

Standing apart, working together

A checklist to help voluntary
and community organisations
reflect on their independence

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The Baring Foundation

What is independence and why is it important?

Independence is a series of freedoms that organisations need in order to do their work. The freedom to:

- determine and uphold the purpose and values of the organisation
- negotiate robustly with funders and partners without fear of sanction
- challenge others and engage in public debate.

Without these freedoms, organisations risk having their work unduly influenced by the interests of outside agencies in the public or private sector rather than determined by the needs of their beneficiaries. The ability of organisations to maintain their independence therefore has a practical impact on their power to be effective.

The independence of the voluntary and community sector has another fundamental importance: it protects the ability of people to carry out action outside the state and without the requirement to make profit for shareholders. Action by civil society has a will and a life of its own that is vital to a healthy and vibrant democracy.

What are the responsibilities of trustees and staff to safeguard independence?

The freedom of organisations to act independently can come under pressure from different sources and in different ways. It is up to organisations to scrutinise this so that activity to protect and promote independence is planned and strategic and not a reaction to a sudden threat. Ultimately this is the responsibility of the trustee board, but on a daily basis all staff should work in ways that both demonstrate and support the independence of organisations.

The following list of questions aims to stimulate discussion amongst all those involved in the organisation. It could be used in a discussion at a trustee meeting, with staff, or with the beneficiaries of your organisation. It will help you to reaffirm what you already do to assert independence and to identify actions that will help to promote your independence where this is necessary. Through these practical actions, independence emerges as more than just an intangible 'good thing'. Instead, it is a characteristic of charities that can be brought to life through the structure and operations of the organisation.

Questions for discussion

Upholding purpose and values
How confident is the trustee board in its role in determining the purpose, values and strategy of the organisation? How does your organisation demonstrate these to people?
Who is the organisation accountable to? Why and how?
Do you give sufficient time to reviewing decisions, programmes and behaviour against the organisation's values and purpose? What happens if you find that an activity is not consistent with the values and purpose?
What gives your organisation the right to do its work and speak on behalf of beneficiaries? How do you prove your legitimacy? For example, how do you ensure that your beneficiaries are meaningfully involved in the governance of the organisation?
Managing relationships with partners and funders
How do you choose the partners you work with? What role do the values of your partners play in this?
How does the organisation manage the attendance at meetings or the appointment to the board of representatives from your funders? Are funders involved in staff recruitment or appraisal?
How does the organisation ensure that the means for safeguarding independence are written into funding agreements? For example, are there systems to resolve conflicts of interest or disputes?
How does your organisation ensure that it does not become over reliant on one source of income? How does it generate resources from other sources?
Challenging others
How confident are you that you can speak out? How far will you go to make your voice heard on the behalf of beneficiaries with funders?
What are your sources of strength when you feel your freedom to uphold your values and purpose is under pressure?

Resources that may help

The Compact is an agreement between Government and the voluntary and community sector in England. It recognises shared values, principles and commitments and sets out guidelines for how both parties should work together. Government's first undertaking in the Compact is to recognise and support the independence of the sector. Voluntary organisations can challenge Government if they feel that it is not living up to the agreement. www.thecompact.org.uk/

The Compact Advocacy Programme was set up by NCVO to help voluntary and community organisations use the Compact to improve their relationships with Government. The Programme provides practical support and wider campaigning to the sector in cases where the Government has not followed the principles agreed in the Compact. Contact Compact Advocacy Programme, NCVO, Regent's Wharf, 8 All Saints Street, London, N1 9RL Tel 020 7520 2551 www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/compactadvocacy/

Compact Voice National Network – The National Network is a forum for national organisations to discuss Compact issues, such as independence, as well as exchange information, experiences and best practice. The Network contains Compact news updated daily and the online discussion forum allows members to talk about their concerns and resolve questions and problems they might encounter. www.compactvoice.org.uk

The Code of Governance sets out best practice in trusteeship www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/governanceandleadership/

Hallmarks of an Effective Charity is a Charity Commission publication that sets out the standards that will help trustees to improve the effectiveness of their charity. It is divided into six Hallmarks or principles. For each of these, a number of ways in which the Hallmarks might be demonstrated are listed, but not every example will apply to every charity. Whilst a few of these are legal requirements, most are matters of good practice. www.charity-commission.gov.uk/publications/cc10.asp#b

Charities Evaluation Service (2007) PQASSO Third Edition; a practical quality assurance system for small organisations or for projects within larger organisations. It provides a flexible, step-by-step approach to working out what your organisation is doing well and what could be improved. Independence issues are incorporated into the different components of the framework. Available from www.ces-vol.org.uk

Geraldine Blake, David Robinson and Matthew Smerdon (2006) *Living Values*; a report on the values of the voluntary sector with practical guidance on how organisations can make their values live – available free from www.community-links.org. Also available as a pocket guide for trustees.

Action for Advocacy (2006) *Quality Standards for Advocacy Schemes*: a guide for advocacy organisations on how to put principles such as independence into practice, relevant for all organisations with an interest in independence – available free from www.actionforadvocacy.org.uk

Community Matters (2005) *Becoming VISIBLE: operating standards for community organisations* has a specific assessment chart on independence. See www.communitymatters.org.uk

Rocket Science (2008) *Literature Review: research into independence and the Compact* gives a full account of research and academic discussion on the independence of the voluntary and community sector from government. Available free from www.thecompact.org.uk

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