

**Brexit  
Civil Society  
Alliance.**

# **SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY**

**THE CASE FOR  
EMBRACING CIVIL  
SOCIETY'S ROLE IN  
DEMOCRACY**

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**January 2021**

# ABOUT THE BREXIT CIVIL SOCIETY ALLIANCE

The Brexit Civil Society Alliance is made up of over 80 organisations from across the UK and includes voices from health, human rights, the environment, consumer and workers' rights, equality, food, farming and trade.

The Brexit Civil Society Alliance work has been guided by a broad set of principles which are:

- ▣ **Open and accountable lawmaking:** Legislating for Brexit must respect the democratic processes, including the devolved nature of the UK constitution. There must be clear limits and safeguards on executive power. There must be robust parliamentary scrutiny at all levels with appropriate levels of transparency and debate.
- ▣ **A high standards UK, with rights, standards and funding to underpin them maintained:** Leaving the EU should not mean weaker standards, fewer rights or loss of funding. A UK framework for common standards must be mutually agreed between the four administrations to enable cross-border working and internal common market.
- ▣ **Leaving the EU should not create a governance gap:** EU institutions have a role in monitoring, oversight and ensuring compliance with the law as well as setting regulations. Where governance arrangements are changed as a result of leaving the EU, there must be clear powers and procedures for ensuring the law is properly implemented and enforced on an ongoing basis.

The Alliance's work is made possible by the generous support of the Legal Education Foundation and the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. We are hosted by Unlock Democracy.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank everyone who contributed their experiences, views and expertise, including Jane Thomas, Liz Shannon, Tim Hughes, Anna Nicholl, Allison Roche, Mihai Cali Bica, Nathalie Sherring, Mhairi Snowden, Charles Whitmore, Liam Evans, Kevin Hanratty, Geoff Nuttall, Hayley Morgan and Kristiana Wrixon.

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# Contents

<b>Foreword</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Civil society organisations and democracy: in theory and practice</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Barriers faced by civil society organisations</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Chapter 3: What's been done? Lessons learned</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Chapter 4: Recommendations</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Appendix 1</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>Appendix 2</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>61</b>

# Foreword

## **The 2016 referendum result confirming that the UK would be leaving the European Union was always going to pose significant constitutional, economic and social challenges.**

Following the 2016 referendum, a number of funding organisations and donors got together to discuss the impacts of Brexit on civil society organisations - many of whom they funded.

As a result, it was agreed to fund a small organisation, Unlock Democracy, to act as a coordinator and facilitator to make sure that civil society voices were heard during the lengthy process of leaving the EU. In particular, it was agreed that the focus of the Brexit Civil Society Alliance, originally the Repeal Bill Alliance, would be to advocate for the maintenance of rights and standards in Brexit legislation, open and accountable lawmaking, and clear governance arrangements to be in place after Brexit.

Since then, the Alliance grew to a network of over 80 civil society organisations. It has included organisations working on human rights, environment, consumer and workers' rights, equality, food, farming, trade and education, all working together to protect fundamental rights and the devolution settlements, and promote transparent law-making in the Brexit process.

A key element of the Alliance's work was to join up civil society organisations with common causes, working in the constituent parts of the UK - the nations and regions - in a collaborative way. At the heart of the Alliance's focus has been inclusion and a wish to protect and nurture the very special elements of the United Kingdom - from Belfast to Bangor, Braemar to Brighton. It was vital to make sure that those parts of the UK that feel most geographically removed from decision-making felt their views were being heard in Westminster.

The Alliance hosted roundtables with local civil society groups across the UK which enabled us to hear the authentic voices of the nations and regions and capture their concerns. While each place faces unique challenges in their local communities - first with the uncertainty of how Brexit would take shape, and now with the added challenges of the Coronavirus pandemic - a common theme that arose from those conversations was how far removed local civil society organisations feel from the decision-making process. A sentiment echoed from local civil society organisations - from Cornwall to Newcastle to Cumbria - was that Brexit was something that was happening 'over there' (i.e. in London).

Despite Brexit having a significant impact on the areas that many civil society organisations work in and represent - from the environment to food and farming to fundamental rights - civil society has been repeatedly left out of the Brexit process. Taking back control has, in effect, just meant control being taken by the centre in Westminster and Whitehall.

The best expression of this is the way the UK Government has engaged (or failed to engage) with the devolved administrations throughout the Brexit process. It is also a stark reminder of just how much Brexit has been dominated by the ever-increasing power of the Executive. The knock-on effect on civil society organisations in the devolved nations has been significant. The quality of their interactions with the devolved administrations have been variable, with Northern Ireland's Assembly having been suspended through much of the Brexit process, and by the same token, the devolved administrations have been able to exert little influence over Whitehall and Westminster.

Brexit has thrown up another issue for the UK to contend with and that is the relationship between its constituent parts. One of the unintended consequences of Brexit has been the fragile nature of our constitution and, in particular, the devolution settlement that has been in place in Scotland and Northern Ireland who both voted to remain in the EU - little wonder that independence movements are gaining traction. A significant role of the Alliance was to try, against that backdrop, to maintain a connection between civil society and Westminster, and to advocate on their behalf.

This is all part of a much wider picture of the relationship between the state and civil society and how that relationship has deteriorated over the last decade. What has been crystallized through the Alliance's outreach to organisations in all corners of the UK, and which is evidenced in this report, is that engagement overall between civil society and the UK Government, in particular, is at best, ad-hoc and intermittent. For too long, civil society organisations have been left out of key decision-making processes, despite the major impacts this will have on their work and the communities they support. At the same time, civil society organisations are operating in an increasingly fragile space, one which has been defined by austerity, and dominated by political alienation and uncertainty about the future, both because of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic.

And yet, as we have seen, civil society plays an integral part in our democracy, with an untapped ability to act as an intermediary between citizens and the state. Indeed, civil society organisations have significant potential to add to democratic processes in the UK: from engaging with individuals who are not otherwise adequately represented in the political process to providing crucial evidence and expertise in key policy areas.

For too long, decision-making has lacked transparency, been too centralised, and failed to recognise and represent those who will be on the receiving end of Government policy. As the UK grapples with the aftermath of Brexit and the pandemic, we need civil society to play an integral part in formulating how policy is made and for whom.

This report aims to provide a way forward, setting out the structural and cultural shifts that are required to truly include the voices of civil society organisations in democratic and policymaking process.

**Malene Bratlie and Jane Thomas**  
(Current and previous coordinators of the Brexit Civil Society Alliance)

## List of Figures

<b>Figure 1</b> Democracy without CSO engagement	11
<b>Figure 2</b> Democracy with CSOs engagement	11
<b>Figure 3</b> The impact of CSO activity on the relationship between citizens and the state	12
<b>Figure 4</b> Spheres of Activity	21
<b>Figure 5</b> Barriers to Engagement	23
<b>Figure 6</b> The Policy cycle	28
<b>Figure 7</b> Examples of values found in meaningful relationships	43

## List of Boxes

<b>Box 1</b> Definitions of key terms used throughout the report	8
<b>Box 2</b> Wales: A case for institutionalised engagement	19
<b>Box 3</b> Bond Checklist for effective engagement between government and civil society	51

## List of Tables

<b>Table 1</b> Lessons learned from proposed democratic innovations	33
<b>Table 2</b> Projects looking at enhancing the role of CSOs in democracy	38

# Introduction

## The importance of Civil Society Organisations

**Civil society organisations (CSOs) are embedded in our society and are vital to the functioning of democratic policymaking. They have a long history of being at the forefront in the response to societal need and social change, from providing services for the poor before the advent of the welfare state to recent campaigns for marriage equality. Since March 2020, it has been charities, voluntary organisations and community groups that have been at the heart of supporting those most isolated and marginalised as the country has grappled with the COVID-19 pandemic.**

With over 165,000 organisations across the UK, CSOs span sectors from law and advocacy to culture and recreation. They are not only ubiquitous but also well-regarded by the public. Even in the context of ethical scandals involving large charities, CSOs continue to be more highly trusted than Government and the only institution ranked as ethical in recent surveys.

CSOs play a vital role in a functioning democracy. They provide a means for citizen engagement and participation in politics, better public dialogue by providing evidence, and act as a vehicle for advocacy and holding government to account. Furthermore, CSOs, being closest to issues on the ground, can help bridge the gap between citizens and decision makers by feeding into policy processes and supporting legislators so that policy meets the needs of communities and decisions represent a wider range of viewpoints. By doing so, CSOs can represent the views and experiences of the communities they serve and provide evidence from expertise or experience. Finally, the ability for CSOs to do activities in the public sphere such as advocacy, and the vibrancy of the social arena in which they exist, are themselves indicators of the health of a country's democracy.

## Problems faced by Civil Society Organisations

Despite their value, CSOs exist in an increasingly precarious landscape. Having already gone through a squeeze on funding as a result of austerity and an increased demand for services, organisations are now faced with uncertainty over EU funding and a fall in fundraising during the COVID-19 pandemic. The manifesto of the current Conservative Government pledged a review of human rights legislation and judicial review: both vital for CSOs to be able to hold government to account, undertake direct action, and protect minority communities. Meanwhile, the Lobbying Act (Transparency of Lobbying, Non-party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act) 2014 placed an additional administrative burden on organisations doing advocacy in the year prior to a general election. This has been found to place a "chilling effect" on the sector as charities are dissuaded from speaking out about observed problems and possible solutions.

The ability of CSOs to engage directly with decision makers, to do advocacy and share evidence, is inconsistent and often limited. At Westminster, there are multiple different routes for engagement, for example responding to consultations or submitting evidence to select committees; however this is often hampered through poor engagement techniques and a lack of collaborative culture. Just one example of this is the lack of consultation with CSOs about the replacement of EU structural funds, which many rely upon for income.

There has been better engagement of CSOs by the devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. The Government of Wales Act 2006, for example, required that Welsh Ministers establish a scheme for the promotion of the interests of the voluntary sector, including methods for consultation. This has resulted in the formation of multiple avenues of engagement such as the Third Sector Partnership Council, a forum on which elected CSO representatives and government officials sit to discuss any topics of joint interest. A similar body, the Joint Government Voluntary and Community Sector Forum exists in Northern Ireland, whilst in Scotland early engagement with CSOs and communities is established practice. Nonetheless, problems continue to be reported by CSOs, both where practice falls short of promised engagement, and in reaching Westminster with its different political culture.

The functioning of local governments is devolved and, as a result, mechanisms for engagement with CSOs vary across the four parts of the United Kingdom. Whilst in Scotland, for example, the instalment of Third Sector Interfaces has required local government to work with communities and community organisations, in England there is no coherent guidance or requirement for meaningful engagement. The ability for local authorities to carry out in-depth engagement processes is additionally limited by the cuts to funding during austerity, which have also impacted on CSOs.

Good policy formation and decision making should involve hearing perspectives and evidence from a wide range of sources, including those who are critical. Where CSOs are kept distant from policymakers, or when decision makers aren't open to what they have to say, the impact is to increase the gap between citizens and the state. Meanwhile attempts to limit the advocacy of CSOs through legal change amounts to an attack on democracy itself.

## Why reform is needed now

Now more than ever, we need CSOs to bridge the gap between citizens and the state. The UK's future is in a moment of flux: having left the European Union and with the need to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic at a local and national level. In dealing with these, and other challenges, it is vital that views, interests, and evidence from the population as a whole are heard by government.

Leaving the European Union opens the door for the UK to set its own policy agenda in many areas where it has not done so for a number of years. The return of decision making to Westminster was welcomed by Boris Johnson, in his first speech as prime minister, as heralding democratic renewal. As new policies, trade deals, and standards are formed, CSOs can provide vital expertise and experiences to ensure the needs of communities are best met.

Destitution - the inability to buy the absolute essentials needed to eat, stay warm and dry, and clean - was estimated to have increased by 35% between 2017 and 2019, with 2.4 million individuals thought to have experienced it during 2019. It is estimated that this number will double as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The policies made by government, both nationally and at a local level, need to respond to the challenges this poses, both by providing short-term support and addressing root causes of poverty. CSOs working with impacted communities will be vital to government in the process of understanding the needs of communities and underlying problems to be addressed.

While Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic are just two of the policy challenges facing governments currently, they reflect the vital need for CSOs to bring expertise and evidence into the political sphere. Meanwhile, this need to bridge the gap between citizens and the state in policymaking is taking place in the wider context of increasing political inequality, alienation and loss in faith in the democratic system, and falling trust in government. In the most recent Audit of Political Engagement, 72% of respondents said that either the system of governing Britain could be improved quite a lot, or needs a great deal of improvement: the highest percentage in the history of its publication. Further, 47% felt they had no influence at all over national decision making, and 36% felt they had not very much. Engagement with CSOs can help bridge this gap.



More broadly, elements of democratic practice such as the right to protest, the protection of rights under the Human Rights Act 1998, and the ability to hold government to account through the courts, are under threat. Action is needed now to end these encroachments on civic space, which will impact on the role of CSOs but also society more generally.

As the UK grapples with its future, it is clear that those in power need to review the ways in which decisions are made, including taking steps to increase engagement between politicians and the people they represent. CSOs are uniquely positioned to play a role in such reforms.

## What this report does

This report sets out a vision for:

### **A vibrant civil society in which civil society organisations can engage in democratic processes inside and outside of the formal policy sphere.**

It will do so by examining the role of CSOs in democratic processes, both in theory and practice; systemic barriers faced by organisations; highlighting proposed reforms and best practice from around the UK; and finally setting out how this vision can be achieved at all levels of government.

Chapter 1 explores the role of CSOs in democratic practices and sets out how organisations currently interact with policy formation and decision making across the UK. It demonstrates the strengths and weaknesses in existing arrangements, and that there is significant scope for reforms.

Chapter 2 analyses the systemic barriers faced by CSOs: poor understanding of their value; the Lobbying Act 2014; lack of meaningful engagement; inconsistency in how engagement is done between departments; being brought in at limited stages of the policy cycle; a narrowing civic space; and limited resources.

Chapter 3 puts engagement with CSOs into the broader context of democratic innovation, setting out what reforms have been suggested. It then summarises projects which have tried to improve the strength of CSOs within democracy to date, highlighting best practice.

Chapter 4 sets out the practical recommendations for how government can meet the standards of best practice identified.

We then conclude with remarks on the importance of decision makers listening to citizens in responding to the challenges and opportunities presented by Brexit and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is acknowledged that there is a role for CSOs and CSO infrastructure in ensuring that they are best able to engage with government and democratic processes more generally. Nonetheless, it is government which ultimately controls conditions for engagement, advocacy, and campaigning. As a result the recommendations in this report are aimed at government, and where relevant the Local Government Association in its support function, only.

Appendices at the end of the report set out the methodology and theories on which this report is based, including details of consultations with CSOs undertaken in the course of reaching our recommendations. The terms civil society and democracy have more than one meaning and are not easily defined. Our working definitions are set out in Box 1; Appendix 1 sets out how we have reached these.

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## Box 1 Definitions of key terms used throughout the report

- ▶ **Civil Society Organisations:** Organisations within civil society which broadly meet the following:
  1. At least some element of formal and institutionalised structure
  2. Separate from the state and the private sector
  3. Non-profit distributing
  4. Self governing
  5. The existence of voluntary participation through, for example, a trustee board, volunteers or donations
  6. Working for social objectives and public benefit
- ▶ **Civic Space:** the space in which civil society organisations and activities exist, both physically and in terms of their legal standing and ability to be active.
- ▶ **Civil Society:** Activities and interactions by individuals and organisations sitting between the state and the private sector.
- ▶ **Democracy:** public control of decision making and equality in exercise of that control. This includes access to representation, participation, and deliberation; fundamental rights; checks on government; and impartial administration.
- ▶ **Formal Political Sphere:** the provision of public services, electoral institutions, parliaments, and governments.
- ▶ **Government:** the current administration in the relevant location.
- ▶ **government:** those carrying out governing more generally, across local, regional, and national government; and over time, not restricted to current ministers.
- ▶ **Public Sphere:** public debate and opinion, including the news media, the internet, and campaigning activities.

**See Appendix 1 for full details of how these definitions were reached.**

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# Chapter 1

## CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AND DEMOCRACY: IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

**CSOs have an important role to play in democracy by promoting greater public control of decision making. This chapter sets out the possible ways for CSOs to bring citizens closer to decision making and how this currently plays out in practice.**

### CSOs and Democracy

Although the concept of democracy is contested, and not limited to one definition, we understand it, as the:

**public control of decision making and equality in exercise of that control. This includes access to representation, participation, and deliberation; fundamental rights; checks on government; and impartial administration.** [See Appendix 1]

To achieve these ideals, there needs to be an ongoing relationship between citizens and the state at and between elections. CSOs play an important role in bridging this relationship.

#### A) Action in the Public Sphere

A large number of CSOs take part in activities in the public sphere: raising awareness of and support for an issue through campaigning, media engagement, and protest. This ranges from setting up an e-petition to mass protests in Westminster; from doing collections for change in train stations to being the beneficiary of a major event such as the London Marathon. Although outside of formal politics, adding to public discourse, participating in direct action and holding the government to account are key aspects of democratic practices.

