Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement

Corrected oral evidence: Civil Society

Wednesday 15 November 2017

11.40 am

Listen to the meeting

Members present: Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbotts (The Chairman); Baroness Barker; Lord Blunkett; Baroness Eaton; Lord Harries of Pentregarth; Baroness Lister of Burtersett; Baroness Morris of Yardley; Baroness Newlove; Baroness Pitkeathley; Baroness Redfern; Lord Rowe-Beddoe; Lord Verjee.

Evidence Session No. 12 Heard in Public Questions 104 - 113

Witnesses

I: Dawn Austwick, Chief Executive, Big Lottery Fund; Sir John Low, Chief Executive, Charities Aid Foundation; Patrick Murray, Head of Policy and External Affairs, New Philanthropy Capital.
Examination of witnesses

Dawn Austwick, Sir John Low and Patrick Murray.

Q104 The Chairman: Thank you very much for coming along. I am sorry that inefficient chairmanship has led to you having to start late; I apologise for that. Can I give you the formal words again? A list of interests of Members relevant to the inquiry has been sent to you and is available. This session is open to the public and is being recorded for BBC Parliament. A verbatim transcript will be taken of the evidence and will be put on the Committee’s website. A few days after the session, you will be sent a copy of the transcript to check for accuracy. It would be most helpful if you could advise us of any corrections as quickly as possible. If, after this evidence session, you wish to clarify or amplify any points made during your evidence, or have any additional points to make, you are most welcome to submit supplementary evidence to us. Could you introduce yourselves briefly, and then we will get on with the questions?

Sir John Low: I am John Low. I am the chief executive of the Charities Aid Foundation. We undertake a lot of research into a whole range of areas. I hope that some of our evidence has been useful to the Committee so far.

Dawn Austwick: I am Dawn Austwick. I am the chief executive of the Big Lottery Fund, which distributes 40% of National Lottery Good Causes funding and that is about £600 million or £700 million a year, to communities in the main.

Patrick Murray: I am Patrick Murray. I am head of policy and external affairs at New Philanthropy Capital. We are a think tank and consultancy that works specifically with charities and funders to improve their impact.

Q105 The Chairman: Thank you all very much. How would you describe the current state of civic participation and of civil society in the UK today?

Sir John Low: Remarkably healthy. We see many people supporting charities. It is a very active area of life in this country. Some £10 billion is donated and we can see through our research that nine out of 10 people have said to us that they did something for charity or something charitable in the last year. It is quite reasonable to say that it is healthy. However, the aftermath of the EU referendum has left us with a very difficult situation, I would suggest. In our research, we have found that 14 million people, when you do the estimates, felt that their community was more divided than at the beginning of 2016, and so there are some serious and worrying trends. The levels of community spirit are worryingly low. Some 33% of people thought it was worse after the referendum over that period, which is quite worrying.

However, what is interesting is that, as a result of that time, far more individuals are politically active and have a desire to be politically active and are campaigning or involving themselves in some kind of protest; either street protests or written ones. Yes, it is remarkably healthy, but.
Dawn Austwick: I would echo that there is a plethora of diverse civic participation at a very grass-roots level. It is often below the radar, very quiet, local and small; and it is very voluntary. If I look at our National Lottery Awards for All funding, where we make about 11,000 grants each year for under £10,000, I see that the sorts of groups we are supporting there are often very small and very much in the neighbourhood. They are doing extraordinary things for the sheer joy and pleasure of serving their community.

If you look beyond that very local aspect, you can also see a desire to engage among citizens. I noticed that some of the previous witnesses spoke about the Olympic volunteers. You could also talk about the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow, where a group of homeless people became the volunteers for the games, and that changed their lives in many ways. What that says is there is a latent appetite in society and among people to participate and a lot of that is at its most beneficial when it is very voluntary, very local and not overengineered or overplanned. In some ways, somewhat chaotic and anarchic—I mean that in a positive sense—civic activity is a very positive thing in communities. When one looks at the charitable sector, I would say that 160,000 charities is a blessing, not a curse.

Patrick Murray: From our perspective, we did a big piece of research over the last 18 months looking at the state of the sector, with interviews, round tables and surveys with chief executives, trustees and charities of all different sizes. From that perspective, where civil society sits, the interesting part is people definitely feel under pressure. There are a number of things going on. The thing that came up time and time again was increasing demand and decreasing resources, against a backdrop of wider social and demographic change, with the digital revolution changing a lot of things. The interesting part of this is what people are doing in response is looking more towards civic participation and civic engagement models. In the face of changing ways that people are expressing demands for more personalised services and products, people are thinking about how they can create more personalised responses and work more closely with communities to achieve change themselves rather than delivering things to them.

