CHALLENGES FACING CHARITIES IN DIVIDED TIMES

Findings from our member listening sessions

NCVO

CHAMPIONING VOLUNTARY ACTION

Foreword from our Chief Executive

Recent months have been challenging for charities. Increased polarisation and binary rhetoric are putting social cohesion at risk. Communities across the country are feeling divided, othered and afraid. Many charities and voluntary organisations are experiencing increasing threats of hatred, intimidation and violence – because of what they stand for, and who they support.

In October, we ran a week-long series of 'listening forums' with our members to understand the realities they were facing on the ground. This report, containing direct testimony from attendees, reveals the difficult situation charities are navigating. We heard clearly that, if not resolved, the rising tide of extremism and hate will prevent organisations from being able to deliver their core missions safely and effectively. Because for many, it already is.

Fear is widespread, affecting staff, boards, volunteers and the people and communities they support. Organisations told us that they are scaling back their visibility, cancelling fundraising and community events, and dialling down their online presence at a time when they are already under immense pressure.

The high level of anxiety is making commuting to work, and even leaving the house, difficult for many - especially for staff and volunteers from global majority backgrounds.

Now is the time when the voluntary sector is needed most. If community leaders, selfless volunteers and those in need of support feel they must stay silent, or even hidden, to protect themselves, the space civil society occupies shrinks. Our collective voice and impact will be diminished. And communities will suffer.

While the challenges are vast, many organisations we spoke to also showed the resilience, urgency and determination that characterise voluntary organisations across the country. In the face of difficulty, I'm proud that our sector stands resolute in its mission to work alongside communities and help build a more cohesive society.

Achieving that relies on the sector's solidarity, collaboration and connection. Organisations must support each other, leaning in when others are struggling. This collective spirit, described in one session as the sector's "superpower", must be leveraged by deliberately partnering across diverse missions to counter division.

We must counter hate by giving people hope. By acting together, and standing arm in arm in unwavering solidarity, we can ensure all charities can continue to play their vital role in building stronger, more resilient and more united communities for the future.

We hope this report will raise the voice of the sector on this issue. NCVO will continue to support the sector to work together, utilising our members' vast expertise, lived experience and local knowledge to inform and shape future action.

**Kate Lee OBE
Chief Executive, NCVO**

Introduction

In a climate of increasing division and polarisation, we heard from members and our Small Charities Advisory Panel (SCAP) that it was vital for NCVO, as a national convener for the voluntary sector, to provide leadership on this issue. The first step was to develop confidential and supportive spaces for members to share their direct experiences.

Between 20 and 24 October 2025, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) held a series of listening sessions in response to a sharp rise in extremism, social division, and hostility affecting the charity sector.

We thank all organisations, members and partners from our Small Charities Advisory Panel who informed the direction of, and took part in, these sessions, and for the unfiltered experiences they shared.

Bringing the sector together to understand a growing threat

These listening sessions were designed to move understanding of the issues forward, help inform NCVO's practical support for members and strengthen our national advocacy efforts, while being grounded in the lived reality of organisations across the country.

We hosted five hour-long sessions titled 'Challenges Facing Charities in Divided Times'. Each session was structured to facilitate an open and candid dialogue in a space for participants to talk openly, and for us to listen.

The primary goals of these sessions were to:

- Develop an understanding of the key themes facing organisations.
- Gather evidence and case studies to help create a more tangible understanding of how the issues are manifesting.
- Identify support, guidance and tools organisations need.

Representatives from 81 organisations registered to attend the sessions, with 46 participating across the week. This resulted in an average of nine participants per session, a small-group format that proved highly effective in fostering high-quality, in-depth discussion and allowing every voice to be heard.

Participants represented a cross-section of UK civil society, bringing a wealth of different perspectives and experiences to the discussions.

Attendees held positions at nearly every level of their organisations, providing a 360-degree view of the challenges being faced, from strategic governance to frontline delivery.

The roles represented included:
- Trustees
- CEOs
- Directors
- Managers
- Officers
- Volunteers

The sessions brought together a range of organisations, from large, household-name charities to small, entirely volunteer-led groups. This diversity was reflected in their wide range of charitable missions.

