

GMCVO

Knowledge

Think Tanks

influencing policy and debate



Think Tanks influencing policy and debate

This is a list and summary of some of the most influential think tanks in the UK at the moment.

Some hold more influence than others, particularly those closest to the two parties in the coalition government. Others have been included more for their relevance to the voluntary sector and their influence within current policy debates, particularly issues surrounding the “Big Society”.

In alphabetical order:

The Centre for Social Justice

CSJ is a centre-right social policy think tank formed by the Conservative MP Iain Duncan Smith, former leader of the party and currently Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. The think tank’s research is primarily concerned with ways to break the cycle of poverty that constitutes “broken Britain”. This is a view of the UK as plagued by deep-rooted social breakdown, with too many people living in dysfunctional homes trapped on benefits, children leaving school with no qualifications or skills, and communities blighted by alcohol, drug addiction, debt and criminality.

CSJ argue for an enhanced role for the voluntary sector; charities are seen as better placed to fight the causes and consequences of poverty than the government. CSJ has also published detailed reports setting out recommendations for extensive reform of the welfare system. The think tank’s recommendations have had a direct influence on government policy since Duncan Smith took office at the DWP – both to incentivise marriage through the tax system aiming to stem family breakdown, and to simplify the benefit system into one universal credit, with benefits tapering off more gradually as people take up work. It is thought these latter benefit reforms will more effectively incentivise employment.

Website: www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk
Email: admin@centreforsocialjustice.org.uk
Telephone: 020 7340 9650

CentreForum

CentreForum is an independent, liberal think tank associated with the Liberal Democrats. Formed in 1998, the think tank seeks to develop evidence-based policy solutions to the problems facing Britain that reflect their liberal aims and values. CentreForum are clear that research “should begin with reference to data, not dogma”, although they have predominantly been associated with the free-market wing of the Lib Dems.

The think tank often publishes edited collections of essays by experts in a certain field to draw conclusions on policy questions. For example, they have drawn on the deficit-reduction experiences of Sweden, Ireland, Canada and Australia to argue that the UK government should demonstrate “fairness” in its spending cuts for them to be successful, and that deficit reduction can be used as a platform to make fundamental changes to the functions and role of the state.

CentreForum has also been a supporter of further independence and freedom for schools, and for lifting the cap on university tuition fees.

Website: www.centreforum.org
Email: info@centreforum.org
Telephone: 020 7340 1160

Centre for Policy Studies

The CPS is a rightwing conservative think tank that develops and promotes policies to “limit the role of the state, to encourage enterprise and to enable the institutions of society – such as families and voluntary organizations - to flourish”.

The Centre was founded by Sir Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher in 1974 to promote the principles of a “free society”. They claim it has since played a “global role in the dissemination of free market economics”.

More recently they have advocated and claim to have influenced policies including simplifying the benefits system, increasing tax allowances to £10,000, introducing localist and decentralising initiatives, and providing more freedoms for schools.

Website: www.cps.org.uk
Email: tim@cps.org.uk
Telephone: 020 7222 4488

Demos

Demos is an independent public policy think tank focused on “power and politics”. They aim to challenge the traditional, “ivory tower” model of policymaking by giving a voice to people and communities. The think tank also carries out deliberative workshops, focus groups and citizen juries.

Formed by a former editor of *Marxism Today* in 1993, Demos have predominantly been seen as a centre-left organisation, and an influential force behind New Labour’s rise to power and time in office. However, they have recently forged links with the Conservative Party, embarking on a project to explore “Progressive Conservatism” chaired by David Willets MP, Tory Minister for Universities. Reports from the project have called for the government to “empower the frontline” of public services, and to give big business a greater role in the “Big Society”. Other work looks at revitalising the Left in Britain through their Open Left project. The think tank has also recently appointed Chancellor George Osborne to their advisory board.

Demos were awarded “think tank of the year” at the Public Affairs News Awards in 2010.

Website: www.demos.co.uk
Email: hello@demos.co.uk
Telephone: 0845 458 5949

Localis

Localis is a small think tank dedicated to issues related to local government and localism. They have produced research on a variety of issues including housing, the reform of regional government, innovation in services and local government finance.

The think tank argues that the primary role of the state should be to reduce the need for the state, by fostering an “independent society and a diverse local economy of co-operatives, businesses, charities and a slimmed down state”. Localis has some links with the Conservative Party, as their Chief Executive Alex Thomson was the Conservative Party's specialist policy adviser for decentralisation and local government until 2010.

Website: www.localis.org.uk
Email: info@localis.org.uk
Telephone: 020 7340 2660

New Economic Foundation

The New Economics Foundation (NEF) is an independent “think-and-do” tank that aims to inspire and demonstrate “real economic well-being”. Their vision is of a new economy based on “social justice, environmental sustainability and collective well-being”. NEF often runs practical projects and policy pilots on the ground in conjunction with their research projects.