There are some good things in that and some challenges. One example in the research we did was the leader who talked about his refugee organisation—and this gives you a bit of a timeframe—and the Calais situation. He said the people in Calais were being kept going by random people getting stuff together in a van, driving it down to Calais and doling it out. There is a challenge for existing civil society organisations about how you do that in a way that generates the greatest impact. Accepting that civil society at the local grass roots is always going to be quite rambunctious, and that is quite a good thing, there needs to be some thought about how larger charities might be able to provide some of the infrastructure that enables some of that action, and how you work with that. Other charities talked about, "We started off as a cause; then we became an institution; and now we’re thinking about how we can be a
cause again, a campaign of like-minded people trying to achieve change”. Civil society is under pressure but people are trying to think more about civic participation.

One thing to say on engagement in communities is there was some work earlier in the year from the ONS which suggested that volunteering had dropped by 15.4% between 2005 and 2015, so, notwithstanding a spike around the Olympics, there is a challenge about how we can get more people engaged in their communities even if there is a broader trend towards more civic engagement that people are trying to tap into.

**Baroness Redfern:** Patrick, do you think local authorities could play a more significant role in bringing charities together and involving public participation and giving advice?

**Patrick Murray:** Local authorities are under a lot of pressure at the moment and have borne the brunt of austerity over the last few years. However, local authorities are thinking much more about a convening role and how they can bring together different actors. In the last session there was some talk about the role of community foundations as well. We had quite an interesting example from research we published. We published a booklet of essays, one of which talked about the London’s Giving movement, which started from the Cripplegate Foundation, a community foundation in Islington, bringing together lots of different actors, including the local authority, the public sector, local businesses and the local community, to try to knit things together and create a much more place-based approach. Local authorities are the democratically accountable body in a community and need to be part of this, absolutely. There is a danger in thinking that local authorities can do everything when they are under a lot of pressure at the moment.

**Q106 Baroness Redfern:** My question is: who is not taking part in civic society? What are the barriers these groups face?

**Sir John Low:** Some 9% of people account for 66% of charitable activity. You have this huge skew where this small number of people—9%—accounts for two-thirds of charitable activity. That is why this inquiry is so important, because that focus does not deliver what is required. One in 10 people over 65 volunteer, but many want to, and the real question is why we have this polarisation; they want to and the benefits are quite significant. Out of a piece of work that Lord Blunkett helped us with a couple of years ago, we have created the concept of a post-careers advice service. People out of employment need advice on their volunteering career. We think that could be taken up and would deliver significant change.

At the other end, if you look at younger people, they are the future leaders of the sector, but more could be done to engage them. If they are in work, they tend to be time poor and have little money, and so their ability to give in terms of both time and money is constrained. If you go to the universities, people want the experience but, again, there is a lot of pressure on time. We did some work with UCAS to include in the
application form details of volunteering and community and charity activity, which counts towards the application process to university. Of course, that changed the whole attitude of schools towards this because there was some value in it; and introducing people early is a really important thing to do.

We find that there is a difference in what people do. Younger people would be much more interested in trying to influence public policy. They would be interested in being active in a political sense, not necessarily party political. They have less time to volunteer in a charity shop or to spend time with an older person who is on their own, or whatever. You get different things happening in different demographics, which is good, but there are gaps. One in 10 older people volunteer; many more want to do it and yet only 9% are carrying the burden.

Lord Harries of Pentregarth: We have heard from you and the previous witnesses that the volunteering sector is basically in good heart, but two things you have just said to us seem to be in stark contrast to that. First, Sir John, you said that a huge percentage of the volunteering is undertaken by a tiny percentage of volunteers. That is a rather startling fact. Secondly, Mr Murray, you said that volunteering over the last 10 or 15 years has gone down significantly. That seems to rather contradict what was being said before.

Dawn Austwick: Can I comment on some of the barriers because that links into your point? There are significant barriers to participation for substantial parts of our population. One might argue that volunteering and all kinds of other participation are in good health among some parts of our communities but not all. There are some significant access barriers to people. Certain communities do not have access to resources and are unfamiliar with what others might see as standard processes. They are not familiar with a very professionalised sector and find some of the systems and networks are not accessible to them. I can use an example of our own funding where we have struggled to fund in some areas, at some points. We rejected an organisation because it did not come through our filters, which are largely risk based. We looked at it again, and visited, and found that all the reasons we felt the organisation might be risky were activities that they were undertaking to achieve their mission. I could give you a very small example: excessive use of mobile phones on international calls. For us, that would be a risk alert for all sorts of reasons. We subsequently discovered that this was an organisation that was working with a particular refugee community and those calls were to refugees on boats in the Mediterranean. Sometimes you have to dig beneath the surface to try to remove some of the barriers that one has inadvertently created for all the right reasons.

