, 2003: 49) and to aid in the decentralisation agenda as a response to New Labour's creation of a 'big state'.

On the relationships between communities and their local government authorities Clarke and Stewart (1991: 29) comment that 'a local authority has the capacity to shape an area, to preserve it, to develop it, to change it, and in doing so to give it a new identity'. Wilson and Game (2011: 42) make a similar argument in specific relation to local government and the difference and diversity of communities:

> A sense of place and past implies distinctiveness: of an area's unique geography, history, economy, social and political culture, and of its consequently distinctive preferences and priorities. It is the recognition that even local authorities of the same type, with identical statutory powers and responsibilities, can be utterly different from each other and have different governmental needs.

The findings of my research in which local government and third sector actors distinguish between the capacity and engagement of different communities throughout the county of Cambridgeshire serve to corroborate this implication of distinctiveness. If the coalition government are to empower not local authorities but communities and local people then the 'different governmental needs' of different local authorities must surely become even more pronounced as they try to respond effectively to the differing needs and capacities of their different communities. In relation to the differences and diversity of communities, Lowndes and Pratchett (2012: 36) argue that it is likely that:

> …not all communities will be able to cope with the cuts in public spending and not all will be able to respond successfully to the 'opportunities' which the Big Society supposedly presents.

Certainly in my research one distinctive finding was that many participants on many occasions expressed their concern regarding the potential for localism to increase

any existing inequalities between different communities in Cambridgeshire. Kisby (2010: 488) pre-empted this finding with an expression of his own concern:

> Many middle-class, advantaged communities with high levels of trust and strong networks or 'social capital' may well be in a position to act to further their interests and, if so inclined, engage in philanthropy, but what about members of less advantaged and less well-networked communities? Far from being a liberating ideal for all, in Cameron's 'big society' members of minority and vulnerable groups potentially may be even more disadvantaged and marginalised than they are already if they are unable to defend and promote their interests and if no-one else acts on their behalf to do so.

Corbett and Walker (2013: 11-12) consider this issue in terms of the potential creation of a 'two-speed big society' (Ellison, 2011: 59-60) as a result of the combination of the influences of Red Toryism and libertarian paternalism on the Big Society, surmising that they 'may induce yet more fragmentation and dislocation within British society as even minimal sources of financial support for local community action are removed'. They argue that 'this concern is heightened by the neo-liberal approach to public spending, which the government is extending much further into the public sector than its predecessors dared to do, under the guise of empowering people' (ibid).

On the issue of community engagement and participation more generally I refer initially to the Conservative Party manifesto which was titled an 'Invitation to Join the Government of Britain' (Conservative Party, 2010b). As McCabe (2010:11) notes, this 'begs the question of whether citizens and communities have sufficient trust in traditional political systems to engage in those formal democratic processes' where localism and the Big Society are assumed to be inclusive of such formal democratic processes. Although scarce there are some examples in my research of when local government authorities have successfully mobilised their residents into civic action. This occurs most often, according to my interviewees and borne out in observations, when people have something, usually one particular local issue, about which they are angry or passionate or both. In these instances people are represented as having been – and indeed do seem to be - more likely to attend meetings or other such forums in order to voice their opinions and concerns. McCabe (2010: 11), broadly speaking, concurs:

> Where Government (both national and local) has actually been extremely successful in galvanising community action is when it has angered people.

This suggests that, to some extent, government authorities – including Cambridgeshire County Council and the District and the Parish Councils involved in my research study - do understand what galvanises people and communities to act. However, there is literature to suggest that this is not always the case, especially at the level of central government. McCabe (2010) for example, discusses the potential role that 'below the radar' groups and activities will play in the Big Society, stating that government and policy makers haven't really understood what motivates communities to act. Similarly, in an article for the New Economics Foundation, Coote (2010:3) describes the Big Society as perhaps being:

> …at odds with the character and purpose of many groups and organisations. People usually choose to participate in community activities when they find them optional, small-scale, convivial and life-enhancing, but many of the Government's plans for supporting civil society are conditional, formalised, complicated and hard graft.

My research provides empirical evidence for this argument at a local level. In my interviews with Emily, the third sector organisation actor who was heavily involved with the Community Led Planning pilot, she was often sceptical about the desires of people and communities to take on the sorts of activities and responsibilities that are imagined within the Big Society. Emily described councils as being responsible for providing services and doing things that other people simply do not want to do, for example collecting their own rubbish or looking after their own old people. At events that I observed during the Community Led Planning pilot this representation was consolidated as attendance numbers remained disappointingly low throughout.

Many academics, including Parvin (2009: 355) agree that ideas of self-determination are not necessarily the most appropriate for fixing 'broken' Britain or renewing democracy: 'liberal democratic principles may not always be best served by devolving decision making power down to local communities'. In one of my interviews with the senior officer overseeing the development of localism in Cambridgeshire this very issue was discussed, providing empirical evidence to underpin the existing literature. John argued that even those communities and

people who were engaged with localism and had the capacity to take advantage of it were not necessarily the best people to make decisions for their localities:

> It's about people being able to decide what they want. The issue is that might actually mean poorer outcomes for people. How can I put it? If you give a budget to the people of [town name] and they're told here's your money, spend it on what you like, they could decide we're going to spend … what we actually want is a really good system for young people and so we're not going to spend anything on roads. So invariably the outcomes for roads will be poor.

People are represented here as not having the ability to think strategically and for the benefit of all. The outcomes of localism are perceived as being potentially unsatisfactory for communities if they are allowed to make decisions for themselves as the government imagine them to do.

Other research which critiques the Big Society in terms of its supposed empowerment of communities and localities includes Corbett and Walker's 2013 article. In the article they are fairly scathing of the 'Big Society' as they subject it to critical scrutiny:

> …the big society urges the retreat of the state from local community life, rather than recognising the potential for the democratic reform of state institutions in partnership with the people as equals. Without embedding these fundamental structural aspects in the notion of empowering people, the big society promises only a further increase in social and economic inequalities through the increased commodification of public life, the shrinking of the state and the enhanced dominance of the market.

This discussion infers heavily that the 'age of austerity' must be considered a detrimental factor to any potentially successful realisation of the Big Society, particularly in relation to communities and local people. The 'age of austerity' represents the fourth and final key incompatibility that I have identified through my research and therefore constitutes the main point of discussion in the next sub-section of this chapter.

7.2.4. The Big Society in an Age of Austerity: Too Much to Ask?

This sub-section relates to the fourth and final key incompatibility that I argue has contributed to the failure to realise the imagined Big Society in Cambridgeshire: the development of localism in an 'age of austerity'.

