



# Good Things Foundation

## **Our response to Government's Civil Society Strategy consultation**

**'Small community organisations are proof that civil society is  
working'**

Civil Society is alive and kicking in the UK and the wealth of small hyperlocal organisations and groups making a difference to lives in their communities across the country is the living proof. However, times are difficult for the people working and volunteering in these organisations and groups. Together we need to do more to enable civil society to grow and flourish, leading to a more integrated, healthy and prosperous society.

In the UK,

- 14 million people live in poverty<sup>1</sup>
- 9 million people are lonely and isolated<sup>2</sup>
- 11.3 million people are lacking basic digital skills<sup>3</sup>
- 52% of charities lack basic digital skills<sup>4</sup>
- Only 27% of people feel like they have control over decisions in their local areas<sup>5</sup>

Together with members of Good Things Foundation's Online Centres Network, made up of more than 5,000 hyperlocal community organisations, we have developed and submitted a response to the Government's consultation on a new Civil Society Strategy.

This response is based on years of experience delivering programmes that have an impact on civil society, helping to tackle some of our most pressing social challenges, and helping to build a stronger society. We work in thousands of communities across the UK (as well as in Australia and Kenya).

To develop this response, we considered our existing research findings and held a workshop with members of the Online Centres Network, as well as gathering their views through an online survey.

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<sup>1</sup> UK Poverty 2017, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2017

<sup>2</sup> Trapped in a Bubble, Co-op and British Red Cross,

<sup>3</sup> Consumer Digital Index, Lloyds Banking Group, 2018

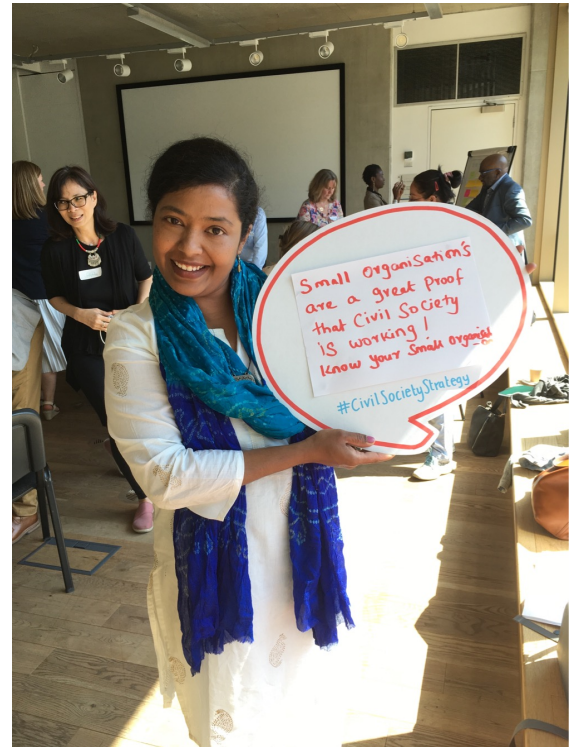
<sup>4</sup> Business Digital Index, Lloyds Banking Group, 2017

<sup>5</sup> Community Life Survey, Cabinet Office, 2016

The key themes we presented in our consultation response were:

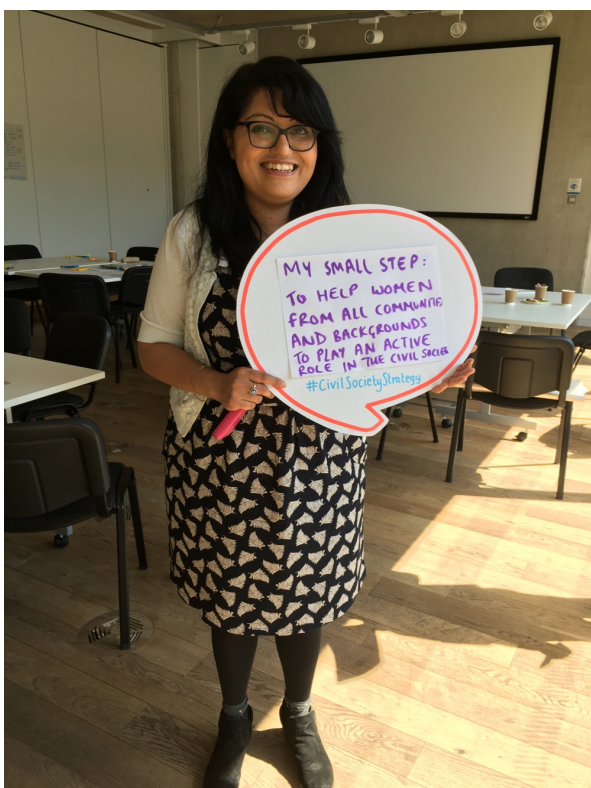
- **Civil society is strong, but faces challenges**

Through the Online Centres Network, we see some of the best examples of civil society. There is a wealth of hyperlocal activity led and supported by small community organisations in the 5,000 strong Good Things Foundation's Online Centres Network. Hyperlocal community organisations are unique in that they support people in a holistic and creative way and take a person centred approach, starting with what matters to people and their families. These groups and organisations are an integral and valuable part of their local communities and often play a powerful and unique role in supporting people who are socially excluded to build the confidence, skills, knowledge and connections to improve their lives and take part in community life.



However, these organisations are working in challenging circumstances, and need support - and it is vital that the Civil Society Strategy addresses this.