#### B) Citizen Engagement with Formal Politics

CSOs provide a means for individuals to participate in formal politics. Those working in communities and providing services are uniquely placed to engage with those who are rarely heard in formal political processes, whether it be because of poverty, language barriers, or because they are in vulnerable positions. Individuals in the UK without voting rights can similarly be reached by CSOs: for example refugees, the homeless, or children. In addition, engagement with and membership of CSOs is growing as a way of expressing political interest in the context of low party membership. There is an intrinsic good attached to greater participation in civil society and the political sphere by all people, particularly those who can't otherwise engage in formal politics.

## C) Communication of Views, Values, and Preferences

**Public Sphere:  
public debate and  
opinion, including  
the news media,  
the internet, and  
campaigning  
activities.**



Within our democratic system, government legitimately makes policy decisions for the population on the basis of what they committed to in their manifestos and were chosen to fulfil in an election. However, as we will go into further in Chapter 3, this is a very blunt tool for understanding what the electorate really think and feel on different issues.

CSOs – particularly those involved in advocacy – are able to aid policymakers in knowing what the public wants, as the amount of backing they receive can act as an indicator of public feeling on an issue. In addition, when policymakers engage with the views expressed and evidence provided by CSOs, they don't only see the volume of support for an issue, but more nuance in how this is expressed. CSOs have a wide range of expertise, spanning policy issues ranging from defence and international trade to immigration, welfare and sport. When they express the views of their members or evidence from their experience, this is far more detailed than a mere tick on a ballot.

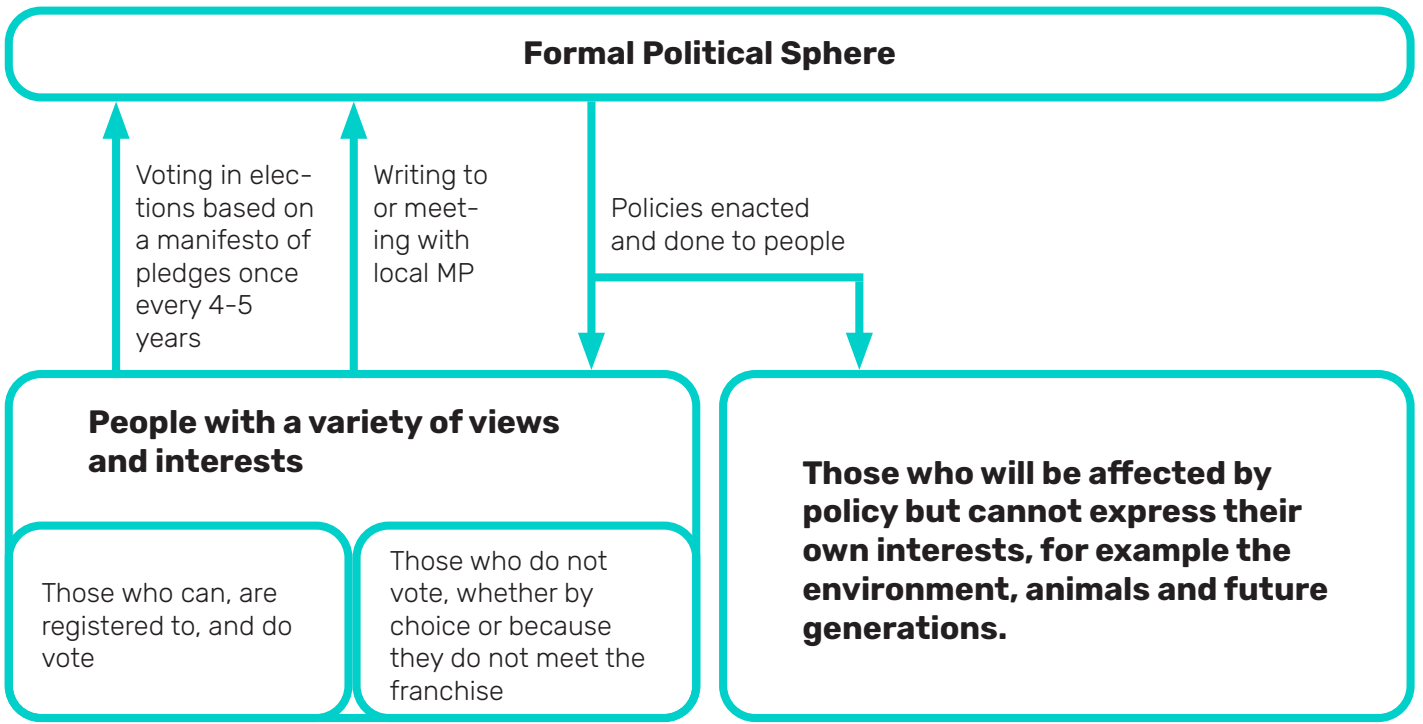
Furthermore, issue-based national organisations are not bound by geography in the same way as constituency voting. Association with a CSO allows those who share views but live in geographically different locations to express their ideas and have them heard where they might otherwise have been ignored. This is particularly important in ensuring the voices of minorities are heard. Whilst this does not represent a perfect method of communicating citizens' views to government, as not all supporters of an organisation will agree with all of its positions at all times, it does add additional depth to the representation of the electorate in policymaking.

## D) Evidence Provision

CSOs play an important role as providers of evidence, which is vital both for policy making and deliberative democracy. It is also key for holding government to account for its decisions. CSOs are specialists: either providing services, doing research, or advocating for their beneficiaries. They are therefore well-placed to report on how policies are working on the ground, see problems emerging and identify possible solutions in a way that government, even at a local level, might not. CSOs are well-placed to take a long term view on problems and possible solutions as they exist outside of the electoral cycle, which can lead to short-term thinking and planning by politicians. Whilst this can be hampered by concerns about future funding, their wealth of experience without the need to seek reelection allows for a longer-term perspective to be taken.

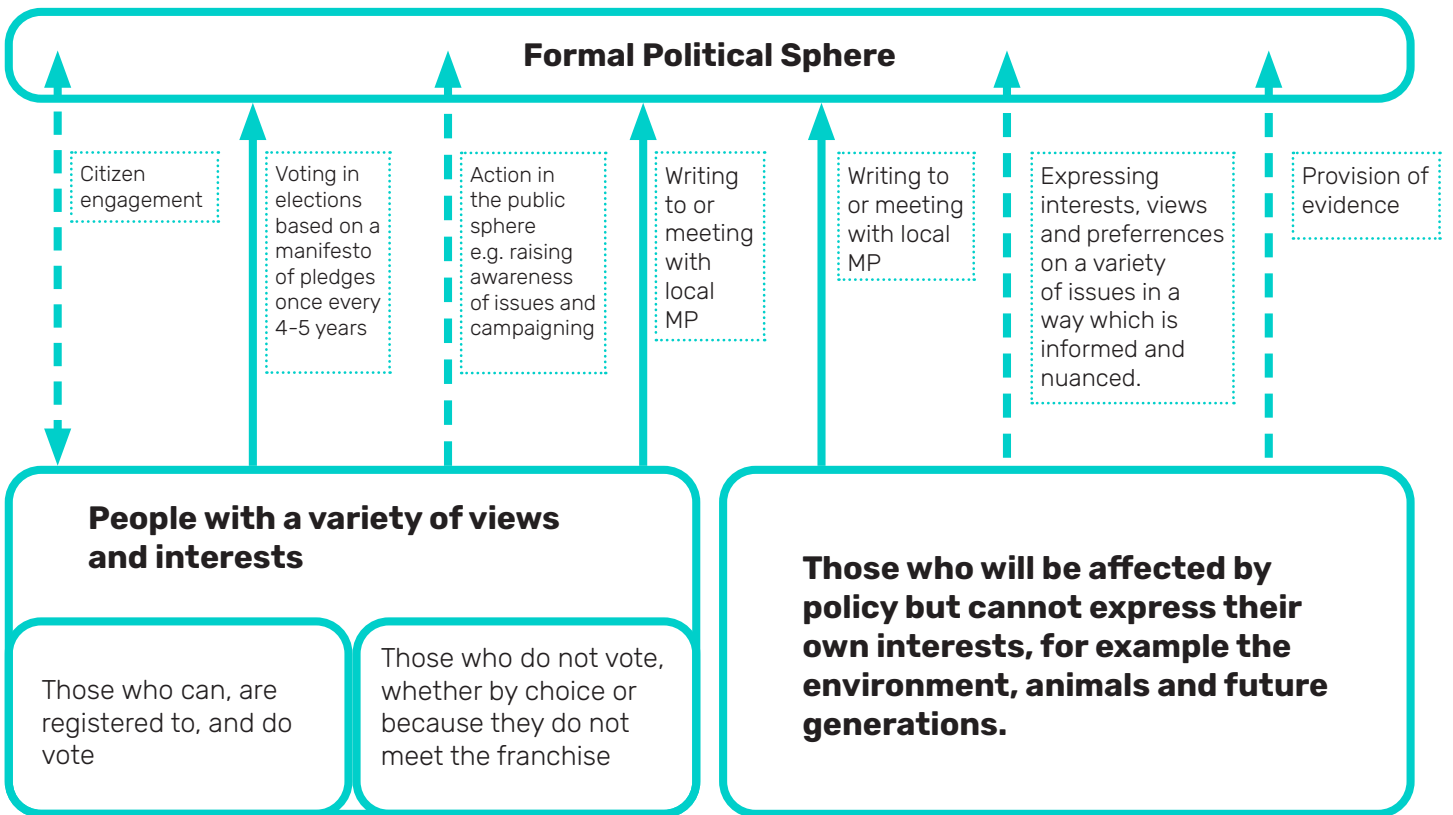
CSOs are therefore able to provide evidence and support to forums for deliberative democracy, such as citizens' assemblies (more on this in Chapter 3), adding value to these forms of policymaking. Within traditional decision making, CSOs are able to both produce innovative solutions and to hold policymakers to account. Some organisations are able to use this knowledge currently for the production of briefings and reports, which can feed into the policy cycle through raising awareness of issues. However, their expertise is underutilised without a mechanism to know that this and the views they express are being listened to.

**Figure 1 Democracy without CSO Engagement**



**Democracy without CSO engagement.** Communities are able to express their views to those who represent them at elections (for those who vote) and by contacting their local MP.

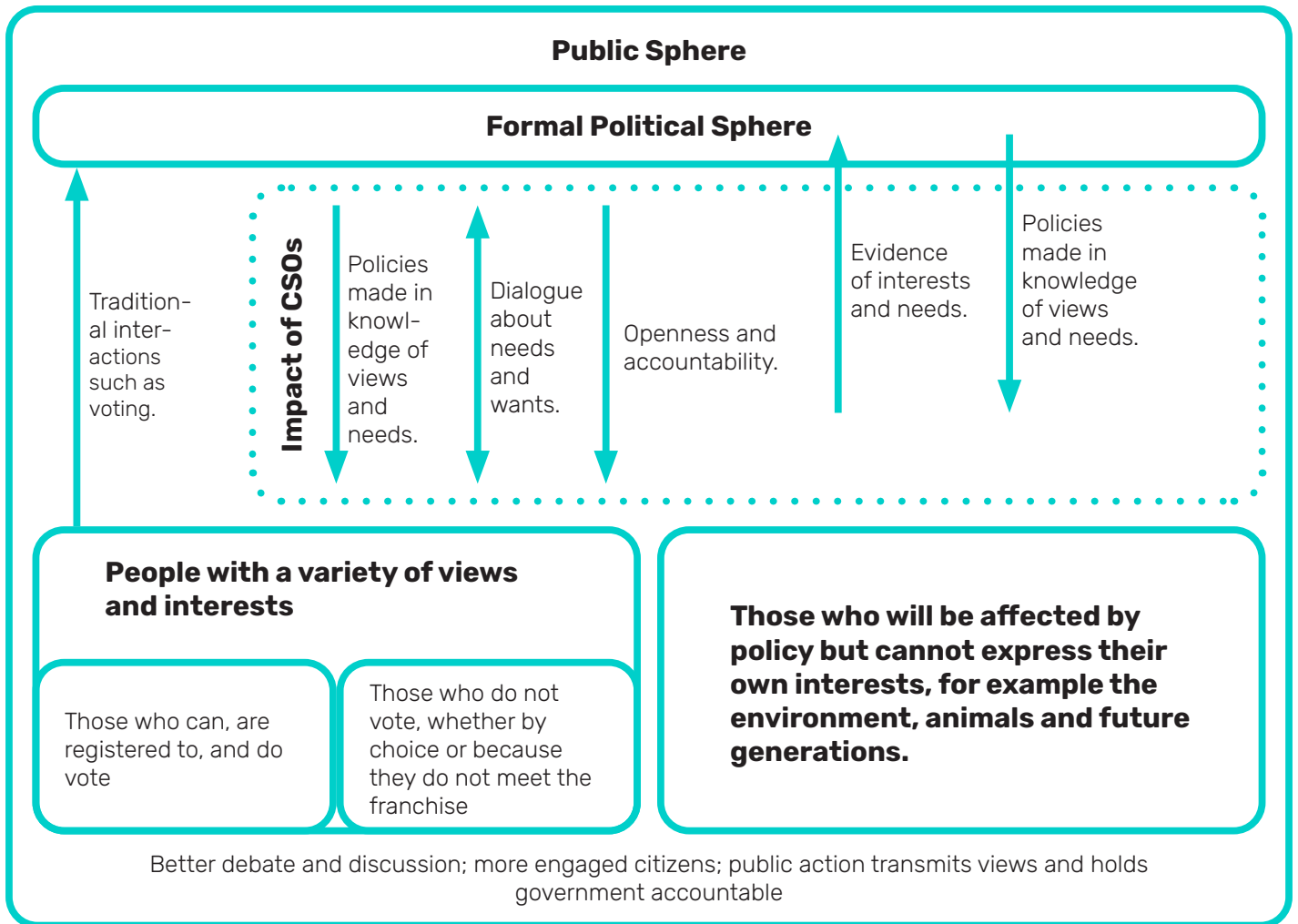
**Figure 2 Democracy with CSO Engagement**



**— — ➔ Additional engagement enabled by CSOs**

**Democracy when there are activities by CSOs inside and outside of the formal political sphere.** This adds many more routes for communities to be heard, for best evidence to reach decision makers, and for government to be held accountable.

**Figure 3 The impact of CSO activity on the relationship between citizens and the state**



**The outcomes of CSOs activities inside and outside of formal politics.** The relationship between citizens and the state which underpins democracy is better and more nuanced, with greater transmission of views, better and more responsive policy, improved and informed debate, and more accountable government

## How CSOs Currently Interact with the Democratic Process

We have seen in the above section that CSOs have the potential to play an important role in our democratic processes. We will look next at how this currently takes place.

### Acting from the Outside

CSOs are well-positioned to speak truth to power, to act as a check on government, and to throw a spotlight onto new issues. Where a government policy is not working, or where the needs of citizens are being unmet, CSOs working with or representing these groups are well-placed to find out about the issue and raise these voices through the press, campaigning, and protest. Nonetheless, these forms of communication have varied success. No matter how loud or well-informed the critical voice is, there are many barriers to advocacy by CSOs which restrain them from speaking up or being heard when they do.

### Reaching Inside

While CSOs will always be separate from the formal political sphere, there are ways in which they are able to reach inside and feed directly into policymaking and democratic processes by responding to consultations on new policies, providing evidence to politicians, and meeting with decision makers to express views and concerns. This enables CSOs to foster democratic processes by acting as a bridge between citizens and the state, as set out above.

Public policy is made in different ways and in different places. For the purposes of this report, we will look at Westminster, the devolved administrations, and local and regional government. In each of these places, CSOs have the opportunity to interact with different policymakers in different ways. This section explores these different routes and assesses their limitations before turning to barriers to engagement more broadly. Where means of engagement are one-off rather than systemic, these will be considered in Chapter 3.

**Formal Political Sphere/  
Formal Politics:  
the provision of public  
services, electoral  
institutions, parliaments,  
and governments.**  
•••••

## Westminster

There are three core groups of policymakers at Westminster: MPs and Lords sitting in parliament; Government ministers; and civil servants.

### Parliamentarians

The primary way for most organisations to attempt to influence policy is by communicating with parliamentarians, either as their own elected representatives or in their capacity as policymakers and scrutineers.

#### 1. As Elected Representatives

MPs are elected to represent the interests of their constituents in relation to matters of national policy. Many hold constituency 'surgeries' to hear about and help with problems, and all are available by letter. Smaller local CSOs can use these routes to contact the MP representing their area, whilst larger CSOs can encourage their members or supporters to do so.

An MP who is made aware of a particular topic which is either a key issue within their constituency or of particular concern to their constituents has a number of options open to them: forwarding the query to the appropriate ministerial department, raising the topic within their own party's policy-making hierarchy, and asking relevant questions in the House. If an MP feels particularly strongly about an issue, they may adopt and champion it through avenues such as Early Day Motions, Private Members Bills, founding or joining All-Party Parliamentary Groups, and securing Westminster Hall debates.

