

Select Committee on Public Services

Oral evidence: Public services: lessons from coronavirus

Wednesday 24 June 2020

3.55 pm

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Members present: Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top (The Chair); Lord Bichard; Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth; Lord Davies of Gower; Lord Filkin; Lord Hogan-Howe; Lord Hunt of Kings Heath; Baroness Pinnock; Baroness Pitkeathley; Baroness Tyler of Enfield; Baroness Wyld; Lord Young of Cookham.

Evidence Session No. 8

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 56 - 59

Witnesses

I: Ian Jones, Chief Executive, Volunteer Cornwall; David Knott, Director, Office for Civil Society, part of DCMS; Lauren O'Donoghue, Branch Secretary, ACORN, Sheffield.

Examination of witnesses

Ian Jones, David Knott and Lauren O'Donoghue.

The Chair: Thank you for coming, and for offering us your time and experience. As you begin to answer your first question, could you say who you are and the organisation you are from, so that Members can put a face to the name that has been circulated to them? Our first question to this second panel is from Baroness Pitkeathley.

Q56 Baroness Pitkeathley: Thank you very much, and good afternoon, panel. I will put this question first to David Knott from OCS, and then our two local representatives can follow up from their points of view, which may or may not be different from his.

Could you provide us with examples of public services collaborating in new ways with volunteers, specifically during the lockdown? I am particularly interested in whether such collaboration used existing networks and organisations, or whether new ones were created in response to the need.

David Knott: Good afternoon, Chair and Committee. I am the director of the Office for Civil Society. We are responsible for charities, social enterprise, volunteering, aspects of youth policy, public services and communities. We are part of DCMS. We take specific responsibility in England but have some responsibility for charity regulation that applies across England and Wales.

We have observed several things on volunteering over this period. Of course, volunteering in public services goes back many years; there are 3 million volunteers in health and care and half a million in other areas of public services, making a huge and distinct contribution. Through the Covid emergency we have seen many younger volunteers step forward, particularly facilitated by digital technology. Of the three-quarters of a million who stepped forward through the NHS volunteers programme, about 43% were younger—aged 20 to 39. That is quite different from usual levels of volunteering. There is definitely something about the age profile and the way that digital has facilitated that.

We particularly see a lot of cross-collaboration between charities and businesses and a rise in community mutualism, with people helping in a very informal way. There are examples around food distribution and supply that have shown the ability of volunteers and charities to respond very quickly; in London, through the London tactical cell, over 4,000 people were supported during the height of the crisis.

A second example is that, as we open the charity shops that are an important source of income for charities, we have seen partnership with the National Citizen Service bringing in young volunteers to work and help to support charity shops reopening. That has been a new and different partnership, with the Charity Retail Association helping about 3,000 charity shops to open safely.

We have definitely seen some new examples, with younger volunteers, and digital-facilitated and cross-charitable and business collaborations.

Baroness Pitkeathley: Thank you very much.

Lauren O'Donoghue: I am the branch secretary of ACORN, Sheffield. ACORN, for those who do not know, is a community union, currently active in 19 cities across England and Wales, with over 3,000 members. Ordinarily, our work centres on campaigning, often around housing and public transport. We are funded predominantly by member dues. Our members make up a lot of our leadership as well, and we are steered in our work by the needs of our members and the issues that our members find important.

Coming into the crisis, we realised that our current work was not going to fit the bill and that there would be a huge crisis, with people desperately in need of food, medication, and that sort of intervention, and that it was not going to happen quickly enough. We pretty much dropped everything we were doing overnight, and within three days we had launched our community coronavirus support network. It mobilised volunteers all over

the country, in about a dozen different cities, to meet that need as quickly as humanly possible.

You asked how we collaborated during the crisis. In Sheffield, Voluntary Action Sheffield, the main support body for voluntary organisations, put together a map and a community directory for all the voluntary sector organisations, community groups and mutual aid groups that were doing that work, and we are a part of that list. Statutory and voluntary organisations, day centres and even the city council were signposting clients to us and vice versa.

A good example is Sheffield Needs a Pay Rise, which is a joint-funded project by Sheffield Trades Union Council and the bakers union. When people rang us to say, "I'm having issues with my employment", "I've gone on furlough and I don't have enough money", or, "I'm being asked to work in an unsafe environment", we were able to pass them over to Sheffield Needs a Pay Rise for support. Working closely with the trade unions has been very important for us.