As a passive beneficiary of the austerity measures and budget cuts, Cambridgeshire County Council's biggest priority was depicted as saving money. The Council needed to save fifty million pounds in 2011-2012 and a further thirty six million pounds in 2012-13; total required savings were estimated to be £160 million between 2011 and 2016 (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2011a). In this respect, localism was not, and indeed could not, be considered a priority. These financial reasons were further represented in specific relation to communities: as constraining the Council's ability to work to build community capacity in order to enable communities to take up opportunities within localism. I also identified a concern at the County Council during the development of localism about the level of resources required for the policy to succeed, with officers often insistent that extra resources were a necessity. With localism unable to be prioritised over budget cuts however, these resources were never made available.

As I discussed in Chapter Two, Sir Malcolm Rifkind MP (2011: viii) cited the economic climate - the 'age of austerity' - as being central to the formation of the coalition government:

> …one cannot understand the coalition government, or its policy platform, without grasping the scale of the economic challenge. The deficit it now seeks to close is not only the Coalition Government's number one priority, but also its very reason for being.

Assuming that this is the case the economic climate must therefore be considered central to any possible realisation of the imagined Big Society. This is a consideration that my research bears out at every tier of local government. It is also a consideration that is borne out heavily in much of the literature relating to the Big Society. Lewis (2012: 187) for instance, considers that perhaps the Big Society and the success of localism in this context of austerity and budget cuts is too resource intensive to be successful:

The attempt to turn the Big Society idea into a viable policy programme is heavily – perhaps fatally – compromised by its timing. The unprecedented level of cuts to public spending in the UK means that whatever merits the basic constellation of ideas that make up the Big Society may possess … seem destined to become debased by what appears to be the political opportunism at its core. The reality is that the public investment that would necessarily underpin a major shift towards, say, the localism agenda, will not be made available.

This was certainly the experience of Cambridgeshire County Council during the development of localism that I observed as part of my fieldwork between 2011 and 2012.

The supposed mitigation of the impact of the spending cuts imposed on local government via the Emergency Budget and Spending Review of 2010 was said to exist in the coalition government's 'commitment to liberalisation and decentralisation in relation to communities' (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012: 25). In my research and throughout the development of localism in Cambridgeshire however, this supposed mitigation was seldom realised. Instead one of the overwhelming concerns and most constraining factors seemed to be the budget cuts enforced on local government and the savings that the Council were required to make. This finding evidences Lewis' (2012:190) description of the second of three 'main sets of contradictions [that] have contributed to the flawed idea of the Big Society':

…the Big Society idea in the UK is inextricably bound up with the practical contingencies of public expenditure cuts, whether one believes this to be the result of either design or bad timing.

Despite the coalition government having apparently committed to decentralise power, the reality is that in 2011-12 central government continued to control 75% of local government finance (Wilson and Game, 2011: 237) and Cambridgeshire County Council needed therefore to find ways to deal with the cuts that they were being forced to make - cuts which I interpreted as being hugely detrimental to any potentially successful realisation of the Big Society in Cambridgeshire. With so much literature citing the budget cuts and so-called 'age of austerity' as a factor constraining any possible realisation of the imagined Big Society (e.g. Alcock, 2010; Coote, 2010; Kisby, 2010; Wells et al., 2011; Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012; Bentley

and Pugalis, 2013; Buser, 2013; Corbett and Walker, 2013) it is impossible to overlook in my own study which develops a critique of the Big Society in its own terms. For these reasons, I argue that this fourth incompatibility is perhaps the most obvious and also the most debilitating in terms of any potentially successful realisation of the imagined Big Society.

7.3.   Discourse and the Big Society

In this third section I will discuss some of the relevant theoretical and methodological issues relating to my research study and in relation to literature which addresses or draws on similar methodologies or concepts. I will focus particularly on discourse as an analytical concept and my use of a CDA methodology, drawing specifically on elements of Fairclough's (2001; 2003; 2010) dialectical relational approach and Wodak's (1996; 2001) discourse-historical approach in combination (Wodak and Fairclough 2010). Before that however, I will focus very briefly on the interpretive approach that I have taken to this research.

The strength of an interpretive methodology was recognised in an article published in 2013 which called for research to be undertaken at a local level in relation to governance, local democracy and the Big Society and localism:

> I argue that interpretive research approaches that can illuminate the implications of the Big Society for democracy and civil society would be immensely valuable.
> (Buser, 2013: 16)

As I have already noted earlier in this chapter, my own research anticipated this call for much needed empirical research. This specific reference to the interpretive approach I chose to use serves only to further illustrate the contribution that I seek to make to the relevant fields of literature.

Interpretive research has been carried out in relation to British politics focusing on a range of issues including but not limited to: the study of British governance (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003); local government traditions (Orr and Vince, 2009); community leadership (Sullivan, 2007); and democratic governance (Bevir, 2010). As Bevir and

Rhodes (2003: 130) describe, all 'interpretive approaches to political studies focus on meanings that shape actions and institutions and the ways in which they do so'. For this research I have sought to draw on a similar interpretive approach in order to understand meanings not just as 'representations of people's beliefs and sentiments about political phenomena' but as in some way fashioning these phenomena (Wagenaar, 2011: 3). In these ways I seek, through the research that I have presented in this thesis, to do what Buser (2013: 16) called for: to 'illuminate the implications of the Big Society for democracy and civil society'.

7.3.1. Discourse: A Necessarily Partial Consideration

Given that policies, in getting people to do things, need to give information about who needs to do what, how it needs to be done, and why it needs to be done (Muntigl, 2000: 146), it follows that both the imagined Big Society and Cambridgeshire County Council's development of localism must represent the actors and actions central to their social practices. I have therefore followed Fairclough (2003) and van Leeuwen (1995; 1996; 2008) in analysing the categories of discourses as social actors and actions. These analytic categories have been combined with an analysis of context, following Wodak's DHA approach to CDA (Wodak, 1996; 2001; Reisigl and Wodak, 2009). This specific analytical methodology was part of a combined discourse-relational / discourse-historical approach to CDA (Wodak and Fairclough, 2010).

The critical realist ontology that underpins my research necessitates an understanding that social actors' representations of the imagined Big Society and subsequently of localism at Cambridgeshire County Council are both fallible and questionable. Indeed my own interpretations and subsequent representations of discourses and recontextualisations analysed within this study must also be considered in this light in an attempt to avoid 'the 'epistemic fallacy' of confusing the nature of reality with [my] knowledge of reality' (Fairclough, 2010: 355). Furthermore, in developing interpretive explanations of my data I have attempted to 'capture the conceptual distinctions and intentions of the agents involved' (Fay, 1996: 114) in generating that data. This is not to say that my analysis and subsequent interpretations are invalid; merely that they are just that – interpretations. As Fairclough explains, 'the only basis for claiming superiority [of

this critical discourse over the discourse which its critique is partly a critique of] is providing explanations which have greater explanatory power' (Fairclough, 2010: 8).

