Lending a hand to lending a hand: The role and development of Volunteer Centres as infrastructure to develop volunteering in England.

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Introduction

Volunteer centres exist to support, increase and develop volunteering. There are currently approximately 324 centres throughout England providing a range of services, from matching volunteers to opportunities, to working with organisations on best practices in volunteer involvement, to engaging with local policy makers to create the conditions that support and sustain volunteering. The majority of funding for volunteer centres comes from local statutory sources and from project funding; most are independent or attached to Councils for Voluntary Service – another piece of local infrastructure to support the voluntary and community sector. Recently government has been influential in initiating the development of infrastructure for the voluntary and community sector, but the part the role anticipated for Volunteer Centres remains unclear. Centres frequently work closely with local government as partners to deliver policy goals, and it is from this perspective that they have attracted interest from policy makers. Government interest in volunteering and volunteering infrastructure means that this is an important time for volunteer centres.

An objective view on the future development of volunteer centres is warranted; research shows that this is potentially a turbulent time for volunteer centres with many facing uncertain futures. On the face of it, and given the emphasis on developing infrastructure, this may seem surprising as volunteering in England appears to be very healthy. The latest figures for England and Wales suggest that as much as 39 per cent of the adult population volunteers at least once a month compared to 27 per cent in 1981 (Low et al 2007). Although the authors of the latest survey stress that figures from different surveys may not be directly comparable, the trend appears to be a steady increase in the number of people volunteering. However, while the picture looks good for volunteering, survey results seems to call into question the value of volunteer centres - only a very small proportion of volunteers find their volunteering opportunities through volunteer centres, with some surveys putting it as low as two per cent (Davis Smith 1998a, Low et al 2007).

Volunteers centres have historically been seen to be the 'clearing house at a local level' (Sheard 1986). A key function is placing volunteers, so why do volunteer centres remain important at the local level, if so few people use them? And might this explain why the

place of Volunteer Centres in present infrastructure development plans is precarious? The answer to the first of these questions is that this must be partly that volunteer centres do more than broker volunteer roles and play a much fuller role as local development agencies. The answer to the second is explored more below.

This paper will look at the role and development of volunteer centres. It begins with an outline of how volunteering has achieved a higher profile with policy-makers and highlights the implications of this in the early development of infrastructure. The paper then goes on to look at what is expected from volunteering outlining how government views it as a cost effective way of addressing specific policy goals. The third part of the paper looks at the current roles and development of centres. It concludes by suggesting that there is a compelling argument for maintaining the role of local centres, but that the network at the moment is fragmented, under-resourced and in need of clarity of purpose.

How government interest in volunteering has developed

Taking a broad historical view, it is only relatively recently that the government has attempted to influence the development of volunteering. For a long time, almost by definition volunteering remained outside the state as an activity involved with issues that the state could not, or would not, do something about.

Looking at how governments have gradually become more interested in promoting, and controlling, volunteering, it is useful to take the World War II as a pivotal point; before then most attention is focussed on the role of voluntary organisations with volunteering assumed to be a part of this. After 1945 the nature of voluntary action might have been assumed to change. It was not that government became more interested, in fact quite the contrary, the advent of a comprehensive welfare state was assumed by many to remove the need for charity and volunteering. Of course this did not happen, not least because Beveridge, the architect of the welfare state, acknowledged that voluntary action is an important component of a healthy democracy in his report titled *Voluntary Action* (Deakin 1995, 1996), but also because voluntary action encompasses much more than the services that were nationalised into the National Health Service and the wider welfare state (Sheard 1986); as well as being concerned with service, volunteering is equally as important when conceptualised as form of activism or serious leisure (Rochester 2006).

In the immediate post war years volunteering attracted little interest from government. This was to change in the 1960s when disillusionment with public services and the welfare state drew in new volunteers. Disappointment with the perceived failure of the welfare state to solve the problems it was set up to do led to an influx of new active volunteers, some of whom set up organisations that were to become recognisable names tackling issues such as homelessness and child poverty (Sheard 1986). At the same time governmental service reviews highlighted that a great many hitherto unrecognised volunteers were involved in many aspects of the welfare state. This was particularly noted in reviews of the personal social services.

