

## Young People in Birmingham are already playing a vital role in achieving the Big Society

**Hundreds of young people descended on Villa Park on Thursday to tell Birmingham's decision makers and business leaders how they are already playing an active role in their communities by taking positive action to improve their neighbourhoods.**

The debate, "*Young People and the Big Society – the Big Problem or the Big Solution?*" revealed that 73% of participants agreed that the Big Society was a good idea but were concerned that politicians aren't recognising the contribution that young people are already making in their communities.

The debate formed part of The Co-operative Foundation's *Truth about Youth* programme run in Birmingham by award winning educational charity Envision. The *Truth about Youth* aims to challenge the widespread negative perceptions of young people by creating opportunities for young people to engage with wider audiences from private, public and voluntary sectors and to positively influence the attitudes wider audiences hold.

The Big Society debate was a landmark event for the young people of Birmingham as it provided a unique opportunity for them to network with key representatives from local government, charities and the business sector and have an interactive and positive discussion on their involvement in society.

The event featured David Cameron's Youth Policy Advisor, Paul Oginsky, as key speaker as well as a fantastic panel line-up including;

- Jon Ling, CEO of BXL,
- Cllr Jon Hunt, Birmingham City Council,
- Prof Peter Alcock, Director of Third Sector Research Centre,
- Susan Nash, Vice President of Society and Citizenship, NUS,
- Jamie Dunn, Young Entrepreneur and founder of The Jamie Dunn Academy.

The debate took place hot on the heels of the Government announcement that £30m will be invested in next summer's pilot of the National Citizen Service.

Speaking about the announcement Paul Oginsky said, "Whilst the government's intention is that every 16 year old in the country will be able to take part in the National Citizen Service, the announcement of just 11,000 places for this year across the country means this vision is likely to be long way off. In the meantime it's clear that young people in Birmingham are just getting on and setting up community projects themselves, with Envision's support."

From the result of the debate poll it was clear that the audience were not yet convinced of the value of the NCS. Only 39% of the participants agreed that the NCS is a good way of involving young people in their communities while 61% either disagreed or were still unsure.

Kashif Mehboob, 18, Envision Alumni said, "I feel that in recent times there has been a barrier between young people and the rest of society. Events like the Big Society debate are a fantastic way of allowing young people and adults to engage with each other. It shows that young people are not a hindrance to society as well as showing that decision makers like Local Councillors and companies like The Co-operative do value the opinion and involvement of young people."

Envision's Programme Manager, Darshna Solanki, said, "It was truly inspiring to see so many young people from Birmingham attend an event like this and to hear how passionate they are about making a positive difference to their communities. This is the Big Society and it's clear that the young people that attended this event aren't hanging around waiting to be asked to be part of it, they are already getting on and doing it!"

The issues discussed in the Big Society Debate originated from the opinions canvassed from 243 Envision students from Birmingham prior to the event. The debate generated discussions on:

### **What role can and do Young People play in the Big Society?**

The over-riding message from the young participants was that many of them are already being proactive in engaging positively with their communities but that this isn't necessarily being recognised by politicians and the local community.

Participants also highlighted barriers such as negative media coverage and lack of opportunities to engage in local decisions which contribute to the negative perceptions that young people are disinterested and apathetic.

Jamie Dunn the 18 year old Virgin Media Pioneer, said "It's so inspiring that so many young people are here today to speak out. There's a real passion among young people for wanting to positive shape society. Young people can make a difference because we already are."

### **Is the National Citizen Service a good way for young people to become involved in their communities?**

Students were sceptical about the impact National Citizen Service would have, and suggested lowering the vote to 16 would in fact be a better way to encourage responsible and active young citizens.

One student also suggested that for adults, the Big Society involved having powers delegated to them, whereas for young people it involved "being rounded up and sent off to summer camp". When asked to vote if NCS was a good way for young people to become involved in their community 39% of the audience agreed while 61% either disagreed or were unsure.

Professor Peter Alcock, Director of the Third Sector Research Centre said of National Citizen Service, "I think there's a lot to play for, but the more it looks like a boot camp, the more it won't work. The more it looks like the sort of things that organisations like Envision here in Birmingham are already promoting, and builds on that best practice, then the more likely it will be to work".

Government Youth Policy Advisor Paul Oginsky agreed, explaining to the audience: "It's not meant to be new. It's meant to take the best of what's out there. It's a gift to young people. It's an opportunity. We've got a new government saying let's do something that's been done before, let's take the best of it, but let's try and do it on a much bigger scale".

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T: 0121 772 7685 W: [envision.org.uk](http://envision.org.uk)

Envision (full name Environmental Vision) is registered as a Charity and a Limited Company in England and Wales  
Charity Reg No. 1095328 Company Reg No. 442212

### **What role should businesses play in the Big Society?**

Students also debated the role that businesses should play in the Big Society raising questions like; do businesses have a responsibility to support the development of the future work force? How can businesses work with young people to benefit local communities?

Of the 236 Envision students surveyed prior to the debate the majority said that Government and the local community were most responsible for tackling local problems. However, young participants were clear in their opinion that businesses do have a role to play in raising aspirations of young people and helping build the skills for the future.

The students also highlighted the need for better work experience opportunities and more places on internships and apprenticeships to help them develop crucial employment skills.

**-Ends-**

### **Notes to editors:**

For more information, photographs or to arrange an interview please contact: Cameron Nimmo, Regional Manager: [cameron@envision.org.uk](mailto:cameron@envision.org.uk) or 0121 772 7685.

### **Envision**

- Envision provides young people with the opportunity to make a difference. The charity was established in 2000 by four young people who wanted to challenge the stereotype that young people are apathetic and disengaged.
- Today Envision supports 16-19 year olds from 100 schools and colleges in Greater London, Birmingham, Leeds and Bristol, helping over 3000 young people every year to design their own local community projects tackling issues ranging from street crime to climate change.

### **The Debate Outcomes**

#### **Young People and the Big Society: Big problem or the Big solution?**

- 73% of the audience agreed that the 'Big Society' is a good idea, 16% disagreed and 11% were still unsure.
- Asked whether the National Citizen Service was a good way for young people to get involved in their communities 39% of the audience agreed, 29% disagreed and 32% were not sure.
- On the issue of whether businesses have a responsibility to develop the skills of a future generation 76% of the audience agreed, 17% disagreed and 8% were unsure.

### **Truth about Youth**

Seven cities in the UK have received their share of £2million funding from The Co-operative Foundation, the grant-making arm of The Co-operative Group, to tackle the negative images of young people through its *Truth about Youth* programme.

In each of the seven cities, one charity has been selected to help establish projects designed to challenge and change the widespread negative perceptions of young people in their communities over the next two years.

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The Co-operative Foundation's seven *Truth about Youth* cities and charities are:

- Birmingham – Envision
- Bristol – The Prince's Trust (Bristol)
- Cardiff – YWCA
- Glasgow – Young Scot
- London – The Oval House Theatre
- Manchester – The Royal Exchange Theatre
- Newcastle – Regional Youth Work Unit (NE)

*Truth about Youth* is one of several initiatives being undertaken by The Co-operative to support young people – one of three priorities chosen by over 50,000 of its customer-members to shape The Co-operative's Community Plan.

The Co-operative Group stands apart from other major retailers in the UK as a business which is owned, not by a small group of shareholders, but by more than five million consumers. With core interests in food, financial services, travel, pharmacy, funerals and farms, it has an annual turnover of £14 billion, employs 123,000 staff and operates over 5,000 retail trading outlets handling more than 20 million weekly transactions.

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