This mix of experience, from those navigating local tensions in rural communities to those managing national campaigns, led to a powerful and nuanced set of insights into the challenges being faced across the country.

81 organisations registered

46 organisations participated

9 average participants per session

1 What we heard

Under pressure, united in purpose

Across all five listening sessions, participants shared candid, moving and powerful insights that revealed a consistent and troubling narrative. We heard from a sector grappling with unprecedented levels of hostility, fear and operational disruption, but one that remains resolute in its mission to support communities and build a more cohesive society.

Participants were clear that while the threats are acute, their roots are systemic. The hostility they face is not new or unexpected but is fuelled by political narratives, misinformation and underlying structural inequities, including institutional racism.

We identified four key themes:
- A pervasive climate of fear
- Operational disruption and forced invisibility
- Direct targeting and abuse
- Increasing internal tensions

1) A pervasive climate of fear

A dominant theme was the profound emotional toll the current climate is taking on people.

Participants spoke of a tangible sense of fear that permeates the daily lives of staff, volunteers, and the communities they work alongside, particularly those from global majority backgrounds.

This anxiety is limiting organisations' ability to deliver. It's also shaping how people behave, with real consequences for daily life.

This feeling was described as widespread and pervasive, and one that has become a constant presence.

" People are frightened... What we're hearing from caseworkers is there's a rising fear in people from a global majority background. "

"It's unsettling for staff, completely unsettling. It's draining. The commute to and from work feels uncomfortable for some of our staff."

" One service user [talked of] feeling like the culture of the country is reverting back to a period in the 1980s where she felt unsafe to walk the streets... It's bringing up a lot of emotions. It's affecting their self-esteem. They aren't sure if they belong here, if this is their country, if this is their home. "

2) Operational disruption and forced invisibility

This climate of fear is having a direct and damaging impact on charities' ability to deliver their core missions.

Participants described a situation where the threat of hostility is forcing organisations to scale back their work, withdraw from public life, and operate under a constant state of alert. This is evidence of a sector feeling unable to operate at the very moment its work is most needed.

Organisations reported being forced to cancel crucial community and fundraising events due to security risks and direct threats. We heard from a small refugee charity whose service delivery had been disrupted, as in-person events were cancelled due to insufficient venue security, and the organisation could not afford the added security costs. Other examples included the scaling back of local Pride celebrations. These examples demonstrated a worrying potential to not only continue delivery of their work, but also a limiting of their ability to raise funds for the future.

There are also examples of growing reluctance among volunteers, particularly those from minority communities, to take on public-facing roles. This retreat from the frontline not only diminishes operational capacity but also reduces the visible diversity of the sector's workforce, reinforcing a sense of exclusion.

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There was a reflection that some of the groups and communities that we're looking to work with are choosing to become less visible. That is how they are choosing to cope with that increased pressure, insecurity and not feeling safe. They are just disappearing and not wanting to be a visible presence.

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"People whose professional roles are about going out and about... are feeling like they would prefer not to, but they're feeling like they need to continue to try and do the work."

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A charity in our county are not comfortable to share [their events] on social media because of the online hate, but also the potential for people who have ill intentions to come along and disrupt those activities... It's a loss of visibility for communities, and that's adding to the isolation and the fear.

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3) Direct targeting and abuse

Participants reported an increase in direct threats.

One organisation working on disability rights received intimidating emails from an extremist group, while refugee charities have been forced to remove trustee names from their websites and the Charity Commission portal to protect them from physical threats.

This trend of removing staff and trustee names from public view is a direct response to rising online harassment, stalking and physical risk. Some individuals reflected that, while it is good to have measures in place to protect the sector, this could lead to a feeling of a lack of transparency, and risks reducing overall trust in charities.

As a result of, and to avoid further online hate and targeted disruption, some charities are making the difficult choice to reduce their public profile, for example, by not promoting their work on social media. While intended as a safety measure, this response risks creating greater invisibility and isolation for the very communities they exist to support.

