

Strategy review focus groups

July 2018

For the Charity Commission

Prepared by: Populus

Populus

Table of Content

- Methodology 3
- Tested concepts..... 4
 - The statement of purpose 4
 - The benefits of successful regulation 4
- Executive summary 5
- Findings 7
 - 1. Attitudes towards charity and charities 7
 - 2. Knowledge and expectations of the regulator 12
 - 3. The statement of purpose 15
 - 4. The benefits of successful regulation 17

Methodology

Populus conducted six focus groups among selected segments of the English and Welsh population in July 2018. Each group consisted of either eight or nine participants.

- 9 July 2018: London, **Professional Advocates** (mixed gender)
- 9 July 2018: London, **Cosmopolitan Idealists** (female)
- 12 July 2018: Manchester, **Cosmopolitan Idealists** (male)
- 12 July 2018: Manchester, **Compliance First** (mixed gender)
- 18 July 2018: Taunton, **Local Volunteers** (female)
- 18 July 2018: Taunton, **Local Volunteers** (male)

Conversations in each group were guided by a discussion guide agreed in advance with the Charity Commission and lasted up to ninety minutes.

The segments were identified using Populus's analysis of attitudes and approaches towards charity and charity regulation, based on a nationally representative poll of over 4,000 English and Welsh respondents. The segmentation was mapped onto the Populus Clockface model to reveal associated attitudes and demographic patterns at a micro level. This was also used to inform the locations selected for the focus groups.

Tested concepts

The statement of purpose

The Charity Commission ensures charity can thrive and inspire trust so that people can improve lives and strengthen society

The benefits of successful regulation

*Successful charities who follow the rules can get on with the job
Charities who follow the rules are given more space to apply their know-how*

*Charities have to live up to the same standards as the rest of us
Charities are held to higher standards that reflect the importance of the work they do*

*People are able to join together and make a difference in their local community
Charities helping people to join together and make a difference in their local community*

*Charities are able to make a difference in the best way they can
Charities are able to make a difference in the best way they know how*

*Working for social change is respected and supported
Charities standing up for the most vulnerable being respected and supported*

In the first groups in London, only the first variant of each benefit was tested. Based on responses in London, participants in Manchester and Taunton were shown both versions of each benefit.

Executive summary

Participants across the four recruited segments were supporters of charities and wanted them to flourish. Their initial associations with ‘charity’ were positive, centring on the generosity and selflessness of donors and volunteers and helping those most in need.

Across all groups – not just those with less forgiving attitudes towards charities – there was a strong desire for charities to be held to higher standards than currently seemed to be the case. The different segments arrived at this conclusion from different perspectives; some said that higher standards applied because charities worked with the most vulnerable, while others believed they should be treated no differently to others in public life such as doctors and the police who were also held to the highest standards. Indeed, once they had established that charities had a positive impact on society overall, the conversations quickly turned with little or no prompting towards concerns around charities doing the right thing, demonstrating impact, and accountability. While the different segments contextualised the sector in different ways – the Local Volunteers, for instance, focused on the importance of local causes and the Cosmopolitan Idealists focused on the wider impact that charity had on society at home and abroad – these core concerns were shared in all segments.

Negative media stories involving specific charities such as Oxfam and Kids Company and general stories about the salaries of CEOs had done much to undermine the confidence that these participants had in the sector overall (it was large, household names which they first thought of when appraising the sector). At best, they thought that large charities wasted vast amounts on unnecessary bureaucracy, and at worst, they felt that many were mechanisms for enriching senior charity workers which went against the spirit of charity. They thought the last few years had given them more reason to doubt charities and that they were “no longer on a pedestal”.

There was little firm knowledge of the body which regulated charities but all groups were adamant that the regulator should have responsibilities beyond making sure that charities stuck to the law. They expected it to construct and enforce a set of behavioural standards which reflected what the public expected from charities and charity workers: from maximising the proportion of donations that reached the end cause, to ensuring that charity workers treated vulnerable people with dignity and respect. Where these standards were breached, they expected the regulator to offer guidance and stewardship for first/minor offences, and to make an example of charities that seriously or intentionally breached them.

The statement of purpose was well-received across all groups. They thought it was strong and decisive, and encapsulated what both the sector and the regulator should aim to achieve. They liked that it focused on positive outcomes rather than punishment and enforcement. Participants also liked the inclusion of the word ‘ensure’. While they recognised that some of the things in the statement were not entirely within the Charity Commission’s control, they preferred this to ‘weaker’ alternatives such as ‘strives to’ or ‘aims to’.

The five benefits of successful regulation were generally well-received; participants were able to easily choose those which most appealed to them and those that did not appeal to particular individuals were largely seen as unobjectionable, though there were some recurring minor concerns. Each of the different benefits appealed in different measure to different segments.

