

SHOW AND TELL: CHARITIES, POLLING & EVIDENCE OF DOING GOOD

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'You can't ... put metrics on the hours spent in courtrooms, the phone calls made to parents who are off the rails, the kind word in the ear of a potential employer, the dreary afternoons in a lost soul's living room. This is the stuff of charity.'

Amol Rajan, Independent (March 2013)¹

'Fail, learn, and then leap to somewhere new.'

Richard Turner, Director of Fundraising, Solar Aid (February 2013)²

Introduction

This is the fourth and final NPC paper in a series based on polling into public attitudes towards charities. The first three—*Matter of trust*³ (October 2014), *Charities, voters & trust*⁴ (December 2014), and *Having their say*⁵ (January 2015)—each looked at how the public views charities, and the political and social factors with which these opinions are linked.⁶ These papers identified a number of trends in the public perception of charities: that larger, more campaign-oriented charities encounter more mistrust; that UKIP supporters are substantially less trusting in charities than other voters; and that 'chugging', while an irritant to many, does not seem to be associated with the trust people place in charities as a whole.

Understanding public attitudes is vital. As we said in a previous paper, charities face varying degrees of criticism from politicians, the media and the general public. *An independent mission*, the review of charity independence published last month, confirms the nervousness many feel about this, taking an extremely gloomy view of a sector whose '*mission ... is starting to be narrowed in public perception*'.⁷ If charities are to respond effectively to these pressures, the more we know about views towards the sector the better.

Show and tell looks at two further aspects:

- How do the public think charities work, and specifically how are charities perceived to use evidence?
- How much does the public care about charities using evidence, and how does this motivate decisions to trust or donate to charity?

NPC has written before about the dangers of "the halo effect", by which the social mission of charities and the general feel-good air around them, ends up sheltering the sector from proper scrutiny. However, the sector cannot rely on this. Transparency, while perhaps opening the sector to scrutiny and criticism in the short term, helps charities in the long run. And it ultimately helps the actual and potential beneficiaries who rely on charities to do their work well.

This is why we took care in our polling to look at public opinion on these questions. Do people think charities make decisions based on their values or on available evidence, and how does this affect their willingness to donate? Do they think about charities' effectiveness on the ground before they support them? What about when charities try something and it fails—how is public opinion affected if they know about these failures?

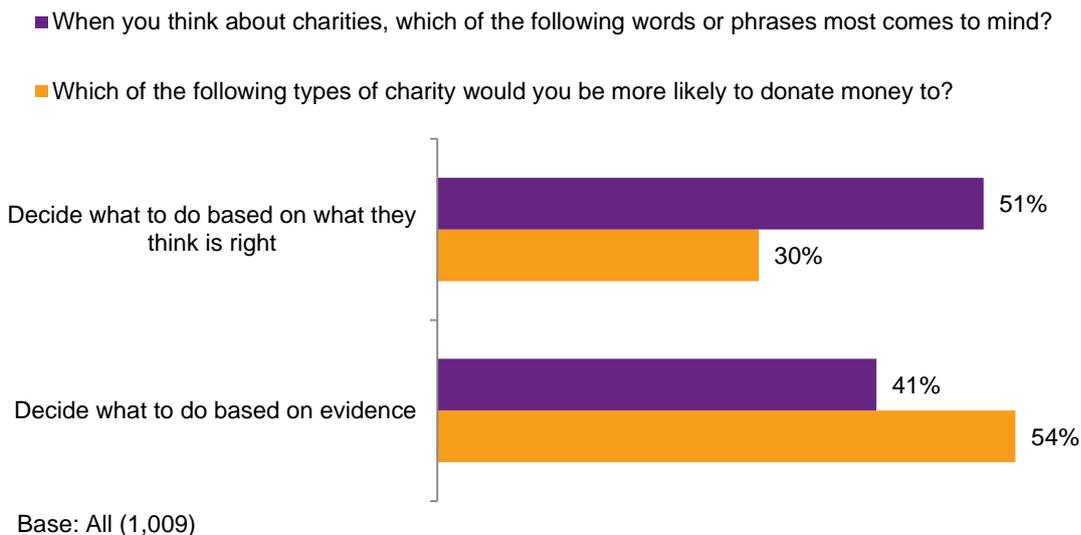
All of this brings us back to a topic at the heart of NPC's own mission: to help charities focus on, and improve, the impact of their work on beneficiaries and communities. Foundations, philanthropists, commentators and think tanks like us all have views on evidence, and this paper looks at how the public view the same subject.

