

Adjusting to change: Volunteering infrastructure in England

This article outlines volunteering infrastructure provision in England.¹ Infrastructure has gone through a great deal of change in recent years, predominantly as a result of the economic downturn and subsequent public spending cuts. This has resulted in some major changes to both local and national volunteering infrastructure organisations.

The article begins by looking at volunteering in England, including how people tend to become engaged in volunteering and the average rates of volunteering. It then outlines the current types of volunteering infrastructure. The history of volunteering infrastructure is briefly explored, because it has important implications for the current situation, which leads into a discussion of the relevant policies of the current Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government (elected in 2010). With 2015 being a general election year, the article ends with a consideration of the prospects of volunteering infrastructure going forward.

In terms of the area the article covers, it is worth briefly explaining why it focuses on England. The United Kingdom (UK) consists of four nations and is governed by the central government based in London. However, since devolution (the devolving of power to certain regions) in the late 1990s, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have gained various levels of autonomous legislative powers. It is beyond the scope of this article to examine the variations in all four nations because they all have different policy environments. Therefore a short article like this needs to focus on one nation, in this case England.

Routes into volunteering

For those people who want to formally volunteer² there are several routes to pursue. Searching opportunities online is often through national databases such as Do-it or a specific organisation's

¹ This article draws heavily on research conducted as part of the Volunteering for Stronger Communities project. One of the main focuses of the report was how volunteering infrastructure was faring in the current economic climate. For more details on the research see: <http://www.ivr.org.uk/ivr-projects/74-volunteering-for-stronger-communities>

² Formal volunteering is defined as: 'Giving unpaid help...through groups, clubs or organisations to benefit other people or the environment'. Cabinet Office. (2013) Giving of time and money: Findings from the 2012-13 Community Life Survey.

websites. Many potential volunteers also directly contact volunteer-involving organisations by phone, email or in person. In addition, there are Volunteer Centres (see full definition in the next section) who help people find volunteer opportunities, although national surveys have indicated that this accounts for a small percentage of volunteers recruited overall.³

There have been official government statistics recording the rates of volunteering since 2001. This gives some insight into fluctuating levels of formal volunteering in England. What is remarkable about the figures is how little they have changed in this period, with formal volunteering once a year ranging from 39% to 44% and volunteering once a month ranging from 25% to 29%.⁴

There is also more informal volunteering occurring, most recently manifested in interest around micro-volunteering.⁵ The role of social media appears to be increasingly important, especially for this less formal activity. For example, street clean-ups in the London Riots in 2011 were organised through Twitter; assistance in the 2013/14 floods in the south-west came via Facebook groups and Twitter.

Volunteering infrastructure organisations in England⁶

This section provides an overview of volunteering infrastructure organisations, both national and local.

National volunteering infrastructure bodies

There is a national volunteering infrastructure organisation in each of the four nations. In England, following its merger with Volunteering England in 2013, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) is now the national volunteering infrastructure organisation.⁷ These organisations seek to support and celebrate volunteering and work with Volunteer Centres as local delivery partners.⁸

Online at: <http://communitylife.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/assets/topic-reports/2012-2013-giving-time-and-money-report.pdf> [accessed 27 June 2014]. p. 1.

³ The National Survey of Volunteering (1997) and the Helping Out survey (2007) both put this at around 2%. See: Low, N., Butt, S., Ellis Paine, A. and Davis Smith, J. (2007). *Helping Out: A national survey of volunteering and charitable giving*. London: National Centre for Social Research and the Institute for Volunteering Research. p. 39.

⁴ See: <http://communitylife.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/index.html>.

⁵ For more about micro-volunteering see: Browne, J. Jochum, V., and Paylor, J. (2013). *The value of giving a little time: Understanding the potential of micro-volunteering*. London: Institute for Volunteering Research.

⁶ This section draws on and replicates material developed for: Institute for Volunteering Research with Greater London Volunteering. (2008). *London Volunteering Health Check: All fit for 2012? Report for the London Development Agency*. London: Institute for Volunteering Research.

⁷ In the other UK nations the national infrastructure organisations are: Scotland – Volunteer Scotland, <http://www.volunteerscotland.net/>; Wales – Volunteering Wales, <http://www.volunteering-wales.net/>; and Northern Ireland: Volunteer Now, <http://www.volunteernow.co.uk/>.

⁸ For more details about NCVO's volunteering infrastructure role see: <http://www.ncvo.org.uk/ncvo-volunteering> [accessed 12 January 2015].

Local infrastructure organisations

There are local infrastructure organisations across England. The following definitions are pertinent.

