

Introduction for participants

We are delighted that you can join this event, hosted on behalf of the Charity Reform Group (CRG) by the Sheila McKechnie Foundation (SMK). The CRG is a grouping of charity CEOs with a shared interest in building the profile and voice of charities and their leaders. It is convened by SMK, which itself is a champion for campaigning and campaigners – a job we believe is especially crucial at a time when we face such a breadth and scale of social, economic, and environmental challenges.

One of the Group's objectives is to build a positive vision of the future role charities will play in society, and their relationship with other sectors, including the State. A General Election is imminent and, with it, the strong likelihood of a change of governing party. The opportunity to reflect on and discuss the quality of those relationships – particularly with regard to social change and reform – feels timely.

Charities work both nationally, sometimes at immense scale, and hyper-locally, responding to the unique needs of many communities. They work with some of the most vulnerable people, and address some of the most deep-rooted and complex problems – from knife crime to climate breakdown. Charities' contribution to social change is unarguable.

William Beveridge referred to the 'perpetually moving frontier' between the sector and State, and we agree it is a constantly evolving relationship. As demand for charities' contributions surge, there is an urgent need to re-examine their potential as providers of support, drivers of prosperity, guardians of rights, and agents of change.

On this portal you will find a series of short essays by charity CEOs and others, exploring aspects of charities' role in transformation and reform. They set out a fresh account of what charities do today and the value they offer. They also reflect some of the hopes the authors have for charities' future role and the relationships they could have with people, government, and business.

Over the 24 hours we have together, we'll ask why charities' role and potential is not fully recognised or valued and what needs to happen to change that. We'll consider this from sector, citizen, government, and business perspectives. How can we build more productive relationships and deeper mutual understanding, while preserving charities' vital independence?

This feels like a critical moment for these conversations. In this election year, and with so many pressing challenges to tackle, we sense an emerging will to reset expectations about the legitimacy and desirability of charities' role as agents of change, as well as to renegotiate the relationship between charities and government.

Sue Tibballs, Chief Executive, Sheila McKechnie Foundation