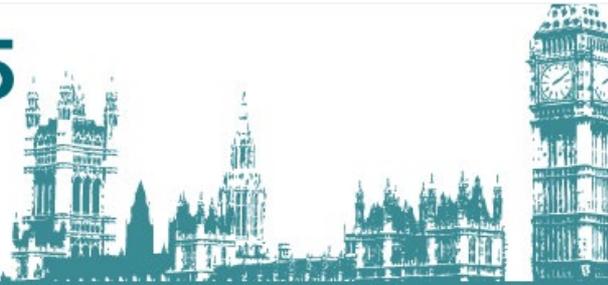


The 2015 General Election



Solutions from the voluntary sector

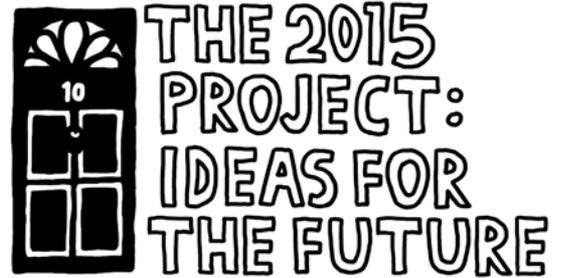
Feedback to members

Summary

- NCVO launched a major consultation called 'The 2015 Project' which ran from June 2013 to January 2014. We received several hundred responses via our website and a series of seminars around the country.
- This is an update for our members on what the responses received through our consultation highlighted. We asked voluntary organisations what their priorities are ahead of the next General Election, for their own organisations and service users, and for the economy and society as a whole.
- Understandably, many of our members' responses highlighted current challenges, and we also received great case studies of the work they are doing that will help us show the difference the voluntary sector makes.
- Members' concerns and ideas included: ways to tackle unemployment and improve social mobility, trouble with public service commissioning and payment by results, the importance of recognition for volunteering, and thoughts on the independence and perception of charities.
- NCVO's 2015 manifesto will be informed by what we've heard from our members.

Introduction – What’s it all about?

The 2015 Project was a major consultation with NCVO members to hear about your priorities with the next General Election in May 2015 in mind. We launched in June 2013, and closed the consultation in January 2014. As part of the consultation we hosted surveys on our website and held regional events.



Here we present a reflection of what our members have told us about their priorities, worries and visions ahead of the next general election, and some of our analysis on what that means for the voluntary sector and our 2015 manifesto. We’d very much like to thank the many of you who responded to the consultation.

What we are hoping to achieve

General elections can be a great opportunity to put policy priorities in front of the political parties as a way to further a charity’s aims. The parties are in listening mode in the year before an election, so it’s a chance to really focus on what your organisation’s policy ‘asks’ are, and to gain the broadest political support for your organisation’s key areas.

With this view in mind, at NCVO we have been thinking about what our work around the 2015 General Election will look like, and what we would like to see in the next government’s plans. We will produce a ‘manifesto’ for the voluntary sector to present to parties of all colours in the year before the polls open.

We see this as a key opportunity to outline the important ways charities can improve society, and make clear to politicians what is needed to ensure the sector can make the biggest difference in tackling the social and economic issues that affect us all.

The process so far

In order to ensure that we are reflecting our members’ views as far as possible in our manifesto, we held a major consultation to hear your priorities and the way you see the role of charities in society. NCVO members replied in their hundreds through our website and we toured the country to hear your experiences and top priorities.

It is these responses, and plenty of research, that will enable us to pin down the manifesto priorities we will suggest to political parties ahead of 2015.

Prime Minister for a day

The first phase of the consultation was to ask members 'what would you do if you were Prime Minister for a day?' This proved to be a great way to kick off the conversation around what priorities people in the voluntary sector would like to see at the top of the political parties' agendas ahead of 2015.



The three main priorities our members identified were:

- help politicians to understand volunteering better
- more thoughtful policy making
- make government more representative.



We divided the next phase of the consultation into four themes

1. Economy and jobs
2. Public services
3. Volunteering and social action
4. Support for charities

Main areas of interest

Understandably many of our members highlighted the broad set of challenges they're being faced with, and the key issues affecting their beneficiary groups.

