



## Debate: Can the voluntary sector pick up the pieces?

**Chair:** Steph Harland, CEO, Age UK

**Speakers:**

- Vicky Browning, CEO, ACEVO
- Dan Corry, CEO, NPC
- Penny Thewlis, CEO, Age UK Oxfordshire

Steph Harland opened the session by reflecting that when considering the roles of sectors and systems, the first thing to understand is the experience of older people.

Vicky Browning set context for the discussion by sharing some of the challenges for charity leaders. ACEVO research showed 80% of leaders had seen demand for their organisation's services grow over the past year, whilst 85% expected more growth over the next twelve months. Worryingly, only 1 in 7 believed they were in a good position to meet that demand. It is clear that the voluntary sector already is picking up many of the pieces, but this is placing strain on those charities, which often boils down to money – the three main challenges identified by charity leaders was income generally, meeting demand, and reduced government funding. Charities are adapting, becoming more entrepreneurial and focussed, with a greater sense of pragmatism leading to hard-nosed decision-making.

Penny Thewlis, as a charity leader, echoed much of what Vicky mentioned. She described the challenges that local charities had in navigating the 'complicated, changing waters' of the public sector – even understanding what those waters were is difficult. Age UK Oxfordshire consulted their community to help guide their future, reflecting Steph Harland's view that we needed to understand older people. This consultation showed that older people understand the challenges that the sector is under and the decisions it might need to make, but reinforced the value in being there for every older person. It also highlighted the role the third sector can play in changing the way people view ageing and older people.

Dan Corry reflected that the voluntary sector should not overstate what it can do – when it comes to health and care the voluntary sector spends £4bn, compared with the £125bn the state spends. That doesn't mean the sector should discount its impact, particularly when considering the outsized impact the third sector can have



on preventative services. Dan noted there were many questions to consider. Should we charge for more services? Will the statutory sector work well enough with charities? Most importantly of all – are we thinking this through hard enough? He closed with an imploration: that the sector continued to speak nationally to articulate clearly the kind of care system we want.

Steph Harland closed the session by stating her belief that Age UK can't go wrong so long as it has the courage to listen to older people and hear the role that they wanted us to play in their lives.

**VB: “The sector’s role remains a pivotal one in the life of the country, reaching where the private sector won’t and the public sector can’t.”**

**PT: “There is a lot of inequality in people’s experiences of ageing.”**

**DC: “A place-based approach will often be the best approach.”**