

The third sector can help solve ‘wicked’ social problems. We are ready and waiting.

Matt Downie, Chief Executive, Crisis

In January 2024, Keir Starmer and his team spent a day with over 100 third sector leaders, reconnecting with us after 14 years away from Government. Tinuke Awe, co-founder of Five X More, took to the stage. Her charity is dedicated to transforming maternal outcomes, righting the wrong that black women are far more likely to die during pregnancy¹. Her message was not about that though, it was about what is to be listened to, to be truly involved in solving a social problem.

How can the NHS stop the harm done to black women without speaking to black women? And why on earth would health ministers not want the solutions that Tinuke and her colleagues have on offer?

It was a striking moment. Striking for the scale of the injustice in public service outcomes, but also for its resonance for every single issue represented in the room. I looked around and wondered just how many of us felt the same; that we are sitting, waiting for government to notice we can help them make a leap forward in social progress.

Pick a social problem. Pick a sticky, seemingly intractable, multi-faceted one. There are plenty out there. Outcomes for cancer patients. High levels of poverty. The worsening mental health of the nation. The frightening rise in homelessness. All of these and many more, have something in common. Each of them has real, tangible, and available solutions on offer from the third sector. Costed, trialled, evidenced, breakthrough, co-produced solutions. And what is more, they also have people willing to give their careers to making those solutions a reality. What a gift to government and the political class.

Take homelessness. It is a problem on the rise, effecting nearly a quarter of a million households in England alone². At its worst, homelessness causes early death, on average at age 43 for women and 45 for men³. The housing crisis is now chronic, and the councils are facing bankruptcy because the costs of homelessness cannot be met⁴. Yet solutions exist. As with so many other social problems, the homelessness sector can draw on deep wells of experience, long-term and clear thinking about solutions.

Crisis has published a full plan for how homelessness can, and should, be ended over a ten-year period⁵. The plan draws on international comparisons of strategy, policy frameworks, and models of political leadership. It synthesises all available evidence on the efficacy of interventions in homelessness. It features commissioned research to plug gaps in evidence. It even shows how to build public support for the right policies. And it is independently costed by one of the big accountancy firms (in case you are interested, it costs £19bn over ten years to end homelessness and saves the country £54bn over the same period).

It would be nice to think that such a body of work might prompt an invitation from Government to discuss those solutions, even to challenge or improve them. In Scotland and

¹ <https://fivexmore.org/blackmereport>

² <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-knowledge-hub/homelessness-monitor/england/the-homelessness-monitor-england-2023/>

³ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsofhomelesspeopleinenglandandwales/2021registrations>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/oct/30/councils-in-england-facing-bankruptcy-as-lack-of-housing-pushes-up-costs>

⁵ https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/239951/everybody_in_how_to_end_homelessness_in_great_britain_2018.pdf

Wales that did happen, but not in Westminster, despite repeated attempts to engage ministers and officials.

Crisis is not alone in taking on complex problems to identify innovative, resourceful, and transformative solutions. Take broader poverty issues for example. In 2016, after four years of careful analysis, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation published their exacting, authoritative blueprint for a nation free of poverty.⁶ The Centre for Mental Health, with the support of every major mental health charity, has published ‘a mentally healthier nation’⁷, offering the full sweep of changes necessary to turn the corner on their issue. And in cancer research and care, the recently produced ‘Longer, better lives’⁸ from Cancer Research UK is a 200-page tour de force. It is so thorough, analytical, and powerful, that it is hard to see why a civil servant would not simply offer it as a programme for government to new ministers.

These are some of the best examples, and there are certainly some gaps where such thorough work is not available. In fact, in searching for examples for this essay, it became clear some sectors might need to rediscover their boldness of vision. However, that is no reflection on the available expertise, data, or solutions on offer in every single sphere of social progress.

So why is it that the political class does not ‘pick up the phone’ to our sector, seizing the golden opportunity presenting by our experts in policy, research, and practical solutions? Where is the disconnect, and what can be done about it?

There will certainly be tactical reasons. Are we smart enough in our political and civil service engagement? Do we build in the quick wins that political and news cycles demand? Do our data stand up to treasury scrutiny? All this and more is vital, but there is a bigger agenda here, one that is about the strategic place of the third sector in our national life.

Over the last 20 years or so we have seen different modes of interaction between government and the third sector. I will leave others to delve deeper into these modes, but in extremis, they have been both too close and too adversarial. Too close, in some ways literally, when contracted to deliver the outputs desired by government departments, leading to a distortion of the models for charitable provision, and accusations that the sector is propping up the state with underfunded services⁹. And too adversarial, in that charities have more and more openly attacked government decisions, personally declaring ministers as ‘liars’ in one recent instance¹⁰, with government intentionally chipping away at our confidence and ability to campaign¹¹.

A new, healthier, confident place for the third sector in our national life is required. One that is based on a mature functional relationship with government. There is a natural tension between the high aspirations of cause-led organisations, and ministers and officials who must temper such idealism with political, financial, and other realities. Once acknowledged, that tension can lead to great things.

We can provide civil servants and their bosses with the vision and blueprints they might struggle for the time and space to produce. Yes, we need to be patient, seizing and creating opportunities to lift aspirations when they come. And we must be ever-ready with systemic, bold solutions – in my experience, political expediency comes with no warning. We must

⁶ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/work/we-can-solve-poverty-in-the-uk>

⁷ <https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/publications/mentally-healthier-nation/>

⁸ https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/sites/default/files/cruk_programme.pdf

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/nov/13/charities-near-insolvency-after-subsidising-public-sector-contracts>

¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-66666435>

¹¹ [A ‘chilling effect’? The Transparency of Lobbying etc. Act 2014 and charity campaigns \(parliament.uk\)](#)

build a reputation for this across the third sector, alongside the public campaigning, the critical delivery of services, this should be the third pillar of charitable purpose.

And to foster a mature dynamic between the state and third sector, one that produces visionary solutions to shared problems, we need government to recast its view of us. The extremes in sector relations of the last decades are dysfunctions that serve no-one. It is dereliction of the state to neglect the potential in our sector, or to pick pointless fights. Those that suffer most are people facing homelessness, mental ill-health, poverty, cancer, and all the other social ills we can and must solve.

Tinuke Awe has a powerful point. Government, can we talk?

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