



#NeverMoreNeeded Comms Review

Report

Penny Walker, 28th July 2021.

1. Introduction

1.1 Why this campaign?

In early 2020, the coronavirus pandemic hit the UK and the government took the decision to closed down the country towards the end of March 2020.

Ill, isolated or trapped, out-of-work and vulnerable people needed the support of charities and community organisations like never before.

And those same charities and community organisations were trying to scale up their emergency responses while seeing many fundraising routes blocked, as well as rapidly reorganising their internal operations to work in lockdown. The sector faced a loss of £4.3 billion¹ income in three months, just as more and more people needed their help.

A group of sector leaders got together to share information and it became clear that additional government support would be needed to enable charities and community groups to provide crisis support and keep their other essential work going for people and communities.

These CEOs started collaborating from March 2020 and ran the highly successful #EveryDayCounts campaign which secured a finance package of £75 Million from the Chancellor in April 2020. The follow on work, including the #NeverMoreNeeded campaign, was done in recognition that this still left a massive funding gap and a sector struggling to keep delivering the vital services needed to support people through the growing impacts of the pandemic.

The #NeverMoreNeeded communications activity was developed to tell the government this².

1.2 The #NMN comms activity

A small communication sub-group was set up, led by Adeela Warley of CharityComms (see Appendix I for fuller list). Working with in-house comms specialists from different charities as well as external consultants, the group developed framing, messages, and materials. Wider networks of organisations were invited to take part in social media pushes highlighting the essential and varied work being carried out by charities and voluntary organisations, using the #NeverMoreNeeded hashtag and later the #RightNow (Feb 21) hashtag. Template letters and press releases were provided. Case studies and stories were gathered to provide more detail. Joint letters were sent to the government: one to the Prime Minister urging more support was signed by over 1,100 charity leaders. There were 75,900 mentions across social media including 6,240 in one day for the

¹ See #NeverMoreNeeded's website for more on this: <https://nmn.org.uk/the-campaign/why-we-are-campaigning/>

² A different approach was taken in Scotland. See <https://scvo.scot/policy/campaigns/never-more-needed>

#RightNow campaign highlighting everything charities are doing right now that needs urgent support.

1.3 About this review

Traditionally, a comms review would look at whether activities achieved their aims, and would involve asking target audiences about how they now see the organisations or issues. This review is different: #NeverMoreNeeded is a collaborative effort which came together very fast, unexpectedly and in unprecedented circumstances. This review focuses on how the collaborative nature of the work – how the people who made it happen worked together and the lessons and recommendations are about collaborating on communications.

The wide range of people who were directly or indirectly involved in the comms work were invited to think about four questions, in relation to the #NeverMoreNeeded comms activities:

- When were we at our best?
- What could we only do / do much better, because we were working together rather than alone?
- What would we definitely want to do again, or more of?
- What would we do differently?

People added their responses to a virtual whiteboard (Appendix II). There were different levels of engagement with the review. The review sub group is grateful to those people who shared their views on the whiteboard or via email.

These responses were then grouped into themes. It was clear that there were different perspectives on some points, and agreement on some key areas. The way the collaborators worked was different at different times, and this is also reflected in the way that some points are mentioned both as things that went really well, and things that need to be different in future, for example speed of response.

The themes were discussed by the review subgroup, providing further insights from those closest to the work.

2. Headline insights

The campaign had impact. It succeeded in uniting many organisations with a shared message and this message did enter the public discourse, and was taken up by others. It did not achieve the political traction needed to move the Government on financial support. It was equally important to show and empower charity supporters that the sectors was actively working to be part of the solution and to put pressure on Government to act.

2.1 The campaign was developed in an unprecedented situation

The campaign was a direct response to the unprecedented situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdown. Demand for services went up, income went down, new ways of working had to be developed and the government needed to be told that its emergency funding was not providing the support the sector needed to play its role.

The collaboration between infrastructure organisations in the sector was unprecedented too, and new relationships and collaborative structures had to be established rapidly.

The urgency and importance of collaborating to respond to the pandemic and lockdown, and in particular to communicate priority messages clearly and collectively, meant the usual comms planning and testing were shortened or cut out altogether. On the other hand, the speed of movement, the degree of solidarity, cooperation, goodwill and sharing of resources was very high.

Susan Smith of SCVO said:

“We jumped into it quickly, which was appropriate, and didn’t expect it to last as long as it did so didn’t have a long-term plan for it. I think that’s fair enough given the circumstances – it’s easy to forget now how desperate we all felt in April 2020 and how much we were all operating in panic mode.”

