

GMCVO

**Greater Manchester  
Equalities & Human Rights  
Parliament**

## **Position Statement on ‘Big Society’, localism and equalities in the voluntary sector**

**Intended audience: the Office for Civil Society, the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities, local authorities in Greater Manchester and the wider Greater Manchester voluntary sector**

### **Who we are:**

The Equalities and Human Rights Parliament (EHRP) is a voluntary sector strategic partnership comprising over 20 equalities-based organisations, working across the Greater Manchester sub-region, and hosted by Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation. The EHRP takes a pan-equality, human rights-based approach towards inequality and disadvantage and is reflective of the seven equality strands as well as the less represented or ‘hidden strands’, such as people with mental health issues. The EHRP works to influence and advise on policy and practice across the public and voluntary sectors.

The EHRP’s vision is: “To make Greater Manchester a place where individual human rights are recognised and respected: where fairness and equality for all is embedded in policy, practice and attitudes”

### **What we do:**

The equalities-based voluntary sector works with ‘communities of interest’ focusing on individuals and groups that have a particular equality identity or protected characteristic. In the Greater Manchester sub-region equality-based voluntary sector organisations (and groups) often span geographical boundaries and play a significant role in ensuring that communities’ needs are met and their rights are upheld. Although the EHRP takes a pan-equality, human rights-based approach to inequality and disadvantage we believe that it is important to recognise the value of ‘single’ equality strand-focused organisations and the knowledge/expertise that these organisations have and their contribution towards building a fairer Greater Manchester.

Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation  
St Thomas Centre, Ardwick Green North, Manchester M12 6FZ

Registered Charity No. 504542

GMCVO, Co Ltd by Guarantee No. 1223344, St Thomas Centre, Co Ltd by Guarantee No. 4185719

T: 0161 277 1000 E: [gmcvo@gmcvo.org.uk](mailto:gmcvo@gmcvo.org.uk) W: [www.gmcvo.org.uk](http://www.gmcvo.org.uk) [www.gmvss.net](http://www.gmvss.net)

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## Context:

“You can call it liberalism. You can call it empowerment. You can call it freedom. You can call it responsibility. I call it the Big Society.”  
**David Cameron: 19 July 2010**

The EHRP recognises ‘Big Society’ as a radical and progressive agenda that wants to reshape the relationship between the state and its people, with a much stronger emphasis on individual and collective action and responsibility standing in sharp contrast to the ‘Big’ welfare state of previous governments.

Certainly, we believe that ‘Big Society’ is closely aligned with ‘civil society’, of which the voluntary sector and voluntary action is a major part and that the voluntary sector should be integral to the vision where “people power” will “take up the slack”. Funded, in part, by the ‘Big Society Bank’ this agenda can be seen to continue much of the work that is already currently delivered by both the generic and equalities-based voluntary sector.

Additionally, ‘Big Society’ is underpinned by **localism** and the ‘control shift’ of powers from central to local government which will work to empower local communities and the people who live in them. However, we are aware that both initiatives will be tempered by stringent cuts to public sector services as the government strives to reduce the national deficit.

We acknowledge that this radical shift will present challenges for all sectors but we believe that this should not be at the expense of the most vulnerable and marginalised members of our society.

## Key issues:

- There are significant concerns that the localism agenda will focus on geographical areas which might not account for ‘communities of interest’. Equalities-based groups/networks often span geographically defined areas – will their needs be met or will they slip through the gaps?
- The impact of the localism agenda on vulnerable and marginalised minorities without a ‘voice’. Not everyone has the means or capabilities to help themselves or others. Will it be a case of who shouts loudest will get the most? What will happen to unpopular minorities, such as trans people, Gypsy/Roma/Travellers and asylum seekers: will these people and communities be further excluded? What about the most vulnerable or marginalised (e.g. women, children, disabled) within these unpopular minorities: how will their needs be met?
- The impact of the recession and cuts to public services. The Greater Manchester sub-region is home to many diverse ‘communities’ that are already economically and politically disadvantaged. How can the voluntary sector/the government ensure that these communities are not further marginalised, excluded or ‘left behind’?
- How will a self-organising ‘Big Society’ overcome the systemic inequality present in the current economic system?
- De-regulation: In the absence of national frameworks who will decide on what services are required and who will be accountable if current provision is no longer delivered?