A third strand of criticism was the questioning of state bureaucracies built on decision making by ‘experts’ that left little opportunity for people to participate in decision

making and in the activities of local communities. Several influential government committees were set up at this time with the task of recommending how to increase participation in all aspects of public life (Deakin 1995). These committees reported on a range of issues – education, the planning system and the social services for example and all concluded that the government needed to find ways to open participation up to the wider population. Volunteering figured explicitly, or implicitly in much of this thinking because it seemed one practical and viable way to increase participation. In particular attention was drawn to the (newly 'discovered') example of volunteers in the provision of health services by the public sector and attention was drawn to how increasing volunteering could do to involve parts of the population – particularly young people – who were seen as increasingly disconnected from society.

The example of volunteers in the personal social services, and in the National Health Service in general, also helped to emphasise importance of what we might now call volunteering infrastructure. In the early 1960s the 'discovery' of volunteers working in health, and the decision by government that this should be encouraged further, led to the appointment of the first paid volunteer coordinators in England in hospitals (Sheard 1986; Gay 2001). In 1968 the Seebohm report was published which recommended the involvement of volunteers in the new social service departments, and although this was not acted upon with the same enthusiasm as in hospitals, the political will to include more volunteers in state services was evident. Following this another government report - the Aves report - noted the need to safeguard and promote volunteering within the social services. The Aves report is an important document in the development of volunteering and its recommendations are still resonating today. They included a call for an agency to nationally support volunteering (This was to become the Volunteer Centre which now, after several incarnations is Volunteering England). Further recommendations led to the Voluntary Services Unit being set up within the Home Office and there was a call for more paid co-ordinators of volunteers. Significantly, the committee also called for the creation of a network of volunteer bureaux to broker volunteering, and to be a focus for information on volunteering. This represented a call to significantly expand the existing infrastructure - at the time of the Aves committee there were 23 volunteer bureaux, but only eight had paid staff (Sheard 1986, Deakin 1995).

If the role of volunteers in health provision provided a positive example of participation, the other stimulus to develop volunteering was how it might be used for those who had little interest in participating in community well-being. Sheard (1986) has noted that it was in the 1960s that volunteering stopped being conflated with the voluntary sector and with that stopped the assumption that volunteering was for, and about, the middle classes. The same wave of government reports extolling the potential for volunteering in health argued for participation in education where it was suggested that young people who could not reach high academic standards should access practical and vocational opportunities. Hand in hand with this was concern about young people not engaging with the community. Putting both together – disaffected youth not engaging with the education system or with the community seemed to the politicians at the time a potent and explosive mix. But the thinking at the time seemed to be offering a way out - could volunteering be both a way of teaching new skills in 'real life' situations *and* a way of

engaging young people in community action? It was thinking about education that seemed to be the driving force for the idea, but as Sheard (1986) has pointed out, aspirations for volunteering as social control looms over the suggestion. As a result there was a flurry of youth focussed programmes which emanated from government or at least had government backing – Task Force to link young volunteers to pensioners, The Young Volunteer Task Force and Student Community Action programmes, both directed towards encouraging young people to use their energy in pursuits useful to the community (Sheard 1986).

This typifies the way in which government approached volunteering in the 1960s and 1970s. There was one more initiative of note to come in the late 1970s, the out going Labour government in 1978 set up the *Good Neighbour* scheme to encourage more volunteers to become active in support of social services in their communities (Davis Smith 1998b).

In 1979 a turbulent time in British politics became no less turbulent, but saw a radical change of policy direction with the election of a Conservative government that finally killed off a style of politics that had existed since 1945. In terms of voluntary action a very important report straddled the outgoing Labour government and the incoming Conservative one. The end of the 1970s saw the publication of the Wolfenden Report on the future of voluntary organisations. This report which played a key part in the history of the UK voluntary sector, reinforced the idea of local intermediary agencies as vital if the voluntary sector and volunteering were to be developed and maintained (Osbourne 1999, Kendall 2003).