It also allows for wider spread of misinformation, as this is not challenged by the organisations with the evidence, data and insight and lived experience to do so.

The hostility is as much online as it is in the street.

"CEOs and trustees have been targeted online. There's a lot of online hate, misinformation, disinformation."

4) Increasing internal tensions

The divisions fracturing wider society are also creating significant internal challenges for organisations.

Participants highlighted that differing personal views among staff, volunteers, and board members can create friction and conflict. This has generated a clear need for guidance on how to facilitate "safe conversations" and manage internal disagreements constructively.

A deeply challenging issue raised was the increase in racist or abusive behaviour from some service users. This creates a real tension for frontline teams, who have to balance their duty of care with the need to protect their own safety and uphold organisational values in the face of hate speech or harassment.

Participants also identified the powerful role of media-driven misinformation in fuelling public hostility. One wildlife rescue charity reported being "hounded by the press" and having volunteers threatened over entirely false narratives accusing migrants of harming swans.

This illustrates how organisations across the sector are being forced to divert precious resources to combat damaging and baseless claims.

Despite the scale of the challenges, the sessions also revealed a strong desire for solidarity and a clear call for specific, actionable support to build resilience.

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We've always prided ourselves on being very diverse. But one of the things that we're seeing more and more, is that our service users do not wish to engage with volunteers from ethnic or diverse backgrounds. They want 'British people'. We're also seeing more and more comments about caseworkers who are from other backgrounds [and hearing] language that would not be acceptable previously. It's been a real challenge... It's a bigger problem than we can handle at this point. We don't want to get it wrong.

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"It's getting that balance between everybody being welcome [when] people are expressing hateful comments... about refugees, but refugees also come and we want them to feel welcome."

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Our biggest problem is people accusing immigrants of doing things that are just not true. Our volunteers and staff are now under threat from catapults, people threatening [them], saying that immigrants are eating swans, for which we have no evidence whatsoever. The press are hounding us for stories that just do not exist and will not leave us alone.

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"We've had an all-staff meeting... around how to stay safe, dynamic risk assessment, how to report a hate crime, how to support the client group. Because refugees and migrants are unlikely to report to the police... How can we support them to do that?"

2 Turning insights into action

The listening sessions highlighted a set of priorities that voluntary organisations see as essential for operating safely and effectively in the current climate. Participants identified both immediate support needs and longer-term systemic changes that infrastructure bodies, funders and government must prioritise.

Immediate priorities: protecting people and operations

Across all sessions, there was a strong demand for tangible resources to help organisations protect their people, manage hostility, and support staff and volunteer wellbeing.

Protecting our people (staff and volunteers)

- Expert-led advice that supports greater situational awareness, online safety, de-escalation techniques, and practical tips for staying safe in public.

- Access to trauma-informed support frameworks, such as professional supervision for frontline workers, particularly for those in small charities with limited internal HR capacity.

- Guidance on how to facilitate sensitive internal conversations, support team wellbeing, and navigate differing viewpoints within their teams.

Protecting our work (operations and mission)

- Practical guidance on conducting risk assessments and safety planning for events and public-facing activities.

- Specialist comms support to equip staff with the skills to counter false narratives, manage difficult press inquiries and social media 'pile-ons', and avoid having their message misrepresented or misconstrued.

- Resources and training on dialogue skills to help staff and volunteers manage conflict with the public and handle challenging conversations with service users.

Beyond practical support: the need for sector advocacy

Alongside practical tools, participants called for systemic action to build collective strength and challenge the root causes of the hostility they face.

Convening for solidarity

There was a strong call for facilitation of regular, safe, and confidential peer-support networks. These spaces would allow leaders and staff to share experiences, combat the isolation many are feeling, and build the collective strength needed to navigate these pressures.

A unified sector voice

Participants called for robust, coordinated, sector-wide advocacy. This work must challenge the political narratives that fuel division, condemn racism and all forms of hate unequivocally, and champion the sector as an expert partner with invaluable expertise in building community cohesion.