There is another section of society that is also excluded and these are often people with what I would call “lived experience”. Whether they have multiple complex needs or mental health problems or whether they come from the disabled sector or whatever, very often the way in which we
organise ourselves, think and make decisions makes it very hard for those people to participate.

I am not an expert in this field, but I can refer you to a really fine report by a young woman called Baljeet Sandhu which talks about how the charitable sector has not engaged with those with lived experience, but, very optimistically, talks about the things that could be done to change that. It is possible to change it, but we have consciously to invest time and effort into doing that.

There are also parts of the population which feel excluded from participating in our civic life because they feel a little alienated. Again, there are some fantastic organisations, such as RECLAIM in Manchester or UpRising, which some of you may be familiar with, which actively work with young people in particular to draw them into and expose them to civic action and activity. The beauty of a model such as UpRising is that it does not simply say, “We will work with this community or this community”; it says, “We want a broad range of young people to participate in our programme so they understand they are part of a whole”. There are a lot of things that can be done. There are a lot of grass-roots things to be done. At the moment, we are funding an organisation called Participatory City to work in Barking & Dagenham on a project called Every One Every Day. It will work through five high street shop fronts to engage the community in thinking, “What do we want to do with this place that is our home?” There are barriers and participation is patchy. The urgency is that we address the patches and recognise there is a lot of success in the other areas, but build on those who have expertise in addressing where we have gaps in our provision.

**Lord Harries of Pentregarth:** I am happy with that answer, but I think we need to receive that report that has just been mentioned.

**Dawn Austwick:** We will happily send a link.

**Baroness Redfern:** I was going to come back to Dawn to tease out the barriers but you have answered the question to Lord Harries.

**Baroness Lister of Burtersett:** I am picking up on what you were saying about people with lived experience and relating to Patrick’s written evidence, which referred to a number of studies that show a link between high levels of income inequality and low levels of civic participation. As I said in the earlier session, I am particularly interested in people’s experience of poverty, which would include—and I do not know whether Dawn would agree—people with lived experience to give. Can you say anything about the particular barriers that groups such as people in poverty face? It links a bit to what you were saying, Dawn. What can be done to reduce them? Would I be right in thinking that they are more likely to be involved in the below-radar informal groups that do not get sufficient recognition?

**Dawn Austwick:** I would absolutely agree that you can go all over the country and find vibrant associational life which is not entirely dependent
on economy. However, some factors cause those who are in poverty to find it harder to create active associational life. Those will be to do with some of the things I have talked about already. They will not have access to resources and probably will not have the confidence. There was also a very interesting piece of work that was done quite a long time ago now. It uses slightly unfortunate terminology, but it looked at “the village” and “the estate”. In the village—and this was not really about the economic position—you had a very active civil society and participation and a lot of volunteering and a lot of groups. The groups, because they were active and had the time because a lot of their members were retired, were able to generate income themselves through activities and fundraising and whatever.

On the estate, there was a lot of money coming in through funding streams and there were a lot of professionals working with those people to improve their conditions, but all those professionals went home in the evening; they were not there. Therefore, things were coming in and activity was provided, but the moment that external architecture went away, there was nothing left. When one is looking at those sorts of programmes, it is incumbent on us to build in not just financial sustainability but sustainability in the community to be able to feel that it can take the lead. Matthew talked about putting people in the lead and that is the byline of our strategic framework. Where we come from is to start by asking people not, “What’s the matter with you?”, which is what we all typically do and we have all been brought up to do, but, “What matters to you and what do you want to build on and what are the strengths that you bring?” The other little mantra we use is, “Nothing about us, without us, is for us”. In other words, we have to enable communities and people to build from the inside and we have to support them to do that.