What does the public think about charities' use of evidence?

This paper reveals a disparity between what the public *thinks* drives charities' decisions, and what the public would prefer and would rather fund.

As shown in Figure 1, a majority of people (51%) feel that voluntary sector organisations are more likely to make decisions based on values ('what they think is right') rather than on the basis of evidence (41%). However, when asked which organisations they would be more likely to donate to, a majority of people say that they would give money to charities that make decisions based on evidence (54%) versus values (30%).

Figure 1: Attitudes towards evidence, charities, and willingness to donate

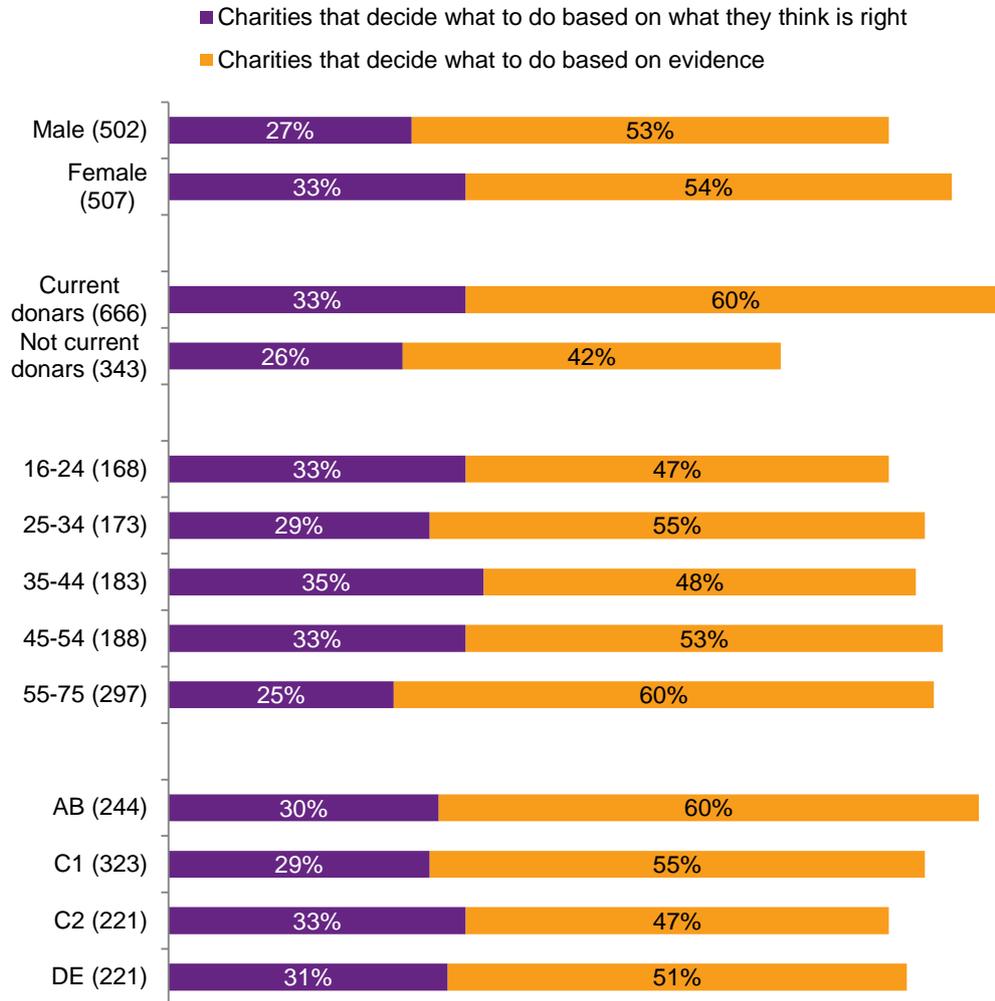


This disparity is evident across different demographic characteristics such as gender, age, and social class, as shown in Figure 2. However, certain social groups are more likely than others to place greater worth in evidence when donating. Older people (aged 55-75) are significantly more likely than people aged under 45 to say that they prefer giving money to charities that base their decisions on evidence.

