

Speak up, *we need you!*

**Why charity CEOs need to be part
of the national conversation**

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About this initiative

The Charity Reform Group (CRG), hosted by the Sheila McKechnie Foundation (SMK), brings together mutually supporting charity leaders committed to using their voice and influence to further the reforming role of civil societyⁱ.

During the first year of the CRG's operation in 2022, we focused on an initial question: **why are charity CEOs relatively under-represented in the national conversation?**

This is how we framed our endeavour:

Evidence and experience show that charity CEOs are relatively under-represented in public and political debate, constrained by a lack of understanding of the charity sector, of them as leaders, and of the unique perspective they bring. As we move out of the pandemic, for many people and for our planet, societal challenges are getting worse. Charities are uniquely positioned to see the large, society-wide systemic challenges and opportunities. By bringing them into the national conversation, there is a very real chance to improve rather than impoverish our public debate, just when we need it to be at its richest.

To get an indication of the problem, we looked at some of the places where that 'national conversation' takes place – current affairs programmes like Question Time, Peston, and the Andrew Marr Show. To get a sense of relative representation, we looked at 75 episodes of these programmes over a six-month period in 2021. We found just six appearances from civil society guests. That represents just 2% of the total – compared to 10% from academia and journalism respectively; and 4% from business.

So, why is this? Why are charity leaders relatively under-represented? To find out, we reached out to people from other sectors to understand more about how they view charity leaders and the question in hand. We hosted a series of conversations, under Chatham House rules, between charity CEOs and leaders from the public sector, politics, media, business, and wider civil societyⁱⁱ.

What we heard and learned over the next twelve months was, we felt, worth sharing more widely. We hope this first report will offer perspectives, raise questions, and offer challenges to charity leaders from all parts of the sector.

Summary of learning

Figures from other sectors told us that:

- They want charity leaders to speak up and bring their unique perspective to important issues
- It is charity leaders' experience of working on critical social issues that is seen to be invaluable – and which confers legitimacy
- However, to cut through, charity leaders were exhorted to speak into the agenda of the day – not just stick to their core issue
- Our contributors wanted to see charity leaders speaking collectively and more widely – reaching beyond government and political decision-makers
- It was recognised that Whitehall is not as open to charities' contribution to policymaking as it has been in the past, and that hostile political rhetoric has had a 'chilling' effect on charities' willingness to speak up. Charities should not simply wait for doors to re-open, they must demonstrate their role and value by engaging with confidence
- There is a need to re-examine what good leadership and governance should look like today and, at its heart, a re-examination of mission and purpose in the face of those who believe charities should 'stick to the knitting'
- More collaboration on shared interests, even establishing shared platforms, would be welcomed
- People and personalities, not just positions, are important – but public prominence can exact a personal cost, so leaders need support

This positive encouragement to speak up from across different sectors and groups feels new, even surprising, given much of the recent commentary around charity voice and campaigning. At the conclusion of the listening exercise, SMK CEO Sue Tibballs said:

“Trying to read the zeitgeist from social media and think tank reports might tempt charity leaders to conclude that people are not ready for a bolder, more visionary tone. Our discussions revealed quite the opposite; that, if more charities put their heads above the parapet, they might be pleasantly surprised by the unusual allies they find.”

The mandate is clear. In what follows, we set out these themes in more detail. Going forward, the CRG will continue its work to further the reforming role of the charity sector and wider civil society, looking in to tackle challenges within our sector; and looking out to tackle barriers outwith and find common cause with those in other sectors who share our values and interests.

If these findings, or the work of the CRG, is of interest, please do not hesitate to get in touch at info@smk.org.uk.

Speak up, we need you!

The resounding message that came through loud and clear in our conversations is that people outside the sector want charity CEOs to speak up and be heard. By common consent, people believe that charities do invaluable work and have a vital perspective urgently needed in public debate. Some talked about charities having good visibility during the pandemic and felt that now, in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis, there was even greater public appetite for charities to use their platform.

