

The Baring Foundation

Allies not servants

Voluntary sector relations with government: a discussion of the thinking behind the new focus of the Baring Foundation's Strengthening the Voluntary Sector grants programme

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Strengthening the Voluntary Sector grants programme 2006

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The Baring Foundation

The Baring Foundation

The Baring Foundation was set up in 1969 to give money to voluntary organisations pursuing charitable purposes. Our purpose is to improve the quality of life of people suffering disadvantage and discrimination.

Since 1969 the Foundation has awarded over £90 million in grants. In 2006, the Foundation will award £2.5 million.

The Foundation believes in the fundamental value to society of an independent and effective voluntary sector. It uses its funds to strengthen voluntary sector organisations, responding flexibly, creatively and pragmatically to their needs. The Foundation puts a high value on learning from organisations and their beneficiaries and seeks to add value to grants by encouraging the sharing of knowledge through a variety of means.

Strengthening the Voluntary Sector

In 1996 the Baring Foundation launched the Strengthening the Voluntary Sector grants programme. This programme funds organisational development work aimed at supporting organisations to be efficient and effective.

The programme has supported 682 organisations, giving a total of £11.5 million.

Strengthening the Voluntary Sector 2006

In 2006 the Trustees added a focus to the grants programme inviting organisations to apply for work that would help them to maintain or increase their independence from government. This paper forms part of a series of papers designed to draw out the lessons learned through the grant making. Please see the back cover for details of other planned papers in the series. These will be put on our web-site as they become available. www.baringfoundation.org.uk

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Allies not servants: voluntary sector relations with government

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“Charity law dictates that voluntary organisations must be independent - and as with all these words independence has proved to be a slippery concept. Independent of government yes...but voluntary organisations need another sort of independence too, one which is much harder to protect in the current climate. Independence of thought, of being as the great Archbishop William Temple described it ‘unpurchaseable’ - The certainty that you cannot be bought, that you are not captured by any particular ideology, that you owe nothing, that you can operate freely.”

Julia Unwin, Allen Lane Lecture, 2005

‘Independence...is the essence of your existence, the reason you can serve, the explanation of why you can be so innovative... (and why) you can make the difference that others cannot.’

Gordon Brown, Chancellor of the Exchequer, speech to the NCVO annual conference, 2004

‘The independence of voluntary action does not mean lack of cooperation between it and public action.’

Lord Beveridge in Voluntary Action: a report on methods of social advance, 1948

Why is the Baring Foundation interested in the independence of the voluntary sector?

The Baring Foundation believes in the value to society of an independent and effective voluntary sector. This belief is captured in the Foundation’s own statement of values and, as such, drives the design and delivery of the grants programmes and it is what the Foundation is trying to achieve.

In 1996 the Foundation launched the Strengthening the Voluntary Sector grants programme. The aim of the programme, as stated in the guidelines, was to support organisations to ‘improve their efficiency and effectiveness’. The programme excluded funding for services, with support being focused on strengthening the core systems, skills, structures and strategies that make up the infrastructure of an organisation. Consequently, the Foundation has supported a range of activities, from strategic planning to management training, from improving financial systems to strengthening user involvement. In 2006, Trustees reviewed this programme and concluded that, while keeping the focus on disadvantage and discrimination, it was timely to add further focus. An external review of the first ten years of this programme will be published in 2007.

Several suggestions were explored all looking at different priorities for strengthening efficiency and effectiveness but the theme that emerged as most urgent was the capacity of organisations to manage relationships with all the branches of government, defined in its broadest sense – central and local government and public agencies. The Trustees acknowledged the welcome opportunities offered to the sector by a closer relationship with

government through increased funding and a greater influence on policy. However, of concern is the threat that closeness with government will change what organisations do and the way they do it.

In 1996 the Commission on the Future of the Voluntary Sector received evidence on the state of independence in the sector, reflecting a diversity of views ranging from independence being ‘the hallmark of voluntary organisations’ to voluntary bodies ‘everywhere... becoming feeble imitations of agencies that fund them and direct their activities, on which they have become wholly dependent.’ The Commission concluded that a fundamental question for its deliberations was ‘whether the distinctive nature of voluntary action... is now in danger of being compromised as organisations move away from their original objectives and take on new roles defined for them by others.’ (Commission on the Future of the Voluntary Sector, 1996)

Such a possibility is captured in the African proverb: If you have your hand in another man’s pocket, you must move when he moves. (Hulme and Edwards 1997) Acting on this wisdom would see the voluntary sector plotting a course separate to government, accepting that receiving government funding inherently compromises independence. The Foundation does not believe that this is inevitable.

