

Localism and Big Society: Open for all?

The Coalition Government have announced that their 'ambition is localism' and it is expected that the Localism Bill will become law by November 2011. This means that there will be a 'radical shift of power from Westminster to local people'.

This is a 'Big Society' in which the Government 'trust people to take control of the decisions that affect them by devolving power closer to neighbourhoods, increasing citizen participation, promoting community ownership, lifting inspection burdens on councils and removing regional government'.

The main benefits of the Bill that are highlighted by the Government will include:

- Empowering local people.
- Freeing local government from central and regional control.
- Giving local communities a real share in local growth.
- A more efficient and more local planning system.

This emerging agenda involves plans for increased involvement in the running of public services by voluntary and private sector organisations and a fundamental redefinition of the role of the state as a provider of public services.

The Coalition is being driven by three main themes that feed into one another and run across current Departmental planning:

- The cuts agenda, driven by the debt, means the public sector will be reduced
- A desire to shrink the state in the name of localism and decentralisation: a "control shift".
- A desire and necessity to encourage greater social responsibility, "social action" or "people power" as the Prime Minister recently said and 'take up the slack'.

Big Society and Localism have not been set in stone; there are opportunities to influence the agenda, both nationally and at a local level. The Government will publish the Comprehensive Spending Review on Wednesday 20th October 2010 and will set out spending plans for the years 2011-12 to 2014-15. This will provide further clarification of the Coalition's Programme for Government

Below are some observations on the opportunities and challenges of the emerging agenda, including a few questions on how it might be made to work for social justice and race equality. One North West will work with our partners across the region to lobby for race equality within the Coalition's programme and throughout the region in its implementation. Please visit www.surveymonkey.com/s/Big_Society_and_BME to participate in the response.

Involvement in Service Delivery

The potential of services being delivered locally, being more effective, and targeted to local needs is certainly appealing. Indeed, the BME Third Sector will recognise the view that one size does not fit all and that different communities require alternative approaches and different solutions. Added to this, there is a promise by Government to open up public sector markets to private and voluntary organisations. This means that there will be potential opportunities for BME Third Sector organisations to deliver services within communities, although with stern competition from the private sector.

However, Baroness Warsi has suggested that organisations representing ethnic and religious minorities should see their public funding slashed, arguing that: "We need to move towards a mainstreaming of minority ethnic and religious groups. We need to move towards a place where we don't treat them as specific interest groups." This will provide challenges for the BME Third Sector within the Big Society and a further threat to the sustainability of the sector.

What role does the BME Third Sector have in the building of the Big Society?

What needs to be in place to ensure equitable commissioning and a fair playing field?

Race Equality

There is a danger that the pursuit of localism may come at a cost of a reduced focus on equality and there is a potential for race equality to slip further down the agenda. The ring-fencing of Government grants will be phased out by October 2010, which has potential to impact on specialist services. This is all in the unclear context of the Equality Act, which will subsume the Race Relations Amendment Act with a lack of clarity on the new public sector duties that will be developed.

There is nothing within the Coalitions' plan to ensure equality of opportunity and indeed no central principles of equality are contained within the Structural Reform Plan.

There is concern that as service delivery organisations are given greater freedom, they may place less emphasis on those communities that are most excluded. This is of particular concern in light of the budget cuts, which could mean that service providers' focus on those who successfully access their services, therefore excluding the most marginalised members of our communities.

How can a focus on Race Equality be maintained?

How should BME organisations join with different equality groups to lobby for the importance of equality?

Community Engagement

The Big Society in the age of Localism will require strong community engagement, which will be welcome to many. Recently, the Prime Minister has promised to 'end the days in which capable people become "passive recipients" of state help'; this means more active citizens playing a greater role in their communities.

This was something that emerged from consultations with nearly one hundred BME Third Sector organisations in the North West in February, when it was advocated that by involving communities in the design and delivery of interventions and empowering people as active agents of change, rather than as passive recipients of support, there is the possibility of fundamental change. However, it is unclear what mechanisms will be put in place

What needs to be in place to ensure BME and BME women's representation and involvement?

How can the equality specialists / the BME Third Sector influence Government policy?

Geographical Variations of Equality

Neighbourhoods are seen as the 'building blocks of localism.' Indeed, the key focus of the social justice element of the agenda includes recognition that measures are needed to support the creation of neighbourhood groups in the most deprived areas.

Funding in deprived areas is welcome. However, it fails to recognise a central issue that for many people, communities go beyond the neighbourhood level. Issues relating to equality of access and outcome for already marginalised communities will potentially be more acute in areas where BME people are in a small minority. There will be a difference in quality of service for people between areas as local areas will set their priorities free from central targets. So, areas with little BME representation could potentially mean that BME communities are not seen as priority.

As budgets are squeezed, local authorities may concentrate on delivering services to the majority and those service-users that they know will access the services, which will have damaging effects on those people who are already amongst the most marginalised. For example, NHS Trusts could cut outreach services for communities less likely to access services. As priorities will be set locally, those socially excluded communities, without a voice, could potentially suffer the upcoming cuts in a disproportionate way.

Can you see any problems in your local authority area? Can you evidence this?

How can we ensure that there are minimum standards of equal access and outcome?

Dismantling of Regional Government

The Government has terminated the Regional Development Agencies and are considering dissolving Government Offices. This includes the NW Regional Strategy being revoked, which included development of work around race equality and also included the provision of sites for travellers.

As regional structures are eroded there are concerns that the voice to Government will be reduced, which will serve to disadvantage marginalised communities with little voice in their local areas. Also, as regional strategies are scrapped, there is a possibility that Local authorities will decide not to set aside land for traveller sites, which has potential implications on the human rights of many travellers within the region.

How can un-funded regional or sub-regional bodies continue to influence government policy to ensure that the broader equalities agenda doesn't disappear?

Accountability

Many people will welcome the eradication of targets and shift of accountability to a more local level. However, with the abolition of the Comprehensive Area Assessments and local inspections, there apparently seems to be no safeguards or monitoring in place to ensure a minimum standard of access, which means that the most marginalised individuals, who rely the most on public services, could be excluded even further.

In theory, services directed from Government provide better safeguards and ensure that services focus on those groups that do not access the services as effectively. When decision-making and service delivery are localised, it is more difficult to ensure this, which provides a central dilemma in the localism agenda

Issues relating to equality of access and outcomes are potentially further complicated by the fact that a key feature of localism is that the rolling back of the state will involve services being delivered by private and voluntary sector organisations. This will again raise issues about how it is possible to guarantee equality of access and outcome within the age of localism.

How should the Government ensure accountability? What role can the BME Third Sector play in this?

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