- **Digital blended with face-to-face support rooted in communities offers the best opportunity for a strong civil society**



We see great examples of this throughout our work, and that of the organisations within the Online Centres Network.

Digital allows us to develop two-way feedback between citizens, civil society and the government. It can also lower barriers to engagement in civil society, help to facilitate relationships, opens up a world of information and learning resources and is providing new ways people can make a change in their communities, and nationally.

However, digital isn't a solution in its own right. Trusted organisations, for example those in the community and voluntary

sector, have a huge role to play in civil society, and in particular in engaging excluded people and groups, encouraging them to play a full role in their communities.

- **Partnership working is crucial**

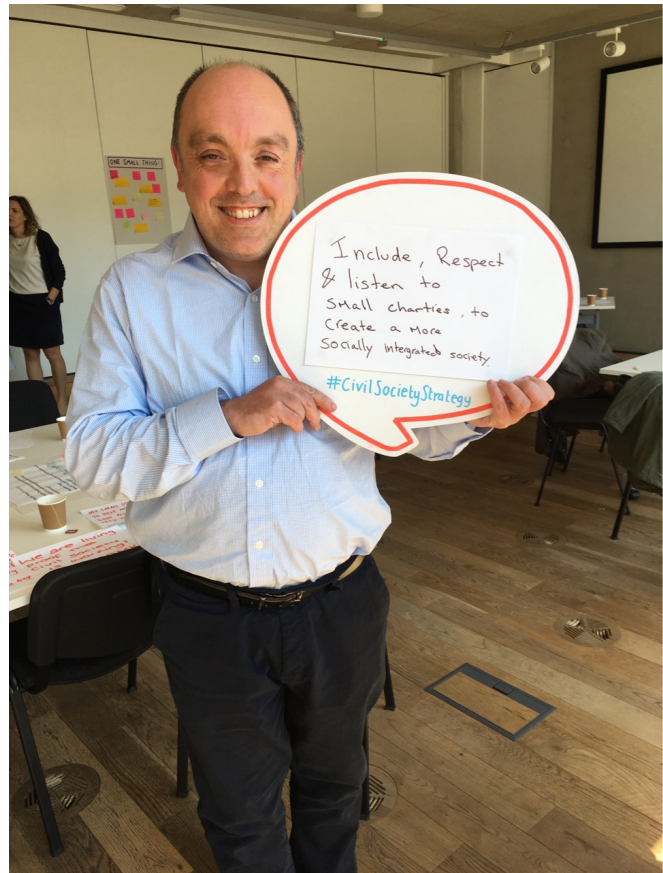
For civil society to truly thrive, we need to maximise the power of working together. Taking time to build partnerships of shared understanding, purpose and responsibility where power is distributed and diversity is valued is key to unleashing the full potential of people who are more excluded to participate in civil society. We need to champion true partnerships where no matter how big or small the organisations taking part are, they can both benefit from and contribute to the partnership. Government has a key role to play in breaking down these barriers.

- **We must build relationships across the sectors**

It is crucial that we work with local public sector institutions to fully implement social value commissioning, or to encourage public sector institutions to open up their facilities for the use of local community groups, or to loan equipment. Dialogue between central and local Government about how they can enable, empower and support local civil society organisations is critical. Businesses can play a useful role in these cross sector partnerships - sustainable models where there are mutual benefits work particularly well. This might include sharing resources, skills, facilities and time.

- **Consider income streams for civil society**

Small community organisations need support in growing their capacity to earn income - be it through grant income, corporate partnerships, or developing their social entrepreneurship - as well as breaking down barriers to applying for small grants. Core funding is increasingly difficult to secure and rental or maintenance costs are rising meaning less funding is available for salaries. Many people working in the sector are paid time and working for longer hours. Although in many areas funding is devolved to local authorities, this can actually be more problematic for small, hyperlocal organisations that are too small to access local authority funding.



**Our key recommendations for a stronger civil society are:**

**DCMS, Good Things Foundation, charities and the tech sector** should work in partnership to grow the understanding of the role of digital in driving impact across all social outcomes. This is not just about digital skills but also leadership. We should aim to deliver culture change, where digital is no longer a bolt-on but is understood and used as a core element of any public benefit delivery.

**DCMS, central Government, local Government and businesses** need to connect the power and the money with the voices that need to be heard, involving excluded people and hyperlocal organisations to co-design public services and public benefit solutions.

**DCMS** needs to understand that policy often undermines the efforts of civil society. Central Government rarely prioritises civil society when considering the key players who will help policy succeed. The Civil Society Strategy should commit DCMS to not just convening other Government Departments to ensure that core public benefit programmes succeed but also intervening where it is clear policies from other Departments are ignoring or negating the needs of civil society's efforts to deliver public benefit.

**DCMS and all partners** should develop a Partnership Charter that all organisations working in partnership can commit to. Government could further develop the face-to-face and digital systems and structures which enable hyperlocal civil society organisations to connect and tackle problems together, through network organisations like Good Things Foundation and others.

**Government, large funders, businesses and local authorities** should work together to ensure we have a funding environment that can support a strong civil society. Funding isn't always reaching the organisations, and the people, who really need it. Through a cross sector working group, government should work with large funders to ensure that funding actually reaches those who can use it for greatest benefit.

**Thank you to all of our partners who contributed to this response.**

To discuss further, please get in touch by emailing us on [hello@goodthingsfoundation.org](mailto:hello@goodthingsfoundation.org) or tweeting us [@goodthingsfdn](https://twitter.com/goodthingsfdn)