

Julia Unwin, Chair, Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society

The future of civil society in a changing world

There are big changes in the way in which the state and the market are operating. What does the future of civil society look like in this changing world, and what can the voluntary and community sector do to thrive in the 21st century?

York and Yorkshire are places rich in civil society – there are no cold spots and the Inquiry I am leading has been really clear that civil society is everywhere. It's just sometimes overlooked.

What is civil society?

Civil society is born out of struggle, change, a longing to do things differently. However, it is also where we do the things that make us happy and connect us to others. Civil society includes campaigning organisations and village halls, choirs and allotment societies, voluntary organisations and social enterprises.

Changes

The Inquiry has made it clear that we live at a time of enormous change, and we need to pay real attention to what's happening now.

The seismic vote of June 2016 reinforced that we are now a divided nation – towns and cities, urban and rural, generations, rich and poor, age and generation. There is a real sense that civil society is also divided. Joseph Rowntree Foundation research indicates that the Referendum vote was influenced by education, age, wealth, but significantly, also by where voters lived. People feel their voices are not being heard in parts of this county and this country.

Times of huge challenge and change can provide opportunities to be at our best. But we need to understand this political landscape, and take back control.

1. Economic change

Changes in the UK economy, with concentrations of wealth, particularly London versus the rest of the country. A small number of conglomerates hold huge financial and data assets but pay little tax.

At the other end of the spectrum an upsurge of small enterprises reflect changes in our economy. Employment now looks very different to older people. The new labour market is insecure with increased automation, a gig economy and low wages. The workplace has changed and isn't somewhere you can always feel you belong or that shapes your identity in the same way as it did. And we all know about the insecurities in the housing market.

2. Political governance

Our government systems are changing, with metro mayors in our big cities, a fast changing local government landscape, Yorkshire First, different powers and roles.

3. Digital and data revolution

Trust is the most important asset in civil society. With increasing scrutiny, there is a collapse in public trust and confidence across the board, including in charities and the voluntary sector. But technology-led interactions and information-holding offer opportunities as well as challenges for civil society.

Against this background we in civil society need to shape and not be shaped.

It's a time of massive change and endeavour in our society and the arc of history shows that civil society is at its best with just this sort of challenge.

This is a moment when we are called on to do things differently. Just like at other key moments of rapid change: Industrial Revolution, to the post-war period when a range of civil organisations were founded, the 1990s when local services were delivered by local government. The Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society is arguing that now this is another such milestone moment.

Challenges

We in civil society face 4 big challenges in understanding and shaping change.

1. Nature of work and activity – paid or unpaid

How do we spend our time – how do we volunteer? What is our sense of purpose in the gig economy? We in civil society need to look at what we offer people and how we value that offer.

2. Belonging and identity

How do people feel they belong in a volatile environment? Churches, communities and causes are vital to identity. What can the voluntary sector offer to make people belong? We need to listen to our members and communities and develop our services to meet changing needs.

3. Place and space

The Inquiry has found that people don't move as far from their birthplace as is thought. Places matter to people – history, heritage and belonging are key to our identity. We need spaces where people can come together, reusing historic buildings that matter to our communities and developing hubs to counteract segregation. We need a common space to thrash out the important challenges for our time.

4. How we organise

Organisations in civil society are doing important work but so are the smaller, often struggling, voluntary groups. These organisations can look different – social enterprises run by young people, community businesses, networks developed using social media. These are the current structures and we need approaches that are fit for purpose.

We need to be flexible and inclusive in our approach to these changing structures. We need to embrace change not police the boundaries.

Taking back control

Now we have real opportunity to shape the new economy, shape the new politics, understand the new commons, connect people.

The purpose of civil society is to connect people, and to drive deep and real change between communities, between power and how people want to live their lives?

How do we drive those connections and enable people to have a voice?

That's what we are here to do, that's what we do best, and if we don't step up, we run the risk of living in a very dry, dehumanised society.

Showing leadership is what Yorkshire and what the country needs now to take charge of change.

Julia Unwin, 17 May 2018, Community First Yorkshire's Taking Charge of Change Conference, York