



A Policy and Public Affairs Role for CO3 - The Views of Members and Stakeholders

Summary

INTRODUCTION

This research was commissioned in light of conflicting views both within CO3 and among external bodies on the question of whether, and how, CO3 might adopt a new profile in advocacy and articulating a sectoral view on key matters.

Methodology

A total of 9 focus groups with members were conducted and 11 face to face interviews with Executive Committee members and stakeholders.

Benefits of Membership

To provide a context for the views expressed in relation to CO3's potential advocacy role, members were asked why they had become members and what they valued most from their membership. Responses included;

- CO3 provides the opportunity for peer support.
- CO3 keeps members up to date on strategic policy issues.
- The 'Call for Help' facility means you don't have to reinvent the wheel.
- Training and seminars help with personal development.
- CO3 provides opportunities for networking and making connections with decision-makers.
- CO3 provides useful guidance and support on Governance matters
- CO3 facilitates conversations that otherwise would not take place
- CO3 provides a conduit for securing membership to Boards and other decision-making bodies.

A Policy and Public Affairs Role – Views

The majority of focus group participants expressed a degree of opposition to the prospect of CO3 assuming a new and higher profile policy and public affairs role.

The views of those who did not favour the prospect are summarised below. A majority of members agreed

- NICVA already represents the sector in a policy and public affairs context and does a good job in the policy context
- CO3 would struggle to present a collegiate view across the sector on more controversial issues.
- There will be resource implications for CO3 if we go down this route.
- Although the RPA Health intervention was regarded as successful, it doesn't mean this should become the rule rather than the exception.

Members and stakeholders also stated;

- Members value the opportunity to have informal discussions with movers and shakers through CO3.
- The RPA health intervention was helpful and might be an example of how a public affairs approach might work in the future.
- It was suggested that there might be a range of themes that cut across members' organisations on which a consensus stance could be achieved for a joint approach to Government Departments.
- CO3 could make an input at policy formulation stage.
- CO3 could provide more innovative ways of influencing Ministers.
- CO3 engages with Government at a different level from other organisations.
- CO3's representational role should not be about specific policies but on giving clarification about how the third sector works, the issues that it faces, and how it can help the work of government.
- There was a need for more effective marketing of the value of the sector to the new and 'fledgling' administration.

- It was the widely held view that strategic intervention in a policy context was entirely consonant CO3's role in leadership development. This should not be pursued unilaterally by CO3 without due recognition of the role currently performed by others in this area.

Stakeholders responded by saying;

- CO3's current public affairs style was valued by most.
- CO3 members could engage more with the Department on strategic policy issues relating to its membership conveying a perspective, informed by the insight and expertise of its membership, on a range of key issues and at the same time market its value to policy-makers in the public sector.
- There were particular approaches that CO3 could use to market the value of the sector.
- CO3 could have a role in helping to frame some of the key policy debates and could establish itself as a policy resource for Departments.
- There was great potential for CO3 to mobilise its intellectual resource towards policy development through better engagement with a wide range of Government Departments.

A Possible Way Forward

The Consultant developed a view that CO3 could pursue a two-pronged approach to its future development.

First, there is clearly a demand for and appreciation of the services that CO3 provides to its members. But its membership is comparatively small when measured against the sector as a whole and more could be done to increase membership by, perhaps, better marketing within the sector.

Second, as suggested by numerous members and stakeholders, there seems to be substance to the view that CO3 has the capacity to harness a resource that could and should be mobilised to promote the sector and help it to establish a role in influencing and developing policy at the formative stages. It is clear that for whatever reason, the sector has some way to go before it enjoys the status that it is afforded in other jurisdictions. Given the scale of the task ahead, no single organisation should expect to have a monopoly in terms of marketing the sector: the key would be to ensure that the message that is being conveyed is consistent regardless of the messenger.

Some milestones in that roadmap might be:

- Following endorsement of this approach by the Executive Committee, communicate decision to membership together with underlying rationale.
- Consult members on the key policy issues that are likely to impact on them over the next three to five years and on suggestions as to how CO3 can best influence the outcomes.
- Establish sub-groups (or networks) within the membership to address these issues at a strategic level and develop strategic responses.
- Explore the agenda with VCU and DHSSPS with a view to determining the best routes for gaining better access to the relevant senior policy makers.
- Liaise with NICVA on proposals.