Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2022:

Shaping social change through campaigning and influencing

Millfield House Foundation

About the author

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The contents of the report express the views of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the commissioning partners.

Third Sector Trends Study

Data in this report are drawn from the Third Sector Trends study which was conceived and originally commissioned by Northern Rock Foundation with research conducted by the universities of Southampton, Teesside and Durham. The Community Foundation Tyne & Wear and Northumberland was a co-founder of the research and is now responsible for its legacy.

The Community Foundation and St Chad's College are now collaborating with partners including: Power to Change, Barrow Cadbury Trust and Millfield House Foundation to undertake the Third Sector Trends Study survey in 2022-23

All publications from the Third Sector Trends study are available free to download at this address:
https://www.communityfoundation.org.uk/knowledge-and-leadership/third-sector-trends-research/

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Introduction

Following months of political controversy, the Charity Commission has clarified that charities are allowed to campaign robustly and engage in political debate providing that such actions align with their mission and has the backing of trustees.[1] This is welcome and reassuring news after a series of statements from prominent politicians and senior members of the Charity Commission earlier in the year that threatened to undermine the right of charities to engage in the political discourse.[2]

In the heat of the debate, leading national charities and sector representative bodies reiterated concerns that political attacks on campaigning could produce a 'chilling' effect.[3] This may be true, but discerning whether political pressures on campaigning, past and present, have affected the activities of charities and social enterprises is not possible because there is no reliable evidence to trace changes in attitudes and behaviour. Consequently, Millfield House Foundation invested additional resources in the Third Sector Trends study in 2022 to collect baseline data on the mechanisms and extent to which Third Sector organisations (TSOs) try to influence social and public policy at the local level.[4]

Earlier this year, Third Sector Trends released the findings from the analysis which, for the first time, provided insights into the extent of charities' and social enterprises engagement with campaigning and influencing.[5] Using a representative sample of over 6,000 organisations across England and Wales, it was shown that 73% of third sector organisations (TSOs) are reticent about getting involved directly in local 'political' issues. But this does not mean that they did not try to influence local social and public policy in other ways. About 71% of TSOs participate in formal consultations on local policy (though enthusiasm is muted – only 21% strongly commit to such

[1] Patrick Butler, (2023) 'Charities can campaign on "issues that provoke strong emotions" – watchdog', *The Guardian,* 17th September. https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/sep/17/charities-can-campaign-on-issues-that-provoke-strong-emotions-watchdog?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Other

[2] Orlando Fraser, Chair of the Charity Commission warned, earlier in the year, that charities should stay out of politics (Christopher Hope (2023) 'Stay out of politics, charities warned as they overstep the mark on Rwanda migrants plan.' *Daily Telegraph* (3rd April)). The issue simmered over the summer, only to be inflamed by comments from the Home Secretary in late August in *The Telegraph* that charities were 'masquerading as humanitarians'; Charles Hymas (2023) 'Braverman: some charities are 'politically motivated activists masquerading as humanitarians', *Daily Telegraph* (24th August). This prompted a joint letter from Sarah Vibert and Jane Ide, as chief executives of sector representative organisations, NCVO and ACEVO to the *Daily Telegraph*. The letter reiterated the legal right of charities to campaign and stated that: 'Robust public discourse is a marker of a healthy, effective and vibrant body politic, and the expertise, insight, and integrity that charities bring should be valued as part of effective public policy making in a democratic society. It is unfortunate that the home secretary has chosen instead to focus on a narrative that fosters a hostile climate and actively seeks to undermine public trust in charities going about their legitimate and essential business.' https://www.acevo.org.uk/2023/09/joint-acevo-and-ncvo-letter-to-the-editor-of-the-telegraph/

[3] One recent small-scale survey of 123 charities by Sheila McKechnie Foundation found that 43 per cent of charities worried about the political consequences of campaigning, and that 47 per cent censored themselves due to fear of a negative public response. Jess Bradley (2023) 'Charities censoring themselves for fear of public backlash, survey finds', *Third Sector* (16th March). https://www.thirdsector.co.uk/charities-censoring-themselves-fear-public-backlash-survey-finds/communications/article/1816771

[4] Third Sector Trends is a study of the 'local' third sector and excludes big national charities (with incomes above £25million) which, due to their scale and purpose, tend to be the most prominent national campaigning organisations. In this report, the term 'charities' is generally used to refer to all types of registered third sector organisations. For full details on the purpose and methodology of the study, see: Chapman, T. (2022) *Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2022 research methodology*, Durham: Policy&Practice, St Chad's College, Durham University. https://www.stchads.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Third-Sector-Trends-Research-Methods-2022.pdf

[5] See: *Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2022: Relationships, influencing and collaboration*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Community Foundation Tyne & Wear and Northumberland: https://www.communityfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Third-Sector-Trends-in-England-and-Wales-2022-relationships-influencing-and-collaboration.pdf

activity). Lobbying behind the scenes to influence policy is an option 43% of TSOs take (only 9% of organisations make a strong commitment to lobbying).

Nearly half of TSOs in the study (47%) agreed that they 'campaign' to influence local social and public policy. The extent of campaigning varies by size of organisations. Only 26% of micro organisations (with income below £10,000) campaign compared with 71% of the biggest TSOs (with income from £1million to £25million). Older organisations, set up before 1945 are less likely to campaign than newly established TSOs (37% and 55% respectively). TSOs in big cities are more likely to campaign (55%) than in town and country areas (41%) and organisations based in the poorest areas are much more likely to campaign (65%) than those situated in the richest areas (37%).

Reaction to these findings was surprising. In events and discussions around the country, we heard as many people say that they were '*amazed to see how much'* campaigning and influencing was going on as those who were '*shocked that there was so little'*. While the findings presented above are certainly not 'random' because involvement in campaigning follows clear and explicable patterns. It must, though, be conceded, that little is known about what survey respondents understood by the term 'campaigning'. Furthermore, we have no idea about how they went about 'doing' campaigns, how often they did so and how effective their approaches were.

Turning to qualitative evidence from our long-term study of 50 organisations in North East England and Cumbria helps to some extent although, somewhat surprisingly, we had never *asked* them directly about 'campaigning'.[6] Instead the focus was softer - looking at how they positioned themselves so that they could resource their work, what approach they took to practice, how they interacted with and tried to influence public and private sector bodies, and what they achieved for their beneficiaries working alone or by collaborating with others.

As it turns out, the insights drawn from this qualitative work helps to make sense of how TSOs try to affect local social and public policy in strategic or practical terms. Crucially, the research shows that TSOs tend to be careful when choosing from all of their options, and certainly not just whether to campaign. Their circumspection is justified as they work hard not to disturb the finely balanced political equilibrium within their own organisation – and especially so when thinking about potentially adverse reactions from people who offer their time voluntarily. Similarly, most organisations are mindful of the consequences of upsetting external bodies which back them financially, work with them collaboratively or are keen advocates of their work.

