



Executive summary

For well over a decade, charities and other not-for-profit organisations in the social sector have faced a series of threats to their ability to contribute to the UK's democratic life. They do this by taking part in public debate and, where necessary, holding government to account; bringing their expertise and the voices of those they work with to bear on government policy-making, including when delivering public services; and helping to educate and inform, as well as build and curate our common culture.

At the same time, the evidence has grown that many people around the UK feel they're not listened to by their elected representatives, that their everyday concerns are ignored, and that they lack control.

In preparing this report, we talked to a range of people across the political spectrum – from charities, other not-for-profits and thinktanks to individual grassroots campaigners and Parliamentarians – to try to understand the problem and identify what action can be taken to tackle it. We also continued to monitor new threats as they arose.

What has become clear is that it is not just charities and not-for-profits but also the wider environment in which they operate that is under threat. We don't currently have a collective phrase in common use for those elements of our democracy that enable people to have a voice, amplify that voice to decision-makers, and help hold politicians to account. Partly because of that, these aspects of our democracy are less visible and harder to defend. That is why we are using a new phrase – democratic space – to make it easier to talk about the whole, not just the parts. This is the space in which people and civil society organisations help shape the policies, services, laws, and culture that affect everyone's lives.

Much of this environment is determined by government and Parliament but its health also depends on a wide range of actors including civil society, the media and the judiciary, who both shape the space and can be constrained by threats to it.

The nature of the threats

We heard of threats to charities and other not-for-profits, such as the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014 (commonly known as the Lobbying Act), which has restricted their right to campaign in the period up to an election, and 'gagging' or no-advocacy clauses for not-for-profit organisations in receipt of public money, which constrain their ability to contribute to policy-making and to speak out when things aren't working. At the same time, there have been a series of changes that have reduced access to judicial review to challenge the lawfulness of government decisions, a route often pursued by not-for-profit organisations and lawyers acting on behalf of individuals to hold government to account.

We also were told that the rights of individuals have come under threat, with rights to peaceful protest being curtailed and trade union powers (already heavily circumscribed after decades of legislation) further reduced, alongside challenges to the human rights of asylum seekers and attempts to repeal the Human Rights Act, abuse of anti-terrorism laws, and new ID restrictions on the right to vote.

More widely, we heard that a decline in standards in public life, including integrity, openness, and honesty, has made government less transparent and accessible and undermined trust and working relationships. The Executive has increasingly taken more powers to itself, including proroguing Parliament during Brexit (which was later judged unlawful) and, more recently, making widespread use of regulatory powers, including to change primary legislation, which do not allow for Parliamentary amendment or in-depth scrutiny. The Government has even introduced rules to prevent experts who have in the past criticised government policy from appearing on government sponsored platforms.

Many of the people we spoke to are also concerned about the increasing hold of so-called 'culture wars' thinking on political and public debate, which has created an intemperate environment in which it is becoming ever harder for both individuals and not-for-profits to debate differences of view or shape a common culture. Some charities have come under direct fire, particularly from certain sections of the media, and the not-for-profit or social sector, along with other key institutions in our democratic space, such as the judiciary and lawyers, and the media, are increasingly being lumped together and portrayed by Ministers and populist politicians as blocks to what the Government is trying to achieve rather than key elements of the democracy we all treasure.

It quickly became apparent through our interviews that it is not just the individual threats that are of concern but also the sum of these individual threats. One interviewee said, 'If you join up the dots between the various things that are happening, you have what amounts to a very serious threat to democracy itself.'

Why this matters

Ultimately, these changes have an impact on ordinary lives and people are starting to notice – from the many people who feel that government is not working for them and cannot be trusted, to those wanting to protest about a new road or library closure who fear this might expose them to criminal charges. Others are more structural and may be less visible. Some voices are being suppressed while others have too much influence and our national debate is becoming more polarised. Government transparency, accountability, and willingness to listen are being reduced. As a result, the quality of our public services, policies, and governance suffers and voter apathy, alienation, and political disengagement take hold.

