

Volunteering in the 21st Century

Interim Report on the
Parliamentary Hearings
for the
International Year of Volunteers

First tranche Jan-March 2001

chaired by

Rt Hon Alun Michael MP
for the
All-Party Group on Charities and the Voluntary Sector

in partnership with the
United Kingdom Volunteering Forum

Preface

by Phil Hope MP

Chair of the All-Party Group on Charities and the Voluntary Sector

I am pleased to set the scene for this interim report and to explain why the group has sponsored this important piece of parliamentary activity.

The year 2001 is the International Year of Volunteers. The United Kingdom Volunteering Forum (UKVF) – comprising the national volunteering development agencies of the four countries in the UK – urged this should be recognised by Parliament. So the All-Party Group agreed to host a series of hearings, with a cross-party group of MPs and peers as a ‘reference group’. The hearings would be organised in conjunction with the UKVF but be ‘owned’ by the parliamentarians. Clearly, the scope for parliamentary activity is even greater than we originally envisaged. This interim report sets the stage for further work later in the year and in future years.

Phil Hope

Introduction

by Rt Hon Alun Michael MP

Chair of the parliamentary hearings

It has been an immense privilege to chair this first tranche of parliamentary hearings. Future hearings will explore further the themes and issues highlighted in this initial report.

The aims of the hearings were threefold:

- to provide parliamentary support to volunteering in the UK during the International Year
- to identify the positive roles that can be played by Parliament and by government, (including public bodies and local government)
- to make 2001 the ‘springboard year’ for parliamentary support of volunteering
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We wanted to listen to and learn from people in the world of volunteering, to explore our role as parliamentarians, and then come to discussion with ministers at a later stage. So, on six mornings in the first part of 2001, parliamentarians gathered to listen to invited experts, from all parts of the UK, giving evidence on selected topics, and to discuss their views with them and with UKVF representatives. That is what made the sessions so free-flowing and stimulating. We are grateful to all who gave generously of their time. We are now discovering and defining a role for parliamentarians – perhaps as a bridge between government and the sector, certainly as partners in promoting a fuller understanding of volunteering and voluntary action – which can be developed fully during the course of the International Year.

This interim report starts to define a wider role for Parliament in promoting volunteering and community involvement. We hope it will stimulate a vibrant debate!

Note: Inevitably this is a condensed form of the report. An extended text, with fuller details and appendices on topics like ‘value’ and ‘barriers to volunteering’, is to be found on the website for the hearings at www.ukvf.org/parliamentaryhearings.

Alun Michael

Challenges of terminology

Our use of language can sometimes be confusing. Volunteering is not 'work', but is often measured as if it were work. The very term 'volunteer' can be an obstacle to some people. The language of community service is traditional, especially in respect of young people, but research shows that young people are turned off by words such as 'welfare', 'charity', 'volunteering', etc, but they quite like terms like 'activity' and 'change'. The Youth Committee of the International Year in England has asked to make a presentation to the Group after the summer, and this will be built into our programme.

After terminology had come up on a number of occasions, one participant said...

'Look, we're never going to find another word, are we?'

We need to use different words for 'selling' volunteering to different audiences, but *we cannot shy away from an obligation to improve the image of volunteering itself as an activity*. This should be a theme running through our later hearings.

Why does volunteering matter in the 21st century?

The evidence confirmed the experience of many of us:

- that voluntary activity plays a major role in empowering individuals
- that on a group level it is even more powerful, as a key trigger mechanism for empowering communities and enabling people to grasp opportunities
- that voluntary engagement is a key element in community regeneration because it builds **social capital** (the relationships, trust and 'connectedness' in a community).

Another recurring theme was that **reciprocity** is fundamental to volunteering – it is about **mutuality**, not just about helping others. The benefits that accrue to the volunteer form a legitimate part of volunteering and community involvement. There is evidence to suggest that the level of participation is greater within higher socio-economic groups. This makes the promotion of volunteering a key issue for democracy itself, as well as for social inclusion and community self-help.