Local infrastructure organisations: there are voluntary organisations whose purpose or goals include the provision of infrastructure functions (support and development, coordination, representation and promotion) to front-line volunteer-involving organisations other than or in addition to themselves.⁹

Local infrastructure organisations include:¹⁰

- **Volunteer Centres:** these have five core functions, including: strategic development of volunteering, developing volunteering opportunities, good practice development, promoting the voice of volunteering and brokerage. They tend to have at least part of their services public facing so that members of the public can drop in and find out more about local volunteering opportunities (what is known as ‘brokerage’) In England these are accredited by NCVO through Volunteer Centre Quality Accreditation;
- **Councils for Voluntary Services:** these provide specialist expertise and support to local organisations and groups, spread good practice and encourage joint working. They also look to provide a forum for local voluntary organisations and community groups as well as making sure policy makers understand their needs.¹¹

Volunteering infrastructure tends to be provided by a Volunteer Centre. These vary greatly in size, income and services provided. Furthermore, two thirds of Volunteer Centres in England are ‘hosted’ in another local infrastructure organisation, usually a Council for Voluntary Services.¹² This means that they are part of a larger organisation and do not have autonomous governance arrangements.

Demand-led infrastructure

It is also worth noting that while infrastructure provision tends to emphasise the organisation providing this support (supply-led capacity building), such as those outlined above, there has also been some examples of attempting to shift the emphasis to the frontline organisations receiving support (demand-led capacity building):

‘During the past 10 to 15 years, policy and practice attention in the field of capacity building has tended to focus on the supply-side of voluntary sector infrastructure organisations.

⁹ Adapted from: Penberthy, C. and Forster, A. (2004) Building on Success: Strategy for volunteering infrastructure 2004-2014. Volunteering England: London.

¹⁰ These definitions are based on: Ramsey, N. (2012) Understanding How Volunteering Creates Stronger Communities: A literature review. London: Institute for Volunteering Research.

¹¹ This draws on: NAVCA. (2010). Strong Independent Roots: Supporting local voluntary action [Version 1]. Sheffield: NAVCA. p. 3.

¹² Lloyd, G. (2015) Annual Return for Volunteer Centres 2012/13. London: Institution for Volunteering Research.

“Demand-led” capacity building is a move away from this approach, where frontline organisations choose and purchase the support they require from a range of providers.’¹³

Whilst there are still relatively few demand-led programmes at the moment, they may increase in significance as funding for infrastructure organisations reduces.

Historical context of volunteering infrastructure

After the 1940s there was a period when organisations, both national and local, were formed and grew, peaking in the 2000s. More recently, since 2010, there has been a decline in the number, size and autonomy of these organisations.

There have never been systematic national funding arrangements for local infrastructure organisations and there are significant variations between areas in terms of local government funding levels for them. This disparity is partly due to their origins. Volunteer Bureaus, the forerunners of Volunteer Centres, emerged in the 1960s. Rochester (2013) highlights how two of the key reports in the last 50 years – The Aves Report (1969) and the Wolfenden Committee (1978) – emphasised the importance of local intermediary bodies and discussed how they could be funded by central government. However, the recommendations were not fully implemented and in practice the onus for funding has remained with local government and is one of the factors that has contributed to the unevenness of the local infrastructure organisations today.¹⁴

The relative economic stability from the late 1990s and increased government funding for the voluntary sector under the New Labour government (1997 to 2010) meant that the sector had something of a boom in the 2000s. The funding came from a number of sources – monies distributed to local government and various national programmes, such as New Deal for Communities and Area-based funding – which funded voluntary sector groups, including local infrastructure organisations, for a diverse range of activities. It saw significant funding for volunteering infrastructure. With Capacity Builders providing over £230 million and the state owned Big Lottery Fund’s¹⁵ programme Building and Sustaining Infrastructure Support (Basis) providing over £150 million.

Volunteering infrastructure under the Coalition government (2010 -)

Voluntary sector funding cuts

¹³ Walton, C. and Macmillan, R. (2014) A brave new world for voluntary sector infrastructure? Vouchers, markets and demand led capacity building. Working Paper 118. Birmingham; Third Sector Research Centre. p. 3.

¹⁴ Rochester, C. (2013). Rediscovering Voluntary Action: The beat of a different drum. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan. pp. 63-4

¹⁵ The Big Lottery Fund is a state owned lottery, with a proportion of its proceeds going to charitable causes. It is an increasing important funder in the charity sector as other funding pots are reduced.

