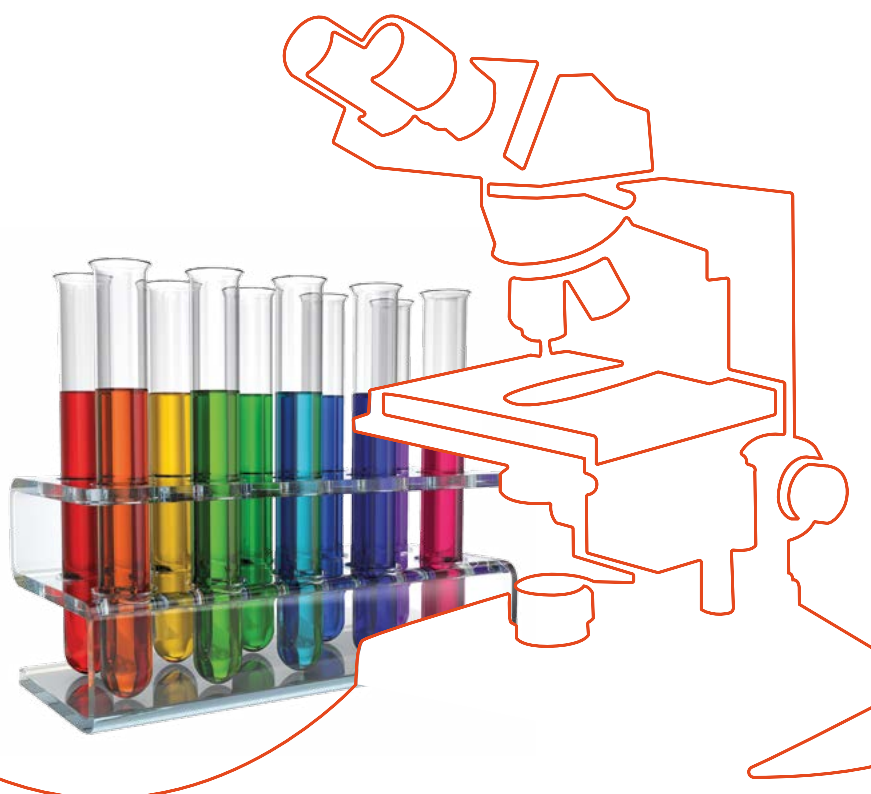


UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

Examining the future of charities in Britain

September 2015



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Foreword

Charities play a vital role in society. Millions of people in the UK rely on the support of charities each year, and their role in daily life continues to develop.

Whilst charities are independent, that does not mean that they exist in a vacuum. The external environment impacts directly upon charities, and changes in both political and public sentiment can have a significant impact on their ability to operate effectively.

The relationship between charities and government is complex and, at times, challenging. Despite this, government and charities share many aims, and there is vast potential to be explored for greater collaboration and partnership working. This depends on a more productive relationship between the two spheres, but also necessitates the retention of public support and trust in both.

This report contains a number of illuminating statistics exploring the attitudes towards charities held by MPs and voters. We pit party against party, and MPs against the public to learn more. We reveal different attitudes within each party, looking at the areas where MPs and their voters may agree or disagree. We also learn about the new intake of MPs, and how their attitudes and perceptions may influence the future of policy towards the sector.

Many of the messages are striking, but behind the numbers are a story. Even during times of difficulty for charities, support from the public and politicians remains strong. There are areas of disagreement on how charities should be supported by government, but that should not be mistaken for negativity. And there is significant optimism for the future, both with regards to the attitudes of the new intake of MPs, and also the vast support across all audiences for securing the engagement of new audiences in giving and volunteering.

All this leaves us with a better understanding of the political landscape, and of how the public want their elected representatives to support charities. The general positive tone of the findings will be reassuring to charities, but cannot lead to complacency. For politicians, differences with public opinion about the role of charities hint at the debates on the horizon. For the public, comes the reassurance that charities and politicians are committed to expanding the role that voluntary groups can play in providing support to those in need.

The need for a shared dialogue between charities and government becomes clear. This report serves as an assessment of the changing role of charities in society, giving charities and political parties insight into how their future is viewed by the public, and how they can develop in the years ahead. We hope that all audiences will heed the messages contained within, and that this report serves as a stimulus to the discussion about strengthening the role of charities further.



Dr John Low
Chief Executive
Charities Aid Foundation

Introduction

Last year, the Charities Aid Foundation (CAF) partnered with ACEVO¹ to launch a series of essay collections across party conference season. Each of these collections – the Red, Yellow and Blue Books of the Voluntary Sector² – helped to demonstrate the vast array of thinking within each party about the future of the voluntary sector, and the willingness of many politicians to work with charities to help them innovate. The reception that these collections received - from the public, politicians and charities - shows that there is great interest in what the policy environment holds in store for charities.

This report is the next step on the journey to improving the understanding between charities and political parties. It comes from a determination to learn about the attitudes held by politicians and voters towards charities, using the findings to learn about the challenges and opportunities ahead and to make sure that charities can continue to develop their relationships with both politicians and voters.³

In order to better understand the attitudes of MPs and the public towards charities we commissioned ComRes to conduct surveys of both audiences. We surveyed across the political spectrum and were able to look in detail at the attitudes of the Conservative and Labour MPs and voters. All participants across both audiences were asked the same questions, giving us data that we can accurately compare, and which helps to inform our awareness of the landscape for charities.

Segmenting the respondents in different ways, including by voting behaviour, allows us to understand the attitudes that different audiences hold towards charities, and what their priorities and preconceptions may mean for the future. We learn about changing perceptions of charities amongst MPs; of the challenges charities face in retaining public trust; the importance voters give to preserving the role of charities; the positive attitudes that MPs hold towards voluntary groups; the unanimous agreement on the need for charities to better engage with young people; the impact that minor parties have had on the political debate; and the need for continued dialogue between government and charities.

All of this aids our understanding of the role that charities play in society, in the minds of both politicians and voters, and what it means for this Parliament. We hope that you find it informative.

1 The Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations

2 These can be accessed at: <https://www.cafonline.org/docs/default-source/about-us-publications/acevo-caf-yellow-book-sept14.pdf> (Liberal Democrat), <https://www.cafonline.org/docs/default-source/about-us-publications/acevo-caf-red-book-sept14.pdf> (Labour), and <https://www.cafonline.org/docs/default-source/about-us-publications/acevo-caf-blue-book-sept14.pdf> (Conservative)

3 For our MP survey, ComRes interviewed 150 MPs online and by self-completion questionnaire between the 14th and 17th May 2015. Data were weighted to be representative of the House by Party, Region and Length of Service; our sample allows us to compare MPs from the two main political parties: Conservative and Labour. For the survey of the UK public, ComRes interviewed 2,071 UK adults online between the 12th and 14th June 2015. Data were weighted to be nationally representative of all UK adults aged 18+. ComRes is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.

Key Findings

The new intake of MPs are ambassadors for charities

The election saw significant upheaval in the House of Commons, and the first analysis of the views of the new intake shows that there is great support for charities. MPs elected in 2015 have views more closely aligned with the public than those from previous intakes, and also are more likely than returning MPs to share concerns that charities are not sufficiently on the political agenda. With this intake of MPs likely to set the political weather for the next generation, the time for charities to develop and solidify ties with the leaders of the future is now.

79%

of new MPs believe it is important for charities to highlight if they think policies will negatively affect people



Public trust in charities is under threat

The past year has seen the activities of charities under scrutiny. The death of Olive Cooke was strongly linked in the media to requests that she received for donations from charities, many fundraising practices have been placed under the microscope, and the recent demise of Kids Company has shown how relations between charities and government can go wrong. Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that public trust in 2015 is lower than that recorded by the Charity Commission in 2014, with 57 per cent of voters agreeing that charities are trustworthy and act in the public interest.⁴ Charities need to focus on rebuilding and restoring trust in their activities so that donors can be encouraged to continue to give generously.

