



Challenges can fuel change: a VODG contribution to Civil Society Futures

There are 11 million disabled people living in England today. By 2025, there will be 11.7m. Voluntary and not-for profit organisations, many of which VODG represents, provide a fifth of the services for people who need support with, for example, mental health, physical disability, or learning and social needs¹.

Despite this rising need, cumulative adult social care cuts since 2010 have amounted to £6.3 billion, and planned savings for adult social care in 2017/18 are a further £824m². In addition, the retrospective back pay to sleep-in shift workers for up to six years would be financially disastrous for many providers if government does not fund this, following a change in its own guidance³.

Meanwhile, there are an estimated 90,000 vacancies across the adult social care sector at any given time. And Brexit further threatens the labour supply for adult social care⁴, an issue that VODG has long lobbied about⁵.



2025
11.7m

¹ See the executive summary of *True Costs*, published by VODG in 2017: www.vodg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017-VODG-True-Costs-Why-we-cannot-ignore-the-failure-in-social-care-funding-web.pdf

² *Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS) Budget Survey 2017*: www.adass.org.uk/media/5993/embargo-280617-adass-budget-survey-2017-press-release.pdf

³ *Estimating the fiscal impact of the national living wage on sleep in cover*, published by VODG in 2017: www.vodg.org.uk/news/financial-impact-of-social-care-sleep-in-crisis-laid-bare/

⁴ *“Brexit: the social care sector must fight its corner”*, Rhidian Hughes, *Medium*, 27 Nov 2017 <https://medium.com/@rhidian.hughes/brexit-the-social-care-sector-must-fight-its-corner-e71b3dae9c6e>

⁵ VODG campaign page, *Managing sector risks and issues as the UK prepares to leave the EU*: <https://www.vodg.org.uk/campaigns/managing-the-risks-and-issues-post-brexit/>

The landscape of increasing demand, dwindling funding and challenges in workforce recruitment and retention is a harsh operating context for social care providers. With the immense pressures on services, it is clear that organisations that simply carry on doing more of the same will fail to be fit for the future. VODG has already called for the voluntary sector to be recognised as central to the NHS and health system⁶ and recently urged voluntary providers to reconsider how they deliver social care with a stronger role for disabled people within the sector⁷.

It is therefore absolutely essential that VODG contributes to the new Civil Society Futures⁸ inquiry launched last year and chaired by Julia Unwin, former chief executive of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Billed as “a national conversation about how English civil society can flourish in a fast changing world”, the aim is to create a space for discussion among those involved in civic action through community events, academic research and online debate.

VODG’s focus is on disability and social care. At a Civil Society Futures event in London, addressed by Julia Unwin, our members reflected on our combined social purpose and the current and potential state of the voluntary adult social care sector. The event was an opportunity to explore critical – and unresolved – questions that VODG members are tackling. These included future hopes, fears and trends for civil society in the future and the barriers to organisational change. VODG members discussed what they might do differently to develop third sector disability provision, and how their roles might adapt.



⁶ VODG paper, *What can the voluntary sector do to encourage greater engagement and collaboration with the health system?* published 2016: <https://www.vodg.org.uk/publications/what-can-the-voluntary-sector-do-to-encourage-greater-engagement-and-collaboration-with-the-health-system/>