Indeed, several felt that charities are punching below their weight:

“You hold the keys to tackling them, as what you’re working on is so relevant and interesting”

“You’re more influential than you think – be bold, just do it”

“They have an amazing message, like that ad, ‘the beer that reaches the parts other beers don’t reach”

It was also remarked that a common criticism of both government and opposition is a lack of vision for change to connect up disparate policy initiatives. This leaves a clear gap for civil society to join the dots on different issues in public debate.

“They understand the issues in a way ministers with short tenures don’t.”

“Charities are carrying the burden of providing checks and balances in our democracy, given the weakness of political opposition.”

Some felt strongly that it is both the role and duty of charities to speak up.

“The purpose of charities is to speak out, if you lose sight of that you’re headed for trouble.”

We heard concern that the charity sector is too polite and, therefore, too easily seen as a ‘nice to have’. There was encouragement to proceed with more confidence and conviction, and that the public are looking for those driven by values and with strong convictions, with charities are well-placed to do this.

“Feel free to be outraged and have passion.”

“Charity sector tends to be very polite. It needs to project a strength of feeling and opinion.”

Some observed that other sectors, notably the Arts, are better at cutting through.

“Charities aren’t in the debate. Arts organisations do cut through better, perhaps because they have big iconic physical spaces and celebrities in their corner.”

Speak from experience

It was broadly felt that it is charities' experience, and the evidence they can present from that experience, that is so valuable and that confers legitimacy. It is our ring-side seat in society that affords permission to speak up and out.

"It's fine to have outrage and passion about a cause, as long as it's backed up by the facts, and delivered in a measured way. There is plenty of room for that."

"On occasion you will be seen as political if you are disagreeing with the administration of the day, but if your contribution is well-evidenced then that is OK. The right to talk on 'political' issues comes from deep knowledge and specialism."

"Some people will always say stick to your knitting, so you might as well be out there anyway as long as you're objective and evidence-based."

Speak into the issues of the day

Importantly, people wanted to see charities step beyond their own immediate area of work and speak into the political priorities of the day. This was expressed as critical by both those with media backgrounds, who pointed out that programmes are looking for people able to comment broadly on social affairs, and those with political backgrounds, who suggested that being relevant to government means speaking to its agenda.

"Charity CEOs could be incredibly powerful on the cost-of-living crisis. Or on the Queen's Speech or on the Financial Services Bill. They have lots to say on a range of the most topical issues."

Some talked about charity sector leaders being seen as single-issue specialists, whereas business leaders are assumed to be entitled to have a wider voice beyond their core business.

It was also recognised, however, that when charities speak beyond their immediate issue, it can be perceived as 'straying into politics'.

"The problem of the political trap. If you start going beyond an issue, e.g. homelessness, and start talking about other aspects of system like care or prisons or poverty, that can appear political."

This gets to an absolutely central challenge: the tension between those wanting charities to speak across a range of social concerns and the countervailing pressure on charity CEOs to stick to their core issues – as we explore in the next section.

Speak together

A strong theme in our conversations was the absence of a strong collective voice, speaking up about issues affecting society – a strong, coherent voice for the sector as a whole. Meanwhile, when the sector does speak up, it was perceived to be too defensive, spending too much energy justifying itself.

“Where’s the CBI equivalent?”

“You need more people willing and able to speak out on behalf of sector as a whole.”

Our conversations frequently returned to the need for more collaboration around common themes, even common positions, which could increase public profile. This in turn could give rise to clear and consistent messages, e.g. around the cost-of-living crisis.

“What are the four things we are doing to solve it, and what are the four things other sectors could do that would help?”

This could avoid debates getting lost in what organisations are doing to address the individual consequences of systemic failures, and instead concentrate on the systemic failures themselves.

Speak beyond government

There was strong encouragement for charity CEOs to direct their messages to a wide range of audiences – not just government. Many talked about the opportunities to find common cause with leaders in other sectors, notably in the private sector where the Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) and ‘Purpose’ agendas are so prominent.

With audience in mind, it was also pointed out that programmes like Question Time have a limited and declining audience, so it is important that charities’ ambitions reach beyond these traditional social affairs programmes.

Message and messenger

It was the clear view of those we spoke to that this is also about people and personalities. As well as having a strong message, it is important that the messenger is credible and compelling – someone worth listening to. It was acknowledged that those who grow a public profile from other sectors are those with strong personalities who have something to say.

