

DIRECTORY OF SOCIAL CHANGE

INFORMATION AND TRAINING FOR THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR

Summary of Conservative Green Paper *A Stronger Society: Voluntary Action in the 21st Century*

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1. Introduction

On 3 June the Conservative Party unveiled a green paper that will form the basis for its policy towards charities, voluntary groups, and social enterprises. The paper is already the product of a significant amount of research and discussion with the sector, but it is clear that the party views it as a consultation document that will be refined and developed in an ongoing process that will eventually feed in to the Conservatives' next election manifesto.

In his speech at the launch event, Conservative leader David Cameron emphasised the centrality of voluntary action to his vision of 'social responsibility'. He argued that the most pressing problem facing Britain today is not economic stagnation but social breakdown, and that top-down central control by government is no longer an effective or responsive mechanism for solving the problem. An independent and strong civil society, where citizens are trusted and empowered to act and take responsibility in their own communities, will be crucial to successfully addressing social issues in what he called the 'post-bureaucratic age'.

2. Summary of sections

The paper examines seven key areas where the Conservatives plan to focus their policy for the voluntary sector. As might be expected at this stage, there is more analysis of the main problems as they see them and much less detail about their proposed solutions.

1) Giving – the paper outlines the importance of charitable giving and examines recent trends in giving. The proposed solutions centre around ways the government could encourage social norms for giving (how much should we give?), and a reform of the Gift Aid system to reduce its administrative complexity.

2) Volunteering – the report examines trends in volunteering and makes international comparisons. It argues that volunteering is best encouraged not by new flagship initiatives, but by finding ways to reduce legal and bureaucratic barriers to volunteering and to enhance existing infrastructure. The main recommendation is to free up civil servants' time to volunteer, in order to set an example. It also says the Conservatives would prioritise efforts on areas in the country where volunteering is lowest.

3) Grant Funding – there is an in-depth analysis of the decline of grant funding, the reasons why it is under threat, and a clear link to its crucial role in supporting community activity. In stark contrast to the current direction of travel, there is a promise to 'use contracts, rather than grants, only where there is a clear justification for doing so'. There are also proposals to develop a 'fair deal on grants', which would embody best practise principles for grant funding from statutory bodies, and a redirection of Lottery funding towards demand-led, locally available programmes, managed by a distributor with greater independence from government.

4) Social Enterprise – this section is framed by the Conservatives' ambition to 'put the power of business growth behind the objective of social change.' It examines the current scale of the movement and the problems that social enterprises face in attracting investment. The main proposals are to set up 'Social Enterprise Zones', which would offer financial incentives to encourage social enterprise in areas where community and economic development is most needed, and to create a 'social

investment bank' to manage the incentives and act as a delivery agent for investment.

5) Public Service Delivery – the report posits that 'participation in the delivery of public services is both the greatest opportunity and the greatest threat facing the voluntary sector today'. Proposed solutions centre around a 'systematic reform of commissioning' that would emphasise multiyear contract terms and a reduction in monitoring and reporting bureaucracy by focusing on outcomes. In his speech David Cameron stressed that the Conservatives also wanted to allow organisations to make a 'surplus' as an incentive to expand and replicate successful services. Earning a surplus is of course already possible, so presumably this would be something above and beyond recovery of full costs; there would appear to be many more questions about what this would entail.

6) Co-operatives – the paper envisions a much greater role for cooperatives, as a mechanism for ensuring that public institutions are more accountable to citizens. It argues that, 'as democratic institutions, co-operatives can act as agents of change in ways not open to any other kind of organisation, whether private, public, or voluntary.' The plans appear to suggest a wide-spread transfer of various public assets to community ownership, even allowing schools to be run by parents on a cooperative model.

7) Changing Government – the final section of the paper concerns the way government relates to the voluntary sector. It specifically discusses the state of the Compact 10 years on, and promises to develop a 'gold standard' of practical measures to underpin compliance. This section also proposes changing the Office of the Third Sector into a more powerful Office for Civil Society with a minister who would be responsible for implementing a 'transformation plan'. Interestingly, senior staff in this office would be 'seconded from relevant departments across Whitehall – who will then return to guide the implementation of those parts of the plan.' A new civil society select committee in Parliament would also be created to scrutinise government policy towards the sector.

3. More about the consultation

The paper concludes with a set of 'top twenty policy pledges' derived from the analysis and proposed solutions in the paper. These will need to be explored in much greater detail in order to become functional policies that can be implemented by a future Conservative government.

Clearly there is a huge opportunity here for the voluntary sector to contribute to how government relates to it in future, regardless of which party wins the next election, as the policies which are developed out of this paper will change the terms of reference of the current political debate.

To download a copy of the green paper, go to:

http://www.conservatives.com/tile.do?def=news.story.page&obj_id=145106

To respond to the green paper, please contact:

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