

Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden opened on recruitment of new Charity Commission chair

The British people are a proud nation of givers, with the majority of us reporting that we have donated to charity at some point in the last year. Whether it is to improve our local communities, fund medical research or protect animals and wildlife – we want to do our bit to support others near and far. Charities are part of the rich fabric of our national life. They bring pleasure, purpose and essential services to millions. The pandemic has been hard on charities. But in many cases the third sector managed to continually sustain and support others during an incredibly challenging time. This is to be commended and encouraged.

The importance of charities and their help in reaching people that the government cannot is precisely why the third sector alongside others have benefitted from government schemes designed to offer hope to organisations otherwise facing a highly challenging future. In fact, we created an additional dedicated scheme of £750 million for frontline charities precisely because of the value we place on them.

Earlier this week one such charity, the Churchill Fellowship, sparked debate with a controversial rebrand which appeared to airbrush Sir Winston Churchill from its public profile. The Churchill Fellowship has now stated that it is not seeking to disown the reason that they exist, which is welcome. But I found it quite extraordinary that it got to the position where this clarification was required.

Sadly it is not an isolated case. Just last week the Guy's and St Thomas' Foundation overruled legal advice to move a statue of Thomas Guy from its main forecourt. A public consultation had been run on the matter, with statements from the foundation citing Guy's shares in the South Sea Company, which had a major role in the evils of the slave trade. His role in founding one of the world's finest hospitals was deemed entirely secondary to this share ownership. Three quarters of those who responded said the statue should remain in place, and yet they announced they were moving it anyway.

This is just another example of a worrying trend in some charities that appear to have been hijacked by a vocal minority seeking to burnish their woke credentials. In so doing they not only distract charities from their core missions but also waste large amounts of time and money. I'm quite sure this is not what the millions of British people who donate to charities every year had intended their hard earned and thoughtfully donated cash to be spent on. Moreover, as we work as a country to emerge from the pandemic, we need our charities to be totally focussed on their important work. We don't need them hunting for divisions in a way that serves neither their benefactors nor the country.

The public's trust depends on charities remaining true to their founding missions. The recruitment of a new Chair of the Charity Commission provides an opportunity for this refocus and resetting of the balance.

I have instructed those leading the search to ensure that the new leader of the Commission will restore charities' focus to their central purpose and empower Trustees to be robust. With interviews beginning next week, candidates will be tested on how they will harness the oversight powers of the Commission to commence this rebalancing. And ministers will only select a candidate that can convince on these criteria. This is an important first step that will benefit not only the public but the charities themselves. I am convinced that the most successful charities of the next century will be those focused on their core purpose of delivering positive change.

The new Charity Commission Chair will need to ensure these organisations are on a sustainable financial footing. The government is rightly supporting charities, but rather than a developing reliance on government grants in the years to come, they should refocus their efforts on public giving.

The British people understand the importance of philanthropy and giving. We understand the importance of the vital work done by charities. But in return for that support charities must recognise there is a wider group to which they owe their existence. The taxpayer has made no demands of those in receipt of these lifelines but those who have accessed this funding must pay due consideration to the wider constituency that now has a stake in their work.

We do our bit when we donate to charities; they must do theirs by ensuring that every penny is spent on real impact.

This op ed was originally published in the Sunday Telegraph on 12 September 2021.