Voters want their MPs to protect charities

Whilst there may be some scepticism about the actions of a minority of charities, there is still public support for the role that they play in society – and a demand that politicians protect their status. From voters, there is a call for politicians to ensure that charities who provide public services are not the focus of spending cuts, and there is greater support still for the retention of the advocacy role of charities – highlighting if they believe government policies will negatively affect people.

60%

of voters want to see charities who deliver public services protected from government spending cuts



MPs of all parties are positive about charities

MPs, in their role as community leaders and national politicians, have disproportionately high levels of engagement with charities. The positive nature of much of this interaction is reflected in their attitudes towards charities, where 86 per cent of MPs agree that charities create a more vibrant community life. Legislators are keen to highlight the positive contribution that charities make in communities and display higher levels of trust than those with lower levels of engagement. Whilst MPs rightly continue to scrutinise the actions of charities, it is important that bonds between charities and politicians remain strong.

⁴ In the Charity Commission's 2014 *Public Trust and Confidence in Charities* report (<https://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Publications/sri-charities-public-trust-and-confidence-in-charities-2014.pdf>), 71% agreed that 'most charities are trustworthy and act in the public interest'. 57% agreed with the same question asked in June 2015 in a ComRes survey.

Voters and MPs agree on the need to secure the future

Whilst there is significant policy disagreement between MPs and the public in a number of places, one area where there is agreement is the need to get more young people engaged in volunteering – a policy backed across the political spectrum. Young people who get involved in giving develop their own skills, whilst also providing charities with a network of supporters to power them in the future. Action in this area should continue to develop in the years ahead.

Action to encourage young people to volunteer is amongst the most popular policies for both MPs and voters



The smaller parties have left their mark

The resounding election result may have caught many people off-guard, but there is no doubt that the contribution of smaller parties in the election campaign has been imprinted upon the minds of voters. When asked about the policies that they would like to see the Government pursue to help charities without being informed of the party proposing each policy, it is those of UKIP and the Green Party that receive the highest levels of support from voters.

The need for dialogue between charities and government remains as strong as ever

The role that charities play in the UK continues to develop – and the policy debate reflects this. Whether it is discussion about the development of the social economy, action to get more young people engaged in volunteering and social action, or greater involvement for charities in providing public services, the need for charities and government to work together is clear for all to see. Whilst there will be disagreements, charities and politicians of all political colours share the aim of strengthening society. A healthy and honest relationship between the two sectors is vital to make this a reality.

The Political Climate

Election years provide a fascinating insight into the political world, and 2015 has been no different. Indeed, it was pleasing to see the needs of charities debated over the course of the election, with each of the major UK-wide parties putting forward different ideas to help develop our giving culture, and to further embed charities within our social fabric.

With the election result – a Conservative majority government – charities were able to immediately get a clearer picture of what the next Parliament might have in store for them, simply by reading the Conservative Party’s manifesto. Charities can therefore expect to see action to give employees in large companies and the public sector the opportunity to volunteer for three days a year, an expansion of the role of charities in delivering public services, and the maintenance of levels of international aid, with a focus on expanding some overseas programmes.

“Charities are key to life in Britain, especially small charities. It’s important that charities do not become overtly political.”

Conservative MP

The Minister for Civil Society (Rob Wilson MP) has spoken of his personal desire to increase volunteering, and as a result it is likely that the Cabinet Office will take action in pursuit of this goal. There is also a new intake of MPs for charities to engage with, and many already have significant experience working in or with voluntary organisations, which hopefully means strong advocates for the sector entering the House of Commons.

The composition of opposition politics has changed too. Labour, the official Opposition, look set to continue their internal debate about the future direction of the party. The Liberal Democrats, for so long the third party of British politics, have seen their position supplanted by that of the SNP, who also form the Government in Scotland. The continued strengthening in support for both UKIP and the Green Party is something that charities must also react to, and building strong bonds with those parties outside of government is essential to ensure that the sector retains support from across the political spectrum.

Inside Parliament, the Charities (Protection of and Social Investment) Bill continues to make its journey towards Royal Assent. The Bill includes provisions to clamp down on the abuse of charity, and seeks to help to rebuild trust in charities. It also aims to increase access to social investment, and a series of amendments proposed in the Lords, accompanied by high-profile interventions, have illustrated the increased presence of charities on the political landscape. The future of charities will come to the fore again when the Bill returns to Parliament.

“I think charities depend too much on public funding and are over political.”

Labour MP

The flames of controversy were stoked by a series of media stories over the summer, stemming from the tragic death of Olive Cooke, who was relentlessly contacted by fundraisers. Other concerning practices have emerged, and the National Council of Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) has been leading a review of fundraising regulation, which was due to report shortly before conference season began. Finally, the closure of the charity Kids Company has focused attention on the relationship between government and charities, as well as the importance of effective charity leadership and administration.

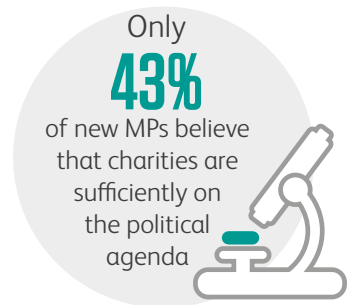
As a result, charities face a challenging media and political climate that, perhaps counter intuitively, also offers great potential for development through heightened awareness of charities issues and the presence of the charity sector on the political agenda. The inclusion of a section on the ‘Big Society’ in the Conservative Party’s manifesto suggests that the Prime Minister plans to redouble his commitment to this part of his political philosophy, and the Government’s policy plans offer charities the opportunity to work in collaboration with ministers to develop their role and impact further.

The political climate for charities alone does not dictate the future of the sector. It would be remiss to neglect the important role that the public play between elections in setting the political weather. For charities, an understanding of political priorities must be combined with a greater awareness of public concerns and attitudes. We will explore both in this report.

The Changing Face of Parliament

2015 saw significant turnover at the election, with 182 new MPs taking their seats in the House of Commons. Many of these will be the politicians whose attitudes and ideologies shape the ground of British politics for years to come, and having a thorough understanding of what these leaders of the future think is vital for charities. Their positive attitudes towards charities bode well for the future of the sector.

Members of the new intake have a view of the role of charities which is much more aligned with that of the public, and are more likely than returning MPs to want to see charity issues given greater priority in Parliament. Less than half (43%) of new MPs believe that charities are sufficiently on the political agenda in Britain today, compared to three quarters (75%) of returning MPs. New MPs are also more likely than returning MPs to agree that most politicians do not understand the important role that charities play (35% vs. 12%) in Britain today. Given this, it can be expected that members of the new intake will seek to push charity issues further up the political agenda.



Members of the 2015 intake are also much more likely to join the public in wanting to protect the advocacy role of charities. Four out of five new MPs (79%) believe that it is important for charities to highlight if they believe government policies will negatively affect people, compared to less than three in five returning MPs (57%). Newer MPs are directionally more positive than returning MPs across a range of statements, including wanting to see charities protected from spending cuts, however these differences are indicative, as opposed to statistically significant.

This does not mean that longer-serving MPs are less positive towards the sector. In fact, they are just as likely as new MPs to regard the sector as important (70% of returning MPs vs. 68% of new MPs), trustworthy (74% vs. 73%) and effective in delivering public services (66% vs. 65%). Many long-standing MPs have been passionate champions of charities throughout their years of public service, and have exciting and innovative ideas about how government can develop the role that charities play in serving the public.