We had quite a lot of communication with mutual aid groups on replicating our digital systems for organising our volunteers. It was seen as an effective way of working and other people wanted to use it for their own volunteer organisation efforts, so we tried to help them out with that.

On collaboration with our own volunteers, we have quite a centralised infrastructure; our staff and leadership developed the model and the resources that we use, but the delivery itself is quite decentralised. The system we set up allowed volunteers to contact people in need directly to arrange any support that they might need. That meant that often people would give us a ring, they would be put into the spreadsheet and somebody would call them to arrange help, usually within a couple of hours. That was exactly the kind of rapid turnaround that was necessary during this time of crisis.

Thinking about existing and new networks, obviously our first port of call was our existing members in Sheffield. We have over 300 members in Sheffield currently. They were our first port of call, but we also put out an open call for volunteers, and in the end more than 400 people signed up to volunteer through our system. We had 400 people who were ready to go, the minute that people needed help. That was how we operated in Sheffield.

Baroness Pitkeathley: Did you match those volunteers up? Did the volunteers go through any formal vetting process, or were they just people who offered?

Lauren O'Donoghue: As with a lot of mutual aid networks, it was a trust-based system. People would sign up with us and there was a data protection agreement in place when they signed up. Our staff team had access to all the volunteers' contact details, but primarily it was a system

based on trust, because that allowed us to be much more agile and responsive.

Baroness Pitkeathley: Thank you very much.

Ian Jones: I am the chief executive of Volunteer Cornwall, which is a charity in Cornwall that has been around for over 40 years. We have two roles. One is an infrastructure role. There are about 4,500 charities in Cornwall, so we work with them on recruiting, developing and managing volunteers. Too often people use volunteers as tools, and they are not tools; they get benefit from it. Hundreds of volunteers who have come to us through Covid are now stepping into care roles because they have seen the exciting benefit of caring for people.

We also promote social capital within communities. In early March—probably 3 March—when we saw what was happening, we started to promote for volunteers. Although we place and support between 2,000 and 3,000 people every year, and we develop volunteering projects with our executive partners, we put out a call for more volunteers on 3 March; over 4,000 volunteers signed up in Cornwall to support people. We work with 280 Covid mutual aid groups. We do not control them, but we work with them and give them support. We do that with Cornwall Council on safeguarding.

You cannot necessarily control people who are volunteers. You can help them achieve what they want to achieve and achieve the tasks that you want them to achieve. We have to work with them on that.

In Cornwall, I sit on a number of strategic boards. We quickly set up something called community co-ordination centres; an integrated service between health and care. I have six community makers employed across Cornwall who are paid for by a foundation trust, and they are formally part of that team. When a referral came in from health or care, we could quickly evaluate and see whether it was a clinical need where we could give some volunteer added value, or something that the community could do with volunteering so that it did not have to be escalated to clinical need.

We did something similar with children's services, paid for by Cornwall Council. There are six community development workers. They were quickly aligned with family hubs, because we started to see the pressures for families and young children in lockdown. We were able to take very flexible and spontaneous action.

We worked very closely with the community cell, which reports to the resilience forum, to ensure that shielded people were supported either by the NHS app or through us. As of this morning, I think we have 3,500 people, and the NHS app in Cornwall has 600 people. The system formally put me through as the system lead for volunteering.

To give you an example, before lockdown we developed something called a high-intensity user role. We wanted to make sure that it was still there

during lockdown because the high-intensity users—or frequent flyers, as the NHS calls them—keep ringing 999 or turning up to A&E. We call them “those the system has abandoned” because they are too complex for people to help.

We started working with one young lady who had children. She had a permanent catheter, various medications and a mental health problem. During lockdown that was exacerbated, but we wanted to keep supporting her with some volunteer mentors. We started to see how she could volunteer, and we now have some evidence from the acute hospital about how much we saved. The post we have cost £47,000, and that one person has saved hospitals and ambulances £85,000. But that project will probably end.

The adaptability to work with someone who is dependent and get them to a frame of mind to volunteer is just as crucial as getting a volunteer to support someone else. That dynamic is very important. Volunteering is not just a tool to achieve something; the people who volunteer get so much out of it as well.

Baroness Pitkeathley: Do you think that many of the people who came as a result of the crisis will stay working with you as volunteers?

