



Open for All?

THE CHANGING NATURE OF EQUALITY UNDER BIG SOCIETY AND LOCALISM

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Executive Summary prepared by
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Centre for Local Policy Studies (CLPS)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This executive summary presents the core findings of research undertaken between February and October 2011 by the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) and the Centre for Local Policy Studies (CLPS) at Edge Hill University. Commissioned by Voluntary Sector North West (VSNW) and the North West Infrastructure Partnership (NWIP) the research has sought to undertake a focused review of the equalities impact and socio-economic implications of emerging government notions around localism and big society and policy reforms around welfare, health, and economic growth.

This work has an emphasis upon voluntary and community sector organisations representing groups with protected characteristics¹ and a range of research methods have been deployed. The research has been undertaken over an eight month period with six research staff involved. We have:

- ❑ undertaken an extensive policy review and produced an associated think-piece;
- ❑ undertaken twelve focus groups with individuals and organisations representing groups with each of the protected characteristics engaging over 200 representatives of the voluntary and community sector across the North West;
- ❑ issued a questionnaire to equalities focused voluntary and community sector organisations across the North West with a return from 86 organisations;
- ❑ developed three area based case studies in Liverpool, Cumbria, and Blackburn with Darwen.

Context

Over the last ten years we have seen the rise in the importance of equalities across public policy and service delivery decision making. A legally embedded equality and human rights framework has been effectively developed which has been concerned with delivering equality of opportunity, fair and equal services, and anti-discrimination. Alongside this legislative framework there has been:

- ❑ a growth in specialist support and advice services across a range of themes;
- ❑ an increase in equalities focused networks and partnerships;
- ❑ an increased opportunity to lobby and advocate upon equalities issues;
- ❑ and an increase in infrastructure representing equalities issues and equalities focused voluntary and community sector organisations.

Despite this policy framework and limited investment there remains significant social and economic inequality in many communities and amongst groups with protected characteristics. The Coalition Government has signalled its intent to carry on the broad approach highlighted above in their Equality Strategy but without the same emphasis upon the associated legislative framework and with an emphasis upon 'fairness' as opposed to 'equality'.

The period since the election of May 2010 has been characterised by a frenzied period of policy making and emerging legislation. The core thrust of policy development has been characterised by a drive to reduce central government prescription and bureaucracy and to hand greater power to communities to develop and deliver their own services. This has however come without an adequate consideration, as our research finds, of the impact of these emerging policies upon equalities groups.

¹ The protected characteristics referred to throughout this report are age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation. We have not discussed marriage and civil partnership, and pregnancy and maternity

Key research findings: impacts on equalities groups in the North West

Having looked at the notions of localism and big society and the reforms around welfare, health, and economic growth the following highlights the key common impacts on equalities issues and equalities focused voluntary and community sector organisations. A full summary of equalities impact is detailed in Appendix A of this executive summary.

1. The emergence of the policy reforms identified above has come at a cost

The policy developments have been developed without sufficient consideration of equalities issues and equalities impact. The Equality Impact Assessments undertaken by central government are patchy, often without sufficient regard to the legislative elements of the Equalities Act 2010. Indeed the whole notion of equalities appears to have taken a step backwards in emerging central policy and as a core value. The language has indeed moved from equality towards fairness suggesting a weakened commitment to equality and those groups with protected characteristics.

2. New forms of representation are weak and excluding groups

Localism places emphasis on community and there was **real concern that this emphasis on geographic community would lead to a weakening of involvement for protected characteristic interests** such as for BME, disabled, and lesbian, gay and bisexual groups. Involvement and engagement are important in governance to secure scrutiny and accountability, but also there are benefits of involvement in the processes for implementation. **Greater consideration needs to be given as to how people with protected characteristics can be involved in the implementation of programmes and the design of services so that they are more effective and responsive to needs.**

3. Cuts are damaging voluntary sector capability to deliver big society

The government have placed great importance on the big society and its contribution to changing the relationship between the state, the individual and society.

