

current trends



Compact

With the Compact Commission in pretty dire straights, and evidence that government is not living up to its promises, Ben Wittenberg says there are some critical approaches needed if the Compact is to actually fulfil its potential

Ten years since it was launched, the Compact is still not working. Although there is a Compact in place at most levels of government, and we are seeing increasing success from voluntary sector organisations challenging Compact breaches, the overall relationship between government and the sector doesn't seem to be improving.

Through our work we are made aware of countless and consistent cases of local authorities and central departments behaving appallingly. With dysfunctional local strategic partnerships, programme guidelines that change mid-application process, repeatedly cancelled meetings, and unexplained and inexplicable decision making, government action is not matching its own rhetoric, or its commitment to the Compact. But why not?

For the sector, relationships with its biggest funder and purchaser are not being conducted on the agreed grounds with any consistency. This results in huge inefficiencies at an operational and strategic level that impact on both sides, but there are obstacles that are hindering progress. Firstly, there is not enough awareness or buy-in on the part of government, and as a direct result, little faith and buy-in from the sector. Secondly, the Compact is a set of rules, largely without the clear support needed to change behavior.

On that first point of government awareness and buy-in, the current crisis facing the Compact Commission has the potential to further hinder progress. Since its creation the Commission has lost its chair and its chief executive, and now the Commission's business plan, which lays out clear and positive steps to implementation, appears to be under threat after only three months. As a result, Phil Hope recently called a Compact summit to discuss key issues around the future roles of the Office of the Third Sector, the Compact Commission and key infrastructure organisations.

My question would be: what does government see as the purpose of implementing the Compact? Meeting a target? Making the relationship fairer? Doing things better? An understanding of how the rationales or motivations differ across, and within, government is essential in understanding the specific challenges we are all facing. There is a real

danger that after ten years 'the Compact' has become a failing institution, and its shortcomings and limitations to date are in themselves huge barriers to implementation.

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If the Compact is to fulfil its potential and become a blueprint for a better relationship between government and the sector, there are some critical approaches that need to be taken.

At a strategic level the political support must be secured by the Office of the Third Sector, led by the minister. If the commissioner has no statutory powers then the minister needs to ensure buy-in from his peers who can enforce compliance within their own parts of government. The commissioner then needs to enable, through increasing understanding, and by facilitating learning and change.

The Compact itself isn't enough to improve the interactions between government and the sector, it is merely the rules of the game, but at the moment government doesn't know quite how to play it, or in certain areas, accept that it's even a game worth playing. If local authorities in particular are to implement the Compact it needs context in their terms; i.e. good funding practice isn't (just) about being nice to the poor old voluntary sector, it ensures wider engagement and higher quality outputs – it's about being better, not nicer.

And finally, approach the key areas of concern and non-compliance separate to 'compact implementation'. If poor funding practice is a key issue, address it with practical help, toolkits, templates, models and so forth that are strongly rooted in the way grant managers actually work, and make it easier for them to do things well than to do them badly.

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Trend watch