

## Public service delivery isn't for everyone



The government's current policy agenda for the voluntary sector is focused almost entirely on those organisations delivering public services. But what about everyone else, asks Ben Wittenberg

The private and public sectors are clearly defined in their roles. The private sector generates wealth and employment and provides goods and services. The public sector defends, protects, cares for, provides for and educates its citizens. Together these two sectors form the system that supports and provides for the majority.

DSC's understanding of what is meant by the 'voluntary and community sector' is the individuals, groups and organisations that provide support for those people and causes that fall outside of that system. Voluntary bodies and charities exist largely because people identify system failures and step in to pick up the pieces. Not a criticism of the state, but recognition that it cannot provide everything. It has limited resources, a limited attention span, operates in a constantly changing environment and needs to do the best it can for the majority.

For the most part the 'VCS' exists because individual citizens devote their time and energy out of belief in a particular cause – in other words, because people volunteer.

This fundamental essence is missing from the government's current socio-economic and regeneration policies. The recent dropping of the term 'voluntary and community sector' and re-adoption of the label 'third sector' in a number of key policy documents will do little to address this.

There are ongoing debates around whether we should refer to a 'voluntary' 'third' or 'not-for-profit' sector but whatever you call it, it is not really a sector at all; these terms are conceptual crutches that describe all organised social activity that lies outside the remit of the state or private sector. There may be no better term to use, but the point is that the motivations that drive voluntary sector organisations are as divergent and complicated as society itself; the VCS lacks a unifying focus.

A core issue facing the sector at the moment is: irrespective of the term used by government, what is the current policy agenda actually referring to?

Does it refer to the whole voluntary sector, from the biggest national super-charities down to the

smallest local voluntary organisations? Or to the 20,000 or so organisations that are most closely aligned with current government policy objectives and have the capacity to deliver services at either a local or national level?

The government's almost total focus on public service delivery suggests the latter, leaving the majority of the wider voluntary sector uncatered for.

To ignore some of the more tactical issues surrounding VCS delivery of public services for a moment, what a fantastic achievement. That over a period of time small groups of individuals united in addressing what the state and wider society saw as unimportant are now being asked by the state to deliver. The state has recognised the need, seen the benefits of addressing it and decided to contract with voluntary sector organisations to ensure effective delivery.

But hang on a minute. Let us assume all invitations to tender meet users' needs perfectly and the terms and conditions are fair, equitable and Compact compliant. Let's also assume no damage to public perception of the sector as a whole as a result of heightened public scrutiny of the few, and no negative impact on volunteering. And assume no significant shift in policy objectives.

What about the rest of the voluntary sector? Government policy is far too heavily focused on the delivery of public services – its own agenda. This brings a range of well documented challenges, which government at all levels has a responsibility to improve, but at the end of the day the delivery of public services is not the responsibility of the voluntary sector.

Government needs to start listening to the whole sector and developing its policy accordingly. The majority of the sector is not about delivering public services, or meeting political objectives, and can't be quantified in terms of political gain or contribution towards meeting targets.

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Trend watch