Ian Jones: Yes. Very early on, we were talking to our public sector partners about renewal, not recovery, because we do not want to go back to where we were. Cornwall Council did a survey of a section of the population, and only one in 10 wanted to go back to where we were. Nine out of 10 wanted a different kind of society.

The two areas that came up most were the environment, which is an acknowledgement of climate change, and the Covid pandemic. That was a common theme that attracted everyone to support each other. With climate change we see a similar thing, so we are looking at renewal with our public sector partners and linking some of it to climate change, around the forests of Cornwall. Volunteers can plant trees in their community as an acknowledgement of what they did, and say, “That is my tree. I planted that for Covid”.

Some families have lost family members, and we are looking at that. We want to do a big harvest festival. We have a database of the most vulnerable, socially isolated individuals. We want to make sure that they do not have Christmas alone, so we are following on from that.

Volunteers are ringing us up to say that they are going back to work, but, at the moment, not one of them has said that they want to be taken off the list. So we have two lists: one is volunteers we can utilise now, and the other is volunteers who still want to participate in the community. We are linking that to some of the mutual aid groups to start looking at activities they can do where they live. I listened to the earlier panel; volunteering is about you, the place you live in and the community around you. If you do that, it works.

I had to give evidence to a civil society Select Committee a few years ago on why the big society failed. It failed because it was taken nationally. It was not taken locally. Every initiative was a national initiative trying to drop things locally, without looking at the past and at what was going on locally. We are very confident that we can keep it going.

Baroness Pitkeathley: Thank you very much.

Q57 **Baroness Tyler of Enfield:** Pursuing that broad theme a bit further, the evidence we have received suggests that some of the Government's efforts to engage charities, volunteers and the community sector have been overly centralised and that has made it harder for local groups to engage with their communities. From your experience, what do you think have been the main challenges that charities, volunteers and the community sector have faced while trying to deliver services during lockdown? Specific examples will be very gratefully received.

Ian Jones: There was initial confusion when the NHS responder scheme was parachuted in. We had people on the ground supporting people weeks before it was in place, because the lockdown happened prior to any scheme in place. We had people panicking, so we worked very closely with our primary care networks and GPs. We are doing a lot more work with them now on place-based activities. We were able very quickly to put solutions in place to support people. That is ongoing.

In the first couple of weeks, we probably got 500 or 600 people a day coming to us. That has gone down to about 20. We are still very concerned about what is happening because lots of people are still scared to go out. A lot of those who are over 70 or 80 have become more physically infirm and emotionally drained, so we are training some of our volunteers to be walking buddies so that we can reintroduce them.

There was confusion. The other challenge we had, which links to some of your discussion earlier, is that the way we commission community activity is through competition. When you procure through competition, the first thing that groups do is stop talking to each other. They see the money. Instead of saying, "What do we need to do together?", it is, "How do we get that money, so they don't?"

A lot of the charities we work with went into their shells; they were fearful for their contracts if they could not cope with what was happening. In the first few weeks, there was silence from many of the charities we work with, particularly specialists. That has changed. Working with our health and council colleagues we managed to set up a thing called VERA—the Voluntary Sector Emergency Response Alliance—with one of our partners, the Voluntary Sector Forum, where we were able to adapt to that. Initially, it was quite scary: people were coming to us and we had to access specialist support that was not there. That has improved now.

Baroness Tyler of Enfield: Thank you. Lauren, would you like to add to that?

Lauren O'Donoghue: Of course. On the national/local level, the way we organise is, and always has been, incredibly locally focused. The national volunteer drive did not have too much impact on our volunteering network because people were still quite keen to volunteer in their areas and their communities.

To be honest, I would say that the biggest challenge we faced was the fact that we had to take up the work in the first instance. We had very few resources and no prior experience of doing anything like it. We are, and continue to be, a campaigning organisation, so it really was not our field of expertise. But it was necessary for us to do it because, in Sheffield, statutory services such as the council helpline were not up and running for almost two months.

In the first few weeks of lockdown, I spent a lot of time manning the ACORN hotline phone. Every single day we got phone calls from people who were elderly, isolated and vulnerable. They were calling us in an absolutely desperate state, often in tears, saying, "Nobody cares about us. We have been entirely forgotten about. We have had the shielding letter and then we have been abandoned. We have no food, no medication and nobody wants to help us".