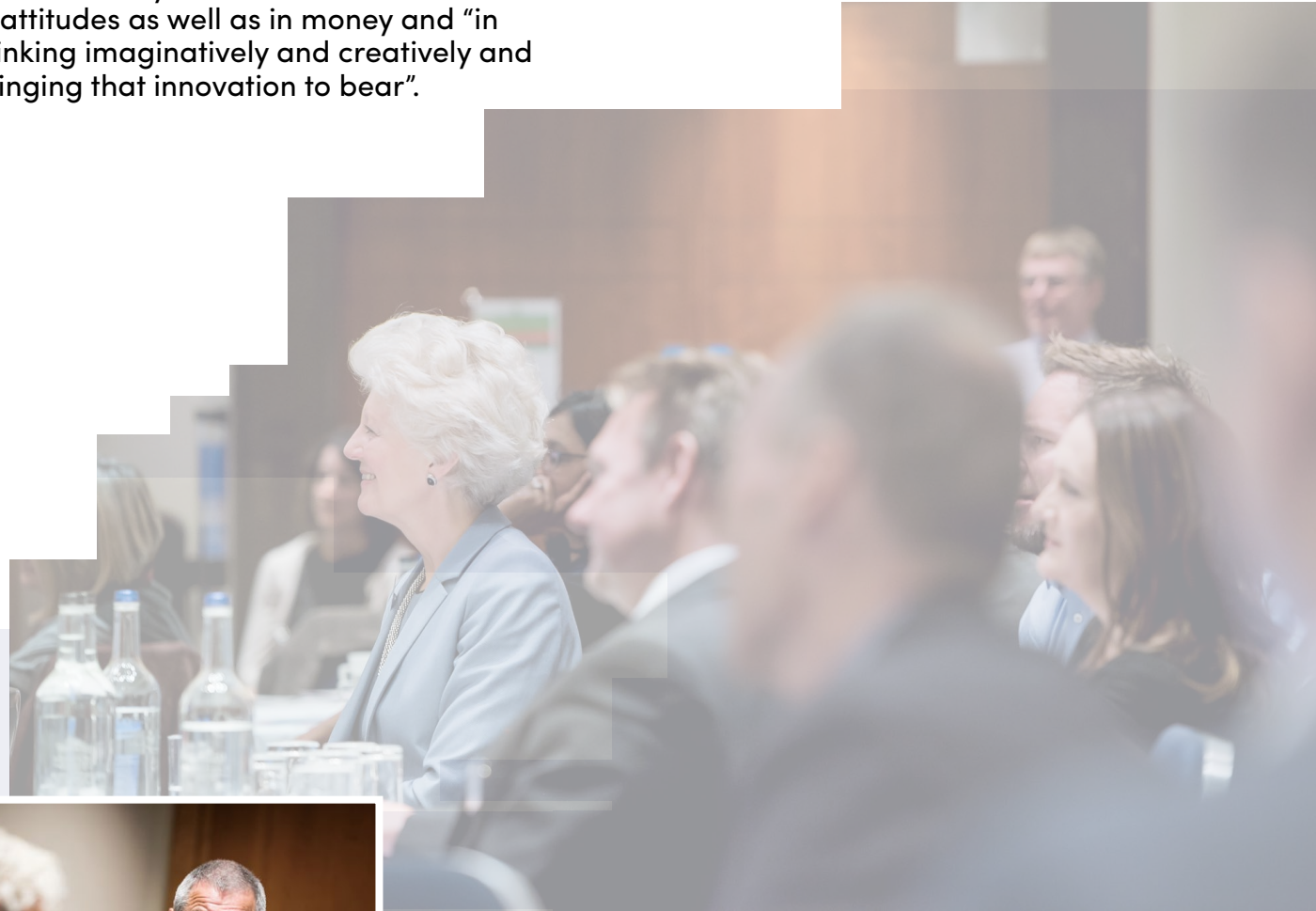
⁷ “2018, the year we could do social care differently”, Rhidian Hughes, *Medium*, 20 Dec 2017 <https://medium.com/@rhidian.hughes/2018-the-year-we-could-do-social-care-differently-a8460dfe4d66>

⁸ Civil Society Futures hub: <https://civilsocietyfutures.org/>

The debate also progressed some of the thoughts aired at a previous seminar for chief executives and senior directors on leadership in turbulent times. At that seminar, participants discussed the risk of charities themselves effectively becoming institutions, and how fit they are for purpose.

Lauching our Civil Society Futures discussion event, Julia Unwin described civil society as “one of the building blocks of our world”, as well as outlining how that world is undergoing profound changes. She described such developments as the “four Ds”; demography, democracy, “the very big votes that have rocked our world,

Brexit being one, the election of Donald Trump the other, the digital environment and the deficit”. The latter, said the chair of Civil Society Futures, involves a deficit in attitudes as well as in money and “in thinking imaginatively and creatively and bringing that innovation to bear”.



