Update from the Charity Commission – 21 January 2014

Speaker:

- William Shawcross, Chair of Charity Commission

**William Shawcross, Charity Commission**

- William’s first full year as Chair of the Charity Commission has been a very full one with much firefighting. January 2013 saw the Cup Trust issue being raised, there was an appearance before the Public Accounts Committee in March and the National Audit Office report was published in early December. The Commission also has an almost entirely new Board that was recruited in the early part of last year.

- The NAO report was scathing and concluded that altogether the Charity Commission were not giving value for money. William does not agree with that claim and points out that in the last six years the budget for the organisation has been cut by half and they are facing further cuts. In the region of twenty five posts will need to be lost this year from a staff of three hundred and consequently this will have an impact and there may be things that the Commission will no longer be able to carry out as swiftly as before.

- William acknowledged that the Charity Commission has been too cautious at times and deliberate abuse has been missed but said that their approach is changing.

- The 2006 Charity Act set an ambition that the commission could never fulfil, indeed this was acknowledged by the Public Administration Committee. However, the Charity Commission has a broad range of statutory obligations which they have to fulfil. Over his tenure as Chair, William wants the Charity Commission to be seen as more and more fit for purpose and value for money. There is a need for a tougher and leaner Commission.

- Another issue from the last year was the Plymouth Brethren who were denied charitable status as adequate public benefit could not be proven. Rather than this going to the Charity Tribunal the Brethren asked whether a stay could be agreed to save on legal costs. This was agreed by the Commission and William set up a sub-committee on the Board to look at this again. It was an extremely difficult case but on 9th January this year the Charity Commission accepted a revised application with an amended trust deed from the Plymouth Brethren. It was a really important case and the Commission hopes that it came to a fair conclusion for all.

- Is the Commission a policeman or supporter of the sector? In law they are the policeman but they also have to be a sensible supporter.

- There are charities that need to be invigilated carefully, for example the Cup Trust. But the vast majority of registered charities certainly don’t need any investigation. To quote William Beveridge the commission aims to ensure that charity remains one of the golden threads of British life. The job of the Commission is to see that the reputation of the sector isn’t damaged and public trust and confidence in charities is upheld.

- With regards to trustees, the Cabinet Office has recently published a consultation looking at the Commission’s powers. The Commission supports these powers but highlighted two of these powers in particular 1. General disqualification power of trustees 2. Powers that give the Commission a stronger ability to regulate – such as issuing official warnings. These powers would need legislative change but it is William’s opinion that this would be better for the Charity Commission and the sector as a whole.

- Looking forward William would like the next NAO report to say there have been a lot of changes for the better.

- William hopes that 2014 will be much less about firefighting and more stopping fires breaking out in the first place.
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Future Meetings

- Tuesday 25th March, 4.00pm – 5.30pm
- Tuesday 13th May, 4.00 – 5.30pm
- Tuesday 8th July, 4.00 – 5.30pm

Please RSVP to Alison Evans on civilsocietyappg@ncvo.org.uk or telephone 020 7520 2473.