- ‘Marketplace’ driven services: Serious concerns over the possible privatisation of essential public services. Where are the lines of accountability? What will happen if a service provider fails to deliver? Is there a mechanism to prevent ‘post-code lotteries’?
- What will the wider impact on the voluntary sector be when funding is cut? Will small support organisations ‘lose out’ to larger national organisations that can undercut costs? How will this impact on local equalities-based support organisations and the people they represent and serve?

## We believe:

- That ‘equality’ should be the conscience of localism.
- A diverse voluntary sector has a fundamental role to play in realising the government’s vision of ‘Big Society’ although it will require continued support, investment and development to achieve this.
- That the generic and equalities-based voluntary sector plays an important part in facilitating ‘well-being’; helping individuals to organise by forming groups and networks.
- That the ‘procurement provision’ set out in the Equality Act 2010 should be vigorously enforced to ensure that services are delivered to all communities in an equitable, fair and accessible manner.
- That the ability to influence locally need not be linked to a geographic area and that there needs to be a robust system to ensure that marginalised communities do not lose their hard-won rights.
- Localised services should not come at the cost of inequality. We believe that there must be clear and established lines of accountability to ensure that services are consistently delivered, maintained and managed.
- Campaigning on social justice issues has always been a key task of voluntary action. We believe that this should remain a vital role of the sector within ‘Big Society’.
- To prevent the continued exclusion of marginalised minorities it is important to ensure that access, in the broadest of senses, is prioritized. This means ensuring that venues, days and times for meetings and consultations are accessible to the widest possible audience.

## We call for:

- We call on the government to ensure that ‘Big Society’ does not increase the levels of inequality and disadvantage that are already prevalent in British society: that effective measures are embedded to ensure equality of opportunity for all people and communities as power is devolved to the local level and that the ‘Big Society’ recognises the significant and effective impact and influence the voluntary sector has.
- We call on the government and local authorities in Greater Manchester to implement a system of checks and balances to guarantee that the rights of non-geographic communities are upheld and that the rights of the most marginalised and voiceless are guaranteed and expanded upon. This system

should contain a requirement to include equality and diversity representation in all consultation frameworks and events and ensure the involvement of local people in community activities to ensure that buildings, organization of meetings and information is accessible for all.

- We call on the government and local authorities in Greater Manchester to make sure that social justice is at the heart of 'Big Society' and that due recognition is given to equalities-based communities, but that these communities are not viewed in isolation from one another. We call on the government, public bodies and the wider voluntary sector to promote the provisions and rights set out in the Equality Act and the Human Rights Act and to continue working towards social justice and a more equitable society for all.
- We call on the government and local authorities in Greater Manchester to provide support and adequate resources for the equalities-based voluntary sector to ensure that widespread inequality and disadvantage are not compounded by lack of voice, resources, services or local opportunities. And as such, we call for investment and support for those groups/'communities' that are already disadvantaged and discriminated against within 'small society'.
- We call on the government and local authorities in Greater Manchester for a system of regulation to ensure that there are clear levels of accountability for the distribution of resources and a minimum standard of service delivery to ensure equitable access and outcomes irrespective of locality or protected characteristics.
- We call on the government to support the voluntary sector infrastructure and networks which promote collaboration, the building of civil society and dialogue between different groups.
- We call on the voluntary sector to take on the mantle within 'Big Society' as watchdog and shepherd: overseeing the promotion of equitable practices as well as the provision of advice, guidance and support for new and existing community-based organisations.



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