Many questions remain unanswered on how approaches to campaigning are conceived or operationalised and whether or not TSOs' decisions to do so are affected by local or national political, social and economic conditions or, more likely, a mixture of the two. The purpose of this short paper, therefore, is to stimulate discussion within the local third sector and amongst charitable trusts and foundations, local public sector bodies and the NHS about what *constitutes* campaigning, the *purpose* it serves and *who benefits*. Crucially, it is also asked whether campaigning organisations are more effective in achieving social impact than their non-campaigning counterparts. But unlike most Third Sector Trends reports, where a strong position is taken on

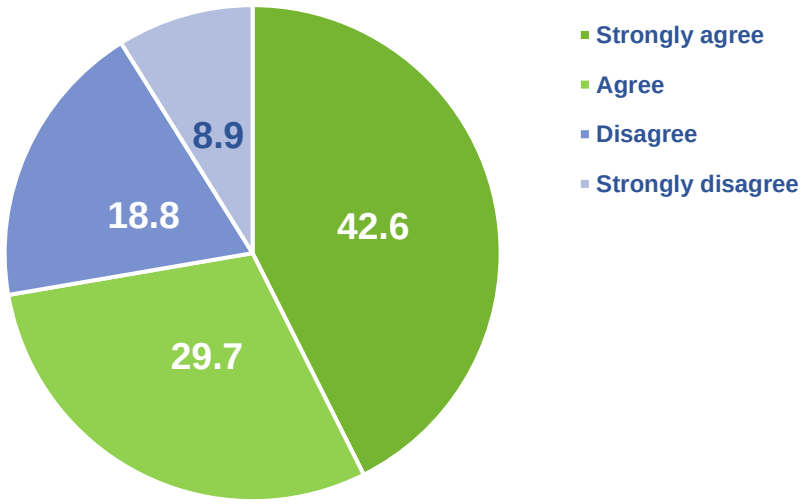
[6] See: Chapman, T. (2022) *Going the distance: how third sector organisations work through turbulent times*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Community Foundation Tyne & Wear and Northumberland: https://www.communityfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Going-the-distance-how-third-sector-organisations-work-through-turbulent-times-October-2022.pdf. It should be noted that this study was about organisational culture and practice. Consequently, the selection of the original sample required that participants were actively practicing in their field. By default, local charities that were solely concerned with campaigning were therefore excluded.

interpretation of findings, the idea here is to work through a series of conceptual questions so that when the survey returns in 2025, we will have a firmer footing to explore some of the answers statistically.

Are charities keeping a low political profile?

Recent political threats against charity campaigning have caused alarm in some quarters – and it has been suggested that this may have a 'chilling effect' upon organisations' willingness to speak up. In the absence of robust time-series data, such commentaries are purely speculative. Third Sector Trends baseline data from 2022 provides a starting point to test such assertions in subsequent rounds of the study. As shown in Figure 1, at present a majority of TSOs (73%) 'steer well clear of political issues'. Indeed, only about 9 per cent of organisations signal that they definitely do not avoid such issues.

Figure 1
Percentage of TSOs which 'steer well clear of political issues'
(n=5,891, non response n=179/2.9% of sample)

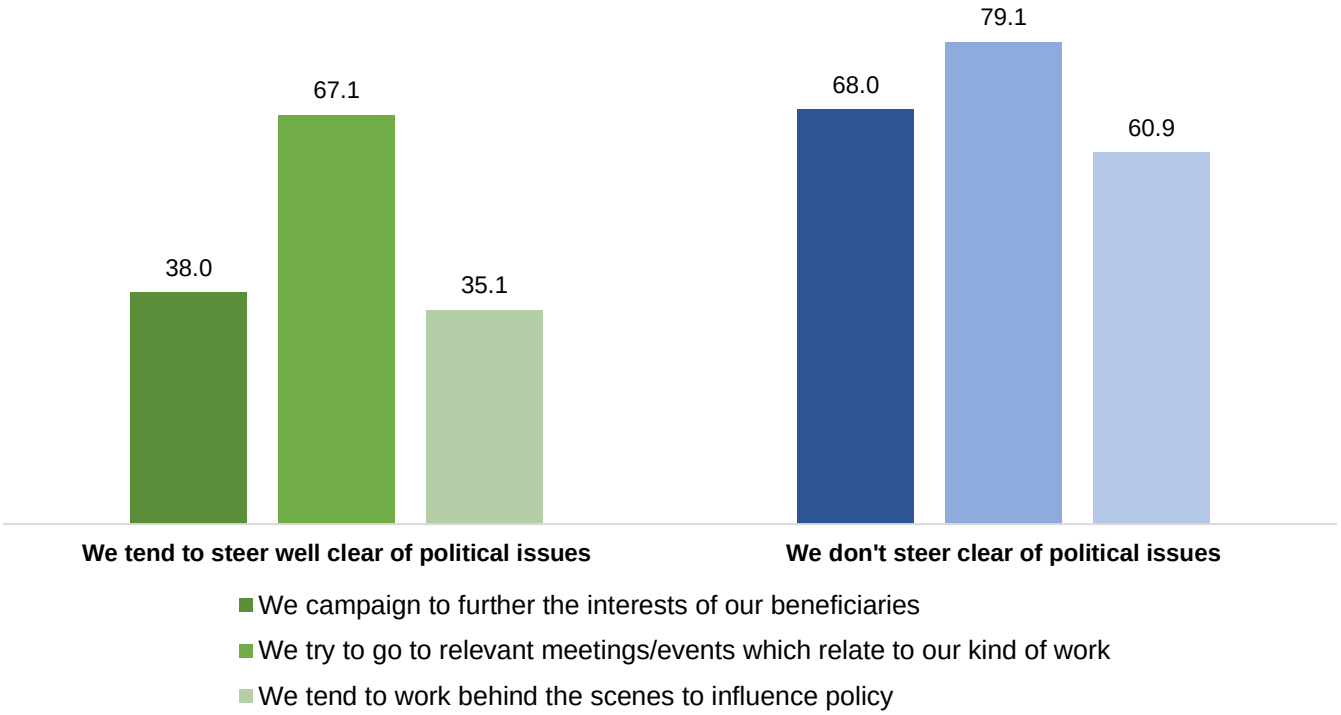


The likelihood is that survey respondents equated 'political issues' with 'party political issues' when they answered this question because the propensity of TSOs to 'steer well clear of political issues' does not necessarily diminish their willingness to influence local and public policy by 'campaigning', 'participating in relevant consultation meetings' or 'influencing stakeholders behind the scenes'.