HOPES AND ASPIRATIONS

Debate among VODG members opened with a focus on their aims for civil society, and in particular the social care voluntary sector. Operating as a “counterbalance to the ‘establishment’ direction of travel and austerity” is, one participant suggested, one way that organisations can carve out a unique role. Others agreed, “we...are not part of the establishment”. Some identified an opportunity for providers to enable people who use services to articulate to government their own demands for social care. This, it was felt, would be a much more powerful way of arguing for care and funding requirements, given that currently providers’ requests continue to be ignored.

As well as being distinct from their statutory counterparts, there were widespread hopes that voluntary organisations would move even closer to the people they support: “Established organisations [could] become more connected to users and local groups.” One contributor argued for a future where “disabled people have a louder voice that is listened to [and it is] less about professionals talking on their behalf”.

Putting disabled people at the heart of decision making and strengthening collaboration with families were popular ambitions. There was agreement that involvement of families and carers could be enhanced and strengthened by social media, with reference to social media-driven, family-led campaigns such as Justice for LB⁹.

Another possibility was shifting the balance of power within organisations by developing them into cooperatives: “The people receiving the service and the people working in the service should say what the organisation does...is that a way of giving some of the power back, some of the control back, therefore is that going to generate a different type of society, for us a different type of sector that’s going to change things?”

⁹Justice for LB campaign page: <http://justiceforlb.org/>

More generally, there was a feeling that the wider sector might become “less fragmented”, with the potential for health and social care to work more closely. One speaker, for example, described a hope that all “interested parties” such as state, funders and providers would align “around the best interests of citizens and support them to contribute to society”.



CURRENT CHALLENGES AND FUTURE FEARS

Attendees turned their thoughts to the potential problems facing the movement. Despite strong convictions that voluntary sector providers of social care are independent and at arms length from “the establishment”, one speaker asked: “Are we as organisations too frightened to put our head above the parapet because actually quite a lot of our income is derived from central and local government?” This means that it is left to individuals, and networks of individuals “to actually stand up and stamp their feet and shout loudly...to get their message heard”. Another participant agreed that families and providers should be united but this potential was often undermined by organisations’ reluctance to put their heads above the parapet: “They do feel that we don’t stand up to those in power because we often can’t afford to”.



Others reflected a sense that despite social care being intermittently “jolted” by scandals like Winterbourne View “there’s been very little change - even though there was uproar [at the time]”.

Ultimately, argued those discussing the challenges facing the sector, funding was the prevalent barrier. “Will social care still exist?” asked one. Not while the resources are “finite”, came one answer. While disabled people are “being hit hard by austerity, cuts and the access to work cap”, some suggested many “fall through the cracks” because they are not eligible for ever-shrinking amount of statutory funding.

“Where does the money come from?” was one rhetorical question posed. While philanthropic sources and social investment were suggested as one solution, the requisite hoops to be jumped through are often too demanding. One VODG contributor explained: “There are some powerful modern philanthropists around but the model’s different now, sometimes it’s more about people saying, ‘all right, I’ll put some money in...but I need a return...I want to see the business workings”. The “biggest barrier”, as another participant concluded about funding issues, is “the reluctance to increase taxation”.



CURRENT CHALLENGES AND FUTURE FEARS

The impact of Brexit on the future of the sector was a strong theme in discussions about challenges. Some 90,000 people from EU countries work in adult social care – which, as one speaker reminded the event, “is the same number of vacancies in the sector at any one day.”¹⁰ The situation was described as “quite catastrophic” for social care, combined with the change in demographics – the ageing population – and the struggle to recruit young people into the sector. “It’s a real challenge,” one VODG member said, “a real worry for us as to actually how we’re going to staff our services”.

In contrast to those who predicted a growth in independence for voluntary social care, some speakers warned of a future where “civil society becomes an arm of government and loses independence – it becomes the new public sector.” Another agreed: “The system is forcing civil society to become more

bureaucratic and corporate”. Some went further, criticizing the “loss of passion and creativity in the face of increasing corporatism and conformity” or fearing that “commissioning behaviour becomes system focused not person centred and drives prices down”. There was also concern about increasing bureaucracy, with the issuing of multiple guidance and frameworks and local authorities “holding on to power” through, for example, controlling personal budgets.

