Volunteering enjoys the widespread support of all main UK political parties. As previous governments have done in the past, the Coalition government is attempting to implement policies aimed at encouraging and supporting greater levels of volunteering in the UK. Much volunteering policy has been directed at voluntary organisations, often through government funding. In this paper I consider the limits that policy directed at voluntary organisations has in encouraging volunteering. I highlight that a great deal of volunteering occurs informally (not through an organisation), in the public and private sectors, in small organisations below the radar of policy, and in organisations that do not rely on government funding. Furthermore, I suggest that the distinctive characteristics that the voluntary sector is celebrated for allows them to remain independent of government policies. To conclude I suggest that for volunteering policy to be effective, a greater understanding of volunteering that takes place informally in small community organisations is needed, as well as a greater understanding of what shapes the volunteering strategies or approaches of organisations.

Introduction

Different governments in the UK have initiated a range of policies and programmes with the purpose of encouraging and supporting greater levels of volunteering, as a means of tackling social problems, or as a way of addressing the needs of communities. Many policies, including those set out in the recent ‘Giving White Paper’ (HM Government, 2011) encourage individual volunteering by focusing on volunteering through a voluntary organisation or by providing support to voluntary organisations to achieve this. As part of a wider question exploring how volunteering can be harnessed for wider social ends, this paper considers the role that voluntary organisations play in implementing volunteering policies.
I start off by briefly reviewing volunteering policy over the last few decades to highlight the different reasons and ways governments have attempted to support and encourage volunteering, and focus on some of the ways that the policies set out in the ‘Giving White Paper’ involve voluntary organisations in their delivery. I then consider some of the potential limits to volunteering policies aimed largely at voluntary organisations, highlighting the amount of volunteering which takes place outside of voluntary organisations, the significant proportion of volunteering that occurs in private and public organisations, in small voluntary and community organisations and in voluntary organisations that do not rely on government funding, and how the distinctive qualities of voluntary sector organisations allows them to remain independent of government policy. Finally, I briefly consider why despite these factors, voluntary organisations may reflect government policy, and what might explain this.

**Volunteering policy**

“one might almost say that successive governments have seen in volunteering a panacea for whatever society’s current ills happen to be.” (Sheard, 1995, p116)

Volunteering enjoys the widespread support of all main political parties in the UK. However, governments have varied to some extent in their approaches towards volunteering policies. In considering some of the main characteristics of different government’s approaches Zimmeck (2010) makes some useful distinctions. She suggests that while some governments have supported volunteering for its inherent value; it being a good thing in and of itself, for the benefits that individuals derive from participating, others have supported it for its instrumental value; because it contributes to some specific policy need. Secondly, she suggests that governments vary between whether their support for volunteering is holistic; aimed at all types of volunteering, by all sorts of people, or targeted; aimed at particular groups of people or activities (Zimmeck, 2010). The following brief overview outlines some of the reasons governments have given for implementing policies to support volunteering and who they have targeted.

In the 1980s the Thatcher government encouraged volunteering as a way of lightening the load on public services and of tackling unemployment (Zimmeck, 2010), as natural allies in rolling back the frontiers of the state (Sheard, 1995) and as having a key role in welfare pluralism (Deakin, 1995). During this period the emphasis was very much on the efficient and cost effective service delivery that volunteering could provide. The 1992 Home Office paper ‘The Individual and the Community: The role of the Voluntary Sector’ set out the Major government’s intention to increase awareness of volunteer opportunities and encourage people of all ages and sections of society to volunteer (Sheard, 1995). Major’s ‘Make a Difference’ campaign in 1994 aimed to encourage more people to volunteer and to become involved in a wide variety of activities (Davis Smith, 2001) and it made a case for breaking down the barriers of class, wealth and race (Zimmeck, 2010). The campaign aimed to promote volunteering, not for the primary purpose of providing public services as was the
emphasis in the Thatcher government, but also as a way to encourage individual participation for both its inherent value and as a way of making a contribution to society (Zimmeck, 2010).

