

Danny Kruger MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

16 July 2020

Dear Danny,

The role of civil society in systemic change and the 'levelling up' agenda

I am writing in response to the Prime Minister's invitation to you to make recommendations about the future role of civil society and how the Government will support it.

There is no doubt that the Covid-19 emergency has seen a spike in social action across the UK. This is fundamentally transforming the relationship between civil society and the State, particularly at a local level, in fundamental ways. There is already a great deal to be protected and built upon.

At the Sheila McKechnie Foundation we have been working with Big Local communities to help them consider how they can be part of making broader changes that prevent crises and improve people's wellbeing, as well as responding to immediate need in their areas. They are as much part of civil society as any national charity, union or youth service that we work with.

We are a sector of both aid and reform

I want to highlight the critical role that these kinds of organisations and community groups play in catalysing systemic changes that improve lives across the board.

Whether these are to national government policy or a local authority's priorities, the provision of help and services cannot be separated from civil society's inherent mission to increase the long-term wellbeing of the people and places we serve.

This will manifest differently for each organisation. Some will regard systemic change as their primary goal, while others may only pursue it where they identify it as a better, more long-term approach to the problems they address.

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The Sheila McKechnie Foundation

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Registered office:
17 Oval Way, London, SE11 5RR

People's experience needs to inform and drive reforms

What is clear to us from our work with local volunteers is that people who come together to tackle a local problem give freely of their passion, time and energy where they believe that a locally designed and implemented solution is best.

A 'levelling up' agenda must ensure that resources and infrastructure that communities need to ensure that their expertise informs and drives change is in place. This includes both capital resources – the places to meet, organise and provide services – and capacity-building resources that build people's skills, knowledge and confidence. It also includes a healthy dose of trust and flexibility that, given access to funding and support, communities will use it to create what they need.

Creating the infrastructure and capacity that will allow people to ensure their daily experiences influence the policies or attitudes that shape their lives is one of the best demonstrations of faith and trust that the Government could offer, especially to those communities too often overlooked. People will not long tolerate their energy being exploited as a sticking plaster if the solutions they are quick to identify are ignored at a local, regional, national or corporate level.

Freedom to speak up and speak out must be respected and protected

The service, expertise, experience and support that comes from civil society to deliver services cannot, and should not, be separated from its right to press for systemic change. The two go hand in hand. Unfortunately, the kind of collaboration, mutual trust and partnership that we have seen blossom in many local areas is not reflected on the national stage.

Measures such as the Lobbying Act and anti-advocacy clauses combine with political and media narratives that say charities should leave politics to the politicians. Together they create an atmosphere in which speaking honestly about what we hear and see from the people we work with, or pressing for solutions to prevent the problems we are tackling, is often regarded as simply too risky. Too many organisations feel they need to choose between being considered 'friend or foe' by the Government – the idea of being an honest broker or critical friend is now a vanishing possibility.

If the Government is serious about devolving power and resources to communities, it must both expect and welcome their intervention in the development of policies and practices that stand in the way of the improvements they seek.

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A new relationship between civil society and government

The Sheila McKechnie Foundation would like to see the Government acknowledge that civil society is a critical part of keeping our social, economic, environmental and political systems healthy. It sits alongside, and on equal footing with, the State and the Market in its role to connect people, generate social capital, increase resilience and help people take greater control of their own futures.

This would be a starting point for a new relationship that embraces challenge, welcomes collaboration and respects independence.

If you would like to discuss any of this, I'd be happy to arrange a call.

Yours sincerely

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