It is obviously incredibly heartening that community unions, street WhatsApp groups and Facebook mutual aid groups came together, but I think that the community spirit rhetoric can be a bit of a smokescreen for what was ultimately quite a phenomenal failing of statutory services to step in and do the work that they needed to do, and had the funding and the infrastructure to do. For us, that was our biggest obstacle, because, ultimately, it is not really the job of organisations such as ours and unpaid volunteers to replicate the work of the state.

The issues that people have been experiencing during Covid, such as isolation, lack of access to food and transport, precarious work and housing, are not new. They did not appear overnight because of Covid-19. They all existed prior to the pandemic, and community organisations such as ours have been trying to address the root causes of these issues—poor housing, food poverty, health inequalities, precarious employment—for a really long time, rather than focusing on short-term solutions. So many of the people who have been the most heavily impacted by Covid were badly affected because they already lived in poverty.

Poverty is a disease. You cannot just treat the symptoms; you have to treat the cause. I would like grass-roots community organisations to be listened to when we say that broader structural change is needed. The first priority needs to be funding local authorities to help people in fundamental ways. That needs to come first in order to take the pressure off community groups and voluntary sector organisations to deliver things such as food banks.

As an example of the more local obstacles, we were working in one area where there was no mutual aid group. It was an area of very high

deprivation, and our local MP told us that we could no longer deliver services in that area due to certain concerns around GDPR and things like that. While safeguarding and data protection are obviously important, at that point, meeting people's baseline needs for food and medication was far more pressing. It is all well and good saying, "You need to complete this and that bit of paperwork", but if we have volunteers waiting eight weeks for DBS checks to come through, that is eight weeks when they cannot be out on the streets helping people where it is needed.

Baroness Tyler of Enfield: David, do you want to add anything?

David Knott: I absolutely recognise everything that this panel and the previous panel have said about emphasising the local nature of the response. That is fundamentally what we see as the distinct value of charities and volunteer groups.

There are perhaps three areas where, rather uniquely, we brought a particular focus from a central government perspective. The first was the provision of guidance to help people understand how they can volunteer safely. We published that and have updated it since, and I think that is fundamentally enabling local groups to find and support volunteers to work safely.

Secondly, on connecting national infrastructure to local groups, specifically there is something called the Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership, which was developed out of the experiences of Grenfell and the Manchester bombing. It is chaired by the British Red Cross, and we and some other central government departments are part of it. That is then mirrored in local infrastructure, in particular through local resilience forums, all of which have community and voluntary representatives. There was a lot of work done on channelling information up and down, and on understanding where there were data gaps or bottlenecks in the policy.

Thirdly, and quite prominently, there was the NHS volunteer responder scheme. To put that in context, we know that there are 12 million regular volunteers. It was outstanding that 750,000 people stepped forward through the NHS volunteer responders programme. That complemented a predominantly local response, and increasingly we see a lot of tasks coming through that from statutory partners.

From a central perspective, it has been very much about enabling a local response through the guidance, through the infrastructure and through the NHS volunteer responders programme.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ian Jones: Can I add a bit more to that?

The Chair: Yes, very quickly.

Ian Jones: One of the things that was confusing was that, when we had some NHS responders responding, it was a very narrow response, because we could not escalate any concerns that were identified.

When our volunteers go to see people, they identify other concerns. Recently, we had one volunteer who was walking a man's dog and taking him food every day, which escalated into social care. Unfortunately, the man died; the volunteer discovered him dead one day, because it was not escalated to the right level. At local level you can have those conversations with GPs. When they used the national scheme, they could not see how that conversation was happening, which was a bit confusing to them.

The Chair: That is interesting. Thank you.

Q58 **Lord Young of Cookham:** Can I ask a fairly basic question about the relationship between the public sector on the one hand and the representatives of the charitable, volunteer and community sector on the other? We have heard from so many witnesses how charities and volunteers can add value to the quality of services being offered, but we also heard from Lauren that they do not want to make good deficiencies in the statutory sector, or simply to be an arm of the state. How do you integrate the energies we have been hearing about with the public service systems, without them becoming overdependent or simply an arm? What are the obstacles to getting that relationship right?

Lauren O'Donoghue: Speaking from an ACORN perspective, I know that being integrated into statutory services is not something we would ever aim for. A lot of the work we do involves holding government services to account, so we need our independence; we need to be able to exist separately from statutory services.

I can also speak from a slightly different perspective, because in my day job I work for a community centre and food bank, which is funded through competitive tendering. I sort of see it from both sides at the moment. The key thing is for funding bodies to listen. They need to listen to existing community groups to find out what the underlying issues are and to tackle them first, because organisations like ACORN should not be picking up that slack. If statutory services were better able to meet the needs of communities in the first place, we would not have to step in.