Nonetheless, an MP championing an issue is unlikely to make much headway without the support of their party. Many of these ways of showing support for an issue have little impact if an issue is not currently on the Government's legislative agenda nor considered pressing by opposition parties. Taking the example of Early Day Motions, there were 946 of these tabled in 2019 alone. The first four of these, tabled on 7 January 2019, made statements on EU citizens' rights and the EU Settlement Scheme; select committee scrutiny of executive pay; protection for companion dogs, and Coventry City Football Club. The last three of the year, tabled on 20 December 2019, covered Barrhead Baby Cafe's fifth birthday; unsafe cladding, and the committee on arms exports controls. With topics ranging from national security to local constituency issues and no guarantee that they will be debated in parliament, never mind listened to by Government; it is hard to see EDMs as anything more than just parliamentary wallpaper and not an effective forum for deliberation, representation or participation.

#### 2. As Policymakers and Scrutineers

MPs do not only act on the interests of their constituents and, along with members of the House of Lords, will be motivated by their own convictions. Sitting in their respective chambers, parliamentarians question the government, debate policy, and vote on legislation.

Within this there is scope for individuals to speak to issues of particular concern for them. There is particular scope in the House of Lords for cross-party working on issues of mutual interest. CSOs wishing to push for a particular policy position can seek to influence MPs and members of the House of Lords through media campaigns, the provision of briefings and reports, and the cultivation of relationships with supportive individuals. By doing so, organisations can introduce new evidence and arguments for or against certain policies into Westminster.

Nonetheless, this is mediated by the strength of the party whipping system in voting, and insufficient opportunities to undertake meaningful scrutiny. Free votes, where no party has given their members instructions on how to vote, are relatively rare: the House of Commons Library estimates that there have been no more than a little over 200 in the Commons since 1979, with many of these relating to the same piece of legislation. Nineteen of these, for example, were related to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill.

Furthermore, an MP's ability to speak in debate or impact the legislation is determined by the amount of time allowed for scrutiny. As the government controls the parliamentary timetable, they are able to determine the extent to which this can take place. Although there has long been an issue with legislation being rushed through parliament, particularly at the end of a parliamentary session, this has been a particular issue in the context of Brexit. The sheer amount of legislation needed has seen tight parliamentary timescales and significant use of statutory instruments, which are given very little parliamentary time for scrutiny.

Rushing through legislation also makes it much more difficult for CSOs to meaningfully engage with the details of what is being proposed and provide input on how a bill will impact on the policy area they work in. As one focus group participant told us in preparation for this report: "the parliamentary approach itself does not have enough resources to actually include civil society". Furthermore, where there is scope for meaningful deliberation and collaboration in the House of Lords, this is undermined by its position: although being unelected frees them from some constraints of party politics in the House of Commons, the lack of a democratic mandate limits its power to achieve meaningful change.

A more formal method of providing evidence to parliamentarians is through select committees. These committees are small groups of MPs and/or Lords set up to investigate a specific issue or policy area, and perform a scrutiny role. The most common of these are departmental committees which scrutinise the work of government departments. They are able to influence policy in a variety of ways. Evidence has shown that recommendations made by departmental committees are often directly implemented. They also wield soft power by influencing policy debate, spotlighting issues and altering priorities, brokering disputes, providing expert evidence, holding government to account, exposing wrongdoing, and threatening exposure in the future. CSOs can feed into select committees by responding to calls for written evidence and, if invited, providing oral evidence as experts.

## Government

The UK Government adopted the seven principles of public life following the 1995 Nolan Inquiry, which includes the need for ministers to be open and accountable. Furthermore, it has signed up to the principles of open government: transparency, integrity, accountability, and stakeholder engagement. This would suggest that there should be a culture of openness and cooperation; however, as we will see below, this is limited, with much engagement happening on the terms of ministers or not at all.

Although strictly Government is made up of ministers who are responsible for their own departments and the actions of their civil servants, the realities of policymaking and implementation are that ministers are not involved with every step of governing. We can therefore look at ways that CSOs interact both with ministers themselves, and those who work for them.

### 1. Ministers

Within Government there is an Office for Civil Society (OCS) which, amongst other duties, is in charge of policies relating to CSOs. Formerly the Office of the Third Sector, created in May 2006, the OCS is, "responsible for policy relating to young people, volunteers, social enterprises and public service mutuals". It has a number of tasks, including implementing its civil society strategy and regulating charities. Whilst the OCS is not in itself responsible for how CSOs relate to Government on substantive policy issues and does not offer a joint forum for input on sector-related issues, it does set out a vision for their place within society and how they relate to the public sector:



“The government is determined that charities and social enterprises should be fully confident in their right to speak in public debates and to have a strong role in shaping policy and speaking up on behalf of those they support.”

Nonetheless, relationships with ministers are determined by their individual willingness to engage with CSOs. CSOs can act from outside of the formal sphere by writing letters, providing briefings, and requesting meetings; however this doesn't guarantee that anyone is listening.

## 2. Department Officials and Civil Servants

The primary means for policy officials to seek input from outside of parliament is through consultation. Although not always legally required, they are routinely held to seek evidence and viewpoints from experts, practitioners, and businesses. Open invitations to respond to potential policy changes provide a route for any interested party to express a view. Furthermore, there are officials in each department tasked with stakeholder engagement, although practice varies from department to department.

More specifically relating to CSOs, their relationship with Government at Westminster is set out on paper through the Compact: an agreement aimed at effective working to achieve common goals and outcomes. The most recent version was published in 2010 by the Coalition Government, although the Civil Society Strategy in 2018 pledged a renewal of government commitment to its principles.

The Compact contains numerous pledges. These include those relating to the policymaking itself: that CSOs will be involved from the earliest possible stage in the design of policies, programmes, and services; they will be given early notice of consultations to have enough time to respond; and policy-makers will consider providing feedback to explain how respondents have influenced policy design and why views have not been acted upon. These principles all reflect those promoted through the OGP. Furthermore the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 requires that public authorities consider social and environmental factors alongside those which are economic during public procurement, suggesting that CSOs would be consulted during the process of public contracts being entered into.

In reality, however, interaction with central Government has been intermittent, with promises of greater engagement appearing to be mere lip service. Consultation is often not meaningful (see Chapter 2), the promised renewal of the Compact has not materialised, whilst the Compact Voice, the charity set up to champion CSOs under the scheme, has remained largely silent since its last blog post in 2016. Research by the Office for Civil Society itself has shown that the requirements under the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 are criticised as being a tick box exercise with limited understanding on behalf of policy officials or CSOs about the process.

CSOs from the devolved nations report particular issues in accessing Government at Westminster. Whilst, as is set out below, there are some fairly effective means of engagement in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, there are issues concerning which CSOs wish to engage with

**“We know of no CSO who would walk away from the offer of a meaningful conversation. They might not want to interact with publicity stunts or feel unable to participate when the processes are not transparent, but they would always sit at the table if the offer was meaningful”**

Kristiana Wrixon, Head of Policy, Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations

.....

**“Policymakers are making policy without consulting the people impacted by it”**

Mihai Calin Bica, Roma Support Group

.....

**“Our community members feel completely disengaged”**

Focus group participant

.....

**“The role of civil society in democratic scrutiny and ensuring effective participatory democracy is relatively well-developed and formalised at the devolved level in Wales, but since Brexit it has become increasingly clear that there are deep-rooted problems in this area at the UK level”**

Charles Whitmore, Coordinator of the Wales Civil Society Forum on Brexit



**“Organisations feel one step removed from the policy-making process. Our members say they do not feel they have any influence at a UK level. If they do, it is because they are part of a UK-wide network or body that take on board their views”**

Mhairi Snowden, Coordinator of Human Rights Consortium Scotland



in bringing citizens closer to policymaking when policy decisions are made at Westminster. Furthermore, CSOs participating in our focus groups report that, where their devolved administrations seek to represent their interests through intergovernmental working, the strength of the CSOs’ positions are diluted by disagreements between the devolved and Westminster governments relating more to do with power struggles than the actual policy issues. This has been seen through the Brexit process, particularly in Scotland, where there have been increased calls for independence.

## Northern Ireland

CSOs have an explicit role to play in democratic processes in Northern Ireland. The relationship with Government is explicitly set out in a document called the Concordat, which sets out a series of shared values and principles, including a concept of democracy which incorporates the voluntary sector and partnership working. The relationship envisaged is one in which both sides accept they have distinct but complementary roles.

On the one hand, the voluntary and community sector acknowledges the particular role of Government in the development of public policy, whilst the Government recognises the right of CSOs to carry out lobbying, and their particular value in identifying and addressing issues of social justice and equality. While this doesn’t go so far as improving the quality of representation or deliberation, it does make space for CSOs to act as a check on Government, in addition to recognising the value of their involvement.

In addition, there are specific forums for engagement with the Government which offer the potential for acting as a conduit between citizens and decision makers. Within Government, there is a Voluntary and Community Unit with policy responsibility for the relationship. The Joint Government Voluntary and Community Sector Forum has elected representatives from CSOs and policy officials and is responsible for developing an effective working relationship based on the framework within the Concordat. Meetings

Westminster. However the different working practices, the physical distance and the lack of relationships amounts to a significant barrier.

Whilst action has taken place under the Civil Society Strategy, this has largely been aimed at providing funding for initiatives such as The Catalyst, to help charities to embrace digital technology, and the Youth Futures Foundation, in which funds from dormant accounts are used to assist disadvantaged young people into employment. Without downplaying the importance of initiatives to support the charitable sector, little has been done to meet the Office for Civil Society’s own goal of supporting input from civil society voices across all policy areas.

## Devolved Administrations

Each of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have their own parliament and executive bodies. These elected institutions have the power to make laws on devolved matters, such as education, health and social services, environment and housing. CSOs have different forms of involvement with government across the three nations; however it has been reported in focus groups that it is difficult to engage with Westminster on UK-wide policy. This poses problems for engagement; while CSOs might have strong relationships with a government department in a devolved nation, this will have little practical use

of the forum offer an opportunity for views and concerns to be expressed. The last full meeting took place on 17 October 2019 and considered the role of CSOs in the delivery of Government outcomes, concerns about preparedness for Brexit, and the engagement of CSOs in community planning.

Nonetheless, CSOs report that whilst the Concordat and the Joint Forum are better than no formal relationships, a culture of engagement has not yet been established. Furthermore, on assessment of the agreement, it fails to provide a permanent forum through which interests and opinions can be transmitted through CSOs. It's also important to note that Stormont was not sitting between 2017 and 2020 due to disagreements between the two governing parties (the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Fein). Undoubtedly, this had an impact on CSOs ability to engage with the Executive and the Assembly.

Although the remit of local authorities in Northern Ireland has tended to be more limited than elsewhere in the UK, reforms under the Local Government Act 2014 have granted community planning powers. Within the legislation, there is a requirement to take into account the views of individuals, including representatives of the relevant CSOs. The implementation of this has varied by area, with some introducing forums for the purpose of consulting the community and feeding priorities about what the area should be like to the local council. Elsewhere, the relationship continues to be ad hoc.

The emphasis on transparency and accountability of processes is reflected through Northern Ireland's Open Government Commitments. Whilst these show a commitment to democratic processes and the role of CSOs, there is an absence of innovations which could enhance the quality of democracy such as forums for greater participation.

## Scotland

The Scottish Government has made explicit commitments to democratic innovation in its recent Open Government Action Plan, including developing a 'participation framework' to guide engagement and test new approaches to co-decision making. These commitments to openness are rooted in the 2011 Christie Report, which recommended, amongst others, that public services are built around people and communities. This open approach to governance has permeated the political culture of Scotland, including in the value placed on CSOs and their role in democratic processes.

CSOs are able to engage with the policy process at Holyrood through both formal and informal routes. CSOs have a history of open access to meetings with MSPs and Government officials with key organisations often being invited to meetings during policy planning stages. Open consultations during the pre-legislative and bill drafting stages allow for early engagement in policy formation, followed by the ability to provide evidence and briefings to MSPs during committee stages .

There is significant scope for the engagement of CSOs with local government through the requirement for Third Sector Interfaces (TSIs) to be involved with community planning. There are 32 TSIs, each working over a local authority area, drawing together views and acting as the primary strategic vehicle for CSO engagement with local service delivery. Nonetheless, there has been some criticism that TSIs are not seen as equal partners to their government counterparts and that they have insufficient capacity for proper involvement. Further recommendations were made in 2015 to work towards truly meaningful engagement. These will be reviewed further in Chapter 3.

Despite their limitations, this represents multiple routes of communication throughout the policy formulation and decision making processes at both central and local government. This gives meaningful opportunities for CSOs to express the views of the communities with which they are engaged, and by providing evidence add to the deliberative quality of the process.

**Democracy (democratic process):**  
public control of decision making and equality in exercise of that control. This includes access to representation, participation, and deliberation; fundamental rights; checks on government; and impartial administration.

.....

## Wales

The ability of CSOs to add to the quality of representation and participation of citizens' interests in Wales is enshrined in the Government of Wales Act 2006, which requires the formulation of a voluntary sector scheme. This scheme sets out the relationship between CSOs in Wales and the Welsh Government, shared areas of priority, and agreed forms of engagement. CSOs in Wales that act in areas of devolved competence and/or for the benefit of Wales are able to engage through the following ways:

### 1. Third Sector Partnership Council

The Third Sector Partnership Council is the primary mechanism for engagement between the Government and the Third Sector. Representatives are elected from CSOs across Wales to sit on the council, reflecting different interests and activities, alongside the Minister responsible for the scheme, representatives from the Welsh Council for Voluntary Action, and other Welsh Government officials.

The three meetings that took place in 2020 focussed on responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, whilst the two meetings in 2019 looked at topics including:

1. Greater engagement with local government
2. Securing future funding including allowing time for co-production and collaboration on future ways of working
3. Particular concerns in the context of Brexit, including future Human Rights protections and post-Brexit funding arrangements
4. Co-production of policies under the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015
5. The role of the third sector in creating a collaborative response to the Climate Emergency

### 2. Ministerial Meetings

CSOs in Wales are able to engage with ministers through correspondence, campaigns, and other events. Where a high level issue is identified which engages more than one CSO, it may be deemed appropriate for a meeting with the relevant minister to take place. These meetings may be one-off in relation to specific issues or take place on an ongoing basis.

### 3. Dialogue Through Third sector Networks and Umbrella Bodies

There is an expectation by the Welsh Government that CSOs will work together and form appropriate networks, with whom the Government, in turn, pledges to have ongoing dialogue and engagement.

### 4. Involvement in Policy Development

Existing lines of dialogue set out above provide a route by which the Welsh Government informs and involves CSOs in discussions on policy areas in which they might have an interest or which will have implications for their work. This gives CSOs an opportunity to have input over policy at an early stage, although with an understanding that a range of perspectives will be considered alongside their own.

### 5. Consultation on Arrangements which Affect the Third Sector Directly

Formal consultations take place on any proposed changes which will impact on the third sector, with guidance having been given to government officials about carrying out appropriate engagement with CSOs.

Engagement at a local level in Wales largely takes place through the community cohesion scheme, aimed at creating communities which are sustainable, inclusive, and resilient. Even from the beginning, these partnerships were planned with third sector organisations in mind. We have heard that engagement with community cohesion officers is particularly effective for CSOs and community groups wanting to interact with local councils. These initiatives have received further funding to assist with the additional challenges posed by leaving the EU.

Looking ahead, the Welsh Government has committed to ongoing engagement through its commitments under the UK's Open Government Plan. The first objective is “[t]o involve and increase engagement and collaboration with a wider range of stakeholders.” This includes continuing to work and engage with civil society and developing a toolkit and a package of development opportunities for officials to help them engage and involve the public and organisations.

Each of these forms of engagement at a national and local level provides a forum for CSOs to express concerns based on their expertise, providing frontline services or advocating for their beneficiaries. This allows them to fulfil their potential by adding to the deliberative quality of decision making and improving representation of citizens' views.

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## Box 2 Wales: A case for institutionalised engagement

As discussed in Chapter 1, engagement between CSOs and the Welsh government is underpinned by the Third Sector Scheme, which is made under Section 74 of the Government of Wales 2006. From this, the Third Sector Partnership Council has been established. It is a formal mechanism for engagement between CSOs in Wales and the Welsh Government. The Third Sector Partnership Council meets approximately twice a year. It is chaired by the Minister responsible for the Third Sector Scheme and its members reflect diverse areas of interest across the sector. In addition to this, CSOs engage with the Welsh Government through regular meetings with ministers, consultations and involvement in policy developments.

There are several lessons to learn from initiatives such as this, primarily, it allows for a structured form of engagement between CSOs and the Government. The Third Sector Scheme is underpinned by a mutually agreed Framework for Engagement. This framework commits to “create a

process which generates shared agendas and outcomes; help both Ministers and Third Sector achieve their outcomes; and connect and give ownership to Third Sector Partnerships members in determining and tracking the process and progress”.

