



Webinar Summary – Educating political parties to help the community sector

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Over the past few months, many of our community organisations were deemed essential services and kept us afloat. They got food on our tables, ensured the homeless had housing and lifted our mental health during a time of crisis. Where would we have been without our community and voluntary sector?

On Wednesday 10 June 2020, [Hui E! Community Aotearoa](#), [ComVoices](#), [Sue Barker Charities Law](#), Trust Democracy and the [Todd Foundation](#) joined forces to ask our New Zealand politicians how they will support a thriving community and voluntary sector.

As one of the first election events in the lead up to Election 2020, there was an air of nervousness in the Zoom waiting room. This soon dissipated as a result of a warm introduction by Pania Coote and the responsive style of facilitator Rawdon Christie. For the politicians, the tone was unusually collaborative, with alignment over the value of the sector and the need to be putting more resources behind it.

The first topic for discussion was **whether we should reinstate the Office for the Community and Voluntary Sector**. Minister Poto Williams (Labour) said her personal view was that re-establishing the Office would be valuable. “We are the most voiceless in terms of a sector, but we are the most important”. She discussed social infrastructure and the need to put a value on the social part of our ecosystems as we #buildbackbetter.

Jan Logie (Greens) reflected on a new level of awareness within government agencies of the value of the sector, as a result of Covid-19. She wants to continue to lift the sector’s status within government and have a more senior Ministerial position, who sits at the Cabinet table.

Minister Tracey Martin (NZ First), tuning in from Gore, said the government agency representing the sector does need to be more dominant. She noted the current difficulty in the Department of Internal Affairs getting Budget leverage for the community and voluntary sector and felt we needed to “shift the mana” of the Office.



Alfred Ngaro (National) didn't specifically advocate for a new Office but did say the sector needs improved resourcing. He reflected on National's funding for [Ākina](#), to support the growth of social enterprise, and emphasised the economic value of the sector – 114,000 not-for-profits and 28,000 charities equating to \$9.4B.

Brooke van Velden (ACT) was sceptical of creating a new Office. She queried whether it would become a traditional government agency rather than a voice for the sector. ACT's fundamental position is that the community will know better than government and should be given more power in decision-making.

Geoff Simmons (The Opportunity Party) agreed that the top-down mindset within government is problematic. TOP is a big fan of localism and giving more power to communities. In Geoff's words, "the sector needs at a seat at the table and it should be as powerful a voice as Business NZ".

The second topic was a challenge familiar to all people working in the sector – funding. Geoff gave an overview of The Opportunities Parties' relevant policies, namely (1) a universal basic income; (2) community sector to be the service providers for social housing; and (3) greater autonomy for community mental health services.

Poto wanted a better picture of the social infrastructure in New Zealand, to understand the gaps and opportunities. She said one of her key priorities is to allow the community to drive government policies.

Tracey focused on prevention and early intervention. She said that more power needs to be devolved to community (agreeing with Geoff, which was notably unusual). In her time as Minister, Tracey has also tried to divert more from gambling funds into the community sector.

Jan reflected on the importance of shifting the imbalance between government and the sector, referring to a recent [study by Martin Jenkins](#) that showed a \$630M a year deficit in terms of the value of social services compared to what government was contributing. Jan supported co-design and said the employees of charity needed additional support.

For ACT, government funding needs efficiency and ACT would prefer individual players in the economy to support community groups.

Stepping back to his time as Minister, Alfred said social sector trials revealed that community groups could often deliver a better service for a better cost than those appointed by government. The previous National Government found that partnering with local government could be useful in creating sustainable funding models. National also supports devolving roles to the community housing sector.

Turning to Covid-19 and the increased pressures on the sector, Poto made the point that the Government's reviews of the Public Finance Act and State Sector Act were critical.

Geoff said we need to do more things like Whanau Ora to let communities set their own goals. A voucher-based 'community dollars scheme' like the *Good in the Hood* scheme by Z Energy but more wide-scale, was floated by Geoff. This attracted an allergic reaction from Tracey, who preferred underlining the power and mana in volunteering, part of the Government's tagline: "earning, learning, caring and volunteering".

Brooke said [ACT's Alternative Budget](#) outlines their approach to #buildbackbetter.

The audience were then given an opportunity to ask questions.

- On **how to generate an honest partnership** between government and the sector, Alfred said National enabled community led development, such as Whanau Ora and Te Wānanga.
- On **“who” the sector is**, Jan said we should not forget the groups that give voice to marginalised communities.
- On **advocacy**, both Poto and Jan agreed that enabling advocacy, particularly through the legislation and government contracts, was vital.
- On **contracting terms**, Poto wanted to get rid of pilots and look to longer term contracts between government and the sector.
- On an **opportunity for change**, Brooke said the disconnected funding for service providers in mental health needed to be fixed.

On the potential for a cross-party agreement, Tracey said that political parties don't always disagree but that our democratic society demands different points of view for the sector.

As suggested by Geoff, perhaps the best way forward is to find the “best” in each party and (a) fund things that work and (b) devolve power to those connected to their community.

Either way, let's value this diverse sector and continue to demand the attention it deserves in the upcoming Election 2020.

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