2.2 Growing honesty about needs and concerns helped with reaching agreement

The comms work was part of a wider collaborative response to the pandemic and lockdown. There was a small group of CEOs leading this collaboration, setting the strategic context for the comms work, and signing off on bigger comms decisions. Because of the role of this group, its ability to work together well and reach agreement impacted on the comms work too.

There was an initial period while this group was finding its feet and learning to be more open with each other about needs and concerns, and this meant that the comms team needed to press ahead with developing framing, messaging, and materials even while the CEO group had not yet resolved some decisions about goals, strategy and tactics.

The collaboration worked best when the people involved were honest with each other and focused on the collective good: letting smaller disagreements go in order to be able to agree and move on. As greater trust developed, things were able to progress more quickly³.

2.3 There were comms experts ready and willing to work on the campaign

The comms work was most effective when the in-house and out-of-house communications experts were able to get on with their work: following a plan with a clear rationale and goal, and drawing on their collective experience and skill. Resources were found from funders, from existing budgets and through in-kind and pro bono contributions, particularly from Forster Communications (a specialist communications consultancy). The team was able to move fast, despite the fact that collaboration is typically slower and harder than working alone. One reviewer said there was a ‘rare level of agility’ in this work.

³ A separate recommendations report about collaboration, as a result of reviewing and reflecting on the IO collaboration as a whole, is available here: <https://nmn.org.uk/2020/11/27/lessons-from-collaborating/>

2.4 The work made use of the breadth and reach

The collaborative work was thought to have worked best when it harnessed the expertise and reach of the organisations involved, through workshops, taking soundings, building on existing relationships, communicating through existing formal networks (e.g. NAVCA Comms network) and specialist channels like Comms & PR Facebook group. Existing networks enabled faster, targeted communication and coordination, and also leveraged existing relationships and trust, meaning people were readier to act because they trusted that what was being requested was worthwhile.

2.5 When the 'ask' was simple and easy, people joined in

The team put together materials for a number of activities, including date-specific social media bursts and open letters. They also requested case studies of the work being carried out by charities and voluntary organisations, to illustrate the overall Never More Needed and Right Now messages.

When the ask was simple and easy to join in with, many organisations and their supporters did take part (see 1.2 above) . However, it was less easy for people to write and send in case examples to be used by the team. It was important to have this human and detailed picture (see 2.6), but hard for people to make time to provide it, when so much else was needing attention. SCVO took a different approach in Scotland, focusing on providing a platform for organisations to highlight the work they were doing during the pandemic to ensure that wasn't overlooked. Using its own digital projects and news outlets (Third Force News TFN) it was able to produce materials include a short film (April 2021)⁴.

2.6 Told the right stories

The #NeverMoreNeeded and #RightNow hashtags focused on the positive contribution the sector makes: the urgent and important support it gives to people and communities, which is especially crucial during lockdown and the pandemic.

Nevertheless, it was difficult to get news coverage, especially in the 'right leaning' national media. It was - and remains - a very busy news environment with lots of sectors pushing their cause and competing for air time. It was hard to get strong case studies from charities, which had new or striking content, or strong news value. It was also hard to secure spokespeople will to speak out. However, according to the comms sub group, the narratives did get used by others – so the discourse did change.

3. Actionable / recommendations

3.1 We continue to need to champion the sector.

There was, and is, agreement that the collaborators need to be seen and heard championing the sector and calling on the government to support the sector to be able to play its role in the pandemic and beyond. This is still the case.

To do this with 'one voice', there was value in having a shared narrative we could unite around.

⁴ See the film here <https://youtu.be/dKwzktQAPUE>

3.2 Collaboration on comms is worth doing, when the stakes are high and the potential rewards are big.

In the #NMN comms work, the biggest benefits of collaboration were:

- A feeling of solidarity, at a very difficult time for individuals and organisations, building new relationships and strengthening existing ones. This will continue to be important as the context in which people are working continues to be challenging.
- Sharing intelligence.
- Pooling resources and sharing the load.
- Speaking with one voice.
- Speaking at the same time, using key moments to create pressure and visibility.
- Harnessing the collective mass of collaborating organisations for greater reach, for a richer understanding of different perspectives and for a greater breadth of stories and actions.

3.3 Use the # as a flexible umbrella.

The #NeverMoreNeeded hashtag was widely praised as very effective, and can continue to be used at key moments to enable comms teams, supporters, wider networks and warm public audiences to repeat and reinforce the message at key moments, telling their own stories and crafting their own calls to action, targeting the government and decision-makers.