The contrast between the 2015 intake and previous generations is stark in places, and reflects the shifting role of charities in society. Charities should welcome the opportunity to engage with the new intake, who are keen to give their issues an airing and protect their role in society. At a time when charities are fighting to retain public trust, it is extremely positive that the new generation of Parliamentarians are eager to fight for their future and stand up as ambassadors for the organisations that do so much good. The onus is on charity leaders to work closely with all MPs to demonstrate their importance and social contribution. This will help disseminate the positive attitudes held by MPs to the public at large.

Representative Democracy? Attitudes of MPs and Voters Towards Charity

MPs tend to be much more positive about the role of charities than the public as a whole. Just over two-thirds of MPs (69%) say that charities play an important role in today's Britain, compared to half (50 per cent) of the public.⁵

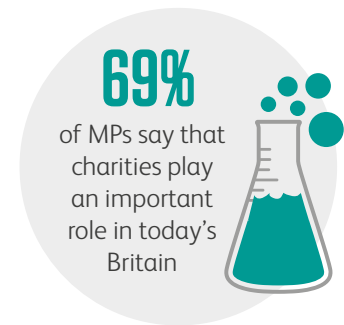
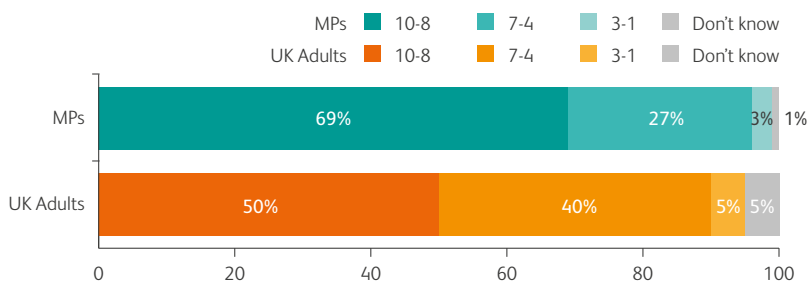


Figure 1 Overall, on a scale of 1-10 where 1 is not at all important and 10 is essential, how important or unimportant a role do you think charities play in British society today?



Base: MPs (n=150), UK adults (n=2,071)

Whilst only half (50%) of the public agree that charities help to create a more vibrant community life, the figure rises dramatically amongst MPs to 86 per cent. MPs are also more likely to trust charities, with 73 per cent agreeing that charities are “trustworthy and act in the public interest,” compared to 57 per cent of the public.

The issue of trust is interesting, and should be a source of concern for all those who serve charities. The survey of voters took place shortly after the death of Olive Cooke, whose tragic suicide was

“Most charities play an important role in raising awareness of issues, helping resolve those issues and creating a sense of community.”

Conservative MP

accompanied by negative media attention about the fundraising activities of some charities. In addition, working practices of fundraisers elsewhere have come under scrutiny, and the story of Kids Company being forced to close has dominated the news agenda over the summer of 2015.

As might be expected as a result of this landscape, levels of trust in charities have fallen, from 71 per cent in 2014 to 57 per cent in 2015.⁶ Whilst this means that trust in charities remains strong, particularly when compared to other professions, it should be of great concern to charity leaders that trust is falling.⁷ The onus is on charities to investigate how they can restore levels of public trust. Recent months should ensure that complacency is not an issue, but charities must continue to undertake comprehensive evaluations of their working practices to ensure that they are acting in a way that will encourage public support.

⁵ Important' is classified as giving a rating between 8-10 out of 10, where 10 is 'essential' and 1 is 'not at all important.'

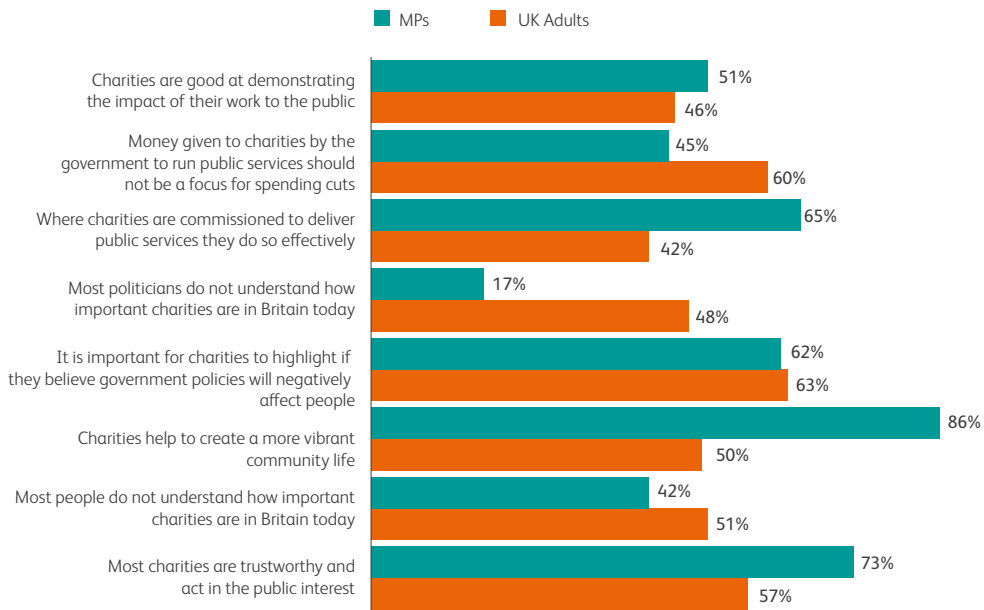
⁶ In the Charity Commission's 2014 *Public Trust and Confidence in Charities* report (<https://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Publications/sri-charities-public-trust-and-confidence-in-charities-2014.pdf>), 71% agreed that 'most charities are trustworthy and act in the public interest'. 57% agreed with the same question asked in June 2015 in a ComRes survey.

⁷ By comparison, research carried out in found that only 16% of Britons trust politicians to tell the truth, compared to 22% trusting journalists and estate agents, and 31% trusting bankers - <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3504/Politicians-trusted-less-than-estate-agents-bankers-and-journalists.aspx>

⁸ CAF's 2014 *Charity Street* survey found that 73% of those who reported having used a charity in the last 12 months rated their importance as 8-10, compared to 48% of those who had not. The Charity Commission's 2014 *Public Trust and Confidence in Charities* report also notes that people with more knowledge and experience of the sector report higher overall trust scores and vice versa.

There is a possible explanation for why MPs are more positive than the public about charities. Research elsewhere has shown that those who regularly use charitable services are more likely to trust them, and a similar phenomenon may be exhibited here.⁸ MPs, both in national politics and in their role as a constituency MP, are likely to have higher levels of engagement, and it is possible that this experience manifests itself in more positive attitudes towards charities. It is hoped that MPs can use their positive experience with charities to help increase public trust.

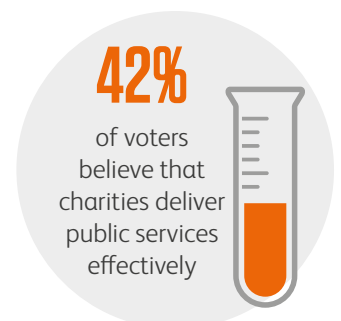
Figure 2 To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? (% agree)



Base: MPs (n=150), UK adults (n=2,071)

Interestingly, both MPs (51%) and the public (46%) are more likely to believe that charities are good at demonstrating their impact than charity workers themselves (only 23 per cent).⁹ Charities may believe that they can do a better job of communicating their successes, which could in turn boost their impact amongst MPs and the public.

Policy differences also come to the fore. The public are more cautious about the effectiveness of charities delivering public services than MPs (42% of the public agree that charities deliver public services effectively, compared with 65% of MPs). Of the policies proposed for charities at the last election, members of the public see the implementation of policies such as removing local authority fees for foodbanks and charities disposing of unwanted goods (36%), encouraging young people to volunteer and take part in social action (31%), and changing the rules so that a private school can no longer be a registered charity (30%), as priorities.