Patrick Murray: I would endorse a lot of that, particularly on this idea of people with lived experience. It points a little to the limitations of the charity model, because if you think about the way accountability works, if you are in a business, if you do not produce what your consumers want, they will shop elsewhere. In the political world, if government makes a “courageous” decision, in the words of Sir Humphrey, you can be turfed out, but in the charity world the people paying for a service are different from those receiving it. Often, you do not have that clear accountability loop. I would endorse the points that were made about the issues of people with lived experience, but it points to where the limitations of the charitable model might be. It is quite interesting that you talked about the estate and village model. In a previous life, when I was a councillor, I represented a ward on the edge of Oxford city, where I am from, where you think of dreaming spires, et cetera. Essentially, this was an estate on the edge of the city with a commuter village stuck on the end and—exactly to that point—to the outside world it looked as though associational life in the estate and the village was quite unequal, but when you were in the estate you realised there was a huge amount of community activity going on. One of the people driving it ran the local newsagent in a row of five or six shops and every day everyone would
come in and buy their papers and milk, and she knew everyone. She got to know how to work the system a bit to get things for the estate and ended up being part of a very active community association. There is a lot to be said about how you can grow social capital, and it does not necessarily come from the areas that you think it is going to come from.

Q107 Lord Blunkett: It is a rather broad question so we probably need to tune it down a bit. It is really about the role of government, what is good about enabling government, what might be scaled up, what is getting in the way and what barriers government provides? It is a two-way street. Two years ago, a CAF report, which has already been mentioned, came up with some ideas about what more the Government could do in support. I was pleased to explore that with Andrew Percy, who was then a junior Minister in the Department for Communities and Local Government, and with Claire Tyler before I was in this House. We might be able to pick up on some of those separately to your answers, but if you can have a go at what you would like to see from the government and what you do not like, that would be quite helpful.

Sir John Low: Many people get involved in civil society and civil engagement because they want to make society better. That is why they do it. They want to have a positive effect on public policy. We often forget the role of civil society and civil engagement in democracy, in enabling the democratic system to function well between elections and to function well for minority groups which will never have the power in general or local elections. We want a vibrant civil society. We want it engaged and we want people engaged, but, frankly, it is pointless if, when we come to an election, it is all shut down—you cannot speak, you cannot speak on behalf of minorities, you cannot participate in that process. It is quite remarkable that government does not take the actions necessary to enable civil society to strengthen and make democracy better, but does in fact the opposite in many of its actions. There are real opportunities for a new, positive relationship between government and charities where charities will feel confident that the Government of the day understand the role of charities in society and want to work with them to tackle the challenges that the country faces. It needs a relationship based on mutual respect and understanding, a positive climate in which civil society can operate. Sadly, that is not universally the case.

Dawn Austwick: I would suggest a rather more invisible hand than central planning in the government role with regard to civic engagement, because, in a sense, it can nudge and encourage rather than prescribe. It was interesting listening to the previous folk talking about possible government investment in capital plant. There is an interesting role for government to look at existing provision and how that is made open and useable by communities broadly. I have a background in the dim and distant past in the museum sector. Museums and civic spaces are safe places for citizens to come together, debate, meet each other, congregate and consider. There is the opening up of schools in the evenings and so on. For me, it is not so much about government encouraging the development of new facilities, but how one can use
existing space, how one can create public space—maybe outdoor space—that enables people to bump into each other and congregate on the corner. I have always thought the moment at which you are most part of your community as a parent is when you pick your child up from the school gate. A regulatory or planning framework could help make it easier for those sorts of places to happen rather than harder and harder.

The Government could also celebrate the amazing diversity that already exists. This has already happened, but they could encourage people to see what wonderful activity there already is up and down the land, and do that across a very diverse range of organisations. That is another way of demonstrating how important this is to us as a society.

**Patrick Murray:** From our perspective, our chief executive, Dan Corry, wrote a pamphlet earlier in the year on the shared society and what it would mean to make that a reality. Essentially, he put forward the argument that often policymakers start from the point of view of saying, “The markets do this, the state does this, and civil society mops up the residual at the end and fills in the gaps”. The argument was if people are more than consumers and more than recipients of public services, which I think we all agree they are, active citizenship and community action should be at the heart of where we start from in these questions. Government could do well by starting by looking at three questions: first, what communities can do for themselves; secondly, what they can do with support; and, thirdly, and this bit comes at the end, what still needs to be provided, but that is still an important bit because we have to recognise the limitations of civil society, what it is good at and where it is not so good.

Obviously, by nature it is voluntary, so in some areas where people get together and do things, it will happen, and in some areas—picking up on some of the points about exclusion in the last section of answers—it is a problem. Some of the things civil society is doing point to a wider policy failure. Food banks would be an example of this. They are a great example of community action and people rallying around to try to help people deal with quite serious hardship, but in an economy that is as rich as ours, is that not an example of a wider policy failure that needs to be dealt with at a structural level? We have that but maybe we should not have it.