The CSOs from Wales participating in our focus group reported that the relationship between CSOs and the Welsh Government is working well and that engagement is happening. Agendas are collaboratively established beforehand and minutes from meetings are taken and shared with all participants. CSOs also reported that, in addition to the embedded mechanisms for engagement, there is a culture within the Welsh Government which recognises the importance CSOs can add to policy-making processes and which “rests upon integrity, trust and mutual respect”.

A key part of the Third Sector Scheme is to involve CSOs in policy development. The Scheme commits to “ensure that it takes into consideration, at a forma-

tive stage, the implications for the Third Sector of new policies or changes in policy” and create opportunities for “continuing discussion between the Third Sector, volunteering interests and Welsh Government to foster early understanding and involvement in policy development”.

However, it is important to recognise that, in reality, this does not always happen. A 2020 review of the voluntary sector's engagement on the implementation of the Wales Future Generations Act showed that, due to various factors, there was not a structured, permanent route for civil society organisations who had played a critical role in the development of the Act to engage with its implementation. Similarly, another recent report from the WWF Cymru and the Welsh Government (2018) also recognised that ‘the workings of policy development are often not visible’. That being said, formal mechanisms for engagement under the Third Sector Scheme provides CSOs with an opportunity to challenge and review when engagement can be improved.

## Local Government Across England

When talking about local government here, we are referring to local authorities and regional governments. All areas in England are covered by some form of local authority, but under the current patchwork of arrangements, only some places are also covered by a regional or metropolitan government. When making recommendations in Chapter 4, the report will specify whether we are addressing local authorities, regional government or both.

Local government largely falls under the devolved competencies, and rules for governance are made in the relevant administrations. Local government in England, however, falls to Westminster. CSOs are as important in local democracy as they are on the national stage, as considered above. Furthermore, the Civil Society Strategy notes that:

“[L]ocal authorities are uniquely placed to bring together all partners, including the voluntary community and social enterprise organisations, to take a wider view in addressing some of the key challenges faced by communities and to ensure the most vulnerable people are not left behind.”

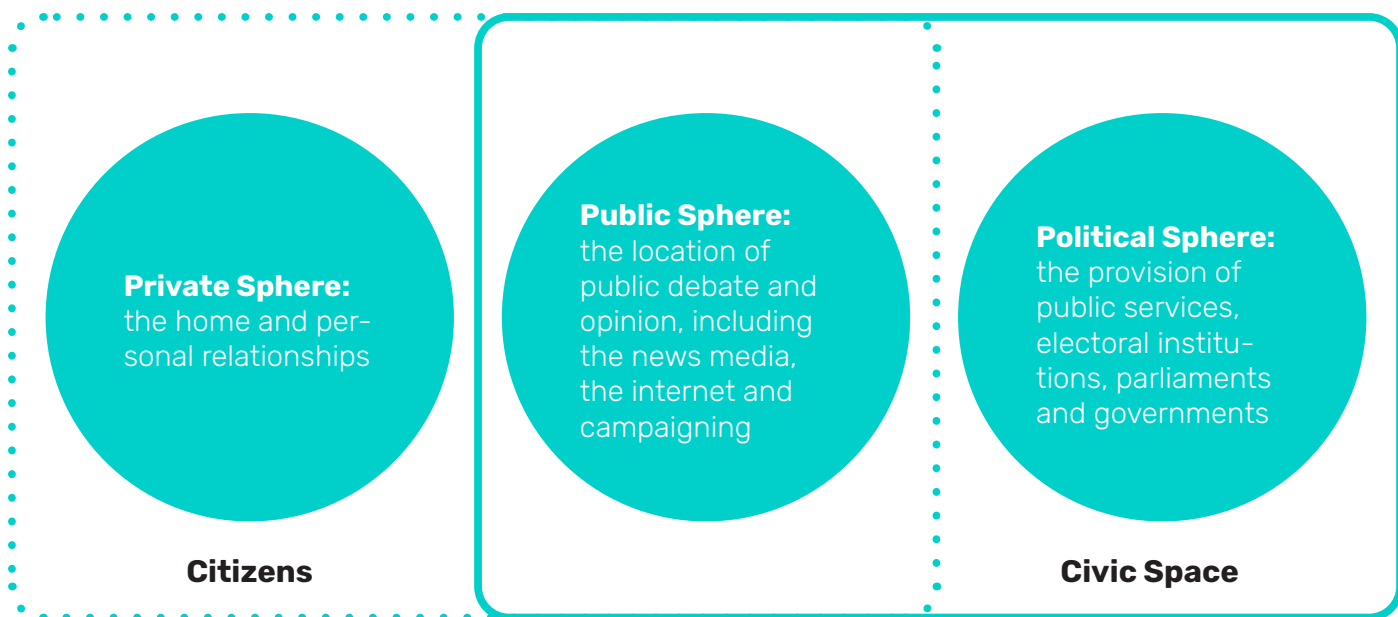
Nonetheless, there has been notably little coherent action to provide meaningful engagement with CSOs across English local and regional authorities. The Localism Act 2011, for example, while providing a mechanism for approved community organisations to develop plans which can shape policy for the development of local spaces, fails to establish a right for CSOs to engage in the decision-making process. As a result, where CSOs are more greatly involved, this is at the invitation of decision makers and varies from place to place.

Furthermore, there is insufficient capacity or infrastructure for such engagement with local government; with notably little support or guidance having been provided to them. The Local Government Association published “A councillor’s workbook on neighbourhood and community engagement” in 2016, which gives advice to individuals elected to councils on how to engage with those they serve. It does not extend to guidance on the processes of local government as a whole. Furthermore, guidance on stakeholder management is only published in relation to specific projects such as dealing with local flood risk management or promoting greater use of digital technologies by councils, neither of which refer to CSOs more than in passing. We would expect to see significantly more guidance and support for coherent and widespread meaningful engagement. Limited infrastructure and guidance is likely to be compounded by the financial squeeze experienced by local authorities as a result of austerity.

What we have seen in Chapter 1 is that CSOs have significant potential to add to democratic processes in the UK. They can do this through activities in the public sphere such as protesting; engaging with individuals who are not otherwise engaged in formal politics; sharing views of communities and citizens and thus making representation better; and adding to the deliberative quality of policy formation through the provision of evidence.

The ability for CSOs to meet this potential varies across different forums of decision making, with significant scope for improvement across the democratic system as a whole. Whilst we have seen some of the problems CSOs experience in each place of government, we turn next to the systemic barriers which they face in closing the gap between citizens and decision makers.

## Figure 4 Spheres of Activity



The private, public and political spheres are different places of activity and discussion. Most citizens and citizen activity exist in the private and public spheres, with barriers to accessing the political sphere.

Civic space, where CSOs are active, spans both the public and political sphere and can therefore bridge the gap between people and political activity.

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## In Summary

CSOs have an important role to play in democracy by promoting greater public control of decision making. This is done by:

- ▣ Carrying out action in the public sphere [increasing participation],
- ▣ Being a means for citizen engagement with formal politics [increasing participation],
- ▣ Communicating preferences and values [increasing representation], and
- ▣ Providing evidence [increasing representation and deliberation].

CSOs currently engage in democratic processes by:

- ▣ Undertaking research, campaigning and awareness-building activities from outside of the policy process.
- ▣ Engagement with elected representatives and civil servants in a variety of formal and informal ways.

### In Westminster:

- ▣ CSOs can seek to engage with MPs as representatives, but their individual power to effect change is limited.
- ▣ Providing evidence to select committees can be an effective way of influencing the policy debate.
- ▣ Best practice for the relationship between CSOs and Government is set out in a document called the Compact.
- ▣ Engagement with ministers is determined by their individual willingness to listen to CSOs with no systematic means of access.
- ▣ Interaction with the mechanisms of central government has been intermittent: consultation is often not meaningful, the Compact

is ignored, and the Public Services (Social Value) Act is viewed as a tick box exercise.

- ▣ It is particularly difficult for organisations in the devolved nations to access decision makers in Westminster due to the lack of formal means for engagement.

### In Northern Ireland:

- ▣ The relationship between CSOs and government is set out in a document called the Concordat.
- ▣ Representatives from the Executive and elected from CSOs sit on the Joint Government Voluntary and Community Sector Forum to discuss views and concerns.
- ▣ There are some formal local processes for CSOs to have input to community planning but these vary by location.
- ▣ CSOs report that the value of formal mechanisms is limited as a culture of engagement and cooperation has not been embedded into government.

### In Scotland:

- ▣ CSOs are able to engage effectively with decision makers in the Government through formal and informal meetings, responding to consultations, and briefing MSPs. CSOs report being brought into the policy-making process at an early stage allowing time to fully engage with the issues under consideration.
- ▣ Third Sector Interfaces (TSIs) - local networks of CSOs - act as mechanisms for CSOs to engage with local government in community planning.

### In Wales:

- ▣ Engagement of the Government with CSOs is enshrined in the Government of Wales Act 2006 which requires the establishment of a voluntary

sector scheme.

- ▣ Representatives from CSOs, the Welsh Council for Voluntary Action and Government sit on the Third Sector Partnership Council, which acts as the primary mechanism for engagement between the Government and the third sector.
- ▣ There is an expectation that Ministers will meet with CSOs where high-level issues are identified which engages more than one organisation.
- ▣ CSOs are asked to work together and form appropriate networks, with which the Government pledges to have ongoing dialogue and engagement.
- ▣ CSOs have the opportunity to have input to policy in which they have an interest at an early stage through these routes, although they are expected to understand that a lot of perspectives will be considered alongside their own.
- ▣ Engagement at a local level takes place through community cohesion partnerships, through which CSOs can have input to local councils.

CSOs across the devolved nations are removed from Westminster decision making by the pull of centralisation in policymaking and the partisan nature of inter-governmental relationships.

Mechanisms for engagement between English local authorities and regional government with CSOs are inconsistent and vary across the country (determining these powers is devolved to Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland). There is little support or guidance from the Government or the Local Government Association as to best practice.



# Chapter 2

## BARRIERS FACED BY CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

### Figure 5 Barriers to Engagement

- ▶ A lack of understanding about what CSOs are and their value
- ▶ Engagement isn't always meaningful
- ▶ Narrowing civic space
- ▶ Legal limitations on advocacy
- ▶ Lack of joined up thinking
- ▶ Limited available resources
- ▶ Engagement at limited stages in the policy cycle

**CSOs have an important role in stimulating democratic processes, both working outside and reaching inside of formal politics. Working on the outside, CSOs can engage with communities and individuals, foster high-quality debate, and organise direct action, all of which add to participation and deliberation. In seeking to bridge the gap between citizens and the inside of the formal political sphere, CSOs can enhance representation and deliberation in democratic policy-making processes.**

There are different ways in which this can be pursued; however there are systemic barriers which prevent this from being truly effective. As we will see below, this ranges from controversial legal limitations on the ability of CSOs to undertake advocacy, to soft barriers in the form of how CSOs are perceived and the political culture in which they operate.

### A Lack of Understanding about What CSOs are and Their Value

CSOs carry out a vast array of core activities, ranging from public service delivery and running community projects, to providing legal advice, doing research, and campaigning. Through these activities, CSOs can engage with citizens and become experts in their fields. Nonetheless, CSOs report that those within the political sphere they liaise with do not fully grasp their value.

This may be ideological: of MPs responding to polling following the 2017 General Election, 52% of Conservative MPs compared to only 17% of Labour MPs stated that it was a high priority issue for them to prevent charities who receive government funding from lobbying. Similarly, 32% of Conservative MPs stated that preventing charities from lobbying at all was a priority, compared to only 9% of Labour respondents. This could, alternatively, be linked to a genuine misconception about the role CSOs can play in enhancing policymaking, and the expertise and evidence they can contribute. Regardless of the cause of this desire, this is a barrier for CSOs.

Firstly, CSOs of all sizes report not being seen as equal partners to those in or working for government. Smaller organisations within our focus groups felt that they could be seen as not professional because of a misconception about charities being run by volunteers. Larger CSOs felt that even where there were opportunities to provide input and expertise, they were not seen as having an equal voice to business. This has played out throughout the Brexit process and the formation of new trade policies. It was only

in October 2020, almost at the end of the transition period, that the Strategic Trade Advisory Group was reformed to include the presence of CSOs – although with a notable lack of representation from all parts of the UK – alongside a new Trade Union Advisory Group. Sector-specific Trade Advisory Groups, however, continue to be made up only of businesses, despite the impact of trade deals on rights, standards and society, issues on which many CSOs have expertise. This attitude underlines both a lack of willingness to engage with CSOs and their input being undervalued.

For many years CSOs have been expressing concerns that they are viewed only in what they can do to assist the state with service provision. This was reflected in our focus groups when CSOs highlighted that policymakers may, in principle, support their work in helping communities, but not be open to listening when they wanted to talk about the causes of the problems those communities face. This way of viewing CSOs is incorrect in two ways. First, and as previously stated, CSOs carry out a vast range of core activities, some of which are to do with public service delivery but many of which are not. Second, CSOs that receive funding for services through public contracts have value above that one activity. Through their core activities, they are both engaging with communities that may otherwise not be listened to by government, and they are gaining a wealth of expertise, both about the functioning of the service and the needs and lived experiences of the communities they work with.

Finally, and most importantly, there is an incorrect conception that CSOs do not belong in the political sphere. There are already regulations that prevent registered charities from undertaking party political activities and this does not prohibit CSOs from advocating for issues affecting their causes or adding to public discourse.

These misconceptions: that CSOs only provide services, that they don't have expertise, that their voices aren't equal to stakeholders from business or politics, and that they shouldn't be political, are highly damaging. CSOs can increase the quality of representation within our democracy through highlighting issues in a more nuanced manner than is possible through elections, and by raising voices which may otherwise not be heard by decision makers. They can improve deliberation through the provision of evidence based on their expertise. These benefits are lost when these attributes are not appreciated.

## Legal Limitations on Advocacy

The Lobbying Act 2014 (Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014) amended the law governing elections to include CSOs amongst those who may need to register with the Electoral Commission and declare expenditure on campaigning in the period leading up to a general election if the campaigning can “reasonably be regarded as intended to promote... electoral success... for... parties who advocate (or do not advocate) for particular policies, or candidates who hold (or do not hold) particular opinions”. This law supplemented existing requirements for charities to remain non-partisan published by the regulating bodies for England & Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.

While the purpose of the Lobbying Act is to ensure transparency in how parties and candidates are being funded, the inclusion of CSOs is highly problematic. Research by the Sheila McKechnie Foundation (2018) has highlighted the ways in which activities by CSOs have been limited by the Lobbying Act.

- a. The cost of compliance with the law diverts limited resources from CSOs' primary functions. This is true for CSOs who are aware that their behaviour falls under the law and who need to register, and for those who require legal expertise to ensure they do not undertake regulated activities or expenditure. Half of CSOs within the UK have an average annual income of under £10,000: it is simply not practical to divert this to legal expenses.

**“A lot of people would like you to believe that charities can't be political at all. That's not true. They can't be party political”**

Kristiana Wrixon, Head of Policy, Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations

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- b. The wording of the provisions is ambiguous, making it difficult for CSOs to know whether they apply to them. This produces a “chilling effect” as organisations choose to avoid a broad spectrum of campaigning activities for fear of falling foul of

the law. Where campaigning is carried out, many CSOs report having changed their language or the tone of their message to prevent being seen as political. There are concerns that this caution reduces the overall effectiveness of communication.

- c. The law disincentivises organisations from building coalitions and working together on areas of shared interest. Whilst joint working is one of the most effective ways for CSOs to have their voices heard, the obligation for organisations working together to be jointly liable for total spending requires that all parties interpret and comply with the rules in the same manner. Given the complexity of the rules and the cost of compliance, the research by the Sheila McKechnie Foundation has shown that there is significant evidence of organisations choosing to avoid collaboration.
- d. These issues have a particular impact on CSOs whose primary objectives relate to politically sensitive areas such as welfare, disability, or immigration as any statement or action risks falling under the legislation. There is evidence reported that organisations feel unable to pursue their primary objectives during pre-election periods even when they are unrelated to the political parties.

**Democracy (democratic process):**  
**public control of decision making and equality in exercise of that control.**  
**This includes access to representation, participation, and deliberation; fundamental rights; checks on government; and impartial administration.**  
•••••

The mere existence of the Lobbying Act represents a significant limitation on democratic practices. This is added to by the substantive parts of the Act which cover charities. Democracy requires that all information, evidence, and arguments should be heard and discussed; and that as many people as possible should be able to participate in the political sphere. This is even more important in the period prior to an election, when citizens are making choices as to their representation. CSO advocacy plays a vital role in ensuring all voices are heard and engaged with. Placing limitations on their ability to do this damages the quality of our democracy.

## Engagement isn't always meaningful

One of the ways in which CSOs foster democracy is through activities linking the experiences and preferences of citizens to decision makers. This not only requires there to be a means of communication but such communication has to have actual meaning. The requirements of this vary depending on the type of engagement - national government consultation would differ from local community meetings - but they are underlined by a single principle: it must be, and appear to be, authentic and worthwhile. If conversations, consultations or other means of communication have no possible impact on the decision-making process, then the potential for CSOs to bridge the gap between citizens and their representatives is rendered null.

