

Co-option or What? Responses from sector leaders to NCIA challenge to their endorsement of the New Compact

NAVCA says.....

Hi Andy

Just back from Tanzania to see your letter about the Compact. In 2009 and 2008 we asked the Chief Officers of NAVCA members how they rated the Compact. In 2008 48% said it was a valuable tool locally and 40% said it wasn't.

In 2009 the figures were 48% saying it was useful and 42% saying it wasn't.

So, around half of the Local Infrastructure Organisations in England value it.

I haven't asked members about the new Compact yet. I will be getting their views later this year. Early anecdotes are mixed – one Chief Officer from a London Borough CVS says that small charities and community groups think it is an improvement. But I am sure there will be mixed views.

The sector has few levers over local government and the local NHS. The Compact with all its flaws is one of them and NAVCA will continue to encourage members to use it and to use public law and judicial review to challenge serious breaches.

Good wishes.

Kevin

Kevin Curley

Chief Executive

Directory of Social Change says.....

There was a long email exchange with DSC. The following is what they were happy to see put up on the website:

Compact Voice asked for DSC's support for the new version of the Compact, and we gave it for the following reasons:

- ♣ We think having some principles in writing which the Government has agreed to is good, even if they aren't followed consistently
- ♣ We believed a shorter version was necessary to make it more accessible – across government and the sector – we've got that
- ♣ It needed revising to take account of some new developments, which it has
- ♣ Momentum needs to be maintained so local authorities do not have an excuse to let local compacts stagnate – a really important point
- ♣ If the Compact is not supported it may collapse, and the Government will be even less accountable for its behaviour, and we think that would be more bad than good

Further:

- ♣ For the new agreement to be successful, it is crucial that the 'implementation guides' address legitimate concerns that have been raised about the new version
- ♣ The new document is not perfect, but we don't see this as the end of the story, and anticipate opportunities to improve it further in the future
- ♣ It's possible that we will need some other tool in future to help us to get government to respect our independence and to really listen to the needs of its citizens – we should all be thinking about what that might be – especially because the political situation will change

this year

NCVO says.....

22/01/2010

Dear Mr Benson,

Thank you for your letter dated of 19th January.

As you can imagine, your view of our sector is not one I recognise or share. Voluntary and community organisations work to improve the lives of citizens and communities. We are independent, mission led, values driven organisations. But I do not accept that our mission and our values are automatically undermined if we enter into financial or partnership relationships with statutory bodies.

Absolute independence is, of course, a myth. No voluntary and community organisation operates in isolation. Relationships with the state, and others, can be difficult, but they are important. We have a responsibility to work effectively with others where it is in the best interests of the communities and individuals we exist for. The real issue is about how organisations manage their relationships.

I firmly believe that the Compact has played an important part and that the refreshed Compact will enable us to continue to transform our relationships with statutory agencies for the better. I note your concerns about the refresh process. Compact Refresh consultations were held round the country, with expert input and responses by organisations representing tens of thousands of voluntary and community sector organisations and groups. In my view the document is a clear improvement over its predecessor, and from the informal feedback we have had, so do many other organisations of all sizes.

I do not accept your contention that NCVO and other organisations involved with the Compact are unwilling or unable to speak out when we are in disagreement with government. We have done so on many occasions. But equally we have a responsibility to be constructive in our approach, it would be wrong to be oppositional simply for the sake of it.

Our sector is large and diverse. Organisations will choose to take different approaches in their work and in their relationships. No one organisation can claim to speak for the whole sector, but NCVO takes very seriously its responsibility to listen to and work in the best interests of its members and the wider sector.

Yours truly,
Stuart Etherington
Chief Executive

Volunteering England says.....

3 February 2010

Dear Andy

Refreshed Compact

Thank you for your letter on behalf of the National Coalition for Independent Action regarding the recently refreshed Compact.

I read with interest the issues raised in your letter and would like to take this opportunity to respond and briefly outline Volunteering England's position on the refreshed Compact.

Through our membership of the Compact Voice Board and the refresh panel, we contributed fully to the refresh process. We are pleased with the final document, seeing it as an improvement in both content and clarity of presentation.

As the national development agency for volunteering, we believe that the Compact and the accompanying introductory document will support volunteer-involving organisations in a number of ways:

- The 'Introduction to the Compact' document sets out the importance of volunteers to the third sector and the scale of volunteer-led groups.
- The document also clearly states that volunteering is one of the Compact principles and enshrines a four further principles as being fundamental to volunteering – choice, diversity, mutual benefit and recognition.
- A definition of volunteering is also included in the introduction, which has been a useful reference point in the past in discussions with government about the nature of volunteering.

More specifically the Compact commits government to:

- Support the development of third sector infrastructure, such as Volunteer Centres, which provide valuable support to volunteers and to volunteer-involving organisations of all sizes.
- To 'accept the recovery of costs associated with volunteering, such as managing volunteers and reimbursing expenses', helping to ensure that these are recognised as legitimate costs.
- Ensure the needs of volunteers are taken into account at the conclusion of funding by 'assess[ing] the impact on beneficiaries, service users and volunteers before deciding to reduce or end funding.'
- Reduce the bureaucracy associated with safeguarding, which can put off potential volunteers by committing to free CRB and ISA checks, and streamlining the process for volunteers.

We believe that this range of commitments, which we hope to see expanded on in a volunteering implementation guide, will provide a useful tool for volunteer-involving organisations and volunteer-led groups seeking to secure a fair deal from government.

As part of the refresh process, I understand that implementation guides to assist the BME and community sectors have been prioritised and will be among the first guides to be

developed. I would hope that this would further help community groups make good use of the Compact, and am sure that the Community Sector Coalition, who are represented on the Compact Voice Board, will continue to raise this issue.

Volunteering England will of course continue to use our membership of the Compact Voice board to raise any issues or concerns that volunteer-involving organisations may have with the Compact or its use.

I would like to briefly respond to some of the wider points raised in your letter. I do not share your concern that the refreshed Compact presents a view that there is 'only good news out there.' Indeed, it is the continued failure of some public bodies to conduct fair and reasonable relationships with third sector organisations that underlines just how important the Compact remains.

The cases dealt with by the Compact Advocacy Team at NCVO clearly demonstrate the benefit of the Compact in providing a framework for successful resolution of disputes. The cases also demonstrate the need for the Compact itself, without which many of the organisations supported would have had no means of redress.

On a related issue, you are right to be concerned by the recent breach of the Compact by the Office of the Third Sector and I can assure you that I have personally expressed concern to the Minister about this.

Lastly, the impact of the recession on volunteering and volunteer-led groups is an important issue. Volunteering England will be undertaking a series of activities to keep volunteering high on the political agenda, including launching a manifesto and 'Volunteering Pledge' for candidates, and organising a volunteering hustings event. Along with the Chair of Volunteering England, I will also be meeting with third sector spokespeople from the main parties to make the case for volunteering, including discussing how best to ensure that volunteering is not negatively affected by the recession.

With best wishes
Yours sincerely

Dr Justin Davis Smith
Chief Executive
Volunteering England

ACEVO says.....nothing.