



Parliamentary Briefing

A Balancing Act: New perspectives on the charity/beneficiary relationship

As the independent regulator of charities in England and Wales, the Charity Commission has commissioned some research from Ipsos MORI on the perspectives of charities, beneficiaries and the public on the relationship between charities and those who use their services. Our report, *A Balancing Act: New perspectives on the charity/beneficiary relationship*, is the first of its kind. These research findings will inform the public debate across all political parties about the appropriate role of charities in delivering public services.

How do people feel about receiving services from a charity?

The majority of people questioned felt comfortable receiving services from a charity. However, a significant minority, 28%, said they would feel embarrassed to receive free help from a charity. Even if the charity charged for the service, 21% still said they would feel embarrassed.

What do people expect of service provided by charities?

40% of the public surveyed think that public sector organisations should provide the highest level of service compared to a private (14%) or voluntary sector organisation (9%). However when asked which type of organisation actually would provide the best service, 24% thought it would be a voluntary organisation (24% thought it would be a private sector organisation and only 19% chose a public sector organisation). Furthermore, 70% of people questioned said they would be confident that a charity would treat them with dignity and respect. Taken together, these findings shown the high esteem in which people hold charities' services.

Who should charities be accountable to?

Interestingly, only 18% of the public surveyed think that charities should be accountable to the people who directly benefit from their goods, services or activities. Both local government and central government were also selected by few respondents (14% and 15% respectively). Instead, a charity regulator and the charity's trustees were the two most mentioned organisations and individuals to which charities should be accountable (48% and 43% respectively).

What problems do charities face in delivering services?

Many charities surveyed would like to help more people but are able to identify reasons why, on occasion, they are not able to do so. 35% of all charities questioned, rising to 60% of large charities¹, said that one reason was that demand exceeded capacity. Furthermore, 19% of charities questioned cited the inability to secure funding for specific people or activities as a reason why they sometimes couldn't help, and 16% said they were unable to get funding to maintain ongoing services or activities.

Are charities just there to provide services?

No, it's important to remember that providing services is just one way charities can further their purposes. One interesting finding from the survey is that charities are in regular contact with their beneficiaries; 59% of charities surveyed have contact with their beneficiaries at least once a month and some much more often. This clearly demonstrates the legitimate and representative voice that most charities speak with, in particular in their campaigning and advocacy role.

How can I find out more about the research?

The full research report, which includes details of methodology, is available on the Charity Commission's website at www.charitycommission.gov.uk.

This briefing document is also available in the Public Affairs area of the Charity Commission's website. If you have any queries please contact our Parliamentary Officer, Andrew Rudd, on 020 7674 2322 or by email at andrew.rudd@charitycommission.gsi.gov.uk.

¹ The report describes charities as "small", "medium", "large" or "very large" according to their level of income. "Large" refers to charities with an income of between £250,001 and £1 million.