Amongst TSOs which 'steer clear' of political issues, many still get involved in campaigning (38%), attend relevant policy meetings (67%) or work behind the scenes to influence policy (35%). As would be expected, organisations which 'do not avoid political issues', though fewer in number, are much more likely to campaign (68%), go to relevant policy meetings (79%) or work behind the scenes to influence policy (61%).

Figure 2

Extent to which the avoidance of political issues affects involvement in other approaches to influencing local social and public policy



Those factors which affect the willingness of TSOs to get involved in influencing tend be mirrored in data which relate to the avoidance of 'political issues'.[7]

- Organisations situated in the poorest areas are almost twice as likely to engage in political issues (39%) than their counterparts based in the richest areas (21%).
- Micro TSOs are much less likely to engage with political issues (80%) than the biggest organisations (57%).
- Those organisations which work only at a neighbourhood or village level are more likely to avoid political issues (81%) than those which work at a wider level (70%).
- In metropolitan areas, only 65 per cent of TSOs avoid political issues compared with 77 per cent in town and country areas.
- Organisations which work entirely on their own are more likely to eschew political involvement (82%) than those which work with others (70%).
- Older organisations are more reticent about getting involved in politics (79%) than the newest TSOs (67%).

[7] The complete data table can be found in the appendix to this discussion paper.

What is the purpose of campaigning and influencing?

There is no precise definition of what constitutes 'campaigning', though most dictionary definitions contain two core elements: they are *purposeful* (to achieve a given economic, military, social, business, environmental or political objective) and involve marshalling resources to effect *planned activity* over a period of time to achieve a given end.

The Charity Commission's definitions of campaigning and political activity say less about what it *is* than what it *should not be*. Campaigning '***refer(s) to awareness-raising and to efforts to educate or involve the public by mobilising their support on a particular issue, or to influence or change public attitudes. It also uses it to refer to campaigning activity which aims to ensure that existing laws are observed.***'[8]

Political activity, it is stated, ***'…must only be undertaken by a charity in the context of supporting the delivery of its charitable purposes. The commission uses this term to refer to activity by a charity which is aimed at securing, or opposing, any change in the law or in the policy or decisions of central government, local authorities or other public bodies, whether in this country or abroad. It includes activity to preserve an existing piece of legislation, where a charity opposes it being repealed or amended.'***

For the purposes of this discussion, dictionary definitions are far too broad while the Charity Commission definition is much too narrow. What is needed is a definition that embraces a wide range of purposeful actions that are adopted to effect objectives. This may range from those campaigns which focus entirely on *persuasion* – so that *somebody else* takes action to achieve the objective, to those campaigns which rely entirely upon *practical action* – where the organisation does the work itself or by working with other like-minded bodies to get something done.

Bearing in mind that this discussion is about the 'local third sector', relatively few organisations are likely to commit themselves solely to practical action or persuasion by campaigning – most will sit somewhere between these two poles. Plotting their position would be difficult because some aspects of campaigning and influencing may, firstly, be driven by the need of an organisation to garner the resources to continue with practice – not just persuading people to think and act differently. And secondly, because most TSOs work informally or collaboratively with other organisations in the local public, private and third sectors, they become embedded within local policy and/or practice. In short, this suggests that campaigning is rarely driven by a single purpose and that the willingness to speak out freely may always be compromised by existing relationships.

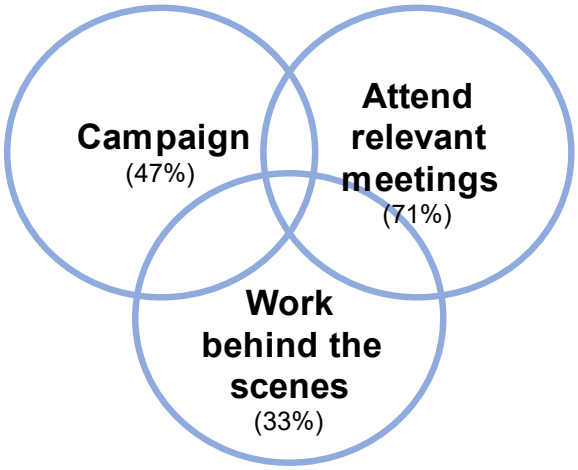
So it is not surprising to find that the majority of TSOs 'mix and match' approaches to campaigning and influencing (see Figure 3). For example, amongst the 47 per cent of organisations which campaign, nearly 90 per cent

[8] Several examples are given, including amongst others: 'a health charity promoting the benefits of a balanced diet in reducing heart problems', 'a refugee charity, emphasising the positive contribution that refugees have made to society and calling for government to enforce existing legislation that supports the rights of refugees', 'a children's charity, drawing attention to the dangers of domestic violence and child abuse' and 'a human rights charity calling on a government to observe certain fundamental human rights, and for the practice of torture to be abolished'. Charity Commission for England and Wales (2022) *Campaigning and political activity guidance for charities,* https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/speaking-out-guidance-on-campaigning-and-political-activity-by-charities-cc9/speaking-out-guidance-on-campaigning-and-political-activity-by-charities

also attend relevant consultative meetings and 38 per cent get involved in behind-the-scenes lobbying. Fewer than 6 per cent of the TSOs that campaign limit their activities just to this form of influencing.

Figure 3

Interactions between different approaches to influencing local social and public policy