So, if we have a vision of

- an inclusive society based on equality of opportunity, and
- a participatory democracy based on active citizenship,

then volunteering is *crucial*, because it underpins that vision – without volunteers, there is no community activity.

Can volunteers change the world in the 21st century?

The answer was a resounding 'yes' – volunteers will bring about change through focused action but volunteering is also a significant social and economic force. Nevertheless, its impact is highly personal.

Volunteering is a key issue for democracy as it enables people to have a share in their community, encouraging political engagement at all levels. Volunteering has been called 'the essential act of citizenship' as individuals choose to exercise their right to participate and to express a sense of shared responsibility. This expression of citizenship often leads volunteers to campaign on issues they feel strongly about; this is an essential freedom, and one that parliamentarians have a duty to uphold.

The 'essential act of citizenship' needs to be learned as young people grow up. The **citizenship curriculum** offers a real opportunity to focus attention on volunteering. It provides a chance to demonstrate the different kinds of volunteering, the fact that many people don't realise they *are* volunteers, and the difference that volunteering can make.

It was suggested that some **educational material** – perhaps a video for schools showing the range of volunteering that young people can do – would be a useful outcome of our hearings. We would certainly support and encourage the UKVF in a project of this kind.

What is volunteering worth? How does it contribute to the 21st-century economy?

This discussion highlighted a fundamental dilemma. Some say we must set **targets and measurements**, because what doesn't get measured may not be valued or appreciated. But in setting targets, it is essential to be clear who owns the targets - government, the sector, or the community -- or whether they should be for all partners to agree?

Other contributors warned against relying on statistics. 'Market economics values what is scarce, not the real work of society, which is caring, being a citizen, a neighbour and a human being,' said one witness.

The value of volunteering is difficult to measure, because:

- what is important in life is often hard to measure quantitatively (and vice-versa)
- it is impossible to put a cash value on the 'output' of volunteering
- volunteering is about relationships, not transactions
- targets bias performance to what 'scores points', rather than underlying objectives or 'real' outcomes.

Yet volunteering does contribute to **social and human capital**, and this has implications for economic policy as well as social policy.

We agreed that, as a starting-point, 'value' means and needs to be understood as both:

- **social value**, in terms of practical benefits to society, to volunteers themselves and to those helped, and
- **economic value**, usually translated into monetary value of equivalent paid work but perhaps measured in a more meaningful way.

The issue of barriers to volunteering appears more serious and complex than we had anticipated. Many barriers are the responsibility of government, so these will form part of the dialogue with ministers later in the year. Engaging people who have in the past been seen as 'recipients' of help is also a challenge for both the voluntary sector and the public sector.

Is there still a place for volunteering in 21st-century public welfare services?

It is clear that volunteers make a substantive contribution to the delivery of health and social services. For example, in England it has been estimated that their equivalent in paid time would amount to a £7 billion contribution – but that is not really the point. Volunteer involvement is also central to issues of governance and accountability (school governors), watchdog and representative roles (members of Community Health Councils) and issues of justice (magistrates, juries, appeal panels etc)

Job substitution is much less of an issue than in the past, but it still needs to be treated sensitively by the public sector. Volunteers do not merely assist paid staff but bring 'added value' and are appreciated for doing so.

If volunteers are to give of their best, moreover, they must receive good **support, training and management**. There is a need to increase and improve the levels of good practice across the public sector, and there was universal agreement that much greater investment in these areas is needed.

In particular, there should be more investment in generic personal training, developing the social and human capital of volunteers, rather than taking a narrow, task-based approach.

Greater stress on voluntary experience would help open up participation in quangos, partnership boards and other forms of voluntary governance to a greater diversity of people. Volunteer projects often deal with aspects of social welfare that fall through the statutory net, such as self-help projects for particularly excluded or damaged people, and such projects have a high risk of failure, because they tackle difficult problems in experimental ways. So we need funding systems that do not penalise failure.

