



Building trust with the new parliament

nfpSynergy and ACEVO report

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Introduction

ACEVO and nfpSynergy are partnering to provide ACEVO members and nfpSynergy clients with a comprehensive understanding of trust, and how it relates to charities. With this series of reports, we hope to give you a more nuanced understanding of what trust is, and why it is important for your charity.

Our first report looked at public trust in charities and why it matters. In this second report, we look at how charities can build trust with the new Conservative government. We look at what trust means in the professional, political context. We also reflect back on how the relationship between charities and Conservative MPs has not always been productive and positive. Then we look ahead to the future and how charities can develop a more trusting relationship with the new government. The report draws predominantly on findings from the Charity Parliamentary Monitor, nfpSynergy's quarterly research with MPs.

At the time of writing, MPs are settling into a House of Commons dominated by Conservative MPs. The political landscape offers a political stability that has been absent in recent years. Many charities are hoping that the passing of the Withdrawal Bill means MPs will have a little more 'non-Brexit' headspace for their areas of concern. The huge majority gives charities the chance to plan longer term strategies – something that has been painfully absent from their parliamentary work in recent years.

However, the elephant in the room is that the party in power has not historically had the easiest relationship with charities. Frustration at the number of charities lobbying in parliament and opposition to government policies has led to 'stick to your knitting' comments¹ and legislation such as the Lobbying Act. Trust is in short supply between both sides. In this report, we set out where the relationship is stronger than this narrative suggests (and some where it is reinforced!), as well as suggesting some do's and don'ts for engaging Conservative MPs.

Key takeaways from this report

1. MPs trust charities a great deal, particularly local charities. Both local and national charities are trusted to tell the truth, put society's interests first, and deliver on their promises. Other sectors generally do not come close to achieving the same levels of trust as local and national charities.
2. MPs of all stripes believe that charities have a problem with transparency – despite the fact that charities publish their accounts. How are you demonstrating transparency to this key audience?
3. MPs are just as affected by negative media coverage as the public, and have a very long memory. To maintain high levels of trust with MPs, charities must demonstrate they are acting honestly and ethically, as well as being well-run.
4. International charities have a trust problem, particularly with Conservative MPs – only 21% trust INGOs to tell the truth. Be sure to emphasise the local elements of your work when engaging Conservative MPs. If you have no local links, you will have to work even harder on transparency.
5. Labour MPs are generally more trusting of charities, and are more likely to think your organisation is effective. While it is going to be more difficult in the current context for Labour MPs to progress your concerns, you should consider how to engage them when looking for cross-party consensus or when you are working to challenge government policies.

¹ 'Charities should stick to knitting and keep out of politics, says MP', The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/sep/03/charities-knitting-politics-brook-newmark> [Accessed February 2020]