I will give some specifics on what government can do. One of the things it can do is help us to understand existing assets. All local authorities have to do a joint strategic needs assessment, so they are very good at mapping out what the need is so that they can try to fix it, but, increasingly, no one has any money to fix it.

Going back to this point about communities being more in control, helping to map assets, both physical and community assets, associations and things such as that, would be very helpful. We need to redress imbalances of social capital. The OCS could do more to build on the ONS work looking at mapping social capital in the UK, to do research about where it is weakest and channel funding there. Previously, people talked
a bit about dormant assets, and money could be part of that: the successor to the EU funding, and channelling some of that to areas to try to build social capital.

It is about recognising the independence of it. Active citizenship should be uncomfortable for Governments sometimes. The lobbying Act was mentioned previously. There was a very good report by the Lord Chairman. Part of the issue with this is not necessarily the specifics of it but the message it sent out. While I appreciate that Brexit is ruling all in terms of the parliamentary timetable, the messages that go out need to be about the importance of civil society voices. We are seeing some of that from the new Minister, to be fair. I go back to understanding the limits of civil society. There are limits to what charities can do and what active citizenship can do, and there are basic rights that need to be secured by the state and by funders.

**Lord Blunkett:** Chair, in the interests of time, could I ask Dawn if she would be kind enough to send us a note on the criteria the Big Lottery Fund uses for its funding of social action programmes? I am interested as to whether it includes citizenship education in the funding that it makes, because it is a crucial funder. A lot of building of social capital and the things we are talking about would not be happening at the moment were it not for the Big Lottery Fund.

**Baroness Morris of Yardley:** When you talked before you all used the word “community” a lot. I was trying to hear whether that was a physical community or a more diverse community. We know there is a difference. Is geography and locality an issue here? When we talk about the role of the Government, it is all right when they can see the community, put a boundary around it and find the space, grow the leaders and all the rest of it, but could you say a bit about when you talk about community how much in your head locality matters?

**The Chairman:** I think Baroness Lister wants to add to that.

**Baroness Lister of Burtersett:** It goes to my question and follows on nicely. Patrick, in your written evidence you say that local authorities could encourage or even fund community development officers. We have had some other written evidence that points to the demise of community development. Community development is not necessarily geographic, but what might the role of community development be? Do we need to look at it again to strengthen the promotion of civic engagement?

**Patrick Murray:** The role of place is still very important. It is where people live and people still experience things in a place.

**Baroness Morris of Yardley:** It is where they live, but that might be—

**Patrick Murray:** I was going to go on to say that you have community but technology has brought together communities of interest in a very different way. That is where you are seeing some of that explosion of civic engagement around particular issues. It is quite challenging sometimes for some charities to manage the engagement—we talked
about a refugee charity. The role of local authorities is important. As I said earlier, they are stretched and are trying to work out what that role should be, but we have certainly found in our research talking to charity leaders that people in local authorities are thinking very differently about how they use their role as conveners and what more the community can do.

The ones that are really taking charge of the agenda are going through those three questions: thinking what communities can do for themselves, what people can do with support, and what they can bring afterwards. There is also a knitting-together role. It has to bring in other actors. I was a councillor back in 2004 and we were talking about silos then. We are still doing that, but the devolution agenda in city regions is an opportunity to get beyond that and break down some of that. Some of that is quite exciting potentially and allows for that convening role. CAF and ourselves worked together at the party conferences this year in a couple of sessions about the role of philanthropy and the metro mayor as being a figurehead and able to bring people together. There are definitely some possibilities there as the state moves down.

**Dawn Austwick:** Can I very briefly comment on that because we have run a number of place-based programmes in England that bring together multiple public sector agencies and the voluntary sector? Place matters but it is not exclusive in terms of the definition of “community”. There are all sorts of communities, and technology helps some and not others. Patrick is right; I do not think we can go back to community development as was, because we have moved on from that. In some ways, the challenge to the public agencies is that they need to play a very different role, which in some ways requires a different culture and different set of behaviours. It is much more enabling and facilitative. That is quite difficult when you have been brought up to a different way of thinking. I would not underestimate the challenge of moving to this brave new world. I do not think it is straightforward. The evidence from places we have worked in is that that is quite a tough call. Having said that, we are right in the middle of moving our staff out of two centres in England into being community and locally based, for exactly this reason: because we feel we need to be much closer to the people whom we fund.

**Q109 Baroness Newlove:** For me, reading the joint submission to this Committee from the Scouts and National Citizen Service, there seems to be this legal limbo, as they say, for full-time and part-time volunteering. Do you think there is a need to resolve legal issues such as national insurance credits, ill health and personal development training?