Rochester (2006) describes two broad instrumental areas of volunteering policy under the New Labour government; civil renewal and social inclusion. The Volunteer Compact Code of Good Practice, which set out an agreement between government and the voluntary and community sector to support and promote volunteering in 2001, made clear volunteering’s intended contribution to citizenship and building communities;

“Volunteering is an important expression of citizenship and fundamental to democracy.” (Home Office, 2005, section 2.1).

In his outline for his vision of civil renewal David Blunkett, as Home secretary in 2003 set out the role of volunteering:

“Personal volunteering… strengthens communities, and helps people learn and care about the wider society and democracy of which they are a part.” (Blunkett, 2003, p27). “We must aim to build strong, empowered and active communities, in which people increasingly do things for themselves and the state acts to facilitate, support and enable citizens to lead self-determined, fulfilled lives.” (Blunkett, 2003, p43).

In the promotion of volunteering as a way of tackling social exclusion the Volunteer Compact Code of Good Practice 2001 acknowledged that;

“volunteering can help tackle social exclusion. Individuals can improve their skills and employability and can show that they have a contribution to make to society.” (Home Office, 2005, section 5.3).

The Cabinet Office Spending Review 2004 set out a Public Service Agreement target to increase voluntary and community engagement, especially amongst those at risk of social exclusion (Cabinet Office, 2006, p17). The target, measured as those who volunteered formally or informally at least once a month in the last 12 months, was aimed at people with no qualifications, people from black and minority ethnic communities and people with disabilities and life limiting illnesses.

The May 2010 general election saw the end of the New Labour government and the formation of a Conservative Liberal Democrat Coalition government, and with it David Cameron’s plans for the ‘Big Society’. The ‘Big Society’ is;

“a society where people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their communities; a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control.” (Conservative Party, 2010, p1).
Although the full impact on volunteering policy is yet to become clear, it is evident that volunteers and voluntary action will be encouraged as part of the ‘Big Society’. The government’s document outlining the programme of policies in support of the ‘Big Society’ outlines that they will take a range of measures to encourage volunteering and involvement in social action (Cabinet Office, 2010b, p2). One of the three core components set out in the Coalition government’s strategy ‘Building a Stronger Civil Society’ is;

“Promoting social action: encouraging and enabling people from all walks of life to play a more active part in society, and promoting more volunteering and philanthropy.”
(Cabinet Office, 2010a, p3).

This suggests that volunteering is supported for its instrumental value of moving towards social responsibility and away from state control.

Who is to be targeted for the promotion of volunteering is less clear. The Government’s ‘Giving Green Paper’ notes that people at risk of social exclusion are less likely to formally volunteer and seems to be suggesting that this is a group who could be targeted to become involved (HM Government, 2010). In the consultation questions of the Giving Green Paper it states “We are interested to hear your ideas on how we can ensure that giving is inclusive to all.” (HM Government, 2010, p29). However, in the body of the White Paper there is no mention of ensuring that giving is inclusive to all. In fact the groups mentioned as being in priority for expansion of giving are those who are retired or approaching retirement, and young people (HM Government, 2011, p32). Citizenship Survey figures show that 65-74 year olds are the group most likely to regularly volunteer (formally, through an organisation) and that those aged 16-25 actually volunteer more than those aged 26-34 (Drever, 2010). The focus therefore appears to be on getting greater numbers involved and possibly targeting groups who are most likely to do this, rather than those who are excluded from volunteering.

Major encouraged all volunteering, by everyone, New Labour targeted support for volunteering at certain groups including the socially excluded with aims of social inclusion and civil renewal in mind, and the Coalition appear to be targeting the young and the old as a way of building a ‘Big Society’. While Zimmeck (2010) highlights the discontinuities between governments, particularly New Labour and its predecessors, others have highlighted the continuities. Lewis suggests that support for volunteering as a necessary part of a democratic society was evident the late 19th century, in the fight against fascism after World War II and again in the 1990s (Lewis, 1999), and indeed has remained important both for the New Labour and the Coalition governments. McCabe (2010) highlights several policy continuities between the New Labour approach to volunteering and the Coalition’s ‘Big Society’ and Alcock (2010) argues that there is evidence to suggest that the major UK political parties all share the same approach to government and third sector relations. The extent to which the distinctions outlined represent real differences rather than rhetoric masking many similarities or continuities could be debated, but what is clear from this overview is that governments have, and are set to continue to attempt to harness volunteering for wider social ends. As policies towards volunteering shift to meet these ends, with
changing emphases and priorities, what role are voluntary organisations expected to take in implementing these policies?

