

Civil Society Minister's speech to NPC 2021 Conference

I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak to you today and I am honoured to have been asked to be the new DCMS Minister with responsibility for civil society and youth.

I'm really sorry that I am not able to be with you live today, but I would like to thank NPC and Dan for making it possible for me to share some thoughts, albeit over the internet.

Charities, social enterprises and volunteers play a vital role in modern Britain. From large national organisations, to locally-run community projects, they tackle some of the greatest challenges that we face, and help people and communities most in need.

I have seen first hand how the extraordinary work of civil society can change lives and enrich communities. I've seen this as a constituency MP, well before covid hit us all, but also and especially during the lockdowns, and of course with other parts of my ministerial portfolio. Particularly in sport, I've worked closely with youth groups, charities and other civil society organisations on a wide range of projects and initiatives.

I know that my predecessor Baroness Barran worked exceptionally hard over the last two years, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank her for everything that she has done.

I am very pleased to be taking on this role. Civil society is a critical part of so much of what DCMS and the whole of government is working to achieve. I believe there is huge potential in embedding civil society as part of my broader portfolio, for example aligning our efforts to unlock philanthropy and grow the role of volunteers.

Of course it is important to acknowledge the extraordinary challenges of the last 18 months.

I know that the pandemic has placed great strains on many charities and social enterprises, as you respond to rising demand, and at times increased financial hardship. It has also required a huge mobilisation of volunteers.

But we have all been inspired by the role that our sectors and volunteers have played, going above and beyond to help those affected by the crisis.

This includes the huge generosity of the British public. Volunteers were essential to the community response with an estimated 12.4 million volunteers across the UK supporting local people to access essential services and stay connected. As well as formal volunteering the pandemic saw communities rapidly mobilising to help local people who were particularly at risk or hardest hit by the effects of isolation.

While the pandemic is not yet over, we must look to the future. It is the defining mission of this government to unite and level up the whole of the UK. This mission is about spreading opportunity, raising living standards, and restoring people's pride in the places they live.

Civil society has a huge and central role to play in this mission. Charities, social enterprises and volunteers are already working up and down the country, delivering a real impact in left behind communities.

We know that the involvement of volunteers, charities and social enterprises make a huge difference to the experience of living in a place, providing opportunities for everyone, young and old, to become active citizens. Participation in civil society builds social cohesiveness and allows people to come together to tackle issues and challenges collectively.

We also know that where charities and social enterprises are active they can deliver positive outcomes for people in need through the services they provide.

However, together we can do even more to make sure these opportunities are available in all neighbourhoods. Levelling up provides us with an opportunity to look again at how government, civil society, the private sector and local communities can work together to go even further, and maximise our collective impact.

I look forward to hearing from you in the weeks ahead about how we can make this ambition possible, and what government can do to support civil society.

Of course central to this will be a strong relationship between government and civil society.

I am committed to building and maintaining an open and constructive partnership between us. I am looking forward to meeting with many of you at future roundtables, visits and events, and hearing about your important work and how we can strengthen our relationship.

I know that you will continue to engage with us in this spirit of openness and collaboration as we work to achieve our shared objectives.

DCMS is here to represent the interests of civil society across government, to unlock opportunities, and create the conditions for our sectors to thrive. Together we can deliver huge change and level up all parts of this country.

Thank you for listening, and I look forward to seeing many of you face to face in the very near future.