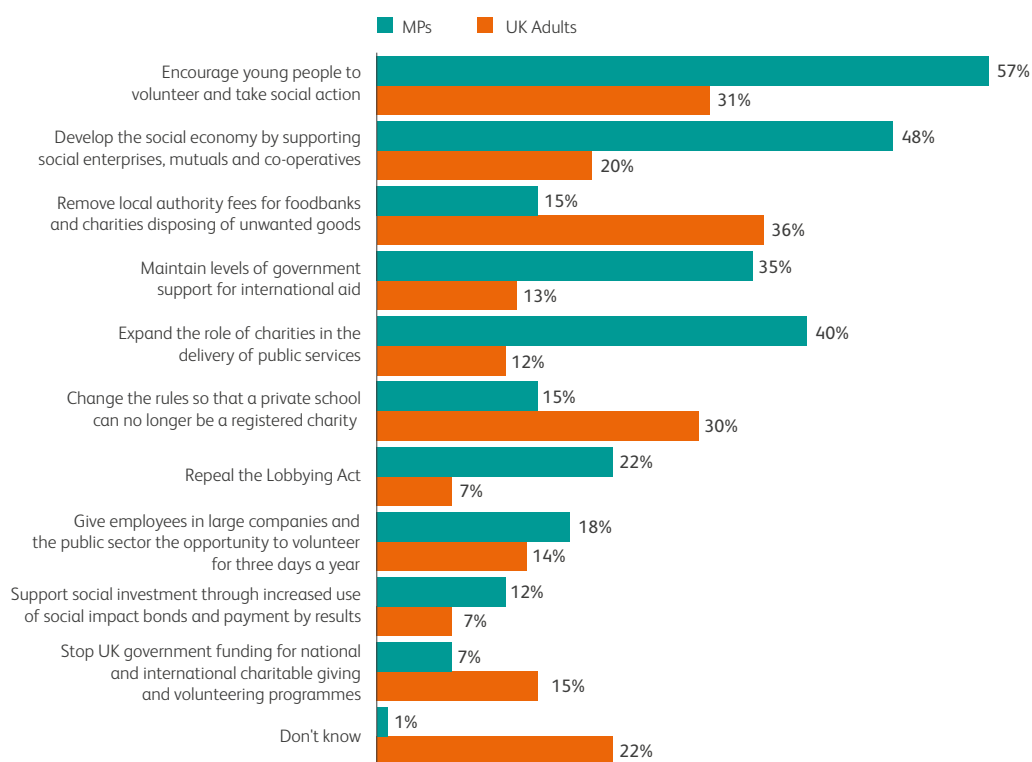
9 CAF (2015) Social Landscape. Available: <https://www.cafonline.org/docs/default-source/about-us-publications/caf-social-landscape-report-2015>
 10 For more information, please visit <https://www.growinggiving.org.uk>

“Charities provide invaluable support to the most vulnerable people in society and they need all the support they can get.”

Labour MP

Both MPs (57%) and the public (31%) agree on the need to encourage young people to volunteer and take social action. CAF’s Growing Giving¹⁰ campaign has helped to develop activity in this field, and it is pleasing to see that cross-party support for this aim remains, as does support from the wider public. With the success of other projects such as National Citizen Service and Step Up To Serve, it is hoped that this will remain firmly on the Minister for Civil Society’s agenda.

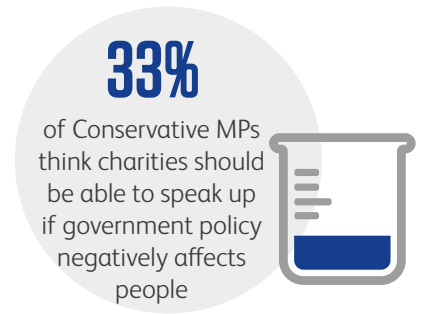
Figure 3 Which of the policies relating to charities and the voluntary sector outlined below do you think are most important for the new UK government to implement?



Base: MPs (n=150), UK adults (n=2,071)

True Blue? Conservative MPs and Conservative Voters

The difference in attitudes between Conservative MPs and those who report voting Conservative at the last General Election is quite striking, particularly with regards to the ability of charities to act as advocates for their beneficiaries. 60 per cent of Conservative voters agree that it is “important for charities to highlight if they believe government policy will negatively affect people,” a figure that drops to just 33 per cent for Conservative MPs.



“Crucial role, often providing a level of compassion, a care public services couldn’t begin to match.”

Conservative MP

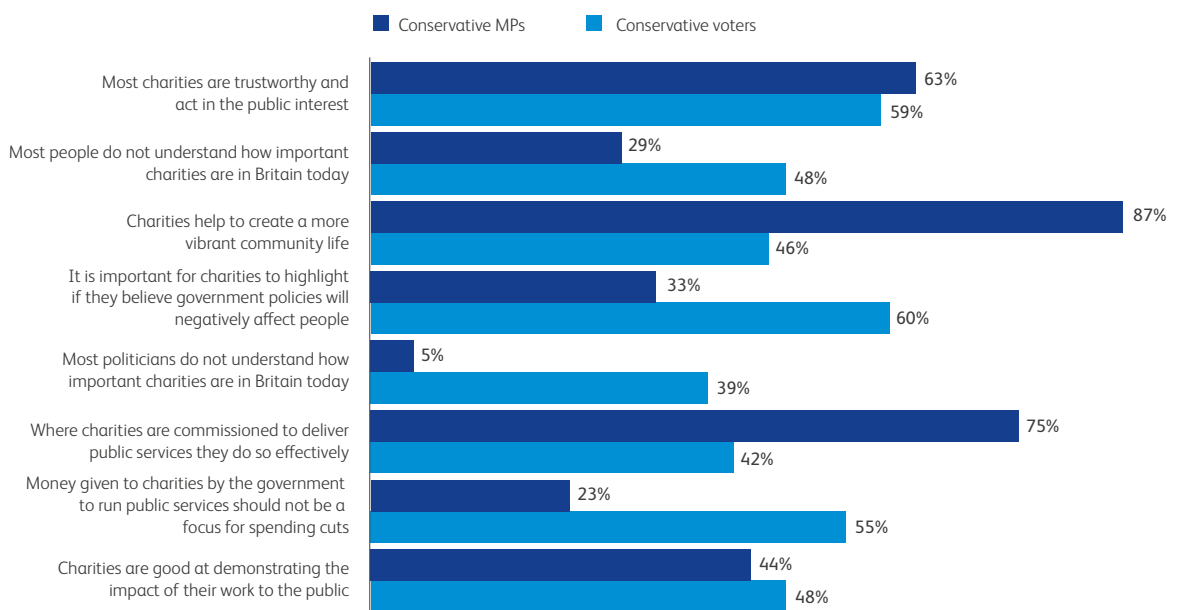
Conservative voters also want to see charities protected from spending cuts. 55 per cent of Conservative voters agree that the money charities receive from government to run public services “should not be a focus for spending cuts,” compared to just 23 per cent of Conservative MPs. Conservative voters are much more likely (48%) than Conservative MPs (29%) to think that people in Britain “do not understand how important charities are.” Where there is agreement between Conservative MPs and voters is on the issue of trust. Sixty-three per cent of Conservative MPs agree that most charities are trustworthy and act in the public interest, as do 59 per cent of Conservative voters.

“Too much duplication of effort.”

