



## RESEARCH BRIEFING

# Interim baseline results

February 2010

Research and interim results produced by nfpSynergy on behalf of the Commission for the Compact.

Baseline assessment of the levels of awareness, knowledge, understanding and use of the Compact among government and non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs).

### Introduction

Generating a picture of Compact awareness, knowledge and use of the Compact is central to the role of the Commission for the Compact in order to understand how and why the Compact is used nationally. This research aims to explore how well the Compact is working within government and public bodies. nfpSynergy (a social research agency) was commissioned to undertake this research on the Commission's behalf. These findings are preliminary findings of the research study. A full analysis will be available in early Spring 2010.

### Methodology

Quantitative research was completed with NDPBs and central government departments through an online questionnaire between October and December 2009. The link was distributed through the network of third sector liaison officers (TSLOs) and other contacts in 14 central government departments (CGD) and over 200 England-based NDPBs. Reminder emails were issued at least twice per contact with approximately a 50/50 split response between government and NDPB respondents.

In order to explore the issues in more detail, qualitative research was completed with a number of third sector leads in government and NDPBs

through telephone interviews of approximately 30 minutes duration. These allowed validation of the quantitative findings and for some of the more complex issues to be understood.

The Commission for the Compact sought five responses from each of 17 CGDs (85 responses) and at least one response each from a prioritised list of 240 NDPBs and other agencies. A minimum of 325 responses was anticipated.

nfpSynergy received 143 survey responses: of the total number of responses, 40 per cent came from 13 CGDs, and 60 per cent from 54 NDPBs and other agencies. In addition, 32 interviews took place with CGDs and NDPBs: 14 from CGDs and 18 NDPBs.

The interim baseline results should be read in that context.

### Central government and public bodies' views and relationships with the third sector

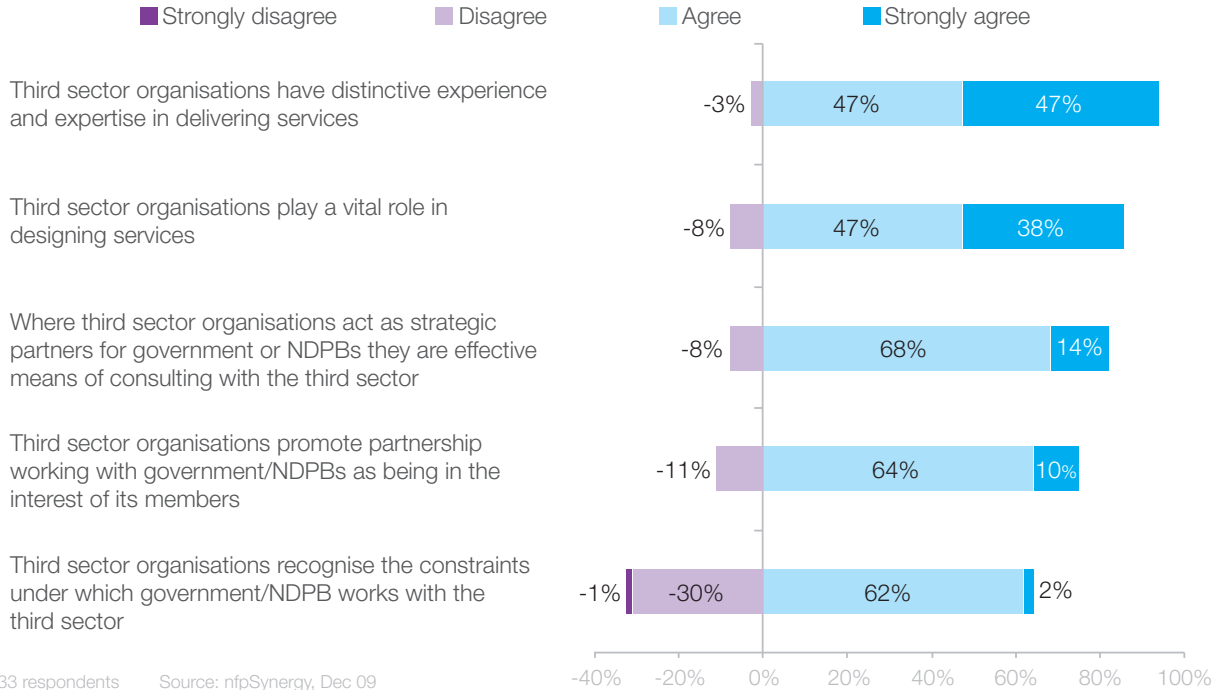
Overall, most respondents reported positive relations with third sector partners who were seen as key stakeholders for many government departments and NDPBs. The strength of this relationship is such that nearly two thirds of questionnaire respondents had weekly or daily contact with third sector organisations, with broad and multiple methods of engagement. This varies from being key stakeholders in each others organisations, committee members, consultation participants and funders, to providing secondments.