However, we cannot view this laudable aim, without viewing it as taking place in an era of cuts. Our evidence suggests that the austerity measures that have been introduced and the way that these are feeding out through local government and the NHS are not leading to the development of a big society. Instead we are seeing a closure and reduction in capacity within the voluntary and community sector. **This work has found that these changes are having a negative impact on equalities in many localities.**

Some smaller and equalities focused organisations had already closed. **There is therefore a great danger that existing capacity to support the big society and the growth of volunteering will be lost. Larger voluntary and community sector organisations may benefit but the sector may be transformed in a way that fails to meet the big society vision.**

4. Welfare reform is having a negative impact on equalities groups

This research work has found that **benefits and services are being reduced in key areas that negatively affect some equalities groups and individuals.** Disabled people and women identified themselves as being in the front line for benefit reform and reductions in services. BME and lesbian, gay and bisexual, and trans groups were concerned about specialist services, that support their effective citizenship through advice, information, training and access to the labour market, would be lost or reduced. **Overall, particular classes of people defined by protected characteristics, were experiencing an unfairness because the new policy framework is liable to reinstate patterns of exclusion and discrimination. This erodes the work of successive equalities legislation that has been attempting to overcome these problems over the past decade.**

5. The implementation of Government policy is disproportionately harming the most excluded

Throughout the focus groups, there was recognition that social and economic deprivation was aggravating barriers to engagement. The socio-economic duty was dropped from the Equality Act 2010, but economic and social deprivation remains a barrier to equalities and its effects intersect with the other barriers to equality experienced by all groups with protected characteristics. Rather than tackling poverty, deprivation and inequality, we would argue **that there is a hardening and a deepening of inequality**

amongst equalities groups and people with protected characteristics; unless there is a place specific commitment from local government to engage and support voluntary and community sector organisations.

6. A real threat to the equalities voluntary and community sector

There are a wide range of organisations that contribute to equalities, some providing specialist services for a particular group within a local area, some providing a regional service supporting local needs and some providing a general commitment to equalities across a wider service. Because of the nature of these services and the communities that they serve many of these organisations have operated through grants or exist as mutuals or through volunteering.

These specialist services have been particularly vulnerable to cuts in small grants and they are more likely to need the support of infrastructure bodies to support their continued survival. The evidence from this work shows that these organisations are coming under increased pressure as demand for their services increase. This pressure on organisations was particularly expressed by disability organisations, BME and lesbian, gay and bisexual, and trans organisations but also the organisations such as Citizens Advice that provide services across the protected characteristics. Beyond this, **there is a very real and growing deficit in the capacity of organisations to properly participate in the new governance structures and hold bodies to account. If equalities are to be effectively supported within these structures then funding mechanisms to support this sector will need to be addressed.**

The shift towards open public services

The equalities impacts described above have been applied to the policy notions of big society and localism and the associated reforms around welfare, health, and economic growth. Since the fieldwork was undertaken the Open Public Service White Paper has proposed five principles that cut across the service delivery agenda. The five principles are choice, decentralisation, diversity, fairness, and accountability. These principles begin the conversation about developing a framework for coherent reform.

Based upon the key findings outlined above we would argue that government need to consider the following core questions to explore how equality could play a radical role in social change:

- ❑ **Choice** – ‘where possible we will increase choice’:
 - How can we have choice over services when specialist equalities focused services are being removed and people have to travel further distances to access services? How can we truly have choice driven change without an understanding of the diversity of need?
 - Who monitors and provides the evidence of service need for groups with protected characteristics?
- ❑ **Decentralisation** – ‘power should be decentralised to the lowest appropriate level’
 - How can decentralisation be achieved without intermediaries and voluntary and community sector infrastructure to provide support and advice?
 - What happens to the array of equalities knowledge and legislative process which has been developed over the last ten years? Will this feed into new provision?
- ❑ **Diversity** – ‘public services should be open to a range of providers’
 - What happens to the equalities focused voluntary and community sector organisations that do not have the capacity, skills, knowledge or experience to bid for and deliver public services?
- ❑ **Fairness** – ‘we will ensure fair access to public services’
 - What happens in those localities and communities where the cuts in public expenditure are having a disproportionate impact on economic and social inequality?
 - How is the voice of the most marginalised heard in service decision making and delivery?
- ❑ **Accountability** – ‘public services should be accountable to users and taxpayers’
 - Who provides a voice, network and lobbying role for equalities focused voluntary and community sector organisations and groups with protected characteristics?

The need for a new framework to support social justice within localism

Throughout the impacts and questions described above three key themes have been emerging.

The first is concerned with measurement of impact and the lack of consideration of equalities in emerging central government policy agendas. There is **a clear need for robust systems to be in place that can measure and monitor equalities impact** as this is a very broad agenda for social change as policy rolls out. The second is **about representation, accountability and involvement**. The third is that **policy change is having a significant and unequal impact on service provision and inclusion and this must be redressed**.

These three themes raise **the question of how equalities will be assured within a new system of governance and within a society increasingly driven by markets, whether that is the conventional private sector market, or as we suggest a social market which is open to all and offers real opportunity and genuine change. The transformative potential of equalities focused voluntary and community sector groups has not yet been understood**.

