



Ms Tracey Crouch MP  
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Sport and Civil Society  
Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport  
100 Parliament Street  
London  
SW1A 2BQ

21<sup>st</sup> May 2018

Dear Minister

### **A Civil Society Strategy that empowers, enables and supports**

NAVCA is the national representative body for local infrastructure in England.

On behalf of our members, the local infrastructure organisations of England that between them represent over 150,000 of the smallest, local, charities and voluntary sector organisations in the country, we very much welcome the opportunity to contribute to the development of this strategy and sincerely hope that it will mark a key moment in the history of the relationship between government, the statutory sector, the private sector and the voluntary and community sector (VCS).

NAVCA members have a unique perspective and voice within civil society. They are the conduit between the statutory bodies at local level and the local VCS. Through these micro - charities and voluntary organisations, the ones that grow 'between the cracks' of larger, more economically powerful, sectors of local civil society, local infrastructure organisations provide a direct link both to the most disadvantaged and disconnected parts of our society, and to the widest range of voices in a local community. Our members' focus is deeply place-based, and they know their communities and their needs well.

It is their perspective on civil society that we have sought to represent in our submission, and throughout our response we have related our comments specifically to the role of the VCS within civil society.

We consulted widely with our membership before considering our response to the consultation, and would like to take this opportunity (in addition to our formal submission online) to highlight the key messages that emerged from that process.

## **The role of civil society**

There is a long and noble relationship between civil society and the state in providing services and support to the people of our country.

However, there is a widespread sense that the relationship between the VCS and the state has in recent times become fundamentally unbalanced, particularly as a result of models of commissioning that require the voluntary sector to carry the majority of risk while leaving the balance of power in the hands of the state agencies.

The relationship between citizens and the state, and also between citizens and civil society, is currently based on outdated and unhelpful models of 'doing things to and for' citizens, without recognising individual and community capacity to do things for themselves, albeit with the support and enablement of other agencies.

But as we prepare for a post-Brexit Britain, it is more important than ever that those relationships are attended to, rebalanced and reinvigorated – for the sake of resilience, cohesion and equality in our society.

## **Partnerships**

In our submission we have provided many excellent examples of some truly creative, innovative and sustainable partnerships between the VCS and statutory partners at local level which are delivering tangible, long term benefits for their communities.

In other places, though, relationships between the VCS and the statutory sectors (especially local authorities and health) are too often unbalanced by commissioning arrangements, with tensions, misunderstandings and misperceptions on both sides.

Local infrastructure organisations can play an invaluable role in brokering and supporting these relationships. They are crucially important in the effective leadership and enabling of the local voluntary sector; and they can be a highly effective strategic partner for statutory bodies at local level.

However, they are widely undervalued by their state partners – not just financially, but in terms of trust and understanding of their role.

Meanwhile at national level there is often a lack of understanding of the different context for small, local charities and voluntary organisations compared with the largest national or international charities.

An investment in that understanding, underpinned by the development of a new Compact that takes account of the wide range of contexts within both the state and the VCS, would be welcome.

Partnerships with the private sector are too often superficial and (unintentionally) unhelpful. Investment needs to be made in breaking down barriers of perception on both sides; and in enabling the exchange of strategic and operational skills between the two sectors, not least in recognition of the substantial contribution the VCS makes to the national economy as an

employer and purchaser of services, and the common ground that we therefore share with the multitude of small businesses across the country.

## **Funding and finance**

We support the development of new models of funding, but it must be recognised that no one model fits all and too often those areas of greatest disadvantage and the communities carrying the greatest inequalities are those left behind or actively damaged by alternative approaches to funding. The essential role of grant funding must not be ignored.

## **Devolution/localism**

We are committed to the key priorities of devolution that we published with Locality in 2016. However, the experience of our members is that they are rarely involved at a strategic level in devolved structures and that when they are, such involvement carries a substantial burden on resource. But without the involvement of local infrastructure organisations, and through them the local VCS, devolution will struggle to work effectively for local communities.

The traditionally paternalistic role of civic society in delivering services to local communities is outdated and generally unhelpful. We call for a paradigm shift in thinking and ethos to one that recognises and encourages an asset based community development approach in order to truly address issues of inequality and support a sustainable future for our country in a post-austerity, mid-21<sup>st</sup> century era.

Such an approach balances power and places trust in the community, moving the state to the role of facilitator and enabler rather than decision maker and commissioner; it also frees up the creativity and innovation within state agencies and removes from them a large part of the burden of bureaucracy.

## **Public services**

Current models of commissioning and procurement are damaging the voluntary sector and the relationship between the sector and the state. The mechanisms for contracting are inappropriate for small local VCS organisations (or sometimes are just inappropriately applied). Increasing numbers of VCS organisations at local level are making the decision to move away from bidding for contracts altogether.

Meanwhile, for those that do undertake public sector contracts the knock-on effects of system failure, such as evidenced by Northamptonshire County Council, are enormous and put the sector at local level at very real risk – impacting not only on those organisations directly contracted but others in the area and, above all, the people they serve.

Local infrastructure organisations have seen major changes in the sources of their funding, and have been imaginative and innovative in response. However, continued pressure on their resources leads to a lack of capacity to fulfil their essential role of supporting the VCS in their

area. This raises real risks within the local VCS – around governance, safeguarding, skills and capacity to bid for funding opportunities.

**Summary**

The overwhelming message that came from our members was not, surprisingly, that they wanted more money in the system (although clearly resourcing is a continuing issue) – but that they wanted to see, contribute to and benefit from a new relationship of trust between the state, as represented both by government and by local statutory bodies, and the voluntary sector.

For too long the VCS has been seen as the poor relation, the amateur or the needy partner in that relationship – a perception that does not take account of the vastly innovative, skilled and effective resource the VCS offers.

Above all, the current relationship and the balance of power within it too often means that public resources are wasted or at best used less effectively than they might be whilst communities fail to gain the benefits they are promised or deserve, simply because no-one has genuinely asked, or listened to, the voices of those communities.

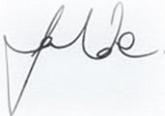
It is time for that to change. It is essential that in a post-austerity, post-Brexit and post-Grenfell era, the partnerships that form civil society in its widest sense put aside their long standing notions of power and find truly effective ways in which to work together, collaboratively, to free up the power of the communities we are all here to serve.

We look forward to working with you and your colleagues across government to carry forward such an agenda.

Yours sincerely,



Caroline Schwaller MBE  
Chair



Jane Ide  
Chief Executive