

# Willing citizens and the making of the good society:

the ideas underpinning the  
practical work of the  
Council on Social Action





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**CoSA paper number one** Willing citizens

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# Willing citizens and the making of the good society

## CoSA paper no. 1

The Council on Social Action was set up by the Prime Minister in 2007. It brings together innovators from every sector to generate ideas and initiatives through which government and other key stakeholders can catalyse, develop and celebrate social action. We consider “social action” to include the wide range of ways in which individuals, communities, organisations and businesses can seek through their choices, actions and commitments to address the social issues they care about.

The Prime Minister encouraged us to be bold. We have tried to learn from what has worked in the past and from what hasn't but to not be burdened by old certainties. Sustained progress depends on a positive response from those to whom our recommendations are directly addressed and from those who influence opinion, particularly in the media. We challenge you, as we are challenging ourselves, to be open-minded, and to be bold.

This paper is the first in a series that is being produced for or by the Council. It sets the scene for our subsequent work on supporting and developing the role of the willing citizen.

The Council has a small support team equivalent to two full-time posts and 14 members – all extraordinary people with lots of ideas but very busy diaries. We are thus especially grateful to the senior civil servants, the many practitioners and to the corporate, public and third sector partners who have contributed generously and enthusiastically to the development of our thinking and to the swift progress of our practical collaborations in our first year.

This report is the work of the Council on Social Action, and as such it makes recommendations to government and to others in its capacity as an advisory body, independent of government. It is not a government document or a statement of government policy.

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# Willing citizens and the making of the good society

## Introduction

The Council on Social Action starts with a belief in the existence of the good society. There is much that is bad in the world; talent wasted, aspirations unrealised, illness endured and harm done. But there is much more that is good; people supporting one another, communities finding solutions to problems, generosity and differences resolved.

The good society is not something that just happens; it has to be made and continually sustained. In this process, more people must be helped to share in the good society. We are optimistic that this can be achieved. This begins with each of us as individuals making two profoundly important decisions; that I want to help make the good society and I believe that I can.

In order to understand how and why people make the decision to act for the good society, we have to explore the way people make choices about what they value, what they want to be part of and how they want to behave. We also have to explore how people can be empowered to play as effective a role as possible in making the good society.

The people who drive the effort to make the good society are *willing citizens*. These people choose to be a part of a local and global community where people show concern for one another. They acknowledge the power of individuals and the value of collaborating to use this power for the collective good. They are 'willing' in the sense that they behave in this way not because they feel they *have to*, but because they *want to*. This gives their effort energy, creativity, confidence and the commitment to persevere.

The good society is made up of willing citizens: the school child who goes over to a new arrival to make them feel welcome; the woman who gives her time to mentor someone; the company chairman who ensures all his staff earn a living wage; the scientist who devotes her career to finding a cure; the nurse who spends time comforting the families of her patients; all those doing the infinite number of things that can make other people's lives better.

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New forms of mass, creative collaboration announce the arrival of a society in which participation will be the key organising idea rather than consumption and work. People want to be players not just spectators, part of the action, not on the sidelines.

Making the good society needs coordinated action between individuals and institutions all pulling in the same direction

## The good society

A major study by the Commonwealth Foundation asked 10,000 people from across the globe to describe the good society. (Knight *et al* 2002) The responses revealed that the good society is:

- **Where basic needs are met** – people have access to sustainable livelihoods, reasonable standards of living, access to utilities, health and education. They feel safe and secure at home and in the community;
- **Where there is association** – people experience a strong sense of belonging and neighbourliness. There is a sense of shared values;
- **Where there is participation** – people feel fairly and justly treated and do not experience social discrimination they feel involved in public affairs and listened to.

The study concludes that in order to achieve the good society the priority is to revive democracy, or in other words, move towards collective decision taking and action in which government is one stakeholder amongst others.

As the Commonwealth Foundation study shows, believing that the existence of democracy means the good society has been achieved comes at a cost. Such oversimplification leads to complacency on the part of those in government and those who vote that once a democratic government is in place, the job is done. It leads to a lack of action and thought on the role of individuals and the public, private and voluntary sectors in sustaining and extending the good society. If our primary interest is making the good society, then democratic representation is one element of that but it is not the whole story.

With continuing inequality and unmet needs, the task for the Council on Social Action is to lead work that will support the genuine participation of diverse groups and individuals in the process of making the good society. Its work must not be about what government or other major forces can do unto others but about what we as a society can do together. People are becoming more directly engaged in many spheres Charles Leadbetter suggests ‘new forms of mass, creative collaboration announce the arrival of a society in which participation will be the key organising idea rather than consumption and work. People want to be players not just spectators, part of the action, not on the sidelines.’