“Different charities are viewed very differently, often driven by the personalities of the people there at the time. Some are seen as rational, reasonable, able to see the whole policy picture, others not.”

“There are lots of talented people in the sector, so that’s not the issue, and you’re starting with a big plus of credibility.”

It was also acknowledged, however, that high profile leadership can come at high personal cost – as attested to by some CEOs in our conversations.

“Public life is messy and brutal at the moment. Vilification is a standard government tactic, ‘the cost of public life.’”

“Chief execs are certainly becoming public figures and therefore seen as fair game.”

For most, not the ‘third’ sector in terms of pecking order

It is worth noting that there were very few who came into this conversation with a perception that charity CEOs are unequal to leaders in other sectors simply because of the nature of the organisations they are running. Ours is a tiny sample, so this should be treated with caution, but the two comments that referred to charities not being high quality organisations both came from those with a business background. As one expressed it, **“charities have a cottage industry mindset whereas business is efficient and effective”**.

So, what's stopping us?

External factors

A 'closed-door' Government

Many of those we spoke to were very aware of the Government's reluctance to engage at present – that charities and wider civil society, particularly in England, are operating in a difficult and, at times, hostile environment.

“The notion of ‘social dialogue’ is much more embedded in Scotland and Wales. Civil society is seen as part of the solution in the devolved nations. In England, you have to fight tooth and nail to get a seat at the table.”

“This Government does engage when it can see the usefulness, but does so reluctantly. It's not wired in.”

So-called 'culture wars'

Some of those we spoke to were keenly aware of the so-called 'culture wars' and how charities are being used as ammunition – though they are not the only institutions affected.

“‘Culture wars’ mean that charities can find what seems relatively routine or innocuous work suddenly politicised – become a ‘big P’ political issue – and then used as a tool to attack the sector.”

“We need to find a way to defend against vexatious attacks on charities that distract them from their mission.”

Few of those we spoke to were aware of the breadth of ways in which charities and wider civil society are being 'chilled'.

“Politicians and some sections of the media want to police the VCSE unrelated to what the legal framework says.”

Indeed, a clear benefit of our conversations was the opportunity for our guests to get greater insight into the pressures being felt by CEOs in the sector.

Lack of visibility and understanding of the sector

Related to this, some commented that the charity sector needs to do a better job of communicating its role and value.

For one, this needs to be rooted in demonstrating economic value.

“If you're not measured, you're not treasured.”

For others, this meant attending to issues of culture and practice that are damaging to the sector's reputation (see below).

Internal factors

Conflicts of interest

Our discussions recognised that funding models can create a conflict of interest.

“Does dependency on the public purse constrain ability to speak up – undermining independence?”

“Most charities don't have public service contracts. Is their campaigning richer as a result?”

But they also touched on the fact that much campaigning is rooted in service provision, so separating the two activities may not be feasible or effective.

“I'm not clear how this would work – service provision can also provide legitimacy, evidence and grounding.”

An excess of caution

A very strong theme across conversations was an 'excess of caution' in charity governance.

“Charities are constrained by governance and regulation – though most missions are broad enough to allow for a lot.”

“The way charities respond to pressure and low-level intimidation. Some see it as a challenge and will take it on, some ignore it, some are prompted to an excess of caution. The Charity Commission is not helping.”

It is interesting to note that one contributor from a private sector background, who is also a charity trustee, said the key difference between governance in the two sectors is that the primary role of charity governance is the management of risk.

Getting our own house in order

Some contributors raised concerns about issues of practice, culture and reputation. One person talked about a culture of **“entitlement, extractive or tokenistic behaviour, dominated by growth and service provision, too abstracted from the grassroots.”**

There's a clear sense that charities' legitimacy to speak up and out is linked with getting their own house in order.

Issues around employment were raised: it is felt that charities are not always the best employers, bringing an expectation staff should go above and beyond because of the mission, despite often low pay.

“Being charitable can mean taking staff for granted. In the commercial sector there’s recognition that happy staff means happy customers. I don’t see the same attitude in the charity sector.”