The role for voluntary organisations in volunteering policy

The Giving White Paper, launched in May 2011 sets out the Coalition governments plans to encourage greater levels of giving, both time and money. It identifies three strands of activity; to make giving as easy as possible, to make giving as compelling as possible and to give better support to those that provide and manage opportunities to give (HM Government, 2011). Whilst with respect to encouraging giving in general, there is mention of exploring new models by working with individuals, businesses and philanthropists as well as charities, foundations and social enterprises, with regards to encouraging the giving of time, most of the support and examples given are directed at voluntary organisations. The paper sets out a provision of £30 million for a local infrastructure fund that will “establish integrated local support services for frontline civil society organisations” (p10), a Social Action Fund which welcomes “proposals from organisations that have a matched funding commitment” (p10) for schemes to expand social action and through this fund they want to “reward, support and grow organisations that have the potential to bring about a significant uplift in giving time and reciprocity” (p28). The giving of time through formal voluntary organisations will be encouraged by funding to improving the Do-It website (a national database of volunteering opportunities through organisations) and through encouraging flexible access to voluntary opportunities. Similarly many of the policies undertaken to encourage volunteering by the New Labour government volunteering were directed at formal organisations within the voluntary sector, and at the infrastructure of the sector (Alcock, 2010, Zimmeck, 2010).

Evidently, voluntary organisations are expected to play a key role in the encouragement of greater levels of volunteering and a significant way of supporting this is through funding. The significant role of funding in the relationship between the government and voluntary organisations can be demonstrated by the government Compacts, which, particularly in the case of the renewed Coalition Compact has a significant focus on the funding relationship between the sectors (Cabinet Office, 2010c). But as Kendall highlights:

“The voluntarism which is a central characteristic of much voluntary sector activity means that these organizations are ‘awkward’ customers. They cannot be steered towards fiat or finance to the extent that state entities or for-profit organizations respectively can.” (Kendall, 2003, p215)

The next section of this paper explores the extent to which this expectation for the role of voluntary organisations in implementing policy directed at encouraging volunteering is realistic.
The limits of volunteering policy directed at voluntary organisations

The ‘dominant paradigm’ (Rochester et al., 2010) or ‘non-profit paradigm’ (Lyons et al., 1998, Rochester, 2006) refer to the commonly held perception that volunteering takes place within large professionally staffed and formally structured organisations, that volunteer roles are clearly defined and specific, that the activity takes place in the broad field of social welfare and that the motivation for volunteering is essentially altruistic (Rochester et al., 2010). Whilst Lyons et al (1998) and Rochester et al (2010) offer alternative perspectives to recognise the heterogeneity of volunteering, Rochester et al warn that the ‘dominant paradigm’ exerts a powerful attraction as a kind of ‘default setting’ for the discussion of voluntary action (Rochester et al., 2010). This is reflected, as outlined above, in government policies which focus on encouraging volunteering through formal organisations with government funding agreements. I would suggest that this ‘default setting’ serves to overlook the fact that a large proportion of volunteering does not take place in these types of organisations, and that a lot of voluntary organisations operate outside of the influences or reach of volunteering policy.

Firstly, a great deal of volunteering does not occur through formal organisations at all. Informal volunteering is widely recognised as a form of volunteering. The Citizenship Survey which measured both formal and informal levels of volunteering in England and Wales between 2001 and March 2011, defined formal volunteering as giving help through groups, clubs or organisations, and defined informal volunteering as giving help as an individual to people who are not relatives (Drever, 2010). The Compact Code of Good Practice on Volunteering stated “We understand the term volunteering to include formal activity undertaken through public, private and voluntary organisations as well as informal community participation and campaigning.” (Home Office, 2005, p4). The ‘Giving White Paper’, suggests that giving could be “simply through taking time to chat to a vulnerable neighbour” (HM Government, 2011, p8). Based on Citizenship Survey figures it has been estimated that around half of voluntary activity in England and Wales is informal, occurring outside of an organisation (Williams, 2003a, Williams, 2003b). Although governments recognise informal volunteering, policy is rarely directed at encouraging this form of volunteering.