The analytic focus on discourses as one element of discourse which is, itself, one element of social life means that any interpretations that I have developed in this thesis are not only fallible but necessarily partial:

> Different discourses are different perspectives on the world, and they are associated with the different relations people have to the world, which in turn depends on their positions in the world, their social and personal identities, and the social relationships in which they stand to other people.
> (Fairclough, 2003: 124)

Despite and perhaps also because of the partial perspective that my chosen approach necessitates, the development of a carefully considered CDA methodology has offered 'a systematic procedure for analyzing texts as windows upon (the struggle between) ideologies and social practices' (Wagenaar, 2011: 158). The strength of the approach lies in my acknowledgement of and engagement with my own reflexivity and the transparent detailing of the process that I have undertaken in order to arrive at the representations and interpretations that I have presented and explored throughout this thesis.

7.3.2. Recontextualising the Big Society

The methodology that I applied in my research drew on and combined aspects of Fairclough's (2001; 2003; 2010) dialectical relational approach to CDA with aspects of Wodak's (1996; 2001; 2009) discourse historical approach to CDA. This methodological approach was presented and discussed in an article published by Wodak and Fairclough in 2010. The article explores 'in some detail at the European Union scale, processes and relationships of recontextualisation between higher education and other EU policy fields' as the authors 'trace the implementation of the Bologna Process in two EU member states, Austria and Romania' through presentation and discussion of 'a detailed discourse analytic study of recontextualisation processes of policy documents' (2010: 19). Whilst the levels of government are obviously on a different scale and the 'localised' contexts in which recontextualisations occur are obviously local on a country rather than a county

scale, the principal objective of interpreting and tracking recontextualisations of discourses representing one central policy in the context of one or more localities is undoubtedly comparable to my own research.

As Wodak and Fairclough (2010: 21-22) explain, the theoretical and methodological challenge in discourse analysis involves:

> Simultaneously addressing (a) relations between discourse and other social elements or moments (i.e. 'mediation'), and (b) relations between social events/texts and more durable, more stable or institutionalised, more abstract levels of social reality: social practices and social structures. Moreover…a further challenge is developing ways to address (c) broadly spatial and temporal relationships between events and texts (i.e. 'intertextuality')

The authors describe 'the main focus of concern' in the article as being that which 'connects (b) to (c), spatial and temporal relationships between texts as elements of events' (ibid). Furthermore the authors consider that 'struggles for hegemony which can be reconstructed in a longitudinal way require very subtle context-dependent analyses' and therefore 'the theorisation of contexts becomes crucial' (Wodak and Fairclough, 2010: 22).

This combined approach has enabled me to trace recontextualisations of discourses representing actors considered central to the imagined Big Society during the development of localism at Cambridgeshire County Council over the course of a year. With a research analytical focus that lies in the connections between social events/texts and social practices and structure, I have been able to analyse 'not only … individual events (and texts) but also … chains of events (and chains of texts), and … the effects of agency and strategy in shaping events (and texts) over time' (Wodak and Fairclough, 2010: 22). The application of Wodak's four level concept of context has worked well in allowing observations and contextual analysis to inform my discussion and situate identified discourses within and between social structures/practices and social event/strategies.

7.4. Summary

In this chapter I have discussed the results of my empirical research as well as the theory and methodology of my study in relation to some of the relevant literature. I have developed and discussed my argument for the importance of focusing on local government as a mediating level to enable research such as this to develop a critique of the Big Society in its own terms. I have addressed in turn each of the incompatibilities between the imagined Big Society and local 'realities' in Cambridgeshire that were established in the previous chapter and that I argue have each contributed to the failure of the realisation of the imagined Big Society in Cambridgeshire:

1. Local government as collective and compliant versus local government as complex and potentially obstructive;
2. Central-local government relations: imagined freedom versus the realities of control;
3. Unrealistic expectations of people and communities;
4. The Big Society in an 'age of austerity'.

I have discussed in relation to each incompatibility the relevant empirical results of the recontextualisations of the Big Society and representations of actors considered central to the Big Society in the development of localism in Cambridgeshire. I have drawn on and discussed this in relation to the available literature on the Big Society, localism, local government, and related issues. I have argued that my research not only provides much needed empirical evidence to underpin many academic theorisations, but that it has anticipated an important call for research in this very area thus further illustrating its necessity and position in that literature. Finally I discussed some of the theoretical and methodological issues relating to my research study and in relation to relevant literature. I argue that drawing on an interpretive approach and a combined CDA methodology has enabled me to develop a much needed empirically based critique of the Big Society in its own terms at a local government level.

In the next and final chapter I will conclude this thesis, revisiting the research questions, describing the strengths and weaknesses of my research study, and discussing the original contribution to knowledge that I seek to make.

8. Conclusion

In this chapter I will seek to reiterate my conclusions, situating them in a brief summary discussion of my research study and the methodology that I employed. I will refer specifically to each of the research questions around which the study was developed and demonstrate how I have achieved my research aim: the development of an empirically based critique of the Big Society in its own terms at a local government level. I will discuss the limitations of this research as well as its strengths and, particularly, the contribution that it makes to literature. Finally, I return to Cambridgeshire and to the settings of my research to briefly relate the current status of localism at the County Council.

8.1. The Big Society: From Central Imaginaries to Local 'Realities'?

The Big Society, if successfully realised, would 'free' local government from central government control, ensure the devolvement of powers to 'the man and woman on the street', and create more responsible citizens who are less dependent on government authorities (see Chapter Six for a detailed analysis of the imagined Big Society). As such, it has the potential to transform the structures and practices of local government. CDA and more specifically my integrated dialectical relational and discourse historical approach to CDA (Wodak and Fairclough, 2010) enabled me to explore recontextualisations of the Big Society within the development of localism at Cambridgeshire County Council. It offered a theoretical perspective by which I could compare and contrast these developing recontextualisations with discourses representing the imagined Big Society in government and Conservative party documents and speeches.

8.2. A Return to the Research Questions

In order to develop a critique of the Big Society in its own terms I firstly needed to define the Big Society in its own terms, hence:

1. *What discourses are drawn on in official government and Conservative Party documents and speeches relating to the imagined goals of the Big Society?*

   a) *How are social actors and social actions represented in these discourses?*
   b) *What are the contexts in which these social actors and social actions are represented?*
   c) *To what extent are representations of these social actors and social actions consistent?*

In my systematic analysis of central government documents and speeches relating to the development and announcement of the Big Society (see Chapter Six) I interpreted a number of actors as being central to the imagined Big Society. These actors, evident to some extent in the following summarisation of my interpretation of the imagined goals of the Big Society, were central government, local government, communities, and people:

- *Society* will be civically responsible and independent of *the state*; engaged with and proud of their *communities*; and take opportunities to share the balance of power with *the state*.
- Power and responsibility will be decentralised from *central government* to *local government* and from *local government* to *communities*, *neighbourhood groups* and *individuals*.
- The role of *the state* will be to galvanise, catalyse and encourage *communities* and *individuals*, etc. to fulfil their role in the Big Society. It is a role of empowerment and facilitation rather than provision.