The change of government brought with it a contract culture designed to encourage voluntary organisations to deliver services on behalf of the state (in one respect using voluntary organisations as a way of breaking state monopolies of service provision). This was built on the idea that voluntary organisations could be more adaptable to need and draw in harder to access service users, but the presence of volunteers was incidental rather than fundamental to this view. That is not to say however that volunteers were ignored; in fact many government ministers drew attention to the contribution of volunteers. Sheard (1986) argues that although the government did not seem to have a coherent policy, three key elements can be identified as to why ministers spoke of their support for volunteering. The first – and importantly part of the contract culture thinking - was that volunteering helped to provide a cheaper alternative to state provision. Second, and again consistent with actions to reduce the role of the state in providing welfare, volunteers were lauded for providing services to such an extent that the state would provide the safety-net role to cover those areas and issues not covered by volunteers. Third, the provision of services by volunteers was also a way defending individualism against monolithic state provision. In summary, volunteers were contributing to one of Mrs Thatcher's cherished aims – that of rolling back the state.

Government sponsored programmes can be viewed in the light of this thinking. The Opportunities for Volunteering scheme looked to recruit volunteers from the unemployed and to increase volunteering in health and social services, a continuation of the

recognition of the role volunteers played in health. Volunteer programmes under the Manpower Services Commission can be seen in terms of social control – getting the unemployed engaged in useful work and keeping then out of trouble. Again voluntary work was seen as a way of usefully including people in community work, only this time it extended beyond just young people to include the unemployed.

As Margaret Thatcher made way for John Major to become Prime Minister there was another change of emphasis. The Thatcherite approach had been driven by a largely market-led ideology – volunteers were cheap, and could be used to productively engage the swellings ranks of the unemployed. But the Major government recognised that over-emphasising market relations neglected to stimulate individuals feelings of being part of communities; or as one commentator has said, something was needed 'to blunt the effect of economic individualism' (Plant 1991). The result was a renewed interest in volunteering as citizenship, and specifically, 'active' citizenship. For voluntary agencies, this meant an additional role - as well as being delivery agent for services, organisations were also a site of participation individuals could be 'active citizens'. The *Make a Difference* campaign was to be the way in which individuals could increase their involvement with the community. The campaign urged people to become involved as volunteers. Significantly resources were made available to provide infrastructure support to achieve the aims including a national telephone helpline – but also resources for local volunteer development agencies (Davis Smith 1998b).

In 1997, 18 years of Conservative government was ended by the election of Tony Blair and a Labour government. Almost immediately interest in the voluntary sector increased with a stated aim from government to create a culture of partnership (Lewis 2005: 121). More specifically Blair brought with him a keen interest in volunteering. This interest soon became apparent with a host of volunteering initiatives aimed at specific sections of the population. Here was continuity with the past, the government was alarmed that young people were not participating in community life and the Millennium Volunteers programme quickly became established following through a pledge made in opposition to do something about involving more young people in the community (Howlett and Ellis 2002). But it was not just young people, other sections of the community were targeted through programmes such as The Home Office Older Volunteers Initiative (Rochester and Hutchison 2002) which was followed by the Experience Corps which was also focussed on older people, while the Black and Minority Ethnic Twinning Initiative (Gaskin 2003) looked to pass good practice between organisations on getting and retaining volunteers from minority ethnic communities. Currently Millennium Volunteers which was run directly by government in England has become a new programme and organisation 'v' (it has recently been announced that yet another review of young people and volunteering will take place, although it is hard to see what this can add). Attention now has turned away from specific groups and onto those parts of the community that are more generally under-represented as volunteers. This is equated as people 'who are, or who are at risk of, social exclusion'.

Along with specific programmes there has also been a growing belief that more people can be encouraged to volunteer if there is a better volunteering 'infrastructure'. To this

end TimeBank was launched as an online volunteer promotion and brokerage early in Labour's first term of office. It was conceived as a new way to promote volunteering to an audience that would increasingly be searching for opportunities on the web rather than face to face. The creation of TimeBank began a problem that, to an extent still exists. To many, particularly to hard-pressed volunteer centres, it seemed TimeBank was given money to do essentially what volunteer centres did. Millennium Volunteers created projects with key workers to recruit youth volunteers, some were located in volunteer centres, but some were not. Volunteer centres argued that money was being given to create new organisations rather than working through existing infrastructure. Worse was to follow when the Experience Corps was set up to find and place older volunteers, relations with existing infrastructure was fraught. The project failed to meet expectations and was closed. It did seem to signal that volunteer centres were not seen as the capable of delivering volunteering as government was demanding. This has changed somewhat with more recent programmes to invest in all voluntary and community sector infrastructure including volunteer centres, but the creation of the handsomely funded 'v' rankles with many volunteer centres who see at best duplication of their role and at worst a usurping of their position. More will be said about the funding of volunteer centres below, but first we consider why governments have turned to volunteering to answer particular policy needs.