In some cases, you've told us about the very basic struggle to stay afloat in difficult economic times. In this position, it can be difficult to think long-term about innovating services and creating new opportunities to evolve.

Despite the hardship felt by many, we have also been overwhelmed by the great stories from members about the work they are doing. Our consultation has vividly demonstrated the amazing range of work that takes place in the sector and the creativity and innovative spirit of so many charities and volunteers. Such positive examples help us demonstrate the work of the voluntary sector, and we'll be threading them throughout our manifesto to show the invaluable difference you make.

1. Economy and jobs

Employment – or rather, the negative impact of unemployment – is clearly a concern for many of you. Whether it's an organisation working to improve the skills of young people, setting up job clubs, working in the disability sector, health, children's services or justice, our members have told us that the high levels of unemployment are likely to be affecting their beneficiaries in some way. And it is not only a growth in jobs that we need, as under-employment, zero hour contracts and low wage have also been highlighted as problem areas.

A lot of voluntary organisations have been involved with the Work Programme, and as well as the more technical problems of delivery for charities themselves, there seems to be fairly firm consensus from our conversations with members that the programme doesn't provide enough tailored support for people who are further from the labour market.

It is clear that many of the people our sector supports are struggling in the economic environment, and this has affected the health of some charities as demand on them increases. It's a challenging time of squeezed incomes, with reduced funding and increased demand for many.

Some of you have expressed concern about negative political and public rhetoric around welfare and poverty leading to increased stigmatisation of the most vulnerable. Some members have recommended that the sector could take a 'myth-busting' role to share some of the reality for those supported by benefits. Many of you are worried that negative attitudes towards welfare have, or will have, an effect on the support for some voluntary organisations.



Photo: RECLAIM Project Ltd

Some of our members are particularly concerned about the need to improve support for disengaged young people to access employment, to integrate into their communities and to more broadly feel a part of society. Ensuring that young people have opportunities to learn skills and have the confidence to enter the labour market is a priority for many in the voluntary sector, with many charities working in this field.

2. Public Services

As public services open up, more and more of you are delivering services on behalf of the state. Equally, as budgets are squeezed, many in the sector have been affected directly or indirectly by the shrinking or closing of some services.



Photo: Bowburn Community Association

We asked you about your experiences with public services. The cumulative cuts to some public services – care, transport and advice, for example – have affected the people many organisations support, often the most vulnerable in society. This in turn has an effect on the need for our sector’s services. Many of you are also concerned that authorities are focussing on securing cheap rather than quality services, so promoting the consideration of social value is a priority.

Specific concerns in public service commissioning include a lack of pre-procurement dialogue, and a lack of understanding on the part of commissioners of the voluntary sector and the types of organisations and services that we provide. Some of you are being deterred from bidding for public service contracts by the complex processes – a consequence of poorly designed and inflexible service specifications and disproportionate bidding requirements. These have been especially burdensome, or simply prohibitive, for small organisations.

Commissioning

‘We have plenty of examples of shocking commissioning practice from LAs. We work with people who are socially excluded and wrap service packages around them to build new lives for those who may be, for example, homeless, ex-offenders, domestic abuse survivors or care leavers.’

Foundation, a charity based in the North of England that works with socially excluded people helping them to gain full independence in their local community.

In addition to these challenges, we’ve heard about how the changed funding environment of public sector contracting also has difficulties, with contracts getting larger in scale and more generic, and how payment by results is unworkable for many charities because of the level of capital needed upfront. These are practical challenges that mean that many charities aren’t able to engage with public service delivery as much as they would like to in order to help the people they work for, and are things that we’ll continue to look at in our work in this area.

Meanwhile, many of you are not involved in running public services, but would like recognition for the work you do that complements and alleviates pressure on services. Many organisations believe they understand beneficiaries’ needs, can advocate for them and help improve services – service user feedback is an example of how services could be improved simply by asking their users what they think of them. And early intervention and prevention services are the cornerstone of much of the voluntary sector.