The current government has rejected centralised target driven approaches for measurement and governance and what is required now is a new approach based on evidence and based on accountability at the local level. **For this to be achieved, a new framework for social justice is required to ensure that equalities and groups with protected characteristics are a central part of localism and the big society**. This focus upon the need for a new framework to support social justice within emerging policy frames our key ways forward from this research. As such the ways forward are related to the government and are entwined in the principles of the Open Public Services White Paper.

Ways forward

- ❑ The Government must recognise that a Social Justice Framework needs to be developed that ensures public services are **accountable** to all users and taxpayers.
- ❑ The Government must develop a more joined up approach to understanding and addressing the impact on equalities groups across all policy areas and Government Departments to ensure **fairness** in provision.
- ❑ The Government must undertake an urgent review of the role of equalities groups in the public service agenda to enable true **decentralisation**.
- ❑ The Government must consider how they can involve equalities focused voluntary and community sector organisations in the process of **diversifying** service provision.
- ❑ The Government must adopt a more consultative approach to service provision which builds in the consideration of people with protected characteristics to ensure everyone has access to the best **choice** of services for them.

Appendix A: Equalities impact and socio-economic implication of emerging policy

Beyond the common concerns and issues identified above, this research has utilised a host of primary methods to identify the detailed impact of the emerging policy notions and reforms upon equalities issues, equalities focused voluntary and community sector organisations, and upon wider social and economic considerations. Table 1 provides an overview of the common findings of the equality impact assessment undertaken by CLPS and CLES for each of the notions of localism and big society; and the reforms of welfare, health and economic growth.

Table 1: Equality impact of emerging policy

Equality Impact	Localism	Big Society	Welfare	Health	Economic Growth
More difficult to access services and more distance to travel	✓		✓	✓	
Cuts in funding and reduction of specialist services	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Loss of networks and partnerships for equalities focused voluntary and community sector organisations	✓	✓			✓
Fewer reporting mechanisms and support for hate crime	✓				
Reduced understanding of community need	✓		✓		
Loss of equalities voice in public services	✓	✓		✓	✓
Difficult to engage in service delivery due to equalities organisation size and capacity	✓				
Marginalisation of communities with protected characteristics	✓				
Reduced ability to lobby and advocate	✓	✓			
Lack of understanding of what policy means	✓		✓		
Growth in demand to provide volunteer placements but a lack of funding to provide training		✓		✓	
Loss of equalities knowledge and specialism		✓	✓	✓	✓
Increased unfair pressure to work			✓		
Increased harassment and prejudice			✓		
Reduced income for groups with protected characteristics			✓		
Humiliation for groups with protected characteristics			✓		
Loss of equalities monitoring mechanisms				✓	
Lack of understanding of equalities issues				✓	
Lack of equalities representation on Boards				✓	✓
Lack of access to opportunities					✓

About the organisations

About NWIP and VSNW

The North West Infrastructure Partnership (NWIP) is a partnership of 28 regional and sub-regional voluntary and community sector infrastructure organisations who come together to provide a coherent voice for the voluntary and community sector at regional level. It is facilitated by Voluntary Sector North West (VSNW). Voluntary Sector North West is the regional voluntary sector network for the North West. The purpose of VSNW is to ensure that the voluntary, and community sector (VCS), in all its diversity, takes its full part in shaping the future of the North West. VSNW members provide community services, regenerate neighbourhoods, support individuals, promote volunteering and tackle discrimination.

About CLES

Established in 1986, the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) is an independent think-doing organisation and network of subscribing organisations involved in regeneration activities, local economic development and local governance. CLES is involved in a number of activities, including: policy research; information and briefing service; events and training; consultancy trading arm; and policy advice function. CLES is a national organisation, with our work supporting regeneration and local economic development in localities across the United Kingdom. CLES has recently acquired New Start magazine and launched a new online service; increasing our capacity to disseminate research findings and policy messages to a wide audience of policy-makers and practitioners across the economic/community development and regeneration sector.

About CLPS

The Centre for Local Policy Studies (CLPS) has been established, since 1993, at Edge Hill University to provide a focus for work on local governance and community development. Within this framework we are concerned with all aspects of policy, organisation and management at the local and sub-national level as they occur in Britain, Europe and internationally. In addition to local policy and theory, the Centre has a concern with those aspects of national policy-making which impact on local and regional structures. Specialist areas of work include: equality, third sector, engagement and partnerships.

About the authors

This report has been written by Matthew Jackson, Head of Research at CLES and Stuart Speeden, Director of Centre at CLPS.

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Further information

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