

Sometimes charities roar at injustice – as they should

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It's frightening but true that we need to be reminded about why charities are here. The history of our sector is not one of pure service provision, only there to meet the immediate needs of individuals. Charities are founded to change something. There's a truism that we should be working to put ourselves out of a job. And it's dead right.

What does being a 'service provider' even mean, at a time when the challenges people face in their lives are overwhelmingly the result of broken system upon broken system, desperate resource shortages, lack of co-ordination and, from many of their fellow citizens, ignorance, apathy or even antipathy?

If charities only work to solve the problems of individuals, we are doomed to fail. And worse, it makes us no more than a cog in a destructive wheel, allowing systems to continue to cause harm by continually picking up the pieces of lives they have shattered. It also means we exacerbate personal trauma by centring individuals or families as the cause of their own suffering – because the truth is, far more often than not, it's the treatment people receive and the opportunities they are denied that are the problem, not something inherent to them.

The term 'service delivery' itself has its roots in the dramatic increase in public sector funding of charities over the last few decades, rather than the idea of charity in which most of our organisations were fostered, through self-help, outrage, philanthropy, and the spirit of survivors of trauma, struggling to protect others from the same.

Public sector funding has been growing as a proportion of charity funds since Care in the Community in the early 1990s, through the funding boom under New Labour, and the spread of commissioning across local government. Even in the early days, some sector leaders warned that if charities became too dependent on the public sector, their ability to challenge it – either on behalf of individuals or systemically – would be compromised. But set against that was the desire to help more people, and indeed much good has been done through the commissioning of charities. People who would not engage with statutory services have been supported in life-changing ways. The entire Sure Start programme would not have happened at all without children's charities, never mind worked in the highly localised, responsive, and non-judgemental way that so many Sure Start centres did. I can say hand on heart that our commissioned services at Shelter continue to break new ground, transform lives, and even challenge commissioners to do better. I am not criticising any charity for taking the taxpayers' penny and turning it into hard-working gold, as so many of us do. However, there can be no doubt that statutory funding has provided a ready excuse to silence the sector. Both locally and nationally, charities are prevented from biting the hand that feeds them.

Perhaps even more concerning, charities now face procurement processes that favour ever larger providers. At national level, we struggle to compete in highly labour-intensive processes that are designed for large corporates, not for us. At local level, the impact is more devastating. When I was chief executive of Women's Aid, a federation of many local domestic abuse charities, many very small, I was horrified at the impact of commissioning practices that were changing dramatically – partly as a result of ideology, partly due to devastating funding cuts in local government. Refuges that had been founded by survivors themselves, often after intense battles for domestic abuse even to be acknowledged, desperate fundraising efforts, even squatting of houses to base themselves in, were being

lost by the women who created them, following commissioning processes they could barely afford to participate in.

If we manage to win funding, we all too often have to invest charitable funds to boost what the contract specifies – funds we could sometimes spend better elsewhere.

If this all makes charities sound powerless, hemmed in by walls we can't pull down, then we need to think again. We must understand the power we hold and use it. And those of us with more power, who are not fully funded by local contracts, whose supporters urge us to push for change, whose every waking moment is not consumed with a struggle for survival for the sake of people facing destitution, danger, and desperation – we have the most responsibility to act. That's why a group of chief executives of large charities came together to found the Charity Reform Group.

However we are funded, our sector is and must remain the single most effective way in which the impact of dysfunctional policy-making on individuals and communities can become known, be challenged, and be improved through lessons learned in the making of public policy. Every single day, charities are in town halls, in Whitehall, and in Westminster, lobbying, persuading, influencing. Our research is never out of the headlines, and without it our politicians and policymakers would lose much of the available data on the impact of their decisions. Whatever even the most vocal of the "stick to the knitting" brigade may say, they know full well that charities are a vital source of information and policy formation.

We combine our anger at injustice with an understanding of the complexities of its causes and of the way in which it is experienced by individuals and communities. This combination is uniquely powerful. In June 2017, the Grenfell Tower Fire claimed 72 lives and devastated a community. It became a horrifying symbol of the impact of inequality, discrimination, and neglect. Shelter's frontline services were on the ground the same day, offering support to those who had lost their homes in the most traumatic way imaginable. And we were far from alone: our sector was central to the response. I could see the fire from my house, although it was over a mile away. I was due to join Shelter in three months' time, and making sense of the tragedy and trying to play a role in ensuring it was less likely to happen again felt like the fundamental duty of an organisation whose purpose is to defend the right to a safe home.

This short account does a disservice to the many incredible colleagues who contributed. We built a relationship with the survivors of the fire, and jointly launched a Commission on Social Housing that learned from their lived experience, along with major research, policy development, and citizens' juries. The outcome was central to Shelter's strategic aims. Not only that, but it led to six years' campaigning in partnership with Grenfell United, and the eventual passing of the Social Housing Regulation Act in 2023.

This is far from being Shelter's success story. It's primarily the story of a group of survivors who were determined for change. They were joined by others including, more recently, the family of two-year-old Awaab Ishak, another victim of the fundamental social injustice of a home that nobody should have to live in. At the same time, I believe our charity was central to this fight for change.

This story shows how we can bridge the sometimes stark divide between the rarefied world of policy-making and its impact on people's lives. What happened at Grenfell Tower, and to Awaab Ishak, was not just a tragedy but the consequences of a broken and unaccountable system that had to change.

And when people experience the effects of systemic failure, they don't just want help, important though that is. They want accountability, justice, and a better world for those to come. And so do we.

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