Delving deeper into underlying assumptions

The previous section traced how government has become increasingly interested in the development of volunteering; this section draws these themes out of their historic perspective to look further at some of the assumptions underpinning why governments support volunteering.

First, successive governments have turned to the voluntary sector and volunteer-involving organisations to deliver public services. Between 1979 and 1997 the involvement of voluntary organisations in a mixed economy of welfare had been an attempt to separate the planning and finance of public services from delivery. In this case government, central and local, became the contractor of service and while some organisations found government contracts gave greater security, others found contracts restricted the organisations ability to act independently (Scott and Russell 2001).The contractual relationship often resulted in a transformation of the style of volunteer involvement within the contracted organisation which needed now to treat volunteers much more like paid staff in order to fulfil contractual obligations. The result was an 'up-skilling of one category of volunteers', but the downside was that this 'is paralleled by the exclusion of those traditional volunteers who brought social rather than technical knowledge' (Scott and Russell 2001:60). That is to say the attempt to cope with cuts to public spending in the 1980s through seeking alternative delivery mechanisms (Deakin 1994) drew in volunteer involving organisations, but resulted in organisations recruiting 'reliable' volunteers at the expense of any that were more difficult to support and manage. No wonder then that it has also be argued that the real appeal of voluntary organisations was nothing to do with citizenship, or with participation, but was because they were cheap (Whelan 1999).

Second, while this is a motive that can still be levelled at policy-makers, it is too easy to dismiss enthusiasm for volunteering by government as motivated solely by cost saving. Controlling public expenditure and reducing the influence of local government may have been a key driver for the various Conservative administrations between 1979 and 1997, but as the *Make a Difference* campaign noted earlier showed, there was recognition that voluntary action and volunteering was way in which people could deepen their attachment to society in a way that they could not if relations were restricted to the economic sphere.

Third, reviewing the actions and intentions of Labour after 1997 shows that government hopes for volunteering was also much about building stronger communities. Prime Minister Blair talked of rebuilding civic pride to repair social breakdown (Blair 1996). It was a call repeated by key ministers (Brown 2000, Blunkett 2001). The theme running through these speeches was that trust, and social capital, could be built through participation. Crucially, the underlying theme was one of people recognising that they owed obligations to the communities in which they lived and that along with the rights they enjoyed they had responsibilities. This approach was summed up by the then Home Office Minister Alun Michael who called volunteering 'The essential act of citizenship' (Michael 1998).

The notion that volunteering could build trust showed the growing influence of Putnam's ideas of social capital (Putnam 2000). Putnam's notion that social capital was characterised by trust and, in turn, a measure of social capital was participation spurred politicians on to encourage more people to become involved. David Blunkett, Home Secretary in 2001 (the UN International Year of Volunteers), was a fervent supporter of volunteering, for him:

> 'Volunteering empowers people. It is rewarding for individuals. It cuts across divides of age, race and gender which isolate and alienate people. It strengthens the bonds between individuals which is the bedrock of a strong civil society. And in doing so it helps create a sense of citizenship that is so often missing from so many of our communities today.
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> That kind of active citizenship is essential for the continued health of our democracy. Those who have a stake in the community around them respond entirely differently in their behaviour to the rest of the community who do not' (Blunkett 2001:4)

What was this thinking based on? There is some evidence that volunteers behave differently to non volunteers which would be attractive to ministers, for example volunteers are more likely to have more social and human capital available to them, be interested in politics and show more empathy for others (Bekkers 2005). Other evidence suggests that participating through voluntary action is associated with a reduction in crime, with better health, a greater satisfaction with life and improved educational performance (Whitely 2004).