The first benefit (on allowing charities who ‘follow the rules’ to ‘get on with the job/apply their know-how’) appealed to some of the Professional Advocates and a couple of the Local Volunteers, though others worried that it suggested an implicit trust in large, successful charities like Oxfam. Some also thought that ‘get on with the job’ sounded too dismissive, while the phrase ‘given more space’ proved troublesome for others who felt that charities like Oxfam had shown that they should not be given more space.

The second benefit (on charities living up to the standards expected of them) was popular among the Cosmopolitan Idealists, the Professional Advocates, and the Local Volunteers because it addressed the concerns they had about accountability; most participants favoured 'higher standards' rather than 'the same standards'.

The third benefit (on people 'joining together to make a difference in their local community') was the most popular among the Compliance First group because they felt it came closest to focussing on demonstrable impact. It also appealed to some of the Local Volunteers (and a few Cosmopolitan Idealists) who liked the inclusion of 'local community'.

The fourth benefit (on charities 'making a difference in the best way they can/know how') divided opinion because of the final part of the sentence; some were willing to view charities as 'experts' but others did not feel reassured by the implication that charities could be left to simply 'do their best'. The second rendering did little to counteract this.

The fifth benefit (on social change/standing up for the most vulnerable being 'respected and supported') appealed to the Cosmopolitan Idealists and a few Local Volunteers. The 'working for social change' reference was however deemed confusing and too open to interpretation; this was somewhat assuaged by the alternative rendering which referred to 'standing up for the most vulnerable' instead.

Findings

1. Attitudes towards charity and charities

Participants in all groups were supporters of charities and considered them fundamental to society. First and foremost they associated the words ‘charity’ and ‘charities’ with generosity, selflessness, and caring for vulnerable people. The Cosmopolitan Idealists felt in particular that the benefits of charity reached beyond the people that charities directly helped; they thought that charities helped to forge connections between different communities and made those who gave to charities “feel good”. All groups believed that, overall, charities did make a positive difference to those in need. When prompted, all participants said that society would be stronger if charities were held in high regard.

*“[I think of] health. There's a lot of health issues that are being supported by charities.”
[London, Professional Advocates]*

*“There would be more people on the street if it wasn't for Salvation Army and Shelter.”
[London, Professional Advocates]*

*“If we didn't have charities the poor would get poorer and the rich would get richer.”
[Manchester, Compliance First]*

*“I think it makes people feel good as well if they're contributing in some way.”
[Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Male]*

“It's about building communities. Looking globally, it's about helping people to be more independent. Whether it's building schools, fresh water, education for young girls, type of thing.” [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

“It goes back to community. Because I'm very much into the arts and sometimes people don't always realise the impact that has on the community whereas I'm passionate about it.” [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

“Society is better off [when charities are held in high regard], because people are thinking of others instead of themselves.” [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

Nearly all participants said they personally supported individual charities. Most commonly, these were medical research, humanitarian, animal welfare, and homelessness charities. In many cases support of individual charities was motivated by personal links to family members or friends who had benefited. In part because of this, most participants did not feel it was appropriate to deem any type of charity more important than any other, and that instead it depended on personal preference. It was clear, however, that the charities which came to mind first when discussing the sector were large, household-name charities which supported humanitarian and health-related causes (though the Local Volunteer participants were more likely to refer to local charities run by local people).

*“You can't say one thing is better than the other. Obviously, Cancer Research is important. I picked Shelter because it's more personal to myself and my family.”
[London, Professional Advocates]*

“You think of the big names – Oxfam.” [Taunton, Local Volunteers]

The Cosmopolitan Idealists differed slightly in their conception of the role of charities in society in that they highlighted the role of the state where other groups did not. In London, the female Cosmopolitan Idealists argued that charities did not receive as much state funding as they had in the past and that this had put strain on the sector. In Manchester, the male Cosmopolitan Idealists thought that charity should only exist as a last recourse when the state had failed in its duties; they were particularly critical of the government for failing to support those in need and suggested that there had been a proliferation of charities in recent years as a result. Rather than being a positive thing, this was seen by the Manchester Cosmopolitan Idealists to be an indication that the government needed to do more to help the most vulnerable.

“A lot of charities get zero government funding. So, without people there wouldn’t be someone fighting that corner.” [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

“The state should do more about inequality instead. Global and national inequality. But the way it is, yes, it is the individual’s responsibility to redistribute that wealth.” [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

“The number of homeless people is ever increasing and you just wonder about the social contract that the government has is being met.” [Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Male]

“Why are we sponsoring something that should be paid for by the government, paid for by services we pay taxes for, when it’s obviously something you need?” [Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Male]

“[We should not become] Americanised, where charities are so ingrained in the culture that without them people die. In other European countries charities are a shadow because it’s already taken care of.” [Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Male]

“The expansion of charity over the last couple of years is the more worrying thing; at the supermarket there’s a box with food bank donations. That’s shameful.” [Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Male]

The Local Volunteer participants were more preoccupied by the the idea that “charity starts at home” (both groups brought up this idea unprompted at an early stage). Though they still thought of large charities such as Oxfam when considering the sector – and indeed they did donate to large charities which worked overseas as well as smaller, local ones – the idea of “helping neighbours” was at the forefront. In part this was because of a sense of obligation to assist those to whom they felt most connection, and in part it was as a result of their belief that it was easiest to see the impact that charities had when donating to local causes.