I feel very strongly about competitive tendering. In my day job, at the beginning of lockdown, we had little ring-fenced pots of money that were very specifically to deliver certain services, such as dementia cafes or diabetes groups. Overnight, it became impossible to deliver those, because we could no longer have people gathering at our centre. So much time, effort and energy went into freeing up that money so that we are able to use it to give back to our community in the way that people need; it has been incredibly difficult.

One thing that needs to come to an end is the top-down approach to commissioning. Frankly, it is people sitting in offices, and not those who

are out on the ground talking to the people who are in need, deciding what those communities need and what is best for them, and then allocating funding on that basis. That can be really damaging. By comparison, ACORN is predominantly funded by our membership, and when we receive funding from external providers, they often relax their normal reporting criteria, because they recognise the value of the work we do and understand that we can do it better if we are given a greater degree of independence and are not constricted by arbitrary criteria and check-box exercises.

It is important for organisations such as ACORN to remain totally separate from the public sphere, because it allows us to be independent and to hold the Government to account. To echo a point that Paul made in the first session, we need an easing up of the funding criteria for organisations that are funded by local authorities, and we need to get rid of, or change, the tendering system so that people are not constantly competing with other voluntary sector organisations for very specific pots of money. Instead, funders should listen to people who are doing the grass-roots work and ask, "What do the people in your community need? Where does the work need to be done? What work are you already doing and how can we better fund that? How can we support you to ensure that you are helping people in the way that you know that people need to be helped?"

Ian Jones: We have created a separation between the state and communities, and that divide is damaging. We have the statutory public sector on one side and the community sector on the other. What did the state emerge from? It emerged from the need to support people because they were not being supported. We have to reframe that and ask how we can work together to ensure that people's needs are met, and their aspirations are supported. It needs a different dialogue.

Locally, there is something to be said about participation and representation. There is disillusionment with voting every five years for a person who says they represent you and will do what we are talking about now, when a lot of people want to do things. There needs to be both, but locally we can reframe what that means.

For the last five years, we have been working with our health colleagues on integration. We have a partnership now. We have the integrated care system, so there will be a lot more autonomy to allow public services locally to work in a different way with the voluntary community sector. We do not intend to substitute public sector investment or work, but we add value to it.

The relationship has to shift. It has been quite paternalistic; there has been a lack of trust and respect. Locally, we have built on that and it is acknowledged that it was done very well. When Ian Dodge, who is the director of strategy and innovation for NHS England, wrote to our STP *[Inaudible]* and said they wanted a volunteering lead, I was put forward. Most other areas were putting forward an NHS employee. They did not do that locally, because they—*[Inaudible]*

The Chair: You have frozen, Ian. We lost your last sentence, I suspect.

Ian Jones: We have to reframe what we are doing locally so that it is no longer the case that you have the public sector on one side and the voluntary sector on the other.

David Knott: I echo that. What is fundamental is a clear understanding of the added value of volunteers, charities and community groups, and how they work alongside public services and statutory services and bring something different. That is fundamentally set out in our civil society strategy, a programme we are implementing that talks about social value across the public, private and voluntary sectors.

I particularly emphasise the concept of social value, and how social value can drive changes in commissioning, both centrally and locally. We have been working across central government commissioning to understand and build in those practices that properly recognise and capture the value of how we buy services for local communities, and how we spread that locally too. That is critical.

There is a key role for the Minister for Civil Society and for our Crown representative for public services, both of whom were very active in the Covid experience and previously. They engage with a whole range of national and local community groups and bring that into relevant government departments, not only our own.

The Chair: Thank you.

Lord Young of Cookham: David, you mentioned commissioning, but we heard from previous witnesses that it was the Cabinet Office that had been relaxing the rules. Could you explain the division of responsibilities between DCMS on the one hand and the Cabinet Office on the other when it comes to some of the issues we have been talking about this afternoon?

David Knott: We have a joint team made up of the Office for Civil Society, DCMS and the Cabinet Office. The Cabinet Office is fundamentally responsible for the procurement rules for public services, and we have a VCSE Crown representative who is based in the Cabinet Office, supported by our public services team in the Office for Civil Society, engaging right across different national and local committees.