Working with third sector organisations (TSOs) was seen on the whole to be beneficial. On the positive side, TSOs enable government to reach people, are embedded in communities, and therefore have better knowledge of those communities. They represent and focus on users and are widely trusted. The diversity of the sector and the activities offered by the sector are unique. TSOs are seen



## Third Sector relations

"Thinking about your relationship generally with third sector organisations, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?"



Base: 133 respondents Source: nfpSynergy, Dec 09

as innovative and able to assist in the delivery of services and objectives set by government policies. There is a willingness to work in partnership with TSOs and the majority of respondents have had positive experiences of this relationship.

However, there are some drawbacks. For example, the diversity of the sector means it can be hard to navigate. There are also some concerns over TSOs' capacity to deliver and some criticism about levels of professionalism within some organisations. Some government departments and NDPBs were also slightly wary, due to the feeling that control can be lost when working in partnership with the sector. This was compounded by funding issues, whereby because of their insecure funding, some TSOs were felt to be overly assertive by government/NDPBs, thereby straining relations.

Respondents felt that there were occasionally unrealistic expectations from TSOs but there was also recognition that it can be difficult for the third sector to work with the level of bureaucracy that exists within government structures.

## Awareness, use and understanding

Levels of awareness of the Compact were high with the vast majority of respondents. Implementation, however, was generally felt to be lower with just a quarter of respondents believing they had implemented the Compact in their organisations. Both awareness and implementation varied across respondents with those who knew it intimately, and worked with it all the time; those who worked with it regularly; and those who knew that it existed but were not aware of the content.

*"[The Compact is] something that definitely moves the relationship between the Third Sector and the Public Sector in a positive direction."* (CGD)

Overall, the Compact was seen as a positive, practical and useful document, one that reflected common sense and good practice, particularly when respondents referred to the refreshed version.

*"It's a brilliant idea... it's great for reminding organisations and colleagues that there is a relationship with the third sector and we need to be mindful of it and we need to do it properly."* (NDPB)

The majority of respondents use the Compact in their work, though this manifests itself in different ways. A third felt their departments refer to the documentation when necessary and include references to it, while 44 per cent state that they use the Compact but do not mention it in their documentation. This difference in use was explored in more detail through interviews.

For a number of participants, the Compact is quite a tailored document, being used when developing internal processes or guidelines (e.g. for commissioning). In many cases, the guidelines had been built into internal departmental documents and processes. This is when the Compact appeared to have the most impact, as it was part of everyday systems and processes.

*“Prior to the Compact, we didn’t really have anything in place that said how you should do consultation... We worked on an ad hoc basis, now we ensure... we do follow Compact guidance.”(CGD)*

Use of the Compact was most frequently cited by respondents in relation to sector consultations, procurement and grant making, with the Compact informing organisations’/departments internal strategies and documentation.

*“The commissioning strategy has taken into account the principles of the Compact.” (CGD)*

However, the Compact is sometimes only used when things go wrong, creating the perception that it is used by the third sector to criticise.

*“It’s a set of hoops that you’ve got to jump through to keep the sector happy and if you don’t then they’ll beat you over the head with it.” (CGD)*

## Impact

When asked to think about the impact that the Compact had, respondents felt that, in general, it had helped departments consider their relationships with the third sector in more detail.