An alternative view is reflected in the phrase used in the title of this paper that voluntary organisations can be allies *with* government, not servants *of* government, in tackling society’s most difficult problems. The phrase is taken from William Beveridge’s 1948 report ‘Voluntary Action: a report on methods of social advance.’ In this report Beveridge explores how voluntary action can remain ‘vigorous and abundant in the future in the face of the inevitable development of state action.’ He describes a relationship characterised by symbiosis, where each brings distinct resources and attributes and which are harnessed for the benefit of those who need support. (Beveridge, 1948)

In 2005 NCVO published a collection of essays exploring the challenges for voluntary action in the 21st century. Nicholas Deakin, Chairman of the 1996 Independent Commission on the Future of the Voluntary Sector and now a Trustee of the Baring Foundation, reflected in this report on issues and themes for civil society. Commenting on relations with government he refers to Frank Prochaska’s remark (in evidence to the 1996 Commission) that the growing relationship with government means the sector is in danger of ‘swimming into the mouth of Leviathan’. However, Deakin goes on to argue:

Striking though this phrase may be, it is in some important respects misleading: Government is no longer – if it ever was – a single marine monster but a shoal of smaller beasts (Deakin, 2005)

In the course of swimming in this shoal, the ability of voluntary organisations to retain their independence varies considerably. Trustees of the Foundation recognised that both scenarios, one of compromise the other of cooperation, are true. What the Foundation began to explore was what are the circumstances under which organisations can achieve a productive relationship, where the experience and resources of voluntary organisations and government combine to greatest effect? The hypothesis being explored in this grants programme is that the quality and effectiveness of the relationship is determined by the capacity of voluntary organisations to retain their independence. The programme is in no sense “anti-government”. Rather it grows out of the Foundation’s belief that the independence of voluntary action is fundamental, whatever the hue or stance of the government of the day. Now, in 2006, all the political parties agree that the sector will play a greater role in concert with all the branches

of government. At this time, the programme seeks to explore and to inform the continual search to discover how these relationships can best be managed.

What is independence and what does it enable organisations to do?

Independence is the ability organisations have to enjoy a range of freedoms. Freedom to:

- agree values based on their own experience and vision and not external pressures
- carry out work that delivers the stated purpose of the organisation
- negotiate robustly with funders and partners
- challenge others and engage in public debate

In turn, these freedoms are necessary for organisations to perform their important functions. To:

- identify needs
- pioneer new approaches to tackling these needs
- provide services that meet these needs
- provide the means of empowerment for groups that are marginalised
- articulate dissent
- promote equality
- inspire others

In reality, independence is never absolute: there are legal and financial responsibilities, the need to meet ethical accountabilities to users, members and supporters and requirements to fulfil funding conditions. Organisations operate through a wide range of relationships. Through these relationships, organisations experience pressures which can have an impact on the freedoms set out above.

Why is government interested a closer relationship with the voluntary sector?

Voluntary action has always been shaped by its relationship with government. Bridge House Trust traces its origins back to 1097 when William Rufus, second son of William the Conqueror, raised a special tax to help pay for the repair of London Bridge. (Bridge House Trust, 2006) Perhaps this is the earliest known example of a government service level agreement?

In the last century, the founding of the welfare state had the most profound effect on the scope and role of voluntary action. Although the momentous new arrangements reflected government acceptance of responsibility for caring for people in the UK “from cradle to grave”, the welfare state’s founding father, William Beveridge, was adamant that ‘needs remain in a social service state’. He argued passionately that there was a continued role for voluntary action and that the principle of independence was central to organisations performing this role adequately. (Beveridge, 1948)

By the early 1980s, the relationship with the state was characterised by an ‘an arm’s length approach’, with voluntary organisations that met public benefit criteria being core funded to pursue their own objectives. These arrangements were significantly altered in the mid 1980s when many voluntary organisations expanded their operations to deliver training and provide temporary employment to unemployed people under contract with the Manpower Services Commission. Legislation in the late 1980s in education, local government finance, housing and health services went on to lay the foundations of a ‘contract culture’ in which voluntary

organisations could, alongside the private sector, tender to run public services. These changes continued to gain momentum under the Labour government after 1997. (Deakin, 2005 and Knight, 2006) The switch from grants had a profound effect on the more traditional local service delivery organisations which had lived in a patronage culture from which the reforms of the 1980s and 1990s jolted them. Since then, government has become the voluntary sector's largest source of income. In 2003/04 38% of the sector's total income (approximately £10 billion) came from statutory sources, compared to 35% from individuals. (NCVO, 2006)

There are two assumptions driving government's current interest in the voluntary sector:

1. The voluntary sector can be a more efficient and cost effective provider of public services than government, giving better value for money.