Looking more widely at social trends, the debate turned to the issue of isolation and loneliness. The challenge is high on the political agenda, with Government recently announcing a new Minister for Loneliness¹¹. Yet the issue was noted as a considerable one facing disabled people and learning disabled people in particular.

Linked to this is that fact that while technology has great potential for people supported by VODG members, “access to technology and the digital world for all may not be possible – people lack skills, abilities and resources”. Another said that it could lead to more isolation and “less social interaction”.

Taking the concept of a fragmented society further, some participants went as far as suggesting potential “social and economic chaos” as “increased anger and protest takes us somewhere negative” and – in a reference to fears over so-called fake news – “misinformation becomes more common”.



¹⁰ Skills for Care report, *State of the adult social care sector and workforce in England*, published 2017 www.skillsforcare.org.uk/Documents/NMDS-SC-and-intelligence/NMDS-SC/Analysis-pages/State-of-17/State-of-the-adult-social-care-sector-and-workforce-2017.pdf

¹¹ Ministerial role, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Sport and Civil Society: www.gov.uk/government/ministers/minister-for-sport-tourism-and-heritage

SEEKING SOLUTIONS

However, in response to such fears, many echoed Julia Unwin's opening remarks to VODG members. She said: "You will all be able to root your organisation's history to either the anger and fury of an individual or a group of people or a time in history...most voluntary organisations, and most bits of civil society were formed because somewhere someone said, 'This just isn't good enough.'" This rallying cry was reflected by those who suggested that action could be sparked by the anger at the status quo. "Well I hope that we'll rise up...We've seen it in other parts [homelessness] years ago, it's coming to us now in terms of social care, as a group we need to rise up and say, "Enough is enough". As one speaker neatly put it, what is needed is "a punk era - but for social care".

And, having noted the negative social aspects of technology, the debate heard that latest developments clearly offer huge potential which could "radically change how we support people". VODG has already championed this issue, most recently in a good practice report¹², underlining that technology is an additional help, not a replacement for social care.

It is time, heard the debate, to think differently about "creativity and risk". Many organisations, said one speaker, are "guilty of doing the same stuff, the same way". Change is possible, said another, if innovation and a less risk-averse approach are encouraged.



¹²VODG paper, *Co-producing technology: harnessing digital solutions for social care*, published 2017 www.vodg.org.uk/publications/co-producing-technology-harnessing-digital-solutions-for-social-care/

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SEEKING SOLUTIONS

A revolution in social care, as several attendees noted, also means mobilising younger people into the sector, to “encourage leaders of the future” and “help shape how organisations might change how they work”. As for more immediate action, some suggested, it is imperative to “be more engaged with families and the community”.

One VODG member explained that the organisation’s constitution has just been amended to stipulate that a number of people on the board should have similar support needs to those using their services. “The role of the board will need to change,” said another speaker, “to become more creative...more diverse”.

VODG itself, some suggested, has a significant role in lobbying on behalf of the collective voice of social care and disability provision. As one speaker summarised it: “We need a national campaign for social care – VODG can be crucial to this.”



A FIRM STRATEGY FOR THE FUTURE

The general consensus was that organisations have no choice but to transform. One participant concluded: “If demography’s changing then the client base is changing and the needs are probably changing. So charities that are still stuck in the ‘this is what we’re for and this is the way we do it’ are not moving with the times.”


There was also a note of optimism and a reflection of the voluntary sector’s positive ethos from another speaker who spoke of “a strong belief in humanity, in the fact that actually we will pull through and we’re all positive and care about each other, or enough of us do to make a difference while we’re [seemingly] worried about social and economic meltdown and chaos”.

The challenge could indeed be a chance for change, as one VODG member concluded: “It’s a time for real opportunity though as well...everything’s up in the air – actually anything can happen”.



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