There are notable divergences in views between different social classes. Some 60% of people in social grade AB (the most affluent) say that they would be more likely to donate to charities that decide what to do based on evidence. This view is held by a smaller proportion of people on lower incomes, in grades C2 (47%) and DE (51%).

Figure 2: Evidence and decisions to donate to charity by sex, donation history, age and social grade

'Which of the following types of charity would you be more likely to donate money to?'



Base: All (1,009).

Answers do not = 100% because of people saying don't know/other

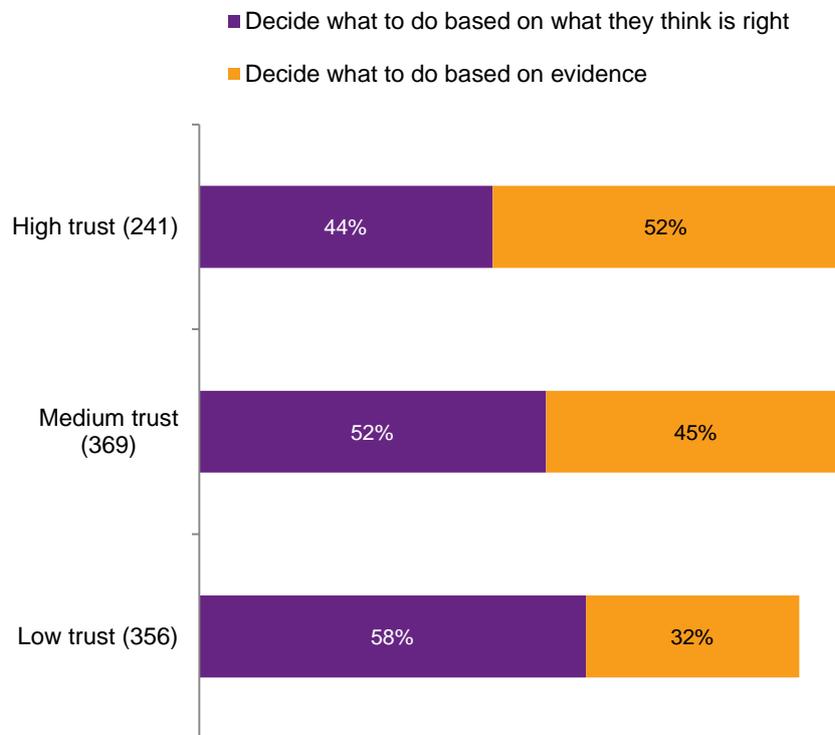
Trust and evidence

The main finding from our second paper in this series was that about one in four people in our sample (24%) rate their trust and confidence in charities at a high level (8-10 out of 10), while 37% rate it as medium (6-7 out of 10) and 35% as low (1 to 5 out of 10).⁸

Linking this to the use of evidence, we can see in Figure 3 that there is an association between overall levels of trust and perceptions of whether charities make decisions on the basis of evidence or values. People who have high levels of trust are more likely to think that charities base their decisions on evidence (52%), compared to those with low levels of trust (32%). This suggests that organisations that want to increase levels of trust would find it helpful to communicate the evidence they have and how they use it.

Figure 3: Attitudes towards charities and evidence by levels of trust

“When you think about charities, which phrase most comes to mind?”



