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Minister blocks No 10's rescue bid for 'big society' project

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Lib Dems unhappy that cuts enforced by communities secretary Eric Pickles will destroy Britain's volunteer army



Eric Pickles is accused of rejecting proposals to reward councils for their contribution to David Cameron's big society strategy. Photograph: Martin Godwin for the Guardian

Downing Street considered proposals to protect David Cameron's flagship "big society" project from the harshest of the council spending cuts but the high-level moves were blocked by the communities secretary, [Eric Pickles](#), the Guardian has learned.

The [voluntary sector](#) faces an estimated £1.14bn cut in its [local government](#) grants this year, triggering warnings this week that Britain's volunteer army will be destroyed. Liverpool has abandoned a big society pilot project because the cuts have hit the voluntary groups who are supposed to take over some services under the programme.

The Guardian has established that ministers and No 10 formulated plans to reward councils for their contribution to the big society or force them to show they were cutting their own costs as much as their contracts with charities. But Pickles rejected the proposals.

A senior Whitehall source said Pickles had opposed the plans formulated by Steve Hilton, the No 10 strategy chief, the Cabinet Office ministers Oliver Letwin and Francis Maude and the big society "tsar", Lord Wei. Pickles instead agreed to hold one-to-one conversations with the worst-offending councils that were "gung-ho" about the cuts.

"He [Pickles] talks a lot about a radical decentralisation and big society, but it's still very municipalist. He won't go the full whack," the source said.

Dame Elisabeth Hoodless, executive director of Community Service Volunteers (CSV), warned that "draconian" cuts were threatening to undermine the big society and that the government had failed to sell the policy to the public.

The Cabinet Office has also confirmed plans to end by 2014 a £12.2m "strategic partners fund" granted by the Office for Civil Society and seen as the key funding to encourage [volunteering](#). Labour said the cuts would not

only endanger the government's scheme, but also damage the nation's existing tradition of community support and volunteering.

Concerns about Pickles are rife among local authorities. A private email circulated to Liberal Democrat councillors in the Local Government Association says: "Concerns about the weakness of the secretary of state have been raised within all three of the main political groups here at the LGA and the message has been heard loud and clear by leading figures in the government. The situation has been likened to having a republican in charge of the monarchy."

The email outlines half a dozen concerns raised by Lib Dem councillors about the localism bill, which is designed to devolve decision making from Whitehall to communities and is key to the big society strategy. It says there is "little enthusiasm" for the bill, adding: "[It is] not written in the spirit of localism – too many new powers for the secretary of state." It goes on to say councils are "dead against" plans for directly elected mayors.

It says: "A key difference between Lib Dem and Conservative views on localism is that Lib Dems believe in representative democracy – [Conservatives](#) are happy to bypass elected local government and give power direct to local residents."

A spokesman for Pickles said: "Both accusations that Eric tried to block moves regarding funding to the charity sector in relation to big society are untrue." He added that any such rules to put conditions on how councils organised their budgets would not be legal.

He also said Pickles rejected the Lib Dem concerns about the localism bill.

"Eric Pickles's department has done plenty of stuff for the big society," the aide said. "Part of the localism bill is the big society – we're saying if you think you can run things better, you can."

Greg Clark, the minister responsible for decentralisation, wrote to council leaders on Friday asking them to work closely with voluntary groups and announced plans for local authorities to publish details of all contracts to allow the charitable sector to bid for work. "It has never been more timely for government at all levels to strengthen relationships with voluntary groups," the letter said.

Ed Miliband, the Labour leader, wrote to the heads of the biggest charities on Monday asking them to take part in their policy review into civil society, expressing his "deep concerns" and calling the cuts to charity budgets "reckless".

The TUC will also host a conference tomorrow for more than 150 charities, which it is attempting to bring into a coalition to oppose government cuts.

Tessa Jowell, the shadow Cabinet Office minister, said: "The Tory-led government are on the brink of destroying this country's great tradition of community support and solidarity. The consequences of their actions will be the slow death of a number of community groups, which will be irreversible in the short or medium term."

"David Cameron can no longer straddle two contradictory positions – sustained cuts in support to community groups and a big society notion which relies on the capacity and engagement of those very same organisations."