Questions were raised about charities being truly embedded in their communities and working openly and collaboratively with others.

Some talked about charities making unreasonable demands on senior figures outside the sector with last minute and poorly thought-through requests. This includes asking people to do things for free when the charity is well-resourced, or wanting senior figures to lend their name and credibility but not being interested in hearing their actual views.

“I find that charities haven’t always been that professional. There’s a bit of entitlement there.”

What needs to happen?

Many of the themes around 'getting the house in order' will be familiar to the sector – employment practice and pay, for example – and they are often reflected in wider public polling. It is important to hear them – but it is beyond the scope of this initiative to try to tackle them directly.

That said, it does seem reasonable to posit that if the public at large were to see and hear more charity CEOs speak up and out, it could make an impression on public perceptions of charity.

So how can we do that?

Reach out

Continue to reach out to senior stakeholders in other sectors

We were heartened by the willingness of all those we invited to engage with charity leaders, and how much they said they enjoyed the conversations, not least as it helped develop their own understanding. We should continue to reach out and make common cause with those who share our values and interests.

These are all people who are themselves well-networked, who see the problems and opportunities, and who want to help. We will keep in touch with those we have engaged and invite others to share our table and join our conversations.

“Do we need independent champions for the sector? More Deborah Meadens? There must be trustees who can fulfil that role. And do we need to let go of the need for their messaging to be perfect?”

And look for ways to collaborate

There was strong encouragement for charities to find ways to work more closely with other sectors. They are seen as 'holding the keys' on issues of huge, shared concern – such as poverty, social care, education, and the current cost-of-living crisis – and have an authenticity and legitimacy others don't have. There is a clear opportunity to use their convening power to work more collaboratively with those in other sectors who share similar concerns – whether to look at specific social challenges, policy work, or shared campaigns and PR.

“Get in amongst business networks, after all most national charity brands are also social-purpose businesses. Be a credible voice in the business community, make common cause. No one sector has a monopoly on solutions. We need to work cross-sectorally.”

“The Purpose agenda has matured in recent years, there are more opportunities now for partnerships beyond fundraising.”

Stand together

Shared platforms

This kind of outreach and convening is hard to do on an individual basis. At the same time, charities do not have the profile or standing we believe they deserve. What can be done about this? Is there an opportunity for a grouping of big charities to create that platform?

“There are some amazing local charities but they don’t have access. How can big nationals lead an ecosystem?”

Is it possible for charities to stand together around shared values or come together at key moments? As someone in the group remarked:

“We are quite atomised as a sector. Where are the spaces we visibly come together, à la the Australian civil society conference, to discuss big issues that span many mandates?”

Whatever form any shared platform takes, it must be driven by external interests – not simply its own.

Shared interests

The concept of a shared platform will need to be explored carefully, but there are more immediate opportunities to collaborate in support of common interests – working together to share intelligence, develop policy, or undertake strategic communications activity.

There are various ways of achieving this – from connecting and coordinating functions within member organisations to investing in a stand-alone resource that can do some of this work, possibly in partnership with a strategic comms agency or a think tank. This can be thought about as a filter or funnel, helping translate the issues the sector is thinking about into useful policy and media content, and vice versa.

“There is a gap in [infrastructure] support for the reforming role as a collective endeavour – strategic intelligence, convening, common actions, common issues. It happens on behalf of sector, but not on issues that sector is trying to address.”

“There are opportunities to work better across the sector, as most of the issues we are dealing with don’t belong neatly to one charity, e.g. education, health, poverty. Areas that leak outside of your area of direct control are often the biggies.”

“Issues are intersectional, so why aren’t linkages between organisations?”

Strengthen our sector

Re-defining leadership

Our conversations show that for charity CEOs to 'cut through', they need to be good communicators and compelling people. This raised further questions about whether charities have the right model of leadership in the sector, or is it too focused on management? Do we need more explicit acknowledgement that leadership in the charity or social sector is not the same as in the public or private sectors? Are we sufficiently comfortable with leaders of vision, who want to take a public role, to take a strong view and, when required, to challenge?