The Cabinet Office, frankly, sets the rules and guidance, and we, from a civil society perspective, bring intelligence and insight into helping develop those. We have taken a joint lead with the Cabinet Office on spreading social value, and I think we are training something like 4,000 central government commissioners in social value.

Lord Young of Cookham: Thank you.

Ian Jones: I have a complex systems background and a social network background. One of the challenges we have had is that we have been trying to manage a complex system as if it was a machine. The new

managerialism that we have been pumping out for the last 20 years is about setting distinct KPIs for a particular bit of work. Working with people in communities is too dynamic for that, so we have to have a different way of managing knowledge at a local level.

In order to identify the possibilities that emerge from interactions, too often we have projects and programmes that say, "There's your money. That's what the programme is and that's what you've got to do at the end". Things might emerge that are really exciting and powerful, and that is what we should be following, and where there are unintended consequences, as we see in government decisions all the time, we have to address them.

Allowing flexibility to look at KPIs locally is important, and I go back to what I said earlier. Some of the KPIs that were driven into our acute system have caused problems in community health because of the emphasis on particular measures. Part of the challenge we have is how we work together to identify problems that we can solve at local level. Then we can see what works, build on what works, and share it across all the systems in the country.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Members, there is a Division. You have about seven or eight minutes left to vote.

Lauren, do you want to come in?

Lauren O'Donoghue: To echo some of what Ian was saying, I think it is absolutely true that we should recognise the value to communities and make sure that people have the freedom to deliver what is needed.

On the point about mobilising volunteers, it is important to note that, while volunteers are incredibly necessary and the function they serve is incredibly important, they should always be supplementary; they should never replace skilled workers. One thing that we have seen happening, and which I find quite concerning, is the push for volunteers to take up caring roles in the NHS that should be done by skilled workers. That is putting at risk volunteers with little to no training and, crucially, no remuneration. Although volunteering is voluntary unpaid labour, it is still unpaid labour.

We are going into an economy in what is supposed to be our worst recession in 300 years, and an employment crisis where many people are going to be out of work. We cannot just look at creating volunteering opportunities. We also need to think about how we create jobs and support people who have volunteer experience to get into work, to be a part of the economy and to continue to contribute in that way, while giving something back to them. We do not want a load of people who have just been laid off doing a load of volunteer work and ending up losing their homes and not being able to put food on the table as a result.

Q59 **Lord Davies of Gower:** My question is directed at David Knott. In

previous sessions, and certainly in both panels today, we have heard much about the work and experiences of voluntary and community groups, charities and social enterprises. I would be interested to know how the Office for Civil Society will take their experiences into account in the coming months and perhaps years ahead to move things forward.

David Knott: Clearly, we are moving into a new phase and starting to look at some of the aspects of renewal and recovery and the legacy of this work. We are very actively engaging with all parts of civil society in learning from what we are doing right now and what that means for the future.

Our Minister for Civil Society, Baroness Barran, is hosting regular engagement with a range of different national bodies, looking at some of the questions and patterns that we have seen through this period. We have specific working groups looking at different dimensions: aspects of sustainability, funding issues; and some of the philanthropic trends that we have seen throughout the crisis.

We are actively looking at data, insights and experiences, and hearing evidence and getting excellent contributions from a range of organisations. As the Government have said, it is an absolute imperative that this is one aspect that we really learn and grow from. We will be doing that in the context of the civil society strategy, which we are already delivering, but we are looking at how we might reboot and refresh some of the themes.

Lord Davies of Gower: It sounds like an enormous task ahead. How confident are you that you are well equipped to do that?

David Knott: Let me give a few examples. The National Citizen Service is a major programme, significantly funded by Government. This summer, the programme obviously is not going to operate in the usual way, but I mentioned earlier that the National Citizen Service is helping charity shops right across the country. It has a huge digital offer that is reaching something like half a million young people.

These are momentous times that will fundamentally change some of the government programmes and the way that government works with and supports civil society. We have had additional capacity inside government to help in our volunteering in civil society work over this period, and I am confident that the Minister for Civil Society is fully energetic and driven to build on and renew all the work coming out of this period.

Lord Hunt of Kings Heath: Is part of your work looking at whether there are mechanisms in central government that either hinder the kind of innovative voluntary charitable work that we have heard about today or encourage it? We have heard about the Cabinet Office easing the procurement rules to make it easier for local authorities and other public bodies to support local voluntary groups to do things out of contract. Do you see part of your work as looking at other mechanisms that will enhance the work that you are doing more generally in civil society?