Little wonder then that despite issues of causality (it is not always clear whether people behave more pro-socially as a result of volunteering, or that more pro-social people are more likely to volunteer), ministers looked to increase participation. The desire to increase the number of volunteers was soon translated into targets. Early in the life of the Labour government the Warner commission called for an increase in volunteering. Targets were later to appear also in the form of Public Service Agreements and in the case of volunteering were measured view the Home Office Citizenship survey – an instrument that has been running every two years since 2001. The 2003 Citizenship Survey reported that the target for England set on 2001 to 'Increase voluntary and community sector activity, including increasing community participation, by 5 per cent by 2006', had been reached by 2003 (Home Office 2004:177)

Persistent themes of wanting to encourage volunteering to draw in under-represented groups and to foster social capital as well as involving volunteer-involving organisations to bolster public services remain. Government looks to be committed to volunteering, and there are those that will argue that that commitment is as much about faith that government can stimulate volunteering as much as it is based on evidence that it can stimulate and direct voluntary action (Seddon 2007). The next section looks at how volunteer centres today are organised to fulfil their roles, and others expectations.

The Role of Volunteer Centres Today

We have seen that in 1969 volunteer bureaux coverage was sparse with 23 centres in existence, and of these only eight had paid staff. At that time, as we have seen volunteering was part of the background of communities – it happened, but public recognition of it was sparse. But as interest in volunteering from government grew, so did ideas that to encourage new people in (young people as well as 'traditional' volunteers) some form or organisation was needed. Prototypes existed in the shape of volunteer bureaux and volunteer co-ordinator posts in the NHS. Today there are currently approximately 324 volunteer centres (as volunteer bureaux became known after the advent of Volunteering England's volunteer centre 'branding) around England (see Volunteering England's web pages at http://www.volunteering.org.uk/WhatWeDo/Local+and+Regional/findoutaboutvolunteeringinyourarea.htmt).

The logic for maintaining and expanding volunteer centres follows from examining a simple question: how are more volunteers to be recruited? Surveys continue to show that word of mouth is the key recruitment method for volunteers (Davis Smith 1998a; Low et al 2007), and yet the same surveys identify a lack of information about volunteering as a key barrier. This implies at least two strategies to increase volunteering. One is to concentrate on making individual organisations better at promoting volunteering and recruiting volunteers. The second is to provide ways to promote volunteering generally and assist prospective volunteers to find suitable opportunities. Both are roles of volunteer centres, but it is the latter that centres are best known for.

Today most volunteer centres development is closely allied with the strategies put forward by Volunteering England in its role as the foremost national volunteer development agency. However as most volunteer centres are independent bodies (or part of Councils for Voluntary Service - see below), they are autonomous. Most are members of Volunteering England, but are not managed by, or in any way beholden to, Volunteering England (VE)[1].

Shortly after VE came into existence, *Building on Success* was published (Penberthy and Forster 2004). This framework, published by VE but is overseen by the England Volunteer Development Council (EVDC)[2]. The EVDC includes representative bodies from around the country and it is through this mechanism that strategies such as *Building on Success* gains legitimacy.VE also begun a new quality assurance programme. Volunteer Bureau were invited to submit themselves to be measured on a range of quality indicators, once passed the *bureau* became a *centre* and was entitled to use a new corporate image designed to make volunteer centres recognisable as the place to go to find out about volunteering. Part of the thinking was that previously fragmented images would be united – no matter which city or town you went to the volunteer centre would be recognisable. *Building on Success* represents an attempt to direct a network of independent centres strategically by outlining the six key functions volunteering infrastructure should deliver, it included working towards avoiding duplication and filling gaps in the network, thinking about quality standards and about sustainable funding. The strategy set targets over a ten year period to direct the growth of the network.

Further impetus to develop volunteer centres came in 2004 when the government introduced the ChangeUp programme. This programme came out of a review in 2002 by the Treasury into the voluntary and community sector's role in public service delivery. The review argued that a strategy was needed to ensure that there was a sustainable infrastructure at the local level, regionally and national levels that could support other third sector organisations. The programme recognised that if the voluntary sector was to be able to achieve policy goals – deliverying public services and becoming a thriving arena for problem solving and participation, it needed support.

The ChangeUp programme is directed at capacity building infrastructure organisations and sets out a vision for the voluntary and community sector. The vision is that by 2014 voluntary and community organisations will have support from infrastructure which can be shown to be effective, is easily accessible, reflects and promotes diversity and is funded in such a way that ensures its sustainability. The programme targets all infrastructure organisations with a role in supporting the voluntary and community sector. In this paper we are considering how it impacted upon volunteer centres.

