



**Civil Society Covenant Framework**  
**Department for Culture, Media and Sports**  
**December 2024**

*Muslim Women's Network UK (MWN UK) is a national Muslim women's organisation in Britain ([www.mwnuk.co.uk](http://www.mwnuk.co.uk)) that has been advancing equality, promoting women's empowerment, and connecting voices since 2003. We are a small national charity (reg. no. 1155092) that works to improve social justice and equality for Muslim women and girls. Our membership also includes women of other faiths or of no faith and men who support our work. We find out about the experiences of Muslim women and girls through research and our helpline enquiries. We identify policy and practice gaps and use this information to inform decision makers in government as well as informing our community campaigns at a grassroots level.*

*We also develop resources and train women, so they are better aware of their rights. We have a separate website for our national helpline ([www.mwnhelpline.co.uk](http://www.mwnhelpline.co.uk)) that provides advice and support on a range of issues including domestic abuse, forced marriage, honour-based violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, female genital mutilation, hate crimes, discrimination, mental health etc.*

**1) Are the 4 key principles – recognition, partnership, participation, transparency – the right ones:**

Yes, these principles are fundamental in building and sustaining strong, effective relationships between the voluntary sector and government. Recognition ensures that the valuable work of charities is acknowledged, which motivates continued engagement and support. Partnership creates a framework for shared responsibility in addressing societal issues, ensuring that both parties have a stake in creating solutions. Participation empowers charities by giving them a voice in decision-making processes that affect their communities and services, making policies more reflective of the needs of those they serve. Transparency fosters trust, as both government and civil society must be open about their intentions, goals, and the resources required to achieve them. These principles provide a comprehensive approach that will help guide long-term, meaningful collaboration, especially as the role of charities becomes even more pivotal in addressing societal challenges.

## **2) What are the enablers of effective partnership and what are examples of best practice?**

Effective partnerships are typically built on shared values, mutual respect, and clear communication. Enablers of strong partnerships include establishing common goals, understanding each party's roles, and creating frameworks that allow for ongoing dialogue. This ensures that both government and civil society organisations are aligned and can work together towards shared outcomes. A critical enabler is having the right resources—both financial and human—which allow for the meaningful contribution of all partners. One exemplary model is the VCSE Accord in Greater Manchester, where the local government and civil society collaborate closely to address the needs of local communities. This initiative shows how civil society and public bodies can work in tandem, resulting in effective solutions that respond directly to community challenges. Additionally, the creation of the Civil Society Covenant aims to establish a nationwide framework for collaboration between government and civil society, focusing on building sustainable partnerships and ensuring long-term impact. These examples highlight the potential for stronger, more coordinated efforts when there is mutual commitment and trust between the sectors.

## **3) What are the barriers to meaningful partnership and collaboration?**

Barriers to meaningful partnership often arise from a lack of trust and understanding between the government and civil society. For example, years of funding cuts have strained relationships, particularly for smaller, local charities that rely heavily on government support. When financial resources are limited or unpredictable, charities may be forced to scale back their services, which undermines the capacity for collaboration. Additionally, the government's focus on larger, national organisations sometimes leads to the marginalisation of smaller charities, limiting their ability to participate in key decision-making processes. Another barrier is the unequal power dynamics in these partnerships, where charities, especially small ones or specialised minority ethnic charities, can feel sidelined or disregarded in favour of more established players. This also applies to Arms Length Bodies, which are funded by the government. Is the government checking whether they are not excluding certain groups? We have unfortunately had negative experiences with such bodies.

There is also a challenge of discriminatory policies or discriminatory rhetoric by Ministers, which demonise particular communities. If these barriers are not addressed, collaboration risks becoming superficial or unsustainable, which can ultimately undermine the effectiveness of partnerships.

For example, Muslim communities have been stigmatised because for almost two decades, much of the engagement with them via civil society organisations has been through a lens of extremism and Prevent strategies. Also, when particular groups have been funded, there has been a lack of transparency about their funding and how the funds are being spent and on what. Another contributing factor of the marginalisation of smaller specialist ‘by and for’ led minority ethnic women’s groups has been the funding model favouring larger organisations. For example, high income threshold being imposed as a criteria. This means minority led women’s groups have to form coalitions to access funding, which is resource intensive and difficult for them. Policies and practices should be assessed through an equality lens to eliminate these types of biases and discrimination.

