

Faiths in the Big Society: What Next?

Opportunity and challenge

As the new year dawns we are entering a strategic time for Faith Communities in the city of Nottingham. The challenge of the “Big Society” post the financial cuts will become clearer. We can of course be cynical towards the new Government’s Big Society policy, politically or otherwise. Though I much regret the cuts in public services that are now beginning to take effect, my view is that we must be positive, accept the challenges and seize any opportunities Big Society offers to Faith Groups and the community partnerships we are committed to.

Part of my role as Faiths Advocate on the One Nottingham Partnership Board is to be a communications link and catalyst for future possibilities. For the last 6 months or so since my election, I have been listening and learning; also meeting some of the key players both in the City Council, on the One Nottingham Board, at NCVS and amongst Faith Community leaders. It has taken some time to begin to get earthed in the history, vocabulary and networks involved. At the same time, and due to the massive change brought about by the new Government’s policies, understanding how One Nottingham works has been something of a moving target. Even in my short time on the Board the City Council’s ability to support and partner the voluntary sector, of which faiths are a part, in terms of future resourcing has been much diminished.

The reality of cuts

We have known from the start that the reality of Big Society means big cuts! Since the detail of the Government’s Comprehensive Spending Review has become clearer we now know Nottingham’s budget has been hit far harder than most other local authorities. In a recent letter to One Nottingham Board members Councillor David Mellen, Chair of One Nottingham wrote:

“Nottingham City council has been one of the hardest cut councils in the country. We face the 21st biggest cut and according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation we are the 12th most disadvantaged local authority area. Councils with relatively low levels of deprivation have fared much better than Nottingham.....

... as the council will be cut by 8.8% to its Revenue Support Grant, cuts in reality reaching 16.5%, when the Area Based Grant funds are included, the Council’s ability to respond to all the areas of need coming from the WNF is seriously handicapped.”

It is the WNF (Working Neighbourhoods Fund) which has funded the vast majority of partnership community working through One Nottingham in recent years. WNF has also funded the strategic support for this work through NCVS, which will be significantly reduced when WNF funding ends in March 2011. The consequences are serious as well as obvious:

- Many people will lose their jobs
- New jobs will be in short supply
- The most needy and disadvantaged in society will be the most vulnerable when the full effects kick in over the next few months.
- Much essential community partnership work, some run by our Faith Groups, will lose their funding and some of this work will be threatened, diminished or cease altogether.

That is the challenge, but also the opportunity! If we do not treat this situation as an opportunity we will be doing our communities and our faiths a disservice.

A commitment to future partnership through One Nottingham

At its last meeting in late November the One Nottingham Board spent some time discussing the way ahead. All were agreed that the valuable partnership networks, methodology and support that has been pioneered

by One Nottingham should continue, whatever the resourcing outlook is. A number of us, including myself, made the point that while proper financial resourcing is crucial, wherever possible, it is not the only key element within partnership. There is in fact some community partnership work which needs very little in the way of funding, and it is often in these areas that Faith Communities are most involved and sometimes bring their own resourcing to the table.

Challenging the Government where necessary

Government ministers have stressed that faith groups are vital to the success of the Big Society, and they recognise that together we have by far the biggest number of community volunteers in the land. Yet we can't simply take the weight of responsibility for all those areas where gaps will arise. If there is the assumption that voluntary groups will carry the whole load, we will have to speak out.

In a recent speech to the General Synod of the Church of England the Bishop of Leicester urged faith groups to show caution. *"They (the Government) must be realistic and not raise expectation that we can take on the care of the elderly, children and asylum seekers. It's not going to work..... There can't be the throwing of a switch such that the state walks out and the church (and others) walk in."* Although faith groups may be willing to play a greater part in community life, their enthusiasm and engagement should not mean the government roll back on its responsibilities to the needy. Faith communities can't do it all on their own. They can have a bigger role, but will need to bring in others to train, create and co-ordinate. . The new Equality Act could also work in our favour with its duty on public bodies to ensure non discrimination towards groups with unique characteristics. The previous negative stance by national and local government to funding faith bodies for social enterprise should thereby be removed.

The way ahead

The Challenges for Faith communities within the Big Society are:

1. Are we are willing to offer even more volunteers, energy, and commitment through our individual projects and partnerships for the health and well being of our city communities?
2. Will we enhance our partnership with the City Council, education, business and other voluntary agencies despite the lack of funding available?
3. Will we commit further funding of our own where appropriate?
4. Will we be willing to take the lead in accessing funding direct from Government where the Council is not able to, yet retaining our partnership with them in delivering community service?
5. How can we access best training for our volunteers if this strategy is to be achieved?

There is much more to critique in this new social enterprise world we appear to be entering, but the task now is for faith groups to be well prepared to face the challenges and take the opportunities that will arise

Big Society is not a novelty. The church and other faith communities have been doing it for centuries. Together we are called to value people and serve our communities. Let's do it where we can.

Peter Hill, Archdeacon of Nottingham and Faiths Advocate One Nottingham Board. 26/01/11