

Social Enterprise Coalition

Response to *improving support for frontline civil society organisations*

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The Social Enterprise Coalition's Response to the Office for Civil Society's consultation on *improving support for frontline civil society organisations*

The Social Enterprise Coalition

The Social Enterprise Coalition was established in 2002 as the national body for social enterprise in the UK. We are a membership organisation. We conduct research; develop policy; campaign; build networks; support individual social enterprises; share knowledge and understanding, support private business to become more socially enterprising, and raise awareness of social enterprise and what it can achieve.

Social enterprises are businesses driven by social or environmental objectives whose surpluses are reinvested for that purpose in the business or in the community. They operate across a wide range of industries and sectors from health and social care, to renewable energy, recycling and fair trade and at all scales, from small businesses to large international companies. They take a range of organisational forms from co-operatives and mutuals, to employee owned structures and charitable models.

Our members come from across the social enterprise movement, from local grassroots organisations to multi-million pound businesses that operate across the UK. With them we are:

- creating a better environment for social enterprises to do business
- helping the social enterprise movement to grow and become stronger
- building networks to share, learn and create business opportunities

The UK social enterprise movement is recognised as a world leader and our members are united in their commitment to changing the world through business. The current climate presents the social enterprise movement with a unique opportunity. We know it can solve some of the UK's most pressing problems, promote social justice and help to bring about the more diverse, bottom-up economic growth that we urgently need. In particular, social enterprises are well placed to deliver on the Government's three priorities for civil society: empowering communities, opening up public services and promoting social action.

This consultation

The last 10 years has seen social enterprise and civil society organisations increase greatly in prominence. Within this context, infrastructure bodies have traditionally played a number of key roles in the UK in order to support their members and the causes they represent. The government has provided funding for a broad spectrum of these activities in addition to the extensive work the OCS has done themselves. These include:

- conducting research and policy development
- disseminating information and best practice to enable frontline organisations to put policy into practice
- awareness raising and knowledge management
- network development
- policy mainstreaming and delivery programmes
- hosting events and providing training, advice and support

- managing grant programmes and funding streams

Given the challenging times we face financially, along with the scale of the ambition for Big Society, it is essential the national infrastructure bodies work in close partnership with government and other public bodies and in a way which enhances the existing strategic working.

A clear and comprehensive cross-departmental policy framework that is effectively communicated and informed by the needs of front line organisations is key to achieving this. We must also recognise that different elements of the Big Society vision will be best delivered by different organisations, according to their expertise and proximity to grassroots organisations and local communities. Moreover, to be effective and ensure sustainability, these organisations will need to work with each other through networks and partnerships.

It is essential that the vast wealth of experience, knowledge and intellectual property held by infrastructure bodies is not lost, but rather harnessed and used more strategically to meet the Government's clearly defined objectives.

We therefore welcome the Government's recognition of the role that national infrastructure organisations have to play in shaping the development of Government policy, providing specialist advice and strengthening networks. We further welcome this opportunity to respond to the Office for Civil Society's consultation on improving support for frontline civil society organisations, and address the question of how central Government can best work with national infrastructure to support and deliver the Big Society.

The Government has indicated that the key funding criteria for a new strategic partners grant programme may include an organisation's ability to:

- represent a part of the sector or the sector as a whole, in helping to shape government policy; and
- help to deliver the vision for the Big Society, including the three priorities for civil society (empowering communities, opening up public services and promoting social action).

The Social Enterprise Coalition supports these broad criteria. More specifically, we believe that government can best support infrastructure organisations to be effective and achieve the greatest impact through two key areas of activity:

- 1) creating an enabling environment for a robust, well-managed and highly efficient national infrastructure that supports grassroots organisations to deliver the Big Society; and
- 2) supporting infrastructure bodies to develop policy and evidence; strengthen networks across civil society and across the regions; facilitate learning and knowledge transfer across the sector; engage new audiences and showcase success.

Question 9: How can central Government best work with national infrastructure to support and deliver the Big Society?

1) Creating an enabling environment for a robust, well-managed and highly efficient national infrastructure

Central government is a key enabler in creating an environment in which infrastructure organisations can flourish and support the growth and development of civil society.

