Government and Volunteering: Towards a history of policy and practice

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Introduction

It is a happy thought that ‘volunteering has never had it so good’ in terms of government’s interest and support (Commission on the Future of Volunteering, 2008: p. 3), but this hopeful message skates over a more complex historical reality. Since the 1960s, government has promoted volunteering to a greater or lesser extent through a wide variety of different policies and programmes. Sometimes these were based on party-political agendas, sometimes on expediency and sometimes on serendipity. Sometimes these were generated within government and sometimes in response to external pressures. Sometimes these were effective and sometimes not. This means that the history of government’s approaches to volunteering since the 1960s is not a narrative of linear progress – from obscurity to apotheosis, from periphery to core, from zero to sixty. Rather it is a narrative of changes of emphasis and scale, twists and turns, fits and starts, ups and downs, two steps forward and one step back.

Before 1997, government’s interest in volunteering was intermittent and its approach, in Kendall’s useful typology (Kendall, 2005), was mainly vertical, as individual central government departments took steps from time to time to secure through volunteering assistance in the delivery of public services in the policy areas for which they were responsible (Sheard, 1992). It was only with the Make a Difference Campaign of John Major’s Conservative Government in 1994–1997, shortly before the arrival of New Labour, that government experimented with a more holistic and broadly based approach. Since 1997, under New Labour,
government’s interest has been more sustained, and its approach has been more horizontal, shaped not by departments’ individual needs but by policies determined at the political centre (by No.10, H.M. Treasury and the Home Office/Cabinet Office) and rolled out across (and in some cases over) departments and other government bodies. Moreover, since 1997, government has been, in Kendall’s words, ‘hyper-active’ and has created a vast array of events, initiatives and programmes; reviews, consultations and commissions; pilots and demonstration projects; machinery of government changes and new organisational vehicles; and exemplars and champions.

Making sense of the multifarious activities of the central government departments tasked with ‘leading’ on volunteering; the devolved administrations that put their own stamp on policies on volunteering conceived in London and implemented them in their own way (since funding for most programmes was England-only); other central government departments that incorporated volunteering in the delivery of their own programmes; and other parts of government (local authorities, the National Health Service, fire authorities and police authorities) that incorporated volunteering in the delivery of their services is not an easy task.

In this chapter, we do not – and cannot – aim at comprehensiveness. We focus on developments in England and note developments in the devolved administrations; at regional level; and at local authority level, where appropriate. We focus on the main characteristics of government’s approach to volunteering and some of its most important or iconic activities, and we indicate where changes have occurred over time. In particular, we explore changes along the following four axes:

1. **The reasons that government gave for supporting volunteering:** Reasons range from its being a ‘good thing’ in and of itself to its contributing to some other policy end (*inherent value vs instrumental value*)

2. **The parts of volunteering that government supported:** Choices range from all volunteering – all sorts of activities by all sorts of people in all sorts of fields of endeavour – to some volunteering – some activities, such as mentoring, by some people, such as young people or people from BME groups, in some fields of endeavour, such as health or sports (*holistic vs targeted support*)

3. **The way that government operationalised its interest in volunteering:** Methods range from helping the institutions of volunteering, infrastructure bodies and volunteer-involving organisations, to carry out their work to the best advantage to running specific initiatives in key