Solidarity and collective strength

Charities need more courage than ever before in a difficult environment. It's incredibly tough, not to mention personal, being on the receiving end of attacks and charities are missing adequate peer support and solidarity mechanisms, whether systematic or informal. Is there support for charity leaders, particularly when they find themselves being publicly targeted?

Tackling governance

There is a clear challenge around the risk-averse nature of charity governance and the suggestion that the sector is constraining itself more than being constrained, which needs to be discussed across the sector.

This should include discussion with organisations representing those responsible for governance, who are not always in day-to-day conversations – chairs and trustees, lawyers, regulators. We believe there are creative solutions that would help to broaden conceptions and calculations of risk to include the risk of failing to speak up. These might include training, trustee secondments, recruitment practice, encouraging more charity leaders to sit on boards in other sectors, and more.

Mission central

Related to governance, there is an issue at the heart of this that we cannot ignore – charitable mission and how it is interpreted.

There have been mixed messages from politicians and the Charity Commission in recent years about whether charities can or should speak into political debate. Research shows that a majority of Conservative MPs believe that charities should stick to their core issue, otherwise they are straying into 'political territory'ⁱⁱⁱ. CEOs themselves have talked about their boards' view that speaking about anything other than the immediate work of the charity would not be an appropriate use of charitable funds.

This year, CEO of the Charity Commission Helen Stephenson said:

"...charities must be able to show that they are driven, not by the background, world view or political inclinations and interests of their leaders, but by their mission and purpose, and by the needs of the people or causes they serve."

Quite right. But it does not resolve the question at the heart of this tension – and a central question for the future of the charity sector – what is the nature of charitable mission?

Many, both inside and outside the sector, prefer to interpret mission very narrowly as the direct work charities do. Yet most of the charities, funders, and stakeholders we speak to recognise that 'core issues' are often influenced by broader factors. They see that charities cannot fully respond to 'the needs of the people and causes they serve' without considering the complex range of factors that affect people's lives.

Our discussions demonstrate that people outside the sector do want charities to feel free to speak beyond their 'core' issues and offer that broader analysis. We will support and grow this opportunity.

Going forward, the Charity Reform Group will continue its work to further the reforming role of the charity sector and wider civil society, articulating and promoting a positive vision for charities – that of a modern reforming civil society organisation.

If these findings, or the work of the CRG, is of interest, please do not hesitate to get in touch at info@smk.org.uk.

About SMK

Part think tank, trainer, convener, and champion, SMK is facilitating a new approach to civil society – the people and organisations outside of government and business. Change often begins in civil society. We believe it has the potential to drive deeper and longer-lasting change – in one person’s life or our entire society – if it works at its best and without unreasonable constraint. We call this Social Power and our ambition is to unleash it.

Sheila McKechnie Foundation

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ⁱMembership of the CRG group:

Halima Begum, Runnymede Trust
Craig Bennett, Wildlife Trusts
Susan Daniels, National Deaf Children’s Society
Matt Downie, Crisis
Paul Farmer, MIND*
Edel Harris, Mencap
Tim Naor Hilton, Refugee Action
Polly Neate, Shelter
Tessy Ojo, The Diana Award
Harriet Oppenheimer, RNID
Chris Sherwood, RSPCA

*Since our conversations last summer, Paul has left MIND to join Age UK.
We are delighted to say Sarah Hughes, the new CEO of MIND, has joined the group.

ⁱⁱGuests were:

James Ashton, Journalist and Author
Patrick Butler, Social Policy Editor, Guardian
Vicky Fox, Chief Executive, Supreme Court
Tanni Grey-Thompson, Paralympian and Peer
Alison Holt, Social Affairs Editor, BBC
Christina McAnea, General Secretary, Unison
Gus O’Donnell, ex-Cabinet Secretary and Head of Civil Service
Cilla Snowball, Wellcome Trustee and former BBDO CEO
Jo Swinson, Director, Partners for a New Economy and ex-MP, Minister and Liberal Democrat Leader
Rachel Treweek, Lord Spiritual in the House of Lords
Craig Watkins, Chief Executive, Kantar Public UK

ⁱⁱⁱInto the Corridors of Power, nfpResearch, June 2022:
https://nfpresearch.com/free-report/into_the_corridors_of_power