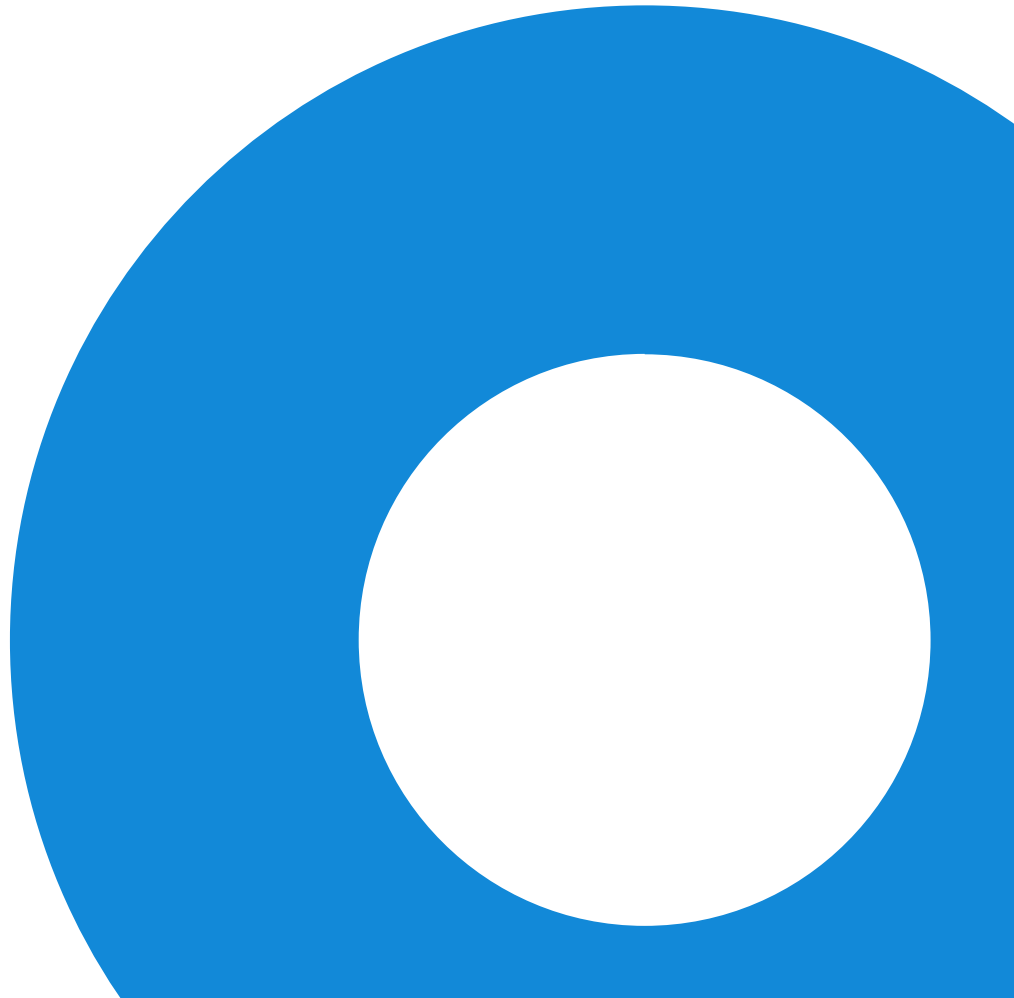


**The Civil Society
Covenant
consultation:
A collective response
from the
London CVS Network**

December 2024



The Civil Society Covenant: Recommendations from the London CVS Network

Introduction

The [London CVS Network](#) is made up of **33 local infrastructure organisations** that, collectively, provide infrastructure support to **30 of London's 32 boroughs**.

Together they support and represent over **21,000 of London's charities and community groups** and have an extensive reach into London's communities. Through their work with small, hyper-local and grassroots groups, they can often reach communities that are the most marginalised and least heard and engaged.

This network has a **distinct perspective** on London's voluntary and community sector (VCS) and what is needed to develop and sustain it. Local infrastructure has a **unique role** and is critical to engaging the sector and connecting it to public bodies.

This is a response to what this network sees as the key questions in the consultation. However, the network is very keen to support any further steps of the development with more specific suggestions to help realise its aspirations. London Plus stands ready to support continued dialogue.