“Charity starts at home. I think a lot of people believe that.” [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Female]

“Local charities. Because you can see where your money is going.” [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Female]

“You get something back from it. You’re not just helping those people.” [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Female]

“Often you know the people who directly benefit.” [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Female]

“One good thing about charities is it allows local passion to be brought together and to be used for something local.” [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Female]

“There are children starving right across the world, and you think ‘I wonder why that nation isn’t doing more to help their own?’ It’s lovely to look after the local, but we need everyone to do that.” [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Female]

“When rotary clubs send money abroad, it goes to another rotary club, which is fortunate. It doesn’t go through a foreign body. All the money that is sent goes to where it is meant to be.” [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Male]

“There’s more control with the local ones.” [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Male]

Having established that charities did have an important role to play in alleviating the suffering of those in need and strengthening society, participants in all groups – even those with more liberal outlooks towards charitable causes – quickly turned to concerns about doing the right thing, demonstrating impact, and accountability, with little or no prompting.

There was a high awareness in both Cosmopolitan Idealist groups of recent scandals involving charities, most notably Oxfam and Kids Company. Some of the Professional Advocates and Local Volunteers were aware of the Oxfam scandal and only a few of the Compliance First group had heard of either of these cases. Those who had heard of them said that stories such as these cast doubt over the governance of not just the particular charities involved but other large charities too (and indeed it was large, household-name charities which they tended to think of first when appraising the sector). Moreover, even among those who were not aware of specific stories about charities (such as those in the Compliance First group), there was a deeply held, general skepticism about the behaviour of senior charity officials and the financial conduct of large charities and a sense that this behavior was becoming more common.

“They’re regarded well still, but perhaps people are more questioning now.” [London, Professional Advocates]

“I know we can’t blame a whole company on the actions of one or two people, but in that situation, I do believe the higher-ups would have known and they should have done something better. The fact that they hid it is quite revolting.” [London, Professional Advocates]

“In my mind now they’re no longer on a pedestal. They’re the same as private companies.” [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

“It’s what people half-suspected. Then they come out and proved it and that’s the tip of the iceberg. Oxfam were quite a respected charity. It’s very negative.” [London, Professional Advocates]

“If one or two are doing it, are they the ones that got caught, is there more that haven’t got caught yet? Is it like an industry wide thing? It doesn’t mean it’s true, it just puts a bit of doubt in your mind and when you go to donate money you think, hang on, where is this money going?” [London, Professional Advocates]

“Some of the overseas aid workers have tarnished [the sector].” [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

"It makes me suspicious. It makes me think well, if it goes on there, it could easily go on elsewhere, in other charities. It does make me suspicious. You don't want to tar them all with the same brush, but I must admit, you hear one story somewhere and you think 'ah, well, this is only a matter of time before something else might be revealed elsewhere'." [Manchester, Compliance First]

"The Oxfam thing was disgusting. You don't trust them fully after that. They have to do a lot to get that trust back." [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Female]

"There's so much bad press at the moment. The Oxfam scandal, what they got up to abroad. They used charitable donations to pay for local prostitutes. It changes my view of them." [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Male]

"Charities have damaged themselves in the last 18 months, two years. The problem is, one affects the other. If you hear something bad about one, it relates to the others as well, psychologically." [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Male]

"Especially the bigger ones. If there's a charity just down the road that I know is based just in my area, I would happily walk in, give them a fiver. But for the bigger ones, I don't know if my money is actually worth giving to them." [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

Along with concerns about the behaviour of aid workers and senior charity officials, participants in all groups raised questions about the financial activities of large charities, continually returning to the perception that charities were opaque about their spending. They commonly believed that, at best, large charities wasted vast amounts of money on admin and bureaucracy, and that at worst, senior staff of large charities were more interested in making sure they earned high salaries than in helping those they purported to help. In Manchester, the male Cosmopolitan Idealists were particularly cynical about "what goes on behind closed doors", and suggested that money had "contaminated" the charity sector in recent years. They believed that in the past, charities had been run by unpaid trustees but now, large charities existed to make profit for wealthy CEOs as much as to help those in need. Some of the Professional Advocates disagreed with this view on CEO salaries, suggesting that they should be remunerated relative to the amount of additional income they were able to bring to the charity.

