



**VOLUNTARY SECTOR  
INDEPENDENCE:  
A CONSULTATION RESPONSE  
BY BRAP**

**AUGUST 2011**

## INTRODUCTION

1. brap is delighted to submit this response to the Panel on the Independence of the Voluntary Sector.
2. brap is a think fair tank, inspiring and leading change to make public, private and voluntary sector organisations fit for the needs of a more diverse society. brap offers tailored, progressive and common sense approaches to equality training, consultancy, and community engagement issues.
3. brap is a registered charity and also has an in-depth knowledge of the sector having delivered direct business, strategic, financial, and administrative support (as an infrastructure organisation) to thousands of voluntary sector organisations over the last ten years. We have also led programmes to develop infrastructure organisations themselves (for example, through the Beyond Survival programme run in partnership with NCVO). brap has also researched and written extensively about voluntary sector issues.

## THE BAROMETER AND THE PANEL'S REMIT

4. We attempted to assess our organisation against the Independence Barometer, but found that it was largely geared towards organisations who provide frontline services to individuals and communities. Perhaps uniquely, we have two broad beneficiary bases: public sector organisations – for whom we provide advice, research, and training on equalities issues – and voluntary sector organisations, for whom we provide business support. As such, many of our answers did not fit squarely with questions asked.
5. The Barometer's leaning in this direction no doubt reflects the Panel's clearly stated intention to focus primarily on registered charities (recognising, of course, the wider lessons that can be drawn from social enterprises and community groups). In this respect, the Barometer is very well designed to elicit responses from organisations who provide commissioned services to individuals and communities.
6. It may be worth the Panel considering in its deliberations, however, that there are many types of not-for-profit organisation which do not deal directly with communities such as:
  - infrastructure organisations: there are currently over 2,000 in England
  - think tanks and research organisations which provide an invaluable role in generating and disseminating information
  - various types of social enterprise and community interest company whose main service or activity is not primarily connected to a social goal; instead organisations of this type promote social justice through other activities, such as employing people from marginalised backgrounds
7. On a minor point of terminology, many of the organisations listed above could also be registered charities. In addition, couching the Panel's remit in terms of 'registered charities' may exclude 'under the radar' organisations, which, for a variety of reasons, may not have officially registered with the Charity Commission.<sup>1</sup> Our experience and research in this area

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<sup>1</sup> See McCabe et al (2010) 'Below the radar: a summary review of the literature', TSRC Working Paper 29 for a fuller discussion of this point. <http://tinyurl.com/3mrqcpw>

suggests that many BME organisations are in this category as they tend to be newer start-ups.<sup>2</sup> However, if independence of action and voice are to have any value in improving conditions for the worst off, it is in relation to precisely these kinds of organisation – providing services to the most vulnerable and marginalised – that they must be promoted.

### **THE BAROMETER: VOICE**

8. As stated above, we will not provide a blow-by-blow account of how brap fairs against the barometer's indicatory behaviours. However, we thought it might be useful to outline some of our experiences in relation to challenging public agencies.
9. As explained above, we don't necessarily look to reflect the views of a 'community', but to speak out against unfair and discriminatory practice based on our understanding of fairness, equality, and human rights. In this respect, we have regularly had to temper our views about national, local, and (until recently) regional government practice in recognition that these organisations comprise our main client base.
10. This is particularly true about public pronouncements about specific organisations. Exceptions are when we have talked about bad practice *per se* (eg the general tendency for organisations to employ models of community engagement based on community 'representatives') and when we have engaged with decision makers on a one-to-one basis.
11. When attending meetings as part of partnerships we have been vocal in drawing people's attention to the equalities issues at stake. A particular barrier here is that some organisations and bodies are not receptive to hearing new ideas or being challenged (despite claiming to be so). If this is the case, we are often hamstrung in our efforts to engage in a more vociferous debate by the need to maintain good relations with potential funders.
12. A key point here is that independence can be defined in both a positive and negative way. A negative or conservative interpretation only looks to remove those barriers that actively prohibit organisations from expressing their views (such as a fear of losing funding, a lack of resources, or a focus on service delivery). A positive conception of independence looks to actively promote the unique contribution the sector can make by encouraging public agencies to seek out the sector's views and incorporate them in decision making. At certain points, the consultation report suggests this is the conception the Panel is operating with. It is not obvious from our experience that this is the definition most commissioners or voluntary organisations operate with, so it may be useful for the Panel to explicitly state that it is its intention to pursue this form of independence.