Conservative MP

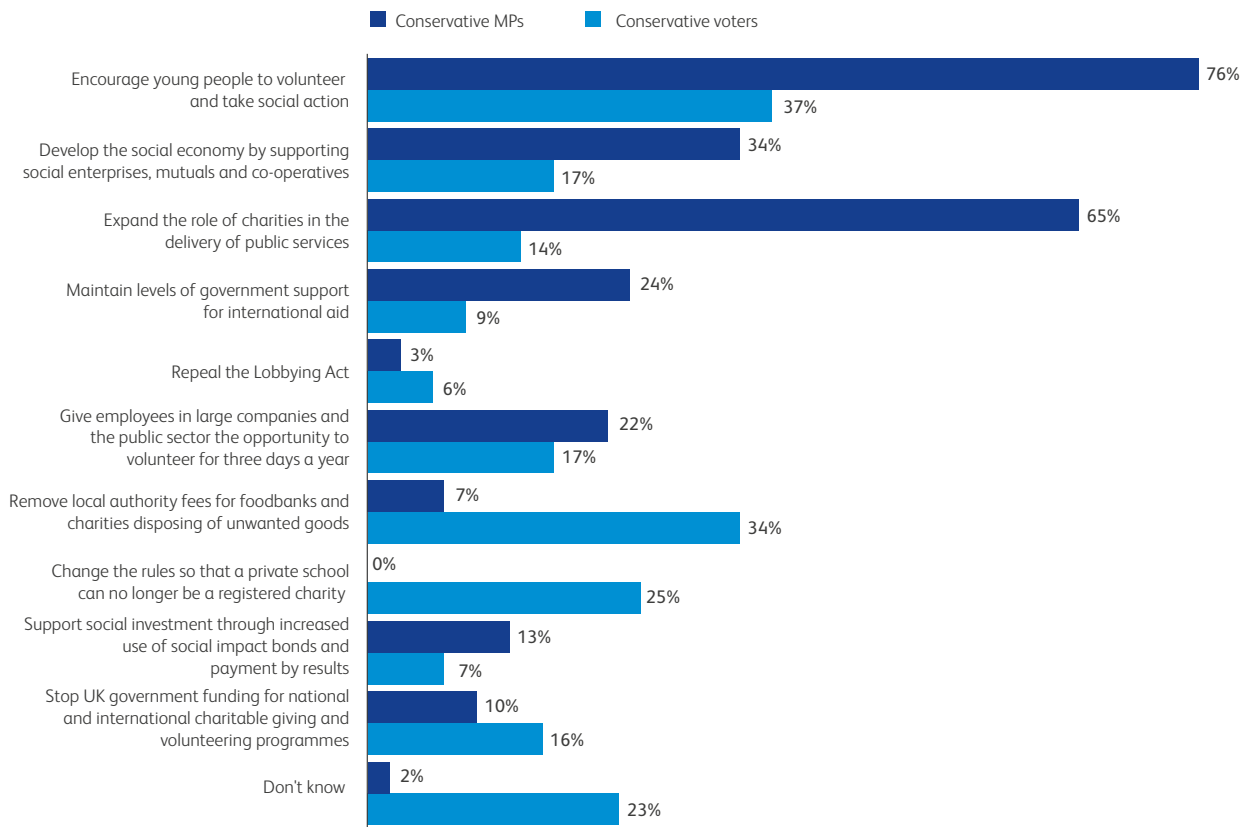
Turning to the policies proposed at the 2015 election, it is not surprising to see Conservative MPs wanting to prioritise the policies included in the Conservative Party’s manifesto as their focus for the future. Conservative MPs would prioritise encouraging young people to volunteer and take social action (76%), expanding the role of charities in the delivery of public services (65%), and developing the social economy by supporting social enterprises, mutuals and co-operatives (34%). One thing that does stand out here though, is that only 22 per cent of Conservative MPs singled out the proposal to give employees three days a year of leave to volunteer – a flagship policy at the election – as a policy priority of theirs.

Figure 4 To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? (% agree)



Base: Conservative MPs (n=59), Conservative voters (n=577)

Figure 5 Which of the policies relating to charities and the voluntary sector outlined below do you think are most important for the new UK government to implement?



Base: Conservative MPs (n=59), Conservative voters (n=577)

“Most are a positive force for change.”

Conservative MP

“Most do their work very well; some pursue an unacceptable political agenda.”

Conservative MP

Priorities for Conservative voters are significantly different, and mirror the attitudes held by the wider voting public more closely. Conservative voters agree with Conservative MPs that action to get more young people engaged in volunteering and social action is important (37%) but are much more likely than MPs to prioritise other measures, including removing local authority fees for foodbanks and charities disposing of unwanted goods (34%, compared to 7% of Conservative MPs) and changing the rules so that a private school can no longer be a registered charity (25%, compared to 0% of Conservative MPs). It is interesting to note that, although the policies were not presented alongside their party of origin, the latter two suggestions are policies proposed at the election by UKIP and the Green Party respectively.

55%
of Conservative voters want to see charities who deliver public services protected from government spending cuts

89%
of Conservative MPs believe that charities are sufficiently on the political agenda

Seeing Red? Labour MPs and Labour Voters

Labour MPs and those who report voting for the party at the last General Election also have a number of interesting differences in opinion and priority. Labour MPs (85%) are more likely to believe that charities are trustworthy and act in the public interest than Labour voters (65%), and Labour MPs are also much more likely to believe that charities are sufficiently on the political agenda (52% vs. 26%).

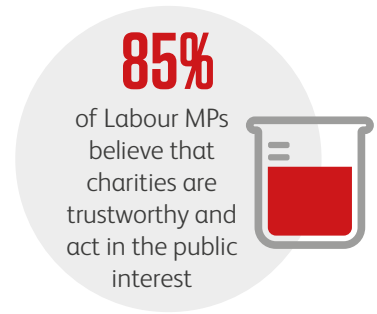
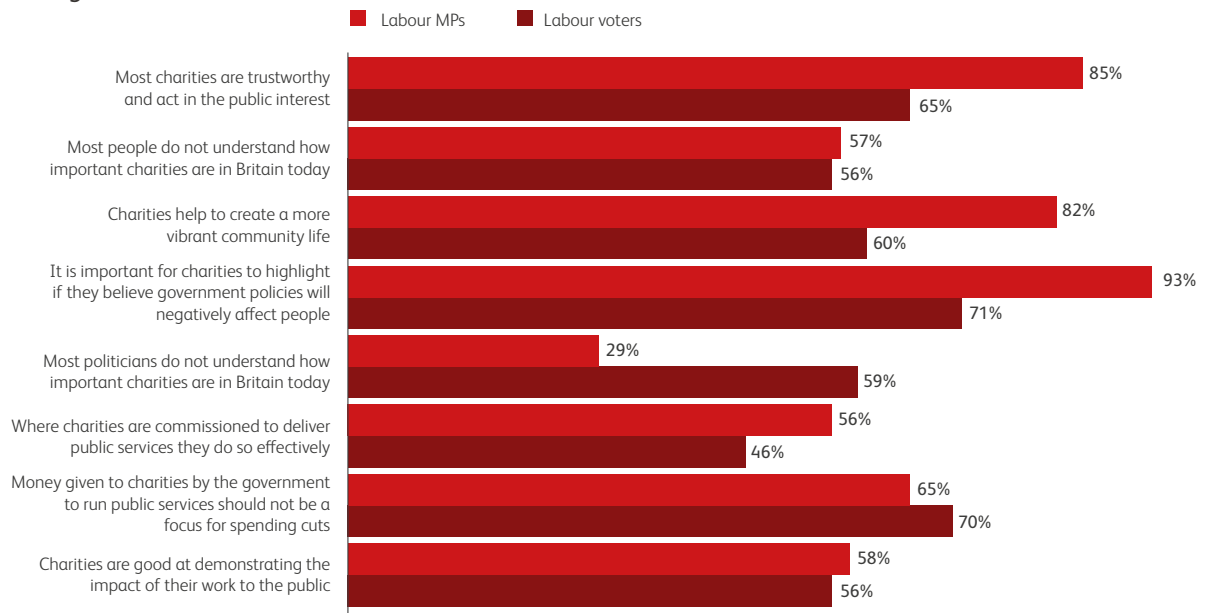


Figure 6 To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? (% agree)



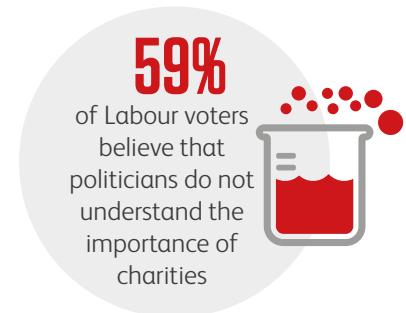
Base: Labour MPs (n=66), Labour voters (n=594)

“Vital to local communities and supporting international development.”

