

# Introduction

## Sir Stuart Etherington, Chief Executive

In May 2015 voters will decide who best can address the challenges that our country faces. Some of these challenges, particularly the need to rebalance and grow the economy, were forged in the 2008 financial crisis. Others pre-date the crisis: the rising needs of a rapidly changing population; globalisation; disruptive technology; fears for the environment. For many people, these changes are unsettling. For policymakers, these challenges demand intelligent and ambitious responses.

Amid so much change, the resilience and energy of our communities has held firm. Everywhere we see volunteers and community groups, and charities large and small, taking an active role in addressing problems, bringing people together, and campaigning for what people want. They are already actively building a more civil society and a more social economy.

NCVO believes that voluntary organisations and the volunteer movement are at the heart of the society that people want to live in. We believe that a powerful volunteer movement and a modern voluntary sector focused on impact have even more potential to help solve the country's most pressing problems.

The positive message outlined in this manifesto is voluntary organisations and the volunteer movement stand ready to make an even greater difference. NCVO members have shared their solutions with us to show what voluntary organisations and the volunteer movement have to offer.

Their stories show the real differences made to individual lives – stories echoed by millions of others across the country. Importantly, they demonstrate the substantial benefits and real savings that could be achieved if voluntary organisations are better supported and able to work in partnership with the government. They are the basis for a renewed optimism about the future.

NCVO's members have told us that an optimistic vision for the future of our country would include:

- economic growth which benefits all parts of society
- public services which are more responsive to people's needs
- an enabling environment so that people can make a difference for the communities and causes they care about.

And they have told us that they are ready to help deliver these improvements. They want to make a bigger contribution. They have scale and reach, making a real contribution to our national wealth and wellbeing. There are over 160,000 voluntary organisations and 15.2m people volunteering each month: the National Trust alone engages 60,000 volunteers contributing 3.1 million hours of their time. Voluntary organisations save taxpayers considerable sums by intervening early, by joining up fragmented services and by reducing demand for public services. Volunteers combat isolation, a clear factor in driving service demand.

We know that voluntary organisations and the volunteer movement can do more. But the policy challenges of the future cannot be met through voluntary sector initiatives alone. They require a fundamental rethink of the way government works – and as part of that, the way it works with us.

While the Compact agreement is as relevant as ever, it is time to think afresh about the relationship national government seeks to build with voluntary organisations. We remain independent, politically neutral, and a vital voice for communities and the causes they care about. We strive to deliver the very best services, support and advice. We provide opportunities for people to fulfil their interests and meet their needs. And in all of this, we complement the roles of the public and private sectors.

It is time to talk again about how we work together to make our country stronger, fairer and optimistic about its future. It is time to talk about how working in partnership together we will be better able to deal with the opportunities and challenges of the future.

**Sir Stuart Etherington**  
Chief Executive, NCVO