So, making the good society needs coordinated action between individuals and institutions all pulling in the same direction and, as Michael Edwards asks, ‘how do societies decide which direction in which to go?’ (Edwards 2007) In order to set the course that the Council on Social Action will take, it is important to make clear the values that underpin its effort. We put forward the following that might serve as the starting point:

- **We all have power.** There is a desire that this power should be used as a force for good in every part of our lives at home, at work and at play. The wellbeing of us all, our communities and our planet, is dependent on the aggregation of these individual, everyday behaviours. Together, through our actions, we have the power to change the world.

- **We are equal.** There is a belief that the individual is the author of their own life and can and should rise as far as their talents can take them but a recognition that we all need support at some time in our lives. With the right support and access to resources, everyone has the potential to achieve great things.
- **We are all connected.** The actions of each of us impact on the lives of others. Acknowledging this makes us tolerant and respectful of each other and recognise that we are more if we combine and collaborate than if we pursue me-first individualism. There is a sense of solidarity between each other across the world and between us and future generations.
- **We all need to work together.** Our democratic representatives will not, on their own, deliver the change we desire. Our public agencies such as schools or hospitals will not, on their own, create the world we want. Industry, business or the market will not, on their own, provide the means or the answers. Community organisations, social enterprises, trade unions or faith groups will not, on their own, save the world. But all of these are part of the response and unless we work together, we will not succeed. Our best ideas are created when we work together with others who are not like us.
- **We must be guided by those who have least.** People who experience a problem understand it best. Given the opportunity, the right space, an audience willing to listen, access to the right resources and networks, the solutions developed by those who currently have least can change the world.
- **We are optimistic.** We believe that we can succeed in this effort to ensure that everyone shares in the good society.

These are not just intangible, airy words. They find practical expression in the daily lives of society's willing citizens. They inspire people, they determine the ways they lead their lives and they define what people are trying to achieve.

As Prime Minister Gordon Brown wrote in *Britain's Everyday Heroes*, 'our communities across the country are not flawlessly perfect, but nor are they utterly broken.' (Brown 2007) In every place there are willing citizens. Much activity is happening already but there is both a need and the opportunity to do better.

## Willing citizens

The word citizen is, to begin with, a legal term defining membership of a state. In its original form, *civitas*, it defines people united in a city or community. However, the term has grown to reflect a wider set of definitions. Firstly, it implies a set of rights to which individuals are entitled and secondly it sets out a broader set of social and civic responsibilities that an individual must meet. This concept of rights and responsibilities has been an important influence on social policy in recent years.

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New approaches to citizenship seek to move beyond seeing the state as bestowing rights and demanding responsibilities of its subjects. In doing so, they 'aim to bridge the gap between citizens and the state by recasting citizenship as practised rather than given.

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by recasting citizenship as practised rather than given.’ (Cornwall and Gaventa, 2001. p.33)

Furthermore the term has developed to define citizens, not as subjects who are subordinate to the state, but as people who have made a stand and profoundly changed their society. Think of Sylvia Pankhurst, who met with other suffragettes in the building that Community Links now occupies in east London. Or think of Václav Havel, fighting for freedom from totalitarian control in the former Czechoslovakia. In *Power of the Powerless* Havel wrote how he and others were simply a ‘physicist, a sociologist, a worker, a poet, individuals who are doing what they feel they must.’

The sub-title for this novel is ‘Citizens against the state.’ Perhaps, then, it is an odd choice of source in an argument encouraging an approach to citizenship that sees all the parts of society trying to act together. But it would be short sighted to ignore the fact that the actions of the state and, for that matter, business and elements of civil society, can act against the values which are set out above and which drive our work. The challenge is, as is said above, to get all the institutions of society pulling in the same direction.

In addition to addressing dilemmas about the relationship between the individual and the state, exploring the concept of citizenship also reveals other relationships and opportunities. It draws attention to the fact that individuals working in the state are themselves citizens and that their day to day actions at work are intrinsically linked to their day to day actions as individuals, living in families and being part of communities. Similarly, it emphasises the role that citizens working in the private and voluntary sectors can play in making the good society.

