# appg on charities and volunteering

Embracing AI

27 February 2024

## Minutes

Lord Hodgson (Chair) introduced the four speakers, each of whom was invited to speak for five minutes.

### Zoe Amar ‒ chief executive, Zoe Amar Digital

* AI is a rapidly evolving technology which will significantly alter how we live.
* Goldman Sachs predicts it could replace 300 million full time positions.
* Civil society will be impacted on both sides: its own work and workforce, and then also the people and communities it supports.
* We have found that 1/3 of charities already use AI.
* Among these, there are concerns around data privacy and algorithmic bias and how this impacts inclusion.
* It is difficult for charities to take full advantage of AI with pressures from the cost-of-living crisis and a lack of digital funding.
* Unlike the education sector‘s collaborative efforts, so far there has been no sector-wide response from charities.
* Digital skills on trustee boards are low.
* There is huge potential for AI to transform the sector for the better, but the risks and challenges need to be navigated.
* We need to overcome barriers to readiness and upskill staff and boards.

### Ben Siggery ‒ research and monitoring manager, Surrey Wildlife Trust

* AI can be used to improve efficiency of existing work but also to deliver new projects like our Space4Nature project in partnership with the University of Surrey funded by the People’s Postcode Lottery.
* We don’t have the resources to implement AI internally, so we are relying on external partners to give us those benefits and insights.
* The automated collection and monitoring of conservation data using satellite imagery in Space4Nature all came from the university.
* All the responsibility for risk also sat with the university.
* The Wildlife Trust is a federation, so we rely on the central body to provide that national guidance.
* Ecology is nuanced, not like mathematics, and AI doesn’t have the capability to replace human ecologists, so it's about using it in the right places.
* We are also starting to use generative AI internally as well to try and improve efficiency in workflows.
* But there is a lack of internal skills, and we think there needs to be more guidance generally for the sector.

### Ian McLintock ‒ founder, Charity Excellence Framework

* With AI you need to work out what problem you are trying to solve, what need you are addressing.
* We focus on the needs of small frontline organisations with limited resources and individuals who need signposting to services.
* Our AI chatbot ’bunnies’ can direct people to different places depending on queries.
* They can help to cut through lengthy regulatory guidance from the Commission that can be hard for small charity staff to get to grips with.
* AI bunnies can handle many more queries than an equivalent hotline.
* We also have data dashboards that plug into AI predictive analytics and may be able to help allocate scarce resources to the best places possible.
* There is not enough funding for AI, and a lack of interest from funders.
* I have had to build these tools myself on a shoestring.

### Louis Stupple-Harris ‒ foresight engagement lead, Nesta

* At Nesta we have been doing work around AI internally with our workforce, as well as work on early years education, and building a network on AI for civil society.
* We felt it was key as staff to get hands-on experience of the tools ourselves.
* I led a ’discovery month’ on AI with Nesta staff as the beginning of the process of imbedding these tools into our ways of working.
* 110 colleagues took part - roughly half our total workforce - over seven workshops.
* We completed practical exercises around writing / editing / brainstorming as well as areas where AI is less developed like research.
* This has allowed for more well-informed discussions about ethics in the organisation, what data we can share, and how much energy we should put in.
* The practical exercises used content designed in-house which was tailored to the day-to-day work of colleagues.
* All the participants are much more confident now, appreciated the opportunity and feel more productive than before.
* It was important to get new starters up to speed, as we had a whole range of understanding internally from people who knew nothing to people who were designing their own tools with AI.
* We are now setting clear policies on what staff can and can’t do, what can we share etc.
* There is a huge amount of efficiency to be drawn out.
* But quality of output isn’t there with the tools in certain areas yet, like research.
* There are problems to be worked out around bias, unpredictability of the responses, how to keep humans always involved, and how we protect jobs.

**Q&A**

**Lord Hodgson asked the panel what an overall sector response to AI could look like?**

Again the example of the education sector was given, and how it defined which challenges were relevant for the whole sector e.g. AI plagiarism in student work. Zoe Amar said that grant makers and infrastructure bodies need to work together with CEOs to ensure tools are both developed and adopted in a way that is socially just. Louis Stupple-Harris spoke about Nesta’s Civic AI Observatory which is focused on looking at service delivery and ethical questions and taking these to government and the regulators.

**Baroness Pitkeathley commented that the discussion had revealed to her how little she knew about AI and speculated that this may be how many trustees feel when trying to provide governance around AI.**

Paul Winyard from the Fundraising Regulator said NCVO are well-placed alongside the regulators to establish best practice in governance around AI. He underlined the need for more conversations that bring people in the sector together to information share. The regulators know AI is important but aren’t clear on all the issues. He said that the Fundraising Regulator are aware of some issues, for example the use of AI-generated images to scam people into donating to fake Turkey and Syria earthquake appeals.

**Baroness Pitkeathley also asked if helplines will still exist in 5 years’ time, or if they will be replaced by AI?**

Ian McLintock again reiterated that problems in the sector are complex and that while AI can do many things humans can’t do – such as working 24 hours a day – human issues need human contact, so helplines shouldn’t disappear. He hopes that AI will free up the workforce to do less admin and more human work. He predicted that AI won’t lead to job losses because charities are currently dealing with massive overdemand, and AI may simply allow charities to meet the demand.

Anna Mowbray from CAF commented that CAF’s recent research shows that the public feel positively about charities using AI. She also underlined the opportunities not just for improvements in back-office efficiency but also in the delivery of completely new projects like Wildlife Trust’s Space4Nature.

Ian McLintock raised the concern that charities trade on public trust and will be particularly vulnerable to the erosion of trust through AI-enabled scams. To give a sense of the scope of AI-enabled scams, he cited an example of a business in Hong Kong where a member of staff received false authorisation over a Zoom call from a digitally-generated simulacrum of the company’s CFO to transfer money to the scammers.

**Abdulsami Arjumand from Muslim Charities Forum asked if charities should be diving into AI before we’ve assessed the risks? He gave the example of the combustion engine that was of huge benefit to mankind but ultimately led to global warming, which was not foreseen at the time.**

The panel agreed that the cat was out of the bag, so charities had no choice but to engage with AI now. Louis Stupple-Harris raised that there will be new demands on charities and potentially create new beneficiaries because of the affect AI will have on society. For example, people befriending an AI rather than real people and becoming socially isolated.

**Lord Hodgson asked if AI can be helpful to very small charities, which make up the vast majority of charities?**

The panel agreed that AI can be helpful to smaller charities, saving them time and money.

**Caro Hattersley from Relate London, North, East and Essex asked if our sector should lead on the addressing the ethics and politics of AI as we are well-placed to?**

Ben Siggery responded that charities need infrastructure bodies to take the lead. Ian McLintock shared that mainstream funders are not interested in AI (infrastructure plus tech is too ’boring’) and that he is focused on funding from the private sector. Chris Walker from NCVO summarised the work of NCVO in this area so far, including roundtable discussions with chief executives and the tech section of the 2024 Road Ahead report. Zoe commented that the process of working out how best to implement AI in our organisations can lead us to reevaluate what is most important about our organisations and that this is valuable.

**Lord Hodgson finally asked if there is anything that parliamentarians can ask government for on behalf of charities?**

Ian McLintock replied that the charity sector is keeping many people going during the cost-of-living crisis and ensuring that those people can continue to contribute to society. The government should see AI as an opportunity to increase the productivity of the charity sector and therefore increase the impact of this vital work in a cost-effective way.