Secondly, a frequently made assumption is that volunteering is synonymous with the voluntary sector. Although a great deal of formal volunteering does occur within the voluntary sector, many voluntary sector organisations do not rely on volunteers other than those on their trustee board, and a significant amount of volunteering occurs within the public and private sector. The 2006/07 Helping Out Survey found that 23% of volunteering took place within the public sector and 11% within the private sector (Low et al., 2007). Policies aimed at encouraging volunteering are often based on the assumption that it occurs within the voluntary sector and are often intertwined with general support for the sector.

Even where volunteering takes place within voluntary organisations, these are not necessarily highly structured organisations with clear volunteer strategies. National Council for Voluntary
Organisations (NCVO) figures in 2007/08, classed 53.2% of voluntary organisations as micro organisations and 31.5% as small organisations (National Council for Voluntary Organisations, 2010). The Third Sector Research Centre work on ‘below the radar’ activity, noting the difficulties in definition and measurement, estimates that small community organisations could be three to five times greater in number than ‘mainstream’ voluntary sector organisations (McCabe et al., 2010). They also suggest that an understanding of ‘below the radar’ activity could include

“a policy radar where organisations or activists are not engaged in any kind of policy agenda either because they have not been recognised or credited with any role or have elected to remain outside of radar” (McCabe and Phillimore, 2009, p3)

McCabe (2010), highlights that there is little evidence to suggest that community groups have the capacity or willingness to engage with ‘Big Society’ agendas and argues that such groups exist to meet basic human needs, not to deliver on policy (McCabe, 2010). This suggests that a significant proportion or organisations may be operating below the radar of policy.

It could be assumed that where organisations derive core funding from central or local government, there is a clear rationale for them to follow government volunteering policy; organisations may need to adapt to the funding that is available to them to flourish or even survive. The impact of the ‘contract culture’ on third sector organisations has been well reflected on (Kendall, 2003, Lewis, 1996) as has the impact of funders requirements to an organisation’s mission (Minkoff and Powell, 2006). However, an estimate using data from the National Survey of Third Sector Organisations estimates that only around 36% of third sector organisations receive some public money and just 14% regard it as their most important source of funding (Clifford et al., 2010). The NCVO estimates that 75% of voluntary sector organisations are not reliant on statutory funding (National Council for Voluntary Organisations, 2009). This represents a very large proportion, in number, of organisations, which exist outside of the particular influence of funding requirements and accountability.

Finally, even for the type of voluntary organisations that volunteering policies are often directed at, the recognised distinctive qualities of voluntary organisations mean they have the capacity to remain removed from government policy. Salamon and colleagues (Salamon, 1987, Salamon et al., 2000) have considered some of the contributions and weaknesses of voluntary sector organisations from a cross-national perspective and Kendall (2003) relates these to the UK voluntary sector. Some of the distinctive characteristics that voluntary organisations are often celebrated for are the very reason that they are not compelled to reflect government policy. It is suggested that voluntary organisations can play an innovation and an advocacy role; because of their independence from the state they can take risks and pioneer new ideas, and also push for government policy changes (Salamon et al., 2000). The fact that they can focus on ‘niche’ or specialist services that are not economically viable for the market or state to take on (Kendall, 2003) means that they don’t necessarily need to focus on the groups or social problems targeted by policy. And the different levels of accountability mean that they are accountable to a board of trustees rather than to the electorate (Salamon,
1987, Salamon et al., 2000, Kendall, 2003). These characteristics of independence and potentially lower levels of accountability mean that organisations are not compelled to reflect to government policy, and are in a position to challenge or campaign against it. Indeed, this independence is something that both New Labour and the Coalition governments have recognised in their undertakings in the respective versions of the Compact - though the removal of the reference to policy in the Coalition’s undertaking is interesting to note:

“To recognise and support the independence of the sector, including its right within the law, to campaign, to comment on Government policy, and to challenge that policy, irrespective of any funding relationship that might exist, and to determine and manage its own affairs.” (Home Office, 1998, section 9.1)

“Respect and uphold the independence of CSOs to deliver their mission, including the right to campaign, regardless of any relationship, financial or otherwise, which may exist.” (Cabinet Office, 2010c, section 1.1)

If most volunteering takes place informally, in the public and private sector, in small unstructured organisations, and in organisations which don’t receive government funding, and the independence of those who do receive funding is respected, what impact can volunteering policy directed at voluntary organisations be expected to have?

**Support for volunteering policy**

I have put forward some potentially compelling arguments to suggest that the impact of volunteering policy directed at voluntary organisations may be limited. However, before concluding I want to consider one final question. Some of the points made above suggest reasons why voluntary organisations do not need to, or are not compelled to reflect or follow volunteering policy. But that does not necessarily mean that they don’t reflect government policy. If the instrumental goals (for example social inclusion, community cohesion) that volunteering policy has been used to achieve are not the mission of individual volunteer involving organisations, what might explain compliance with policy?

It has been suggested that there are two reasons for doing something in an organisation; a strategic or commercial reason, or a moral or value based reason (Campbell and Tawadey, 1992). Organisations may feel a social or moral responsibility to embrace policy aims such as social inclusion and community building even where these are not their main mission. Leat (1996), considering the different levels of accountability in voluntary organisations suggests that they could be accountable to the general public and the community; whereas organisations may not be accountable directly to the electorate, they may feel they do have a moral responsibility to the general public.

In terms of strategic reasons, organisations may want to align themselves with governments for instrumental reasons other than funding; they may wish to build a close relationship with
government for example to maintain a position of influence or to be consulted upon. It is not unusual for voluntary organisations to struggle to recruit volunteers; volunteering policy could be used by voluntary organisations to extend their volunteer pool, or attract different people with new skills into volunteering. Volunteering policy might be useful to legitimise changes within the organisation, be used to add weight to existing aims of the organisation or it may be important for organisations, in terms of their reputation or partnerships with other organisations, to be seen to be doing the right thing.

Finally, voluntary organisations don’t operate in a vacuum; rhetoric on certain issues, such as around building strong communities is far-reaching, compelling and persuasive. While voluntary organisations may not intentionally set out to follow or reflect government policies on volunteering, they may unconsciously be influenced by rhetoric surrounding volunteering.

As part of my on-going research in partnership with a large volunteer involving organisation, focusing on the role of organisations in making volunteering inclusive, I will seek to get a deeper understanding of what informs an individual organisation’s strategy towards volunteering and its relationship with volunteering policy.

**Conclusion**

Different governments in the UK have fostered policies towards encouraging or supporting volunteering whether for instrumental or inherent reasons, with holistic and targeted aims. While policies may differ in detail, it can be argued that there is also much continuity between the approaches of different governments. While many policies aimed at encouraging volunteering are aimed at voluntary organisations, a significant proportion of volunteering occurs informally or in private and public organisations, in small voluntary organisations and in voluntary organisations which do not rely on government funding. Furthermore, the distinctive characteristics of voluntary organisations mean they are not compelled to reflect volunteering policy. The impact of policies on the levels of volunteering is extremely difficult to measure (and will be even more so with the recent cancellation of the Citizenship Survey) and the suggestions that overall levels of volunteering in the UK (Staetsky and Mohan, 2011) and cross nationally (Musick and Wilson, 2008) have remained relatively stable call into question the extent to which volunteering policy impacts levels of volunteering. In recognition of these limits it is worth raising questions about the expectations of what policy directed at voluntary organisations can achieve. Indeed, it raises the question of how else volunteering can encouraged or supported. As the current government and future governments seek ways to encourage and support volunteering for wider social ends, I would suggest that for volunteering policy to be effective, a greater understanding of volunteering that takes place informally and in small community organisations is needed, as well as a greater understanding of what shapes the volunteering strategies or approaches (formal or informal) of organisations.
References