17% campaign, lobby and attend meetings

25% campaign, attend meetings but do not lobby

1% campaign and lobby but do not attend meetings

3% campaign but do not attend meetings or lobby

10% attend meetings and lobby but do not campaign

18% attend meetings but do not campaign or lobby

4% Lobby but do not campaign or attend meetings

21% do not campaign, lobby or attend relevant meetings

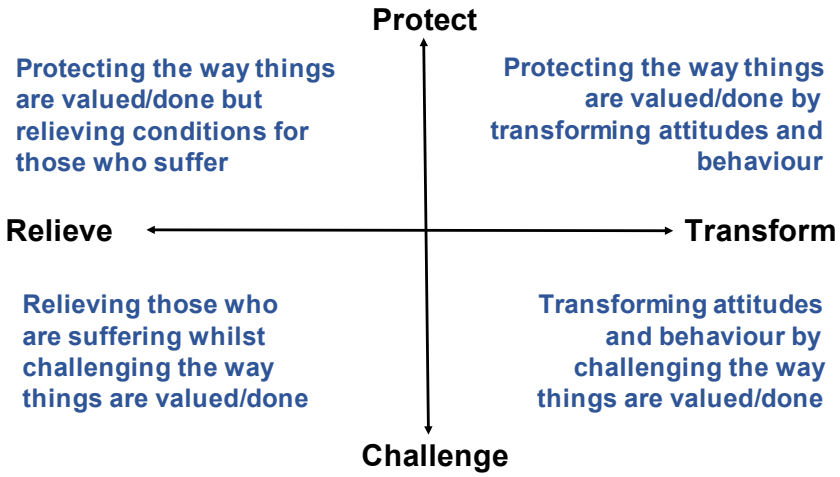
For some, the point of campaigning and influencing is to *change* something, while for others it is to ensure that something *remains the same*. Either way, campaigners must make a case to persuade people to see things their way. Drawing a distinction between charities that want to change things with those which wish things to remain the same is too simplistic because it assumes that organisations have a singular focus. The reality is that it is difficult to determine, statistically, what TSOs do, whom they serve and what they achieve. This is not because taxonomies of charity activities are insufficiently well developed to accommodate the minutiae of distinctions.[9] Rather, it is because most local charities have multifaceted aims, practices and impacts.

As Figure 4 illustrates, when campaigning and influencing, TSOs position themselves in relation to social issues and decide what they want to achieve. They decide if it is their aim to *protect* something (such as the greenbelt) or to *challenge* people's views or behaviour (such as persuading them to accept the idea of same-sex marriage). Charities must also decide whether it is their aim only to *relieve* conditions for the people they want to help (as can be the

[9] In 2023, the Charity Commission has been working with stakeholders to refine taxonomies of charity objectives and beneficiaries served. While the new set of categories promises to be more finely tuned, registered charities will only rarely confine themselves to just one category which means that it will be difficult for researchers to determine their 'principal' purpose. Third Sector Trends analysis of interactions of charitable purposes, impact and beneficiaries indicates that untangling crossovers between activities is not possible. Instead, it has to be accepted that most charities activities are multidimensional: see: Chapman, T. (2021). The structure, dynamics and impact of the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector: a study of West Yorkshire Combined Authority, West Yorkshire & Harrogate Health and Care Partnership and Humber Coast and Vale Health and Care Partnership areas, Durham: Policy&Practice, Table 5.4, p. 87.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354544242_The_structure_dynamics_and_impact_of_the_voluntary_community_and_social_enterprise_sector_a_study_of_West_Yorkshire_Combined_Authority_West_Yorkshire_Harrogate_Health_and_Care_Partnership_and_Humber_C

case with foodbanks) or to invest their energy to *transform* policy and practice (by, for example campaigning for the living wage).

Figure 4
TSOs' commitment to continuity and change



If only it were this simple – a case of choosing between options. The reality is that many charities do *all* of these things at the same time. A local environmental organisation, for example, may be involved in *protecting* natural habitat while *challenging* those who threaten it; they may *relieve* conditions where harm has been done and seek to *transform* policy to limit or eradicate threats to habitat. On all fronts, charities may meet resistance. Furthermore, as resources of money, employees, trustees, volunteers and advocates are finite, organisations are forced into competition with other TSOs which want to achieve different (or similar) objectives. TSOs campaigning to make a difference one way or another, in short, face formidable hurdles.

How does change come about?

In the short term, change is hard to achieve. Which makes it all the more surprising that, from a long-term perspective, change often looks seamless and smooth. Some changes in attitudes and behaviours in society happen because of the continual process of younger generations replacing those which have died off. Attitudes and behaviour can change significantly across the life course. For example, *British Social Attitudes* recently demonstrated that amongst people born in the 1960s, only 18% agreed that 'same sex relationships are not at all wrong' in 1983 (when they were in their twenties) compared with 73% in 2022 (now that the same cohort of people are in their sixties).[10]

Spotting critical points in history which signal significant change is a popular way of accounting for what factors brought change about. Indeed, taking or attributing credit for social change is something of a national pastime amongst

[10] National Centre for Social Research (2023) *British Social Attitudes 2023*: https://natcen.ac.uk/british-social-attitudes

politicians, novelists and poets, film makers, entrepreneurs, trade unions and, of course, charities. Looking at the process of change from a long-term perspective is a bit like watching the waves ebb and flow as the sea comes in. Progress towards high tide appears to be terribly slow when closely observed.

Significant social changes often occur at a slow pace and usually involves many hands: some may see the benefit and seek to accelerate such change, while others resist if change produces unexpected and detrimental consequences for them. Change can gather momentum or is thwarted in unpredictable ways.

Here is one example. Campaigning for (what was then called) the minimum wage was an enormous challenge which business and government vociferously opposed for many years claiming that the consequences for the economy, business closures and unemployment would be enormous. The campaign was won. But its most famous champion, Professor George Bain, regretted aspects of his actions. Certainly, a minimum wage benefitted the poorest paid workers, but it had been exploited by employers who considered this to be 'the going rate' and progressively brought down higher wages to this level for those who were too powerless to resist.[11]

Charity campaigning can make remarkable differences to the way people think and act in the long term, usually in alliances with other organisations. But it should not be forgotten that some charities also quietly enjoy considerable success at protecting their own and their beneficiaries' interests. Recently in the news, for example, is the debate about whether private schools should retain their charitable status (on the grounds that they embed social privilege and block social mobility) and linked to this whether they should pay VAT, which this part of the sector is resisting vigorously. [12]

Do campaigning organisations have a bigger impact than those which do not campaign?

