

CIVIL SOCIETY STRATEGY ENGAGEMENT EXERCISE

NCVO response

May 2018

About NCVO

Established in 1919, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) is the largest representative body for voluntary organisations in England, with over 13,000 members. NCVO champions voluntary action: our vision is a society where we can all make a difference to the causes that we believe in. Volunteering and a vibrant voluntary sector deserve a strong voice and the best support. NCVO works to provide that support and voice.

Introduction

At NCVO, we think that a thriving, independent and diverse civil society is key to the future success of our country. We welcome the government's ambition to develop a civil society strategy so that it can better support the actions of millions of people who everyday make a difference to the causes that they believe in.

There is much to build upon. The British people are incredibly generous. We have a proud tradition of helping others, giving time and money, sharing skills and coming up with new ways to solve problems. Whether it's helping to look after a local park, providing advice on mental health or helping out with sports for children, we come together through charities and community groups. Together, we work on the issues we care about, pursue the interests we enjoy and help change our communities, country and world for the better. At NCVO, we think people getting involved, whether it is pursuing their interests or helping others, are among our country's biggest assets. The civil society strategy can help build on this.

There is much to do. If we want more people to participate more of the time, we need to make it easier to get involved. If we want civil society to play a bigger role in providing the services that people rely upon, we need to find new ways to build sustainability and resilience that bring in new resources and partners. And if we want people to have a greater say in what goes on in their communities, we need to make getting involved more worthwhile and really enable people to make a bigger impact. The Strategy can help to achieve these aspirations.

We view our response to the Strategy consultation as the starting point of a dialogue that all too often has been missing in recent years. We believe government will find organisations across civil society that are ready and eager to help shape the future of our country – sometimes in opposition, sometimes in agreement, always in pursuit of what they believe a good society looks like, always underpinned by a desire to benefit the public. We hope that the Strategy provides a framework for engagement and dialogue, and for policy development across government. We look forward to engaging in more detail with regard to more specific policies as the framework shapes government's thinking in future years.

Principles and key recommendations

Strategy principles

At NCVO, we think that the civil society strategy should be based upon the following principles:

- 1. Celebrate and reward civic participation** throughout government policy and regulation. Government should always err towards policies that make it easier for people to get involved in their communities, whether that is their interest or where they live. Conversely, it should ask whether policy proposals might inhibit greater participation.
- 2. Recognise and uphold the importance of a thriving, independent and diverse civil society.** The strategy should enshrine and promote across all government departments the principle that clubs and societies, charities and social enterprises have a right to campaign, regardless of any relationship they have with the State or business.
- 3. Practise informed and meaningful engagement with civil society.** Civil society can help government make a bigger impact by helping to involve people and communities in the design of policies, programmes and services. The strategy should champion across government the benefits of working with civil society to involve people and communities in policy development, and commit to meaningful consultation and feedback.
- 4. Create a legal and tax framework that enhances the sustainability of civil society.** The strategy should start from the principle that government can use the legal and tax framework to encourage and support civil society. Giving and philanthropy, volunteering and social action – private action for public benefit – relieves the state and should be encouraged. The strategy should also enshrine the need for proportionate regulation, minimising the burden on small organisations in particular.
- 5. Focus the strategy on what government should – and shouldn't do.** Any strategy that seeks to direct or shape civil society is likely not to work. Equally, any strategy that focuses only on the service delivery role is likely to disappoint. The strategy can achieve its purpose if it stands back and recognises that civil society is a good thing in and of itself. It should focus on what government can do to encourage, support and engage civil society: enable people and communities, and their organisations, to make a bigger difference.

Key recommendations

Our Civil Society

1. **Increase the impact of civil society by building upon five key strengths:** delivering high quality services; finding new solutions to problems and meeting new needs; voice and advocacy, particularly for those furthest from power; giving expression to society's interests, culture and values; and connecting people together by building communities.
2. **Better involve civil society in the development of policies and programmes:** draw upon the experience and reach of civil society earlier and more widely; protect civil society as a 'space' where people discuss how society should progress; and build relationships and networks with civil society organisations, particularly where it can involve communities furthest from the policy development process.

People

3. **Make it easier for people to get involved in their communities:** make volunteering more accessible and more appealing by legislating to provide 3 days' paid volunteering leave; create an access to volunteering fund for disabled volunteers; and ensure better, more accurate information on volunteering is given from Job Centre Plus staff to unemployed people.
4. **Encourage public sector bodies to promote getting involved:** work with NHS leaders to set targets for the development of volunteering, including the establishment of volunteering champions amongst senior leaders.

Partnership

5. **More use of grant funding:** where appropriate, commissioning and procurement professionals should be encouraged and supported to provide grants for charities.
6. **Give the Social Value Act more traction:** the requirement in the Social Value Act that public bodies 'consider' social value in public sector contracts should be upgraded so that they must 'account for' social value.
7. **Support local communities for a generation to come by building local grantmaking capacity:** Using capital from dormant assets with an estimated value between £1-2 billion, government could help to create income-generating endowment funds, distributed by local grant making bodies, or Community Foundations. These can then be used to fund small and local charities now and in the future.
8. **Put more assets into community ownership:** create more facilities for the public's long-term benefit by using the money from dormant accounts to buy local community assets such as pubs, green spaces or historic buildings, and put them in the control of local people.
9. **Design a long-term replacement for EU structural programmes that puts communities in control:** as the UK leaves the EU, we should replace EU structural funds with a new Shared Prosperity Fund commissioned around place and needs. These should foster innovation, improve ease of access, and cut across policy silos such as health, wellbeing and employment.
10. **Make it easier for small and medium charities to bid for government contracts:** government should put in place procurement processes that enable small and medium charities to engage and deliver alternative approaches. This includes developing new models of commissioning services and making more use of grants.

Place

11. **Reverse the trend towards fewer, larger contracts when commissioning services:** the continuing use of large scale prime contracts has posed a barrier for many local and specialist voluntary organisations wanting to deliver public services. Reversing the trend will increase the diversity of providers and engage more of the specialist expertise civil society organisations offer.
12. **Improve and extend the training of public sector commissioners:** government should scale up successful training and system leadership programmes (such as the NHS' Building Health Partnerships programme) to change commissioning culture and practice.
13. **Open up government's spending data to make public sector markets work better:** it will only be possible to know that civil society organisations are more involved in delivering services, and that public service markets are healthy and diverse, with good quality data on government decisions. Government should support the Crown Commercial Service's leadership this agenda, promoting good practice around compliance and data quality.