As part of the 2002 Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR), HM Treasury carried out a review of the role of the voluntary sector in public service delivery. This explored how central and local government could work more effectively with the voluntary and community sector to deliver high quality services. (HM Treasury, 2002) Subsequent initiatives and reviews have been carried out, increasingly more explicitly underpinned by concerns for efficiency. Sir Peter Gershon in his recent review of public sector efficiency examined scope for 'delivering savings in the 2004 spending review period (through) strategies for greater usage of public, private and voluntary sector intermediaries' (Gershon, 2004). The 2007 CSR refers to an 'ambitious and far reaching value for money programme...to address (current and future) challenges, involving further development of the efficiency areas identified in the Gershon review.' (HM Treasury, 2006) An important component of this is competition amongst agencies bidding to provide services, with an anticipated consequence that competition will drive down costs and produce savings and other efficiencies.

2. The voluntary sector has a central role in strengthening society, by providing an alternative to state power, supporting the development of citizen action, tackling exclusion and reaching and engaging people that government cannot.

This role is described in a variety of ways promoting civil society, civic society, community cohesion, regeneration, renewal or social inclusion. Prime Minister Tony Blair set out this vision in his speech to the NCVO conference in 1999:

In the first half of this century we learnt that the community cannot achieve its aims without the help of government providing essential services, and a backdrop of security. In the second half of the century we learnt that government cannot achieve its aims without the energy and commitment of others - voluntary organisations, business, and, crucially, the wider public...So turning around schools doesn't just depend on motivated teachers and pupils; it also depends on parents, on local people willing to give time as governors or mentoring children. Cutting crime doesn't just depend on the police. It also depends on people giving time to neighbourhood watch, serving as a magistrate, or befriending a teenager who is getting into trouble with the law. So government and community need each other. They need to act in tandem. (NCVO, 1999)

Government has built on the first assumption via a significant expansion in contracting and service level agreements and through the ChangeUp programme (Home Office 2004) and the Futurebuilders investment fund to help voluntary organisations deliver better public services (Futurebuilders 2006). Meanwhile, all the branches of government have found it more difficult to put in place practical mechanisms that reflect the second assumption.

Statements from government about the sector's current and future role are regularly accompanied by renewed commitments to recognise the sector's independence. Most recently, Ed Miliband, the new Minister for the Third Sector said in a speech to a sector audience that:

We may not always agree as we work together. I may not be able to deliver everything you want. What I promise is to try my utmost to listen and learn from you. Despite this, you will sometimes feel the need to point out where we are going wrong. That is a natural, healthy part of the independence you rightly cherish. I will try my best to cherish it too. (Cabinet Office, 2006)

This belief in the independence of the sector is enshrined in the Compact between government and the voluntary sector. The frameworks contained within the Compact seek to establish and maintain a relationship of mutual advantage with specific codes of good practice on black and minority ethnic groups, community groups, consultation & policy appraisal, funding and volunteering. Local areas are now producing local codes of good practice as part of local compact development work to better reflect local priorities. A Compact Commissioner has been appointed to champion full implementation of the Compact at every level of government.

These statements and agreements are welcome yet, there is a tension, and perhaps even contradiction, between being seen as a source of value for money in public service delivery as well as a promoter of strong society. By positioning the sector as an implement of government policy rather than as a possessor of distinct skills and experience of its own, by making the sector a 'servant', government risks destroying the very attributes it values in the sector and that encouraged a closer relationship in the first place. The users of public services gain nothing if services are just transferred to an alternative delivery agent without being transformed. (Paxton et al, 2005)

What are the dominant characteristics of the current relationship with government?

Having identified independence as a theme for Strengthening the Voluntary Sector, the Trustees asked Foundation staff to carry out a series of interviews with voluntary organisations and government representatives as well as wider reading and research. This work revealed how the nature of the relationship with government is putting pressure on voluntary organisations in a number of ways, all with a potential impact on independence. Many of these areas are increasingly well documented, and are listed briefly here:

Reduced public sector provision of public services, but increased centralised control over the incoming providers of such services through funding mechanisms and accountability arrangements.