CSOs report a lack of authenticity across the ways in which they engage with government. Organisations have been asked to attend meetings on policy, but can emerge with their presence having been used as a rubber stamp for a decision already made. More fundamentally, the practice reported by focus group participants of policymakers in Westminster of restricting access to relevant documents means that any input from CSOs and other participants is uninformed and indicates a lack of openness to effective input.

At both a national and local level, the requirement to take into account social value when forming public contracts, which has the potential to foster dialogue with CSOs, has been criticised as a tick box exercise. This has been mirrored across the UK: for example, some Scottish Community Planning Partnerships, established to bring communities and local CSOs into local planning processes, have been noted to have an incoherent approach to engagement.

Where an interest in engagement is intermittent or follows media pressure, there are concerns that governments will disengage once a different issue has gained prominence. We have heard from several CSOs that engagement with organisations working on race equality issues has increased in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests, something which they are not resourced for due to previous underfunding. Whilst any engagement is welcomed, there are concerns it will peter out as the public agenda changes.

**Formal Political Sphere/  
Formal Politics:**  
**the provision of public services, electoral institutions, parliaments, and governments.**  
•••••

**Civic Space:**  
the space in which civil  
society organisations  
and activities exist, both  
physically and in terms of  
their legal standing and  
ability to be active.  
.....

More specifically, consultations, whilst being just one form of engagement, are the most formal, with guidelines as to best practice, and published questions and outcomes. For the process and outcome to be seen to be authentic, a consultation needs to provide adequate opportunity for responses – ideally 12 weeks, according to the Compact published by the UK Government – and responses need to be properly considered with explanations published about how they have informed policy.

That this is what ought to happen is reflected in the inclusion of these goals both in the largely disregarded Compact in Westminster and the UK Government’s own Consultation Principles, most recently refreshed in 2018. However, increasingly, consultations are being held with short response times, leaving CSOs struggling to mobilise their often limited resources to provide detailed responses. The contentious UK Internal Market Act 2020, for example, was open for consultation for a mere four weeks.

The second part of authentic consultation relates to responses needing to be properly considered, and this process being open to scrutiny. CSOs, however, report consultation responses to often be inadequate; failing to demonstrate the breadth of evidence and views which have been voiced; and not providing sufficient explanation of the influence of evidence and why outcomes have been reached.

The consultation on EU retained case law, for example, showed how the voices of CSOs could be minimised and ignored. Rather than being grouped together, they are classified as being “Legal Services”, “Businesses and other Organisations”, or “Human Rights Organisations”; weakening the coherent voice of those who responded. It appears that the vast majority of the responses to the consultation, including those from CSOs, argued to maintain the status quo; however the outcome has been for the Government to make their proposed changes. This is done without fully setting out or substantively addressing the reasons given by organisations against the proposed changes.

Inadequate follow up after engagement is key to understanding whether such exercises are worthwhile. Even in the context of fully authentic engagement, where evidence and views are openly sought in a manner which enables proper response, a question is raised by CSOs about whether it has any impact.

A lack of tangible feedback on the outcome of engagement is reported across different areas of decision making. A common theme we heard from organisations in our focus groups was that even where relationships are good between CSOs and government, they do not necessarily translate into action. Relationships with decision makers (ministers and central government departments) were seen as better than no engagement at all, but as one participant said, “the relationships are just window dressing if we are not getting the policy decisions that make a difference to the lives and the causes that we [as CSOs] work for”.

This was also reflected by an organisation working at a local level: “There is a constant battle to try to influence various levels of local government because it is not meaningful and it depends on who you are talking to”. This lack of meaningful engagement was also echoed by the Directory of Social Change (2020) who recently wrote about their experience of engaging with the Government: “No matter how many meetings we attend, how much data we share, how many papers we submit, they don’t seem to either understand the trouble charities are in or, indeed, care!”

Furthermore, a query has been raised over whether it is worthwhile to engage with political actors who aren’t at the centre of decision making but who might have some influence. This was raised by CSOs we have spoken to in two ways. Firstly, CSOs report that although engagement with evidence gathering bodies such as select committees is meaningful, it is hard to trace the impact of this on future policies or decisions made by Government. Secondly, there are concerns that for organisations engaging with their respective devolved administrations about issues relating to the UK as a whole, although these conversations are meaningful, their perspectives become lost in party political debates in Westminster.

**“The power we hold in devolved nations as CSOs doesn’t work on a national scale”**

Hayley Morgan, TGP Cymru  
.....

CSOs report multiple instances of engagement having no meaning, either because it is being carried out inauthentically, without fostering full participation, or because there are no tangible outcomes. This limits the extent to which CSOs are heard when providing evidence and raising the voices of the communities they serve: the very activities which allow them to act as a mediator between citizens and the state. This severely hinders their ability to enrich our democratic processes.

## Lack of Joined-Up Thinking

A common theme from CSOs we have spoken with is that there is a lack of joined-up thinking between departments, which means engagement with CSOs varies across government. This is a problem at different levels of government: between different departments at Westminster, officials responsible for different policy areas in the devolved administrations, and across services at a local level. The result of this is that although CSOs can foster relationships in one area, if their policy area spreads into the remit of multiple departments, there is no clear route for engagement. Focus group participants highlighted this as a significant barrier to effective engagement. At a local level, an organisation might have good relationships with the community cohesion officers, for example; however when dealing with other parts of the local authority, such as social services, the evidence and issues highlighted by local organisations are not recognised as important. On a central level, participants reported that while an organisation might have good relationships with one department, 'rarely do these departments work together', which 'creates problems with getting big, systemic change'.

On the basis that part of CSOs' role in fostering democracy is being able to transmit views, evidence and preferences; transient relationships present a block on being able to do so successfully in the long term.

## Engagement at Limited Stages in the Policy Cycle

Just as democracy does not only happen at the ballot box, governing does not only happen at the point at which a policy is formed. Government decision making, nationally, regionally and locally, happens through a cycle. Democracy, then, requires representation, participation and deliberation, as appropriate, at each stage of the cycle. However, CSOs carrying out activities such as advocacy and evidence provision in furtherance of these ideals, are often only engaged at certain stages of the policy cycle.

Broadly speaking, there are five stages to the policy cycle: agenda setting, policy formulation, decision making, implementation, and evaluation. All of these are important in determining the shape of policies. CSOs are engaged in different ways in each setting, with the extent of involvement varying over different levels and places of government.

### a. Agenda Setting

This refers to the ability to put an issue up for discussion in the first place and the way in which it is framed. CSOs may be able to foster engagement from communities that are rarely heard or are disenfranchised, but if the issues raised are not already on the agenda and without the power to place them there, the engagement loses its impact. Other than indirectly placing issues into the public consciousness, agenda setting can currently best be seen where there are regular meetings between representatives of CSOs and ministers or policy officials. The most notable lack of this type of forum is at Westminster, amounting to a particular barrier for CSOs operating primarily across England or in relation to non-devolved policy areas. CSOs from all three devolved areas have noted that it is significantly more difficult to engage with Westminster than with their own administrations.

**“In terms of constituencies most affected by a hard border on the Isle of Ireland after Brexit, there was no formal engagement at all”**

Kevin Hanratty, Director, Human Rights Consortium

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In addition to looking at what is being discussed, the ability to set the policy agenda determines how issues will be discussed. This is important because it influences what information, and from whom, will be considered relevant. Consultation around the Brexit negotiations, for example, have largely focussed on trade. However, as we have heard time and time again from CSOs, leaving the EU is not just an issue about trade and economics but one which affects people. Input from these perspectives has rarely been invited. For example, we heard from civil society groups based in Northern Ireland about the lack of engagement from both central and devolved levels on how Brexit would impact the peace process and the lives of people who cross the North-South border every day. This again limits the ability for CSOs to effectively augment voices and provide evidence which could foster better democratic processes.

**b. Policy Formulation**

Much of the engagement discussed elsewhere in this report - consultation, stakeholder meetings, or other means of engagement - relate to the formulation of policy. This is the stage during which evidence and arguments are gathered and evaluated to determine the best course of action to solve a particular problem which has been identified. This is a significant opportunity for CSOs to have a role in policy formulation, albeit with the limitations which have been discussed above and below.

**c. Decision Making**

Decision making is traditionally the purview of elected ministers and parliamentarians. However, we are now seeing more deliberative methods, for example co-production and citizens’ assemblies, being used to guide decision making. Where these new ways of reaching decisions are introduced, it will be important to ensure that CSOs are given a platform to provide input and evidence about specific policies. This is an area where CSOs have the potential to add real value to the quality of the deliberation.

**d. Implementation**

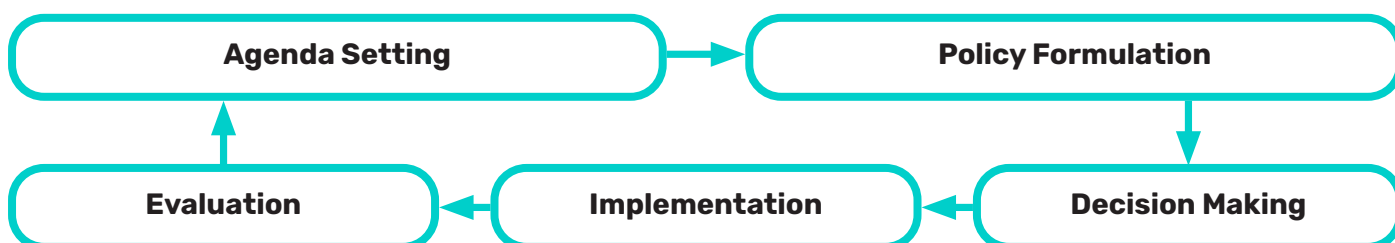
It is uncontroversial that there is a role for CSOs in the actual execution of policies and the delivery of services. Any constraints on this are discussed further below.

**e. Evaluation**

One of the key roles for CSOs in fostering democracy is speaking truth to power and holding decision makers accountable. Outside of the formal political sphere, the ability for CSOs to speak publicly about perceived failures are hampered by the other restrictions on campaigning mentioned in this chapter. Within formal politics, this can take place both through existing stakeholder engagement structures and by providing evidence and policy positions to those parliamentarians, councillors, and assembly members tasked with holding government to account. This is limited in impact, however, as has been seen above, where this engagement isn’t meaningful.

These difficulties are cemented by a lack of transparency in how decisions are reached. CSOs report that their meetings with officials are often unrecorded, preventing them from being able to publicly hold governments to account for what has been said or for pledges which have not been followed through on. The lack of feedback on how evidence and responses to engagement are taken into account in reaching decisions prevents organisations from pointing to the underlying reasons for decisions. Meanwhile, in Westminster, the ability of organisations to use existing mechanisms to ensure

**Figure 6: The Policy Cycle**



transparency and accountability, such as the Freedom of Information Act 2000, are reported to be being hampered by internal monitoring of requests, suggesting requests are not being treated neutrally.

**“We are not recognised as important; we have to fight for our existence”**

Focus group participant



Transparency and openness are vital to CSOs being able to act as an effective check on those in power. Furthermore, there needs to be effective engagement, not only on proposed policies but in forums for evaluation of what has taken place. Without this, the ability for CSOs to hold decision makers to account for their actions will continue to be limited.

## Generally, Activities by CSOs are Taking Place in the Context of a Narrowing Civic Space

As outlined already, CSOs are a channel for more meaningful democratic governance, and their ability to exist is an indicator of a functioning democracy. However, in recent years, the civic space in which they exist has continued to narrow. The physical space of civil society broadly has been severely limited through austerity, for example through the closure of town halls and libraries, with one-fifth of the latter closing between 2010 and 2019. How this has impacted the ability for CSOs to undertake their activities will be discussed below.

Here we turn to the second aspect of civic space which has been narrowing: CSOs’ actual and perceived right of existence.

Despite Government statements supporting CSOs, their existence continues to be criticised, particularly in Westminster. The attack on “activist lawyers” by the Home Office refers directly to those working in the third sector and is just one of a number of incursions on civic space. The Civic Space In Europe 2017 Report (2018) identified the UK as being relatively unusual amongst Western states in having public attacks on CSOs, particularly with the nation’s history of supporting civil society. Respondents to its survey reported a gradual silencing of CSOs who may otherwise have criticised the Government, particularly those in receipt of public funding.

Furthermore, civic space cannot exist without meaningful individual rights: freedom of expression, freedom of association and assembly, freedom of religion, personal integrity and security, and social group equality. These need to be not just ideals but enforceable. Without these, CSO advocacy on behalf of minorities, the ability to speak out on issues governments would rather not hear, and the ability to take direct action are severely compromised.

The current Conservative Party leadership has been open in its criticism of the protection of rights under the Human Rights Act 1998 and the review of government actions through the courts. Prime Minister Boris Johnson, speaking at the Conservative Party annual conference in October 2020, talked about the need to strengthen the criminal system against “lefty human rights lawyers, and other do-gooders.”. These comments come in the context of a pledge in the 2019 Conservative Party manifesto to set up a Constitution, Democracy and Rights Commission to review, amongst other issues, “the Human Rights Act and administrative law to ensure that there is a proper balance between the rights of individuals, our vital national security and effective government.” While this Commission has not yet materialised, the intention to limit individual rights where their exercise is inconvenient for the achievement of government policy represents a distinct threat to civic space.

On two fronts, these encroachments on civic space are damaging for democracy. Any limitations on rights and the ability of CSOs to exist and function in the political sphere is in and of itself anti-democratic. More substantively, these restrictions limit the power of CSOs to carry out activities mediating and improving the relationship between citizens and the state and, accordingly, limit their ability to foster democracy.

## Engagement by CSOs is Limited by Available Resources

CSOs need funding and resources to carry out their activities: those that link directly to fostering democracy, such as engaging with governments, and those which are indirect, such as service provision, both of which lead to greater community engagement and the accumulation of expertise of how policies work in practice.

However, CSOs have operated with increasingly squeezed funding for a number of years as a result of austerity, during which they experienced both cuts to funding and increased demand on their services. The latest funding data released dates to the 2017/2018 financial year, at which time almost half of income came from the public, and just under a third from the Government. Although income increased in that year, this related predominantly to large legacy donations. Since that time funding has become increasingly precarious as a result of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic: in recent research, 83% of charities forecast a decline in their income over the next 12 months, relative to pre-crisis expectations, and 34% expect this to be a fall of over 24%.

The UK's departure from the European Union signifies a shift in funding for a number of CSOs. Hundreds of organisations have received income from the European Structural Investment Funds, with one estimate by the Directory of Social Change placing the amount allocated to UK charities in 2015 alone at £258,423,869. As there was a requirement for funding to be matched by the UK Government, this represents a significant possible loss to CSOs. Replacement funds have been promised in the form of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, aimed at reducing inequalities between communities. However the promised consultation had not taken place at the time of this report's publication, and there are significant concerns that funding will be allocated to infrastructure projects rather than being focussed on equality and social inclusion.

In this context, some CSOs report fears that if they are critical of the government they may lose what funding they have. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a £200 million package of emergency assistance was promised for small charities across the UK; however, it subsequently emerged that the management company PriceWaterhouseCoopers had been contracted to carry out additional checks on applicants. Although insufficient information has been made available to know the substance of these checks, that similar checks were not carried out on businesses applying for pandemic-related funding is indicative of their unequal status in the eyes of decision makers. Furthermore, it adds to speculation that funding is used by government to constrain public criticism.

A lack of sustainable funding amounts to a severe threat to the sector and their ability to carry out the activities which have the potential to foster democratic activity across the UK. Furthermore, if CSOs feel unable to speak out due to precarious funding, a chill will be placed on the ability to have meaningful discourse and hold governments to account.

CSOs have an important role in fostering democratic processes, both working from outside and reaching inside formal politics. However, as we have seen above, there are significant barriers to the ability of CSOs to meet their potential in augmenting democratic practices. The Lobbying Act 2014 and a limiting of civic space amount to an anti-democratic attack on free speech and the ability to protest. Where there is engagement, this is often not authentic: seen as a tick box exercise, lacking in transparency, and without any culture of officials wanting to listen. But with the potential for CSOs to play a vital role in mediating the relationship between citizens and the state, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit, and the climate crisis, changes to these relationships need to be made. We turn in the next chapter to what has been done to address this so far.



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## In Summary

There are systemic barriers to CSOs fulfilling their role as democratic actors across a range of activities and locations.

