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Perception gap between public and charities threatens the 'special relationship' says ACEVO

August 10, 2009- A new poll released today by the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations (ACEVO) reveals a dangerous perception gap between the public's understanding of charities and the reality which could lead to an erosion of trust and confidence in 'the special relationship' the public has with charities.

ACEVO say that to maintain the very high levels of trust they currently enjoy¹, charities need to have a much more honest relationship with the public.

Research commissioned by ACEVO² shows that the commercial and professional bases on which charities operate are barely understood by the public and it is calling on the sector to become more accountable and transparent to prevent an erosion of public confidence.

ACEVO is as a result leading a coalition of 240 charities and trade bodies to draw up a 'transparency manifesto' which it will urge all charities to sign-up to. It will also seek the backing of the Charity Commission.³

ACEVO's key public survey findings are:

- Nearly 50% think there are less than 70,000 registered charities in England and Wales. Only 16% identified the right ballpark figure of over 170,000
- A staggering 77% of respondents were unable to correctly identify the right bracket of the number of people working in the charity sector as between 500,000 and 750,000
- On average charities spend 12.5% on their overheads. Only 20% of the public got this figure in the right ballpark. 61% of the public thought they spent more than 20% on overheads
- 52% estimated that the total annual income for charities was less than £20 billion - it is in fact more than £30 billion
- Only 16% were in the right ballpark on the average income charities receive from government as government grants, income and loans. Charities receive £11.5 billion from government

There is also confusion surrounding which organisations are charities and which are not:

- 22% thought the Equalities and Human Rights Commission is a charity but it is in fact a public body
- Only 19% correctly identified Eton College as a charity and 14% rightly identified Oxford University as a charity

Supporting and Developing, Connecting and Representing

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Commenting on the results, Stephen Bubb, Chief Executive of ACEVO, said:

“Times have changed, and charities have changed too, but it doesn’t seem we have brought the general public with us. We are an increasingly diverse professional sector, with a large paid workforce and wide range of income sources.

“It is a real worry that public attitudes and understanding of charities lag so far behind the reality. I think we as a sector have been complicit in the widening of that gap by not being as upfront as possible about how we have developed, for fear of reduced donations or criticism.

“We have nothing to be ashamed of and should be loud and proud about how the charity sector has developed. If we are not, there is a real danger that the high levels of trust and confidence the general public has in us will be eroded and fundraising may suffer.”

Notes to editors

1. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer, charities are among the groups the public trust the most, rated second only to doctors. Public trust in other institutions including banks, energy and media has fallen dramatically in the last year.
2. All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2065 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 23rd - 25th June 2009. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).
3. ACEVO heads up the charity sector ImpACT Coalition. The ImpACT (Improving Accountability, Clarity and Transparency) Coalition has been established to promote better public understanding of how charities work and the benefits they bring to society. Its founding members believe that charities have a duty to be more transparent and accountable. The Coalition includes 240 charities and trade bodies, incorporating all of the 40 top charities and a broad representation of smaller charities.
4. According to the Charity Commission’s Economic Survey of Charities published in March 2009, 52% of charities say they have been affected by the economic downturn and 58% of these have experienced a decrease in income.
5. The Charity Commission survey also revealed an increased demand in services, with one in five charities (21%) surveyed that deliver services reporting an increased demand for the previous twelve months.

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