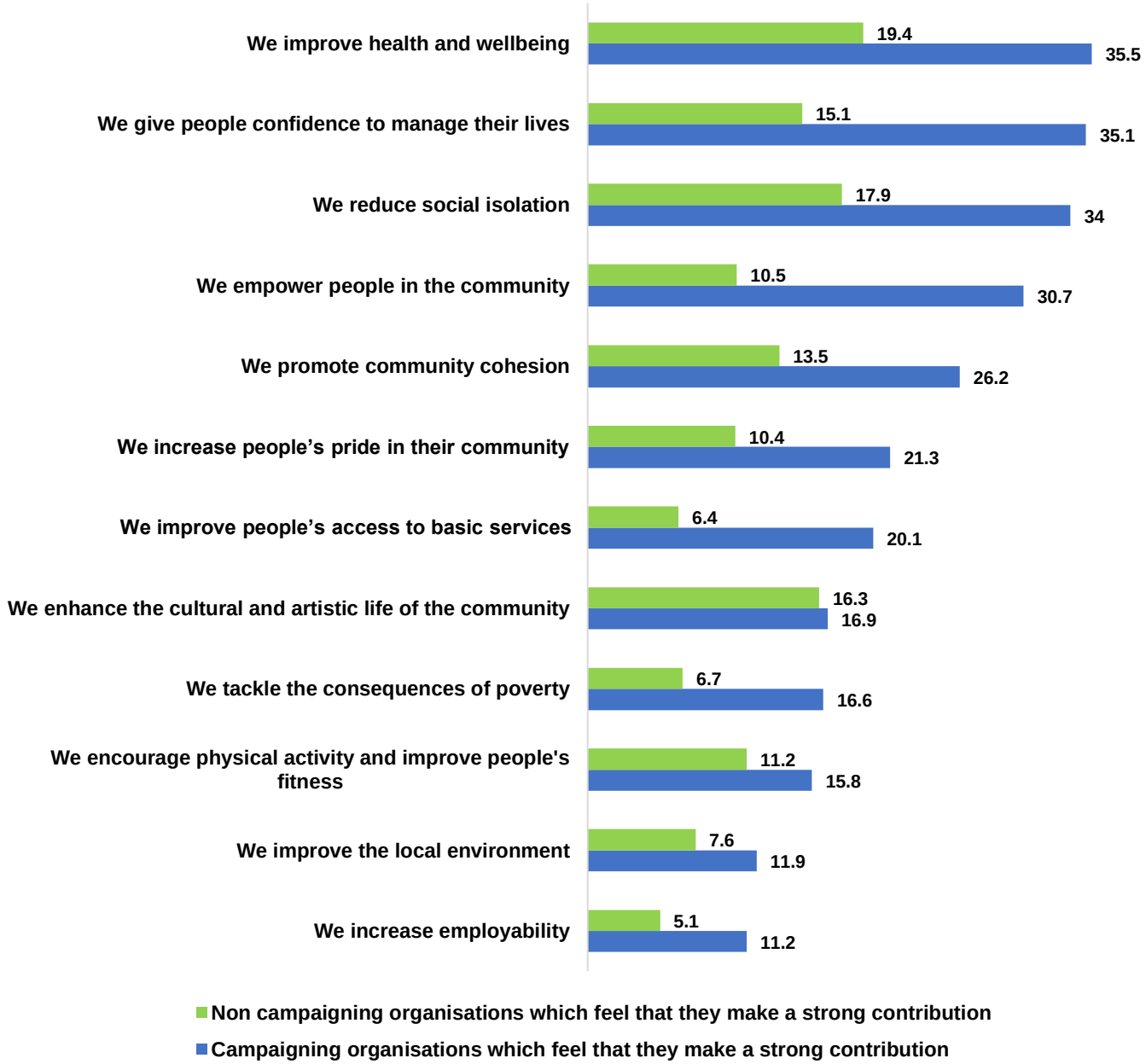
This is a controversial question and, certainly, it will not be possible to get to the bottom of the issue in this discussion. But new findings from Third Sector Trends published for the first time here, certainly provides food for thought. The percentages of campaigning and non-campaigning TSOs which feel that they 'have a very strong impact' for their beneficiaries are shown in Figure 5.[13] Campaigning organisations engaged in 'improving health and wellbeing' are the most likely to feel that they have a strong impact (36%) while those attempting to increase employability are the least (11%). With just one exception (TSOs which hope to enhance the cultural and artistic life of the community) campaigning organisations claim to have a stronger impact in all fields of activity than their non-campaigning counterparts.

[11] Katie Allen (2014) 'National minimum wage not fit for purpose, says its founding father', *The Guardian* (21st February). https://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/feb/21/national-minimum-wage-not-fit-purpose-sir-george-bain-low-pay

[12] Tom Ambrose (2023) 'Labour backs down from plan to strip private schools of charitable status', *The Guardian* (27th September): https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/sep/27/labour-backs-down-from-plan-to-strip-private-schools-of-charitable-status#:~:text=Labour%20backs%20down%20from%20plan%20to%20strip%20private%20schools%20of%20charitable%20status,-Party%20says%20policy&text=Private%20schools%20would%20retain%20some,strip%20them%20of%20charitable%20status.

[13] The precise question asked of respondents was as follows: 'At a community level, what kind of impact do you think you have? (please tick one box on each row), the available options were 'We have a very strong impact', ' We make a good contribution', 'We make some difference', 'We don't try to do this'. There were no opt out categories (such as 'don't know' or 'won't say'. Few respondents chose not to answer the question. For generalised areas of impact, such as we 'improve health and wellbeing', response rates were high at 95% (total respondents n=5,787) but were lowest on a more specific areas of impact: 'We improve the local environment' at 87% (total respondents n=5,284).

Figure 5
Percentage of TSOs which feel that they have a strong impact for their beneficiaries
(in rank order for campaigning organisations - most to least impact)



The extent of these perceived variations in impact are shown in Figure 6. Campaigning TSOs which help improve 'people's access to basic services' are the most likely to feel that they make a 'strong impact' for their beneficiaries compared with non-campaigning organisations (at a ratio of 3.1 to 1) while those which enhance the culture and artistic life of the community are the least (almost a 1 to 1 ratio).

Figure 6

Do campaigning organisations feel that they have stronger impact than non-campaigning organisations?

	Campaigning organisations which feel that they make a strong contribution	Non campaigning organisations which feel that they make a strong contribution	How many times more likely are campaigning organisations to say that they make a strong difference than non-campaigning organisations (ratios in rank order – most to least)
We improve people's access to basic services	20.1	6.4	**3.1 to 1**
We empower people in the community	30.7	10.5	**2.9 to 1**
We tackle the consequences of poverty	16.6	6.7	**2.5 to 1**
We give people confidence to manage their lives	35.1	15.1	**2.3 to 1**
We increase employability	11.2	5.1	**2.2 to 1**
We increase people's pride in their community	21.3	10.4	**2.0 to 1**
We reduce social isolation	34.0	17.9	**1.9 to 1**
We promote community cohesion	26.2	13.5	**1.9 to 1**
We improve health and wellbeing	35.5	19.4	**1.8 to 1**
We improve the local environment	11.9	7.6	**1.6 to 1**
We encourage physical activity and improve people's fitness	15.8	11.2	**1.4 to 1**
We enhance the cultural and artistic life of the community	16.9	16.3	**1.0 to 1**

Fascinating though these variations are, it cannot simply be taken as read that campaigning organisations *are* more effective than non-campaigning TSOs because data refer to '*self reported*' opinion on the extent to which positive impact is achieved. There are several ways in which the findings can be interpreted.