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[1] Volunteer bureaux had an umbrella body in the National Association for Volunteer Bureaux, which changed its name to Volunteer Development England before merging with The National Centre for Volunteering and the Consortium for Opportunities for Volunteering in 2004 to become Volunteering England (VE).

[2] EVDC is a high level consultation body for which Volunteering England is the secretariat.

ChangeUp introduced the idea of national 'hubs' covering areas such as governance, information technology and funding. Each of these hubs was awarded to a bidding organisation which presented the business plan thought by the programme sponsor (ultimately government, but latterly managed through an organisation called Capacitybuilders) to offer the best outcomes. Volunteering England became the volunteering hub. Although each hub was required to sub-contract some work, the hub, by presenting the business plan was able to direct the work. Volunteering England was thus able to align some of the Change Up funding to achieve work already highlighted in *Building on Success* which although a key vision document for volunteer centres had, at that point, no resources attached to it. Volunteer centres thus had a programme framing development which had a goal of ensuring sustainability and of developing the local role of centres. What impact this has had will be returned to below.

It is important to acknowledge that *Building on Success* recognized that the brokerage role of volunteer centres is only one of a number of functions centres should provide if they are to help develop volunteering at the local level. The document outlines the six core functions of volunteer development agencies as being:

- Brokerage – matching volunteers to opportunities;
- Marketing – raising the profile of volunteering;
- Good practice development – working with volunteer involving organisations to ensure that practices are appropriate and of good quality;
- Developing opportunities – working with organisations to expand the range of opportunities available to volunteers;
- Policy responses and campaigning – involvement in campaigns to increase the awareness of volunteering and to create a volunteer-friendly environment;
- Strategic development – linking local networks to strategies at local level.

(Penberthy and Forster 2004)

The strategy promises to deliver a sustainable volunteer support network, in practice however there is still much work to be done. In truth the volunteer centre network is still a collection of autonomous organisations which rarely acts with a unified voice and direction. This does need some qualification. Volunteer centres are managed by Volunteering England; but neither are they always able to act wholly independently. Research shows that in 2004, of the 324 volunteer centres, 128 were independent (that is they had their own chief officer and board of trustees) and183 were integrated with Councils for Voluntary Service (CVS) (Coombes 2007)[3]. A CVS is also a local infrastructure body. The remit of a CVS is usually to deal more with organisational issues – funding, training of voluntary organisation staff and so on, rather than with promoting and placing volunteers. Centres integrated with a CVS will have less autonomy, they will be answerable to the board of trustees of the CVS. A further question of independence is the extent to which volunteer centres are directed by the funding opportunities they can tap into.

[3] 13 Centres were part of other types of organisations).

Despite centres having six core functions, in practice for many centres the key measure *is* getting people into volunteer roles. All centres will have a list of volunteer opportunities which they update through being in touch with local volunteer-involving organisations. Many will run specialist projects, for example supported volunteer programmes that place people with mental health problems into volunteer roles. Other programmes might be targeted at people from black and minority ethnic communities, or young people (many centres ran Millennium Volunteer projects for example).

Brokerage may seem to be the central task of a centre, but the other five functions are tied into how successful the brokerage function is. Can we say how much time a centre spends on brokerage? Or how effective helping one organisation to increase the number of volunteering opportunities it offers is (as opposed to spending more time looking to place individuals in existing opportunities)? The availability of data to analyse how much times spent on each of the core functions, or to estimate whether work is focussed on brokering individuals, working with organisations and so forth is scarce. The most comprehensive set of data looking across volunteer centres is the Annual Members Return collated by Volunteering England (for example see Malmersjo 2006). This annual report represents the most comprehensive data on centres. It lists organisational features (how many centres are charities, how many are companies limited by guarantee and so on), how many have branches, the number of staff, the average hours centres are open, income, number and breakdown of enquiries to volunteer. As such it provides useful data. But it has limitations. First, it does not collect data on the time spent on each function. Second, it is limited to volunteer centres that are members of Volunteering England, and while this may be most, it is not all. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the ways in which many of the categories for data are defined is opened to interpretation. So for example, when Volunteering England engaged with some work to look at developing a sustainable funding model for centres, the authors used the Annual Members Return, but noted that '..the reporting of this information by volunteer centres is not done on a consistent basis and that there is considerable variation in the reporting methodologies used by centres' (Gilbert et al 2006: 10).