Due to the recession and budget deficit significant public spending cuts were instigated by the Coalition government elected in 2010. It is estimated by NCVO¹⁶ that £20 billion will be cut from public spending during the spending review period (2011/12 to 2015/16). Moreover, funding to local government, a key funder of multiple components of the voluntary sector, is falling, with local government spending estimated to fall by 11.4% between 2010/11 and 2015/16. In the most recent figures NCVO estimated that in the financial year 2011/12, the first year since the cuts took effect, voluntary sector funding from the government fell by £1.3 billion from the year before, a real terms decrease of 8.8%.¹⁷ However, it is interesting to note that the government funding of the sector is still higher than 2005/06 levels.

Funding for volunteering infrastructure is also more limited. The government funded Strategic Partners programme, which helped fund national infrastructure bodies such as Volunteering England, NCVO and the National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA),¹⁸ was gradually phased out after 2010, and ceased totally in 2013/14.

There is no longer any core funding for national infrastructure bodies. In terms of programmes aimed at volunteering infrastructure, the Office for Civil Society's Transforming Local Infrastructure Fund (£30m) and additional Big Lottery Fund funding (around £20m) are not comparable to previous initiatives in terms of scale. This change in approach is outlined by the Big Lottery Fund:

‘...we need to be realistic about where we spend our limited resources to achieve the best effect. It is not sustainable in the present situation to use limited Lottery investment specifically to maintain the current structure of voluntary sector infrastructure bodies at national, regional or local level.’¹⁹

Rather than funding existing structures the emphasis is on transformation and change, for example the Big Lottery Fund funded programme BIG Assist stipulates it prioritises ‘those that are ready and needing to implement change’ which includes ‘developing new services, new ideas and products or new innovative ways of working, developing new more sustainable income, new partnerships, consortia or mergers’.²⁰

The number of Volunteer Centres has seemingly declined. It is hard to obtain accurate figures on this because not all Volunteer Centres seek official Volunteer Centre Quality Accreditation. However, it is worth noting that between 2010-2013 248 volunteer centres were accredited, compared to 288 in the wave before.

The decline in funding has led local infrastructure organisations to look for more diverse funding streams. Some suggest a more radical change. Rochester (2012) believes that it is an opportunity for

¹⁶ See the NCVO Almanac 2013 online: <http://www.ncvo.org.uk/policy-and-research/funding> [accessed 4 March 2014].

¹⁷ See: <http://data.ncvo.org.uk/a/almanac14/how-have-government-spending-cuts-affected-voluntary-sector-income/> [accessed 17 July 2014].

¹⁸ This is the national infrastructure body representing Councils for Voluntary Services.

¹⁹ Big Lottery Fund. (2012). Building Capabilities for Impact and Legacy – Executive summary. London: Big Lottery Fund. p. 8.

²⁰ For more details see: <http://www.bigassist.org.uk/about-us/>.

local infrastructure organisations to return their roots in voluntary action, with less paid staff.²¹ It is interesting to note in this context that whilst staff levels have remained relatively static in recent years, the numbers of volunteers engaged by Volunteer Centres has doubled.²²

Conclusion: The way ahead for English volunteering infrastructure

There has been a great deal of change but also some continuity for volunteering infrastructure. Core funding for national infrastructure organisations has reduced. After the merger of Volunteering England and NCVO, national volunteering infrastructure remains, but is delivered using more diverse funding streams. Funding from local government remains the single largest source of income for local infrastructure organisations.²³ However, there have been winners and losers amongst local infrastructure organisations, with some maintaining funding levels and others folding and/or merging with other organisations.

There seems to be a consensus that volunteering infrastructure is at a crossroads. The multiple issues facing infrastructure, especially local infrastructure organisations, from funding difficulties to more fundamental challenges to their mission and existence, require considerable thought and action. The recognition of these challenges led to the establishment in early 2014 of *The Independent Commission on the future of local infrastructure*. The cross-sector commission was launched by NAVCA and reported early in 2015. Its terms of reference include:

‘The Commission will use evidence-based, creative and radical inquiry into the current and future support needs of local voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations and the implications for infrastructure provision. The Commission’s task will be to propose practical actions by a range of actors to secure high quality support for local voluntary and community action throughout England.’²⁴

With the various and continuing challenges and opportunities facing infrastructure at this time, such a commission can make a useful contribution to finding a way ahead for volunteering infrastructure.

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²¹ Rochester, C. (2012) ‘Councils for Voluntary Service: the end of a long road?’, *Voluntary Sector Review* 3 (1), pp103–110. p. 109.

²² Lloyd, Annual Return for Volunteer Centres 2012/13.

²³ Lloyd, Annual Return for Volunteer Centres 2012/13.

²⁴ See Terms of Reference: <http://www.navca.org.uk/commission>

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