The design of public services is crucially important to their effectiveness too. You have told us your expertise and the experiences of your volunteers could and should contribute to the service design process more fully.

Early action

‘We have built links with local housing provider to enable our clients to access additional support before it becomes a disaster.’

Mental health organisation

3. Social action and volunteering

The volunteering community has been particularly active in responding to our consultation, giving us very helpful feedback on the work of volunteer-involving organisations and volunteers, as well as highlighting the challenges in volunteering policy.

Volunteering expenses

Salford CVS has taken an innovative approach to help reduce barriers to volunteering by developing a fund to ensure volunteers can receive out of pocket expenses.

The driving force behind the idea was their desire to ensure that good practice underpins everything that they do. As part of their work with local organisations they ensure that where possible before they place volunteers that they are able to ensure the groups and organisations they work with are able to pay expenses. Since the economic downturn they had noticed that more organisations were struggling to provide this and it was identified as an issue by their volunteer coordinators forum. Some organisers identified that they weren't able to afford volunteer expenses or factor it into their funding bids.

In response Salford CVS launched an expenses fund for local organisations. They are now in the process of growing the pot of funding with the support of their local MP who is encouraging local businesses to get involved through donations and sponsorship. They are also encouraging those to donate who feel that they don't have time to volunteer but through donating to the fund feel that they can support others to volunteer.

Initially open to micro-businesses, the ambition is that applications will be open to medium organisations in future if the fund continues to grow and be successful.

Salford Community & Voluntary Service

One of the clearest messages we've received has been that 'less is more' when it comes to government policy on volunteering. What would be most appreciated is more support for the volunteering already taking place. More of a focus on marketing the opportunities that already exist would be welcome by many organisations too, with some even suggesting that tax breaks could be used to incentivise individuals to volunteer, or for employers to host employer supported volunteering programmes.



Photo: Student Hubs

In fact, a lack of understanding of what volunteering actually is – the roles volunteers undertake, and the real cost to volunteering – has been cited as a concern for the sector, with many saying neither politicians, businesses or the public seem to really understand the breadth of volunteering. Some in the volunteering world have told us that even the charities they work for don't always seem to recognise the importance of proper volunteer management.

Volunteering and Integrated Care

'Age UK's Newquay Pathfinder project brings together Age UK staff and highly trained volunteers to help older people remain independent and stay out of hospital. The objective is to improve the individual older person's quality of life but an important result has been to reduce hospital admissions and crisis situations.

An Age UK staff member or volunteer acts as the key link, listening to the older person's needs and desires so that, together, they can draw up a care plan which suits their life and will help them maintain their health and well-being. By joining up care across the NHS and social services and signposting to other voluntary and statutory services they become a central point in co-ordinating an individual's care.

By focussing on the needs of the individual, the quality of life, confidence and wellbeing of those people taking part in the pilot project has improved significantly, and there has been a 35% reduction in emergency hospital admissions.'

Age UK

Genuine volunteering can be a pathway to employment for many people. You have told us that the distinction between what constitutes as volunteering and the Government's increased use of sanctions-backed work placements for those supported by unemployment benefits needs to be clearer. Mandated work placements can last anywhere between 4 weeks and 6 months, and can be in public, private or voluntary sector. If the claimant fails to comply with the placement, they can be referred for a sanction. Clearly, mandated work placements are not volunteering – even if they occur within a charity – and you have highlighted that this needs some explanation.

Confusion over volunteering can sometimes be apparent in Job Centres Plus. We've heard that some claimants have been told they must stop or cut down on their volunteering to continue to receive benefits, whilst other claimants have felt that they have been mandated to 'volunteer' in order to continue to receive benefits. There needs to be more understanding around this subject – particularly 'on the ground'.

You have told us that more clarity over unpaid internships in respect to volunteering would also be welcome, as this is a hot topic in the sector at the moment.

Barriers to volunteering

'I work for a disability charity in Brighton and access to accessible volunteering opportunities is something we are passionate about providing and helping other local organisations to provide also. I think one of the main barriers is organisations not having the funds to make reasonable adjustments for disabled volunteers.'