- ▣ There exists a lack of understanding amongst those in or working for government about the role and value of CSOs. This includes the full extent of activities CSOs carry out, their expertise, professionalism, and right to exist in the political sphere.
  - ▣ The Lobbying Act 2014 places an undemocratic limit on the ability of CSOs to put information into the public sphere, whilst its substance places a chill over campaign activities.
  - ▣ Where engagement between CSOs and the state exists, this is not always meaningful. Meetings and consultations can be a “rubber stamp” with views and evidence going unconsidered, whilst insufficient transparency and time prevent CSOs from being able to respond to consultations as well as they could. There is insufficient follow up to demonstrate the impact of engagement.
  - ▣ There is a lack of joined-up thinking between departments and policy officials with engagement often depending on personal relationships.
  - ▣ There are insufficient mechanisms for CSOs to “put items on the political agenda”, leaving government in charge of what is open to discussion. Meanwhile, a lack of transparency hampers the ability of CSOs to hold policymakers to account for their actions.
  - ▣ CSOs are hampered by a narrowing civic space in which fundamental rights and judicial review are under attack. Meanwhile some organisations are actively criticised by political leaders.
  - ▣ CSOs have experienced consistently squeezed funding as a result of austerity. This is augmented by the COVID-19 pandemic and the uncertainty over the replacement of European Structural Investment Funds with the UK Shared Prosperity Funds. Additional checks on CSO activities before the granting of state relief funds has fostered fears that funding will be removed from organisations who are critical of government.
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# Chapter 3

## WHAT'S BEEN DONE? LESSONS LEARNED

**CSOs have the potential to foster democratic practices, by engaging with citizens, bettering informed discussion, taking part in direct action, transmitting preferences, sharing expert evidence, and holding decision makers accountable. However as we have seen in Chapters 1 and 2, the mechanisms for these activities are limited, with multiple systemic barriers in place. In this chapter, we turn to what reforms have already taken place, and what we can learn from them. First, we examine the broader background to democratic reforms before turning to CSOs.**

### The Background to Democratic Reforms

Throughout this report, we have touched on challenges to democratic practices in the UK: the shrinking of civic space, low trust in government, and threats to the protection of fundamental rights. In the face of these problems, a much broader spectrum of democratic innovations has been considered, of which enabling the role of CSOs is just one.

An innovation in this context relates to anything which aims to achieve a broadening, thickening, or deepening of democratic processes. The simplest democratic innovation was the extension of the voting franchise, first to all adult men and some women and then, ultimately, to all adults. This broadened democracy substantially by increasing the number of citizens who could vote or stand for election.

Of course much has changed since a time when universal suffrage was innovative. There continue to be campaigns for electoral reform to improve a system in which one party gains power disproportionate to its vote share. Nonetheless increasingly, the focus for improvement has fallen upon the participatory and deliberative aspects of democracy. Whilst free and open elections remain important, the outcome of voting is a blunt tool for understanding the interests and preferences of the electorate.

The problems facing our society today are complicated and span a variety of policy areas. It is impossible for politicians to truly encompass all of these in their manifestos and, even if they could, voters choosing between two or three candidates are unlikely to support all of their choice's stated positions. This is complicated further by the need for politicians to respond to unforeseen events. The voters for the Conservative Party in the 2019 election, for example, were not making an electoral choice on the basis of how they were going to respond to the pandemic. It is for these reasons that academics and activists have increasingly focussed on how democracy takes place in between elections.

**“Yes, the government was voted in on their manifesto. But it is a manifesto that just under 14 million people voted for, out of a population of 66 million in the UK. That means that 1 in 5 people voted for the Conservatives of all people in the UK. Even out of registered voters, it is less than 3 in 10. They are there to govern all of us, not just the people who voted for them”**

Kristiana Wrixon, Head of Policy, ACEVO



Set out below are a handful of the projects that have tried to close the gap between citizens and the state, and to make citizen engagement, whether it be through voting or the introduction of more deliberative practices, more meaningful. This gives a flavour of the types of innovations which have been attempted and highlights common themes which can be applied to engagement with civil society.

**Table 1 Lessons learned from proposed democratic innovations**

Name	What it's about	Types of innovations recommended
<p>The Democracy Commission: Reforming Democracy to Combat Political Inequality (Lawrence and Birch, 2015)</p>	<p>The IPPR examines political inequality across the UK and ways in which it can be combated.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▢ Reforms to electoral processes to ensure voting is more meaningful. This includes reviewing seat competitiveness when drawing constituency boundaries, the introduction of single transferable voting, and new duties for electoral registration officers to improve the process of registering to vote.</li> <li>▢ The establishment of a Democracy Commission to facilitate participation and deliberation across the UK.</li> </ul>
<p>Blueprint for a UK Constitutional Convention (Renwick and Hazell, 2017)</p>	<p>The Constitution Unit at University College London considered how a citizens' convention could be convened to look at the constitution.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▢ The type of event - a citizens' assembly - which the report is looking at is itself a democratic innovation as it would enhance citizen participation and deliberation.</li> <li>▢ In the event such a convention is convened, it is recommended that CSOs should not be engaged as participants, but that they play a meaningful role in providing evidence and support for the process.</li> </ul>
<p>Effective Democracy: Reconnecting with Communities (The Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy, 2014)</p>	<p>Between 2013 and 2014, a Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy was convened in Scotland, comprising local government, CSOs, and experts. The Commission was tasked with addressing how to tackle weak local democracy and put communities in control of their future.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▢ Reform of local government decision-making processes to give local authorities more power to determine tax and spending, and to enhance participation and deliberation.</li> <li>▢ Reducing barriers to engagement with local decision makers by placing a general duty in law to support and resource community participation in local decision making, with a specific duty to support communities likely to face barriers to participation; and increased investment in community development services in the third sector to support those facing barriers to participation.</li> <li>▢ Increased accountability through the establishment of an independent Office of Wellbeing to monitor and report on the well-being impacts of fiscal and macro-economic policy, thus enhancing accountability for national decisions.</li> <li>▢ The establishment of a Centre for Participatory Democracy to support national and local government and public agencies with greater deliberation and participation.</li> </ul>

**Table 1 Lessons learned from proposed democratic innovations**

Name	What it's about	Types of innovations recommended
Democracy Matters (Bland and Cullingworth, 2019)	Democracy Matters formed one-half of the Local Governance Review launched in 2017 by the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. The review engaged with communities, individuals, and organisations from across Scotland to consider participation with decision-making at a community level.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="691 241 1460 481">▣ The institutionalisation of and greater support for participative processes. This includes better use of consultation, co-production and forms of accountability; and greater support for citizens to engage with processes, including access to information and communication.</li> <li data-bbox="691 481 1460 909">▣ An agreed set of values governing the relationship between communities and local authorities setting out how communities should be treated by public authorities, how they should work together, and new ways of working to improve outcomes for communities.</li> </ul>

A common theme in these examples is the need for reforms to enable participation and deliberation. This can be done either by improving existing practices or through new forms of policymaking, such as citizens' assemblies or forums for co-creation in which citizens, CSOs, and government design policies jointly. The proposed mechanisms for this range from changes to the way local authority staff members are trained to the formation of new national bodies.

Across these proposals, there is an understanding that what is really being aimed for is greater public control of decision making, and that CSOs have a role in fostering this process.

However, whilst many of these recommendations can apply to the general opening up of decision-making processes, including to CSOs, specific recommendations about their role are limited to investment and providing support. We turn next, therefore, to what has been considered specifically for CSO engagement.

## Democratic Innovations and CSOs

Chapters 1 and 2 of this report set out the current, limited, ways that CSOs are able to play a part in bettering democracy in different places of decision making across the UK, and the systemic barriers which are faced. Within the broader context of democratic innovation set out above, there have been various attempts to break down these barriers.

We look now at these projects to highlight best practice and lessons learned which can be applied more broadly. This includes the Scottish system of local Third Sector Interfaces (TSIs): although these are an institutionalised mechanism for engagement of CSOs with decision making, their introduction was viewed as a democratic innovation and they have been subject to considerable review in an attempt to maximise their utility. The recommendations have been grouped by theme, with project details linked at the end of the chapter.

**Civic Space:**  
the space in which civil society organisations and activities exist, both physically and in terms of their legal standing and ability to be active.

## Infrastructure for CSOs

### *Funding and resources (a) (f)*

Across initiatives of all types, there is a call for adequate funding and resources for CSOs to be able to efficiently carry out their activities, including engagement, advocacy work, and the provision of evidence to decision makers.

- ▣ Where grant funding is provided to CSOs, any conditions which restrict campaigning should be removed.
- ▣ In justifying the use of funding, CSOs should be asked to demonstrate social impact rather than value for money.
- ▣ New initiatives calling for input by CSOs should be adequately funded.

These recommendations reflect the barrier presented by the lack of resources outlined in Chapter 2. CSOs have faced squeezed funding over a number of years due to austerity, while their services, particularly those delivered on the front line, have faced increasing demand. Sustainable funding is required for organisations to both properly function and to properly engage with democratic processes by bringing together citizens with decision makers.

### *Place-based networks (a) (c) (i)*

We heard time and time again in our focus groups about the importance of networks, both based on geography and specialism. This is reflected in the projects which have been carried out.

TSIs in Scotland were introduced in 2011 as a new way for CSOs to collaborate and as a mechanism for engaging with local government. A subsequent review has produced recommendations for how they can best meet their goals. Taking this further, in one TSI, there have been internal democratic reforms to maximise input from grassroots voices. Meanwhile a “London Hub” has been recommended to coordinate CSO activity across the city. The themes across both proposals are as follows:

- ▣ Place-based networking bodies are best situated to organise the provision of specialist support for CSOs in relation to: business functions, such as managing legal compliance and human resources; best practice in carrying out core functions; and effective campaigning. This could be by providing these services themselves or by linking frontline organisations with others best placed to provide specialist support.
- ▣ Place-based networking bodies have a role in maximising the capacity of the sector by building on existing networks and relationships.
- ▣ Place-based networking bodies should act as a forum for CSOs to coordinate on issues of importance and campaigning.
- ▣ An appropriate coordinating body should provide training for those leading and working within place-based networks to meet their responsibilities.

When CSOs work together and pool resources and knowledge, they can achieve more than when they function alone, while providing a combined mechanism for interaction with public bodies. Whilst there are some networks in place locally, we have heard that they are inconsistent in the extent to which they meet these expectations. Proposed reforms fit under the following themes:

- ▣ Government should take responsibility for reviewing, reforming and, if necessary, establishing the system of networks.
- ▣ Government at all levels should consider whether existing networks are the best way to engage with CSOs.
- ▣ Networks need adequate funding to meet their purposes.

Establishing well-functioning networks meeting these standards maximises the ability of CSOs to provide evidence and advocate on key issues which, in turn, improves democratic practices.

These recommendations support the needs of CSOs, thus fostering their ability to undertake activities to serve communities and bring them closer to decision making.

## Culture Shift Within Government

It is clear from trials of democratic innovation, and from what we have heard in focus groups, that any project or process which is put in place to foster collaboration needs to be accompanied by a culture shift. Without this, any reform, no matter how well-meaning, risks being a tick box exercise.

### *Championing CSOs (c) (d) (f)*

- ▣ There needs to be a genuine openness by decision makers and public authorities to working in a collaborative way.
- ▣ Leaders within organisations need to promote the values of collaborative working and the role of CSOs.
- ▣ Leaders within government need to recognise the role and contribution of CSOs, both publicly and in internal communications and practices.
- ▣ Those working with CSOs directly, particularly in relation to contracts and funding, need to foster a culture of collaboration, not competition; and move away from the concept of CSOs as transactional partners.

### *Government internal practices (a) (d)*

Reforms to internal government practices can foster a culture shift in how decision making and collaboration are approached.

- ▣ Where a collaborative working practice or other reform is being put in place, the principles of what is needed for that exercise to be successful need to be defined. This should be shared amongst all those impacted by the reform.
- ▣ A training programme should be developed and provided to staff members around the new practices being implemented.
- ▣ Existing practices should be reviewed to embody genuine openness. For example, meeting rituals should embody a listening culture, joint working and deliberation.

CSOs might have great potential to promote democracy, but without meaningful engagement, this is lost. Changing the culture in government increases the likelihood of authentic and valuable interactions which will bring decision makers closer to the public through CSOs.

## Meaningful Relationships Between CSOs and Decision Makers

A lack of meaningful engagement was highlighted in Chapter 2 as a key barrier to CSOs conveying the preferences and experiences of citizens to decision makers. For an interaction to be meaningful, it needs to be both authentic - where all parties are genuine in their desire to achieve the stated outcome - and worthwhile. Several projects have looked at how to instill relationships with meaning to make them more effective.

### *Values within relationships (d) (g) (j)*

For relationships to be meaningful, they need to have agreed values embedded in them. It is agreed across reports examining relationships between CSOs and decision makers that the necessary values are:

- ▣ Inclusive - any CSOs who have a legitimate interest in an issue should be able to participate in relevant processes.

**Democracy (democratic process):**  
public control of decision making and equality in exercise of that control. This includes access to representation, participation, and deliberation; fundamental rights; checks on government; and impartial administration.  
.....

- ▶ Worthwhile - there should be open collaboration and early engagement with CSOs.
- ▶ Deliberative - there should be well-informed discussion, where a range of perspectives, arguments and evidence are critically engaged with. Differences and disagreements should be worked through. Agreeing to disagree should be the final option when consensus cannot be found.

### *Evidence (d)*

Decision makers need to be willing to listen to evidence from a wide range of sources, including those delivering services. We have heard concerns that relationships tend to be least authentic and worthwhile when decision makers are driven by ideology. The role of CSOs as evidence providers and experts has been stressed across reports, with the following specific recommendations:

- ▶ Governments should not view evidence gathering as a one-way relationship: engaging with those working on the frontline properly involves supporting their participation and offering an element of partnership to be considered worthwhile to CSOs.
- ▶ Evidence gathering must embrace complexity and different perspectives from a variety of actors.
- ▶ An ideal method for gathering evidence is Collaborative Action Research (CAR). This is an approach to research which gives those who are actually delivering services ownership over the research process in engagement with those doing the research. It embraces the values of (1) collaboration and participation; (2) research and inquiry; (3) action and change.

### *Practical steps for meaningful engagement (a) (e) (g) (h) (j)*

Reports reviewing engagement processes and how these can be made better have set out a number of steps. These relate to a range of processes from consultation to co-decision; however they are underlined by certain key principles:

- ▶ Sufficient time must be provided for any engagement process, whether it be responding to a call for evidence or collaborating on a specific project.
- ▶ All relevant information must be provided to CSOs prior to engagement.
- ▶ CSOs' available resources need to be considered as this will impact the amount of engagement they can provide over a given period.
- ▶ There must be clarity in what the engagement is meant to achieve.
- ▶ There needs to be follow up or feedback on the outcome of the exercise. This includes feedback on where input from CSOs was not taken forward and why.

It is further recommended that decision makers at all levels and locations are educated on the benefits of different types of engagement and decision-making processes to encourage more open processes.

Without authentic and worthwhile mechanisms of engagement, CSOs trying to inform decision makers of citizens' preferences and experiences may well go unheard. These recommendations - embedding values, encouraging expert evidence, and steps for meaningful engagement - will better the position of CSOs to foster democratic processes.

**Table 2 Projects looking at enhancing the role of CSOs in democracy**

Name	What's It About?
a) Reimagining Community Planning in Scotland: A Vision from the Third Sector (Escobar, 2015)	In 2014, a two-day forum took place bringing together representatives from Third Sector Interfaces (TSIs) across Scotland to evaluate Community Planning (shared planning of local services). As set out in Chapter 1, each local area in Scotland has a TSI responsible for acting as a strategic vehicle for engagement between CSOs and local authorities.
b) Open Government Network (OECD, 2016)	The Open Government Network is an ongoing initiative drawing together CSOs, civil society actors, and citizens to work together and engage with the Government on its Open Government commitments for greater transparency and openness in governance.
c) The Way Ahead: Civil Society at the Heart of London (Sen et al., 2016)	London Funders with Greater London Volunteering and the London Voluntary Service Council commissioned a Review of the Future of Civil Society Support in London. It looked at what support and infrastructure are needed for civil society to blossom and, accordingly, Londoners to benefit.
d) What Works Scotland (What Works Scotland, 2018)	What Works Scotland ran from 2014 to 2018, exploring how to improve the way that local areas in Scotland use evidence to make decisions about public service development and reform.
e) Collaborative Action Research (CAR) carried out by What Works Scotland (Brunner, Bennett and Bynner, 2018)	<p>Collaborative Action Research (CAR) was one of the methods of learning carried out by What Works Scotland (WWS) (2014 - 2018) in seeking out best practice in the use of evidence by local authorities.</p> <p>There is no single way to do CAR; broadly what it requires is bringing together researchers and practitioners and giving practitioners ownership over the research process. For WWS, three elements were identified: (1) collaboration and participation; (2) research and inquiry; (3) action and change.</p> <p>CAR was trialled over four local authorities in relation to their community planning partnerships. This review examines its use.</p>
f) Social Power: How civil society can 'Play Big' and truly create change (Sheila McKechnie Foundation, 2018)	The Sheila McKechnie Foundation carried out an extensive project looking at how individuals and CSOs can achieve social change, defined as "all types of transformations change - from service innovation to changes in law and policy."