3.4 Agree the relationship between comms activity and wider activity.

There remains a range of views about the relationship between comms activity and other forms of change-making (e.g. advocacy, public affairs), and some of the leaders of the collaboration were more willing than others to take advice from comms professionals about this. This contributed to delay in agreeing the focus, and some long-running circular conversations about goals, audiences, tone of voice, and the different roles various organisations in the collaboration could play.

In future, it would help to:

- Agree the clear strategic goals early on and let the comms work flow from these. Avoid revisiting these unless the outside context changes.
- CEOs need to delegate and then let the comms professionals do their job, which includes focusing on the different audiences (primary and secondary audiences, observers).

3.5 Find ways to agree despite our differences.

In all collaborations, there will be differences between the collaborators, and sometimes disagreements and even conflict. The collaborators found ways to agree on what to say, and how to say it, despite these differences, as one contributor to the review put it “In service of the collective good”.

Finding agreement sooner leads to faster delivery. The CEOs smaller group also developed tools and approaches to help understand the strength of agreements and disagreements more clearly. There is more about this in the collaboration review, but it was mentioned by contributors to this comms review as well.

3.6 Make clear asks.

Requests for action need to be clear and easy-to-understand, whether they are for CEOs, staff, member organisations, supporters or network members. In situations where members and supporters aren't being asked to take action, they still need to be informed about what is happening.

The "leader briefing" before the #RightNow moment (January 2021) is a good example of a clear communication to CEOs and others, setting up the action which they can ask others to take.

Creating and sharing a comms strategy, with associated messaging and compelling materials, also makes it possible for organisations to take part easily, and as much or as little as they are able.

Early agreement about roles and responsibilities for the necessary decision-making groups and implementation teams is also helpful for rapid action and to reduce duplication.

3.7 The core disciplines and practices of great comms work apply in collaborative situations too.

The urgency of swift action and the squeeze on resources made it hard for this comms work to do some of the things which would usually happen, including testing messages before using them.

As always, being clear about who the comms activities are designed to influence and what difference the comms is designed to make in relation to those audiences, is a core discipline.

3.8 Agree early about the stories to be communicated.

In the case of #NMN, the focus was on the good the sector does, the value it brings. There is a need for better evidence (case studies, data) to tell this story. Peter Gilheany of Forster Communications put it like this:

"The difficulty came from two core challenges – the first was the media itself and the amount of space that was being taken up by the pandemic itself, which led to a squeeze on the room for reporting on other stories. The second element was the lack of new stats or insights on the scale and depth of the issue faced by charities. We had individual stories of the impact on charities but never quite reached the threshold the media was looking for in terms of compelling data about how damaging the lack of funding was being and the impact it was having on beneficiaries."

The PR brief changed at least twice during the campaign (see Appendix III for the original brief), with Forster Communications creating new assets and tactics as it became clearer which approaches had a greater chance of success.

In collaboration, it should be easier to coordinate activity so that the collaborators are not unnecessarily competing for media coverage. The PR approach was shared with and signed off by people from a small number of the collaborating organisations, including CEOs and communications specialists.

3.9 Find and invest resources, and match the work to the available resources.

Funders, collaborating organisations and comms professionals in consultancies were generous with time and money, including working for most of the time pro bono, because they could see how important this work was (see appendix and thank yous).

Funders were supportive of moving fast, outside of the usual grant-making processes, because they saw the urgency and the intent to work together.

If the resources are available, additional comms approaches and materials can be developed to supplement the existing suite.

3.10 Expect collaboration to be challenging.

There are typical, expected challenges in collaboration which can't be eradicated. Recognising these and being ready to respond to them as a team helps collaborators avoid blaming each other when they inevitably arise. This is one way of thinking about these challenges:

- It isn't easy – not least because you only do it when the situation you're trying to change is hard to tackle.
- Decisions are shared – so take longer to make and will often be different to the decision your own organisation would have made.
- It depends on great relationships – so if they are not already in place, you need to build them.
- It requires high-quality internal working too – clear roles, good relationships, good communications, processes which enable collaboration.
- It's a marathon, not a sprint – but this situation required speed.
- Success may look different from what you expect – because decisions are shared and visions are created together, everyone's initial idea of success will shift.

