

The Renewed Compact: Burning Questions for the BME VCS



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A renewed version of the national Compact was launched on 14 December 2010. The Compact, an agreement setting out shared commitments and guidelines for effective partnership working between Government and the voluntary and community sector (VCS), was originally written in 1998 and has helped to shape the environment within which many organisations work.

Important undertakings setting out in the Compact such as 12 week deadlines for consultations, three months notice of the end of funding agreements, and an affirmation of the independence of VCS organisations, have been fundamental to improving the relationship between voluntary organisations and both national and local government over the last decade.

Here we look at some of the key motives behind the changes and what has been made different in the Compact.

Wasn't the Compact recently refreshed? Why change the Compact again?

Yes the Compact was refreshed in December 2009. However since then we have seen a change in Government, a further deterioration of the economic climate as well as new Government priorities.

Changed priorities of the new coalition government and the need to strengthen the Compact are the key motivations. The Government publicly stated its commitment to the Compact and wanted it strengthened, so it was discussed what a new document could look like and how to increase its accountability and transparency.

How was the agreement negotiated?

The document was agreed by government, led by the Office for Civil Society, and the voluntary sector, led by Compact Voice. Both parties reached an agreement based on discussion, dialogue, expertise and individual priorities.

What are the main aspects of the new agreement?

The new Compact:

- Offers more effective accountability
- Is easier to use and understand
- Reflects government approaches and policy initiatives, including the Big Society
- Ensures continuing relevance to major challenges faced by the VCS, such as spending cuts and budget reductions

So what has actually changed?

The new Compact is a much shorter document (8 pages to be precise). It retains much of the key commitments that were in the previous Compact. There are also some new commitments which place greater emphasis on Government to reduce bureaucracy, create increased fairness and transparency in commissioning processes, and to incorporate social, environmental and economic value within the design, development and delivery of policies and programmes. And of course there are now accountability measures which signify government's commitment to increasing the transparency and accountability around the implementation of the Compact.

Has the equalities section changed?

The equalities section is now called 'An equal and fair society'. We are pleased to say that the key commitments from the equality section of the refreshed Compact have been transferred to the new Compact. The new Compact comprises commitments which requires Government to take practical action to meet its duties under the Equality Act as well as carrying out impact assessments when designing and implementing policies, programmes and services.

What are these accountability measures?

The accountability measures have been put in place to strengthen the implementation of the Compact across Government. Under the measures:

1. The National Audit Office will carry out a one-off study into the operation of the Compact across government and its agencies. Their report will be made to Parliament in 2012.
2. From 2012-13, government departments will be required to include a statement on how the Compact is being implemented in their business plans.
3. The Informal Ministerial Group on the Big Society and Localism will be instrumental in monitoring the progress of the renewed Compact as well as being a key forum for raising concerns or dealing with breaches.
4. The Parliamentary Ombudsman will investigate on behalf of complainants in cases in which the Compact has not been upheld. If the complaint is upheld the Ombudsman will make recommendations for the appropriate remedy to the relevant department.

What has happened to the BME Implementation Guide?

The BME Implementation Guide has to be refreshed to align with the new Compact. Due to the Commission for the Compact being abolished from April 2011, the Office for Civil Society will be taking the lead on the renewal of the Guide. Voice4Change England will continue to monitor progress.

Does the renewed Compact still provide recourse to Public Law remedies?

Yes. Public Law is law which governs the way in which public bodies exercise their powers. The Compact is underpinned by Public Law principles, which set out how public bodies are legally obliged to behave. Government has signed up to the Compact creating a legitimate expectation that they will abide by the commitment. Failure to abide may provide recourse for VCS organisations to legal remedies. Furthermore the equality section of the Compact requires compliance with current equality legislation. Thus breach of the Compact may establish a breach of the law.

Voice4Change England will be partnering with the Empowering the Voluntary Sector project at NAVCA to provide Compact and Public Law training to skill up BME VCS organisations to challenge unjust decisions made by public bodies. To find out more contact Ravi Chauhan on 0207 843 6129.

For more information on the Compact Refresh and to download the new document please visit www.compactvoice.org.uk or www.voice4change-england.co.uk.

Voice4Change England would like to thank [Compact Voice](#) for contributing to the drafting of this resource.