Contents

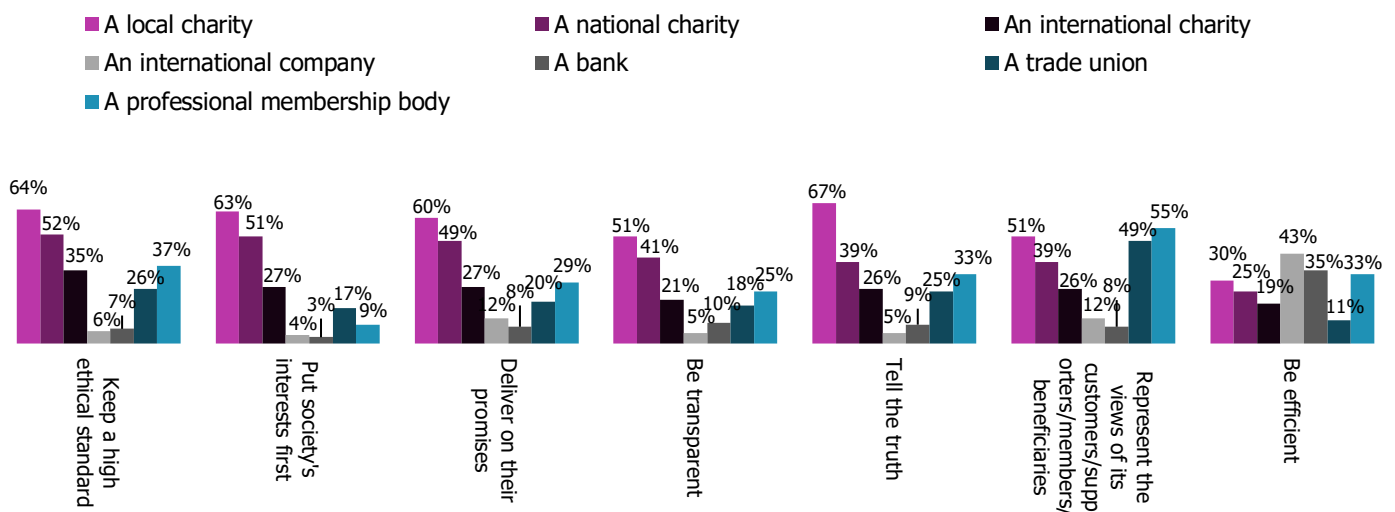
| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction | 2 |
| Key takeaways from this report | 2 |
| Contents | 3 |
| 1. Charities (particularly local charities) are well trusted compared to other sectors..... | 4 |
| 2. The factors that impact MPs' trust in charities | 5 |
| 3. MPs remember when charities fall short | 6 |
| 4. Transparency (or a perceived lack thereof) is damaging trust..... | 7 |
| 5. What to do and not do with Conservative MPs | 7 |
| 6. What to do and not do with Labour MPs | 9 |
| About nfpSynergy | 11 |
| About Acevo..... | 11 |
| Understanding trust in your charity | 11 |

1. Charities (particularly local charities) are well trusted compared to other sectors

To develop our understanding of MPs' trust in charities, we asked MPs to select the organisations they would be most likely to trust to enact a range of values in summer 2019. Values included telling the truth, putting society's interests first, and delivering on their promises². MPs could select as many organisations as they liked for each category.

We asked about three different types of charity; local, national, and international. Charities were relatively more trusted than most other organisations, including international companies, news organisations and banks (Figure 1). Charities were well trusted to tell the truth, keep a high ethical standard and put society's interests first.

Figure 1. Organisations MPs are most likely to trust to enact certain values



"Which of the following organisations would you be most likely to trust to: (tick as many that apply)" **Ranked by total for national charity**

Source: Charity Parliamentary Monitor, Jun-Aug 2019, nfpSynergy. Base: 137 MPs

The data reveals a real disparity in MPs' levels of trust in international charities, compared to local and national charities. International charities have low levels of trust across the board. Only 26% of MPs would trust international charities to tell the truth. We discuss below how MPs recall incidents of poor behaviour by international charities, which as this question shows, have affected their level of trust.

Professional membership bodies and trade unions are more trusted to represent the views of their members / beneficiaries. MPs also trusted membership bodies, banks and international companies to be more efficient than all levels of charity.

² "Which of the following organisations would you be most likely to trust to: (tick as many that apply)" Source: Charity Parliamentary Monitor, Jun-Aug 2019, nfpSynergy. Base: 137 MPs

2. The factors that impact MPs' trust in charities

From raising awareness of a service or a cause through to pushing for legislative change to improve the lives of beneficiaries, MPs can perform many roles in aid of charities. Many of the findings from our first report on public trust in charities will apply to MPs; they are more likely to trust a charity if they believe it to be ethical and honest, and less likely to trust if the charity has done wrong. However, the realities of their role and responsibilities mean that other factors can also influence an MP's trust in charities:

- **Public opinion of charities**

MPs are sensitive to public opinion, and have professional and personal incentive to be this way. Professionally, they must represent the views of their constituents. Personally, their jobs depend on it. Unlike Peers, who may be more willing to engage with controversial causes, MPs are more likely to trust charities that are much loved by the public. When charities let down the public, MPs also respond to this. Some MPs still reference charity scandals from many years ago when talking about an organisation's current parliamentary work.