Labour MP

Labour MPs and voters agree that most people do not understand how important charities are in Britain today (56% of Labour voters, 57% of Labour MPs), although Labour voters (59%) are more likely than MPs (29%) to agree that politicians do not understand the importance of charities.

Both Labour MPs (93%) and Labour voters (71%) believe that there is an important role for charities in highlighting if they believe that government policies will negatively affect people. There is also enthusiasm for protecting charities from spending cuts, with 65 per cent of Labour MPs and 70 per cent of Labour voters agreeing that the money given to charities by the government to run public services should not be a focus for spending cuts.

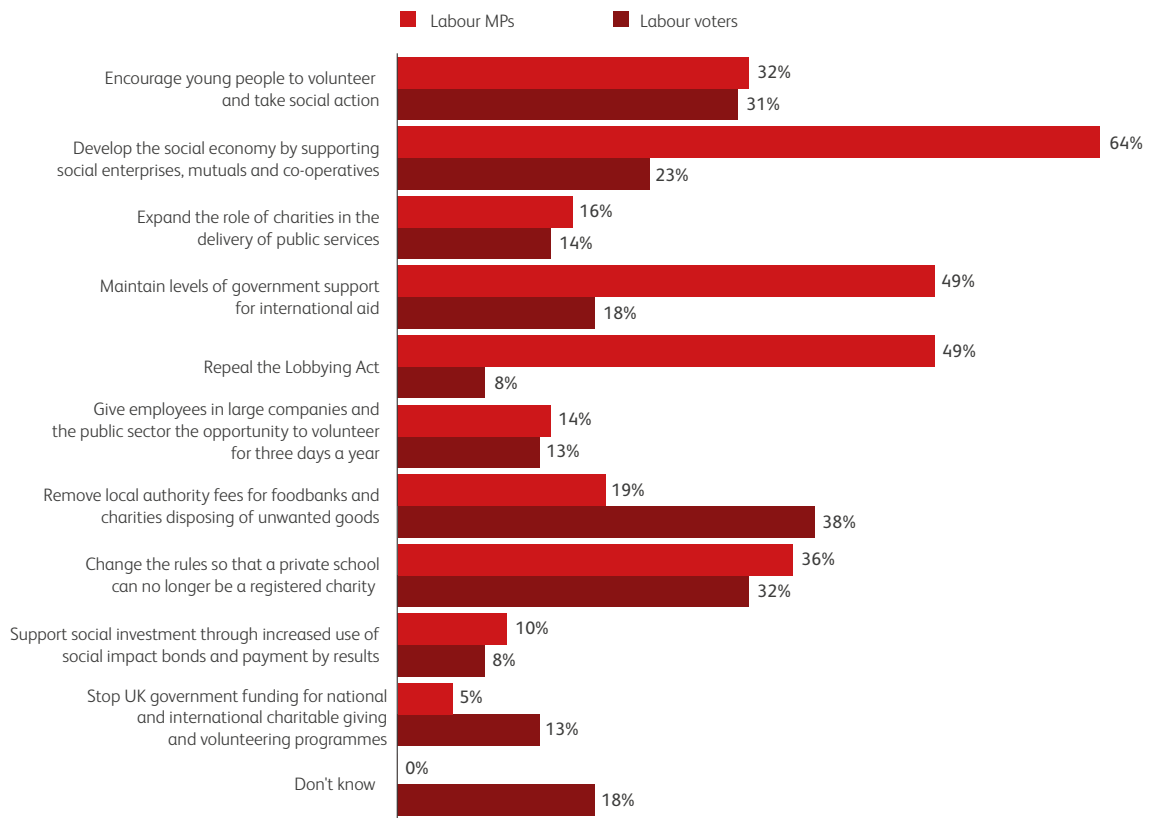


“Necessary in a ‘small state’ society.”

Labour MP

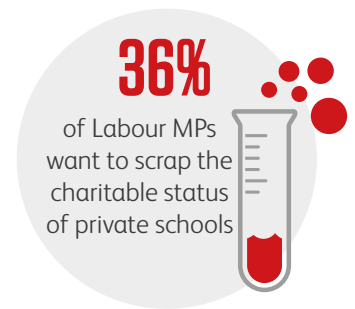
The policy priorities of Labour MPs reflect their manifesto priorities, with action to develop the social economy (64%), repealing the Lobbying Act (49%) and maintaining levels of government support for international aid (49%) receiving significant levels of support. Given Labour’s stance on the Lobbying Act and their vociferous commitment to repealing it if elected, it is perhaps surprising that only half (49%) of Labour MPs chose this as a policy area that they would prioritise.

Figure 7 Which of the policies relating to charities and the voluntary sector outlined below do you think are most important for the new UK government to implement?



Base: Labour MPs (n=66), Labour voters (n=594)

For Labour voters, there is less adherence to the manifesto, as might be expected. Labour voters would like to see the Government prioritise removing local authority fees for foodbanks and charities disposing of unwanted goods (38%), changing the rules to stop private schools being registered as charities (32%), and encouraging young people to get involved in volunteering and social action (31%). Again it is the individual policies of the Green Party and UKIP for the sector that are particularly well supported, although as has been noted previously these were presented independent of their party of origin.



“Central to a healthy civic society – a partner to the state sector, different but complementary; at best, able to harness effort and resources from the private sector.”

Labour MP

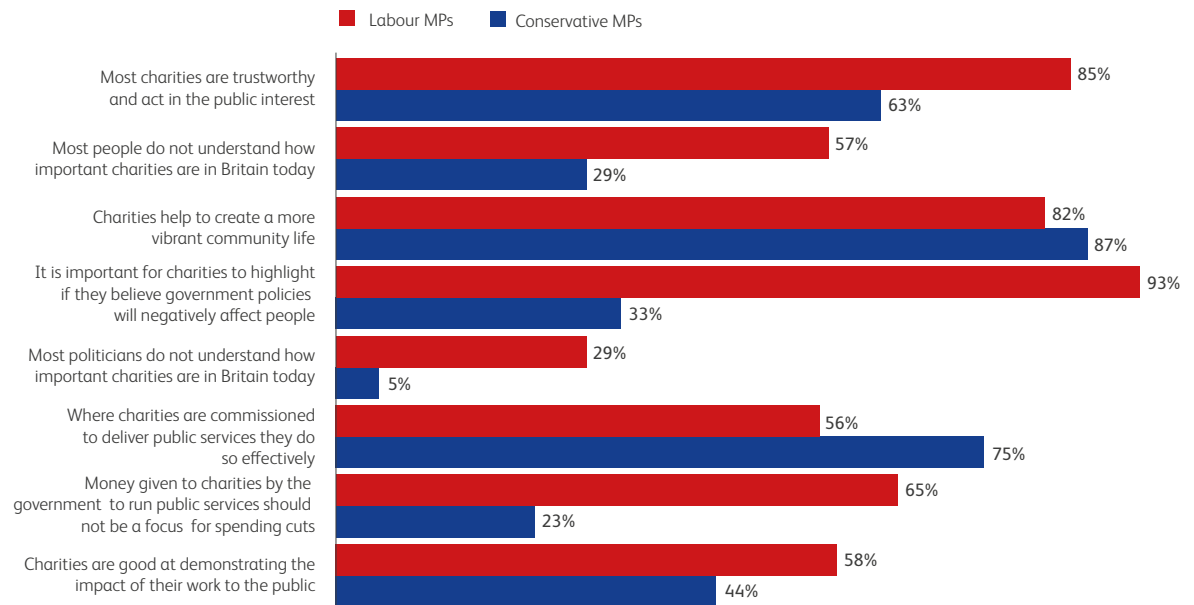
“Very positive, but often fail to get across the extent of their work.”