All groups firmly believed that it was not enough for charities to follow charitable law with regards to financial activity; they thought they also had an obligation to ensure and then demonstrate that donors' money was put to best use in achieving charitable purposes.

"I think people are worried: 'where does the money go?' We can't see where the money goes." [Manchester, Compliance First]

"I don't give to big charities, like Oxfam and Cancer Research, because I don't know where my money's going." [Manchester, Compliance First]

"I think instinctively there is a sense that charities over the last few years have... I don't feel they're what they should be, in that they have become contaminated." [Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Male]

"The first thing that comes to mind [when thinking of charities] is this: if you believe what you read, there's so much money that is given in good faith, but it never reaches the people it's meant to reach. The management and the people who run the charities take all the money." [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Male]

"[I first think of] 'bureaucratic'. A lot of the charities can be, too admin focused, so you don't actually get the money. What can be quite disconcerting is when 80% of the donations are going to admin, so less than 20% of the pound is going to the cause on the ground" [London, Professional Advocates]

"They send you this that and the other through the post. What does it actually cost these societies to send this stuff out? Wouldn't they be better of using that money for the charity?" [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Female]

"There's uncertainty about where the money goes with international charities. You just have to do it on trust." [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Female]

"They're not necessarily held in high regard at the moment because there's been bad press about certain charities. Is the money actually getting to the shop floor so to speak? CEOs have been milking money into their own bank accounts." [Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Male]

"The big pay packets of CEOs of these charities are very questionable." [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

"Exactly whose life is being improved the most? Is it the child in Africa, or is it the chief executive with his multi-million-pound pension? That's not where people want their money going." [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

"You think you're giving to a good cause and you're just lining somebody else's pockets. It's not going where it should go. It quite probably happens outside of Oxfam too." [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Male]

"You hear the stories they're paying the CEOs thousands and thousands of pounds, then you think, 'that's what I'm paying towards'." [Manchester, Compliance First]

"I think they should get a decent salary because they are CEOs, but it shouldn't be six figures because I can't imagine why a charity would be taking money that could be used for a charitable cause and giving it to someone who claims to believe in what the charity is doing." [London, Professional Advocates]

"If they bring a lot to the charity, they have to be remunerated for that." [London, Professional Advocates]

"If you can't get someone to work for a low salary, you have to employ somebody who is capable of doing the job but on a big salary." [London, Professional Advocates]

These attitudes were occasionally exacerbated by the notion that there was little evidence that long-standing charities had achieved the aims they set out to achieve (for instance, in researching cures for medical conditions or fighting poverty), though this was only mentioned by a few participants.

"I believe a significant change should be seen because in third world countries and developing places. You would expect that over the years the charities should have taught them how to sustain themselves without needing further help." [London, Professional Advocates]

“That sort of thing makes you wonder, if some people are making so much money out of the charities, why is it in their interest to solve the problem?” [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

2. Knowledge and expectations of the regulator

There was little firm knowledge of the body which regulated charities in any of the groups and it was clear that participants had given little prior thought to the matter. Many had heard of the concept of charities being ‘registered’ and were generally aware that this register was maintained by an independent body but little else besides. When prompted, around half of the participants across each group said that they had heard of the Charity Commission, having seen it appear in news stories when charities had been found in the wrong. Beyond this, however, there was again little recall of what it did or what activities it was primarily engaged in.

“They've got commissioners, but I don't know what they do.” [London, Professional Advocates]

“Does it give organisations charitable status?” [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

“I'm imaging a kind of Ofsted type of thing where they just turn up and ask to look at the books and make sure they're ticking all boxes.” [Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Male]

All the groups were clear that the regulator should have powers beyond making sure that charities stuck to the law. A common theme was that the regulator should construct and enforce a “code of conduct” or set of behaviour “guidelines” to ensure that those who worked at charities were held to a defined set of behavioral standards. The Cosmopolitan Idealists, Local Volunteers, and Compliance First groups focused on the regulator ensuring that an appropriate portion of the charities’ funds reached the intended cause rather than being used directly or indirectly to enrich charity workers, while the Professional Advocates were particularly keen on the regulator “investigating” charities to make sure that they were doing what they said they did.

Indeed, while the Compliance First group said that investigating malpractice and ensuring that charities stuck to the law should be its primary aim, they too were adamant that it had responsibilities beyond this. Again, they returned to financial transparency and impact, arguing that a key part of the regulator’s job should be to audit charities and reveal how much of donors’ money was spent directly on the intended cause. Both the Cosmopolitan Idealists and the Local Volunteers said that charity was “about morals” and that this meant the Commission had an obligation to go beyond checking that charities adhered to the law.

