

Beyond Brexit Roundtable – Meeting Note

Final version, 14th May 2019

Introduction

On 1st May 2019, the NCVO and the Joffe Charitable Trust convened a round table of 16 civil society leaders to discuss how civil society could better respond to Brexit and its causes. Participants came from charities, campaigning organisations, think tanks, donors and others. See the list of participants below.

Participants brought substantial experience of the issues and related initiatives. Discussion drew on the blog [Brexit, then what?](#) and background note [Take Back Control: Brexit as a springboard to fix British politics and build a better society](#) as a starting point.

The discussion can be summarised into the following eight themes. Taken together, they constitute a challenge to civil society to step up and seize the opportunity created by Brexit to shape how Britain changes as a nation, even if it means working on unfamiliar issues and adapting current practices.

Themes

1. Civil society urgently needs to act together to help shape the course Britain is taking.

Brexit has exposed major problems and divisions in our society. It has unleashed political upheaval and national change. As a result, it has cracked open some of the foundation stones of how Britain works. This creates extraordinary opportunity and risk for civil society.

The opportunity is for civil society to keep the crack open and actively shape national renewal. We can help build the Britain we want, that reflects our core values. The risk is that opposing forces will shape the country's future in different directions. Support for the far right could surge quickly. This would put current gains at risk and create a more hostile environment for our work and service users.

The issues are huge and unfolding right now. They run very deep and will be contested. They are bigger than any single organisation can address alone. In order to seize the opportunity, civil society needs to mobilise around shared strategic actions. We need to act urgently with the same national ambition shown by Extinction Rebellion or the Leave campaign. This is a time to be truly radical and ambitious.

2. Brexit creates a unique opportunity to reform our political system.

Our political system is a foundation that affects all charitable work. It is the operating system for our country that determines who has power and opportunity, and who does not. It is currently broken. Our society is deeply

divided. Ordinary people are too disconnected from political institutions. There is not enough opportunity for all. This is fuelling resentment. It is widely seen as a root cause of Brexit.

The last 20 years have seen major constitutional reforms. These broke the old settlement but did not form a coherent new settlement. So, we are in a situation of frustrated renewal, not just decline of an imperial system. This helps explain the current scale of frustration. It raises major questions about what the new settlement should be, and whether we should become a more 'european' country with a written constitution.

Brexit creates a unique opportunity to channel this energy and reform the system, so that it is more democratic and creates a better society that works for everyone, less influenced by vested interests. This is not about engaging in party politics. It is a legitimate charitable concern directly linked to charitable objectives. It is a concrete opportunity to tackle fundamental issues about creating a more inclusive, forward looking and fair society.

3. People expect new forms of direct participation in decision making.

The limitations of representative democracy have been thrown into sharp relief by Brexit. We need to supplement it with different forms of citizen engagement. People have new expectations about how they engage with institutions, based on direct participation, enabled by technology. It is reflected in increased interest in deliberative democracy and 'mini publics', such as citizens assemblies, and the individual action at the heart of Extinction Rebellion and localism. Looking ahead, our formal political and government processes need to enable new forms of direct participation.

4. The way that civil society acts on this is as important as what we do.

Civil society needs to model the new approaches we are promoting. This should help nurture a new culture of collective action and political engagement. There is a great deal of good practice and innovation in civil society to build on.

The vocal liberal elite, including civil society leadership, is seen as distant and insulated from many ordinary people's concerns. Our decision-making may be dominated by metropolitan urban views. In this way, there is a risk that we have contributed to division and resentment. Across the country, people want to be heard and respected rather than told what to think or do. We need to build more bridges across divides, for instance strengthening dialogue between different parts of the country and different groups. We should work with allies that established civil society does not normally work with.

It will be important to connect the issues to people's lived experiences, rather than focus on abstract or institutional issues. There are significant differences in political culture, identity and engagement across the four nations, with many opportunities for England to learn from Scotland, Northern Ireland & Wales.

5. Civil society should ensure our day-to-day work tackles the causes of Brexit.

Civil society organisations should ensure that our day-to-day work addresses division and the causes of Brexit. Civil society organisations often already work with the most deprived groups and in the most deprived places. We should seek to deepen our engagement and actively build cohesion in the communities where we work, encouraging dialogue between Leavers and Remainers. Our work should strengthen people's voice in ways that link to formal government and political systems.