*“I think it has led to a more grown up relationship with the Sector, much more respect for the Sector within Government.” (CGD)*

However, it is less easy to distinguish those changes that have been made by the Compact itself and those made by wider Government policy towards the sector. Nonetheless, it is seen as an important symbol of the Government’s approach.

*“It’s quite difficult to tease out the impact of the Compact with the impact of this particular administration’s approach to the Third Sector.” (CGD)*

## Changes

When respondents were asked what would improve the Compact, the main ‘ask’ was for it to be simplified. Some knew that this was happening through the ‘Refresh’ process but others were not aware.

There was some discussion about the need to clarify the roles and responsibility of the different organisations involved in promoting/supporting the Compact, particularly the Commission for the Compact, Office of the Third Sector and Compact Voice.

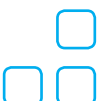
There was discussion from respondents as to how regulated the Compact should be. Approximately half of respondents felt there should be more regulation, with the Commission having ‘more teeth’ and a requirement for departments to report on their activities relating to the Compact.

*“If this is seen as a softly, softly nice thing to do, you are going to always find it difficult to actually push the Compact agenda.. How to address this? The Commission for the Compact having more teeth.” (CGD)*

However, other respondents felt that the Compact should be made less prescriptive (values not rules).

*“I don’t necessarily think it would be helpful for the Compact to be a regulatory mechanism because we have put a lot of effort into embedding the principles that underpin the Compact within various policies.” (NDPB)*

In addition, there was a call for increased understanding of the third sector and the value of working with third sector organisations by government and public bodies. Respondents felt that without this understanding, individuals and organisations may find it hard to engage with the Compact, as they would not see its value.



*“People working in statutory organisations don’t really understand how the Voluntary Sector works.” (CGD)*

Continuing to raise awareness was seen as a key goal. There was an appetite from many to receive help with interpretation and case studies. This could show the benefits of this type of working, sharing success, highlighting existing good practice and reinforcing the respondents’ view that the Compact is a positive thing to engage with. Practical help, case studies, peer support, training, e-learning modules and networking with similar organisations were all suggestions as to how this could be achieved.

*“It is a positive and non bureaucratic process that enhances relationships with the sector and is a strong tool for third sector engagement.” (CGD)*

## The future

Respondents recognised that the Compact was working best where it was embedded into working practices. A key recommendation was that this should continue.

*“All Compact principles need to be embedded in all the key documents – procurement guides, various bibles for Commissioning, Central Government policy guidance, impact assessment guidance.” (CGD)*

Respondents were aware that there were challenges ahead. Principally these were issues around projected financial constraints; cuts in public sector spending were seen as inevitable, and there may be a danger that the Compact is not seen as a priority and becomes sidelined. The need to ensure value for money and impact will be crucial.

*“Producing a business case for Compact compliance will be important.” (CGD)*

## Conclusions

Research findings illustrate that the Compact is regarded as a positive addition to organisations’ policies and procedures but there are differing levels of awareness of the Compact across public bodies. This research has highlighted positive practices with regard to embedding

Compact principles into government departments and NDPBs. However, this has not necessarily translated into practice for all participants.

Awareness of the Compact as a whole is relatively high, however, there is less awareness of the detail of the commitments (although this is higher where it relates to a specific area of a person’s job role). There is a need to translate awareness into implementation more readily and routinely, for it works best where the Compact is embedded into department processes and procedures. There is a real desire by most respondents to work effectively and more closely with the third sector but this is coupled with a call for an increased understanding of the third sector ‘offer’ in relation to each department. Learning by seeing and doing is central to understanding.

There is now a real opportunity with the refreshed Compact and implementation guidance to ensure organisations build and share knowledge and best practice routinely in order to understand how the Compact can be used effectively.

## Final reporting

This research briefing highlights some of the preliminary findings from the national fieldwork. A full analysis of the research is underway and a full report is currently being written, which will be available from the Commission for the Compact in Spring 2010.

The full research report will be available from [www.thecompact.org.uk](http://www.thecompact.org.uk)

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