(from: Working Collaboratively: A Practical Guide to Achieving More, Walker, 2013)

Appendix I Thank yous and contributors

Thanks you to people who were part of the comms coordination team:

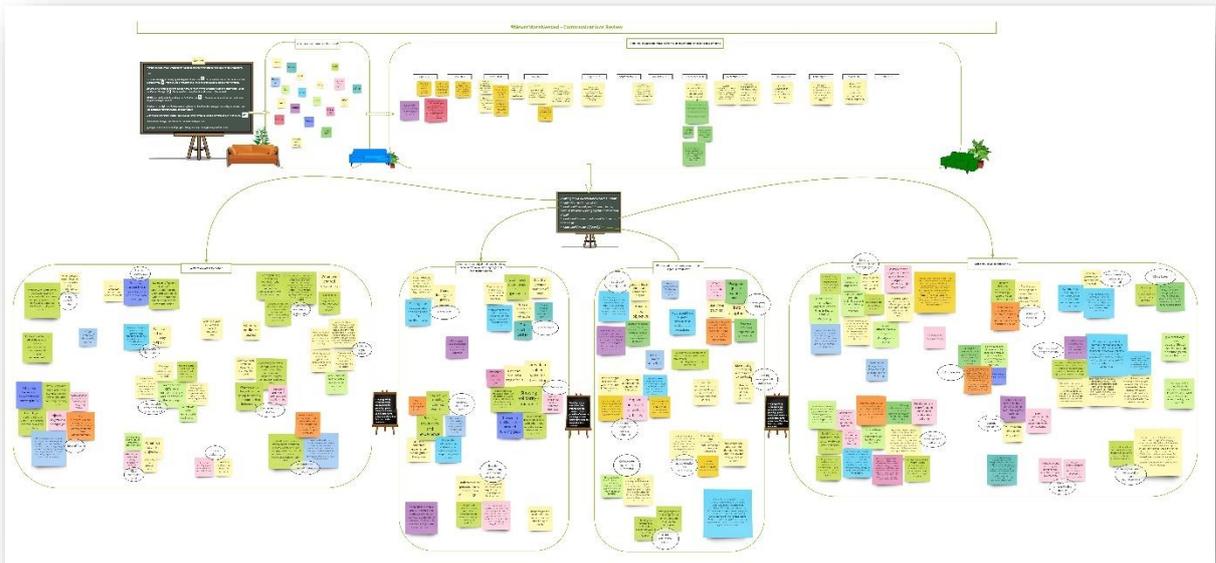
Clare Mills, NVCA
Dan Fluskey, CIOF
Debra Allcock Tyler, DSC
Duncan Shrubsole, Lloyds Bank Foundation
Jane Ide, CC Skills
Nicky Hawkins, Frameworks Institute (now On Road Media)
Paul Reddish, Volunteering Matters
Peter Gilheany, Forster Communications
Rita Chadha, SCC
Tilly Humphries , SCC
Yvonne Coleman, DSC

List of contributors to the review

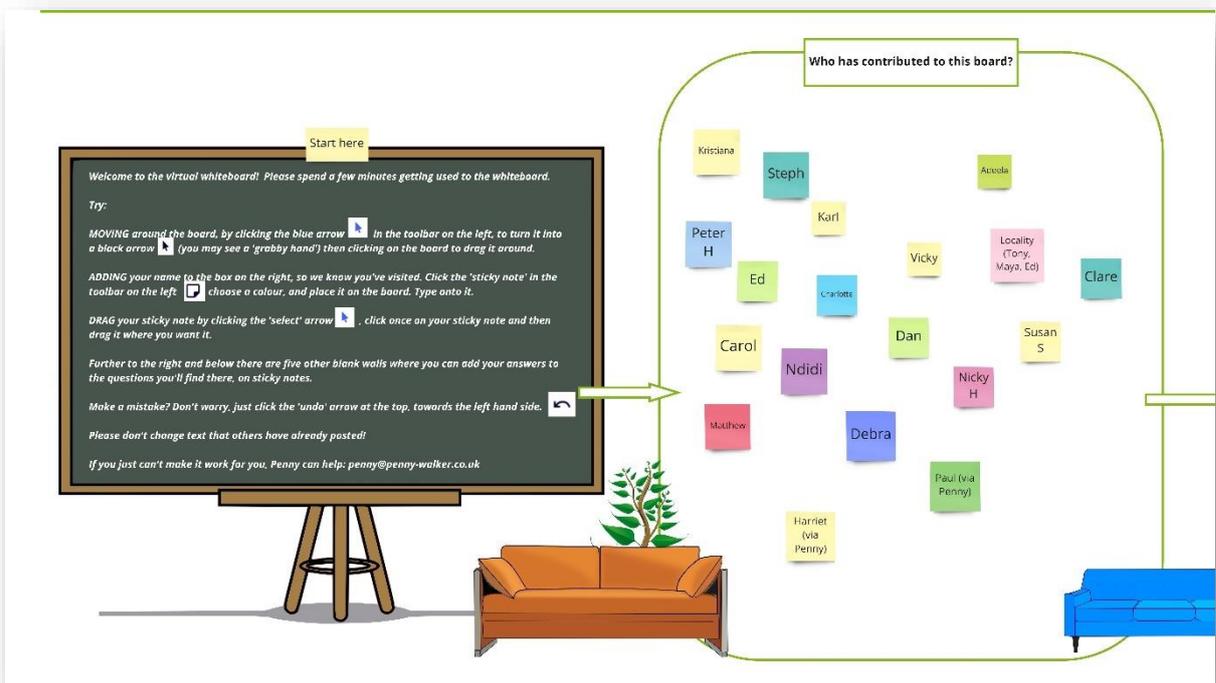
Adeela Warley, CharityComms
Carol Mack, ACF
Charlotte August, National Voices
Clare Mills, NCVA
Dan Fluskey, CIOF
Debra Allcock Tyler, DSC
Ed Mayo, Pilotlight
Ed Wallis, Locality
Harriet Crabtree, Inter Faith Network for the UK
Karl Wilding
Kristiana Wrixon, ACEVO
Matthew Sherrington, Inspiring Action Consultancy
Maya Bhose, Locality
Ndidie Okezie, UK Youth
Nicky Hawkins, On Road Media
Paul Reddish, Volunteering Matters
Peter Gilheany, Forster Communications
Peter Holbrook, Social Enterprise UK
Stephanie Draper, BOND
Susan Smith, SCVO
Tony Armstrong, Locality
Vicky Browning, ACEVO