The emergence of the 'contract culture' in the 1980s reflected a move away from funding through grants to payments through contracts. Recent legislation such as the Children's Act (2004) and the Mental Capacity Act (2005) put new formal arrangements in place for the purchase of services through commissioning and procurement. A survey carried out by the British Association of Settlements and Social Action Centres (bassac) in December 2005 with 55 of its members explored how community-based organisations are performing since the Treasury's cross cutting review of 2002. This revealed that 50 per cent felt that their independence was compromised by the nature of government funding programmes, in particular the wide scale replacement of grants with contracts and service level agreements. Rather than devise local solutions to local problems, community-based organisations were

increasingly forced to compete for contracts to deliver centrally devised programmes. (bassac 2006) Contracts bring with them regimes of accountability that set out complex (and sometimes even conflicting) requirements for monitoring, reporting, evaluation and accounting. These regimes put an emphasis on indicators that are short term and quantifiable rather than long term and qualitative. The impetus to develop such indicators serves funder demands to demonstrate value for money more than it encourages learning from success or failure. Meanwhile organisations that deliver services, but are not involved in their design, shoulder all the risks - of failure for users, of damaged reputation and of a weakened organisation. (Paxton et al, 2005)

Centralised control but gaps in coordination

This is often referred to as silo commissioning, where planning and commissioning processes take place in isolation from one another, missing opportunities for tackling problems in a more strategic way. This puts particular pressure on organisations that see the virtue in a multi-project approach making it more difficult to join up their own responses. This also results in organisations having to manage relationships with a potentially large number of government departments, agencies and structures at central and local level. One medium-sized organisation interviewed as part of the programme consultation has funding relationships with three departments in central government, four departments at their local authority, two with other local authorities, then with different public agencies including the Legal Services Commission and the Learning Skills Council and the Primary Care Trust, then special initiatives including Sure Start and the Children's Fund, then New Deal for Communities, Single Regeneration Budget 6 as well as being a member of the Local Strategic Partnership.

Services commissioned but not paid for

Achieving full cost recovery, or the principle that the service provider should be able to claim the total cost of delivery and not have to subsidise activity from other sources, is still a challenge. William Beveridge covered this in 1948 arguing that government grants 'might be made not simply to cover the basic costs of services, but to help with the overheads as well.' (Beveridge, 1948 p. 316) Nearly 60 years later, the Gershon review weakly encouraged 'further progress towards full acceptance of the principle of full costs recovery'. (Gershon, 2004 p.28) A recent National Audit Office (NAO) report on the way the sector is funded was scathing about the lack of progress on paying full costs. (NAO, 2005) Further research by bassac highlighted the issue of transaction costs of tendering for services. (bassac, 2006)

Services subject to short termism and changing priorities

The short length of funding terms has an impact. In May 2006, Third Sector magazine reported a 'historic' commitment by the Local Government Association to run a campaign amongst its members to bring an end to one year contracts with charities. (Third Sector, 2006) This commitment comes four years after HM Treasury's recommendation in the cross cutting review to do just this. All the pressures listed above are underpinned by the constant threat that priorities and structures will change in a context of shifting public and government opinion and pressure on resources: In the 1960 film 'Psycho' Norman Bates explains to Marion Crane why the desolate Bates Motel has no other guests, saying 'Oh we have 12 vacancies; 12 cabins, 12 vacancies. They, uh, moved away the highway.'

What are the potential implications for voluntary organisations?

These characteristics pose important questions concerning the ability of organisations to act independently. In 2000 the Baring Foundation explored the relationship between voluntary organisations and government in a discussion paper titled 'Speaking Truth to Power'. (Unwin, 2000) Amongst its main conclusions were that:

'the approach of central and local government offers many voluntary and community organisations greater opportunities to influence policy and implement programmes to tackle problems than before. However, this approach also places great strain on the capacity and skills of organisations, especially smaller ones and infrastructure bodies, and may also run the risk of undermining their independence.' (Unwin, 2000)

These 'greater opportunities' are welcome and the Foundation sees through its current grant making examples of organisations taking these opportunities and securing better terms and conditions for providing services. Both service delivery organisations and umbrella bodies now have more impact on the implementation of central government policy than before.

These 'strains' can change voluntary organisations:

- They change their distinctive roles by moving the source of inspiration for doing the work, distorting accountability away from users to the priorities of government, which are not necessarily the same. It reduces the sector's capacity to identify new needs and pioneer new ways of meeting these needs, to dissent, take risks and advocate.
- They change the way sector organisations work by emphasising short term outputs over long term change and reducing organisations' ability to be flexible. They tie organisations up in bureaucracies, standardised planning and delivery systems and internal management structures set up to meet the needs of external funding arrangements which are not necessarily compatible with the needs of beneficiaries.
- They undermine the stability and sustainability of organisations by requiring services to be subsidised, diverting income away from investment in organisational infrastructure. This in turn puts pressure on organisations' relationships with independent funders and individuals donors reluctant to fill gaps in funding.