**Sir John Low:** We have to be careful not to have a different effect from the one we intend. That issue is quite challenging. Charities do not want to inherit by accident employment obligations over a very large number of volunteers. It would completely destroy many charities which are running with large numbers of volunteers if the volunteers gained employment rights that were very expensive to resolve. Frankly, it is hard to see how many there are. Sir Stuart made the comment about the number of full-time volunteers, and certainly the number is small. Many
older people who are volunteering are not caught by national insurance anyway so it is not an issue for them. What does paid sick leave look like for a volunteer? If they do not come to their role, the role does not get done. What does it look like? Training is really important, but we have to avoid the benefits problem.

One thought I had—and I offer you this without much consideration, frankly—is about the effort that many charities, including my own, are making to benefit from the apprenticeship levy so that charities can benefit from the money that we are obliged to pay in and scoop up the money that many businesses see as an extra tax and are not going to take much benefit from it. One thing you may want to consider as a Committee is whether there is any opportunity to access the apprenticeship levy for volunteers. Could there be apprentice volunteers? I do not know if that is an oxymoron, but it is a thought for you.

Patrick Murray: I would like to comment on the full-time volunteering issue because Sir Stuart said there were 1,000 full time-volunteers in the country. The organisation I was vice-chair of was responsible for at least eight of those. We had quite an interesting debate as a board about all the questions about exploitation that you have to think through very carefully. In the end, we did a pilot and took students from Germany where, as we heard earlier, it is much more regularly done, to see whether it would work. For us, it was very much about a specific bit of work that was much better done through volunteers and not necessarily a job description role. It was about working with someone in a particular way. You had a different power dynamic between the volunteer and the person receiving the service than you would do with a support worker. It is very interesting.

It is certainly worth looking at whether some of these issues can be resolved. At NPC we have some broader questions about what this means for diversity. The charity I was involved in had to put a lot of infrastructure around that to ensure people were able to take part. I am sure we will talk about governance. The report that came out on Monday said that 75% of trustees earned over the national wealth—I am not sure if it is income because so many are retired. Do you just replicate that at the other end? Do you make it so that only young people who have independent wealth and who have the time do full-time volunteering? You are not getting paid for it as, by nature, it is voluntary. There is a challenge around diversity there.

There is a broader question around the labour market effects of, effectively, holding young people out of employment for a year while they do full-time volunteering. To look at the volunteering stats more broadly, the number of 16 to 24 year-olds has gone up. Part of that might be because people feel they have to do work placements and volunteering in order to get a job. It has not been easy for young people in recent years to get into the employment market and we do not want inadvertently to make that more difficult.

Lord Blunkett: I think we are going to have to try to find a definition of
a full-time volunteer. The Prince’s Trust does 12-week full-time volunteer programmes as does Volunteering Matters, and City Year UK does a nine or 10-month programme. We will have to have a look because I was quite taken aback earlier on.

Patrick Murray: To clarify, our placements are for between six and nine months. Obviously, people can drop out if they want, but they are selected carefully as people who want to make that commitment.

The Chairman: We will investigate that further.

Q110 Baroness Eaton: I had better start by declaring my interest as chairman of Near Neighbours, which is a charity which deals with community cohesion. Your charity, Sir John—so perhaps I will start with you—suggests that charities are uniquely placed to monitor levels of threat in communities, and there is a suggestion that the Government should work more closely with charities in that area. What more could charities do to build bridges between communities and to promote social cohesion?

Sir John Low: That is a brilliant question. When I saw it I thought that was the right question. On the ground, charities are very aware of the levels of social cohesion. They are great watchmen of what is happening in our communities. They are out there, experiencing it and touching people. Local authorities could keep in touch with civil society organisations for the purpose of discovering what is going on because they are the eyes and ears. However, I feel strongly that you cannot contract charities to monitor social cohesion. It would be a hideous outcome. Yes, there are opportunities for charities to change social cohesion in their actions. One that I was particularly impressed with is a small charity called Newham All Star Sports Academy. A Russian woman started a basketball charity to reduce knife crime. It brought huge numbers, hundreds of children together, and their families, changing behaviours and changing social cohesion; and they were just playing basketball. That is all they were doing. Social cohesion does not come into any of their language—you will not see it on their website—but the reality is that is what they are doing. The money it takes is very small but even that is very difficult for it. It is quite significant, but it cannot be mandated. There is a wee tricky line there between the role of civil society organisations and the engineering of social cohesion from the state.

