

Is Big Society Still Equal to Deaf People?

Observational views from Craig Crowley, CEO of Action Deafness

I took the time and opportunity to gather views, comments and concerns prior to and from the UKCOD Conference on Big Society on 21st June 2011.

The local, regional and national deaf sector organisations are facing challenging times and an uncertain future due to the shift of focus away from equality of deaf people, the unprecedented level of public spending cuts and the move away from grants and towards commissioning. Within this climate, many people may see a diminished deaf sector; however this would undermine efforts to build the Big Society.

The failure to effectively engage with equalities issues carries the potential risk that current policies, from the Big Society to Health Reforms, will have significant implications for equalities issues and may in fact exacerbate established inequalities across the protected characteristics.

With this in mind, the role of deaf sector organisations that meet the needs of, and lobby for, Deaf, Hard of Hearing, deafened and deafblind will become increasingly important.

Yet, the sector is under threat as a result of public sector spending cuts and the subsequent reductions in local authority grants. There is a real risk that equalities-focused deaf sector organisations, which are often smaller and more reliant on volunteers than 'mainstream' organisations, will lack the capacity to deliver public services and as a result may even get left behind.

Moreover, those organisations that are in a position to engage in commissioning and contracting may find that their ability to contest government on issues affecting Deaf people is constrained.

Discussions by groups have identified the key reasons why the deaf sector organisations representing deaf people is so important. These were based around three key factors:

Inequality: The deaf sector organisations emerged from a lack of accessible services and inequality within society that still persists today. The sector is an essential way to bring about equality within society. Conversely, the long term socio-economic costs of an unsustainable deaf voluntary and community sector are enormous.

Delivering Services and Engaging Communities: Whilst often delivering effective services to the whole community, deaf sector organisations understand the needs of deaf people, their wider communities and engage with them most effectively, due to a wide variety of factors that includes cultural understanding, commitment and expertise, the provision of safe spaces and the holistic approach that is often taken

Advocacy: The local, regional or national deaf sector organisation is an essential partner for national and local Government in order to communicate the needs of deaf communities that public authorities and mainstream voluntary/private sector organisations consider 'hard to reach'.

It seems to me that the budget cuts, Big Society and Localism have the potential to create unreasonable impact on disadvantaged deaf people in the wider communities throughout.

So, as to make sure that Big Society has **equality** at its heart I believe UKCOD should perhaps call for the following:

LISTEN, VALUE AND INVEST IN DEAF PEOPLE AND VOLUNTARY & COMMUNITY SECTOR ORGANISATIONS: It seems to me that the deaf sector organisations representing deaf people has actually been delivering with the 'Big Society' concept for many years and many of us can deliver on Government and local priorities in an innovative and value-driven way even to the most marginalised communities.

However, the role of the sector in promoting the **local ACTION voice** of under represented voices needs support to ensure that deaf people are included in Big Society.

Furthermore, the value and expertise of deaf organisations must also be recognised both nationally and locally, particularly as the budget cuts will and have also already impacted the most on deaf people.

Some deaf organisations have been proven to be good value for money and it is crucial to improve investment in order to secure both the short and long-term goals of saving money and ensuring better futures for all deaf people and the wider community.

CONSIDER THE IMPACTS OF DECISIONS AND POLICY ON THE MOST VULNERABLE: Equality and accessibility are essential to the Big Society. To ensure that Big Society includes the most vulnerable, Equality Impact Assessments should be completed on all decisions that are being made, especially proposed major policy changes and funding cuts. This must include consultations with deaf, hard of hearing, deafened and deafblind communities.

In addition, the recognition of deaf people with multiple disadvantages must also be considered in order to ensure that the most vulnerable members of our society are not excluded.

ENSURE MINIMUM STANDARDS OF ACCESS AND OUTCOMES: The access to a quality service for all is fundamental to any fair and equal society. There must be some minimum standards of access and outcomes to ensure that deaf people from wider communities, within any area, are not further marginalised. Government and local authorities should monitor the access and outcome for the most vulnerable individuals

ENSURE EQUITABLE COMMISSIONING: A Common Standards for Equalities in Procurement that embeds equality and diversity in procurement practices of public authorities and also amongst private sector contractors would perhaps support more equitable commissioning.

Additionally, the ability of deaf sector organisations to significantly increase their role in delivering services requires the process to recognise the added value that is brought by them and also to include more deaf people representation on commissioning panels at all levels where possible.

RECOGNISE THE IMPORTANCE OF GRANTS: Grants should be recognised as an essential part of the funding mix and as a more suitable way of funding many small, particularly grassroots organisations.

By giving organisations more autonomy and reducing the administrative workload grants can provide value for money and an effective way to support local and regional organisations as well as allowing for innovation and targeting deaf people that have less access to services.

“UK DEAF STRATEGY 2020”: Because of the uncertainty facing deaf people all over the UK perhaps UKCOD need to consider asking its members to set up a new and important initiative which should draw attention, support and active cooperation from all involved with deafness / hearing loss.

