



CHARITIES AND
VOLUNTEERING

INAUGURAL MEETING

RESETTING THE RELATIONSHIP WITH GOVERNMENT

Wednesday 20th November: 3.00pm – 4.30pm

Room T

Portcullis House

Attendees: Mary Foy MP, Ian Roome MP, Abtisam Mohamed MP, Maya Ellis MP, Helen Maguire MP, Daniel Francis MP, Baroness Pitkeathley, Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbotts, Baroness Sater.

Mary Foy MP introduced the topic for discussion, highlighting the government's recent announcement of a new Civil Society Covenant Framework, which recognises the voluntary sector as an important part of society. She then introduced the speakers, each of whom spoke for 5-10 minutes each.

Saskia Konynenburg, Executive Director, National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)

- NCVO is the largest membership body for charities in England, with over 17,000 members, ranging from local grassroots community groups to large 'household name' charities.
- The development of the Covenant is being led by NCVO and ACEVO on the civil society side, and DCMS and Number 10 on the government side.
- We have been encouraged by the meetings we have had so far with government officials, junior and senior ministers.
- One of the big aims of the Covenant is to foster greater collaboration between charities and public bodies so charities can be partners in decision making.
- We know charities have the answers to many of the challenges currently facing society, because we know our communities so well.
- We are currently in the consultation period and there are opportunities to feed into that process via online workshops and a feedback form on our website that closes on 12th December.
- We expect a draft of the Covenant to be ready towards the end of February.

Rebecca Mear, Chief Executive Officer, Voscur

- Voscur is the support and development agency for Bristol's voluntary sector. We help to create an ecosystem where communities are empowered to improve their own lives.
- In preparation for this meeting, we did a quick-fire survey to understand what our members think of the Covenant. We received around 30 responses.
- I was struck by the range of public bodies that were covered in the responses: not just local authorities, but police and crime commissioner units, integrated care boards etc.

- The bottom line from our survey is that the Covenant must come with teeth and money, but there are several other points I would like to make.
- Government should allow community organisations to define not just delivery but also outcome.
- The best practice in public bodies right now is giving charities control of how they deliver outcomes, but communities also know what changes needs to happen and should be in control of outcomes.
- Real investment will be required! This can't just be about practices. We need more than 6–12-month funding streams.
- A lot of money could also be saved on admin costs with less focus on monitoring to meet government targets to prove 'value for money'. Reporting can be extremely onerous and is deeply disproportionate.
- Charities also cannot provide the analysis and detail expected because the tools and expertise haven't been invested in.
- Relationships with funders can also be difficult. Because of cuts to government headcounts, sometimes the collaborator and the commissioner are the same person, which creates a conflict of interest.
- High staff turnover in both charities (because of uncertain funding environment) and public bodies (because of cuts) also makes these relationships more difficult because trust cannot be built over time.
- Public bodies should view themselves as enablers, as removers of barriers, and should not seek to control charities. One survey respondent said, "We can be agile, but we aren't free."
- Flip the usual way of doing things: come to our spaces, instead of us coming to yours, and see how you can add value to what we are doing, not the other way around.
- Finally, we cannot get away from the fact that the increase announced in the Autumn Budget to employer's NICs is poor timing with the Covenant because it will hit charities. Based on our survey responses, the average increased cost to our members will be 4.8% a year.

Karen Wint, Chief Executive, Sister Circle

- We are a women's health charity based in north-east London and are integral to some of the public services we work with, including perinatal services and health visiting.
- These services are in trouble but we are helping to shape the services to make sure the women who need our help aren't falling through the gaps.
- We are fortunate enough to receive ICB commissioning contracts as part of that work as well as local health funding.
- Having said that, procurement processes are far too complicated and we are being driven by last minute decisions in those bodies. Our staff are insecurely employed so they leave and then you have to start from scratch.
- One example of good practice: the Mayor of London's VAWG Grassroots Fund. This has been co-produced by the charities themselves. We influenced the theory of change and

the application processes, to make sure capacity-building for grantees was one of the aims.

- The contrast to this is that far too many public bodies are obsessed with short-term thinking and pilots.
- There are lots of other examples of best practice around the country, like the National Lottery's ten-year funding to Blackpool.
- We have now designed a new database to create an evidence base so we can dictate what our KPIs will be and ensure our monitoring data is helpful and relevant to our beneficiaries and volunteers.
- None of it is easy work. But the fragility around funding makes it much harder.

Q&A

Mary Foy MP questioned whether DCMS will be talking to funders as part of their work on the Covenant, because charities appear forced to adapt to funding requirements rather than funding requirements adapting to the good ideas of charities. Ian Roome agreed and shared that the multi-year funding settlements guaranteed by the new Labour government should provide some stability to charities working with local authorities.

Alasdair Grant from the Centre for Deaf and Hard of Hearing People spoke about the importance of empowering d/Deaf people to do things for themselves in Bristol and that accessible governance is part of this to allow d/Deaf people to become trustees.

Baroness Pitkeathley questioned how much issues between charities and public bodies are to do with personalities rather than processes, and said that it is trying to embed good practice into a structure and instead of relying on people that 'get it' that is difficult.

Abtisam Mohamed MP spoke about the Sheffield Compact, which has worked well. She said there is still too much of an 'us' and 'them' approach to service design and delivery, where public bodies will work with the voluntary sector only if they absolutely must, which normally means when they want services delivered very cheaply.

The panel agreed there is a problem with micro and small charities not being involved in partnerships and then being subcontracted to do pieces of work when they should have been contracted in the first place.

The panel also discussed campaigning in relation to the Covenant. Saskia Konynenburg reiterated that charities absolutely can campaign and be a critical friend to government, so long as the campaigning relates to their charitable purpose. She expressed hope that we would see an end to charities being dragged into culture wars.

Regarding whether the Covenant has teeth / mechanisms for accountability, Rebecca Young from NCVO clarified that there are no plans to create a new public body to enforce it but are looking at whether there are existing mechanisms in the existing institutions that can embed it e.g. civil service training, but will wait until the consultation period is over to come to a position.

Abdulsami Arjumand from Muslim Charities Forum (MCF) spoke about the decline specifically in young people volunteering, citing evidence from an MCF report. The panel discussed how this matches data from NCVO's Time Well Spent report and that the challenges appear to be around a lack of time and worries about ending up out of pocket.

Finally, Ian Roome MP asked what the ultimate aim of the Covenant is and how will we know if it is working. The panel said we need to change the power dynamics and change the funding models. Saskia Konynenburg said that proof will be in the pudding: if it succeeds then charities will be at the table with this government and future governments.