“The overarching reasons for the charity being a charity has to be met in totality.” [London, Professional Advocates]

“We expect charities to work with integrity. There should be guidelines on best practice, on all sorts of things: staffing, money, so they're not being wasteful.” [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Female]

“They should be checking the books, finding where the money is spent.” [London, Professional Advocates]

“They should check the charity is run properly. It’s a moral thing.” [Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Male]

“I want charities to improve their morals really and be held accountable, to be made an example of.” [Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Male]

“It sounds silly, but almost undercover investigations. You see those programmes on Panorama where they go undercover and expose all this stuff. If they can do that quite easily, then the body should be able to do that as well.” [London, Professional Advocates]

“A code of conduct on the way they behave when they go abroad.” [London, Professional Advocates]

“There should be annual assessments as to what they’ve spent their money on. [They should step in] if they’ve spent it badly and it’s been proved to be spent badly.” [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Male]

“You should know from each pound that you give how much of that pound goes to the cause.” [Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Male]

“It should be making sure that people get paid correctly, and the money is going to where it should go to.” [Manchester, Compliance First]

“I think they should check that the trustees are fit and proper.” [Manchester, Compliance First]

“Whatever the function of the charity, if the people involved aren’t helping the people in need, the Charity Commission should be very hard on that. Their people should be passionate about the cause.” [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Female]

“Measuring how well a particular project or initiative is doing. Say in foreign countries they’re doing something with water, they can easily report back. We can see if something is working.” [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

Few participants explicitly brought up the Commission’s role in providing advice and guidance to charity trustees, but when informed that this was part of its remit, participants responded positively, acknowledging that the transgressions of some smaller charities in particular might be the result of a lack of knowledge and experience rather than intent. Indeed, participants in all groups were keen that the regulator did not just focus negatively on those who had intentionally broken the law, but that it also play a part in positively highlighting the good work that compliant charities did to achieve their charitable purposes.

“It should give a certain level of productivity assistance, something like that, not just behaviour or negative things, maybe more positive things as well.” [London, Professional Advocates]

“Providing the advice and guidance, that’s more of a positive thing, so it’s quite good they are doing that.” [London, Professional Advocates]

“They should announce announce a charity that’s doing everything perfectly. One that would be open and honest with everything, and you could look into their finances so you knew exactly if you gave a pound, what percentage of that pound is going to help people.” [London, Professional Advocates]

“They should be promoting accountability and transparency within the charity sector. It should be looking at best practice, having charities to maybe share best practice, promoting collaborative working across charities.” [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

“I think a lot of trustees are very well-meaning but they might not necessarily know the role of a trustee too well. I sit as a governor on a local school. We all sat there thinking what does a governor do? So we all signed up to a course and got advice on how to do it. It’s useful.” [Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Male]

The idea of ‘naming and shaming’ charities which broke charitable law was supported in all groups – participants strongly believed that charities should not be afforded any special protection from this if the same was expected of those in other sectors who had broken the law. They also expected the regulator to recommend dismissals where charity workers had committed serious offences and to dissolve charities which had seriously breached the terms of their charitable status.

“Definitely, because otherwise these people can just move into a different job and there’s no real repercussion. We have a right to know. We’re the people who donate to these charities. We have the right to know if a person who is working there is abusing their position of power.” [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

“They should be named and shamed, because it shows then that they are on top of things.” [Manchester, Compliance First]

“No one else gets protection so why should charities?” [Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Male]

“They should be able to revoke people’s charitable license.” [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Male]

“They should be able to recommend somebody being sacked, like any other business.” [Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Male]

The idea of ‘naming and shaming’ those who had not broken charitable law but had failed to meet other public expectations was met with caution, particularly among the Local Volunteers and Professional Advocates. There was some desire for the regulator to do so in extreme cases in which it was clear that a charity had contravened its charitable purpose, but at least a few participants in each group were concerned about the impact this might have on the health of the sector and particularly on smaller charities which might not survive negative press associated with them.

“Good idea. It goes back to transparency. In my company, it’s a construction company if somebody has an accident it’s all over the news that’s a good thing it makes us try harder.” [Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Male]

“They should if they’re wasting money. If they’re employing people that they don’t need to employ, because they should run on the least number of staff possible and volunteers.” [London, Professional Advocates]

"I would be concerned about that. It depends really on who has done what and monies raised and where it's been spent." [London, Professional Advocates]

"In a tiny charity with ten people they would have no way of defending a score they believe is unfair, but Oxfam I'm sure would take legal action forever and a day, because it's a multimillion pound business. That's the difficulty with naming and shaming; all charities are not the same. There's such a wide variance." [Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Male]

"They shouldn't name and shame [if they fell short of public expectations]. It doesn't need to be negative. They should help them." [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Female]

Participants struggled to answer whether declining public trust in charities would indicate that the regulator was doing a good job or a bad job, partly because they thought that the charities themselves had greater responsibility than the regulator to demonstrate positive behaviours. When pushed, they tended to side with the idea that the regulator should be aiming to increase public confidence in charities, not decrease it. They suggested that part of the regulator's role was to educate charities on best practice and to pre-empt bad practice, and that therefore it should aim to "catch it before it reaches the news", thereby reducing the risk that the public standing of charities might decline.