### **BEST PRACTICE**

13. We are aware of cases where the voluntary sector has been employed to deliver a service specifically because it can maintain a critical independence from public providers. One example is Stoke-on-Trent City Council, Staffordshire County Council, and Stoke-on-Trent and North Staffordshire PCTs jointly fund Age UK North Staffordshire to provide emotional support to older people recovering from injuries. It is a conscious decision on the part of

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<sup>2</sup> 'BME' is an abbreviation for 'Black and minority ethnic'. See, for example, brap (2009) *The Pied Piper* for more information: [www.brap.org.uk](http://www.brap.org.uk)

statutory funders to employ a voluntary organisation, since this gives the team the freedom to speak out on behalf of older people, ensuring clinical workers have access to information from their patients so that services are more responsive to patients and designed around them. More examples are in our recent report on older people's services:

[www.brap.org.uk/content/view/377/509/](http://www.brap.org.uk/content/view/377/509/)

14. In addition, brap has undertaken work with various public organisations which focuses on the behaviours and attitudes of individuals rather than organisations' processes and initiatives. For example, brap recently produced a community engagement framework for Birmingham local authority which outlined a set of behaviours public bodies could enact which would uphold the principles of transparency and accountability. This is important because, as the Panel recognises, establishing forums and panels doesn't necessarily mean that voluntary organisations' views and perspectives will be listened to. Instead, it is necessary to change individual decision-makers' attitudes and behaviours. In addition to the factors outlined above, independence of voice is also massively restricted by a perception on the part of voluntary organisations that their opinions simply aren't valued by the public sector. This indifference can be manifested in a number of ways, such as a lack of activity occurring after consultation events. Public bodies can behave in particular ways to ensure they seem welcoming and eager to hear other opinions (e.g. making sure they share the results of consultation and say how/why they have made a particular decision). At the very least public bodies can show how they have digested the information they receive (even if they can't always act on it). Changing the attitudes of public bodies/ decision-makers through the promotion of positive behaviours is an important element of promoting independence of voice.
15. As stated above, brap is in constant contact with a large number of voluntary organisations through our various infrastructure programmes and through our administration of the BME third sector network, the Collective. For more information or for more examples of best practice, please feel free to contact us.

### **INITIATIVES TO PROMOTE INDEPENDENCE**

16. Following on from the best practice identified above, we would suggest the following as starting points for initiatives or ideas that can promote independence:
- support research exploring how the impartiality and independence of the sector is helping commissioners meet existing demographic, financial, and political challenges
  - provide training to voluntary sector organisations on how best to influence and lobby public agencies. From experience, we would suggest that support is required in the following areas: an outline of where decision-making power exists and what mechanisms have been created to facilitate engagement; understanding how to lobby and advocate (ie, how to build relationships with decision makers; the importance of using appropriate language); and campaigning skills (eg, how to build and maintain a network)
  - organise a day marking voluntary sector achievements and highlighting the position of the sector to a wider audience
  - support work aimed at identifying and communicating the behaviours of public bodies/voluntary organisations that can lead to effective, efficient, and inclusive engagement. Creating a series of behaviours which can be publicly communicated to

voluntary organisations and public bodies which will establish a 'standard' which community groups can use to hold public organisations to account

**MORE INFORMATION**

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