Central government have an important role to play in creating the Big Society; broadly speaking they enable the development of responsibility and the decentralisation of powers. Their role is foregrounded in the imagined Big Society and they are represented consistently as powerful; it is central government who hold the power and central government who have the ability to devolve or centralise that power as they see fit.

Local government are collectively and objectively represented as a compliant and mediating force; a necessary level through which power must pass in order to reach

people and communities. Their role is unclear but unavoidable. It is broadly represented as an enabling and empowering role; freed from central government control they will be accountable to local people and work with those local people to fix 'broken Britain'.

Communities are cohesive and identifiable. They are represented as being dependent on the state for their continued wellbeing but are imagined to be self-sufficient and cooperative within the Big Society. They will become dependent on the people that live within them rather than on the state. They are passive recipients of power passed to them via local government as a result of central government's decentralisation agenda.

People are also currently dependent on the state for their wellbeing; this is considered not to be ideal. Like communities, they are passive beneficiaries of the government's intended devolvement of power; it is imagined that people will share the balance of power and responsibility more equally with the state. People are imagined to be active, engaged with their communities and inclined to want to help them were they able to do so. Within the Big Society people do not rely on the state; they are more able to help and look after themselves. In all representations people are passive but imagined to be active.

This is a summarisation of the Big Society in its own terms. I then asked questions which focused my research on developing a critique of this interpretation of the Big Society at a local government level. With Cambridgeshire County Council's development of localism as my primary research setting I asked:

2. *What discourses representing the Big Society, government, local government, communities, and people are drawn on in official County Council documents relating to their initial response to the Big Society between May 2010 and May 2011?*

   a) *How are social actors and social actions represented in these discourses?*
   b) *What are the contexts in which these social actors and social actions are represented?*
   c) *To what extent are these representations of social actors and social actions consistent?*

In these documents the Big Society was not represented at all; the discourse was one of localism and local working and thus I necessarily restricted my analysis solely to the representation of localism. Localism was represented as nothing particularly new; it was consistent with Cambridgeshire County Council's commitment to devolve powers and decision making to a more local level, but also required change at the level of the County Council to succeed. On more than one occasion, localism was represented as a policy that could be applied or an agenda that could be delivered. In this respect it was abstractedly represented as a tangible outcome. Furthermore localism was considered to promote the values of opportunism and creativity at the County Council.

Central government are evident in these documents in relation to the Big Society for which I know that they are actively responsible but representations of them are otherwise scarce; central government are largely suppressed. When they are included it is by means of a collective and subjective representation that considers them as having provided little clarity around the Big Society particularly in terms of what it might mean for local government.

Communities are represented as cohesive and existing units which are generalised and collectivised. It is acknowledged that for localism to succeed, communities must be active and engaged. This imagined representation is similar to the representation of communities in the imagined Big Society. Communities are also imagined as working in partnership with the County Council in the future; this is represented as an aim of the County Council's localism agenda. People are also represented collectively and generally. They are represented as passive beneficiaries of localism and of the work of the Council. They are imagined as taking over services that the Council can no longer afford to provide in the future.

Local government are represented specifically and objectively as Cambridgeshire County Council in these documents. The documents make a series of promises and depict an imagined future similar to the way in which government documents depict the imagined Big Society. The County Council are imagined to work locally and be genuine in doing so. They are active in promising to improve the relationship between themselves and their communities in Cambridgeshire. They are also active in enabling and facilitating the development of communities. They are imagined as devolving decisions and services to a local level.

Within the County Council several actors are specified as being important. Cabinet members are collectively and abstractedly represented as dictating the direction in which localism will be developed at the County Council. County officers and particularly the Localism and Community Engagement Board are active in the development of localism and related areas of activity at the County Council. The pilot projects for which the Board is responsible are activated in testing some of the Council's ideas for localism. And finally parish councils, collectivised, objectivised and subjected, are represented as important partners with whom the County Council would work in developing localism.

Having established the Council's initial response and intentions regarding the development of localism in Cambridgeshire I then asked:

3. *What discourses representing the Big Society, government, local government, communities, and people do County, District and Parish Council members, Council officers and third sector community organisation workers involved in the development of localism in Cambridgeshire draw on in reflective, semi-structured interviews and in relevant meetings and events?*

   1. *How are social actors and social actions represented in these discourses?*
   2. *What are the contexts in which these social actors and social actions are represented?*
   3. *What aspects of these representations of social actors and social actions change over the course of a year? What are the reasons for change and the contexts related to the changes?*
   4. *What aspects of these representations of social actors and social actions are consistent or inconsistent?*

This analysis is too complex to relate in any detail here and I will simply refer you to Chapter Six for the presentation and discussion of my interpretations of the data. I will consider instead the development of a critique of the Big Society in its own terms via analysis of the recontextualisations of discourses representing the actors imagined to be central to the Big Society within the County Council's development of Localism. This is in answer to question 4 (for a more detailed answer to this question see Chapter Six, Section 6.3.):

4. *What aspects of these representations of social actors and social actions are consistent or inconsistent across central government and County Council documents and across interviews and observations with County, District, Parish and third sector organisation actors over the course of a year?*

Recontextualisations of the Big Society in Cambridgeshire began with the rejection of the term 'the Big Society' in favour of localism. Already the County Council seemed to be seeking to distance themselves from central government policy. Nonetheless it seemed clear that they were following the government's Big Society and related Localism agenda in a number of other ways: making a commitment in their 2011-12 Integrated Plan to become a 'genuinely local council', setting up the Localism and Community Engagement Board and commissioning a number of pilot projects to allow them to test their ideas for localism. Whilst localism was arguably a recontextualisation of the Big Society embraced by the County Council and therefore also within the Community Led Planning pilot, even this was difficult for the District Council to accept. Despite the Area Committee Participation pilot being included by the County Council as one of their 'localism pilots', the District Council represented the pilot as being about area working rather than localism. By the end of my fieldwork, far from being represented as a 'positive vision for the future', localism is considered by the County Council to be difficult to define, understand or implement, resource intensive and less important than saving money.

The suppression of central government throughout my fieldwork is perhaps unsurprising given that I was researching a localised context. Nonetheless, it could also be indicative of the already discussed rejection of central government's terminology around the Big Society.