- **How effective your charity is believed to be**

If an MP sees your charity as effective, they trust you to be good at delivering for your cause. It also means they are more likely to have a successful relationship with you, and they can achieve progress in partnership with you.

- **Being perceived to be 'too political'**

This comment regularly makes an appearance in our research. It often means 'not agreeing with me' or 'deploying tactics I don't like', and these do not correlate with trust. If an MP thinks your charity is 'too political', it could imply trust is scarce and your relationship is distant.

- **How good are your public affairs staff?**

We often see the perceived effectiveness of an individual charity increase if the public affairs staff are very good at building relationships with MPs. Sometimes it can be one individual who is effective at engagement or already has trusting relationships with a network of MPs.

- **Was your chair of trustees once an MP?**

It does not go unnoticed in the Westminster bubble when high profile staff have a political history. Many Conservatives, for example, will comment about a revolving door between the Labour party and charities. It may not be true, but perception is reality. This can have an impact on how much an MP will trust your charity, though of course many MPs regularly work with other parties in their parliamentary career.

3. MPs remember when charities fall short

As discussed above, MPs are very sensitive to public opinion. Charities have faced periods of intense scrutiny in the last 5 years, and MPs have certainly picked up on this. Two particular periods stand out: Kids Company in 2015, and the uncovering of inappropriate behaviour among some overseas aid and development charities. Both appear to have had long lasting effects on trust in charities.

Kids Company

In the wake of the collapse of Kids Company in 2015, we asked MPs if they had any specific comments on the charity³. The responses were overwhelmingly negative, with many MPs blaming poor financial management, a lack of accountability and even corruption for the demise of the organisation. Others felt that an over-reliance on charismatic leadership and celebrity endorsements were to blame for the charity's downfall, with one Labour MP describing it as *"an object lesson for politicians overawed by personality"* and another saying *"reputation badly damaged. Not to be trusted."*

Several MPs felt that the incident had caused considerable reputational damage to the charity sector, and many were disappointed to see the demise of a charity that they felt had provided important services for vulnerable young people. One Conservative MP wrote that Kids Company had *"done a lot of harm to (the) youth charity sector"*, and a Labour MP felt that the closure had *"left a huge hole in support for vulnerable young people"*.

Overseas/international charities

In 2019, we asked MPs why they felt 39% of the public distrusted charities⁴. Negative media coverage and scandals were the top reasons they gave, and these were dominated by international charities. This was true across all parties.

- *"Scandals overseas have damaged charities" (Conservative MP)*
- *"Recent scandals involving abuse of trust e.g. Oxfam" (Conservative MP)*
- *"Child abuse scandals of some international aid organisations." (Conservative MP)*
- *"Recent stories about international charities abusing the people they were tasked to help." (Labour MP)*
- *"Oxfam and Save the Children scandals have got to be part of this." (Conservative MP)*
- *"Some high profile scandals involving employees of international charities." (Labour MP)*

Clearly, there is not an easy answer for this. Bad and immoral practice happens in all sectors, but often the scrutiny of the response to the issue can be as damaging as the initial reason an organisation is facing pressure. In the months following the Oxfam scandal of 2018⁵, we asked journalists to share the advice that they would give to charities on how to respond to a public crisis or scandal⁶. They talked about ensuring

³ nfpSynergy Charity Parliamentary Monitor. August – October 2015, 150 MPs. "A number of organisations are listed below. If you have any specific comments about them, good or bad, please write them in the appropriate space." **Kids Company**

⁴ nfpSynergy Charity Parliamentary Monitor. June – August 2019, 137 MPs, and nfpsynergy Charity Awareness Monitor, July 2019, 1000 adults, national representative of the UK. "The British Public were asked whether they trusted charities in a recent nationally representative survey. Please look at the proportions of the public that trust and distrust charities and comment on what you think could be behind these levels of trust and distrust. 59% of the British Public trust charities and 39% of the British Public distrust charities."

