

# A report **encouraging boldness** in third sector organisations

## living values summary

“Values drive every bit of work we do”

Third sector interviewee

“People dedicate their lives, you can’t underestimate the power of this”

Third sector interviewee

### What are values?

Values are the **beginning** they are what inspire us  
values are the **means** they are what we do and how we do it  
and values are the **end** they are what we strive to achieve

### Why we did this work

It is often claimed that the distinguishing feature of organisations in the third sector is that they are value-driven. But the values of the sector as a whole are rarely defined. We believe values are important. Values shape what the organisation does and the way the organisation does it – how it manages, how decisions are made, the manner in which people work.

The third sector has always existed in the midst of forces that variously shape, support and threaten its work. Now, more than ever, there are pressures acting on the sector which have the potential to cause a step-change in what the sector does and how it does it. These pressures

are experienced very differently by organisations that are small and large, local and national, those that campaign and those that deliver services. We need to ensure that they do not destroy the very thing that makes the third sector special in the first place – its values.

### What we did

We investigated:

- ▶ What are the values of the third sector?
- ▶ Are these values unique to the sector?
- ▶ Are these values under threat?
- ▶ What can we do to protect and promote these values?

# Our findings

There is a set of values that are meaningful to third sector organisations. These are:



- ▶ Empowering people ▶ Pursuing equality ▶ Making voices heard
- ▶ Transforming lives ▶ Being responsible ▶ Finding fulfilment
- ▶ Doing a good job ▶ Generating public wealth ▶

## These values inspire people to work in the third sector.

Values are the sector's most important asset in recruiting people and sustaining their commitment. If the sector is to continue to inspire people to get involved both as volunteers and as paid workers, then it has to be able to rigorously and passionately demonstrate these values.

"The third sector isn't a perfect employer. Workloads can be high and financial rewards low yet it seems that once in, it's hard to leave – for all the right reasons".

Third sector interviewee

## Separately these values are present in the public and private sectors. However, the way in which third sector organisations combine and prioritise these values is unique.

The values that most interviewees identified as unique were making voices heard, empowering people and being responsible although the numbers choosing a single value as unique were small suggesting a belief that, taken individually, these values are present in other sectors.

"The sector does not do itself any favours by trying to occupy the moral high ground. Some businesses have excellent values. Public services have dignity and value. People still work in them for a reason."

Third sector interviewee

'To empower people' combined with 'to be led by people who experience problems' is unique. A school does the first one, but not using the approach captured in the second statement."

Third sector interviewee

## There are forces that have the potential to change the values of the third sector.

These are:

- ▶ The nature of the relationship between government and the sector which is characterised by:
  - a top down approach
  - targets and outputs set by the centre
  - short termism
  - scepticism over involving those outside government in the design of services

"There is no question that the third sector is seen by government as a better way of delivering some public services than public or private institutions. And here a real difficulty arises – the whole point of getting voluntary organisations to deliver services is the difference or value added they bring, but you can't get this into a tender. What voluntary organisations most add is the least measurable. If the sector just becomes an agent it loses the very thing government is contracting with it for."

Public sector interviewee

- ▶ The nature of the funding environment which is characterised by:
  - increased use of contracts
  - decreased use of grant funding
  - lack of funding for what you want to do in the way you want to do it

"This organisation has had to move away from a holistic approach to get funding. The statutory sector not understanding full cost recovery and joined-up thinking makes it easier to get small simple projects funded than projects that really meet complex needs."

Third sector interviewee

## The organisations that navigate these forces successfully are those that passionately focus on their values.

“It’s about keeping your own flame burning and then being quite systematic about revisiting the values and making sure that they are underpinning what you are doing.”

Third sector interviewee

## The biggest threat to the sector comes from within.

It lies in organisations:

- ▶ Not focusing clearly on values
- ▶ Chasing funding that does not fit values
- ▶ Allowing values to be influenced by others outside the sector
- ▶ Allowing the demands of running an organisation to overshadow values

“Values are under threat from the sector itself because the voluntary sector is choosing to devote its energies to core public service delivery and income generation through trade. It’s choosing to do this for survival and the opportunity to get bigger for its own sake and the more it’s driven by contractual requirements and bottom lines, the less freedom it will have to tackle the problems that diminish society”.