The most obvious contradiction in representations of local government is the collective and compliant representation in central government's imagined Big Society versus the distinguishable and specific representations of local government authorities and associated third sector organisations in Cambridgeshire County Council's development of localism. Even more specific were the representations of the roles of Council members and Council officers in each of my case studies. These roles were not represented at all in central government documents or speeches and that is despite local councillors being the elected representatives for local areas and thus presumably unavoidably implicated in any localism policy.

The representation of local government as a mediating force is consistent with discourses represented throughout my fieldwork. However the imagined role of local government as an enabling and empowering organisation through whom power must necessarily pass on its way to communities and local people is simply not borne out in the County's development of localism during this research project. Despite making an initial commitment to devolve services and budgets where possible to a local level, control is gradually exerted over time and justifications made as to why this should not happen. The County Council are reluctant even to devolve power to the level of other local government tiers such as District and Parish Councils, let alone to the level of communities and local people. Far from being a collectively compliant and mediating tier of government, local government are complex and obstructive, ultimately contributing to the failure to realise the imagined Big Society in Cambridgeshire.

Finally, the representation of local government 'freed' from central control is also contested in my research. All tiers of local government are represented time and time again as passive beneficiaries of the budget cuts made to local government authorities by central government. These concerns are important for Cambridgeshire County Council and certainly take priority over localism. Furthermore, even when Cambridgeshire County Council do consider themselves to be acting in a way consistent with localism, they are apparently subjected to reprimand from central government minsters for doing so. These contradictory messages certainly seem to lessen any potential for the realisation of the Big Society in Cambridgeshire.

Recontextualisations of discourses representing communities and people were consistent with central government representations in one way: as being currently dependent on the state for their continued wellbeing. Where contradictions begin to emerge is in representations of communities and people as they are imagined to become within the Big Society. Communities becoming self-sufficient, cooperative and dependent on the people living within them rather than on their local authorities or on central government simply did not happen. Some community level activity was already in place when my fieldwork began, and it was often for this reason that the government's representation of the Big Society was criticised or rejected. But certainly any increase in that level of engagement and participation leading towards a cooperative or partnership approach to service delivery amongst other things, was

not evident in any of the case studies included in this research. Overall communities and people remain passive beneficiaries of the actions of their local authorities, be it their County, District or Parish Council, or of a third sector organisation with a remit and a budget to help.

8.3.   A Critique of the Big Society in its Own Terms

The Big Society was conceived of in Conservative Party documents and speeches in 2009 and announced as a 'driving ambition' (Cabinet Office, 2010a: 1) of the new coalition government in May 2010. Exactly what is meant by the Big Society has been argued over and disagreed upon since this announcement. The idea has come in for criticism and its theoretical and ideological underpinnings have been widely examined, as have its prospects for changing British society (e.g. Alcock, 2010; Kisby, 2010; Evans, 2011; Hunter, 2011; Taylor, 2011; Albrow, 2012; Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012; Sullivan, 2012; Buser, 2013; Clarke and Cochrane, 2013; Corbett and Walker, 2013). Despite the criticisms and doubts cast upon the Big Society idea it remains a 'flagship policy' of the coalition government and a 'passion' of David Cameron. Cuts to public spending have been made and local government authorities in the shape of county, district and parish councils, as well as third sector organisations and, ultimately, communities, are feeling the effects. As recently as last year, Buser (2013: 15) identified a persisting need for 'research which uncovers the various ways in which these notions are defined, explained and put into practice', particularly at the level of local government. This is the contribution that this thesis seeks to make.

I was not convinced that the discourses of the Big Society would deliver the shift in the balance of power between central government and localities that they imagined. My research was therefore based on a simple premise; that the imagined Big Society represented at a central government level is potentially incompatible with the lived experience of society at a local level. In this thesis I have developed an empirically based critique of the Big Society in its own terms and concluded that the Big Society (in its own terms) has failed to be realised in Cambridgeshire. I have argued that this is largely the result of four key incompatibilities:

1. Local government as collective and compliant versus local government as complex and potentially obstructive;
2. Central-local government relations: imagined freedom versus the realities of control;
3. Unrealistic expectations of people and communities;
4. The Big Society in an 'age of austerity'.

8.4. Limitations

There are, obviously, some limitations to this thesis. One of the most important limitations exists in the research design – that of a multiple embedded case study. Whilst my focus on the recontextualisation of discourses meant that a contextual focus was not only beneficial but vital, case studies are, by their very nature, bounded and the emphasis is very much on the setting or the context of the case or cases being studied (Lofland and Lofland, 1995; Stake, 1995; Marshall and Rossman, 1999; Yin, 2009). This research is therefore limited to the in-depth textually oriented discourse analysis of a relatively small number of texts, including documents, interviews and observation notes, generated over a relatively short period of time (one year) within three specific settings. As such, I cannot generalise my findings to other local government authorities who may be or have been developing their own responses to the Big Society.

A further limitation is also related to my research design. By including one primary case study and two embedded case studies I was able to explore the developing relations between tiers of local government as they became implicated in the development of localism in Cambridgeshire. However, it also meant that any possibility to focus in great detail on any one specific organisation, tier of local government, individual or idea within localism was constrained. Whilst my analysis entailed a micro-level analysis of discourse, my contextual focus remained reasonably broad. There are therefore relationships between specific tiers of local government that are underrepresented in terms of complexity in this thesis. For instance the relationship between Cambridgeshire County Council and their parish councils was particularly interesting; indeed the perceived suitability of parish councils for the roles that they are increasingly being expected to fulfil within the current context could be a focus for potential future research. Equally the

relationship between the County and the District Councils is underrepresented in my data. Issues within the second pilot project were largely related to differences between the two Councils and I have plenty of material to enable me to develop a critique of this relationship and its inherent complexities in the future.

Communities are clearly implicated and of central importance both within the imagined Big Society and within the development of localism in Cambridgeshire. Due to the finite scope of my research and my resources I was unable to include community members amongst my participants. I did carry out interviews with one community member in each of the pilot project case studies but I eventually decided to omit the analysis and discussion of these interviews due to a lack of space and refinement of my research questions to focus specifically on the mediating level between central government and communities: local government.

8.5. Strengths

There are several ways in which this thesis constitutes a positive contribution to literature in the field of this research. One methodological strength lies in the combination of aspects of Fairclough's (2001; 2003; 2010) dialectical relational approach to CDA with aspects of Wodak's (1996; 2001; 2009) discourse historical approach to CDA. This combined approach was previously applied to the investigation of the implementation of the Bologna Process in two EU member states: Austria and Romania. It has been successful in enabling me to trace the recontextualisations of discourses representing the imagined Big Society throughout the development of localism at Cambridgeshire County Council over the course of a year.