This more rounded sense of citizenship is important. On the one hand it encourages the participation of individuals in making the good society. It says that all of us when we are at home, when we go to work and when we meet up with friends and enjoy ourselves are citizens and the things we do can have a positive effect on other people’s lives. On the other hand it strengthens the accountability and responsiveness of our public, private and voluntary institutions as being the sum of the individual actions of their workers. But, there is one underlying requirement for this to work, and that is *willingness*.

This is why we put forward the idea of the *willing citizen* as being the driving force of efforts to make the good society. In the mantra of rights and responsibilities, the idea of *responsibility* is important because it tells us about the obligations we have to each other. But *responsibility* risks being heavy and deadening. If we think about the way the word responsibility is used – we have to *accept* responsibility, people feel duty bound to take responsibility, or they try to refuse or escape it, responsibility can be said to *weigh heavily* on our shoulders.

People choose to be willing citizens not because they are forced from without, but because they are compelled from within. This motivation sets an immediately different course for action much closer to the values set out earlier in this paper. A course that is more positive, proactive, creative and energetic. A course that is also much more likely to be sustained than if a person is motivated by just doing what they told or because they feel guilty. Antoine de Saint-Exupery in *The Wisdom of the Sands* wrote that ‘If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up the men to

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gather wood, divide the work and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.'

What can willing citizens achieve? The idea creates two powerful forces for good. The first is people who, in their day to day relationships and their work, try to live up to the values expressed above. These are people who are prepared to reach beyond themselves to the lives of those around them, locally and globally, to respond to the needs of others and to take action on their own and in collaboration; the father who patiently spends time reading with his child; the woman who brings two communities together to build peace; the shopper who buys fair-trade or who boycotts the company using child labour; the husband who cares for his wife or the child who cares for her parent.

The *results* of this work are substantial and useful, from the smallest act of kindness to the greatest and most bold effort to change the world. But the *process* of doing this work is also valuable. Seeing your actions have a positive effect on the person next to you, or someone on the other side of the world, raises your self esteem and it gives people the confidence and resilience they need to build their own ladder out of problems they face. It creates that sense of personal empowerment which in turn nourishes the desire to achieve more. Kevin Titterton, a volunteer football coach in Sheffield, captures this when he says 'If you can get involved in some voluntary work, it is just brilliant. I know there's a cynical view: that you do it for yourself, for the "feelgood factor", as if there's something wrong with that. If you do voluntary work, yes, you do feel good and you're doing something positive: that is good for your soul, it's good for you as a person. You do start to make a difference, and you see that difference. All the moaning that we all do about the state of things – the gangs of youths, the state of our community – everybody moans about everything, don't they? Everyone says it's not like it used to be, there's no community spirit any more, but they don't do anything about it. If you get involved, you can change something.' (Brown 2007. p.95)

The second force that willing citizens create is a community of people who are prepared to demand, and then accept the need for, bold action by the institutions that represent us in tackling the greatest problems we face. Willing citizens provide the platform for the policy interventions needed to encourage the good society. Perhaps the best example of this is the national consensus that swept in the raft of initiatives inspired by William Beveridge's 1942 report on *Social Insurance and Allied Services* which set out how to replace the myriad approaches to private and voluntary insurance with a system of welfare and health services that was universal and paid for from taxation. Some might not instinctively view the raising of a new taxes as a cause for celebration, to say the least! But it is inspiring to reflect on the decision that society collectively took to give up their own resources for government to spend for the greater good.

In this, government is seen as a progressive force, collecting resources and deploying them on our behalf and taking decisions that will result in improvements to people's lives. But the levers of government are nothing without the consent of wider society. And so the empowered willing citizen is the partner of the enabling state and not the alternative. Willing citizens help to build and then sustain the necessary consensus for action. They are both a pre-condition for, and a necessary step towards,

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achieving what Prime Minister Gordon Brown called in his speech to the United Nations in September 2007 ‘the greatest coalition of conscience in pursuit of the greatest of causes.’ He went on to say; ‘Today we have the science, technology, medicine and wealth: what we need now is the unity and strength of purpose to employ the ingenuity and the resources we have.’ (Brown 2007b)

Willing citizens are the means to achieving this unity and strength of purpose, and they are the result.

This is cross class. It is absolutely not about cosy notions of middle England. Everyone has something to give and to gain from being a willing citizen. This is also cross faith. When Christians say ‘do to others what you would have them do to you.’ When Jews say ‘what is hateful to you, do not to your fellow man.’ When Buddhists say ‘hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful”, they are sending out exactly the same message. When Muslims say ‘no one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself.’ When Sikhs say ‘treat others as you would be treated yourself.’ When Hindus say ‘do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you’ they are, one by one, whatever their differences of theology, expressing a common article of faith – that you support others not by engaging in one-off acts of charity, but by ensuring that fellow human beings have the same freedoms, the same opportunity to develop their potential, and are treated with the same dignity.