"If the public standing of a charity goes down it has nothing to do with the regulator because it's the charities actions that have made the public standing go down. It's like a football match: you can't blame the referee." [London, Professional Advocates]

"If more people become suspicious of charities, it's usually because something has happened, and it's up to that regulator to come out and make us aware. Why is that charity in the press? They're a bad one because of this. They shouldn't be trying to make us suspicious of everyone, but just make us more aware of which ones to be suspicious of." [Manchester, Compliance First]

"You'd hope that they'd put action plans in place to make it run correctly, and not just shut it down, or not paint it negatively." [Manchester, Compliance First]

"They should be catching it before it's in the news." [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

3. The statement of purpose

"The Charity Commission ensures charity can thrive and inspire trust so that people can improve lives and strengthen society"

The proposed statement of purpose was well received across all groups. They thought it captured the essence of what they expected from the regulator and could find little in the statement to disagree with. The female Cosmopolitan Idealists in London liked that it was less "bureaucratic" than they might have expected, and also liked that it referred to 'improving lives and strengthening society'. The male Cosmopolitan Idealists in Manchester said it summed up "what charity is about" and those in the Local Volunteer groups echoed this sentiment, calling the statement "ideal". The Professional Advocates liked the "positive" focus on "trying to inspire", and this view was echoed by the Compliance First group; while most of them favoured naming and shaming charities which deliberately mismanaged funds, they were keen for the Commission to also point out positive examples of charities which complied with the law and excelled in furthering their charitable aims. Participants in this group initially had minor concerns that the statement did not cover "compliance

monitoring and damage control”, but then came to the consensus that this was part of ‘inspiring trust’. None of the groups aside from one or two participants felt that the statement was too ‘soft’.

“[I react to this] very positively. We’ve been talking about how they should be punishing people and making sure everyone is doing their job right, but this is saying nothing about that. It’s trying to inspire people to do the right thing in the first place.” [London, Professional Advocates]

“It’s a very positive statement, nothing negative at all. If they do what they say there then that’s what you can expect. You can’t expect any more.” [London, Professional Advocates]

“It’s basically what charities are all about really.” [Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Male]

“It’s a strong statement, because it clearly sets out what they aim to do. It’s good.” [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Male]

“I think it’s an ideal statement. It says what it wants and it’s to the point.” [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Male]

“It feels like it’s a bit of a response to things that have been in the press. A good response.” [Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Male]

“I think it’s just right. The charity can thrive and inspire, that’s what you want, and it does improve lives and strengthen society. If charities don’t do their work, society starts to suffer.” [London, Professional Advocates]

“If I saw that on the tube in a little poster, I’d think ‘that’s great.’” [London, Professional Advocates]

“[I like ‘thrive and inspire trust’ because it suggests they] won’t hold them back too much. You don’t want to tie them up with too much red tape, and that’s what I said earlier about creating an environment that they can do their job.” [London, Professional Advocates]

“It’s less bureaucratic than I expected it to be.” [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

“It’s soft, but it’s not fluffy.” [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

“As an umbrella statement it works.” [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

“It’s a good statement. It covers lots of things.” [Manchester, Compliance First]

“I think that’s what they should be doing.” [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Female]

“I like ‘thrive and inspire trust’. It shows purpose.” [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Female]

“There’s nothing in there about compliance monitoring or damage control.” [Manchester, Compliance First]

“I’d say that comes under ‘inspiring trust’.” [Manchester, Compliance First]

Though they recognised the inherent problem with proposing to ‘ensure’ something which was not entirely within one’s control, participants on the whole much preferred this to “weaker” alternatives such as ‘strives to’ or ‘aims to’ etc. In general, they liked that the statement was able to encompass the positive outcomes that they hoped for while also reassuring them that the regulator was not too ‘soft’ or close to charities.

“It’s a bold, confident statement. There’s no ‘we might, we’re going to try’, it’s ‘we’re going to do it’.” [London, Professional Advocates]

“I think ensure is better than saying might.” [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

“It sounds like they’ve got the legal powers to compel charities to work in certain ways.” [London, Professional Advocates]

4. The benefits of successful regulation

Participants were shown five different benefits of a successful charity regulator and asked to indicate which ones appealed to them and which they found objectionable. In the first groups in London, only the first variant of each benefit was tested. Based on responses in London, participants in Manchester and Taunton were shown two versions of each benefit. Both versions are shown below.