#### **4) How do we ensure this Covenant holds weight and is effective?**

For the Civil Society Covenant to have real impact, it must be grounded in concrete actions rather than symbolic commitments. Both the government and civil society must be equally dedicated to ensuring the framework leads to tangible outcomes. This includes long-term, sustainable funding for smaller charities, which have been particularly vulnerable due to ongoing cuts in public sector budgets. For the Covenant to hold weight, it’s crucial that charities are actively involved in shaping the policies that affect them, ensuring that the voices of both large and small organisations from diverse communities are heard. The Covenant must also recognise the social value charities provide, which often extends beyond measurable economic impact to include things like improved social cohesion, health, and well-being. The government’s role is to create an environment that allows charities to thrive, such as through supportive and simple procurement policies or regulatory frameworks. Too many contracts are being given to the private sector who only focus on profit. Training / information sharing workshops would help to make procurement more accessible to smaller charities. Delivery by the civil society sector means capacity building them and funding going back into communities who are more likely to understand the needs of the communities. One example, is the Equality Advisory Support, the Helpline which advises

and assists individuals on issues relating to equality and human rights. We understand the contract has been awarded to G4S, despite various concerns about this company. Less than 2% of their calls are about inequalities linked to religious belief, which is a surprisingly low figure. By changing the current status quo, the Covenant can become a meaningful, long-term partnership that helps charities better serve their communities and drives real change across society.

**5) How do we harness the excellent ability of civil society to innovate and find new solutions to societal problems, and how do we support that spirit to spread across the sector?**

Civil society has always demonstrated a remarkable ability to innovate, whether it's through developing new solutions for health care, social services, or education. To truly harness this potential, targeted grants for innovation, similar to those available to businesses, should be made available to the voluntary sector, ensuring such opportunities are made equally available to the minority ethnic by and for led organisations. This would enable charities to explore creative, out-of-the-box solutions to the complex issues they face. While many businesses may experience setbacks and failures as part of their innovation process, charities should be afforded similar opportunities to experiment and learn from their own experiences without the fear of jeopardising their financial stability. Furthermore, collaborative spaces that encourage the exchange of ideas between charities, businesses, and the public sector can help spread innovative solutions across the sector. Providing mentorship and capacity-building support can also help smaller charities scale up their innovative ideas, ensuring that they can replicate and expand successful projects. By supporting civil society's natural spirit of innovation, we can create a ripple effect, enabling charities to tackle societal challenges more effectively and ensuring that these solutions reach wider communities.

**6) How do we make the new relationship a reality, especially in the current economic context?**

In today's economic climate, where charities are facing growing demand for services and declining funding, it's essential that the relationship between government and civil society is built on practical, actionable commitments. This means that the government must move beyond rhetoric and provide consistent, stable funding to charities, particularly those that are small or local. In the current climate, where austerity measures have severely impacted the

voluntary sector, the government must be proactive in developing new funding models that prioritise social value and support charities in delivering public services. For example, government procurement policies should better recognise the social benefits charities provide and ensure they have access to opportunities to deliver services. Also, budget decisions should also be assessed on how they will impact on charities. For example, the recent announcements on the increase in employer national insurance contributions will significantly add to charity salary expenditure, likely to result in scaling back of services of smaller charities who are already struggling to access funding – the current charitable funding environment is the worst it has ever been.

Additionally, reducing bureaucratic barriers and providing more flexibility in how charities can operate would help them navigate the current financial constraints. Ensuring that the voices of smaller charities are not lost in the process is also vital, as they often play a crucial role in their local communities. By addressing these challenges and building trust between the sectors, the new relationship can become a reality, helping civil society play its essential role in delivering social value even in tough economic times.

**On behalf of Muslim Women's Network UK,  
Neelam Rose  
(Advocacy Officer)  
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