

The 'Big Society' comes to Farnham



**Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP
Secretary of State for
Culture, Media and Sport**

and

**Belinda Schwehr
Farnham Humanists**

Some 200 people came to hear Jeremy Hunt explain the Big Society – and to tell him what *they* thought of it. Friday's event was organized by Farnham Humanists in association with Surrey Faith Links and Churches Together. This audience did not want a party political speech and Mr Hunt wisely eschewed the platform, standing among us to give a short explanation of the Big Society before fielding a barrage of challenging questions. Farnham Humanists' Belinda Schwehr chaired the lively discussion.

Mr Hunt said that The Big Society is a vision of *social* renewal - more people taking more responsibility for themselves, for their families, and for their community. David Cameron, he said, hopes to be the first Prime Minister to leave government with less power than when he first took office. The Big Society will only work if we can harness the dynamism of existing organizations. Of 180,000 UK charities 4,000 are in Surrey and 58 in Farnham. Of these Mr Hunt highlighted the Bishop's Meadow Trust in Farnham, Stepping Stone School in Hindhead and Pancreatic Cancer Action in Haslemere.

Mr Hunt stressed that the Big Society is not about government opting out of social responsibility or trying to save money. Nor is it party political. The Labour movement has a long tradition of encouraging cooperatives, volunteering, and self-help.

Government actions to encourage the Big Society included reducing bureaucracy around volunteering, especially Criminal Record Bureau checking; reducing the paperwork needed for smaller charities to claim Gift Aid; encouraging arts organisations to set up US style endowments and the setting up of a Big Society bank to provide £200m of venture capital for social enterprises. Mr Hunt's department had recruited 70,000 Olympic Games volunteers half of whom had never volunteered before. Mr Hunt concluded by saying that the Big Society was a key factor in other government policies, the social services reform, "free" schools and health service reform.

Questions from the floor came thick and fast. Was it the Big Society that was abandoning minimum nutritional standards for school meals; charging VAT on repairs to war memorials; preventing sincere orthodox Christians adopting as they had the “wrong cultural background” for the child in question; closing libraries and museums and increasing unemployment? The government had come to power promising a bonfire of the quangos, slashing red tape but it wasn’t happening.

Celia Sanders felt that air quality and traffic congestion were Big Society matters for Farnham but the people were powerless to take it forward; Steven Cochran thought the division of responsibilities between Waverley and Farnham made the latter powerless. Farnham Residents’ Sophie Lovell wondered what MPs and councillors were *for* in the Big Society. Mr Hunt used these questions to stress his support for ever more decentralization and devolution of power. He felt London had been transformed since it acquired a Mayor, even one with limited powers, and felt it was a shame that the recent elections had found little support for mayors in other cities.

Many deplored apathy among voters, especially the young, as seen in local elections. Businessman George Hesse wondered if holding elections at weekend would increase turnout. Mr Hunt agreed this is a huge issue. Maybe our adversarial political party system puts off the young but he added that this endless scrutiny by the opposition, and the media, is what “keeps politicians honest”. A-level student Dave Parry spoke up for his generation saying that most of his class were politically aware, and committed. A 63 year old lady spoke eloquently for older people. She resented the phrase “burden of the elderly”. Mr Hunt strongly agreed. Much of the voluntary work in Farnham and elsewhere was carried out by the recently retired and we should celebrate that.

Tracey Marlow described the Community Matters Partnership helping charities in Rushmoor whose funding had been cut. The partnership has been nominated for a Big Society award.

But the serious reservations continued, Local Authorities were playing off competing charities against one another, simply to drive down the price paid for services. Frimley Hospital has 700 volunteers; would they continue to volunteer if the hospital was run for profit? Mr Hunt defended private enterprise including much-criticised pharmaceutical companies, who provided vital medicines and had supported his own charity.

David Savage of Farnham Humanists thanked religious organisations for their community work but added that many secular organisations, like Citizens Advice, also play a key part. Government surveys show that non-religious people are just as likely as religious people to volunteer to help our community and the vulnerable. Yet Government spokesmen, like Baroness Varsi, tend only to stress the role of ‘faith groups’. Could this be corrected?

Mr Hunt has been with Baroness Varsi at the Vatican when she made her “militant secularism” speech. He felt that it had been appropriate in context, and that Christian charities did enormous good work, as Gordon Brown had found in Africa.

The questions were still coming at 8:30pm when Mr Hunt had to leave. Belinda Schwehr thanked Mr Hunt and Andrew Carter, Head Teacher of South Farnham School.