Labour MP

A Sword-Length Apart? Attitudes of MPs

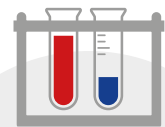
As might be expected, there are a number of differences in the attitudes held by Conservative and Labour MPs, and some of these hint at the wider philosophical divides between the two parties and how each party's MPs see the role of charities in modern Britain.

Figure 8 To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? (% agree)



Base: Labour MPs (n=66), Conservative MPs (n=59)

Conservative MPs are more positive about the role of charities in delivering public services, with 75 per cent of Conservative MPs agreeing that charities provide public services effectively, compared to 56 per cent of Labour MPs. Given that, it perhaps is not surprising that 65 per cent of Conservative MPs see expanding the role of charities in the delivery of public services as a priority, with only 16 per cent of Labour MPs agreeing. Despite this, it is Labour MPs rather than Conservative MPs that are more likely to want to see the Government protecting charities that deliver public services from spending cuts.



93% of Labour MPs think it is important for charities to highlight if they believe government policy will negatively affect people, compared to 33% of Conservative MPs

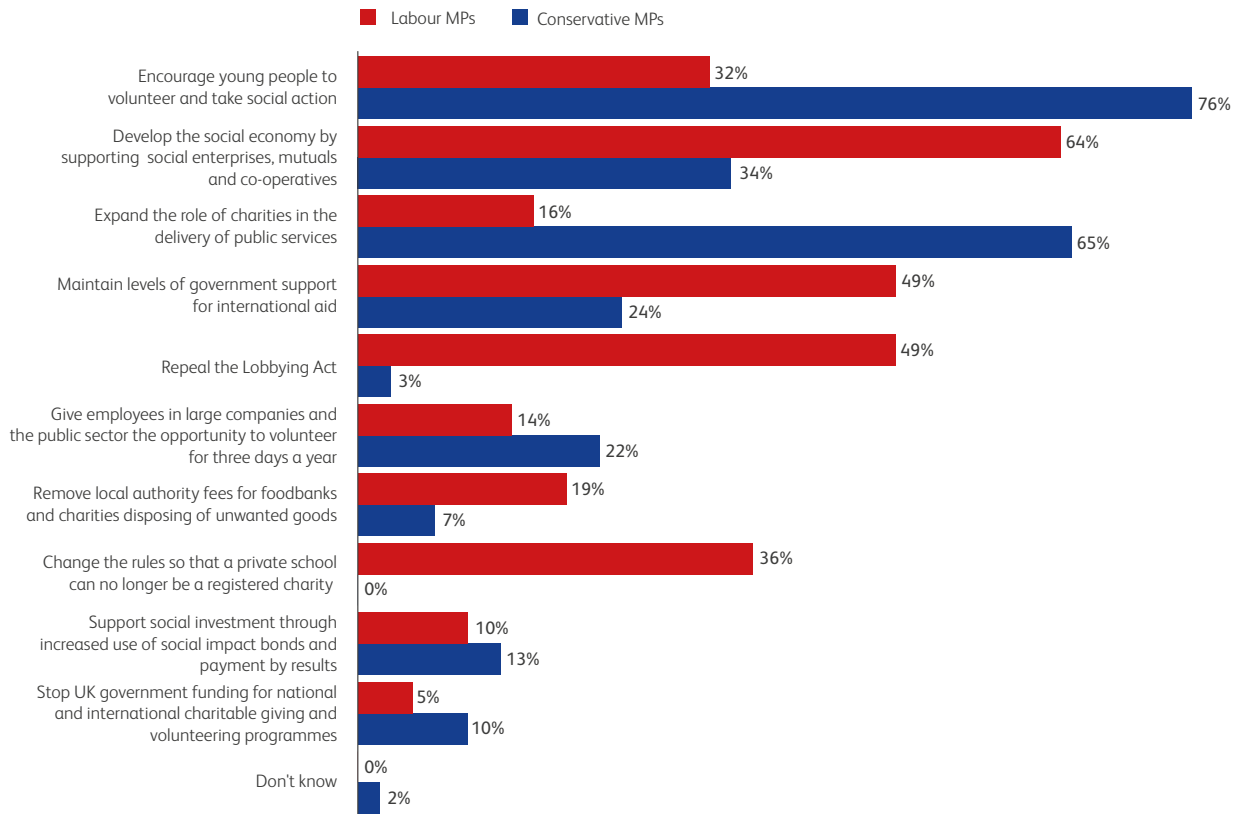
“They are an essential part of a mixed economy in the provision of public services and the Government needs to think smarter in the way we use them if we are to keep up with demand.”

Conservative MP

Conservative MPs are also more likely to believe that both MPs and the public understand how important charities are in Britain today. Whilst only 29 per cent of Conservative MPs believe that most people do not understand how important charities are, this figure rises to 57 per cent amongst Labour MPs. Similarly, although 29 per cent of Labour MPs agree that most politicians do not understand how important charities are, only 5 per cent of Conservative MPs agree. Whilst 89 per cent of Conservative MPs believe that charities are sufficiently on the political agenda, only 52 per cent of Labour MPs agree. Despite assuming that both people and politicians have less of an understanding of the importance of charities, Labour MPs (85%) are more likely than Conservative MPs (63%) to agree that most charities are trustworthy and act in the public interest.

11 In a report published by nfpSynergy in January 2014, more than three-quarters of Conservative MPs said that it was a negative trait for charities to “be political” – nfpSynergy (2014), *The Politics of Charities* – Available: <http://nfpSynergy.net/politicscharities>

Figure 9 Which of the policies relating to charities and the voluntary sector outlined below do you think are most important for the new UK government to implement?



Base: Labour MPs (n=66), Conservative MPs (n=59)

Labour MPs are significantly more likely to see a role for charities in highlighting if they believe government policies will negatively affect people. Whilst 93 per cent of Labour MPs believe that this is an important function for charities, only a third (33%) of Conservative MPs agree. In a similar vein, 49 per cent of Labour MPs would prioritise the repealing of the Lobbying Act, compared to just 3 per cent of Conservative MPs. This may be a reflection on the fact that the Conservative Party are currently in government, and some Conservative MPs have also previously voiced concern about charities being overly political.¹¹

“They are a vital part of our lives but tend to get in complications when they become quasi commercial bodies acting as agents of government.”

Labour MP

When asked about the challenges facing the sector, Conservative MPs highlight generating more income or achieving financial sustainability (55%), and securing and maintaining volunteer engagement (47%). For Labour MPs, the challenges are instead reductions in government funding (53%), and meeting demand for services (45%).

Turning briefly to the policies from the smaller parties receiving widespread support, 36 per cent of Labour MPs would prioritise the Green Party’s policy of scrapping the charitable status of private schools, compared to no Conservative MPs surveyed. Although only one in five consider it a priority, Labour MPs are also more likely than Conservative MPs to back UKIP’s policy of removing local authority fees for foodbanks and charities disposing of unwanted goods (19%), with only 7 per cent of Conservative MPs agreeing.