Third sector interviewee

## There are practical things that third sector organisations, and those that support them, can do to put values at the centre of every activity.

The assumption that the sector’s values are at the mercy of forces outside its control was strongly disputed by interviewees’ responses. Those that support the sector can help organisations to put values at the centre of every activity. However, organisations felt that we have to take responsibility ourselves for making our values live. No-one else will do it for us. We found this an inspiring and optimistic finding.

If values are the beginning, the means and the end, then organisations need to bring values to life in each of these stages, and to do this forcefully and passionately.

- ▶ **The beginning: talk about values** – agreeing the values of the organisations is like laying the foundations of a building. You can’t change the foundations without demolishing the building. Similarly you cannot change the values of an organisation without destroying its integrity. But values must be constantly referred to and kept in the front of the minds of everyone connected to the organisation.
- ▶▶ **The means: build every activity on these values** – putting the values of the organisation into practice requires every part of the organisation to think about what values mean for how people behave, how ideas are formed and how work is planned and delivered.
- **The end: measure your work against your values** – delivering the values of the organisation requires work on measuring whether and how this is being achieved. If an organisation is doing all three of these, each stage reinforces and enhances the quality of the others.

The report contains examples, case studies, signposts and practical exercises that will help organisations to put these stages into practice.

## Final word

What do the findings of the Collaborative Inquiry mean for third sector organisations? At a time of change, opportunity and threat, we need to go beyond the vague assertion that the third sector’s values are different to other sectors and do this with confidence and authority. We need to concentrate on what inspires us to do our work, on how our methods help us to be effective and on what we want to achieve. Our work sits alongside the contribution of the other sectors but we believe that the approach is distinctive and valuable and must not be lost.

Talking about values, building every activity on values and measuring activity against values are the key to moulding, rather than being moulded by, the forces that are exerted on the sector.

Third sector organisations have to take responsibility for making this happen. We must take this challenge. We must be bold.

“Are you in earnest? seize this very minute  
Boldness has genius, power and magic in it”  
Goethe

# Values are the beginning, the means and the end.

## How we did this work

We invited 12 people from a range of organisations (third sector, public and private) to join a Collaborative Inquiry Group to research this issue with us. We developed an approach for interviews and group discussions where participants selected statements from a list and built their own value diagrams. In total we spoke to 59 people. We analysed the data and presented interim findings to two seminars involving a further 65 people. We are grateful to the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation for funding the Inquiry and for their enthusiastic and valuable participation.

## About Community Links

Community Links is an innovative inner city charity running community based projects in east London. Founded in 1977, we now help over 50,000 vulnerable children, young people and adults every year, with most of our work delivered in Newham, one of the poorest areas in Europe. Our successes influence both community-based organisations nationwide and government policy.

This is a summary of “Living Values, a report encouraging boldness in third sector organisations”. The full report is available from Community Links  
105 Barking Road  
London E16 4HQ  
[www.community-links.org](http://www.community-links.org)

Please let us know if you would like this information in a different format.

## Inquiry Group members

David Robinson (Chair), Community Links  
Ann Blackmore, NCVO  
Craig Deardon Phillips, Speaking Up!  
Claire Dove, Blackburne House  
Marie Gabriel, Newham Primary Care Trust  
Joanna Holmes, Barton Hill Settlement  
Peter Martin, Addaction  
Marj Mayo, Goldsmiths College  
Nicola Pollock, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation  
Mary Riddell, The Observer  
Ellivate Sikana, community activist  
Yasmin Waljee, Lovells  
  
Geraldine Blake and Matthew Smerdon,  
Links UK, Community Links.

## What next?

What do you think about the findings of this report?  
Do you have examples of how you make your values live that will inspire and encourage others?

**Organisations** would you like support with exploring your values and how you deliver them?

**Funders and policy makers** can we help you to think through how you might help third sector organisations to deliver their values?

We are keen to hear from you.

[geraldine.blake@community-links.org](mailto:geraldine.blake@community-links.org)  
[matthew.smerdon@community-links.org](mailto:matthew.smerdon@community-links.org)