David Knott: There is a mixture of both in some of the things we are doing to remove the barriers and some of the things we are doing to foster and enable. For example, the work on social value is a mixture of both. In trying to open some of the commissioning channels, we have been working in recent years with some great local authorities, such as Staffordshire, helping leaders to think about the culture and practices that bring communities in at the start of the commissioning cycle and draw on the value and expertise that lie inside their communities. We have some legislation going through at the moment on the lightening of charity regulations over this period, to allow charities to do the best they can do at the moment.

There is a lot on the enabling and fostering side, and I think that is something we have seen in recent years. You heard about some of those examples earlier from the CBI. Of course, they are not new. We know of great work through Business in the Community, over many decades. We are seeing renewed effort in some of those areas. We have been running something called the inclusive economy partnership, working with some of the leading corporate, public sector and civil society leaders. It reaches some of the most vulnerable people in our society, growing innovations, and then trying to bring them back to government to say, "What do they mean at a greater scale?" There are plenty of examples, such as how we help to support mentoring for young people who typically are less represented in the workforce.

There is a bit of both. I see it as a responsibility for the Minister for Civil Society and the Office for Civil Society to create the conditions for charities in civil society to thrive, as well as trying to smooth, streamline and reduce some of the barriers to their good work.

The Chair: Thank you. We have heard criticism this afternoon that the siloed approach of government frequently does not enable charities and communities at local level to act in the integrated way they need to in order to deal with the patient, the client or the service user. How far are you, from the office in DCMS, able to tackle the silo mentality that inevitably is there across government?

David Knott: This crisis has provided a real moment of clarity as to how important charities are across the range of interests of different government departments. The funding package for charities was comprised of funding for local and small charities, as well as for large charities, and was distributed through different government departments. One of the things I have been personally struck by over this period is that many departments had not realised how important charities and voluntary groups were in their delivery chains. The crisis has revealed the central role that they play; something like £16 million of central commissioning and grants flows to voluntary sector partners.

There is real recognition and a moment of opportunity for us to build on. It is about how we look at some of the big future moments of public services reform, using the social value approach that goes with the grain of what is happening, and has been happening for some time, at both

national and local level. Getting on and doing that, and training the people who are responsible for procurement, both centrally and locally, will be a key part. This situation has brought greater recognition of the central role that charities and community groups play, inside and alongside our public services.

Lord Filkin: Picking up David's point that many people in central government are discovering that there are charities and that they are quite important and useful—my tongue is in my cheek a little bit—we had a similar comment from the directors of public health. They were tearing their hair out at the ignorance of people in central government about the role of directors of public health and their significance.

We could start to build up a picture. One of the problems is massive ignorance at central government about operational problems locally and real local delivery. Probably a number of us are biased, because we have been in both places, but this seems to illustrate one of our fundamental problems. Lots of ambitious politicians go into national government, and able young people go into central government, but they often do not get their boots on the ground sufficiently to understand the realities of life. That is a really unbiased question. Would people like to comment on it?

David Knott: Many commentators have reflected that observation about the Civil Service and Whitehall more generally.

One of the things I have found quite important in how we in the Office for Civil Society have helped ourselves, and supported others across government, is lived experience. It is actually going out and hearing the experience of real people who interact with services, particularly young people. Through various panels, we have brought young people into the heart of some decision-making. That is incredibly revealing, not only about what young people want but about their experiences of interacting with services.

As examples of getting into the detail, we certainly have a lot more pluralistic models of service delivery in all parts of public services now. We need to spotlight those examples and bring them back to government to see some of the wider principles. They are some of the things that have certainly helped us in the Office for Civil Society, and if they could be spread further, it would probably be to the collective public benefit.

The Chair: Thank you.

Lauren O'Donoghue: I want to pick up Lord Filkin's point about the perceived disconnect between people in central government and organisations working on the ground. It goes even further than that. It is a disconnect between people in central government and people who live in those communities, people for whom it is their day to day.

Some of what ACORN does is door-knocking. We used to go every week before lockdown and talk to people in communities, in their homes and ask them, "What is it that you need?" One of our questions was, "If you

could say one thing to people who work in central government, or to the Prime Minister, what would be it be?" Time and again, it would be, "Come here. Come to where we live and see what is happening. Come and work an hour in the food bank. Come and do an hour of door-knocking. Come and spend an hour manning the ACORN hotline and see how real people live, see how people are suffering and see how Covid-19 has taken pre-existing inequalities and made them a thousand times worse".

