HOW WE’RE BUILDING A GREATER SCOPE FOR GREATER IMPACT

Mark Atkinson, CEO, Scope

The story so far

Like many other organisations, Scope was created just a few years after the end of the Second World War. It was a time of great austerity and yet great optimism. Three pioneering, ambitious and determined parents and an equally courageous social worker came together because they shared a dissatisfaction with the education available to their own children, and others with cerebral palsy. Their expectations were high but their demands were far from unreasonable—in essence, they wanted an opportunity for people with cerebral palsy to access education and employment and to have an equal place within society.

The founders of Scope were unquestionably entrepreneurial and together they built an organisation that grew exponentially. The National Spastics Society (as it was known originally) quickly achieved many of the hallmarks that we often recognise in today’s large charities—a compelling vision, proposition and reason to support; a strong voluntary income stream; a large individual membership base; celebrity endorsement; and a growing base of services used and valued by its ‘beneficiaries’.

Over the decades that followed, there were, of course, bumps along the road. Struggles for control of the organisation between parents and disabled adults; the all-too-familiar tensions that arise when an organisation straddles campaigning and the delivery of statutory services; and the battle to hold onto the initial entrepreneurial spirit when the realities of large scale delivery kick in. And large scale it was. At its peak the Football Pools of the Spastics Society sold six million tickets a week, providing 42% of its income. As a result, it was opening new services—schools, colleges, residential care homes, sheltered employment services—at an incredible pace.

In 1994, the organisation changed its name to ‘Scope’—thankfully rejecting the alternatives on the shortlist including ‘Cerebral Palsy Society’, ‘Action Cerebral Palsy’ and ‘Capability and Action Disability’. The change of name was symbolic for two reasons. First, ‘spastic’ had become a term of abuse often bandied around the school playground. There was therefore a risk that the brand may be a negative rather than positive force for change. Second, that this was the start of a fundamental repositioning—a tentative move towards being an organisation focused on tackling the common barriers faced by all disabled people and not solely or exclusively those with cerebral palsy.

Why we’re doubling down on mission

Fast forward to more recent times and the key question facing Scope is: what is its relevance to disabled people in 2017? The truth is that the world has moved on. Disabled people’s aspirations have changed. The notion of ‘charity’ is seen by many to undermine disabled people’s rights. Yet Scope was left with a patchwork of different
services that had been established over seven decades, geographically scattered across the country and which collectively reached just a few thousand disabled people. While its award-winning campaigns and advocacy work—including powerful attitudinal campaigns—largely lived in a different universe.

It was with this question of relevance at the front of our mind that we embarked on a soul-searching process of developing a new strategy. We knew that the conclusion had to be radical if we were to become relevant to a far larger proportion of the 13 million disabled people in the UK. There had been modernisation within the organisation in recent years but it was arguably driven by a dislike of what we had become rather than in pursuit of a positive vision of what we might be. Our most recent strategy to move away from delivering residential care in eleven of our largest and most outdated homes—which were established in the boom days of the National Spastics Society—was unquestionably a positive move. The issue was there was no specific or defined sense of ‘what next’.

This question of ‘relevance’ is pertinent to many charities and not-for-profit organisations. It is certainly a question facing parts of our sector. For Scope, we found the answer by redoubling our focus on our core purpose. Scope’s mission is to achieve an equal society in which all disabled people have the same opportunities as everyone else. This means our focus must be on achieving structural change within society—influencing public policy, law, markets and attitudes. So now Scope has chosen to become a mission-led social business. We will focus resolutely on core mission and stop or exit or transfer everything else.

Over the coming months we plan to transfer all our regulated and day services to other experienced providers who will invest, develop and grow them over the coming years. So much of the estate and current services offer that was built over the decades following the birth of the National Spastics Society will no longer be part of the organisation. In transferring, we hope to secure the future of these valued services—they do after all deliver great outcomes to those that use them but it would be difficult to argue they achieve Scope’s core purpose of everyday equality for all disabled people. This move will also allow Scope to refocus on doing less, reaching more and having greater impact. It will, however, mean an initial reduction in our annual income by 40% and see the number of employees reduce by two thirds.

**What we’re planning**

We want to be known for being a social change organisation—a force that brings us ever closer to everyday equality. We will focus on the areas in which disabled people face the greatest barriers and move away from being a charity that ‘does’ to one that ‘facilitates’. We want to create the platform that allows disabled people, through Scope, to drive change.