What supports an effective relationship between civil society organisations and public bodies?

Previous commitments have succeeded or failed depending on the nature of existing relationships. This covenant must go further to ensure that it is meaningful and actually builds relationships based on trust, respect and understanding.

- **Understanding of the sector:** It is vital that government and voluntary sector work together to build public bodies' understanding of the sector. The sector is so much more than large charities and 'free' services from volunteers. The value and importance of grassroots organisations must be recognised, particularly their role in reaching communities often not reached by public bodies. There must be a recognition of the sector's impact & value, and its contribution & capability to support the work of government. Furthermore, there must be no expectation that this support comes for free. The recent decision to include charities in the increased rate of National Insurance employer contributions indicates a lack of understanding of a sector already struggling to survive and retain its workforce. A stronger understanding must be developed across all levels and departments of government.
- **Understanding and valuing VCS infrastructure:** Infrastructure must be recognised, properly valued and resourced for its role in ensuring sustainability and viability of local/grassroots groups and facilitating their engagement. The health and effectiveness of infrastructure organisations is intrinsic to the VCS achieving positive impacts in its work, and this cannot be neglected.
- **Adequate investment:** To truly value the role and contributions of the sector, there must be adequate, long-term and sustainable investment, including core funding, to

ensure it has sufficient resources and capacity, and can develop and retain its skilled and experienced workforce.

- **Shared goals:** If government and the sector can define areas where we can achieve more by working together, it will amount to significant progress and will have greater impact for large numbers of people.
- **Power-sharing:** For effective partnership working, attention must be given to ensuring there are robust mechanisms to ensure shared decision-making authority, shared resources and shared responsibility.
- **Inclusivity:** There must be a clear shared commitment to working together to promote inclusivity and accessibility for all communities, particularly those that are seldom heard and most marginalised.
- **Effective co-production and engagement:** It is important to be realistic and respectful about the time that is needed to fully and truly engage groups, and adequately resource their time.
- **Good communication:** Best practice should be followed, namely clear, specific and timely communications. Particular attention should be given to ensuring that public bodies communicate with the VCS in ways that are consistent. This is particularly key in local government where departments can have opposing objectives in relation to their interactions with the sector.
- **Good commissioning practices:** Attention should be given to commissioning approaches that pit large charities against small and grassroots groups. This practice needs to be reviewed to address issues of effectiveness and fairness.

Ensuring civil society organisations and public bodies uphold these principles

The covenant and its principles must be communicated and implemented in a way that embeds them within the culture of government at every level, so that political and personnel changes do not diminish the impact. This change should be regarded as a long-term commitment that will outlast one government or another. There must be accountability to ensure that it is meaningful, effective and adds value.

Awareness and commitment

- **Build cross-party Parliamentary support** to ensure the sustainability of the covenant, regardless of future political changes at local and national level
- **Build and sustain knowledge** of the covenant at all levels of government, across all departments
- **Embed the covenant in contracts** and grant agreements to ensure awareness, commitment and enforceability across all levels of government

Accountability

- **Leadership:** Senior leaders should in part be appraised on the basis of how they embed the covenant and its principles in their functional areas (this may even feature in competency frameworks)
- **Consequences for breaches:** The covenant must be enforceable
- **Clarity around the process:** How issues can be raised, who is responsible locally for ensuring it is adhered to
- **Arbitration and advocacy service**

Local oversight and evaluation

- **External local oversight** to ensure local government compliance (there may be a role for local infrastructure in monitoring)
- **Evaluation** measures must be defined; the covenant must include measures of covenant adherence and its impact on relationship building

Conclusion

The network welcomes this opportunity to reset the relationship between government and the sector. We particularly welcome the engagement of local and small grassroots groups in the consultation as this is such an important part of the sector that can often be overlooked.

Network members are strongly committed to playing their role ensuring that the principles in the covenant live strongly in the relationship between government and the sector. Members regard this contribution to the consultation as the start of a deeper dialogue and wish to contribute further more specific insights to help the principles embed. London Plus welcomes the opportunity to act as a conduit to continue this dialogue.

We look forward to the commitments outlined in the covenant.

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