



“TIME TO REBUILD TRUST” – NEW SETTLEMENT URGED BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND CHARITY SECTOR

CONCERNS GROW OVER THREATS TO CHARITIES SPEAKING UP FOR THOSE WITH LEAST POWER – FOUR-YEAR INQUIRY

A “new settlement” is urged between government and the charity sector, as concerns grow over threats which inhibit the ability of voluntary organisations to support the most vulnerable in society, and about the Government’s willingness to listen – according to a Panel of independent experts at the end of a four-year inquiry, the results of which are published today.

The report finds that UK charities are facing a barrage of attacks on their freedom to defend the most vulnerable people in society – part of a disturbing trend that the Panel says has been growing over each of the last four years – which has included threats to organisations such as the **Trussell Trust** and **Women’s Aid**.

The Panel is also “very concerned” by the growing tendency of senior Ministers to characterise the voluntary sector negatively, for example, as “anti-business,” (George Osborne) or to question the validity of charities campaigning or challenging the Government in the courts (Chris Grayling), at the same time as the number of truncated government consultations has doubled to over 80 per cent, thus reducing the voluntary sector’s ability to contribute to policy making that affects the people it serves.

In its final report, **The Panel on the Independence of the Voluntary Sector** has today said that it is time to rebuild trust between government and the voluntary sector. As well as reversing restrictions such as “gagging clauses” and those imposed by the Lobbying Act and restoring the minimum 12 week period for consultations, the Panel says there need to be formal mechanisms for dialogue between government and the charity sector at national and local levels; and it calls on the next Government to demonstrate that the Charity Commission is genuinely politically independent. It adds that the Charity Commission must do more to defend unambiguously the independence of the sector, including its campaigning role, and the Compact (the current agreement between the Government and the sector) must be given teeth.

The Panel also welcomes the announcement, included in its report, that the Baring Foundation will be fund-raising to set up a new Commission on the future of the voluntary sector to help take this new settlement forward.

In evidence given to the Panel, Chris Mould, the Chair of the Trussell Trust (which in 2014 delivered emergency food aid to 900,000 people) reported that, after raising issues publicly about the causes of food poverty, there were:

- angry conversations with ministerial aides, accompanied by threats of closure: “You need to think more carefully, the government might try to shut you down” as a charity “crossing the line from a regulatory point of view.”
- And, after asking for a meeting with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, attempts to belittle the organisation by questioning the robustness of its data, accusing it of using publicity to attract donations and briefing newspapers with untruths about the Chair’s plans to resign in an attempt to damage the cohesion of the Board.

38 Degrees, the voluntary organisation that seeks to give a voice to people in society, told the Panel that it had been subject to attacks through the circulation of misinformation about the “aggressive” nature of its campaigns.

Women’s Aid informed the Panel that “gagging clauses” in contracts for public services, self-censorship because of fear of loss of vital funding and active threats by some local authorities to those voluntary organisations that do speak out are having a damaging effect on the services victims of domestic violence receive.

The National Association for Voluntary and Community Action also reported: “We've had members say they couldn't attend meetings to discuss the Work Programme because of these [“gagging”] clauses.” The Panel has been concerned about the use of “gagging clauses” in the Work Programme, which it heard over the last year are now being more widely used, and it calls for their abolition.

Elsewhere, **Oxfam** has been referred to the Charity Commission and publicly attacked by a number of MPs for the “political” nature of its campaigns – leading to an ambiguous ruling by the Charity Commission, after a 6 month silence, which is likely to add to the confusion and chilling effect already created by the Lobbying Act.

Chair of the Panel, Roger Singleton, said today:

“Over each of the last four years, we have seen ever more attacks on the independent voice of the voluntary sector, which makes it harder for charities to seek to make things better for the most vulnerable people in society and creates a climate in which politicians stop listening to legitimate voices and concerns. This damages democracy and good government and puts the future of an independent voluntary sector at serious risk. If we are not careful, we will end up like Canada where the regulator has recently ruled that Oxfam as a charity can only alleviate, not seek to prevent, poverty.

“We’re calling today for a new settlement between government and the voluntary sector. It’s time for trust to be rebuilt. This means government working with the sector, listening and involving it in decision making through genuine consultation. It also means charities and the Charity Commission taking the lead and ensuring that legitimate freedoms to speak and to act are protected. We welcome the Baring Foundation’s decision to fundraise to establish a new Commission on the future of the voluntary sector to help lay the foundations for this new settlement.

“The alternative is a diminished society; one in which charities are too scared to act and people in real need lose out.”

Notes

1. [*An Independent Mission: the voluntary sector in 2015*](#) is published on 11 February 2015. Copies of the report are available on request. **For more information and interviews**, please contact Natasha Dyer: natasha@dhacommunications.co.uk; 020 7793 4306 / 07590 024 387 or Daniel Harris daniel@dhacommunications.co.uk: 0207 793 4038; 07989 309 058.
2. To speak to Chris Mould, please see contact details above; for Women's Aid, please contact Franki Hackett, Media Officer, Women's Aid; 0207 566 2511; 07807 218687. To speak to 38 Degrees, please contact Blanche Jones: blanche.j@38degrees.org.uk
3. The Panel on the Independence of the Voluntary Sector was initiated and is funded by the Baring Foundation to ensure that independence is seen as a top priority by the voluntary sector and those with whom it works and to make recommendations to ensure that it is not lost. This is its fourth and annual assessment.
4. Members of the panel:
 - The Chair is Sir Roger Singleton, CBE, appointed July 2012. Sir Roger was chief executive of Barnardo's for 21 years, and was awarded a knighthood in 2005 for services to children.
 - Nicholas Deakin CBE, Emeritus Professor of Social Policy at Birmingham University and Chair of the Commission on the Future of the Voluntary Sector which reported in 1996.
 - Andrew Hind CB, Editor of Charity Finance and Trustee of the Baring Foundation, formerly Chief Executive of the Charity Commission.
 - Joanna Holmes, Chief Executive of the Barton Hill Settlement and Chair of Locality.
 - Sir Bert Massie CBE, formerly Commissioner on the Compact and of the Disability Rights Commission.
 - Julia Unwin CBE, Chief Executive of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and an expert on voluntary sector independence.
 - Louise Whitfield, Partner at Deighton Pierce Glynn and an expert in public law and judicial review.
 - Nick Wilkie, Director of UK Programmes at Save the Children.