We are determined to ensure there is a perfect fit between our influencing work and our direct services offer. Our direct offer to disabled people and their family will be a small suite of products and services that build resilience, skills and knowledge. They will be there at key moments in a disabled person’s life, and they will largely be delivered through digital channels and centred around information, advice and support. At the same time, we will seek to influence public policy, change attitudes, disrupt markets and improve the structures within society by ensuring the needs and experiences of disabled people are front and centre.

These two things—a direct offer to disabled people and our influencing work—are simply different sides of the same coin. They are inter-connected and mutually dependent. Our services will act as a demonstration of our policy solutions in practice and our customers will provide insight, evidence and data to drive our influencing. We no longer believe that acting as a sub-contractor of the state is the best way to achieve our purpose. So we will
stop participating in statutory work programmes that offer limited room for innovation and personalisation. Instead we will work with our partners to design and deliver our own programmes. These will support disabled people to access and remain in work and at the same time influence the policies, procedures and attitudes of employers.

How we’ll do it

You don’t have to dig too far in our sector to hear talk of ‘transformation’. Indeed, NPC’s recent State of the Sector report, Charities taking charge, based on the views of 400 sector leaders refers to ‘transformation’ more than a dozen times. The truth is that real transformation is difficult.

To lead an organisation from one operating model to another can be really challenging, particularly when you are working on a finely balanced financial model with limited room for failure. It does of course become a question of risk appetite and is totally unachievable without a united board and management team who are prepared to work together to make the shift and to share the load.

At Scope we are working towards a new target operating model, one in which we: empower our staff and volunteers, providing freedom to innovate and take decisions; embrace digital, data and technology both internally and as a means to reach our target of working directly with two million disabled people each year from 2022; focus on understanding our customers and supporters and committing ourselves to nothing less than a brilliant experience; and work with external partners to deliver the internal support services we need (we are after all a mission-led social change organisation so we will focus on what we are good at).

One of the most interesting, and difficult parts of our transformation programme is around culture. The shift from the behaviours that you typically see in a highly regulated social care and education provider to those that you need in an agile mission-led social business that embraces innovation and risk. We want to be an organisation that attracts talented, values-driven people who can embrace new technology and who are motivated by social impact. Retaining the most capable and committed colleagues in this period of transformation is one of the hardest challenges.

The long road ahead

We have considerable work to do in restructuring Scope before we can claim this transformation to be an example that others should follow. But the principle of being driven and motivated by core purpose and social impact rather than income or size is important for others to learn from. Too often charities who claim to be radical and pioneering are in reality cautious and conservative and unable, or possibly unprepared, to take difficult decisions that are in the long-term interest of the organisation.

The demise of the traditional fundraising model places ever greater pressure on charities to be transparent both about their cost and their impact. This has to be a good thing. There will definitely be losers—organisations that struggle to reform and who want to hold on to yesteryear. In the end it comes down to the reality that no charity has a right to exist and that support will gravitate to those with a clear purpose, who have relevance, that operate in contemporary ways and those who can demonstrate their social impact in a compelling manner.

At Scope our work is not done. That’s because 65 years after our creation, everyday equality is not the norm for many disabled people. Many continue to face poverty and discrimination compounded by social attitudes and ignorance.
Our obligation is to ensure that Scope is fighting fit—in good shape to tackle the barriers of 21st century Britain. We are proud of our history but the need to transform is obvious and that is a journey we have started. It is littered with risk but none greater than doing nothing and hoping for the best. Who wants to lead an organisation through a prolonged period of ‘managed decline’? Not me and I am fortunate to head an organisation that has woken up to the reality that change is constant and the sooner you take control and shape your own future the better.

This essay is part of a series on transformation from the boldest voices in the sector.

About the author

Mark joined Scope in October 2013 as Director of External Affairs and was subsequently appointed as chief executive in June 2015. Mark has predominately worked in the third sector undertaking communications, policy and strategy roles for organisations including Citizens Advice, Youth Sport Trust and Ambitious about Autism. He spent 3 years working for the Local Government Association in both Westminster and Brussels. He is a Trustee of Prisoners Abroad.
TRANSFORMING THE CHARITY SECTOR

NPC is a charity think tank and consultancy. Over the past 15 years we have worked with charities, funders, philanthropists and others, supporting them to deliver the greatest possible impact for the causes and beneficiaries they exist to serve.

NPC occupies a unique position at the nexus between charities and funders. 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.