⁵ 'Oxfam Haiti allegations: How the scandal unfolded', BBC News, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-43112200> [Accessed February 2020]

⁶ 'Has your charity had a media crisis? Here's some journalists' advice', nfpSynergy, <https://nfpsynergy.net/blog/journalist-media-team-advice-charity-media-scandal> [Accessed February 2020]

transparency (read more about this below), the importance of charities maintaining a fast and consistent response, and suggested regular media training for senior staff.

4. Transparency (or a perceived lack thereof) is damaging trust

In 2017, 75% of Conservative MPs said that making charities more transparent should be the next priority for the sector. Of a list of prompts we gave them, this was the top issue for Conservatives, ahead of finding more funding sources and comprehensive training for charity trustees. Fast forward to late 2019, and transparency is one of the top reasons for why MPs think the public struggle to trust charities. As one Conservative MP put it, "Too little transparency on where the money goes."

We were surprised by this response in 2017. We thought that repealing the lobbying act or CEO pay would have come out as higher priority issues; so, we followed up this research with a question the following quarter - how do you think charities could become more transparent? The answer? Would you believe it, for 30% of Conservative MPs, it was publishing accounts / accurate figures on where the money goes and for a further 15%, publicising executive salaries. Many of the answers revolved around publishing more information. The irony is, of course, that all this information is available in charity annual reports.

This is the transparency dilemma for charities. You publish the data but very few, including MPs, will read it. Moreover, it then becomes a reason to not trust charities. This is why we always recommend that public affairs staff (and any member of staff who has contact with MPs) are ready to talk about what your income is spent on, how much your CEO is paid and why, and crucially, a clearly articulated summary of the impact the charity has.

5. What to do and not do with Conservative MPs

Do remember that many Conservative MPs trust charities to do good in the UK

In 2016, nearly 9 in ten MPs said the charity sector was a force for good in the UK, including 84% of Conservative MPs⁷. When we asked MPs why the public trust charities in 2019, it was evident that this belief and trust that the sector does good remains. Here are just a selection of comments:

- *"We are a giving society and see charities as a force for good."*
- *"Remain trusted as deliver an important role in society."*
- *"Generally very good, high performing charities in UK."*
- *"Basic British supportive views about Charities still outweigh the recent negative news stories."*
- *"Charities generally trusted."*
- *"We instinctively trust charities."*
- *"Good charities do a great job e.g. Macmillan, Alzheimer's Society, Age UK."*

⁷ "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about work with charities?" Base: 150 MPs | Source: Charity Parliamentary Monitor, Jun - Aug 16, nfpSynergy

Do remember that MPs see charities as a trusted source of information and support

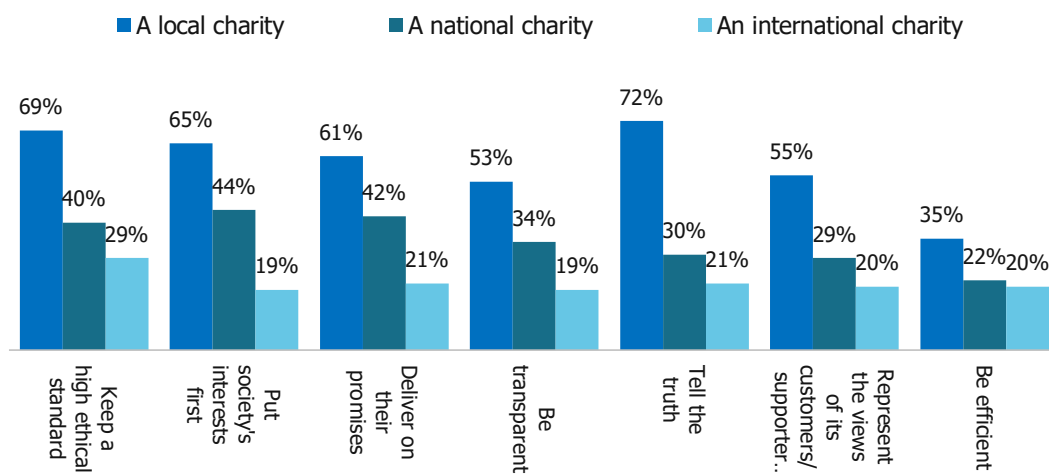
In our Charity Parliamentary Monitor research in 2016, we found that MPs across all parties recognised that the research and support that charities provide is vital to MPs work. 56% of Conservatives and 80% of Labour MPs agreed 'research and support from charities is vital to my work'. As a source of knowledge and support, charities perform an essential role in our democracy because they help MPs raise points in debates or with problems their constituents might be facing.