Internally, civil society organisations should ensure that all parts of society are represented in our leadership and management. We should create opportunities for people from disadvantaged backgrounds to move into these influential positions.

6. Civil society needs to engage with the process of Brexit.

Civil society needs to continue to engage with the process of Brexit, which is likely to continue for years. This will mean continuing to get involved with crucial issues around the rights of different groups, the transfer of powers and legislation from Brussels to the UK, the impact on devolution and the devolved assemblies, access to funding, the labour market and many others.

Civil society organisations should also inform their supporters and service users about the impact of different Brexit scenarios and ensure that their voices and concerns are heard in the on-going political debate.

7. There's a lot to build on ...

Participants briefly mentioned a number of initiatives currently under way to help civil society respond collectively to Brexit, including:

- The [Brexit Civil Society Alliance](#) is continuing to hold round tables for civil society around the country.
- The Brexit Civil Society Alliance, NPC and Lloyds Bank Foundation convened a [conference in London on 26th April](#) and have another scheduled in Manchester in June.
- Koreo & Compass are hoping to win funding for a larger civil society convening event in the next few months, building on their previous work including Koreo's roundtables and Compass's conference.
- The Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust and other donors have created a new Democracy Fund and are convening an event to discuss it.
- An informal group of donors is meeting regularly to discuss how to respond to Brexit.

There are certainly other collective initiatives, which it would be useful to identify and share information about.

In addition, many individual organisations are undertaking work to respond to Brexit, including through building bridges across society and reforming the political system.

8. ... but more ambitious, coordinated approaches are urgently needed.

Participants suggested many ideas for action, though did not discuss next steps in detail. The suggestions can be summarised as follows, which is presented as the basis for further discussion rather than an approved agenda. There was a strong view that the current national turmoil makes action urgent, with the expectation that we should learn and adapt rapidly as we go.

- a) Charities should address the causes of Brexit in their day-to-day work, for example by:
 - Ensuring that their work reaches the most deprived areas.
 - Building dialogue and cohesion in the communities they work in, using common approaches where possible.
 - Ensuring that individuals in their decision-making positions reflect a diverse range of life experiences across Leave-Remain divides.
 - Encouraging disadvantaged groups to engage with local and national government structures, on a non-party political basis.
- b) Groups that represent and support civil society should vigorously encourage civil society organisations to address the causes of Brexit, for example by:
 - Encouraging leadership to engage with these issues even if they're outside current strategies.
 - Signposting and providing common tools and analysis.
 - Ensuring that the legal issues and limits of this work are clearly understood.
 - Providing light touch co-ordination and opportunities for shared learning.
- c) Think tanks and innovators should develop new approaches, where necessary, that have the potential to attract large scale civil society support and impact at national scale.
- d) Donors should support civil society to address the causes of Brexit, for example by:
 - Funding the above.
 - Encouraging civil society leaders to engage with these issues, even if they're outside current strategies, and co-ordinate their approaches.
 - Coordinating their own work on these issues as donors.
- e) All civil society actors should continue to engage with the process of Brexit, for instance by:
 - Publicising the impact of different Brexit scenarios on their work and service users.
 - Engaging with collective processes to stay informed about and influence developments.

3. Participants

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| Alex Jacobs | Joffe Trust |
| Alexandra Runswick | Unlock Democracy |
| Anthony Barnett | Open Democracy |
| Chris Walker | NCVO |
| David Stead | The Charities Aid Foundation |
| Duncan Shrubsole | Lloyds Bank Foundation for England and Wales |
| Florence Orban | St John Ambulance |
| Jacob Millen-Bamford | Brexit Civil Society Alliance |
| Jonny Will Chambers | Koreo |
| Kitty von Bertele | Luminate |
| Neal Lawson | Compass |
| Oliver Robertson | Quakers In Britain (Britain Yearly Meeting) |
| Rachel Whale | Koreo |
| Rosemary Bechler | Open Democracy |
| Stuart Etherington | NCVO |
| Tim Dixon | More in Common |