Employee volunteering

Some businesses encourage employees to volunteer, but a lot more could be done. Modern-day pressures appear to prevent many young and middle-aged professional people from undertaking the sort of voluntary work that was once expected. More could be done to give people in the workplace the opportunity to volunteer. It was emphasised that companies will want to add value, not substitute for the public purse. We

suggest that the All-Party Group hold a separate set of hearings on corporate social responsibility and the **interface between companies and the voluntary sector** in conjunction with the Industry and Parliament Trust, the Co-operative Movement and the proposed All-Party Group on Corporate Social Responsibility.

Volunteering in voluntary and community organisations

The voluntary sector itself often fails to recognise the roles played by volunteers, and does not always deal with volunteers appropriately. A critical issue is the **funding of training and development**. Unless an organisation has adequate core funding, or an adequate contribution towards training from project grants, the training and support of volunteers can be pushed to the bottom of the list – as happens also in health and local government. We consider that this issue, and how it is dealt with in the Compact between government and the voluntary and community sector, needs careful examination. The All-Party Group will also examine the outcomes of some recent **major government initiatives** aimed at increasing the number of volunteers. There is a lot of money going into ‘innovation’ while ‘volunteering infrastructure’ organisations find it difficult to cope, yet are essential to match would-be volunteers with volunteering opportunities. We will suggest to ministers that government and the sector should seek to achieve a sustainable balance between innovation and ‘maintenance’.

How do we create a vibrant image for volunteering in the 21st century?

We agree that volunteering needs a **new, vibrant, modern image** – not a change of name. Ideas for encouraging media coverage by creating ownership and ‘easy ways in’ for the media included:

- a database of vibrant and varied case studies
- encourage more journalists to volunteer, with an employee volunteering drive and an award scheme for imaginative involvement
- an annual award scheme for positive media portrayal of volunteering
- seminars bringing media professionals together with grassroots volunteers
- challenging advertising agencies to produce short films that challenge stereotypes of volunteering
- ‘mainstreaming’ volunteering by making it acceptable as an inclusive term rather than as an activity solely for a certain type of person.

We suggest that the media often *portray* volunteering in mainstream news and comment (like political activity) as old-fashioned compared to ‘activism’, though they are generally sympathetic to the *idea* of volunteering. Should journalism change, or can volunteering become ‘a good story’? When it was suggested that more ‘ordinary’ volunteers should be invited to No 10, it was pointed out that they *are* – on an almost daily basis – but that media coverage follows the celebrities. There were opposing views about the merits of promoting celebrity involvement, but it was noted that where celebrities have remained close to their communities – as with many ethnic minority figures – celebrity involvement was seen as genuine, powerful and meaningful.

Reality is just as important as image, and we discussed the need to change attitudes as well as how to influence the media. And in the same session we discussed **diversity and inclusion** – key themes to return to in later sessions.

Paying the piper in the 21st century – the role and responsibility of government

Government’s increasing support for volunteering is welcome, but it raises urgent questions about the role of government and its relationship with volunteering. If government promotes and supports volunteering, it must also preserve the independence and freedom of volunteers and voluntary organisations. In being accountable for how it spends public money, government must be proportionate to ensure that funding goes straight into front-line activity.

The challenge for government is to differentiate between:

- support given to volunteering because it is an expression of active citizenship (which must include advocacy and campaigning), and
- support given to volunteering to achieve government policy objectives.

There is also a tension between the random, spontaneous nature of volunteering and the need for a strategic approach. A strategic approach allows those organisations that are well-organised and prepared to win the available resources, while those which are instinctive and responsive may miss the boat. Fear of criticism – particularly from the Public Accounts Committee – results in safeguards which stifle enterprise in voluntary and community groups. This cannot be the intention, so it would be good to hear more about the work of the PAC and consider how government can promote ‘risk in the public interest’ and create an **enabling environment**.