In addition to volunteering, under this theme of the consultation we also looked at campaigning, and the way that organisations build relationships with private business.

The consultation period overlapped significantly with the passage of the Lobbying Bill (now Act) through parliament. This doubtless concentrated minds on the issue as the bill required much energy from many campaigners. Our members said it was important to build on and cement in the recognition that politicians of all parties expressed during this time for the legitimacy of campaigning activities of charities. This is an ongoing concern of the sector.

Corporate social responsibility is now a well-recognised term, and is standard practice in many companies. You said the challenge now is often for businesses and charities to build better



Photo: Refugee Action

relationships and to work together for real, strategic mutual benefit, not just quick wins. A greater understanding of community cohesion and local partnerships is also something our members have highlighted as a growing need.

4. Support for charities

How to best support charities, in their funding, regulation and operations is a huge topic, and these are the 'bread and butter' issues for NCVO.

You said that organisations need to develop better relationships with their communities – with other charities, businesses, and donors of cash and time – in order to improve effectiveness and to make efficiencies. Relationships with local authorities, and other regional and local bodies have changed rapidly and charities will continue to adapt to this shift. This is partly a consequence of diminished budgets and partly due to a change in structures, such as the creation of new bodies including clinical commissioning groups and police and crime commissioners.

Many organisations are adapting to the new funding environment, with a much greater emphasis on bidding for contracts, working under the new commissioning processes and being able to really demonstrate impact. The level of competition is also growing, which can be seen through some local authorities becoming competitors with charities for contracts and the difficulties associated with this.

One big worry for our members highlighted through the consultation has been the reduction in grant funding. The argument from some of our members is that not all services can be funded through individual donations or can be sold, and that there is a lack of recognition of this from funders as well as local and national governments. You said, and we agree, that there are some cases where it is simply more efficient to fund via grants.

Organisations working in areas with a harder ‘sell’ to politicians and the public feel particularly vulnerable when looking to demonstrate impact to potential donors, funders and commissioners, despite the sometimes genuinely vital nature of their work. Addiction, sexual health, mental health, domestic violence and bereavement are all fields where you have said it can be harder to fight for the funds you need to help people because of the unpopular image of beneficiaries. Charities in these fields may have to work especially hard to show the difference they make.

So, what next?

This consultation has helped us get a real feel for your issues and concerns ahead of the next General Election. We are now beginning to think about workable policy solutions for a government to help address these.

All your responses will be fed into our development of the manifesto for the voluntary sector, and we hope to provide a view of the ways the voluntary sector can be part of the solution to some of the big social and economic problems the parties will be interested in.

Our manifesto will aim to demonstrate the many ways in which you contribute to society, and how we can offer solutions to pressing policy challenges. We will include compelling examples of voluntary action and voluntary organisations making a difference, and our key asks for political parties to help maximise the sector’s contribution to society.

Many examples of voluntary action will demonstrate the value of volunteering and we want this to be a clear thread throughout our election manifesto. It's also important that the examples we highlight showcase the different sizes, locations and different sectors that make up NCVO's membership, and the voluntary sector as a whole.

We'll keep you informed throughout the process, as well as providing practical advice for organisations seeking to campaign in the run up to May 2015 through blogs, guides for members and learning sessions.

Overview of consultation

- May 2013 - Launched at NCVO's Members Assembly 2013
- June 2013 – Launched PM for a day at Evolve
- 82 people had their photos taken in front of our 10 Downing Street banner to tell us the first thing they would do as PM for the day
- July 2013 – Launched online consultation
- 15 sector leaders wrote thought-provoking guest blogs on issues such as welfare, PM for day, employment and giving to launch each theme.
[Read all the blogs here.](#)
- NCVO hosted four policy workshops around England, with a total of 106 attendees
- In total, we received 223 responses to the consultation
- NCVO staff wrote 12 discussion papers to provide background to each theme.
[Read all discussion papers here.](#)

If you would like any more information on NCVO's election work, please email the team at 2015project@ncvo.org.uk

Note – All photographs taken from NCVO's Member Photography Competition 2012–13.