- A '***literal***' interpretation of the data indicates that campaigning organisations *are* the most effective – such an explanation may persuade some (but probably not many of the people who run non-campaigning organisations).
- A '***polite***' yet sceptical interpretation might suggest that campaigning organisations are more likely to understand the 'technical language' surrounding the assessment of social impact and are, therefore, more willing to signal that they have been particularly effective in this respect.
- A more critical and '***personal***' interpretation might assert that people who run campaigning organisations have a stronger sense of self worth and exaggerate, intentionally or otherwise, their assessment of impact.
- Or to '***opt out***' from these difficult arguments, the findings could be dismissed as 'a statistical anomaly' due to the likelihood that it is bigger organisations which make the most impact because they have more capacity to do so than medium-sized or small TSOs?

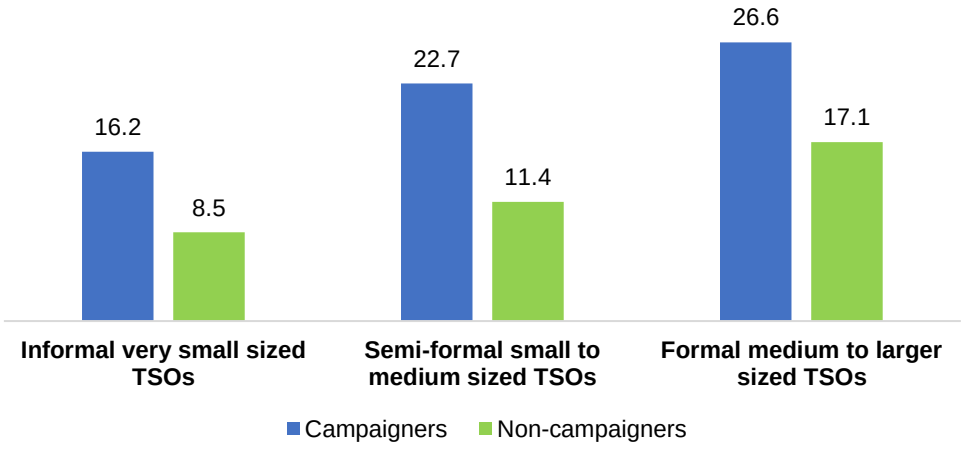
So, let's test that one out.[14] When comparing how campaigning and non-campaigning TSOs assess their social impact (controlling for their size) it is clear that bigger organisations are generally much more likely to state that they have a strong social impact than smaller organisations *whether they are campaigning or not*. For example, in the field of 'reducing social isolation', 41 per cent of bigger campaigning TSOs claim to have a strong impact compared with just 21 per cent of the smallest campaigning organisations.

Amongst the biggest organisations, campaigning TSOs are generally more likely to claim strong social impact than similar-sized non-campaigning organisations. For example, almost twice as many campaigning TSOs feel that they 'increase people's pride in the community' than none campaigning organisations. There are some exceptions: in the domains of 'physical activity and improving people's fitness', and 'enhancing the artistic and cultural life of the community' non-campaigning organisations are equally or more likely to claim strong social impact.

When the situation of *smaller-sized* organisations is considered, this puts a spanner in the works for those who assume that it's all about big organisations. In relation to nearly all aspects of social impact, small organisations which campaign are much more likely to feel that they have strong social impact than non-campaigning organisations. On average, small campaigning organisations are more than twice as likely to state that they have a strong impact (a ratio of 2.1 to 1). For medium sized TSOs, the ratio is also 2.1 to 1. But for the biggest organisations the ratio it is just 1.6 to 1.

To summarise, the average assessments of 'strong social impact' (collated from all the areas of social benefit) are shown in Figure 7. This indicates that small TSOs are less likely to claim strong social impact than the largest organisations, whether they do or do not campaign. But it also shows that small organisations which campaign are much more likely to claim strong social impact than their non-campaigning counterparts – this gap narrows, rather than widening, as organisations get bigger.

Figure 7
Average percentage of campaigning and non-campaigning organisations which feel that they make a strong social impact



[14] The full data table is available in the appendix (Table A3).

These are significant and surprising findings. Certainly, any claims that smaller and medium sized organisations generally keep their heads down and avoid campaigning and influencing need to be questioned. We also now know that, irrespective of size, campaigning TSOs generally feel that they make more of a social impact than non-campaigning organisations.

What we still do not know, is whether campaigning organisations claim to achieve more impact because they are more determined, productive and effective, or whether non-campaigning organisations simply understate the impact of their practice?

Summary and implications

This discussion paper demonstrates that there are still significant 'gaps' in the empirical evidence from Third Sector Trends on the prevalence, purposes and impact of campaigning. Little is known about how TSOs go about campaigning in practical terms (for example, newsletters, exhibitions, mail drops and social media; demonstrations, protest or direct action; use of research, publications and events to argue a case, and so on). We do not know anything about the commitment to and intensity of their campaigning activities nor is there any specific evidence on the discrete purposes of campaigning.

In a study which has sector structure, dynamics, impact and value as its central purpose, bridging these knowledge gaps may not be possible statistically. And even if survey respondents were patient enough to provide all the detail suggested above, it cannot be certain that we could pin down in precise terms what sector or sub-sector objectives are, how they work in practical terms and what they achieve.

Understanding social phenomena does not just depend upon statistics. Indeed, reliance on statistics alone can be a hindrance when it is not possible to define meaningful categories that can be agreed and clearly demarcated from one another by respondents and researchers. And in any case, insights from Third Sector Trends' qualitative research suggest that practical social action to effect objectives by TSOs is so deeply embedded in sector culture that it is conceived as 'something we do' and signifies 'who we are' and does not, therefore, always register as a form of campaigning.

The objectives of TSOs, this discussion paper has argued, are effected through a mix of practical action and influencing, If this is so, it strongly suggests that threats from politicians to limit the third sector's campaigning and influencing activity is unlikely to impinge significantly on the way that local organisations make decisions about what they want to achieve, how they garner resources and how they work – it is just *one* factor amongst *many* other considerations.

As autonomous entities, TSOs take the responsibility to decide what their social objectives are. In the case of registered charities, they must write these objectives down and abide by them in practical terms. This is why organisations define their objects with care (but not necessarily with so much precision that it limits their room for manoeuvre). And while TSOs may enjoy a higher degree of autonomy than many other types of organisations, especially in the public sector, this does not mean that they are free to act entirely as they choose in 'an ideal world'. Instead, their actions are constrained by their ability to attract trustees, volunteers, employees and beneficiaries; the requirement to raise sufficient funds to achieve their practical objectives and decisions they make about working alone or in a complementary or collaborative way with other organisations.

Keeping all these balls in the air requires dexterity and diplomacy – not least, because organisations work in a crowded social marketplace within which they compete for resources and attention. To do that, they must tell a compelling story about what their values are, what they want to achieve, for whom, and how they will do it. In this sense, all organisations in the third sector are continually engaged in a campaign to champion their chosen cause and convince others that investing in them is worth their while.