Appendix II - Screenshots from virtual whiteboard

Whole whiteboard



Who contributed



What could we only do / do much better, because we were working together rather than alone?



What would we definitely want to do again, or more of?



OVERVIEW

The not for profit sector urgently needs a much larger and more sustained commitment from government while the country is dealing with the Covid crisis. That urgency brought together the infrastructure bodies and major influencers in the sector to campaign as one and secure the support needed.

The first phase, #EveryDayCounts scored a significant success when the Chancellor announced a financial support package for the sector, but it didn't go far enough.

That led to the launch of the second phase of the campaign, #NeverMoreNeeded, to keep the pressure up by highlighting the hugely important role not for profit organisations are playing in tackling the Covid crisis and just how crucial the sector will be when we seek to recover and rebuild.

We have a very powerful and arresting framing for that campaign, but we need to put it front and centre with decision makers and influencers like MPs, and encourage the people who influence them, such as their constituents, to put the pressure on.

That means generating media coverage that conveys the urgency and importance of the issue and the need for action right now.

Recommended approach

Thinking about the urgency for this campaign, and the need to stretch the resources available for it as far as we can, we recommend the following approach:

Create a media relations programme focused on generating coverage in the media read by decision makers and influencers such as MPs, but particularly Conservative MPs and their constituents

Build that media approach around two core themes:

- The critical importance of supporting the not for profit sector right now
- Ensuring the sector has the capacity and capability to play the key role needed to help lead us out of the crisis and into recovery

Bring those two core themes to life through four core elements:

- First-hand testimonies and stories from beneficiaries and others on the difference not for profit organisations have always made to their lives and the issues they care about, and their impact during the current crisis
- Data, such as survey findings, that provide new evidence of the value of the sector, the threats it currently faces, the damage a lack of the right support is causing, the difference it can make in the future as part of rebuilding
- Opinion and calls for action from sector leaders but also independent, influential voices such as supportive MPs, former ministers, LA leaders etc
- Case studies that demonstrate the difference made and being made by sector organisations, celebrate and highlight the sheer range and diversity of the sector, champion the especially crucial role they play in supporting marginalized groups and issues, and promote their role in tackling issues that will tick the boxes for Conservative MPs and their constituents

Focus on media that will be seen, consumed and shared by our priority audiences – the usual national opinion former titles, key regional titles and BBC outlets in target constituencies and sector media

Use an agency like us create the framework for this PR campaign and to take a lead on priority titles, use volunteers to find the raw material for the four elements to feed into the campaign, and encourage PR teams within some of the larger charities to develop and place their own pieces using the messaging and framework developed the agency.

Appendix IV - Examples of Coverage

Third Sector Podcast: #RightNow and the Spring Budget, 26th February 2021
<https://www.thirdsector.co.uk/third-sector-podcast-rightnow-spring-budget/article/1708506>



Charities continue to benefit from last year's 'major investment', government says, Civil Society News, 18th February 2021
<https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/charities-continue-to-benefit-from-major-investment-government-responds-to-rightnow.html>