This is not a distant utopia because willing citizens already exist in every community, in every government department, in every business and in every voluntary organisation. The 2007 Civil Service Awards celebrated individuals and teams from across the civil service who have made outstanding contributions to improving people’s lives. The Cabinet Secretary’s overall ‘winner of winners’ award went to the peace process team in the Northern Ireland Office for their work on reforming the criminal justice system, managing the relationships with all the parties involved in the peace negotiations and underpinning the work with legislation. Swiss Bank UBS have for 18 years been forging links between its staff in the City and the communities in deprived neighbourhoods in east London, from student mentoring to sponsorship of a new City Academy. And beyond the world of willing citizens at work, a recent pamphlet produced by TimeBank, called *Mentoring for New Migrants*, points out that every other person in this country has been a volunteer in some way in the past year and 1 in 3 of people in Britain volunteers on a regular basis at least once a month. (TimeBank, 2007) The majority of us are already part of this. In the words of the novelist John Buchan, ‘Our task is not to put the greatness back into humanity, but to elicit it, for the greatness is already there.’

## The Council on Social Action and willing citizens

Community organisations are often accused of “preaching to the choir” – seeking to further engage only those people who are already active in the community. To significantly increase the level and extent of willing citizenship the Council on Social Action must answer the following big question:

### How can we make more willing citizens?

This question has to be asked of two very different groups. First, what can we do to encourage those who already feel comfortable and are unconcerned about the discomfort of others? Those like the 1990s MP who said he knew all about the homeless, they are the people you step over on your way out of the opera. Or the city banker, in a letter to the City AM newspaper, saying ‘Who cares if bonuses are lower this year, I can still buy a Porsche.’

Second, what can we do to engage and draw in those who are so vulnerable or disconnected from society that they end up separating themselves further, or worse, causing harm to themselves and others? Those like the members of a family overtaken by drug or alcohol abuse and who make life a misery for each other and their neighbours. The idea of *making* someone *willing* is of course an absurd contradiction. The question here is really what can we do to make people realise what we all have to gain from being willing citizens? The Council on Social Action will have to answer this if it is to reach and engage people in the collaborative effort of making the good society.

In so doing, it has to build its work on an understanding of *identity* and how it is constructed. The identity we choose for ourselves defines the choices we make as members of families and communities, as consumers and as workers. It determines what we value, what we feel part of, who we agree and disagree with, what messages and influences we give importance to, what we want to change and how we want to behave. If ‘We Are What We Do’, then our choice of identity determines that.

Some people get one-dimensional and restricting identities thrust upon them by others. Think of the way a group of young people who chose to wear a particular sort of jumper were branded ‘hoodies’ and endured all that was implied by that term or think of someone coming out of prison who is forever branded an offender. People can also hold many identities at once reflecting different aspects of their lives: father, son, colleague, boss, husband, friend, voter, customer, patient, Leyton Orient fan. But values, when they are deeply held, run through all these to create an intuitive sense of the life we want to lead. As Alvin Toffler said, ‘values are the “big things” you think about whilst you’re doing the small things, so that all the small things go in the right direction.’ Values determine what we take for granted and the assumptions we make, they determine what we define as common sense.

The Council on Social Action needs to understand these processes and the influences that act on people and shape their values. In particular, what information and experiences do people need in order to be convinced that there is a different way of being that is better for all and to choose this path instead? It needs to ask how more people can be encouraged to identify with the values and actions of willing citizens

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'I always think back to the very first family that I worked with. Mum had mental-health issues that hadn't been diagnosed. When I finished working with her after about three or four years, she went to college, got qualifications and is managing her life. She got back in touch with family that she had lost contact with, the children were attending school regularly, and she was happy.'

as defined here. This is important for the Council, because, for the first group mentioned above, convincing people to choose and sustain this identity is the first step on the journey from me-first individualism, looking out for your own interests at the expense of others, to the idea of the willing citizen acting in collaboration with others to make the good society.