This paper has explored some of these strategies statistically and shows that TSOs engage with and try to persuade others by participating in formal policy-making processes by attending consultations (71 per cent do this), by working behind the scenes to lobby influential stakeholders (33 per cent do this) and by mounting campaigns to effect change or keep things as they are (47 per cent do this).

It has been shown that most organisations mix and match these methods. And while about a fifth of the sector say that they do not engage in any of these more 'formal' approaches to influencing of local social and public policy – they still need to construct a compelling case for people to join them, work for them, give them money and take part in their activities. By defining what they want to do, deciding how they will deliver it through their practical action and by recognising their need to garner resources to get things done - they *are* (according to dictionary definitions provided above) involved in a campaign.

The orientations of individual TSOs towards social issues and the claims they make about social impact are complex. Few organisations attend to just one social issue and as this report has shown, most organisations claim to achieve impact on many fronts. This indicates that the impact TSOs achieve is usually shared and rarely wholly owned. And because we know that most TSOs work with other organisations in informal, complementary or collaborative ways,[15] a fine balance needs to be struck to maintain good relationships with reasonably like-minded organisations (within the public, private and third sectors). This means that approaches to campaigning and influencing are often compromised to retain credibility and secure the support of allies, staff, volunteers, funders and partners.

All of the above factors make the task of understanding the purpose, extent and value of campaigning and influencing for the sector as a whole mightily complicated. And this complexity increases when taking into account fundamental disagreements about values. It is rarely possible for the third sector to speak with one voice. Indeed, sector consensus on *any* social, cultural or environmental issue is an unlikely prospect. But when it comes to the way that the third sector as a whole is allowed to operate, the situation changes, as is the case in the private sector when fundamental aspects of business practice are threatened by government.

Political pressure at a national level on the way charities campaign or lobby has proven to be an unwelcome intrusion in established sector culture and practice. It is right and proper that leading sector representative bodies, such

[15] Third Sector Trends demonstrates that 73 per cent of TSOs are currently engaged in 'informal relationships' with other voluntary organisations and groups and another 9 per cent would like to work this way; 65 per cent of organisations work closely but only semi-formally with other TSOs. Complementary working is an option 11 per cent of organisations are considering; and a third of TSOs work in formal partnership arrangements (34%) and another fifth are interested in doing so. Furthermore, most TSOs have productive relationships with public sector organisations and many do with private businesses. For full details, see T*hird Sector Trends in England and Wales 2022, Relationships, influencing and collaboration*, Sections 2 to 4. https://www.communityfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Third-Sector-Trends-in-England-and-Wales-2022-relationships-influencing-and-collaboration.pdf

as NCVO and ACEVO have spoken up to defend these interests.[16] And it is a big relief to many that the Charity Commission has clarified that the right to engage in the political process (within certain limits) is enshrined within the law.

Future government ministers may tinker around the edges on the limits of charitable activity, but it seems unlikely that many would choose to mount a sustained political attack on the realm of civil society. To do so would be hard to justify, constitutionally, because civil society is so ancient and deeply rooted in our institutional heritage, culture and identity that its operation has come to be seen as 'how things are' - an inalienable right. To threaten that would bring some very unusual alliances out from the woodwork.

Because the freedoms to speak out, associate and campaign feel like they are such a 'normal' part of life in the UK, it is easy to forget that this is not the case elsewhere. In recent years, state actions in many countries have dramatically undermined democratic processes, civil liberties and civil association together with heightened state control over campaigning by NGOs, media autonomy and freedom of speech.[17] And so, even in the UK, it would not be wise to take our eye off the ball.

In comparative terms, though, I remain unconvinced that the pronouncements of leading politicians are having a fundamental 'chilling' effect on the willingness of charities in the UK to campaign or attempt to influence social and public policy. For the present, my feeling is that many charities, especially at the local level, are simply maintaining a watching brief in what currently looks like the dying days of the present administration – if necessary, many would gird themselves for a longer fight.

Imperfect and incomplete though current data are from Third Sector Trends, it will be possible in 2025 to see if TSOs are more or less likely to be involved in campaigning and influencing than they were in 2022. My intuition tells me that the situation will be much the same, irrespective of a probable change in government - but after 15 years of study and so many surprises that have come the sector's way since 2008, that remains to be seen.

[16] See footnote 2.

[17] See, for example, the sobering annual report of CIVICUS *2023 State of Civil Society Report*. https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/SOCS/2023/state-of-civil-society-report-2023_en.pdf. The UK was not without mention. References included, for example, the limitations announced on strike action to ensure minimum service levels, the provision of wider police powers to restrict or break up protests. See also: the Freedom House indices on democracy, *Freedom in the world 2023* https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/FIW_World_2023_DigtalPDF.pdf.

APPENDIX

Data tables

Table A1
Orientation toward political issues by organisational characteristics

Affluence of areas where TSOs based	TSOs which avoid political issues	TSOs which do not avoid political issues	N=
Poorest IMD 1-2	60.6	39.4	1,146
IMD 3-4	67.7	32.3	1,084
Intermediate IMD 5-6	76.5	23.5	1,253
IMD 7-8	77.6	22.4	1,257
Richest IMD 9-10	79.1	20.9	1,032
Size of organisations			
Micro - income below £10,000	80.2	19.8	1,755
Small - income £10,000-£49,000	78.2	21.8	1,609
Medium - income £50,000 - £249,999	67.5	32.5	1,437
Large - income £250,000-£999,999	55.4	44.6	679
Big - income £1million - £25mllion	57.4	42.6	366
Spatial range of working			
Just in our neighbourhood or village	81.0	19.0	1,912
Within our local authority	68.2	31.8	1,770
Across a wider area	67.9	32.1	2,175
Urban form			
Metropolitan areas	65.1	34.9	1,704
Major urban areas	72.8	27.2	1,467
Town and country areas	76.5	23.5	2,694
Working collaboratively			
Work only alone	82.8	17.2	1,045
Work with others	70.1	29.9	4,808
Date established			
Before 1945	79.0	21.0	959
1945-1979	77.1	22.9	1,023
1980-1999	72.1	27.9	1,511
2000-to date	67.3	32.7	2,336
All TSOs	**72.3**	**27.7**	**5,891**