Do emphasise the local elements of your work

When we asked about levels of trust in different types of charities (Figure 1, p4), we found that the higher levels of trust in local charities was mostly driven by Conservative MPs

Conservative MPs were far more trusting of local charities over national across all measures (Figure 2). They were particularly more likely to trust local charities to tell the truth (72%) than national charities (30%) or international charities (21%).

Figure 2. Conservative MPs' likelihood to trust charities to enact certain values



"Which of the following organisations would you be most likely to trust to: (tick as many that apply)" **Ranked by total for national charity**

Source: Charity Parliamentary Monitor, Jun-Aug 2019, nfpSynergy. Base: 137 MPs

Why do Conservative MPs have such high levels of trust in local charities? Many referenced the visibility of local work:

- "Most charities are trustworthy as they offer support locally."
- "People generally support charities especially local ones."
- "Strong local charities with local links delivering in their area."
- "Personal experience of local action."
- "Good work done locally and nationally."

Emphasising your charity's impact at a local level will go a long way to building trust with Conservatives. The top five most effective charities in the eyes of Conservative MPs are all national charities. They are maybe warmer to the idea of volunteer-led, local charities, but in practice they work well with, and trust, national and

international charities. Charities that are able to produce constituency statistics or arrange local drop-ins for their MP are very likely to get good feedback from Conservative MPs for this work. For international charities who are unable to demonstrate this local work, we believe you must go the extra mile in transparency. MPs cannot see the impact of your work locally, so make sure they are able to clearly grasp the impact you have abroad.

Do reach out to new MPs

With 109 new Conservative MPs in the Commons, now is the perfect time to start on a relationship on a positive note. In the year after an election, we consistently see higher levels of confusion among MPs over who works on what in the charity sector, such as Macmillan Cancer Support being associated with cancer research, and Cancer Research being associated with cancer care. If an MP understands your mission and areas of expertise, they are more likely to approach you for briefings and signpost constituents to you for support – all solid components of trust!

Don't be perceived as 'too political' (unless you want to be!)

So far, this report has been about building trust with Conservative MPs. This might not always be the best approach for a charity. Some have achieved change and built strong reputations by ignoring all the points above. Hence, why we see comments like the following,

- *"Waste money on political campaigns of a left wing nature."*
- *"Questionable political motivations."*

As these comments demonstrate, when Conservative MPs comment that a charity is too political, they often mean 'too party political' or 'too left wing'. In 2016, we interviewed MPs' Researchers about their engagement with charities. One comment from a Researcher for a Conservative MP was quite typical.

- *"You can tell from the tone of their email whether or not they support what the government is doing and whether they are going to be annoying or not ... some of the emails are quite inflammatory and quite condescending."*

You must decide what the best approach is for your charity. If your campaign is in opposition to a government policy then this label might be difficult to avoid from members of the governing party. However, framing your position in the language of the different parties can help. For example, talking about housing issues in the language of consumer rights could appeal more to Conservatives.

6. What to do and not do with Labour MPs

Do capitalise on the warmth of Labour MPs towards charities

Over the years, Labour MPs have, on average, been more likely to rate individual charities as effective than Conservative MPs. This is not just an opposition effect; it was the case even when Labour was in government. Consider how to engage Labour MPs when looking for cross-party consensus or when you're working to challenge government policies.