The work into sustainable funding was commissioned by Volunteering England and undertaken as part of the ChangeUp programme. Its rationale is that the network as it stands is in a precarious funding position and a more robust and rational formula is needed to allow funder to see exactly what they can expect for their money. But what will a sustainable organisation, and network look like? The number of centres, some 324, must be a key strength; almost every major town has a volunteer centre. But this impressive number masks a reality in which a sizable number of centres are small and under-funded. At the heart of *Building on Success* and the work on a sustainable model is the assumption that some re-configuration of volunteer centres is necessary. It is likely this would bring the overall number of centres down. However, it would not be a cull of centres, ideas may include rationalisation by having one centre in an area as the recipient of funding with existing centres possibly acting as satellite branches to maintain a local presence.

In fact, this vision is one that under-pinned, much of the ChangeUp thinking. In practice however there has been little re-configuration. Instead more centres have begun to work in partnership, perhaps as a precursor to further collaboration and merger. This may be un-surprising, any idea that centres would voluntarily give up autonomy to merge with other centres may have been ambitious. In fact there has been extensive partnership work to extend the reach of centres into communities, but at the moment it is too early to say what impact this is having (Coombes 2007).

That something will need to change is evident from further work to progress the ideas behind *Building on Success*. A report of research with centres showed areas where the end of funding meant posts were being lost, and general agreement that many centres were not able to deliver the core functions, and in many services were limited to brokerage (Rochester et al 2007).

Although, as has been mentioned, there are not figures to disaggregate whether centres are spending a majority of their time on brokerage, some idea may be gleaned from the report into sustainable funding. The authors did not give a breakdown of time spent on each function – that was not in their remit. They did however look at the median costs of providing the services. This is not a good measure in itself for our purposes, many factors might influence the costs, for example paying for IT equipment for a database for volunteering opportunities is a very different measure to pricing staff time for attending meetings to discuss the strategic development of volunteering. Likewise brokerage is an on-going cost while the policy response function may be ad hoc. Nevertheless, if we make an assumption that the greatest cost is associated with the service that the centre prioritises then we can see that it is interesting to note that brokerage was the greatest cost, this was almost twice as much as the next highest costs which was developing opportunities and six times the lowest cost which was strategic development (Gilbert 2006:24).

To what extent does a centre need to pursue all six functions in order to promote volunteering effectively? There is little doubt that the 'bread and butter' work of a centre is seen as brokerage. But with the advent of national volunteer databases such as Do-It to what extent should this be the 'core' core function? The argument is that volunteering is local and a local presence is needed to be the 'face' of volunteering. All Do-It enquires are routed through local volunteer centres and indeed it is the centre that will upload opportunities on to the database in the first place. There therefore seems little argument that brokerage is, and remains, a key function. However, it is also clear that the six core functions knit together. To expand volunteering, more choice of opportunities will be needed, and yet we know that many volunteer-involving organisations offer opportunities in un-imaginative ways. There is a role for centres to help organisations develop new ways of presenting opportunities –out of office hours, short-term tasks, more flexible and rewarding tasks for example could help recruit more volunteers. And yet, volunteer centres are often unable to do this role, it takes staff time that many simply do not have. Furthermore volunteer centres are wary of pursuing some functions if the knock on effect will cause problems. A common example of this is that work to market volunteering will result in more volunteer enquires which is good, but then the centre will not have the staff

to deal with them, or indeed the opportunities may not be available if the centre has not been working with local organisations in developing more attractive and well supported volunteer roles (Howlett, unpublished).

We are working in the dark however because in fact there is little or no systematic research on the impact of functions. Centres have to provide evidence in order to achieve the Quality Standard, but this is largely process and not impact evidence. The Institute for Volunteering Research have produced a toolkit for centres to try and address this. Some centres have used the toolkit (Howlett and Semmence, forthcoming), but there has been no attempt to consolidate results to form any overall picture.

Hardly surprisingly funding is a critical issue for volunteer centres. Typically, most have too little to cover the six core functions. The majority funding for volunteer centres core functions (that is not for project funding) comes from government – with 59 per cent of funding from this source. Of this five per cent comes from central government, the rest is from local government. Almost a quarter (24 per cent) comes from other third sector organisations and five per cent comes from the National Health Service and the rest from other sources (Gilbert et al 2006:11).