A further successful combination was the integration of van Leeuwen's framework for the analysis of social actors and social actions with aspects of Fairclough's dialectical relational approach to CDA. In this I followed Farrelly (2006). The application of the framework, albeit with one small modification due to a point of conflict (see Chapter Five, section 5.3.6.1.), successfully allowed me to analyse representations within two policies – one imagined at a central level and one developed at a local level – of the actors central to the policies and the actions in which the policy requires that they engage.

A theoretical and methodological focus on discourse has allowed me to contribute to the development of an understanding of the potential incompatibilities between the imagined Big Society and local 'realities' in Cambridgeshire. Whist I must acknowledge that this understanding will not solve the problem of the incompatibilities I have identified, it will go some way to highlighting and explaining the problem and the reasons for it. As such, it could be useful as a resource in any attempts to consider ways in which the problem could be rectified. As Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999: 35) emphasise:

> Neither CDA nor other forms of critical social science are in the business of 'prescribing' alternative practices, but rather helping to clear the ground for those engaged within a social practice to seek the changes they want, by clarifying obstacles to change and possibilities for change.

This research has already gone some way in 'helping to clear the ground for those engaged within a social practice to seek the changes they want' in as much as I have presented intermediate and emerging results and observations to actors involved with the development of localism and, more widely, community engagement, at the County Council on two occasions to date. These presentations and subsequent opportunities for actors to engage with the potential incompatibilities between the imagined Big Society and local 'realities' in Cambridgeshire has, on both occasions, been favourably and enthusiastically received.

Finally I must acknowledge that, whilst undertaking my fieldwork, a number of interviewees mentioned to me during or after interviews that they found the opportunity to talk in detail about the policy development, reflect on recent events and think about what might come next both cathartic and helpful. It became clear that policy actors don't often get the chance to reflect or consider the policy development process as they are going through it and this, in itself, I perceived to have been a beneficial exercise for participants to engage in.

8.6.   An Original Contribution to Knowledge

There are very few articles or studies available at this time that present empirical evidence as to the responses of those organisations who mediate between central government imaginaries and local 'realities'. Wells et al. (2011) come close in an article in which they draw on national datasets to explore the variation in themes which they depict as central to the Big Society across the local authority districts of Yorkshire and the Humber. But again, no empirical evidence is used and the article is based on supposition and predictions. Supposition and prediction, albeit soundly argued and eloquently asserted, cannot replace empirical evidence.

This research is based on much needed empirical evidence at a local government level. As Buser (2013: 16) attests:

> First, area-based or case studies would be particularly valuable in order to consider specific local government responses to localism and engagement … [and] secondly, within the frame of English devolution and decentralisation, multi-level studies of governance, investigating the evolving relationship between tiers of government as well as links between government, individuals, third sector groups and private interests could provide critical insights into the opportunities and barriers for democratic renewal and decentralisation.

This research accordingly makes a necessary and valuable contribution to the literature on the Big Society, particularly in relation to local government. The research contributes to the debate on the Big Society and moves it forwards somewhat in terms of offering empirical evidence at the level of a local government authority that deals with both that authority's internal response – localism – and the evolving relationship between tiers of government within this context; specifically central government, a County Council, a District Council, a Parish Council and a third sector organisation. Whilst some of my findings may not be entirely unpredicted in the pre-existing literature, the strength of my research lies mostly in its empirical contribution to the debate. It provides an empirically based critique of the Big Society in its own terms, ultimately concluding that four key incompatibilities have thwarted any potential realisation of the imagined Big Society in Cambridgeshire:

1. Local government as collective and compliant versus local government as complex and potentially obstructive;

2. Central-local government relations: imagined freedom versus the realities of control;
3. Unrealistic expectations of people and communities;
4. The Big Society in an 'age of austerity'.

8.7. The Importance of Representations in Policy Analysis

A further contribution that this thesis seeks to make to knowledge and to the literature around policy analysis relates to the importance of considering representations as a salient analytical category in the analysis of policies. As I discussed in Chapter Four (page 71) representations are key to interpretive policy analysis (Freeman, 2012). Policy makers create policies through representation: they represent problems, solutions, versions and accounts; they make claims and justifications by means of any one of the many possible forms of communication; they intervene through representation. In my research study the imagined Big Society was represented by the Conservative Party and subsequently the coalition government as the answer to the problem of 'broken Britain' – itself a representation constructed by the Conservative Party in the lead up to the general election of May 2010 of the problems facing Britain at that time.

With the imagined Big Society being constructed largely at the level of central government in documents and speeches (see Chapter Six, Section 6.1.), representations therefore needed to 'travel' successfully across a number of scales of social practice if the Big Society was to be successfully realised at a local level in Cambridgeshire. As I have argued throughout this thesis, there are different social actors across these different scales of social practice who were each positioned in different ways in relation to the Big Society and who each made representations of the Big Society. If I accept that representations 'enter and shape social processes and practices' (Fairclough, 2001: 123) then representations of the Big Society, made by different social actors in different institutional settings, would have impacted on the realisation (or not) of the imagined Big Society in Cambridgeshire.

Of the four incompatibilities that, based on my analysis of data generated at Cambridgeshire County Council and from documents and speeches at a central government level, I have interpreted as thwarting the potentially successful

realisation of the imagined Big Society in Cambridgeshire, three of them relate directly to representations of actors and the actions in which they were imagined to engage within the imagined Big Society:

1. Local government as collective and compliant versus local government as complex and potentially obstructive;
2. Central-local government relations: imagined freedom versus the realities of control;
3. Unrealistic expectations of people and communities;

Only the fourth incompatibility (the Big Society in an 'age of austerity) does not relate so clearly to representations. Instead this fourth incompatibility relates more to the national financial context of budget cuts enforced on local government authorities in which localities were attempting to realise the imagined Big Society.

This is an important point in arguing for the application of Critical Discourse Analysis to policy analysis as it provides evidence to suggest that the success of policy initiatives at a local government level is dependent not only on practical, logistical or financial issues, but also on issues of representation. By representing local government as collective and compliant in the imagined Big Society, central government were both unrealistic and misleading as to the potential for power to be devolved from Whitehall 'to the man and woman on the street' (Cameron, 2010). Furthermore, by representing communities and local people unrealistically as broadly ready, willing and able to take on the actions imagined for them within the Big Society, the potential for the Big Society to succeed in its own terms in Cambridgeshire was severely constrained.

What my research suggests and what I would therefore argue is that representations of problems and of actors considered central to the solution to the represented problem are key to understanding the potential for policy initiatives constructed at a central government level to succeed at a local government level. The concept of recontextualisation has been invaluable in allowing me to analyse these representations across the various scales of social practice involved in constructing and potentially realising the imagined Big Society.