- *Using existing resources to increase awareness across government agencies of the existence and role of infrastructure bodies.*

Significant government investment has gone into infrastructure bodies raising their awareness to their target audiences and this has been very welcomed. We are now entering a new era and if we are to grow the social enterprise movement to meet the scale of ambition articulated in the Government's Big Society vision, we need to ensure that government policy is supported by practical steps to raise awareness across government agencies of the social enterprise movement and existing infrastructure support. The primary purpose for this must be to ensure that, citizens and organisations who seek information from government on starting up social enterprises and getting involved in the Big Society are directed towards the appropriate infrastructure organisations swiftly and accurately.

In order to support the growth of the social enterprise sector and the realisation of the Big Society vision, it is therefore essential that government maximises the use of existing resources to facilitate connections and information sharing.

In particular, a commitment is needed to using existing government communications portals, such as Directgov and Business Link's website, to signpost and drive traffic towards the appropriate infrastructure body. Better use of these existing opportunities to provide appropriate and direct signposting is a key means by which government can enable infrastructure bodies to provide appropriate and specialist support on social enterprise, and network citizens and organisations into the movement.

The Social Enterprise Coalition is delighted in the initiative that Directgov and Business Link demonstrated in engaging with the Social Enterprise Coalition to actively link from their websites and share content. It is anticipated that this will help more and more citizens are only two steps away from getting directly the advice and information they need about social enterprise.

We urge the Office for Civil Society to co-ordinate a rolling out of this approach to ensure more strategic use of government communications resources, to systematically train and inform other agencies at all levels, to refer using centralised portals such as DirectGov and to embed this best practice as normal practice. The OCS has already spent considerable

time and investment in raising the profile of social enterprise across government departments and other public bodies.

- *Facilitating connections within government*

The Office for Civil Society has played a valuable role in working to embed support for civil society organisations across the breadth of government departments. There has never been more interests from civil servants across government at a national and local level.

The Social Enterprise Coalition believes that a continuation of the Office for Civil Society's role in facilitating connections across and between government departments is a key aspect to how central Government can best work with national infrastructure to support the Big Society.

Moreover, since its creation in 2006, the Office for Civil Society has been extremely successful in striking the right balance in offering support to the movement without trying to take control. In order to foster the Big Society and encourage grassroots organisations and communities to innovate and develop solutions to local issues, it is vital that this successful balance is maintained.

- *Clarifying the relationship between infrastructure bodies and government*

The current review of funding for infrastructure bodies presents government with an opportunity to set a clear vision for its engagement with civil society. By clarifying its funding intentions, the government will galvanise the infrastructure sector to achieve efficiencies, whether by adapting their operational models and remit or by undertaking mergers, the purpose of which is to maintain choice but to ensure that routes to information are less confusing, content, practice and information is shared more and there is decreased duplication, where it exists.

In setting this agenda, it is essential that the government bears in mind the valuable role that infrastructure organisations play in brokering contact between their members/customers or constituents and government, and seeks to support organisations that can help government to quickly access grassroots organisations.

2) Supporting infrastructure bodies to develop policy and evidence; strengthen networks across the civil society and across the regions; facilitate learning and knowledge transfer across the sector; engage new audiences and showcase success.

The Social Enterprise Coalition welcomes the government's recognition of the important role that infrastructure organisations play in shaping government policy. We believe that policy and research work cannot be separated from network development aimed at supporting the

growth of the sector. As such, we believe that four key areas the government should consider funding are:

- using policy to create a better environment for social enterprises;
- developing the evidence base for social enterprise;
- showcasing stories to help foster the Big Society; and
- networking to support the growth of social enterprise.

- *Using policy to create a better environment for social enterprises*

A supportive and well-informed policy framework is key to creating an enabling market and operational environment for social enterprises and wider Big Society initiatives.

In order to support the growth of the social enterprise movement through policy, a clear understanding of the operating environment for these organisations is needed. Membership bodies like the Social Enterprise Coalition have direct access to organisations working on the ground to deliver community-based solutions and public services, and we draw on the expertise and experiences of these organisations to develop evidence-based policy recommendations.

Developing such recommendations requires both an expert understanding of how to translate barriers on the ground into policy solutions and a strong understanding of the policy landscape, in order that the recommendations put forward are appropriate and in synergy with the UK's wider social and economic developments and needs.