Given the importance of getting this right through the **Compact process**, progress on the Compacts should be the first topic in the next tranche of hearings.

We need the following from government and the sector – and perhaps Parliament can also make a contribution:

- a strategic policy framework or UK-wide protocol linking the national Compacts
- ‘proofing’ all policy and legislation for their impact on volunteering
- tax and other financial incentives applied to the giving of time (such as citizenship credits)
- a clear Active Community Strategy in England, as proposed by the Warner report – with regional developments drawing on experience in the devolved administrations.

The structure of organisations which support volunteering and their relationship with umbrella bodies for the voluntary sector can be puzzling, particularly in England. This should be looked at in the next tranche when we will also be able to learn from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and add a UK perspective.

One of the biggest gaps in this set of hearings was the absence of local government. The second session in the next tranche should examine the **role of local government in respect of volunteering**, as well as the progress of the *local* Compact process.

Conclusions and next steps

We have opened up a form of dialogue on the subject of volunteering that has enormous potential. The field for discussion is so enormous and wide-ranging that we have not even started to scratch the surface. There was unanimity amongst us *all* that the importance of volunteering is not just in the work undertaken, nor just for the benefit to those who are helped, nor just for the benefit to the community as a whole. If volunteering is ‘the essential act of citizenship’, then how we promote volunteering and how we treat volunteers must be a central theme for government.

We suggest that the House should also have a greater role in scrutinising or endorsing the Compact process than is provided by an annual Commons debate on the sector.

The energy put into these hearings will have been wasted unless the work is carried forward in a sustainable way. *Voluntary* support by UKVF and the *voluntary* commitment of MPs and peers cannot sustain this activity for long at its present level.

- **We recommend that Parliament establish a formal mechanism for continued engagement with volunteering issues.**

Parliament is unlikely to establish a formal group to deal with volunteering alone – but, in truth, volunteering cannot be separated from the other constructive aspects of citizenship and social inclusion. Volunteering takes place in the public sector as well as the voluntary sector, while the private sector plays a significant role through corporate support and through employee volunteering. The voluntary sector and its relationship with government is also a growing area of interest for both government and Parliament. The same parliamentary body might look at *all* these areas of significant activity and development under the overall heading of ‘**Voluntary Action and Citizenship**’.

A good solution might be a **Joint Committee of Both Houses**, which would have a resonance with the Committee established to deal with Human Rights: a committee about rights balanced by a one about responsibilities; a committee about the formality and legalities of citizenship balanced by one which looks at social inclusion, mutual support and engagement.

Our future discussion should include hearing the views of ministers as well as those of the sector and parliamentarians. For Westminster, this is clearly a topic that lends itself to cross-party debate, which is good for Parliament.

- **We propose that these ideas be explored during the remaining hearings in order to make firm recommendations before the end of the year.**
- **We also recommend that a short tranche of four sessions on specific topics be planned for late June and early July so that UKVF can invite contributors and plan the sessions irrespective of any election.**

We propose that in September and October some members of the Reference Group visit Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and two regions of England. Each session/visit would include hearing from the national or regional volunteering organisations and meeting members of the relevant Parliament, Assembly or Chamber and Government Office in the case of the English Regions. The visits would be facilitated by the relevant UKVF member organisation.

- **It is recommended that members of the Reference Group be asked for a commitment to such a process and that all members of the All-Party group be notified of the programme once decided and invited to join in any of the sessions. An approach will now be made to the relevant bodies to seek their agreement and co-operation.**

We confirm that there should be a further full session of hearings later in the year, some six or eight sessions running from late October onwards, with a view to making some firm recommendations for the future. Topics will be selected in the light of the suggestions made throughout this report.

Details of all submitted evidence and summary of the discussions are posted on the UKVF website at www.ukvf.org/parliamentaryhearings.

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The UK Volunteering Forum (UKVF) brings together the national volunteering development agencies of the four countries in the UK:

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