

**Briefing document for the Understanding Charities Group
October 2014****Introduction and background**

Public trust in charities remains high, but there is no room for complacency in an environment where people want to know much more about the operations of the organisations they engage with, and have the digital tools to do so.

Although we celebrate the fact that trust remains high, we believe trust levels could be at risk because of a lack of understanding of modern charities and how they operate. Issues such as the rights of charities to campaign, levels of CEO pay, fundraising methods and administration costs have prompted some negative responses from the press and Parliament that could damage the way charities are perceived by the public.

We believe charities must be proactive about upholding public trust. Increasing understanding is an important element of this. Supporters and beneficiaries have the right to ask charities questions about our impact and how we go about our work, and we have a duty to respond to their questions. This also gives us more opportunities to build public understanding of charities, both in terms of the overall contribution of charities to the fabric of life in the UK and more specific areas around how charities actually work.

As part of a cross-sector plan developed with NCVO and other bodies, CharityComms is looking to develop a new 'narrative' for the charity sector. This is an opportunity to get on the front foot: to be proactive as well as reactive; to be positive about charities' unique and invaluable contribution to the fabric of the UK's society, not defensive.

NCVO consultations with sector CEOs suggest that most feel individual charities are best placed to communicate with their supporters and beneficiaries, but many also believe that developing a stronger narrative for the charity sector and sharing 'lines to take' would be helpful.

CharityComms convened a round table on 1 October 2014 to take forward the development of a narrative for the sector, to work towards giving charities tools to help them to be more proactive in upholding public trust. Following this meeting we are now looking to widen participation in this initiative across the sector.

Who is doing what already?

- **NCVO** has carried out a range of meetings with its key stakeholders and also pulled together key ideas and strands of thought on how to tackle the issues. In particular it ran and published the [CEO pay commission](#).
- **The Charity Commission** has published research every other year on [attitudes to, and trust in charities](#). It has a statutory duty to maintain trust and confidence in charities.
- **The ImpACT Coalition** for many years spearheaded activities on transparency and accountability of charities. It has left behind a number of good tools and publications such *Asking For It: Honest Answers to Tough Questions* and most recently *Through a Glass Darkly*. It also produced a self-assessment tool kit spreadsheet on accountability and transparency.
- **Imagine Canada** is the equivalent body to NCVO in Canada. It has an extensive programme designed to try and improve public understanding of charities in Canada and is keen and happy to co-operate. It has produced a [narrative tool kit](#) including some quick-to-read information sheets which

provide context, key messages and supporting facts on the issues of *Advocacy, Compensation, Fundraising and Administrative Expenses, The Scope of the Sector and Impact Evaluation*.

- **nfpSynergy** has published a range of research on public attitudes to charities, and has just updated its 2006 publication *Getting the Message Across* which explores public attitudes and how charities can change them.
- **New Philanthropy Capital** published research earlier this year on public attitudes to charities through its [State of the Sector](#) research.
- **The international NGO sector** is working on its own narrative project to build public awareness and support for global development in the US, UK, France and Germany.
- **ActionAid** has published a 'crowd-sourced' [transparency report](#) on 23 September with contributions from 17 organisations (including the BBC, DFID, the Big Lottery Fund, sector bodies and charities) which aims to improve policy and practice in the not-for-profit sector by bringing in comparative perspectives and highlighting examples of good practice to promote meaningful and proportionate transparency.
- **NPC's** report [Mind The Gap](#) looks at what the public thinks about charities and explores whether recent attacks on charities from politicians and the media have adversely affected the public's attitude to the sector, based on the results of a poll carried out by Ipsos MORI.
- **CAF** has [produced a report with IPPR on the use/value of charity to ordinary people](#) showing how ubiquitous they are in people's lives and that charities can be worth tens of thousands of pounds to real families.

About the group and how it works

Objectives of the initiative

- To improve the understanding of the public, donors and other stakeholders of how charities work
- To improve the public's trust, empathy and engagement with charities
- To increase positive media coverage of the charity sector as a whole and better tackle the negative
- To achieve this by combining collaborative action by the sector with the activities of individual charities

Group composition and leadership

The core steering committee for the group is:

- Vicky Browning, director, CharityComms
- Alan Gosschalk, director of fundraising, Scope
- Joe Saxton, driver of ideas, nfpSynergy
- Karl Wilding, director of public policy, NCVO

Other people who attended the initial meeting or have expressed an interest in being part of the initiative are listed below.

Alan Gosschalk has agreed to chair the group in the short term but a permanent chair will need to be sought. Vicky Browning will act as the central co-ordinating point for the group's activities.

Measuring progress

We need to think through how we might measure progress in achieving our objectives. This will be tackled under the research strand of work (see below).

Timeframes

We should probably see this as an initiative that will take at least five years and nearer to 10 to yield substantive results in terms of public attitudes. We might be able to get results within six months for a better system for responding to media 'scandals' and we might hope to see a better general media profile in a couple of years.

Funding

We have no funding at the moment. We believe we shouldn't wait for funding in order to start work. NCVO has had some commitments from charities to contribute. But in the short term, the majority of this work will be undertaken by the people involved on a voluntary basis alongside business as usual.

About the strands of work

We have identified four broad strands of work, much of which will be interdependent.