Table A2
Interaction between area of impact and campaign orientation of TSOs

		Campaigning organisations which feel that they make a 'strong' or 'good' contribution	Non campaigning organisations which feel that they make a 'strong' or 'good' contribution	How many times more likely are campaigning organisations to say they make a difference than non-campaigning organisations
We improve health and wellbeing n=5,787	Strong impact	35.5	19.4	1.8
	Strong or good impact	75.4	55.4	1.4
	Any impact	93.5	85.2	1.1
	No impact	6.5	14.8	
We reduce social isolation n=5,673	Strong impact	34.0	17.9	1.9
	Strong or good impact	70.1	53.8	1.3
	Any impact	89.8	81.6	1.1
	No impact	10.2	18.4	
We encourage physical activity and improve people's fitness n=5,451	Strong impact	15.8	11.2	1.4
	Strong or good impact	40.1	32.6	1.2
	Any impact	68.3	58.1	1.2
	No impact	31.7	41.9	
We increase employability n=5,281	Strong impact	11.2	5.1	2.2
	Strong or good impact	31.9	17.0	1.9
	Any impact	61.7	37.1	1.7
	No impact	38.3	62.9	
We tackle the consequences of poverty n=5,321	Strong impact	16.6	6.7	2.5
	Strong or good impact	39.0	18.4	2.1
	Any impact	64.6	41.7	1.5
	No impact	35.4	58.3	
We improve people's access to basic services n=5,300	Strong impact	20.1	6.4	3.1
	Strong or good impact	43.7	18.3	2.4
	Any impact	68.1	38.4	1.8
	No impact	31.9	61.6	
We enhance the cultural and artistic life of the community n=5,432	Strong impact	16.9	16.3	1.0
	Strong or good impact	39.8	39.2	1.0
	Any impact	66.7	64.9	1.0
	No impact	33.3	35.1	
We improve the local environment n=5,284	Strong impact	11.9	7.6	1.6
	Strong or good impact	31.8	21.7	1.5
	Any impact	61.3	48.4	1.3
	No impact	38.7	51.6	

Table A3 Continued/…		Campaigning organisations which feel that they make a 'strong' or 'good' contribution	Non campaigning organisations which feel that they make a 'strong' or 'good' contribution	How many times more likely are campaigning organisations to say they make a difference than non-campaigning organisations
We promote community cohesion n=5,473	Strong impact	26.2	13.5	1.9
	Strong or good impact	59.4	41.4	1.4
	Any impact	85.0	71.7	1.2
	No impact	15.0	28.3	
We empower people in the community n=5,399	Strong impact	30.7	10.5	2.9
	Strong or good impact	63.3	31.5	2.0
	Any impact	85.6	60.9	1.4
	No impact	14.4	39.1	
We increase people's pride in their community n=5,346	Strong impact	21.3	10.4	2.0
	Strong or good impact	50.7	34.7	1.5
	Any impact	77.2	66.1	1.2
	No impact	22.8	33.9	
We give people confidence to manage their lives n=5,464	Strong impact	35.1	15.1	2.3
	Strong or good impact	63.7	36.3	1.8
	Any impact	83.3	63.0	1.3
	No impact	16.7	37.0	

Table A3
Purpose of campaigning and social impact by organisational size

	Percentage of TSOs stating that they make 'a very strong impact'	Informal very small sized TSOs (income below £50,000)	Semi-formal small to medium sized TSOs (£50,000 to £249,999 income)	Formal medium to larger sized TSOs (income above £250,000)	Ratio of difference between largest and smallest
We improve health and wellbeing	Campaigners	19.8	33.3	45.8	**2.3**
	Non-campaigners	11.8	18.8	32.0	**2.7**
	Ratio of difference between campaigners and non-campaigners	**1.7**	**1.8**	**1.4**	
We reduce social isolation	Campaigners	21.4	34.1	40.7	**1.9**
	Non-campaigners	11.3	17.5	29.1	**2.6**
	Ratio of difference between campaigners and non-campaigners	**1.9**	**2.0**	**1.4**	
We encourage physical activity and improve people's fitness	Campaigners	13.8	17.4	15.6	**1.1**
	Non-campaigners	8.1	11.7	15.4	**1.9**
	Ratio of difference between campaigners and non-campaigners	**1.7**	**1.5**	**1.0**	
We increase employability	Campaigners	6.9	7.9	16.2	**2.3**
	Non-campaigners	2.3	5.1	9.5	**4.1**
	Ratio of difference between campaigners and non-campaigners	**3.0**	**1.5**	**1.7**	
We tackle the consequences of poverty	Campaigners	5.8	14.5	24.0	**4.2**
	Non-campaigners	2.5	6.4	13.9	**5.5**
	Ratio of difference between campaigners and non-campaigners	**2.3**	**2.3**	**1.7**	
We improve people's access to basic services	Campaigners	8.7	16.3	29.2	**3.4**
	Non-campaigners	3.4	5.1	13.4	**3.9**
	Ratio of difference between campaigners and non-campaigners	**2.5**	**3.2**	**2.2**	
We enhance the cultural and artistic life of the community	Campaigners	18.3	20.6	12.7	**0.7**
	Non-campaigners	16.6	16.9	14.3	**0.9**
	Ratio of difference between campaigners and non-campaigners	**1.1**	**1.2**	**0.9**	

Table A3 Continued/…	Percentage of TSOs stating that they make 'a very strong impact'	Informal very small sized TSOs	Semi-formal small to medium sized TSOs	Formal medium to larger sized TSOs	Ratio of difference between largest and smallest
We improve the local environment	Campaigners	15.0	13.5	8.6	**0.6**
	Non-campaigners	8.0	7.3	7.7	**1.0**
	Ratio of difference between campaigners and non-campaigners	**1.9**	**1.9**	**1.1**	
We promote community cohesion	Campaigners	20.5	29.7	26.0	**1.3**
	Non-campaigners	11.7	14.5	14.1	**1.2**
	Ratio of difference between campaigners and non-campaigners	**1.7**	**2.0**	**1.8**	
We empower people in the community	Campaigners	21.3	29.3	36.4	**1.7**
	Non-campaigners	7.2	9.3	17.5	**2.4**
	Ratio of difference between campaigners and non-campaigners	**3.0**	**3.1**	**2.1**	
We increase people's pride in their community	Campaigners	22.2	24.0	18.2	**0.8**
	Non-campaigners	10.5	10.7	9.4	**0.9**
	Ratio of difference between campaigners and non-campaigners	**2.1**	**2.2**	**1.9**	
We give people confidence to manage their lives	Campaigners	20.3	31.9	45.8	**2.3**
	Non-campaigners	8.0	13.5	28.6	**3.6**
	Ratio of difference between campaigners and non-campaigners	**2.5**	**2.4**	**1.6**	

Note on statistical base: Informal micro and small TSOs: campaigners n=616, non-campaigners n=1,089; medium sized semi-formal TSOs: campaigners n=984, non-campaigners n=1,309; larger formal TSOs: campaigners n=1,101, non-campaigners n=657; total respondents 5,756.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