11 In a report published by nfpSynergy in January 2014, more than three-quarters of Conservative MPs said that it was a negative trait for charities to “be political” – nfpSynergy (2014), *The Politics of Charities* – Available: <http://nfpSynergy.net/politicscharities>

Expanding the Picture

There are a number of additional findings that help to inform our understanding of attitudes towards charities in the UK. When asked for an unprompted view on how they would sum up their opinion of charities, women (50%) are notably more positive about charities than men (44%), which echoes findings from research elsewhere that has shown that women are more likely to give in support of good causes.

“I would like to see charities play a significant role in shaping public policy. Charities have experience helping people who need it. Government can learn from our best and most effective charities.”

Liberal Democrat MP¹³

“Play a very positive role, but some are too large and cumbersome.”

SNP MP

“Have a positive impact on society and political debate.”

SNP MP

Generational attitudes are also revealing. Older people (65+) are more likely (53%) to be positive about charity than those aged 18-34 (43%). In addition, whilst one in four (23%) 18-24 year-olds say that they do not know the most pressing challenges facing charities, this figure drops to just 9 per cent amongst those aged 65+. Given this, it is particularly important that action is taken to engage young people in giving, a priority that secures support from both voters and MPs from across the political spectrum.

Liberal Democrat, SNP and Green voters hold broadly similar beliefs to those held by Labour and are more likely than those who report voting Conservative (47%) or UKIP (36%) to say that charities play an important role in society today. They are also all more likely than the Conservatives and UKIP to agree that charities should highlight the negative impact of government policies. At the other end of the spectrum, UKIP voters are the least likely (37%) to say that charities play an important role in society, and also the least likely (46%) to agree that charities are trustworthy. UKIP supporters are twice as likely as the overall public to disagree that charities should be protected from spending cuts, and they are also the least likely to agree (54%) that charities should highlight if government policies are negatively affecting people.

¹² CAF (2015) *UK Giving 2014* Available: <https://www.cafonline.org/docs/default-source/about-us-publications/caf-ukgiving2014>

¹³ Whilst all other verbatim comments from MP come from the survey conducted with ComRes, this comes directly from interaction between CAF and a Liberal Democrat MP

Re-assessing the climate

“Most charities are great and do a good job. There is however too much duplication and unnecessary competition between leading charities which wastes resources.”

Conservative MP

“I believe they are a poor substitute for properly funded public services.”

Labour MP

The differences between MPs and the public, MPs of different parties, MPs and voters who affiliate with the same party, and the findings detailed throughout our data give a flavour of the ways that different audiences view charities.

Firstly, division between Conservative and Labour MPs in itself is perhaps not surprising, but some of the areas where they disagree may be. Labour MPs may see their role as standing up for charities, seeking to protect them from spending cuts and ensuring that they can continue to speak out on issues. Whilst Conservative MPs are also positive about the role of charities, it is manifested differently; they see the involvement of charities in public services as a priority, wanting them to do more to use their expertise to help people in this way.

Whilst Conservative MPs are extremely positive about the role of charities in delivering public services, that does not extend to a desire to protecting them from funding cuts. The picture becomes murkier still, with members of the public significantly less likely to be positive about the involvement of charities in public services, but adamant that they should be protected from spending cuts. Given the Conservative Party's priorities, it is expected that charities and public service provision will be a focus for both policy making and political debate in the next few years, and these findings are informative. Where MPs unite is in their positive viewpoint of charities which, as has been discussed elsewhere, is likely to be down to their heightened experience of charities. Given the strong community role of MPs, charities can hope that MPs continued engagement with them will result in their MP continuing to be an advocate on behalf of the sector.

“There are far too many charities all effectively trying to do the same thing.”

Conservative MP

“Becoming more necessary due to government cuts.”

Labour MP

Members of the public want to see charities as advocates too, highlighting where government policy may have adverse effects on people. Recent months have seen many countries across the world implement policies making it more difficult for civil society organisations to engage in advocacy. This is a worrying, regressive trend that the UK should not follow, and it is clear that members of the public want to see charities free to provide a voice to those who need defending.

Levels of trust in charities remain comparatively strong but with room for improvement, particularly in light of a recent fall. Recent months have seen a number of stories that could damage trust in the charity sector, and it is vital that charities reflect on their practices and make sure that they are acting in a way that means they retain the support of the public, essential for the future of the voluntary sector.

The policy priorities of MPs and the public are also illuminating. Broad support for youth participation is welcome, and action to encourage new audiences to get involved with charities will benefit both donor and recipient. However, the public support for policies proposed by the Green Party and UKIP may come as a shock to MPs from the larger parties, and shows that there is an appetite for new ideas amongst voters.

Part of the problem for political parties comes from the challenge of communicating their policy priorities more effectively. Even after manifestos were published at the recent election, only 5 per cent of charity workers agreed that political parties were communicating their policies for the voluntary sector effectively.¹⁴ It perhaps is not surprisingly that the Conservative Party – the only party who dedicated a section in their manifesto to the voluntary sector – were seen by charity workers as the most effective in getting their messages across.

14 CAF (2015) Post-Manifesto Sector Survey <http://givingthought.org/2015/05/06/understanding-manifestos-what-do-charity-workers-think-about-plans-for-the-future-of-the-sector/>

Conclusion

This report provides a fascinating insight into the way that both MPs and the public perceive charities.

A number of themes stand out. Trust in charities is under threat, and action needs to be taken to rebuild those bonds with the public. However, there remains great support for charities from both the public and MPs, and both audiences want to see action taken to further develop the role that charities play in society. Even though there is a consensus that many people do not understand the importance of charities, this offers an opportunity for organisations to further demonstrate their impact and build up awareness of their work in the years ahead.

The public also are staunch defenders of the remit of charities. Their role in standing up for those negatively affected by government policy is supported by voters, who also want to make sure that charities that provide public services are not seen as a focus for spending cuts. These are messages that we would urge the Government to take on board.

The attitudes of the new intake of MPs bode well for the future. Even though many longer-serving MPs already do a great deal to support charities, the enthusiasm and support from the new intake for protecting the role of charities and placing them onto the political agenda is a welcome message for charities to hear.

Whilst differences between parties are expected, areas of mutual support are welcome. It is particularly pleasing to see politicians and the public unite in support for getting more young people engaged in volunteering and social action. This is a vital step in securing the future of charitable giving, and we look forward to seeing action in this area.

The recurring message that comes out from the data in this report is that support for charities remains strong. Even though voters and MPs see their enthusiasm manifested in different ways – and plans for the future differ – all audiences have attitudes and concerns that are directly linked to their determination to preserve and expand the role of charities in society. A better understanding of these attitudes can help to inform the sector, and shape the relationship it has with both politicians and the public in the years ahead.

Recent years have been challenging for charities – as for both the private and public sectors. Many have had to deal with a reduction in funding, at the same time as seeing an increase in demand for their services. Charities are innovative and able to respond to the challenges that they are posed, but many face a testing future. A strong relationship with government and a positive climate for charities can help.

Charities must, of course, retain their independence from government, but that does not mean that a mutually beneficial relationship cannot develop. Charities and the Government should work hand-in-hand in partnership to build a stronger society, helping to provide support to people and using the expertise that charities offer to make a difference. This will, in turn, help charities continue to retain the support from the public.

CAF has consistently called for politicians and government to engage constructively with the sector. We reiterate that message now. We all benefit from a thriving civil society, but it does not exist in a vacuum. We need the support of policy makers to create an environment that lets the commitment and creativity of charities to flourish. That message is backed by the voters, who have made it clear that they want to see charities protected. The public have spoken; now is the time for charities and MPs to act.

About CAF

Charities Aid Foundation (CAF) is a leading international charity registered in the United Kingdom, with nine offices covering six continents. Our mission is to motivate society to give ever more effectively and help transform lives and communities around the world. We do this by working globally to increase the flow of funds to the charity and non-profit sectors through the provision of philanthropy advice and services.



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