Through the consultation, the Foundation heard that organisations are deeply concerned about this. Parts of government are too, because the dominant characteristics of the current relationship risk undermining the very attributes that it most values in the sector.

How can organisational development help organisations to establish and maintain productive relationships with government?

Since the Strengthening the Voluntary Sector (STVS) programme was established in 1996 the Foundation has seen the tremendous impact that support for strengthening infrastructure can have on improving the effectiveness of organisations. These impacts have been across a varied range of organisations and types of work; strategic development, staff development, training, collaboration, IT, finance, human resources, governance, monitoring, evaluation and research.

The Foundation's Trustees saw the value in continuing to fund organisational development. In this way, the new grants programme will support the same types of activity that have been funded until now. What the focus adds is an opportunity to test how organisational

development can lead to increased independence, and then how independence can lead to greater effectiveness.

These questions prompt further questions about what are the characteristics of organisations that are able to enjoy a productive relationship with government? What can organisations that currently feel their independence is under pressure do to move towards a more productive relationship, and, more precisely, how can a grants programme that supports organisational development help that process?

Through the consultation with organisations, the Foundation looked at the characteristics of organisations that organise and operate in ways that bring to life the freedoms set out above. The Foundation saw how organisations harness these characteristics as they establish and manage relationships with government, the potentially much more powerful party in the relationship. This helped to draw out how other organisations could be helped to develop and strengthen these characteristics. They can be summarised under two headings

The ability to demonstrate legitimacy

This is the source that any voluntary organisation draws on in its relationships with others. It is the justification for existing and having a seat at the table. The practical organisational development activity that can strengthen legitimacy includes:

- involving users or beneficiaries in organisational review, planning and management for the first time or in a significantly better ways;

- developing or improving ways of collecting evidence of the needs of users and beneficiaries or potential users and beneficiaries;

- introducing appropriate ways of assessing the quality and impact of the organisation's work;

- developing ways of listening to complaints and responding;

- introducing a new organisational or management structure;

- strengthening the governance of the organisation;

- reviewing the values of the organisation.

The ability to act with confidence

This is reflected in the skills voluntary organisations draw on when establishing and managing relationships. Practical organisational development activity includes:

- developing skills, capacity and confidence in negotiation;

- developing skills, capacity and confidence in campaigning;

- diversifying sources of restricted funding;

- developing systems and expertise in calculating full costs recovery and the pricing of services delivered under contract;

making use of the Compacts with central and local government and other statutory bodies;

improving skills or knowledge about how to work with the media;

developing strategies, systems and skills for communicating with members, supporters, customers, the media or the wider public in significantly better ways;

These activities formed the basis of the programme guidelines made available to organisations in March 2006. The first round of grants will be made in November 2006.

In what other ways will the Foundation approach this issue?

The grants to be awarded in November 2006 mark the ‘end of the beginning’ of the grants programme. A range of research and development activity will also take place alongside this. Rather than these activities being seen as something *additional* to the programme, these are seen as absolutely *integral* to it.

Bringing funded organisations together

Grant recipients will have opportunities to come together to share information, problems and solutions. This element of the programme will be designed with grant recipients and be required to demonstrate how it genuinely contributes to the success and quality of the programme.

Running a real time evaluation

One of the challenges for the programme will be assessing any change in an organisation’s independence. An external evaluation agency will be commissioned to work with organisations at the start of funding to discuss this challenge and identify simple and appropriate indicators of independence. The evaluation agency will carry out annual reviews which will be published. It is hoped that this group will form a cohort of interesting case studies of how to use organisational development to strengthen independence. The Foundation will use this to inform its own future programmes and also policy on support for the sector.

Publishing findings

The Foundation will publish a series of working papers alongside the grants programme which will share lessons and reflections.

What does the Foundation hope to achieve?

The grants pot is very small in relation to total sector income, but it is hoped that the programme will have a range of impacts. It will:

- Provide insights into how the issues of independence from government are being played out within voluntary organisations;
- Support a set of organisations to be better placed to manage their relationships with government;
- Generate authoritative evidence about how organisations can tackle issues related to their independence with relatively limited extra resources;

- Generate lessons for the Foundation, other funders and government on how to support the sector in ways that help its independence and effectiveness to flourish.

As always, the Foundation is keen to collaborate with others in pursuing these objectives and would welcome comments and cooperation from others.

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