Ultimately, this is potentially destabilising, undermining the unwritten social contract between the governed and the governors and making the UK more vulnerable to extremism and social division.

Where are we now?

Not everything in our system is broken. Charities continue to campaign, the Supreme Court over-ruled the Government's attempt to unlawfully prorogue Parliament, and a former Prime Minister has been sanctioned for deliberately misleading Parliament.

However, the view amongst those we spoke to in 2022 was that the situation was serious and things are likely to get worse. One interviewee likened it to 'boiled frog syndrome', where the frog doesn't notice the water heating until it is too late.

The next Westminster election is seen as an opportunity for a potential reset but, even if the will were there, they see a danger that any incoming government would not prioritise changes.

Why this is happening

There are also deeper drivers, some of which will remain even when leaders come and go.

Many of those we interviewed thought a key motivation is the Government seeking to avoid accountability and challenge and acting against what it sees as opposition to its democratic mandate from a range of quarters.

People also pointed to the undue influence on policy of certain vested interests, including big business, powerful media moguls, and thinktanks funded through 'dark money'. This imbalance becomes ever greater as other voices are clamped down upon and the local media, which is so important to the health of our democratic space, continues its decline.

Some of the people we interviewed mentioned the long-term impact of changes to funding, which began under the last Labour Government and have led to more public services being delivered by charities and to a shift from grants to tightly

specified contracts for services. This has fuelled a view that charities should not campaign, inform public policy, or speak out when services need improvement. Contract funding has also led to the under-funding of policy capacity.

There was a strong view that so-called 'culture wars' are being used by populist politicians more recently to sow dissent and whip up public support, though on some issues opinions don't neatly divide along political lines. Yet we also encountered genuine clashes of values and world view.

Finally, people point to the influence of social media and algorithms in fuelling conflict and the role of big data in the targeting of political messages, all adding to polarisation.

Much but not all of the environment described here is determined by government. It is worth noting that most of the problems we report are not being reproduced in the UK's devolved countries, although they are subject to many of the UK-wide changes and debates mentioned above.

The international picture

This picture is part of a wider international trend. Britain has proudly championed democracy abroad and sees itself as a model for others. But, this year, CIVICUS Monitor downgraded the health of the UK's civic space from 'narrowed' to 'obstructed'. We now sit alongside countries like Poland, Hungary and South Africa in this category.

A call to action

This is a potential tipping point. We hope everyone involved will seize the opportunity to reverse the current trend and renew our democratic space.

There are potentially powerful forces who, together, could find common ground. If arms are linked, they will become a stronger collective power to build political momentum because it is, ultimately, politicians who need to take action.

Because not-for-profits have been at the sharp end of specific threats for so long, they are a key line of defence and are well-placed to bring people together, within civil society and beyond, to create this coalition of the concerned. But greater investment is needed from charitable foundations to put them in the best position to do this.

There are already some prominent figures in the media, politics, and the wider world raising concerns about the health of our democratic space and challenges to fundamental rights, and there are more potential allies to be made to help form this wider coalition. Thriving networks and alliances already exist, for example for the protection of civic space and democracy, and the links can be made.

Moreover, our research suggests there is scope to find common ground for a wide conversation, cutting across political and sectoral divides, about the importance of a democratic space that truly enables all voices to be heard, reduces existing power imbalances, and ensures democratic institutions work on behalf of the people, with

full political accountability and transparency. This is in tune with public opinion: polls show that many people feel that that the system is not working or delivering for them.

As well as connecting these interests, and curating the conversation, the social sector needs to raise awareness of its role in the democratic space with people who do not know the sector well, and demonstrate in concrete ways how these issues affect the public.

But it is politicians who have the key responsibility for protecting and nurturing our democratic space, a responsibility that should be acknowledged in their manifestos for the next UK election. They need to respond to the public's appetite for renewal in our politics and our democracy, and stem the tide of disillusionment and disengagement that is undermining their ability to deliver for the British people.

If they don't act and instead continue to threaten our democratic space, then this will be negative tipping point – it is ultimately their legitimacy that is at stake and democracy itself that will suffer.