Successful infrastructure bodies have developed this expertise both in order to advocate on behalf of their membership, and to enable them to analyse government policy developments and cascade information on their practical implications back down to members. This is essential in supporting the sector to be nimble and respond to changing market opportunities, particularly with regard to public service reform. It also enables infrastructure bodies to ensure that they are developing products and services that can best support the growth of the sector.

The comprehensive policy frameworks being developed by each government department make clear that such policy functions are essential to the delivery of the Big Society Vision. These areas of work are, however, challenging to fund through alternative means as they are not time bound pieces of work. As the sector grows, the opportunity for such functions to become sustainable will also grow. Until this time, however, there is a need for government to support the continuation of policy work conducted by infrastructure bodies.

- *Developing the evidence base for social enterprise*

Our ability to deliver the Big Society vision is dependent on our ability to develop a robust and relevant evidence base for social enterprise. Through building evidence and gaining insights into social enterprise, infrastructure bodies can inform the development of new

products and services as well as policy developments to support the growth of the movement.

Social enterprise specifically is an under developed and fragmented research field. While academic interest in the social enterprise field is growing, there is great demand to better connect academic research with grassroots organisations to ensure such research has practical application.

Additionally there is a need to build evidence on the characteristics of the social enterprise movement as a whole including its size, structure, motivations, barriers and enablers. This is essential in providing both policy rich information for use at a national and local level, as well as valuable information for the social enterprise movement and support sector to draw upon.

- *Showcasing stories to help foster the Big Society*

Showcasing the work of the social enterprise movement is an important aspect of helping to achieve the Big Society vision. Strategic partners have to date played an important role in raising the profile of social enterprise, particularly among the public sector and government.

Achieving the Big Society vision will require the partnership and involvement of a broad range of stakeholders from mainstream businesses and public sector employees, to young people, communities and grassroots organisations. These groups will need to understand the potential of social enterprise and know where to go to get the support they need to develop enterprising solutions and deliver the localism agenda.

In particular, the Big Society agenda hinges on wider business and economic reform as well as public sector reform, and there is still work to do on developing a wider understanding of co-production, localism and more pluralistic economic models that foster the bottom-up economic growth the UK needs.

The media can play an important role in driving awareness-raising and ensuring people can access the information and support they need. Organisations that have engaged in raising awareness of social enterprise to date have played an important role in shifting the media outlook on the economy and sustainable business.

Often the government is not best placed to deliver this function. Infrastructure organisations that are in close contact with the grassroots organisations that are working on projects connected to the localism and mutualising agendas, have enjoyed some success to date and could have much more in the future, marketing the Big Society and bringing new audiences to engage with it.

Sharing stories about what social enterprises have achieved inspires people to act, as well as helping them to learn about how to replicate successful endeavours. In particular, government should seek to support awareness raising that helps all sectors of the media to understand and articulate the benefits of social enterprise and the Big Society vision. In the

current economic climate, it is especially important that we reach key audiences such as young people, who are the future social entrepreneurs and work force that will grow and develop the movement.

The appetite for information from these audiences is growing rapidly, as evidenced by the number of social enterprise start-up organisations that contact the Social Enterprise Coalition on a daily basis to seek support. The government's strategy for working with infrastructure bodies must take account of this need in order to capitalise on the opportunity it presents to support citizens who want to get involved.

- *Networking to support the growth of social enterprise*

Building networks is fundamental to supporting the growth of the Big Society vision. Not only do such organisations fulfill important functions in relation to learning and sharing information, but they are also significant in terms of bringing organisations together, enabling them to feel part of a community of activists and innovators.

This is in line with the government's own vision for the future of business support, which plans to create a system that is based more on peer support and mentoring than funding business support services. Building such networks is also essential in order to develop practical tools for social enterprises, identifying where gaps currently exist and developing products and services to fill these gaps.

Conclusion

We believe that through continuing and developing these areas of work, we will be best placed to ensure that:

- the social enterprise sector is represented to government and policy developments cascade down to social enterprises on the ground;
- policy developments and support services are evidence based;
- resources are used as effectively as possible and government and infrastructure bodies work in a coordinated manner; and
- we create greater demand and interest in achieving the Big Society Vision.

We further believe that these activities should be funded with a view to infrastructure bodies moving towards organisational sustainability. In the interim, there is a need for government to support the work that infrastructure organisations do to provide business support and skills training, and to ensure that the public understands and has access to information about the Big Society and how they can play a part in it.