

Chief executive's breakfast – the voluntary and community sector and climate change

Thursday, 30th April 2010

1. Aim of the meeting

The aim of the meeting was to share the key messages of *Shaping our future* – the report from the Ministerial and Third Sector Task Force on Climate Change, the Environment and Sustainable Development, with a range of chief executives in order to further accelerate commitment and action on these issues throughout the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS).

While environmental organisations have made an invaluable contribution to the achievements made on the climate change agenda, it is essential to engage a broader range of non-environmental organisations in order to make full use of the opportunities that a transition to a low carbon economy offers the sector. Climate change is not simply an environmental issue, but is a cause of concern for the sector as a whole. Organisations need support in identifying how climate change is relevant to their work and different parts of the sector will approach climate change from different perspectives. Overall, this will lead to a wider range of groups calling for action on climate change in more diverse and compelling coalitions, as well as mobilising different groups at national and community level.

This note highlights the key issues identified by those present at the meeting.

2. Key issues discussed

- Ways in to the issue of climate change
- What type of capacity building should be provided?
- Need to build significant alliances.
- Particular role of commissioners and funders.

Ways in to the issue of climate change

Many in the sector do not yet see the links between their missions and climate change. The VCS needs more positive messages about climate change and sustainable development, which make clearer links between organisations and a wider range of issues, in particular the links with efforts to secure social justice. By better highlighting these links and showing what positive actions organisations have already taken, more will realise that building action on climate change into what they do is necessary but is also not difficult and will bring many benefits (to staff, financially, etc.). Making this integral to existing work is key, rather than it being seen as an additional burden.

For example, the National Housing Federation has successfully addressed the sustainability agenda by spreading the message that improving the environmental sustainability of homes is improving the lives of individual households – their message is not about making homes greener but about offering warmer homes to the people that live in them. It was clear from other attendees that varied narratives and ways of talking about climate change are emerging in different areas of the VCS.

Individual organisations should build tackling climate change into their strategy planning, finding an alignment between environmental goals and their own mission, values and objectives. Whilst action to reduce carbon footprints is valuable, organisations can see this as a distraction from their mission and values. Instead, VCOs should work to identify how their mission and values will be affected by climate change and embed action on it in their work.

For this to happen, it is necessary that individual trustees understand they have a responsibility to consider these issues strategically and to show leadership on them. Winning hearts and minds within an organisation can be as important a challenge as making the case externally. Skills Third Sector has built action on climate change into their occupational standards for trustees.

Good regulation can also set the standard and act as a real driver of transformational change. However, some local community organisations have started to report a lack of interest and fatigue about good practice on ‘going green’. This is starting to be perceived as ‘regulation creep’ and just another ‘tick box’ exercise. The need to avoid this is linked to the need to recognise the relevance of climate change to core work, so that the rationale for addressing them becomes clear rather than an additional exercise.

Organisations from the children and young people’s sector are a good example of how links between core issues and climate change have been recognised and are being acted on. The National Children’s Bureau, the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services, and the British Youth Council all reported that their involvement with young people has been a key driver for change. It has allowed them to understand that the issues of sustainability and climate change are the top priorities for the next generation and therefore for the organisations themselves.

What type of capacity building should be provided?

There is urgent need for a capacity building initiative within the sector, to develop sustainable skills on green issues. National infrastructure organisations, such as NCVO, could play a fundamental role in helping organisations make the practical connection between their mission and action on climate change and sustainability in the organisation’s work. This type of support is particularly important for small grassroots organisations, so they don’t feel as if the climate change agenda has been imposed on them ‘top-down’, but they can see it as integral to their work.

The sector also has a profound role to play in fostering and supporting community and social action on climate change. Building sustainable communities is central to tackling climate change, so an element of citizen action and of changes happening ‘bottom-up’ is essential within this agenda. VCOs active at the local level are best placed to engage communities, they can be an engine for collective behaviour change, and are a catalyst of community action.

Significant shifts in public behaviour will be essential to achieve climate change targets. People need to be provided with opportunities and incentives to change their behaviour in ways that also improve their quality of life. With its reach into communities and ability to engage people in programmes relevant to their needs, the VCS is well placed to play a lead role in enabling behaviour change. VCOs can design and deliver programmes that work for their members and supporters, harness the power of social networks to drive change, and foster and reinforce collective commitment to sustained change.