8.8. Further Research

The limitations and strengths that I outlined above provide and suggest opportunities for future research. There are also several opportunities for ways in which this research can be developed. Most obviously, in my opinion, would be the development of this research to focus in discursive analysis on 'genre' – that is the enactment of discourses representing localism; how localism is 'done' in Cambridgeshire. As I mentioned in discussion of the limitations of the research, relationships between specific tiers of local government have been underrepresented in terms of complexity in this thesis. Therefore areas in which this research could be developed include a focus on the relationship between Cambridgeshire County Council and their parish councils, or indeed Cambridgeshire County Council and the District Council. In terms of parish councils particularly the concept of democracy at a local level could be usefully conflated with discursive analysis of localism related policies. In terms of County and District relationships a conflation of the concept of political ideology could be usefully integrated with discursive analysis. There are also some specific inter-organisational relationships which could be further explored in this research, for instance the relationship between members and officers. Furthermore I believe that CDA could be usefully applied specifically to the analysis of policy development processes at a local government level.

With my focus on the mediating level of local government I was unable to include analysis at the level of communities in this study. Therefore future research could usefully include a focus on localism at a community level, perhaps involving a comparison between communities with different demographics in terms of capacity and propensity to engage.

Lastly, the policy making process has been widely addressed in academic literature (e.g. Dorey, 2005; Bochel and Duncan, 2007; Hill, 2009; Wilson and Game, 2011) but any analysis of the policy making process has been beyond the scope of my thesis. Nonetheless I acknowledge that my research could be usefully interpreted to contribute to such literature at another time and with a different focus by applying one or more analytical models that Wilson and Game (2011: 332) cite as having been 'widely used to describe the distribution of power and influence inside local authorities'.

8.9.   Cambridgeshire County Council and ~~Localism~~ Post – Localism

I conclude this thesis by way of a short post-script. Shortly after I finished my fieldwork in June 2012 the Localism and Community Engagement Board ceased to exist. It was replaced in Spring 2013 with the Communications and Community Engagement board. Whilst my contact was keen to confirm that the activity relating to localism was continuing and would be overseen by the new Board, they were concerned that losing the 'localism' emphasis was not necessarily a good sign for its future development. Whilst the 'Big Society' was rejected almost immediately by the County Council, it seemed that, shortly after my fieldwork was complete, localism too faced rejection. Community engagement, given that there was an existing strategy in place and a greater level of understanding in evidence around the council, seemed now to be the preferred terminology. Whilst it cannot be surmised what the impact of this was on localism activities, it certainly seems suggestive of a conscious move away from 'localism' altogether.

Furthermore, approximately one year after the completion of my data generation, the role that John occupied was abolished as part of a series of redundancies designed to assist the Council in making their required savings. Ultimately then, it seems that the age of austerity and the Council's subsequent need to make savings became more important and certainly more influential than localism in Cambridgeshire was ever able to be.

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Appendix One – Participant Information Sheet (Interviews)

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PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Section A: The Research Project

Project title

Responding to the Big Society: Implementing Localism in a County Council

What is the purpose and value of this study?

The purpose of this study is to investigate the role of a County Council in implementing the Coalition government's Localism agenda and in devolving power to local communities through pilot project initiatives.

In May 2010 the Prime Minister, David Cameron, announced the Big Society Programme; a cross-government policy programme that is designed to empower local people and communities.

The concept of the Big Society has been frequently mentioned and explained by the coalition government in speeches, official documents and media articles. However, what the 'Big Society' actually means in practice is not yet known. The value of this research study lies in its potential to uncover the meanings, interpretations and methods of implementation that are being trialled by Cambridgeshire County Council as part of the Big Society agenda.

The potential learning to come from this research study could be of future benefit not only to Cambridgeshire County Council by informing their future policy thinking and decision making, but also to the citizens of Cambridgeshire's local communities who will be the recipients and beneficiaries of these future policies.

Invitation to participate

You are being invited to take part in the **interview stages** of this research project. Before you make your decision, it is important for you to understand why the research is being carried out and what it will involve. Please take the time to read the information on this sheet carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please

ask me if there is anything that is not clear or is you would like more information. Thank you for taking the time to read this.

Who is organising the research?

This research is being organised by me as a funded PhD student at Anglia Ruskin University, in the Department of Family and Community Studies.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The results of the study will be published in my PhD thesis in early 2014. Results may also be published as part of associated articles. Your identity will be protected as far as possible in any publication in which aspects of your data are used.

How is the research being funded?

This research is being funded by the Faculty of Health and Social Care within Anglia Ruskin University.

Who do I contact for further information about the study?

For further information please contact either myself:

Laura Eyre

PhD student
c/o Claire Mitchell
Faculty of Health & Social Care
Anglia Ruskin University
Webb 001,
East Road,
Cambridge,
CB1 1PT

laura.eyre@student.anglia.ac.uk

Or my principal supervisor - Sarah Burch

Sarah.Burch@anglia.ac.uk

Section B: Your Participation in the Research Project

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part in the **interview stages** of this research study because you have been identified as a key individual who is working with or is involved in the implementation or delivery of Cambridgeshire County Council's Localism agenda or one of the following Localism pilots:

- Community Led Planning pilot; and/or
- Area Committee Participation pilot

Can I refuse to take part?

Taking part in the **interview stages** of this research is entirely voluntary; it is up to you whether or not you decide to participate. Refusal to take part will incur no penalty or any loss of benefit to you.

Can I withdraw from the study?

You are free to withdraw from the **interview stages** of this research study at any time and your doing so will incur no penalty or loss of benefits. However, data from any interviews which have already taken place prior to you withdrawing your consent will be retained for use in the study in an anonymised form.

If you wish to withdraw from the interview process please inform me of your decision via my contact details as set out above.

What will happen if I agree to take part?

If you agree to take part in the **interview stages** of this research study then I will conduct a series of three, one to one interviews with you over the course of approximately one year. Each interview will take place at an interval of approximately 3-4 months and will last for approximately one hour. All interviews will be recorded using a digital recording device. Interviews will take place in pre-booked meeting rooms at a Council venue most convenient to you. I do not envisage that you will be required to travel far to meetings; however any travel expenses incurred for journeys of more than 3 miles that are made specifically for the purpose of partaking in an interview will be reimbursed accordingly.

Are there any risks involved (e.g. side effects from taking part) and if so what will be done to ensure my wellbeing/safety?

The risks incurred by participating in these interviews will be minimal. The main potential risks are related to the time that you will be required to give up through participation. As a professional individual working in busy organisation, I appreciate that the interviews may act as a burden on your time. In order to minimise this risk I will be as flexible as possible as to the exact dates and times that the interviews are scheduled in order to best fit in with your schedules and minimise disruption to your work.