*Successful charities who follow the rules can get on with the job
Charities who follow the rules are given more space to apply their know-how*

This benefit appealed to some of the Professional Advocates and a couple of the Local Volunteers, who liked the idea of reduced bureaucracy for charities which followed the rules.

However, the Cosmopolitan Idealists and some of the Professional Advocates and Local Volunteers worried that this suggested an implicit trust in large, successful charities like Oxfam which cut against recent experience. None in the Compliance First group chose this as their favoured benefit. The concept of ‘risk-based regulation’ was therefore a hard sell for these participants.

The Cosmopolitan Idealists in Manchester also had concerns but for slightly different reasons: they felt it suggested that certain charities would be favoured while others would be left behind, which they did not think was constructive. This was somewhat assuaged by the omission of ‘successful’ in the second rendering, though concern remained for some participants about a) selective and inconsistent treatment and b) giving charities too much ‘space’ with loose regulation, given recent experience with charities such as Oxfam.

“It just says what they do, that they’re making sure the charities do what they should be doing and they can get on with what they need to do.” [London, Professional Advocates]

“It does make you think that if they follow the rules now they will just leave them to it and they won’t need to go back and check again.” [London, Professional Advocates]

“That implies the ones that might have had a few hiccups will be somehow held back or restricted.” [London, Professional Advocates]

“They have expertise, in terms of research. They can tap into specialists in that field.” [London, Professional Advocates]

“The first one kind of rang alarm bells for me, because I think that’s what happened. People did think [that successful charities could be allowed to get on with the job] and that they were following the rules, and then we discovered they weren’t.” [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

“They should be monitoring what they are doing, but just because you’re successful doesn’t mean that suddenly you don’t have to be monitored.” [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

“‘Get on with the job’ is just so dismissive. ‘Oh, just get on with the job.’” [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

“It sounds like ‘I’m all right Jack and sod you lot.’ [Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Male]

“I would worry about giving them too much ‘space’.” [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Male]

Charities have to live up to the same standards as the rest of us

Charities are held to higher standards that reflect the importance of the work they do

This benefit was popular among the Cosmopolitan Idealists, the Professional Advocates, and the Local Volunteers. Those who chose this as their favoured benefit felt that it addressed the concerns they had about accountability – these two segments showed a clear desire for charities to be held to at least the same standards as businesses and those in public life. Indeed they felt that charities’ work with vulnerable people made this more not less essential – if doctors and police had to do it, so should they. The second rendering was favoured overall: most felt it should say ‘higher standards’ rather than ‘the same standards’.

“They are a business and they should abide by the rules that govern other businesses. They are charitable, but they can’t get free reign.” [London, Professional Advocates]

“It goes back to what we were talking about earlier on. They do have to be held to higher standards because of the work they do. It is an important job. Charities are important.” [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Male]

“[They should be held to higher standards because] policemen and doctors and people who work in drug and alcohol clinics, they work in hard jobs and we’re not giving them slack and saying, ‘go and do what you want’.” [London, Professional Advocates]

“I think it’s pretty obvious. It’s to do with accountability, it’s to do with transparency. An organisation has to be held to a certain standard. We would expect it in any industry and even more so within the charity sector. I think it’s important that they act with integrity.” [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

“I think it just goes back to transparency. I can understand not knowing how much my boss gets paid but I want to know how much the people running the charities get paid.” [Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Male]

“I chose this one because I just think that it states that charities do have to live up to standards. There are probably not a lot of people that actually realise that they are regulated.” [Manchester, Compliance First]

*"I prefer 'higher standards', because you do have high expectations of them."
[Taunton, Local Volunteers, Female]*

People are able to join together and make a difference in their local community

Charities helping people to join together and make a difference in their local community

This benefit was the most popular among the Compliance First group because they felt it came closest to focussing on demonstrable impact – some of the participants in this group favoured small, local charities because they believed it was easier to see what was being done with donors' money than with large charities. It also appealed to a few of the Cosmopolitan Idealists who stressed the importance of community and society, and a few of the Local Volunteers who liked the inclusion of local causes. When considering the second rendering of the statement, participants liked that the addition of 'Charities helping people' clarified the direct involvement of charities and the impact they had.

In London, the Cosmopolitan Idealists and Professional Advocates did not object to this benefit but it was not seen as particularly compelling.

"You see them in your community, or in your day to day lives, and that influences your decisions." [Manchester, Compliance First]

"You can see what the local benefits are." [Manchester, Compliance First]

"I chose it because I liked the idea of 'local communities'. You can actually see the difference. I volunteer at the local food bank, and I can actually see the benefit of what I'm doing." [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Male]

"I came very close to choosing that one." [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Male]

"Teach somebody how to fish rather than give them a fish; the idea of being a catalyst it sounds more sustainable because charities are supposed to be the icing on the cake." [Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Male]

"I always think not only about the end goal and the impact but actually the impact that people who are involved in that charity by volunteering. It encapsulates that too." [Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Male]

"The second one links it directly to the charity just a bit more formally." [Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Male]

"I think it's about showing that charity is giving people the platform to make a difference. The top one looks a bit more informal." [Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Male]

Charities are able to make a difference in the best way they can

Charities are able to make a difference in the best way they know how

This benefit divided opinion because of the final part of the sentence, between those who were willing to trust charities as 'experts' and those who were not.