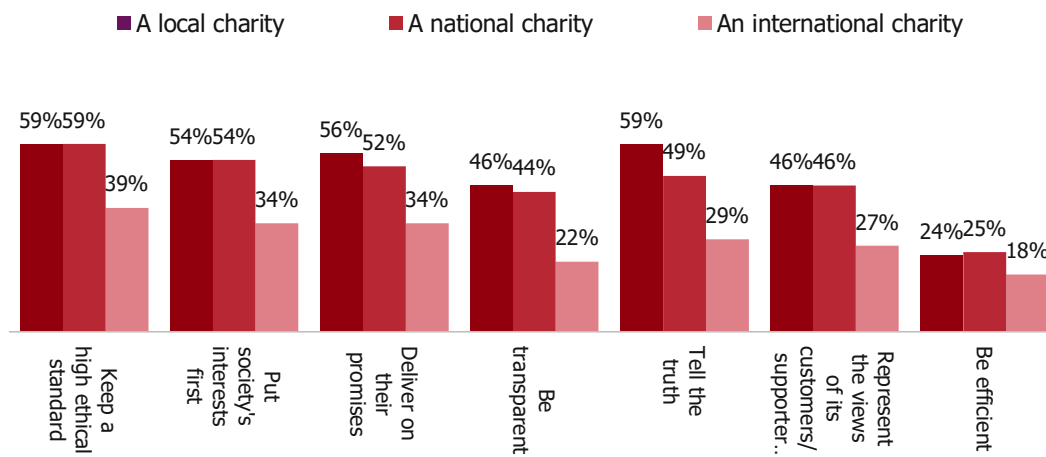
Don't overinvest time and resources in engaging with Labour MPs

As with any new government, it's good to make sure all MPs have a baseline awareness of your work. However, the reality is that Conservative MPs will be more influential in this parliament. Some charity parliamentary teams recognise the value in building relationships with Labour MPs as a way to learn more about the Conservative MPs they may contest with.

Do communicate the resourcefulness of working as part of a national charity, or network of charities

Labour MPs have reasonably equal levels of trust of local and national charities (Figure 3). This may be because Labour MPs are more likely to see larger national charities as good at using resources than smaller charities, compared to Conservative MPs.

Figure 3. Labour MPs' likelihood to trust charities to enact certain values



"Which of the following organisations would you be most likely to trust to: (tick as many that apply)" **Ranked by total for national charity**

Source: Charity Parliamentary Monitor, Jun-Aug 2019, nfpSynergy. Base: 137 MPs

Do keep showing local and constituency links in your work

This is time-old advice that works across all parties. All MPs want to see how an issue affects their constituency.

They are also open to being engaged on non-constituency issues. Select Committees and APPGs can be excellent forums for building trusted relationships with MPs.

About nfpSynergy



nfpSynergy is a research consultancy that aims to provide the ideas, the insights and the information to help non-profits thrive.

We have over a decade of experience working exclusively with charities, helping them develop evidence-based strategies and get the best for their beneficiaries. The organisations we work with represent all sizes and areas of the sector and we have worked with four in five of the top 50 fundraising charities in the UK. We run cost effective, syndicated tracking surveys of stakeholder attitudes towards charities and non-profit organisations.

We survey over 150 MPs four times a year and 100 Peers annually. The samples are representative of the composition of Parliament in terms of both political party and region. We have been conducting our Westminster research for the last 15 years – giving us a wealth of experience and trend data to help you inform your political campaigning.

Other audiences we reach include the general public, young people, journalists and health professionals. We also work with charities on bespoke projects, providing quantitative, qualitative and desk research services. In addition, we work to benefit the wider sector by creating and distributing regular free reports, presentations and research on the issues that charities face.

About Acevo



ACEVO's vision is to see civil society leaders making the biggest possible difference.

Together with our network we inspire and support civil society leaders by providing connections, advocacy and skills.

ACEVO is the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations. For 30 years, we have provided support, development and an inspiring, collective campaigning voice for our members across the UK. ACEVO's network of over 1,150 individuals includes the leaders of small, community based groups, ambitious medium-sized organisations, and well known, well-loved national and international not-for-profits.

Understanding trust in your charity

If you are interested in better understanding trust in your charity, please get in touch with Tim Harrison-Byrne on timothy.harrison-byrne@nfpsynergy.net

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