

Russell-Cooke's debate on the public's perception of charity sector

Russell-Cooke's charity and social business recently held a lively debate on the motion "*This house believes that the public does not understand the role of charities or their regulator*".

Hosted at the Southbank Centre, participants included [William Shawcross](#) Chair of the Charity Commission, [Sir Stuart Etherington](#) Chief Executive of NCVO, [Lesley-Anne Alexander CBE](#) Chief Executive of RNIB and Chair of ACEVO and [Joe Saxton](#) founder of nfpSynergy.

Today's charity sector is a broad church which varies enormously from the "kitchen table" charities run by small groups of unpaid trustees through to large complex "corporations". They deal with a myriad of issues and operate in many different ways. So, can there be a one size fits all "role" for charities?

The charity sector has faced a number of challenges in recent times, with scrutiny of Chief Executive's pay, increasing criticism of fundraising techniques and campaigning and questions on how charity funds are invested. Are these criticisms justified, or do they just simply demonstrate that the public doesn't understand how charities operate?

From the results of recent surveys, it would be hard to oppose the motion. William Shawcross and Sir Stuart Etherington noted respectively that 90% of recent survey participants thought the Charity Commission's role was to investigate complaints about charity delivery and that a majority thought 40% of charities' income came from the state.

Whilst all participants agreed there was some truth in the motion, this was with some reluctance. William Shawcross said that whilst there was a gap in the public's understanding of charities and the Charity Commission, the public still has an "*instinctive understanding of the good*" that charities achieve. He also warned charities that any misunderstandings should not be used as a "*convenient defence*" when facing criticism.

Sir Stuart Etherington noted that criticism and misunderstanding of charities is not new and that public trust remains high. Although, he warned charities not be complacent. Charities need to continue to evidence their impact, not be afraid of transparency and to develop "*tactical responses*" and communication strategies when criticism is levied.

Joe Saxton raised the point that whilst public understanding was low, the public live in a "*rosy fog of ignorance*" and still love charities, as demonstrated by The Stephen Sutton Fund and recent reaction to the fire at Manchester Dogs' Home. A key problem, he said, was that the media "isn't really interested" in charities, with no routine coverage of charities and what they do.

Lesley-Anne Alexander said that "*the public*" and the "*charity sector*" are not easily definable groups and contain great diversity. However, Lesley-Anne Alexander also said that the sector ignores public opinion at its peril and that charities must find new ways of communicating with the public. There is already a great deal of regulation, she said, listing over 9 different regulators that RNIB must satisfy. However, Lesley-Anne Alexander's "*ultimate regulator*" is the beneficiaries of RNIB.

It could have been easy to agree with the motion in a general mood of defeatism but the impassioned participants all drew out different ways that the sector could continue to tackle any misunderstandings and boost public trust and confidence.

The debate was reported by [Third Sector](#) and [Civil Society](#).

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