**Table 2 Projects looking at enhancing the role of CSOs in democracy**

g) Ensuring civil society is heard: principles and practices to improve government engagement with civil society (Abrahamson et al., 2019)	Bond, the UK network for CSOs working in international development, carried out a review of government engagement – primarily with the Department for International Development – and organisations. It then set out recommendations for how engagement can be improved.
h) Reflections on the What Works Scotland initiative (Geyer, 2019)	A review of the methods used by What Works Scotland (2014 – 2018). The initiative focussed on collaboration between researchers at the universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow, local authorities, agencies with an interest in public services, and CSO networks. It noted that it faced challenges from elections, the EU referendum, and austerity cuts.
i) Participation and representation: Strengthening the third sector voice in local governance (Cullingworth and Escobar, 2019)	Between 2015 and 2017, the East Lothian TSI, STRiVE, worked with What Works Scotland to evaluate how it could best have participation with and represent its CSOs. Workshops were held with CSOs to examine how they could and wanted to be represented and how to best ensure their participation in processes.
j) LEDES/HOB Open Space (Involve et al, 2020)	This Open Space was founded in 2018 and is ongoing. It provides a forum for the Home Office and CSOs to have constructive conversations about the National Law Enforcement Data Programme and the Home Office Biometrics Programme. This is a forum for discussion and deliberation, not for policymaking. The meetings are facilitated by Involve. The scope of the meetings and the principles of working together were decided by participants at the first meeting.

A lot of work is being done currently to look at creating a closer relationship between citizens and the state. Within this, CSOs are positioned to play a vital role in boosting engagement, campaigning on issues, and providing evidence to better deliberation. Research and trials have taken place across the UK looking at how to better the role of CSOs, but only on an ad hoc or temporary basis. In this chapter, we have drawn together this knowledge into the following broad themes:

- ▶ The importance of infrastructure for CSOS: resources and funding; place-based networks; and the role of regional and city authorities.
- ▶ The need for a culture shift within government: championing CSOS; and changes to internal practices.
- ▶ How to form meaningful relationships between CSOs and decision makers: embedding values into relationships; being open and listening to evidence in all forms; and making practical changes to how engagement is carried out.

Chapter 3 has looked at what has been tried to enhance CSOs ability to fulfil their potential in fostering democracy. Next, Chapter 4 will draw together lessons learned from these projects and existing practices, and set out the changes needed for CSOS to engage in democratic processes inside and outside of the formal policy sphere.

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## In Summary

There has been ongoing progress for the “broadening, thickening, or deepening” of democratic processes since elected representatives became the norm.

Elections are a blunt tool for ensuring decision makers are acting with the best knowledge of the views and interests of citizens and hearing the best evidence for deliberation. To better this, a number of proposals have been made whose recommendations can be summarised in the following themes:

- The establishment of a body aimed at increasing participation and deliberation. Within this new structure, CSOs should be engaged as evidence providers and in considering their future role in democratic processes.
- The need to give greater powers to local and regional authorities to connect decision making with community needs.
- Participation and deliberation need to be institutionalised in government through implementing new forms of policy formation and decision making; and changing the internal culture of government.
- The importance of an agreed set of values governing the relationship between communities and public authorities.
- The need to reduce barriers to engagement by local communities with government, including working with and investing in CSOs to reach

“seldom heard” communities.

CSOs have a role to play in bringing about these reforms, whilst some of these reforms will also assist organisations to carry out their current role in bringing together citizens and the state.

A number of key lessons can be taken from trials and proposals carried out to date seeking to support the role of CSOs.

### **Infrastructure is important:**

- CSOs need adequate access to funding, which should be based on social impact rather than competition-based efficiency.
- CSOs can achieve more when part of effective and sufficiently funded networks. Governments should ensure these are adequate and consider their worth as a formal mechanism of engagement with organisations.
- City and regional authorities should play a coordinating function for CSOs and networks of CSOs within their remit.

### **There needs to be a culture shift within government:**

- Decision makers need to be genuinely open to collaboration and champion the role of CSOs.
- Internal practices should be reviewed and reformed to foster culture change, including providing training to personnel.

### **Change is needed to bring about a meaningful (worthwhile and authentic) relationship between CSOs and decision makers:**

- Relationships need to be embedded with values: inclusivity, worth, and deliberation.
- Decision makers need to be willing to embrace complex evidence from different perspectives and view the process of evidence gathering as equal and participative.
- Methods of engagement should meet certain standards, including allowing sufficient time for response, transparency, clarity about the purpose of the activity, and the provision of feedback.
- Decision makers should be educated on the different types of engagement and decision-making processes to encourage more open processes.

# Chapter 4

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**CSOs play an important role in our democratic processes. Outside of formal politics, their ability to feed evidence and a spectrum of perspectives into public discourse, engage with people on issues and undertake campaigning and direct political action are all vital parts of a thriving democracy. Reaching into the formal political sphere, CSOs can improve democratic processes, such as decision making and policy formation, through advocacy for the views and interests of the communities they serve, and by bringing expert evidence into deliberations. Nonetheless, we have seen a number of barriers to their ability to fulfil this role.**

This report has explored some of the initiatives which have aimed at bringing CSOs into the democratic sphere. This chapter identifies areas of best practice and sets out the recommendations to achieve these. It sets out the levels and areas of government the recommendations are suitable for; however, we note that in some circumstances these institutions and practices may well be in place in some locations to some extent. Furthermore, although key departments are identified to implement and monitor reforms, it is important that all departments are engaged in the changes in order for them to be effective.

Implementing this package of reforms will achieve the vision of:

**A vibrant civil society in which civil society organisations can engage in democratic processes inside and outside of the formal policy sphere.**

## Institutionalised Engagement

*Institutionalised engagement is important, but it must be dynamic to be meaningful.*

Formal relationships and mechanisms for engagement are important as they provide a clear route for CSOs to communicate with the state, regardless of size or location. Where this is most effective, the relationship goes beyond a written agreement and includes active ongoing discussion.

**Best Practice:** In each place of national and regional government there is a document setting out the relationship between government and CSOs. This is meaningful and reflected in practice.

[Examples of good practice or recommendation: Welsh Voluntary Sector Scheme]

	Recommendation	Who is responsible for implementation?
1a.	Each seat of government is to ensure a document is in place setting out the relationship between civil society and government.	The Office for Civil Society and Cabinet Office (Westminster)
1b.	<p>Where one does not exist, it is to be drawn up. Where it does exist, it is to be reviewed. This process of review and formation includes the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▣ Engagement with CSOs about the current relationship: what is working, what isn't, how it could be improved; what commitments are not being met and an action plan to resolve any issues identified.</li> <li>▣ A process of consultation between CSOs and government in which values to be embodied in the relationship are co-produced and agreed.</li> <li>▣ The document and the relationship in practice be reviewed by the individual tasked with overseeing CSO engagement (see recommendation 3) every two years in consultation with CSOs.</li> </ul>	<p>Department for Communities (Northern Ireland)</p> <p>Directorate for Communities and the Third Sector (Scotland)</p> <p>Deputy Minister (Wales)</p> <p>Regional and Metropolitan Mayors<sup>1</sup></p>
	<p><b>Anticipated outcome:</b> The scope and boundaries of engagement between each place of government and CSOs are agreed, clearly set out, and maintained by all parties. The relationship embodies agreed values which are visible throughout methods of engagement. This promotes transparency and openness by government and enables CSOs to engage in policy processes.</p>	

Figure 7 Examples of values found in meaningful relationships



**Source:** Bland, N. and Cullingworth, J. (2019) Local Governance Review: Democracy Matters. Scottish Government; Abrahamson, Z. et al. (2019) Ensuring civil society is heard: principles and practice to improve government engagement with civil society. Bond.

**Best Practice:** National and regional governments have permanent forums made up of government and CSOs representatives, to discuss issues relating to the third sector as a whole and to provide oversight of engagement more broadly.

[Examples of good practice or recommendation: Third Sector Partnership Council and Joint Government Voluntary Community Sector Forum]

	<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Who is responsible for implementation?</b>
2a.	The establishment of a forum in each place of regional and national government to act as the key mechanism for engagement for issues relating to the third sector.	The Office for Civil Society and Cabinet Office (Westminster)
2b.	<p>Where such a forum is identified to already exist, it is to be reviewed to ensure that engagement is meaningful and happening on a regular basis.</p> <p>Each forum must meet the following standards:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▢ Ensure it is made up of members from CSOs which reflect the diverse areas of interests across the sector and all areas within the geographical remit of the place of government. At Westminster there must be representatives from all regions and the devolved nations.</li> <li>▢ Include government personnel responsible for CSOs and oversight of government policy more generally (for example a Minister from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media &amp; Sport to represent the Office for Civil Society, and a Minister from Cabinet Office).</li> <li>▢ Be required to meet on a regular basis, at least twice per year.</li> <li>▢ Have a process in which agenda items can be put forward by all parties.</li> <li>▢ Be open, with minutes of meetings recorded and publically available.</li> <li>▢ Have the power to invite ministers from other relevant departments.</li> <li>▢ Have the power to circulate concerns and information to other departments.</li> </ul>	<p>Department for Communities (Northern Ireland)</p> <p>Directorate for Communities and the Third Sector (Scotland)</p> <p>Deputy Minister (Wales)</p> <p>Regional and Metropolitan Mayors</p>
	<p><b>Anticipated outcome:</b> The permanent body provides a forum for CSOs to express concerns to government on a range of issues, including other engagement mechanisms. This both provides a direct link for the communication of key views and reinforces other mechanisms for engagement.</p>	

**Best Practice:** There is an individual – either elected or a member of the civil service – within government with specific responsibility for overseeing engagement with CSOs across government, and managing engagement on policies relating to the third sector.

[Examples of good practice or recommendation: Welsh Voluntary Sector Scheme]

	<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Who is responsible for implementation?</b>
3a.	The establishment of a role in each place of regional or national government responsible for overseeing engagement with CSOs across government.	The Office for Civil Society and Cabinet Office (Westminster)
3b.	<p>Where such a role already exists, their remit is reviewed and amended where necessary.</p> <p>The role holder has the following remit:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▢ Be responsible, where relevant, for reviewing the written relationship between CSOs and government and ensuring it is upheld.</li> <li>▢ Be responsible, where relevant, for holding at least bi-annual meetings of the representative third sector/government forum.</li> <li>▢ Be responsible for ensuring consistent engagement with CSOs through stakeholder liaison officers over all departments.</li> <li>▢ Be responsible for engagement on policies relating specifically to CSOs, such as funding or regulation.</li> </ul>	<p>Department for Communities (Northern Ireland)</p> <p>Directorate for Communities and the Third Sector (Scotland)</p> <p>Deputy Minister (Wales)</p> <p>Regional and Metropolitan Mayors</p>
<p><b>Anticipated outcome:</b> There is increased accountability for decisions affecting CSOs and the quantity and quality of engagement. Engagement on substantive policy issues takes place and is a consistent and open across government departments.</p>		

**Best Practice:** There is a direct method for local CSOs to liaise with local authorities on matters relating to communities.

[Examples of good practice or recommendation: Third Sector Interfaces and Community Planning Partnerships; Community Cohesion Partnerships]

Recommendations <sup>2</sup>		Who is responsible for implementation?
4a.	The Minister for Housing, Communities and Local Government with the Local Government Association should produce a resource setting out the different types of engagement methods possible, both for ad hoc consultation and permanently.	Minister for Housing Communities and Local Government with the Local Government Association
4b.	The person responsible for community outreach and relationships with CSOs within local authorities, and/or council leaders, to be made responsible for reviewing different forms of engagement and justifying the method used when carrying out engagement.	Council leaders and individuals responsible for communities and CSOs within local authorities.
<p><b>Anticipated outcome:</b> Local authorities are better equipped to carry out meaningful engagement with CSOs on issues relating to the local community, including increasing awareness of issues at an early stage allowing for a focus on prevention.</p>		

<sup>2</sup> Due to the restraints on local authority expenditure as a result of austerity, concrete recommendations relating to local authorities have tended to be limited to improving current practices, and the provision of support and guidance by the Department for Housing, Communities and Local Government, and the Local Government Association. Where local authorities would like to undertake a more wholesale review of their practices, we would signpost them to the "Keep it Local" campaign by Locality.

We have also not explicitly addressed any recommendations to local authorities in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Significant work has taken place in all three of these areas to ensure good practice, as has been highlighted in this report. We defer to those carrying out the reforms specific to each nation as to what further reforms are required.



## Government Culture and Internal Practices

*A culture of collaboration and openness within government is vital for effective relationships.*

Formal relationships are only truly effective in entrenching a meaningful role for CSOs in our democratic processes when there is a genuine desire by those in the relationship to work together.

**Formal Political Sphere/Formal Politics:**  
the provision of public services, electoral institutions, parliaments, and governments.

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**Best Practice:** There is ongoing training for staff responsible for engaging with CSOs.

[Examples of good practice or recommendation: Community Planning Partnerships]

	Recommendations	Who is responsible for implementation?
5a.	<p>A training programme be developed including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▣ The role of CSOs as experts and campaigners;</li> <li>▣ The requirement for engagement;</li> <li>▣ The benefits of engagement;</li> <li>▣ Different forms of engagement (ranging from user research to co-production);</li> <li>▣ Best practice for engagement</li> </ul>	<p>The Civil Service Leadership and Learning Board (Westminster)</p> <p>Permanent Secretaries Group Corporate Human Resources - Development Branch (Northern Ireland)</p>
5b.	<p>This training be provided to all staff tasked with engagement with CSOs, such as departmental stakeholder liaison officers.</p>	<p>Director-General for Organisational Development and Operations (Scotland)</p>
5c.	<p>Guidance and template training be drawn up by the Department for Housing Communities and Local Government with the Local Government Association for use by local authorities.</p>	<p>Head of Organisational Development and Engagement (Wales)</p> <p>Regional and Metropolitan Mayors</p> <p>The Minister for Housing Communities and Local Government</p> <p>Local Government Association Heads of Human Resources and Learning &amp; Development Officers across local authorities.</p>
<p><b>Anticipated outcome:</b> Policy officials and civil servants across national, regional, and local government have a good understanding of what CSOs do, their value, and methods of engagement. This is consistent across departments preventing issues of churn or reliance on personal relationships.</p>		

**Best Practice:** The values of openness, collaboration, and transparency are embedded in day to day practices of the government at all levels.

[Examples of good practice or recommendation: the Commission on Localism; Civil Service Awards]

	<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>Who is responsible for implementation?</b>
6a.	Government organisations to review existing models of best practice and where necessary amend to embody these values.	The Civil Service Leadership and Learning Board (Westminster)
6b.	Review of staff KPIs or objectives to include targets relating to these values.	
6c.	<p>Mechanisms be implemented for showcasing and sharing best practice:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▢ In Westminster and in the devolved nations, this is to build on the civil service awards and include the provision of case studies from the winners of The Collaboration and The Policy and Use of Evidence Award.</li> <li>▢ Regional government to put in place a mechanism for identifying, rewarding, and sharing best practice amongst the authorities under the remit. Whilst leaving the detail to each individual institution, this could be modelled on the civil service awards.</li> <li>▢ Local Government Association to put in place a mechanism for identifying, rewarding, and sharing best practice for member organisations. This should meet a minimum standard of identifying where good practice has taken place, highlighting its qualities, and circulating to members.</li> </ul>	<p>Permanent Secretaries Group Corporate Human Resources - Development Branch (Northern Ireland)</p> <p>Director-General for Organisational Development and Operations (Scotland)</p> <p>Head of Organisational Development and Engagement (Wales)</p> <p>Regional and Metropolitan Mayors</p> <p>The Minister for Housing Communities and Local Government Local Government Association Heads of Human Resources and Learning &amp; Development Officers across local authorities.</p>
<p><b>Anticipated outcome:</b> Action taken at all levels of government is carried out with the goal of maximising transparency, accountability and openness. Engagement with CSOs is meaningful, allowing for the best communication of evidence, advocacy, and accountability.</p>		

## Reforms in How Engagement is Done

*Engagement must be done to a consistently high standard, embodying transparency, openness and accountability.*

**Public Sphere:**  
public debate  
and opinion,  
including  
the news  
media, the  
internet, and  
campaigning  
activities.  
•••••

In practice engagement between CSOs and government at all levels can be improved. For CSOs to advocate for the communities they serve, share their expert evidence, and hold government to account for their actions, there must be sufficient transparency and opportunity to engage with policy and decision-making processes.

**Best Practice:** Engagement methods consistently meet an agreed high standard, which is meaningful, inclusive and deliberative.

[Examples of good practice or recommendation: Bond report; Third Sector Interfaces and Community Planning Partnerships]

	Recommendations	Who is responsible for implementation?
7a.	The Bond checklist (2019) for effective engagement - or an equivalent where this is deemed not suitable (see below) - be used as a basis for engagement at all levels of government and be circulated as the basis for any engagement with CSOs [see Box. 3].	The Office for Civil Society and Cabinet Office (Westminster) Clerk of Committees, Committee Office
7b.	The relevant individual in each place of government responsible for relationships with CSOs to review current standards for engagement and augment or replace with the checklist to ensure this represents a minimum standard of best practice.	Department for Communities (Northern Ireland)
7c.	The checklist forms part of the training for stakeholder engagement officers or other relevant individuals implemented further to recommendation 5.	Directorate for Communities and the Third Sector (Scotland)
7d.	Regional authorities and the Local Government Association to circulate the checklist to local authorities.	Deputy Minister (Wales)
7e.	Where the checklist, or an equivalent, is adopted, this is made available to CSOs as a guide to what they can expect.	Regional and Metropolitan Mayors  Local Government Association Community and CSO engagement officers within local government.