In relation to any concerns you may have regarding information which you disclose during an interview, you may rest assured that all interview data will be anonymised as far as possible and that you will never be named in my thesis or any further publications. Equally, all interview data will be kept and stored so as to protect and ensure your confidentiality.

Any information which you disclose during the course of an interview which relates to a crime or other illegal activity will be passed on as appropriate, after consultation with my supervisory team where necessary.

What will happen to the interview data that is collected from me?

The data collected during the course of your interviews will be transcribed and analysed in relation to the purpose of the research study.

Are there any benefits for me in taking part in this research?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits to you in participating in these interviews, it is hoped that the interview data generated will be vital in contributing to the work of this research study that will uncover some of the meanings, interpretations and methods of implementation that are being trialled by Cambridgeshire County Council with regard to the as yet untried and untested Localism agenda. There may also be some future benefit in terms of learning both for the County Council and for citizens of Cambridgeshire's local communities.

How will my participation in this study be kept confidential?

I will ensure your confidentiality by making sure that all information and data relating to your interviews is accessible only to those who have the authorisation to view it. Members of my supervisory team may have access to anonymised forms of data for support and advisory purposes at the analytical stage. All data will be stored securely, either in a locked filing cabinet within the University or on a password protected University computer. Audio recordings will be destroyed once transcribed and transcripts will be destroyed 5 years after the data has been collected.

In order to ensure your anonymity, all data will be anonymised as far as possible at the transcription stage and separated from as much identifying information as possible through the assignation of code numbers for participants in analysis and the use of pseudonyms in transcriptions where necessary. If, for any reason, you are unavoidably identifiable in any of the interview data, I will seek further consent from you that the data might still be used for analysis in its current state or whether further means of anonymisation are required before we reach an agreement regarding its inclusion in the final study.

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS TO KEEP, TOGETHER WITH A COPY OF YOUR CONSENT FORM

Appendix Two – Participant Information Sheet (Observations)

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PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Section A: The Research Project

Project title

Responding to the Big Society: Implementing Localism in a County Council

What is the purpose and value of this study?

The purpose of this study is to investigate the role of a County Council in implementing the Coalition government's Localism agenda and in devolving power to local communities through pilot project initiatives.

In May 2010 the Prime Minister, David Cameron, announced the Big Society Programme; a cross-government policy programme that is designed to empower local people and communities.

The concept of the Big Society has been frequently mentioned and explained by the coalition government in speeches, official documents and media articles. However, what the 'Big Society' actually means in practice is not yet known. The value of this research study lies in its potential to uncover the meanings, interpretations and methods of implementation that are being trialled by Cambridgeshire County Council as part of the Big Society agenda.

The potential learning to come from this research study could be of future benefit not only to Cambridgeshire County Council by informing their future policy thinking and decision making, but also to the citizens of Cambridgeshire's local communities who will be the recipients and beneficiaries of these future policies.

Invitation to participate

You are being invited to take part in the **observational stages** of this research project. Before you make your decision, it is important for you to understand why the research is being carried out and what it will involve. Please take the time to read the information on this sheet carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask me if there is anything that is not clear or is you would like more information. Take your time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for taking the time to read this.

Who is organising the research?

This research is being organised by me as a funded PhD student at Anglia Ruskin University, in the Department of Family and Community Studies.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The results of the study will be published in my PhD thesis in early 2014. Results may also be published as part of associated articles. Your identity will be protected as far as possible in any publication in which aspects of your data are used.

How is the research being funded?

This research is being funded by the Faculty of Health and Social Care within Anglia Ruskin University.

Who do I contact for further information about the study?

For further information please contact either myself:

Laura Eyre

PhD student
c/o Claire Mitchell
Faculty of Health & Social Care
Anglia Ruskin University
Webb 001,
East Road,
Cambridge,
CB1 1PT

laura.eyre@student.anglia.ac.uk

Or my principal supervisor:

Sarah Burch
Sarah.Burch@anglia.ac.uk

Section B: Your Participation in the Research Project

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part in the **observational stages** of this research study due to your involvement in meetings which occur in relation to Cambridgeshire County Council's Localism agenda or one of the following Localism pilots:

- Community Led Planning pilot; and/or
- Area Committee Participation pilot

The observational stages of the research are designed to involve all individuals who participate in or attend any of these meetings.

Can I refuse to take part?

Taking part in the **observational stages** of this research is entirely voluntary; it is up to you whether or not you decide to participate. Refusal to take part will incur no penalty or any loss of benefit to you.

If you do not wish to participate in the observational stages of this research then please contact Laura Wiffen, an individual independent of the research, to inform her of your decision at least 24 hours prior to the scheduled meeting:

Please be assured that, should you not wish to participate, your attendance at the relevant meetings will not be compromised. In the event that any attendee does not wish to participate, I will not observe the meeting.

Can I withdraw from the study at any time?

You are free to withdraw from the **observational stages** of this research study at any time and your doing so will incur no penalty or loss of benefits. However, data from any observations which have already taken place prior to you withdrawing your consent will be retained for use in the study in an anonymised form.

What will happen if I agree to take part?

If you agree to take part in the observational stages of this research study then you are agreeing to allow me, as the researcher, to be present at and observe any relevant meetings or events in which you are involved. During each observation I will make handwritten notes in a small notebook.

Are there any risks involved (e.g. side effects from taking part) and if so what will be done to ensure my wellbeing/safety?

The risk to you as a participant in these observations is minimal. The only potential risk is related to your own feelings of comfort and ease and the potential for these to lessen in the presence of an observer. In order to minimise this risk I will ensure that

any disruption or intrusion caused by my presence is kept to a minimum; I will be observing the meetings and events but not partaking or altering the course of events in any way.

What will happen to any information/data that is collected from me during the course of an observation?

The information collected will be used to inform the interviews that will be carried out as a further form of data collection and will also be used to inform the analysis of the interview data.

Are there any benefits from taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the observation stages of this research project, it is hoped that you will be contributing to work that will uncover some of the meanings, interpretations and methods of implementation that are being trialled by Cambridgeshire County Council with regard to the as yet untried and untested Localism agenda. There may also be some future benefit in terms of learning both for the County Council and for citizens of Cambridgeshire's local communities.

How will my participation in the project be kept confidential?

I will ensure your confidentiality by making sure that information and data is accessible only to those who have the authorisation to view it. Members of my supervisory team may have access to anonymised forms of data for support and advisory purposes at the analytical stage. All data will be stored securely, either in a locked filing cabinet within the University or on a password protected University computer.

All observation data will be anonymised as far as possible and you will not be named in any of the publications. However, it would be unreasonable for me to guarantee that you will not be identifiable from contextual data.

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS TO KEEP AND CONSENT WILL BE RE-CONFIRMED BY THE CHAIR AT THE START OF THE MEETING