

By developing relationships of trust with under-served, vulnerable or marginalised people, charities can go where the State often can't – ultimately building people's capacity to advocate on their own behalf.

Benaifer Bhandari, Chief Executive, Hopscotch

The [Foundling Museum](#), celebrates what may have been the country's first children's charity. In equal measures it is inspiring in its intention and horrifying in its processes.

Created around the mid-1700s, the charity is a great example of those that have the means taking care of those most marginalised in society. The process was part philanthropy and part entertainment, as the wealthy of the day with time on their hands hand-picked the children they wanted to support.

The museum is full of positive stories where the children have fared well and, for the more sensitive amongst us, squeezed in between each wooden panel is the heaviness of what might have happened to the other children.

Today, the sector focuses on being "by and for" where possible. At [Hopscotch Women's Centre](#) we are over 80% by and for – and it's hard. With the desperation of trying to recruit, meet outcomes, and attempt to meet core costs, it can be easy to take our eye off the ball. This is the very ball we use when we support those most marginalised in society – we pass it back and forth, assuring vulnerable citizens that we are here, we can catch, we aren't going anywhere, and we will keep this ball for as long as those more vulnerable than us need us to.

We rarely would pass a ball to someone who we cannot see. Which is the way the government and other statutory bodies may see individuals in need, as a homogenous whole. It's too difficult to break down groups into different humans. Those accessing charitable services often need first to have confirmation that they are seen, that they are acknowledged and not judged – because they often come having borne the effects of being "easy to ignore" by the very systems they hoped would be their safety net.

The time taken to have a gentle approach, be culturally appropriate, and build rapport, is such an important investment in time, which many charity workers make without even thinking about it. From interview onwards, leaders focus on what this needs to look like for team members, so we are truly present for those who should benefit from our services. This investment in time sends messages of reassurance and hope, sometimes for the first time in the lives of beneficiaries.

I see teams driven by their understanding of systemic discrimination – protesting and/or working in every way possible to bring about systems changes. Yet, day to day, they quietly tailor all front-line support, at the pace set by the service user. I wish we spoke more about this essential dichotomy and how it isn't only charity leaders who focus on systems change, but the front-line workers too.

When Hopscotch Women's Centre was the Mayor of Camden's charity of the year, the results of the fundraising went into being able to work at this more trauma informed pace, with the cost-of-living crisis bringing in a further influx of complex cases (on top of those caused by lockdown). As an example, these cases could have elements of VAWG (Violence Against Women and Girls) with housing and immigration uncertainty, and now with the addition of poverty together with mental health issues.

Working with this complexity doesn't fit into funder timelines or outcomes. Charities have to focus on building unrestricted income to be able to work at a pace that matches the vulnerable person, to rebuild confidence and motivation, so that individuals can start to visualise a life after the crisis. Overall, the sector is working super hard at staying afloat and it's heartbreaking when one of us goes under, but also pushes us to do more and pick up the slack – as that's what the sector does as the fourth emergency service.

The complexity of trauma, whilst putting pressure on charities, is beautiful in a way, because it means that no case is like another. We see that no individual's resilience is replicated in anyone else, and the sector has become the expert in this because of the constraints and therefore resistance from statutory bodies. I love that the sector attracts workers with law degrees. In my experience, these particular team members are powerful when it comes to reminding a housing officer, social worker, or GP surgery what their role remit is, and by when their actions need to be completed.

Every difficult act of advocacy performed helps embed self-worth in those we support – unless there are mental health issues, and then that needs culturally appropriate support first. As self-worth builds, so does the desire to take back agency that may have been taken away over so many years. We cannot predict the timeline from initial assessment to those accessing the service feeling ready to move on – making many funding applications a guessing game.

But it's a beautiful feeling when beneficiaries become friends of the organisation and even feel ready to give back in some ways. Many charities don't speak about this transition and I think it's because many of us are inundated by requests for access to current and ex-service users for the sake of consultation.

We say “nothing about us without us” in relation to those we support. Equally, we know the pitfalls of consultation with neither adequate accessibility or support and where there is no reward or recognition built in. The work that charities like Hopscotch Women's Centre do to educate stakeholders and funders around appropriate consultation isn't funded. Yet it is essential so that those we have worked with who have experienced exploitation aren't put into that same position again – in however minor a way – in the guise of consultation.

Recently, when Hopscotch created a Positive Masculinity Programme for boys as a preventative for VAWG, the team consulted with men with a history of lived experience of violence in the home. These were professional men who asked if they could help. They had been in therapy and really wanted to engage in this work which meant a lot to them... but the consultation had to be paused because the topic triggered PTSD, despite their own therapy and the therapeutic support we had in place. It was such a learning moment for us about how much time, patience, false starts, etc. that charities experience when attempting to include people with lived experience in our innovative programmes.

I want to issue a call to action – let's acknowledge that we must keep evolving as charities and speak widely about the fact that:

- The sector, generally, is skilled in reaching those missed by statutory bodies – they are experts in working with complex cases and trauma, often with resources stretched beyond restricted funding
- The statutory sector is stretched too – it relies on the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) to sensitively and appropriately handle complex cases because it does not always have resources or skills to provide the support laid out in its own mission

- No government or funder, in pursuit of efficiency or economies of scale, can hope to replicate the effectiveness of tailored support with one-size-fits-all 'solutions' controlled from the centre – we need greater trust and flexibility in these relationships
- Charities, government, agencies, and funders can learn from each other – and particularly from areas like Camden, with its 2000 charities and initiatives, where those in need can locally access high quality support that is centred around them, their barriers, and needs.