Dawn Austwick: I would endorse what John was saying about the level of activity that draws people together. We launched a funding programme in the summer of 2016 to celebrate Her Majesty’s 90th birthday. It was very small grants, even smaller than National Lottery Awards for All. The aim of it was for communities to celebrate something that had brought them together, whether that was a group of young people or old people. One of my favourites was in Sheffield, where a community hall had been refurbished by a group of offenders doing community service. They had an event that brought those offenders back and they had a celebration together. What was really interesting about this was we had to double the
amount of money we put in because within six weeks we were
overwhelmed by applications.

There are a lot of on-the-ground examples of where people really enjoy
bringing people together, but it is not choreographed. The Big Lunch is
another fantastic example, where 9 million people across the country
came together in their local streets and had lunch together in the
summer. Projects such as the Big Iftar are very interesting because that
is an opportunity that the Muslim community uses to draw in people both
from within and without its own community to celebrate at the end of the
day when they break their fast. There are examples and specific charities,
such as the Tim Parry Johnathan Ball Foundation, that only work in this
area and do a very good and effective job.

Baroness Barker: I wanted to query the initial assumption that charities
are uniquely placed. I know that charities have traditionally existed and
thrived on having a far more detailed knowledge of their communities
than anybody else. Those of us who sat on the Select Committee on
Charities, which Baroness Pitkeathley chaired, will know that we asked
every single person who came to give us evidence, “If you lived in a poor
community, who would know more about your community and who would
you be more pleased to see: Lidl or a charity?” The answer to that might
once automatically have been a charity; I do not think it is so now. It is
partly to do with data—to refer back to one of previous questions about
what government might do, it might help the charitable sector with digital
skills. That, in turn, might help charities to get back to what they could
do, which was to spot trends and troubleshoot. Do you agree with that?

Sir John Low: If the data is helpful. Forty-six per cent of people believe
that charities can help improve community cohesion. When we went out
and asked, that is the result that we found. Interestingly, 55% of people
said that charities are most likely to provide effective support for those
who need help in times of political and economic uncertainty. That is
55%, compared to 36% who said local authorities were capable of doing
it and 16% who said that central government was capable of doing it.
The evidence would appear to be that the public feel that charities have a
significant role in social cohesion, but I accept they are not exclusively
the custodians of social cohesion and all that relates to it. Of course not.

Q111 Baroness Barker: My question carries on in a similar vein about
charities and the role that they play in overcoming discrimination and
inequality. We know that all charities are under a duty of public benefit,
but they serve minority communities, sometimes exclusively. Do you
think there needs to be something within the governance code of
charities which means they have people on their boards from minority
communities such as women?

Sir John Low: Whether a code of conduct is the right way to do it, we
could discuss. There is no doubt in my mind that charities work very hard
at diversity. When I was leading RNID, as it was called at the time, we
employed significant numbers of deaf people and other disabled people
simply because we were able to accommodate them, and we were open
to it and it was the norm, and therefore people were willing to come. As part of that, we also had had much higher levels of gay and lesbian staff than other organisations and a very good gender balance.

The experience that I have is that charities work hard in this area. If I look at my own organisation, like many charities, 70% of employees are women. As we go up through the grades in the organisation to the more senior level, it remains at about that. We have worked very hard at it. At the top level of the directors, immediately it flips over to being male dominated, in spite of vigorous efforts on my part in a leadership role to not be in that position. When you get to the trustee board, we have a good balance. It is not the same as the staff group—it is not 70% women and 30% men—it is maybe 60% men and 40% women, something of that order. It is extremely difficult to force the issue all the way up through the organisation, for all sorts of reasons. Bringing in young trustees and people from a whole range of backgrounds makes a huge difference to the governance of organisations. If you have someone who is unemployed on your board telling you what it is like, not just listening to the theory, it makes a huge difference. What we must not do, in my view, is put more obligations on charities than we put on business. We cannot be in that position.

**The Chairman:** Do you want to add briefly to this, with an eye on the clock?

**Patrick Murray:** There are a couple of things. Tied to this question and referring back to the previous one, we need to recognise that civil society is not perfect in all ways. Some of it is about bonding social capital and bringing together groups which can be quite exclusive, rather than bridging social capital and reaching out across communities. That is very real and we need to be a little careful about saying that charities, echoing Baroness Barker’s point, are the only people uniquely placed to do this. Some of them are, but we certainly found in our research, when the question of Brexit came up, that our staff might have been rather ardent remainers and yet the area we worked in voted strongly leave. How connected are we? There is a lot of soul searching going on in some organisations about how they reach out.