It is important for the second group because helping people to see that there is another way of living is the first step on the journey out of isolation and vulnerability towards self confidence and a stake in society. Pat Beattie, a worker with a ground breaking project in Dundee working with families best known for persistent anti-social behaviour recalls 'I always think back to the very first family that I worked with. Mum had mental-health issues that hadn't been diagnosed. When I finished working with her after about three or four years, she went to college, got qualifications and is managing her life. She got back in touch with family that she had lost contact with, the children were attending school regularly, and she was happy... Whereas when I first started working with her, she was distraught, very anxious. I have always felt that I was leaving (families) in a better place than they were when they started off.' (Brown 2007. p.170)

This leads to a second big question for the Council on Social Action:

### **What can we do to make willing citizens feel and be more powerful?**

We have to ensure that everyone has the skills and the resources to contribute to making the good society. This is about *power*: economic power – access to material resources; social power – access to knowledge, skills, and partners for collaboration; political power – access to decision making; and psychological power – the self confidence and belief in one's own ability to bring about change. Perhaps the last of these is the most important. This is the power that the people featured in the book *Britain's Everyday Heroes* have in common. People like Vic Ecclestone who 'simply believed things could be better than they were and set about making them so.' (Brown 2007. p. 211)

The obvious point is that in the exercise of power some people have more influence than others. What we all have in common though is the same instinctive process of thought and action when we see something that we want to change. We ask ourselves what resources and what influence do I have to respond? This is true of the child seeing the discomfort of a new classmate on their first day at school and of the Prime Minister in Number 10 seeing children still growing up in poverty.

Analysing and building power is a vital part of supporting effective willing citizens. The Council on Social Action will have to work to create new opportunities and openings in the practice and structure of power. Its practical work will have to make people *feel* more powerful and possess the tools to be more powerful. Of the Council's first initiatives already underway, the Global Forum on Social Leadership will share learning from across the world about how willing citizens are using their individual and collective actions to build a better world. It will bring willing citizens together in unexpected groupings – world leaders with children, international business leaders with people running micro enterprises. It will inspire new collaborations, actions and networks.

Alongside this, the Prime Minister's Awards for Pro-Social Technology will reward and support the development of ideas which promote the social uses of existing and widely-owned technology. This aims to help willing citizens to be more powerful by bringing these technologies to greater scale making them more widely and more cheaply available so more can use them; it will reward the work of companies developing these technologies and provide incentives to develop more products like this.

So the Council on Social Action's contribution to making the good society is in encouraging and stimulating the work of willing citizens. The Council's role is to bring together leading social activists and innovators and harness their creativity and commitment to this agenda. Their role is to generate new ideas, bring people and organisations together to develop ideas, and support the delivery of initiatives. Albert Einstein said that 'the significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them' and the Council on Social Action needs to look back on its work in later years and say it did extraordinary things. Clayton M. Christensen coined the phrase 'disruptive technology' to describe a technological innovation, product or service that overturns the status quo in its field. Such technologies are, in broad terms, designed either to create new markets amongst non consumers or to meet the needs of mainstream customers who want more. To draw language from a different field, the Council must seek out and develop disruptive innovations in social action which both inspire more towards willing citizenship and enable us all to develop the level, depth and quality of such activity. It must harness the skills and resources of all the sectors as well as the power and influence of the Prime Minister to get all parts of society pulling in the same direction, driven by the values set out at the start of this paper and brought to life by society's willing citizens.

In this, the Council requires an approach that recognises the skills and contributions of public, private and voluntary sectors but also their limits. Pursuing this is certainly not the sole responsibility of individuals on their own, nor of one of the sectors as they are defined. But there are questions for the Council in how its work relates to each of these. The Council will therefore have to ensure that its work programme properly encompasses action across all these areas: Action by individuals, by the public sector, by the private sector and by the voluntary sector.

## Conclusion

We believe that willing citizens are the energy that drives the making of the good society. By encouraging more people to be willing citizens, and by supporting the work of the millions of existing willing citizens, we have an optimistic belief that more people can be helped to share in the good society.

We want to help make the good society and we believe that we can.

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## Council on Social Action Papers

The Council on Social Action has produced a series of papers setting out the CoSA programme.

**CoSA Paper No. 1**, Willing Citizens

**CoSA Paper No. 2**, Side by side: a report setting out the Council on Social Action's work on one-to-one

**CoSA Paper No. 3**, Side by side and Implications for Public Services

**CoSA Paper No. 4**, Collaborative Commitments, written by Prof David Grayson, Doughty Centre for Corporate Responsibility on behalf of CoSA

**CoSA Paper No. 5**, Council on Social Action: Commentary on Year One

**All the CoSA papers are available for download from the CoSA website:**  
[www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/social\\_action.aspx](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/social_action.aspx)

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