We have seen what UK Vision Strategy have done for people with blindness/sight loss but I believe that because of the Big Society agenda perhaps local, regional and national deaf sector organisations should get together to promote improvement in the care, quality of life and opportunities for deaf people.

Perhaps it is time for deaf sector organisations to set up new UK DEAF STRATEGY 2020 with an objective to research, find and review of the current evidence base that would inform, support and underpin these strategic aims:

- 1. *the current and future impacts of deafness, culture and hearing loss, including the health, social and economic impacts;***
- 2. *current practice and access to services; and***
- 3. *national and local initiatives in deafness/hearing loss which could provide a framework for informing future policy and development ie: Bi-lingualism, Hearing Loss Screening; Deaf Leadership Development; legal protection of deaf people***

TEN SUGGESTED WAYS TO MAKE THE BEST OF BIG SOCIETY FOR DEAF PEOPLE AND DEAF SECTOR ORGANISATIONS

1. MAKE EQUALITY THE MAIN GOAL

- Robust social justice framework
- Fair and sustainable
- Shared understanding
- Rules of engagement
- 'User-Led Organisations' (ULOs) becoming more important

2. BUILD A BROADER ECONOMY

- deaf communities cannot solve on their own
- shared responsibility
- clear understanding of social and economic factors
- open, accessible economy
- stronger, democratic control in the interests of community

3. BUILD A BIGGER DEMOCRACY

- Deaf people and deaf sector organisations (including ULOs) to work together to promote local action with the central and local government
- Equal chance
- Contribute and benefit
- Transform rather than 'obliterate'
- Changing way it works
- Smaller and strategic state to plan for the long term
- Engaging and participating in government decision-making at local and national levels

4. PARTICIPATE, PARTICIPATE, PARTICIPATE

- Direct action by deaf people and locally/regionally based organisations/groups
- Deaf people must be able and willing to participate
- Same for small groups and deaf sector organisations
- Those with less capacity to build up knowledge, skills and confidence
- Big Society will not work if there is no adequate or consistent support for local deaf people and organisations
- Attitudinal changes needed

5. STANDARD WAY OF GETTING THINGS DONE

- Providers, purchasers, contractors and users to work together
- Equal and reciprocal partnership
- Pool of different kinds of knowledge & skills
- Encourage to join in and be part of a common cause by building local/regional networks
- Strengthens capacity of local groups
- More resources, better outcomes, less volume of 'need'
- properly supported by Board of Trustees/Directors of deaf sector organisations and local groups

6. TRANSFORM ROLE OF PROFESSIONALS

- Despite Commissioners admission that Big Society is still 'vague'
- They need to change how they think about themselves
- influence positive change
- Understand others and how they also operate
- Learn to work in partnership with users/stakeholders
- Gaining value and respect of users
- Facilitate action via brokering/connecting relationships
- Working with people rather than doing it 'to' or 'for' them

7. UNPAID/PAID TIME OPPORTUNITY

- Big Society encourages 'time-out' paid opportunity for charitable/local cause
- Opens up new incentives for unpaid activities
- Help to spread opportunities for paid employment with 21 hours per week as minimum standard
- Important for redressing inequalities for deaf people who are unemployed and interested in such incentives

8. STABLE, SUSTAINABLE & SUFFICIENT

- Must be stable and viable in the long term
- Social and economic terms
- Sustainable plan for the future generations
- Strong focus on prevention
- Sufficient level of services and future costs for deaf people
- Shift of values to help shape economic growth

9. MEASURE WHAT MATTERS THE MOST

- How its different elements will have performed
- New ways of working assessment
- There shouldn't be short term financial effect but longer term and wider impact on deaf people and groups
- Must take notice and account of any unintended consequences
- If overlooked it will have substantial impact for the longer term
- Work with deaf people who are directly involved in Big Society
- Help shape judgements about success and failure and future planning & investment

10. MAKE IT PART OF UK DEAF TRANSITION

- Radical change is needed – 'call of action'
- Bigger society – 'bigger deaf society'
- Broader economy
- Bigger democracy
- Shift from unsustainable path to a system where everyone in deaf sector organisations, groups and individuals concerned are able to survive and thrive on equal basis
- Changing how we live or work
- Organise our economy and society
- Safeguard our equality, accessibility and awareness

- Route towards better quality of life and opportunity for deaf people
- Growing movement of deaf people and deaf sector organisations – (UK DEAF STRATEGY CAMPAIGN)
- Transition on this scale for deaf people can be realised and sustained over time.

Glossary:

'deaf' - represents those who are Deaf, hard-of-hearing, deafened and deafblind children, young people, adults and older people from all walks of life

'deaf sector organisations' – represents voluntary, community and private sector organisations representing/serving deaf, hard of hearing, deafened and deafblind people

Craig Crowley
Chief Executive, Action Deafness
Email: ceo@actiondeafness.org.uk