It goes so deep, and so much further than simply public services. It goes into everything from housing to food poverty, to health inequalities in different communities. The change needs to be absolute and structural. In ACORN, we organise around the central principle that it is one thing to sit around and talk about change but nothing matters unless you translate it into action. I hope that, as a result of this, we will see some real tangible action in our communities to make people's lives better.

Ian Jones: From what I have seen of central government, it does not understand communities. As I said, a few years ago, I gave a presentation to a Select Committee on civil society. One of the panel members said to me, "Why don't you in the voluntary sector structure yourselves so that we can talk to you at our level?" I did not make friends when I said, "What, fail like you as well?" That did not go down well.

People do not understand the nuances between different streets. Even when you are working in Cornwall, Bude is nearly 90 miles away from Penzance, and they are different. You have to work with people differently. As it cascades nationally all the way through, you have to work differently.

It is even about national charities. David mentioned the Red Cross. We have problems with national charities parachuting ideas into our area from funding they get nationally. Last Christmas, we had duplication of work on hospital discharge. The Red Cross got national money for something we already had a project on. It stopped working with us and said, "You've got to deliver this now". Charities such as NAVCA—the National Association for Voluntary Community Action—get local groups together to talk differently. Where you have big charities, it can be problematic.

We have been working hard on cultural change with our public sector partners. Tonight, I have a discussion with 15 primary care network clinical directors. They are responsible for the primary care networks in Cornwall, which is about 60 GP practices. They are keen to work in a different way. That would not have happened five years ago. There is a commitment to change the way we lead our communities, and an understanding that not everyone has the one answer and that working together in a different way on leadership, as well as delivery, can work. But there has to be a change of mindset from the centre as well.

Lord Bichard: I really do not want to turn this into a debate about Whitehall structure, but what we have been talking about quite a lot today is redefining the relationship between the state and the voluntary

sector, and between local and central. We have talked about the importance of looking again at how we resource and how we procure. We have not talked much today about data sharing, but it is a pretty important issue if we are to have real involvement of the voluntary sector in the delivery of services for public good.

David, if that is the debate—if it is about redefining the basic fundamentals of services for public good—should the Office for Civil Society really be in DCMS? Is it really going to have the power to reshape what other departments do? I used to run one. I would be interested in your answer.

The Chair: David, I do not want you to feel you are under a lot of pressure. I remember when the OCS was in the Cabinet Office, though, so, if you feel you can answer that, I think we would appreciate it.

David Knott: Machinery of government issues are for the Prime Minister and Ministers. I have been in the Office for Civil Society in both the Cabinet Office and DCMS, and I feel we have been able to discharge our civil society and cross-governmental responsibilities very effectively in DCMS as well as in the Cabinet Office.

We have an extremely capable and passionate Minister for Civil Society in Baroness Barran, who is doing exactly what you would want her to do in engaging with civil society and bringing those issues to government and driving them across government. The civil society strategy, which was written when the Office for Civil Society was inside DCMS, is a cross-governmental document with endorsements and examples from Ministers right across a range of different departments.

Lord Bichard: I realise it was a difficult question, and I am sorry to put you in that position, but it is an important issue if we are to change the face of that relationship. Who has the power to do that?

The Chair: I think the Minister makes an enormous difference. David is right. Baroness Barran herself set up a charity and ran a charity. That was the experience that I think brought her into the Lords, so she understands the sector.

We have really—

Ian Jones: Baroness Armstrong, can I make one more quick point, please?

The Chair: Okay, quickly.

Ian Jones: We invest billions of pounds every year in the physical defence of our nation through the MoD. I was in economic development for many years, in this country and overseas, and we spend millions of pounds developing our money—our GDP capital. We spend nearly nothing on developing our social capital, which is about the strength of our communities. There has to be some evaluation of that. Andy Haldane, the chief economist at the Bank of England, is a very strong advocate of

trying to recognise the real value of the community voluntary sector. It is worth billions, but we do nothing about it.

The Chair: You have all made your cases very strongly today and I thank you. I thank David for, in a sense, having to defend against two real champions of locality and devolution.

It has been a really interesting session. If there is anything that you think you should have said or commented on, please let us have it in writing. We are always very grateful to see additional points in writing.

That brings us to the end of today's public meeting. Thank you all.