The focus on 'making a difference' and on charity workers doing their best to help those in need made this benefit popular among a few of the Local Volunteers, but others had second thoughts about the apparent notion implied in the final part of the sentence that charities could be trusted to do the job they were supposed to. The Cosmopolitan Idealists rarely chose this as their preferred benefit but they responded better to it than both a) some of the Professional Advocates, who were conflicted

about whether charities could always be considered to have sufficient expertise to determine ‘the best way’ to operate; and b) Compliance First, who thought it was too vague and not reassuring. The second rendering did not assuage these concerns because participants still perceived a sense of doubt in the statement about charities’ ability to do what they were aiming to do. Some of the Cosmopolitan Idealists in Manchester did prefer the second rendering, which they felt gave them slightly more reassurance that charities knew how best to achieve their goals, but other participants in this group remained ambivalent about the benefit.

“I think number four is really good. It’s good if they’re able to make a difference in the best way that they know how.” [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

“Anybody who gives up their time to a charity is going to put the full effort in. They’re not usually the type of people to do it for their CV. They’re the right people for the job and they’ll do it to the best of their ability.” [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Male]

“That’s what charities do. They do make a difference.” [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Female]

“You trust that there are people in [small, local charities] who are driving them the right way.” [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Female]

“I suppose it goes back to them being the experts. To me, they are the experts. They’re the ones involved in it. They’re the analysts.” [Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Male]

“It’s not worded right. It’s like they’ll give it a go, ‘we’ll try our best’.” [Manchester, Compliance First]

“With the first one, it’s open to [being interpreted to mean that] they might be doing it the wrong way.” [Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealist]

“I’m not too keen. It says ‘the best way they know how’: it’s implying there are other ways that would be an improvement.” [London, Professional Advocates]

“I worry because there are a lot of people with good intentions, who mean well but don’t have the means to actually deliver.” [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Female]

“It leaves a bit to be desired. It’s as though if someone did something wrong, they could just be like ‘well, look, I did my best’.” [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Male]

Working for social change is respected and supported

Charities standing up for the most vulnerable being respected and supported

The fifth benefit was well-received among the female Cosmopolitan Idealists in London, who supported the concept of campaigning to change attitudes being respected by the public – and for those campaigns to be treated impartially by the regulator. A few of the Cosmopolitan Idealists in Manchester also liked this benefit for similar reasons, but more widely there was initial confusion in most groups about what ‘working for social change’ meant and this was a stumbling block for many.

Those who were shown the second rendering therefore preferred it to the first because the alternative focus on the ‘most vulnerable’ removed the ambiguity of ‘working for social change’ and accorded with their view that charities should focus on those most in need.

The Local Volunteers were largely indifferent to the fifth benefit though two participants chose it as their favourite on the grounds that charity work did not receive the respect and support it should. They also agreed with the Cosmopolitan Idealists (when probed) that those who campaigned to change attitudes should be treated fairly and with impartiality and respected by society at large. As they interpreted social change to mean “supporting the less well-off”, they did not have strong views on which of the two versions of the benefit was preferable.

“I think that it would be a huge change. It could be any sort of charity. If everyone respected change and supported it, there would be a real difference.” [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

“I don’t really understand it. What do they class as social change?” [London, Professional Advocates]

“It sounds quite good a nice thing to say, but I can't see why that has any relevance to The Charity Commission.” [London, Professional Advocates]

“I personally think anyone that fights and campaigns for their own views should be respected. Then everyone has their own individual thing, whether you support them or not.” [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

“You need to have two sides of a debate before you can make your mind up.” [London, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Female]

“I liked ‘the most vulnerable’. I was interested in how charities have changed in the last few years and when the Red Cross is talking about poverty in this country instead of government saying it.” [Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Male]

“I prefer the second version. I think the term social change is just a bit ambiguous people could read into that all sorts of different things.” [Manchester, Cosmopolitan Idealists, Male]

“I prefer the second because charities do stand up for the most vulnerable. People that need help, whose situation isn’t like ours.” [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Female]

“‘Social change’ means the less well-off being supported more.” [Taunton, Local Volunteers, Male]

Northburgh House
10 Northburgh Street
London EC1V 0AT

T +44 [0]20 7253 9900
F +44 [0]20 7253 9911

info@populus.co.uk
www.populus.co.uk

Populus