Base: 966 people with high, medium or low trust in charities
 Answers do not = 100% because of people saying don't know/other

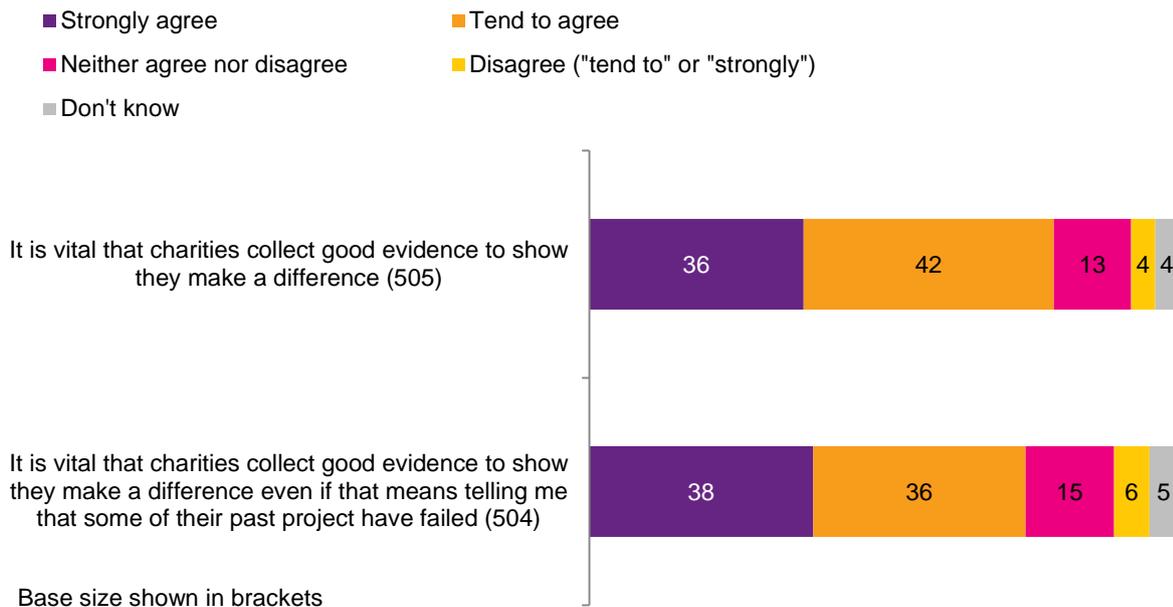
Reporting failure and public opinion

Our findings on public trust and charities complement previous polling. A report by Ipsos MORI in 2012, for instance, found that ‘*evidence of the impact [that a] charity has*’ is in the top three most important factors for people when deciding on whether to support a charity, along with ‘*details about what the charity does*’ and ‘*details about what the charity spends its money on*’.⁹ (This survey shows that evidence of impact ranks above both information on executive salaries and details about where a charity operated).

When we asked people if they agreed with a similar statement—‘*it is vital that charities collect good evidence to show they make a difference*’—79% agreed. It may not be surprising to get such high approval for a statement like this, so our research went further by splitting the sample to test whether perceptions would be affected if charities occasionally reported negative results. This is because previous studies have shown that charities are reluctant to report negative results¹⁰, despite the sector as a whole generally agreeing that organisations should be encouraged to report failures or negative results.¹¹