Need to build significant alliances

It is essential that organisations establish partnerships and build alliances in order to undertake joint working on climate change projects. This should happen not only between organisations sharing the same thematic purposes, but across the whole sector. The group also discussed the need for organisations to demonstrate leadership on these issues, both among their peers and external stakeholders, as well as to reach out beyond their specific area within the VCS. For example, an organisation may work with young people on drug and alcohol issues, but may also work on a wider range of issues with different people. However, this can represent a challenge.

An interesting link suggested was the one between climate change and equality, looking at how climate change has a different impact on disadvantaged groups, BME communities, etc.

Particular role of commissioners and funders

Government and funders have often created incentives for positive change, for example by making the sustainability agenda a condition of funding and therefore using finance as leverage. This can be a valuable way of motivating organisations to address environmental issues, but it must be sustainable in the long term and lead to meaningful action, rather than requiring organisations to hastily develop an environmental policy just to get funding.

There is a particular concern for small charities, which often don't have the management or sufficient resources to embrace these issues, so once a particular project ends it is difficult for them to keep climate change at the top of the agenda.

3. Next steps

Climate change is a pressing challenge for the whole of our sector, not just for those organisations that work on the 'green agenda'. Climate change and the environment are economic and social issues too, and organisations need to understand that its impacts on their core work and beneficiaries can provide a key driver. There can also be an economic case, as well as the more traditional 'moral obligation' to address these problems. Once they explore the links, many organisations will find their missions influenced by environmental issues, with valid reasons for making climate change action integral to their work. The sector needs to be supported in making these links so that we reach the breadth of engagement that is necessary to achieve real change.

In order to achieve this:

- **Government** should recognise, draw on and better support the skills that the whole of the VCS has to address climate change, and in particular the profound role it can play in providing leadership and fostering behaviour change through campaigning and empowering local communities.
- **Funders** need to see environmental initiatives as a legitimate cost to support charities in making progress in this area, and they should make grants specifically for environmental improvements. Even when the grant or funding is not specifically intended for environmental purposes, sustainability standards should be built in as part of the conditions, as a driver for positive change.
- **VCOs** must recognise that climate change is an important issue for them and explore the opportunities for effectively addressing it through their own work and in partnership with other actors like Government, a full range of private and public sector bodies, as well as other VCOs. It is only by building a better understanding of climate change's relevance to a wide range of issues and building more diverse partnerships to address it that we will begin to identify the most useful routes in to the issues, where support and interventions can best be targeted and to really begin to see action on climate change properly mainstreamed across the sector.
- **Small community organisations** need to find ways to easily engage with the climate change agenda and should be given practical support to make this happen. It is necessary to develop a full understanding of what this part of the sector needs and how capacity building can best be provided, in order to support real 'bottom-up' change.

4. Contacts

NCVO and Green Alliance are both continuing to work on the challenge of mainstreaming action on climate change across the VCS and would be happy to discuss this and any questions you may have in more detail.

Elizabeth Chamberlain – NCVO, Policy Team, Elizabeth.Chamberlain@ncvo-vol.org.uk
or 020 7520 2559.

Faye Scott – Green Alliance, senior policy adviser, fscott@green-alliance.organisation.uk
or 020 7630 4524.

APPENDIX

The Third Sector Taskforce

The Joint Ministerial and Third Sector Taskforce was established in April 2009 to examine how action on climate change, the environment and sustainability can be mainstreamed in the sector. It included ministers and officials from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC), the Cabinet Office's Office of the Third Sector (OTS) and the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG). Ministers from each department acted as co-chairs and Stephen Hale of Green Alliance was elected as the third sector co-chair. 16 third sector leaders sat on the task force. The secretariat was provided by Green Alliance and NCVO. More information about the Task Force is available at <http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/climatechange-taskforce> or <http://www.green-alliance.org.uk/grea1.aspx?id=3702>.

In February 2010 the Task Force published its final report '*Shaping our Future*', which presents an inspiring vision for third sector action on climate change and sets out how we can achieve this over the next five years. The report can be found at [http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/sites/default/files/Final Task Force Report 0.pdf](http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/sites/default/files/Final%20Task%20Force%20Report%200.pdf).