On the diversity of trustees, the report that came out earlier this week sets out the scale of the challenge. It is not that people in this sector do not care about it. It was a big topic that we explored in our research, and people certainly thought it was important, but they did not link it to anything; they did not link it to having a greater impact and being more effective, so it ended up falling down the list of priorities that they had. There is some work to do to build the case for why it is important, around sparking innovation, about being more representative and reflective of communities. We had a very interesting blog from Mike Adamson about the challenge to the British Red Cross in the post-Grenfell environment, where people were associating the words “British” and “Cross” with an establishment Christian organisation when a lot of people from very
diverse communities had just been failed by institutions, so it was quite
difficult to engage in some of that.

As society changes and becomes more diverse, it is going to be mission
critical for people to reflect the communities that they work in more.
What can you do? It is difficult. As I say, we need to build the case for
diversity. It is difficult to mandate things, but there are certain nudges
that we would suggest. We think the Charity Commission could do more
to ask people through the annual return. Getting people to report on
diversity and things such as that would certainly help nudge trustees in
the right direction. A lot can be done in the sector by sector bodies, et
cetera.

Q112 **Lord Harries of Pentregarth:** The Committee would like your views on
the effectiveness or otherwise of citizenship education and National
Citizen Service.

**Sir John Low:** The range of initiatives that has been in place has
worked, up to a point. I would urge that these types of initiatives are
much more closely integrated with existing civil society organisations.
You have organisations across every community: Scouts, Girlguiding, a
whole range of others, I am not being exclusive. It is rather sad that they
are not integrated. We do not need, with all respect, endless political
initiatives. We need to move forward in an integrated, cohesive way if we
are going to build community cohesion.

**The Chairman:** Ms Austwick, would you like to add?

**Dawn Austwick:** On whether they work, one has to look at the
evaluation on the National Citizen Service, and it is probably a bit too
early to know the answer to that. Fundamentally, a little like John, for me
it is about having a menu of different things happening in different ways.
I sat in a shed in east Belfast and talked to a gentleman who was an
active participant in that shed. It was the Men in Sheds project. He said,
“When my wife died, I turned in on myself. I stopped going out. I didn’t
see my friends. I didn’t see my family. I thought my life wasn’t worth
living”. One of his neighbours said, “Come down to this shed one
afternoon”, and he started talking. He is now there three or four days a
week. He teaches some of the youngsters joinery. His life has been
transformed. You need that whole menu of different ways of citizens
engaging and learning about how to be active, and learning by doing is
possibly as useful as didactic learning in the sense of citizenship.

Q113 **Lord Rowe-Beddoe:** Let us focus on funders for a moment. Dawn, I am
sure we were all interested to see in your written evidence that you
thought that your funds should be more open to risky projects. I was also
interested, Patrick, in your comments about infrastructure as being
toward the middle or the bottom of the table. What can be done to
encourage funders to give more support to engagement with charities?

**Dawn Austwick:** I would go back to one of the places I started: about
enabling funding to be accessible. I used the example of the refugee
group. Another lovely example that we came across recently was a group
that was not good at writing, but was perfectly able to articulate orally. We filmed their application and are now going to film the creation of the funding contract with them, so we will have a different mechanism to enable them to participate, and therefore develop. There is a whole plethora of things we can all do to make it easier for people. We can also look at specific types of funding that encourage participation. For example, Young Vic runs a neighbourhood theatre project which enables young people to have free tickets to their shows as well as engaging them in conversations about those shows, and that is an exploration of their civic understanding of issues and so on. For us, our mantra of putting people in the lead means that we ask every applicant, “How are you demonstrating that? How are you bringing that to life? What is your governance structure? If you are a project that is about young people, are there any young people on your board? If you want to work with homeless people, and want to design a process to encourage them and enable them to lead a different life, are they involved in the design and development of that process?” For us, there are specifics that are around topics of civic engagement, but there is an underpinning of all our funding that asks organisations to demonstrate how they really are living that, and sometimes they struggle and sometimes we get a bit of kickback from it, but we try to be firm.

**Lord Rowe-Beddoe:** Is that what you call risky if you then go ahead and invest in them?

**Dawn Austwick:** That is not risky per se across the board. The risk is where you will be thinking about funding a group in a way that you might not have done before; for example, the group I was talking about earlier. That is really what we are talking about there.

**The Chairman:** We must call it a day. We have overrun, I am afraid. I am sorry not to have given you all a chance on that last question. We found your evidence and information very valuable. Thank you.