We have already noted that centres are autonomous, but the extent to which voluntary and community organisations are constrained by funding is a topic that remains contentious. Blackmore (2004) argues that there is a temptation to view the past as some golden era when funding was easier to come by and imposed less conditions on voluntary organisations. It is still an area of debate, the Chair of the Charity Commission has raised questions of funding causing 'mission drift'(Leather 2007), others have been scathing in their arguments that reliance on statutory funding has distorted the mission and values of the sector (Seddon 2007). Other research (Knight and Robson 2007) has reported that there is little empirical evidence that voluntary organisations are having their independence compromised.

This is not to say that all partnerships will have negative effects on volunteer centres, but they do impact on how work is planned and implemented. An example is the targets set under Local Area Agreements. An LAA is a three year agreement structured around themes which highlight agreed priorities. The themes include healthier communities and safer stronger communities – areas in which volunteering can play a part. Through LAAs volunteer centres find that they can access money by agreeing to recruit volunteers to projects and organisations that can contribute to these policy goals (Young 2006). On the face of it, it is a win-win situation; centres get funding to provide services which are their core function and local authorities reach their own targets. In practice the targets can be very challenging and figure largely in the priorities of centres. This double-edged sword needs careful management; local authority money is important to volunteer centres, but local authorities themselves are increasingly target driven.

Lobbying for an effective infrastructure, arguing for sustainable funding and leading work to encourage volunteer centres to look at appropriate organisational configurations at a local and regional basis is a role that Volunteering England takes. Volunteering

England remains the most significant network facilitator for volunteer centres as a whole. However, on the ground volunteer centres remain a loose network and it appears that many of the issues outlined above are culminating in, if not a crisis, then certainly not a sure and prosperous future.

Three points should be highlighted before summing up this paper.

First the research into progress the ideas behind *Building on Success* shows that there has been little genuine buy in. It would appear that Volunteering England's aspirations for the network does not resonate at ground level. Volunteer Centres are trying to cope with tensions between seeing themselves as second-tier infrastructure, strategically guiding volunteering, and viewing themselves as service providers (Rochester et al 2007).

Second, volunteer centres are in danger of being marginalised because their main funder – local government, does not distinguish the role of the centre from other providers –why, for example pay for a local provider when do-it exists nationally to broker volunteering opportunities? There is anecdotal evidence that Volunteering England's idea of one accountable volunteering infrastructure body per local authority area has been taken up by local government, who have zeroed in on CVSs instead of volunteer centres.

Third, as this paper was being written the Commission for the Future of Volunteering – the body set up to provide a legacy after 2005 the Year of the Volunteer, published its report (The Commission for the Future of Volunteering 2008). The Commission produced a "manifesto" and not only does it fail to endorse the work of VCs its lame recommendation for funding was the only one not accepted by the government (see Office of the Third Sector 2008).

Conclusion

Volunteering has assumed a significant importance in policy terms over recent years in addition to the everyday role it plays in communities across the UK. Volunteers have, by and large, found opportunities through word of mouth. However there are compelling arguments that volunteering – although a feature of societies throughout the ages - cannot be left to chance. If we are to re-connect people with local communities, then volunteering – getting and keeping those people who 'lend a hand', itself needs some help.

To overcome information asymmetries prospective volunteers need a source of good quality information. But more than this, volunteer involving organisations need a place to post opportunities, a place to find good practice advice and training; funders and policy makers need a source of information and cajoling if they are to make the right decisions to increase volunteer numbers.

All this argues for a volunteering infrastructure. This existed in volunteer bureaux. But these have become swept up in the need to participate in funding programmes to help them become 'fit for purpose' in the new environment where their work is so valued. But

so often they are playing catch-up from years of under-investment, or a misunderstanding of what volunteering is and what they can achieve. Funding from foundations is very competitive, that from the local state often restrictive and target driven, while national programmes such as ChangeUp demand a level of strategic input that not all centres can participate in. Moreover, as these infrastructure programmes progress it appears that volunteer centres are still being marginalised. Strategic leadership of the type outlined in *Building on Success* seems to have founded and the dismissal of centre in the manifesto of the Commission for the Future of Volunteering is a cause for concern.

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