Strand 1: Creating a narrative for the sector as a whole. We want to create a positive, proactive narrative which explains how modern charities work and why they do what they do. The narrative will reflect the diversity of the sector and show it as an innovative, exciting and dynamic part of the structure of UK society. We hope this will help charities tell their stories better in the context of the wider sector. This strand of work will be led by Vicky Browning at CharityComms.

Strand 2: Engaging with charities and creating ways for them to engage with their audiences. We can't expect charities to just do what we say or take any notice: we must treat this as a dialogue and a discussion, rather than command and control. But in order for this initiative to have any impact, we need to engage with charities of all sizes, find out their challenges, and encourage and cajole them into action. Effectively we need to do outreach work into our community. This strand of work will be led by Aidan Warner at NCVO.

Strand 3: Getting more generic media coverage for charities and creating a media rebuttal protocol. Charities need to reposition the way we talk about the sector with the aim of generating more generic media coverage. We need coverage more like the business or arts sector in which who charities are and how they work are routinely covered. This will correlate to the narrative in strand 1. At the same time, there is a need for a media rebuttal protocol: many charities are asked similar questions by their donors, volunteers and stakeholders. We can provide tools to help charities develop a common narrative around areas such as:

- Staff salaries (including CEO pay)
- Fundraising methods
- Admin costs and issues of effectiveness, transparency and accountability
- Partnerships/collaboration/mergers and competition between charities and why new charities are sometimes still needed
- Charities and government contracts
- Volunteering
- Impact

This strand will be led by Joe Saxton, nfpSynergy.

Strand 4: Researching and understanding the public, testing ideas and narratives out on them and measuring success. There is a body of research already on public attitudes towards charities carried out by the Charity Commission,

nfpSynergy and New Philanthropy Capital, among others. While we don't think that the first priority is for more research at this point, we are clear that more research may be needed, and also that we will need to test ideas, issues and concepts on a regular basis. We should consider making an objective assessment of media scrutiny, including assessing the level of coverage different stories have received. We also need to develop and implement a method to measure the success and impact of this initiative. This strand of work will be led by Sue Wixley at NPC.

Group participants

The first meeting of the Understanding Charities Group, held on 1 October 2014 was attended by the following people, alongside the core steering group, whose discussions have helped shape this briefing document:

- Caroline Abrahams, director of external affairs, Age UK
- Sarah Atkinson, head of information and communications, Charity Commission
- Anna Bloch, acting senior policy and public affairs officer, CFG
- Judith Davey, director of people, performance & accountability at ActionAid
- Sherine Krause, executive director of fundraising and communications, Action for Children
- Peter Lewis, CEO, Institute of Fundraising
- Daniel Mazliah, head of media relations, Scope
- Brendan Paddy, head of communications, DEC
- Mohammad Shakir, communications officer, Muslim Charities Forum
- Aidan Warner, external relations manager, NCVO
- Sue Wixley, director of communications, NPC

The following have also expressed an interest in being involved:

- Keiran Goddard, head of communications, Association of Charitable Foundations
- Mayur Paul, head of communications, Bond
- Carolan Davidge, director of marketing and engagement, British Heart Foundation
- Ben Russell, CAF
- Caron Bradshaw, CEO, CFG
- Rachel Whale, CharityWorks
- Steven Buckley, head of communications, Christian Aid
- Marie McQuade, Creative Cahoots
- Kieran Theivam, senior media officer, Crimestoppers Trust
- Lisa Day, head of communications strategy, resources & projects, Diabetes UK
- Hayley Stimpson, former UK corporate affairs director for Aviva, Dogs for Disabled trustee
- Sarah Jurado, head of brand, marketing & communications, EY Foundation
- Peter Gilheany, director, Forster Communications
- Rosie Chapman, independent charity and nfp advisor
- Allan Freeman, fundraising consultant, Freestyle Marketing
- Simon Sheehan, director, Hilton in the Community Foundation
- Dominic Will, joint managing director, Home Fundraising
- Matthew Sherrington, consultant, Inspiring Action Consultancy
- Nick Brooks, partner, Kingston Smith
- Tony Charalambides, managing director, Listen
- Lynda Thomas, director of fundraising, Macmillan Cancer Support

- Halima Khatun, communications manager, Muslim Aid
- Tom Madders, head of policy and campaigns, National Autistic Society
- Leon Ward, freelance and trustee of Plan UK
- Sarah Milsom, head of media & communications, Relate
- Richard Piper, CEO, Roald Dahl's Marvellous Children's Charity
- Ian MacQuillan, manager, Rogare
- Tanya Steele, director of fundraising, Save the Children
- Steve Palmer, press and public affairs manager, SCIE
- Dan Sumners, senior policy adviser, Signature
- Richard Fernandez, head of public affairs, St John Ambulance
- Angela Cummings, head of digital and marketing, Sue Ryder
- Susan Fiddian, head of PR, celebrity and communications, Sue Ryder
- Matthew Reed, CEO, The Children's Society
- David Mills, group account director, society & education at Guardian News & Media
- Chris Wainwright, head of communications, WaterAid

Please direct any comments, questions and offers of help to vicky@charitycomms.org.uk

Vicky Browning, Alan Gosschalk, Joe Saxton and Karl Wilding
October 2014