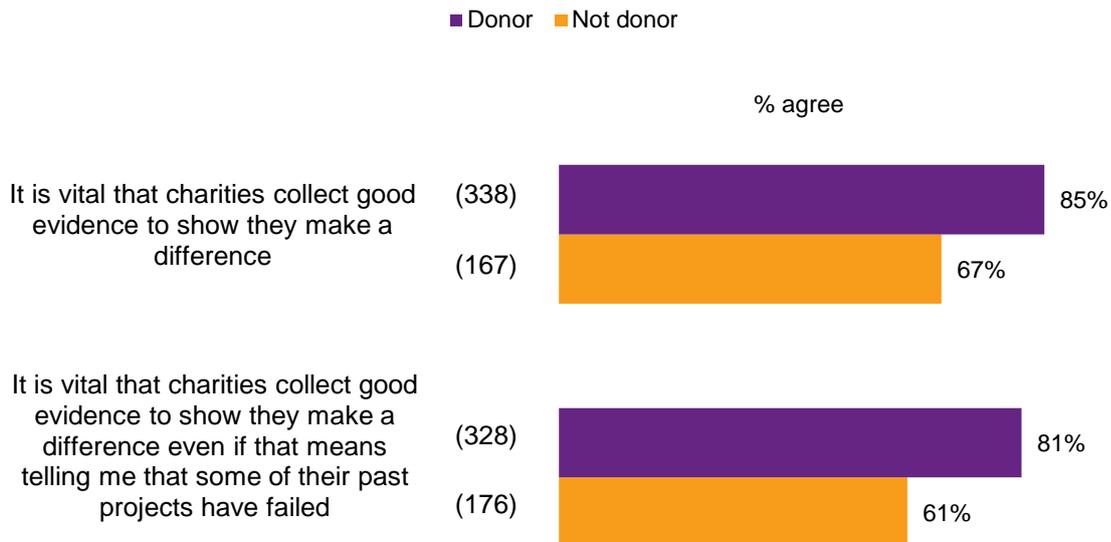
With this in mind, for half the sample we added ‘*even if it means telling [them] that some of their projects have failed*’ and found that there is virtually no difference in the responses compared with the shorter version that asked only about evidencing impact, with three-quarters of people agreeing (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Attitudes towards evidence and reporting failure



People who have a relationship with charities (donors, employees and users) are more likely to agree with the importance of evidence than those with no contact with charities. One interpretation is that this may be more because of indifference among the public than any opposition to the idea. However, there is some evidence to suggest that those without any contact with charities are less tolerant of failure. The results show that 12% of this group (although small) disagree that charities should report failure, compared to just 5% of donors. Indeed around eight in ten donors, employees/volunteers, and users of services all think it is vital that charities collect good evidence even if that means reporting failure.

Figure 5: Attitudes towards evidence and reporting failure by donor status



Base size shown in brackets

Conclusion

These findings contains important lessons for charities and donors alike.

While people still largely think of charities as 'values-led', the polling suggests that basing decisions more on evidence of what works—and making these decisions public—appeals to donors. Equally, the more people think charities base their choices on evidence, the more trusting they also seem to be of charities as a whole. In other words, when it comes to trust, good evidence pays off.

This is extremely important. Previous NPC research has already shown that collecting and using evidence helps charities work more effectively for their beneficiaries; the very purpose for which they exist. What we now know is that a greater public emphasis on evidence may appeal to potential donors, too, and help bring in funds that will guarantee work into the future.

Intriguingly, our research suggests that the barrier to many charities making their failures public—the fear that it will drive away donors—might be unfounded. Our data shows that public support for charities collecting evidence remains the same whether or not people hear about failed projects along the way. The most important thing to them is knowing that charities are collecting evidence and using it, which frees up the sector to be far more transparent about which projects have worked for them and which have not. This is essential if the sector as a whole is to become more effective and increase its impact.

References

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- ³ Noble, J., and Wixley, S. (2014) [Matter of trust: What the public thinks of charities and how it affects trust](#). New Philanthropy Capital
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TRANSFORMING THE CHARITY SECTOR

NPC is a charity think tank and consultancy which occupies a unique position at the nexus between charities and funders, helping them achieve the greatest impact. We are driven by the values and mission of the charity sector, to which we bring the rigour, clarity and analysis needed to better achieve the outcomes we all seek. We also share the motivations and passion of funders, to which we bring our expertise, experience and track record of success.

Increasing the impact of charities: NPC exists to make charities and social enterprises more successful in achieving their missions. Through rigorous analysis, practical advice and innovative thinking, we make charities' money and energy go further, and help them to achieve the greatest impact.

Increasing the impact of funders: NPC's role is to make funders more successful too. We share the passion funders have for helping charities and changing people's lives. We understand their motivations and their objectives, and we know that giving is more rewarding if it achieves the greatest impact it can.

Strengthening the partnership between charities and funders: NPC's mission is also to bring the two sides of the funding equation together, improving understanding and enhancing their combined impact. We can help funders and those they fund to connect and transform the way they work together to achieve their vision.

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