

UPDATE

The Big Issue

Agreement in the main, curveballs from the side

What do the political parties' election manifestos say about the charity sector?

The major political parties might see eye to eye on few of the mega-questions facing the country, but when they published their election manifestos over three frantic days in mid-April there was a considerable degree of alignment on policies involving the voluntary sector.

The Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat manifestos all promise a role for voluntary sector organisations in delivering public services. The Conservatives say that the government has “pioneered ways to deliver high-quality public services, including through getting the voluntary sector more involved”, and would continue this through social impact bonds and payment-by-results contracts.

The Lib Dem manifesto says the party values the role that the voluntary and community sectors play in delivering public services and would continue opening up public procurement to them. Labour's election manifesto says that it would create “a new National Primary Childcare Service, a not-for-profit organisation to promote the voluntary and charitable delivery of quality extra-curricular activities”. Some sector eyebrows have been raised by the absence of Labour's previous commitment to reserve some public contracts “exclusively for organisations in the pursuit of a public service mission”.

The three main parties and the Greens all pledge support for the social economy: the Conservatives say they would give

more people the power to start a social enterprise or take over local amenities; Labour says the UK's charities, mutuals, cooperatives and social enterprises are “pioneering new models of production that enhance social value”; and the Liberal Democrats say they would help charities and social enterprises through supporting social investment. All three say they would

ambitions”, and the Lib Dem pledge to “encourage citizens to engage in practical social action” and to see government as a facilitator rather than just a provider, could have come straight from the 2010 big society playbook. In fact, the big society makes a reappearance in the Conservative manifesto, with three main tenets: guaranteeing every teenager an NCS place; promoting “equal treatment and equal opportunity for all”; and giving people who work for large companies or the public sector an entitlement to three days of annual volunteering leave on full pay.

Labour's manifesto contains its oft-repeated and popular pledge to scrap the lobbying act, which it says “has gagged charities”. The Tories say the act “addressed public concern about the influence of money on politics”, and the Lib Dems say they will “consider carefully” the official review of the act by Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbots and “ensure the right balance has been struck”.

There are divergences – the Green Party says it would end the charitable status of private schools, the Lib Dems promise to confer it upon non-profit local news outlets, and Ukip promises to clamp down on “so-called ‘fake charities’ or state-funded political activism”, a measure it says would save £2.25bn over the next government. Given that such curveballs come mainly from the minor parties, the evidence of the manifestos suggests the result of the next election might result in no more than minor, nuanced changes to many areas of voluntary sector policy. ■

Sam Burne James



promote youth social action and volunteering, with Labour supporting the Tories' brainchild, the National Citizen Service, which the UK Independence Party says it would scrap, along with other big society projects, to save money.

Labour's commitment to “helping people to help themselves, both to improve their own communities and to achieve their