Addressing root causes

Participants emphasised that a sustainable response must go beyond reacting to acute incidents. It must tackle underlying structural issues, including institutional racism, which create the conditions for division and hate to flourish.

3 What NCVO is doing: a commitment to action

The insights from these listening sessions make clear that voluntary organisations need sustained support, practical guidance and better access to expertise to operate safely, effectively and confidently in pursuit of their missions.

NCVO is committed to acting on what we have heard and supporting our members and the wider sector to navigate these challenging times. As well as collating a list of existing support (see Appendix A), we are:

- Identifying potential help and guidance to meet emerging needs, and who is best to deliver this in the sector.

- Working with partners to leverage key expertise and mobilise collective action.

- Exploring opportunities to further convene members and the sector to provide spaces for collaboration and peer-to-peer support.

- Raising the voice of the sector to the Charity Commission as the sector's regulator, and to government in line with the principles of the Civil Society Covenant, to identify the role they can both play in addressing the challenges faced by the sector.

Conclusion

The powerful testimony shared during these listening sessions paints a stark picture of a sector under immense pressure, but also one showing real resilience and commitment.

The challenges we face as a society are serious, but the voluntary sector's role in bridging divides and strengthening communities has never been more important.

The resilience of civil society is a measure of the health of our democracy. We call on government and partners to work with us to ensure this vital work can continue, free from intimidation.

Appendix A
Existing NCVO support and guidance

1. Safeguarding, safety and risk management

- Safeguarding resources and guides
- Volunteering and health and safety
- Supporting staff and volunteer wellbeing
- Responding to discrimination (internally)

2. Governance and leadership support

- Trustee duties, risk and decision-making
- Webinar: How to make good decisions in challenging times
- Managing internal conflict and difficult conversations
- Legal compliance checklist

3. Misinformation, online safety, crisis comms

- Social media guidance and safety tips
- Dealing with misinformation
- Communicating in a crisis
- Webinar: Responding effectively when your charity faces opposition

4. Influencing, convening and peer support

- NCVO policy and influencing hub
- Political campaigning
- Webinar: Maximising opportunities and minimising risks in partnership working
- Webinar: Successful charity partnerships with corporates and local authorities

Appendix B
Support and guidance provided by others

Links to external organisations are shared to help charities access specialist support. NCVO is not responsible for the content on external websites and does not endorse any political views or positions held by these organisations or the people who work for them. If you deem any of these links inappropriate, please contact us with full details so we can review.

1. Government & statutory agencies

- How charities can respond to the current hostile environment
- How to report a serious incident at your charity
- Report a hate crime
- Protect UK: Guidance on "Martyn's law" (Protection of Premises)
- Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC)
- Acas (hate crime at work)
- Hate crime training event materials
- Personal safety tips

2. Guidance and Risk Management

- Charities and risk management
- Decision-making for charity trustees
- Campaigning and political activity guidance for charities
- Downloadable risk assessment guide

3. Infrastructure bodies and umbrella organisations

- Find your local infrastructure organisation
- VCS Emergencies Partnership
- LGBT Consortium
- Together with Refugees
- All Ways Network
- The Jewish Leadership Council

4. Specialist charities

- Hope Not Hate
- Charities against Hate: How to Respond to Racism
- British Muslim Trust
- Tell MAMA (anti-Muslim hate)
- Community Security Trust (CST) (protection for Jewish community organisations)
- Galop (LGBTQ+ hate crime support)
- Stop Hate UK
- Runnymede Trust

5. Trauma, mental health & workforce wellbeing

- Mind
- Samaritans
- Hub of Hope (directory of local mental health services)
- NHS Every Mind Matters
- When Hate Spills into Workplaces - A Leader's Guide

6. Community cohesion and mediation

- The Jo Cox Foundation
- Communities Against Hate
- British Future (cohesion & public attitudes research)
- Belong Network
- More In Common

7. Digital safety, cybersecurity and anti-misinformation

- Hope Not Hate online safety checklist
- National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC)
- IPSO: Help with Press Intrusion
- Crisis comms
- How to combat online misinformation
- Social media moderation and mental health
- Digital resilience for charities
- Free online safety checklist