7f.	<p>In any area of engagement where the checklist is not deemed suitable, such as open calls for written evidence to consultations, a set of guidance is produced and circulated by the relevant individuals, including the following key principles:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▢ Sufficient time is provided for responding to any engagement process. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. 12 weeks should be the default period allowed for response to a consultation, and this should be followed in practice.</li> <li>2. Government and CSOs to coproduce an understanding of the time needed for meaningful engagement through the joint forums in recommendation 2.</li> <li>3. Where the full period is not practical, the reason for a shorter consultation period must be justified in the consultation launch.</li> <li>4. The individual responsible for the relationship with CSOs is to monitor the time allowed for consultation and feedback to CSOs through the body provided for in recommendation 2.</li> </ol> </li> <li>▢ Relevant documentation to be provided to CSOs at the start of engagement activities and prior to in-person events. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Agendas and draft documents to be discussed to be provided 5 working days prior to any engagement event.</li> </ol> </li> <li>▢ It is clear what engagement is intended to, and has, achieved. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. At the start of any engagement process, it is stated in writing what outcomes it is intended to achieve.</li> <li>2. The consultation process is designed in light of that goal.</li> <li>3. Feedback is provided following the end of the engagement processes setting out how the information provided by CSOs was considered, the outcome of the engagement process, whether the stated goal was achieved, and if not, why not.</li> </ol> </li> </ul>	
	<p><b>Anticipated outcome:</b> Engagement processes in which CSOs have the time and resources to best communicate the interests of the communities they serve and their expert evidence. Accountability is bettered by demonstrating the impact of engagement.</p>	

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## Box 3 Bond Checklist for effective engagement between government and civil society

### Before

- Agree the scope of the engagement.
- Agree a clear structure for the engagement.
- Develop a Terms of Reference, if appropriate.
- Identify a criteria for selecting participants.
- Choose appropriate mechanisms for engagement.
- Agree a timetable for the engagement process.
- Identify and agree resources required for engagement.
- Agree a dedicated focal person for each organisation.
- Include responsibilities for engagement in job descriptions.
- Create a feedback mechanism.

### During

- Ensure people have enough time to respond to documents and consultations.
- Provide participants with all the information they need to take part.
- Schedule regular meetings and put them in the diary as soon as possible.
- Share participants lists in advance.
- Develop the agenda for meetings through dialogue and share them within a short timeframe.
- Take meeting notes and share them promptly.
- Publish notes and documents online if appropriate.
- Regularly review your approach to engagement and make improvements as necessary.
- Keep others in your organisation informed.

### After

- Provide feedback to all participants.
- Publish the results of your engagement.
- Conduct a joint evaluation or learning exercise.
- Make recommendations about how to improve the process and share them.

**Source:** Abrahamson, Z. et al. (2019) Ensuring civil society is heard: principles and practice to improve government engagement with civil society. Bond.

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**Best Practice:** Debates, policy formation, and decision making are informed by evidence from all available sources. Evidence gathering by government at all levels is done in partnership with CSOs.

[Examples of good practice or recommendation: What Works Scotland]

Recommendations	Who is responsible for implementation?
<p>8a. The methods used by the What Works Network are reviewed to ensure there is an effective mechanism for input from CSOs: through early engagement, collaboration, and an openness to inclusion</p> <p>8b. A transition to the use of Collaborative Action Research by the What Works Network, learning from the experience of What Works Scotland. At a minimum guidance to be issued by Cabinet Office requiring that research projects are designed to be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▣ Collaborative and participative;</li> <li>▣ Based around broad research and inquiry from a wide range of sources including CSOs;</li> <li>▣ Leading to action and change.</li> </ul> <p>8c. Guidance to be produced and circulated by the Cabinet Office and the Local Government Association respectively, to government departments, regional governments, and local authorities about the range of ways to gather evidence, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▣ The benefits of early engagement to respond to emerging issues.</li> <li>▣ Different types of evidence and the value of lived experience.</li> <li>▣ How to engage with CSOs and communities to receive evidence of lived experience in its full complexity.</li> <li>▣ How to carry out Collaborative Action Research and the benefits of doing so.</li> </ul>	<p>Cabinet Office</p> <p>Local Government Association</p>
<p><b>Anticipated outcome:</b> The best and widest-ranging evidence is used in policy formation and decision making. This ensures good quality deliberation and maximises the likelihood of policies being formed which reflect the needs and wants of the population.</p>	

## Making it Easier for Government to have Relationships with CSOs

*Joined-up working through networks should be encouraged and utilised as a mechanism for hearing from the sector.*

CSOs often form networks to work together and pool resources and knowledge. By recognising and liaising directly with these, governments can maximise their efficiency in regular contact with the sector.

**Best Practice:** Government acknowledges networks of CSOs and engages with them in a meaningful manner.

[Examples of good practice or recommendation: Welsh Voluntary Sector Scheme; Third Sector Interfaces and Community Planning Partnerships]

	Recommendations	Who is responsible for implementation?
9a.	Relevant CSO networks are identified and contacted about their willingness to act as a conduit between their members and government.	The Office for Civil Society and Cabinet Office (Westminster)  Department for Communities (Northern Ireland)  Directorate for Communities and the Third Sector (Scotland)  Deputy Minister (Wales)  Regional and Metropolitan Mayors  Local Government Association Community and CSO engagement officers within local government.
9b.	Details of the relationship, membership, and contact details are circulated to relevant government departments and teams.	
9c.	Quarterly meetings are held to discuss issues of shared interest.	
9d.	The network is consulted early in relation to any policy falling within their remit.	
	<b>Anticipated outcome:</b> The gap between CSOs and government is significantly narrowed, with a better ability to communicate the views of the communities they serve.	

## Civic Space

*There must be an end to the encroachments on civic space.*

A vibrant civic space is necessary for democracy to thrive, including the ability for CSOs to do advocacy, take part in direct action, and be equipped to engage in the formal political sphere. Recent years have seen limitations placed on CSOs' ability to undertake advocacy through the Lobbying Act, an increase in rhetoric against CSOs having a role to play in political discourse, and attacks by ministers on third sector actors who take action against their policies. Further threats to civic space are posed by the review of the Human Rights Act 1998 and the judicial review process for challenging government decisions. For CSOs to play a role in democracy through advocacy, protest, evidence provision, engagement with policy, and holding the government to account, these encroachments must be stopped and reversed.

**Best Practice:** CSOs are encouraged to take an active role in political discourse, within the confines of necessary regulation.

	Recommendations	Who is responsible for implementation?
10a.	Repeal of the parts of the Lobbying Act 2014 relating to activities by charities.	Office for Civil Society
10b.	Strengthen and promote Charity Commission guidance (CC9) that charities must not undertake campaigning as their primary activity and must maintain neutrality between political parties.	Charity Commission Ministry of Justice
10c.	A public reiteration of the right of CSOs to undertake political campaigning in accordance with existing Charity Commission regulations.	Committee of Standards in Public Life
10d.	The maintenance of the enforceability of all civil liberties currently enshrined in the Human Rights Act 1998.	
10e.	The maintenance of rights to protest.	
10f.	The maintenance of the right to challenge government decisions through judicial review.	
10g.	Consideration and the publication of guidance by the Committee on Standards in Public Life as to whether the verbal attacks by ministers on CSOs amount to a breach of the Seven Principles of Public Life.  [Examples of good practice or recommendation: The Chilling Reality - Sheila McKechnie; Civic Space in Europe report ]	
	<b>Anticipated outcome:</b> CSOs acting in a vibrant civic space, without unnecessary restriction on their voices, can best advocate for the communities they serve, hold government accountable, and enhance discourse in the public sphere.	



Related to the need for civic space, is the need for CSOs to be adequately resourced. Throughout the secondary research and focus groups carried out for the purposes of this report, we have heard of problems with current funding arrangements: excessive focus on cost efficiencies over social value, short term contracts preventing organisations from planning, and increasingly squeezed resources, particularly in light of fears that funding from the EU will not be replaced. We have also heard calls for a return to grant funding instead of government contracts. Making detailed recommendations about funding arrangements reforms falls out of the scope of this report which has focused on law and guidelines governing advocacy and engagement. Nonetheless it is clearly vital for governments to bear this in mind when considering their relationships with CSOs.

**Democracy (democratic process):**  
**public control of decision making and equality in exercise of that control.**  
**This includes access to representation, participation, and deliberation; fundamental rights; checks on government; and impartial administration.**  
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# Conclusion

**Civil society organisations (CSOs) have long played a vital role in our society: meeting community needs; campaigning for change; and providing a safety net where government fails. Through all of these activities, they are able to enhance democratic processes by bridging the gap between citizens and the state, ensuring evidence is heard in policy debates, and by holding government to account.**

Through analysis of the current role of CSOs and how they engage with decision makers, this report has identified the systemic barriers they face in playing an active role in democratic processes and has set out a roadmap to achieve the vision of:

**A vibrant civil society in which civil society organisations can engage in democratic processes inside and outside of the formal policy sphere.**

This report comes at a time when it is vital for those in power to hear from those they are elected to serve. As the UK responds to the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic and social impacts, creates its post-Brexit trade policy, and seeks to implement the levelling-up agenda, policies must be shaped around the needs and views of those they will impact. Outside of policy formation, attacks on judicial review, human rights, and the ability of CSOs to be politically active present a dangerous attack on democracy and must be reversed.

Although the recommendations in this report are concrete, what we have heard time and time again, both through our work coordinating an alliance of CSOs and through the focus groups held for this report, is the importance of organisations being valued by government. There is a strong appetite and need for change: to move to an open and collaborative culture amongst decision makers. The recommendations set out in Chapter 4 offer a road map for the way forward, and must be taken as a whole for meaningful change to take place.

We address this report to all those involved in government throughout the UK, in different places and at different levels. Some areas will already meet some of the standards of best practice, whilst others will have to implement systemic change. No level of government, however, is exempt from the need to improve. Truly participative, deliberative, and representative democracy is an ideal: the recommendations in this report offer a road map for how to step closer.

# Appendix 1

## THEORY AND DEFINITIONS

Concepts such as civil society and democracy are not easily nor uncontroversially defined. We have used the following working definitions throughout the report. The reasons by which we came to these definitions are set out below.

### Box 1 Definitions of key terms used throughout the report

- ▣ **Civil Society Organisations:** Organisations within civil society which broadly meet the following:
  1. At least some element of formal and institutionalised structure
  2. Separate from the state and the private sector
  3. Non-profit distributing
  4. Self governing
  5. The existence of voluntary participation through, for example, a trustee board, volunteers or donations
  6. Working for social objectives and public benefit
- ▣ **Civic Space:** the space in which civil society organisations and activities exist, both physically and in terms of their legal standing and ability to be active.
- ▣ **Civil Society:** Activities and interactions by individuals and organisations sitting between the state and the private sector.
- ▣ **Democracy:** public control of decision making and equality in exercise of that control. This includes access to representation, participation, and deliberation; fundamental rights; checks on government; and impartial administration.
- ▣ **Formal Political Sphere:** the provision of public services, electoral institutions, parliaments, and governments.
- ▣ **Government:** the current administration in the relevant location.
- ▣ **government:** those carrying out governing more generally, across local, regional, and national government; and over time, not restricted to current ministers.
- ▣ **Public Sphere:** public debate and opinion, including the news media, the internet, and campaigning activities.

## Civil Society, Civil Society Organisations, and Civic Space

The exact definition and boundaries of civil society are contested, but broadly speaking it encompasses the space left unoccupied by the state and the private sector. This includes formal and informal associations, actors, and activities; and the space available for their existence. Some see the purpose of civil society as to improve the lives of individuals and communities, whilst others see it as a check on state power. We take these as being complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

This report follows on the previous work of the Brexit Civil Society Alliance, which has worked predominantly with formal civil society organisations. Whilst there is no perfect definition of what differentiates a CSO from other actors within civil society, we broadly follow the principles as set out by the NCVO in their definition of the voluntary sector:

- ▶ At least some element of formal and institutionalised structures
- ▶ Separate from state and the private sector
- ▶ Non-profit distributing
- ▶ Self-Governing
- ▶ The existence of voluntary participation through, for example, a trustee board, volunteers and donations.
- ▶ Working for social objectives and public benefit

Conversely, this report notes the importance of participation from across civil society, particularly the need for better links between formal institutions and social movements such as Black Lives Matter. Determining the means of achieving this, however, falls outside the scope of this report.

As noted above, the space in which CSOs and other civil society actors exist is important. This includes physical space, the legal rights to speak and act, and the constraints on or freedom to exist within society more generally. Rather than include this within the definition of civil society, we follow the Civic Space In Europe 2017 Report (2018) and International Institute for Democratic and Electoral Assistance (2019) (International IDEA) in using the term *civic space*.

## Democracy and Democratic Innovations

*Democracy* is as difficult to define as civil society, with different meanings at different times and in different circumstances. At its most basic, it is the, “popular control over public decision-making and decision makers, and equality between citizens in the exercise of that control.” (International IDEA, 2019). What it means to use this control varies and spans different ways of making decisions. This can be seen in what are called the three models of democracy: representation, participation, and deliberation.

Representative democracy is best described through the election of individuals to a forum such as parliament, in which they represent the interests of those who voted for them. It is a competitive process focussing on the aggregation of interests and attempting to satisfy the most number of people. Popular control and equality between citizens under this concept of democracy relates to the need for free and fair elections, inclusive suffrage, and an elected government.

Participatory democracy is the ability for citizens to engage more actively with and critique decision making. Examples of participation include involvement in political parties, engagement with civil society campaigns, writing to your MP, and signing petitions. Here citizens express control of processes and equality through the ability for all to shape and provide input to different forms of participation.

Deliberative democracy expresses an idea that decisions are made not only by representatives on behalf of citizens, but by citizens themselves. Policy is formed as a result of communication and discussion leading to consensus about what outcomes are supported by the best reasons.

There is scope for these models to conflict: it is hard to see how an understanding of democracy based on discussion and consensus fits with democracy based on majority vote. However they need to be seen as complementary, and each adding something the others cannot. We need all three for the very practical reason that it is neither possible nor efficient for all citizens to be in every room where decisions are being made which affect them. This report therefore does not privilege one understanding of democracy over any others.

In addition to being based on an idea of popular control, there are certain ideals embodied in the concept of democracy. The International IDEA (2019) sets these out as:

- ▶ the guarantee of equality and basic freedoms
- ▶ the empowerment of ordinary people
- ▶ the resolution of disagreements through peaceful dialogue
- ▶ respect for differences amongst us
- ▶ and the bringing about of political and social renewal without economic and social disruption

International IDEA (2019) provides a practical framework by which systems can be assessed according to theories and understandings of democracy. We draw on this throughout the report in understanding how CSOs can bring citizens closer to the state.

Representative Government	Fundamental Rights	Checks on Government	Impartial Administration	Participatory Engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Clean elections</li> <li>▶ Inclusive suffrage</li> <li>▶ Free political parties</li> <li>▶ Elected government</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Access to justice</li> <li>▶ Civil liberties</li> <li>▶ Social rights and equality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Effective parliament</li> <li>▶ Judicial independence</li> <li>▶ Media integrity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Predictable enforcement</li> <li>▶ Absence of corruption</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Local democracy</li> <li>▶ Direct democracy</li> <li>▶ Electoral participation</li> <li>▶ Civil Society participation</li> </ul>

**Source:** International IDEA (2019) The Global State of Democracy 2019: Addressing the Ills, Reviving the Promise. doi: 10.31752/idea.2019.31.

## Public and Political Spheres

This report follows those of the Sheila McKechnie Foundation (2018) and Nesta (2020) in viewing the activity of CSOs as taking place in different spheres or spaces. This is a way examining the way actors relate to each other in different spaces, each of which are governed by different values. The boundaries of these spheres vary, but for the purposes of this report we are using the following working definitions:

**Public Sphere:** this encompasses “the realm of public debate and opinion, of social and cultural normal, [and] of civic action.” (Sheila McKechnie Foundation 2018) It includes the news media, the internet, and campaigning activities.

**Political Sphere:** this includes all activity to do with formal politics, with both formal and informal rules governing activity. It includes the provision of public services, electoral institutions, parliaments, and governments.

Civic space mentioned above, spans the political and public sphere in addition to the community sphere, which this report does not touch on.

# Appendix 2

## METHODOLOGY

### Desk Research Exercise

We undertook a desk research exercise, looking at the existing literature on civil society organisations, democratic innovations, and the intersection of the former and the latter. This exercise has largely been based on publications focussed on the UK as we sought to explore the particular circumstances of civil society organisations here. This was supplemented with some limited research looking at experiences and commentary from elsewhere.

### Qualitative Research

Three focus groups were held with representatives from different civil society organisations, including Roma Support Group, Turn2Us, Dorset Race Equality Council, Human Rights Consortium, Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, Wales Council for Voluntary Action, Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations, Human Rights Consortium Scotland, Unison and TGP Cymru. The focus groups were conducted with semi-structured questions to allow participants to develop their thoughts and speak more freely on the issues raised.

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