The think tank’s focus is on improving quality of life by promoting innovative solutions that challenge mainstream thinking on economic, environment and social issues, often by emphasising the need to evaluate social outcomes as well as economic ones.

NEF has been vocal in their criticism of the coalition government’s spending plans and policy agenda, claiming that voluntary organisations will not receive enough support to fill the void left by the state, and that already marginalised groups will be left behind by the “Big Society”.

Website: www.neweconomics.org
Email: info@neweconomics.org
Telephone: 020 7820 6300

New Philanthropy Capital

New Philanthropy Capital is a think tank and consultancy dedicated to helping charities and their funders achieve a greater impact. They undertake research projects, provide consultancy to charities and funders, and host a variety of events and training programmes.

Their work with funders aims to assist with strategic planning for funding, as well as reviewing the impact their funding has achieved. They have worked with a variety of trusts, foundations, and government departments. NPC’s aim is to ensure that funding is used “as thoughtfully and strategically as possible, so that it creates the greatest impact possible”. NPC have developed an innovative “Charity Analysis Framework” as a means to analyse the effectiveness of charities, using a variety of relevant criteria.

Website: www.philanthropycapital.org
Email: info@philanthropycapital.org
Telephone: 020 7785 6300

Policy Exchange

Policy Exchange is an influential think tank that aims to provide centre-right means to achieve what they call “progressive” ends. They have a particular concern for free-market and localist solutions to public policy problems, usually with a central focus on promoting economic growth.

Following research conducted by Policy Exchange that claimed public sector workers earn on average 30% more than their private sector counterparts, the think tank have been especially vocal about the need to reduce the public sector pay-bill, recommending a five year public sector pay freeze.

Their work on housing reform has been influential, and Housing Minister Gregg Shapps has expressed an interest in implementing Policy Exchange’s “right to move” scheme for social housing tenants. They have also argued for a Pupil Premium in education, and to transform housing associations into mutually-owned John Lewis-style social enterprises.

Website: www.policyexchange.org.uk
Email: go to www.policyexchange.org.uk/contact
Telephone: 020 7340 2650

Reform

Reform is a free-market, right-of-centre think tank that aims to create a “consensus for reform” regarding better ways to deliver public services and achieve economic prosperity. Recent work has included recommendations for a programme of public spending cuts even more severe than announced by the coalition government, based on the Canadian model of the mid 1990s.

Their publications include various proposals to reduce the deficit whilst avoiding tax rises. These include abolishing what they label “middle class benefits” such as Child Trust Funds and Winter Fuel Allowance, lifting the cap on university tuition fees, reducing public sector staff and pay, and charging fees to visit GPs.

Their main research areas are the economy, health, education and law and order. The think tank was founded by Nick Herbert, now a Tory MP, and they maintain strong links to the Conservative Party.

Website: www.reform.co.uk
Email: info@reform.co.uk
Telephone: 020 7799 6699

ResPublica

ResPublica is an independent, right of centre think tank established in 2009. The think tank aims to reshape centre-right politics through providing radical solutions to social and economic problems. Their work focuses on moving beyond the traditional models of market and state, which they view as having manifestly failed. They instead advocate a comprehensive redistribution of power towards “civil society”.

To overcome the UK’s perceived economic, political and cultural crises, ResPublica argue for a remolding of society based on “bottom-up” civil association, the growth of social enterprise, and frontline control of public services. Parts of this agenda have formed the intellectual basis of David Cameron’s “Big Society” policy platform, for which ResPublica’s Director Phillip Blond has often been credited as the original architect. However, Blond has been critical of some aspects of the government’s deficit reduction plans, claiming they are destined to fail the poor.

ResPublica’s research areas cover the economy, welfare reform, public service delivery, civil society and social innovation, and family policy.

Website: www.respublica.org.uk
Email: enquiries@respublica.org.uk
Telephone: 020 7438 2637

Social Market Foundation

Social Market Foundation is a public policy think tank interested in “marrying markets and social justice”. The think tank publishes original policy research and edited essay collections, holds seminars and debates in Westminster and elsewhere, and runs an extensive programme of events at the three main party conferences.

SMF emphasises the role markets can play in improving people’s lives, but stresses that “a truly pro-market approach is often not a free-market one”. They argue that the state has a vital role to ensure that the market works for everyone in society, and so provides social justice. Without social justice, SMF claims, the market economy lacks legitimacy.

Founded in 1989 as a right-of-centre organisation, it later moved closer to New Labour, influencing Tony Blair’s public service reforms and the “choice” agenda in the 2000s.

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Sam Boyd, GMCVO, November 2010

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