

## Thinking out loud - The Job of Voluntary Services

### What voluntary services should do, not do and might do

Voluntary action occupies a space within civil society that is distinct from both the state and the market - a space in which citizens come together freely to exercise self-determining collective action. Such formal and informal associations are an expression of citizen action, usually driven by compassion, conviviality and fun, mutual interests and generally, a determination to make the world a better place. Voluntary groups do not have to exist. Their activities are not required by law, nor is there a statutory duty to keep them going if they fail. This is the core of voluntary action: to exist and act by choice. Voluntary groups that provide services to individuals and communities are part of this wider world of voluntary action.

Over the last 10 years, NCIA has cast a critical eye over the changing nature of the relationships between voluntary services and public services, and between voluntary action and the state. These relationships are complicated and contested because they raise issues that go beyond particular services or activities and into political and ideological debates and dilemmas about the role of different institutions in civil society. These dilemmas are especially prominent in an era of massive cuts to public services and wholesale outsourcing and privatisation of what is left.

We have frequently been asked “so what should voluntary services do” and “surely voluntary services are better than no service at all” or told that “voluntary services do a better job than statutory or private services, so let them get on with it”. This paper is an attempt to respond to these questions.

### Voluntary services past and present

For generations voluntary organisations have provided services for individuals, families and communities. Before the establishment of the welfare state, these may have been the only social and welfare services available. The post war settlement saw the creation of a wide variety of rights and entitlements alongside the extended provision of free health, education, legal aid, income support and social welfare protections. The bulk of welfare services were provided directly by state agencies, decreasing the importance of provision by voluntary services. Many voluntary agencies re-positioned themselves as places from which to stretch the frontiers of state provision through innovation, and to provide informed policy and political critique of the shortcomings of that provision.

Though the role of voluntary agencies as alternatives to state-run public services took some shape in the '80s, it was not until the New Labour years that the idea of voluntary services

as an arms-length delivery vehicle for state policy and services took hold. As a result of successive New Labour, Coalition and Conservative governments - and with cuts to and privatisation of public services - voluntary services have become one of the instruments for government policy; policies that aim to divest or dilute state responsibilities for welfare provision. The result of these successive government policies has been to create a new dual narrative: that provision of directly managed public services is inefficient, ineffective and old-fashioned; and improvements in public services can be driven by privatisation and outsourcing to the private and voluntary sectors. State-led commissioning and procurement, along with the withdrawal of grants to support community-led action, became the mechanism to enact this narrative.

The dilemma for voluntary services - to participate or not in the privatisation of public services - is compounded by the fact that there is broad cross-party support for the outsourcing of public services to private or voluntary contractors. According to Government, the voluntary sector trade press and the so-called representative sector bodies there is only one show in town (certainly in England). This is, of course, not true – voluntary groups can make choices about what they are or are not prepared to do within their own independent organisations.

## Voluntary services: principles before pragmatism

Whilst it is possible to adopt a simplistic position that voluntary services should not conspire with current neo-liberal policies and take on the responsibilities of the state in running public services, the real dilemmas are more complex. Clearly there has been and remains an important role for voluntary groups in providing services and, historically, these groups have also played an important part in helping to shape and influence the direct provision of public services by the state.

The dilemmas facing voluntary services are not simply operational but predominantly ideological and democratic. A partnership of equal status, between governments and voluntary services, might be possible if we had a benign state and where power relationships sit in healthy balance in order to reach an accord between partners. My view is that it is not possible to assume the goodwill or competence of the state and that it is a fundamental job of civil society to be ever vigilant towards its state, whilst holding to its own self-determined and plural principles.

So when is it acceptable or unacceptable to reach for voluntary services when considering how best to deliver specific public services? What services should be retained in direct state management and why? What values, principles and political positions can voluntary services reach for to guide their decisions on these matters? Behind these specific questions and dilemmas lies the real contested ground – what do we want the role of voluntary services to be in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?

This is my attempt to answer the questions of principle – what are voluntary services uniquely and structurally placed to do, as part of a wider pattern of provision and as part of civil society. Such principles can be, and have been, lost in the rush for expediency and survival. To have integrity and purpose we need principles to underpin, guide and test the pragmatic, and often contingent, decisions taken to plan and provide services of benefit to us all, and to those with less. Without such a route map it's unlikely we will reach the

destination we wish for to be a good society – even if there are many deviations and different ways to reach our destinations.

My focus is on the particular job for voluntary services as part of civil society. I touch on the role of public services and of the market, as a lens through which to consider the role of voluntary services, but do not consider in depth the role of the state and the market. This has been dealt with in other reports from the [NCIA Inquiry into the future of voluntary services](#).

## The starting point: voluntary action & democracy

I start with four fundamental principles:

- a belief in public services run by publicly accountable institutions;
- that public services be run for people and collective benefit and not for individual profit or according to market ideologies;
- that our democratic health depends on safeguarding and nourishing a space for citizens to act separately from the state and the market, in particular in the interests of care, justice and equality amongst people and for the planet;
- that within this space, voluntary services are to add to, complement, challenge and test out new ways to meet need: not to take the place of public services.

Voluntary services are part of a wider realm of voluntary association and citizen action. Such action does a critical job as part of our democracy:

**The First Democratic Job:** to provide an ungoverned, or own-governed, space where citizens and residents can come together and exercise freedom – outside of state control and the pressure of markets – to enjoy other company and join activities, whether for simple conviviality, leisure, solidarity and assistance, personal or social change.

**The Second Democratic Job:** to act as a check and balance to the state and other powerful interests, such as the market.

**The Third Democratic Job:** to spot gaps in community needs, test out new ways to meet these and ensure these are made available more widely and that there is state responsibility for its citizens.

It is these democratic functions which should be guarded jealously and against which decisions for or against involvement in service delivery can be tested by voluntary groups. As part of a civil society made up of free(ish) citizens, voluntary services are duty bound to safeguard their autonomy, without which their particular democratic role is compromised.

## The job of voluntary services – a suggested typology

In order to safeguard over-arching democratic roles, I propose the following typology within which to consider the place for voluntary services:

1. *No voluntary services here* - there are some services which only the state can provide effectively; voluntary services are not equipped, structurally or operationally, to provide such services;

2. *Only voluntary services here* - there are some activities which only voluntary endeavour should provide; there is no place for the state here;
3. *Shifting boundaries* - there are some services which either the state or voluntary agencies (or both) might provide, depending on, and under, particular circumstances.

The rest of the paper explores this typology.

## The market

For the avoidance of doubt, I set out my stall on the role of the market. I believe that public money raised to meet basic needs should not be used to create private gain. I am opposed to the transfer of public services, facilities and activities into the control of private firms and corporations. There is no place for profit making from community needs and human struggles to make a good society: whether as a contractor for public services, or by charging those seeking support from services. We can argue about the meaning and extent of profit (e.g. legal aid lawyers, GPs and dentists, charitable trading activities), but the basic principle here is “for people, against profit”.

My opposition to profit in either public or voluntary services rests not only on principle. The operation of markets for profit simply doesn't work as an efficient or improved way to meet needs. In the first place, to take account of profit the cost of provision is higher and/or the ability of service users too limited to enable businesses to make a profit. These markets are not sustainable in their own right. Secondly, the market is distorted by an asymmetry of information: consumers lack the information and understanding needed to make an informed judgment about what they need and to choose the best 'product', such as pensions, health care insurance or social care provision. Finally, there is no evidence to show that privately run public services are better. Indeed the opposite appears to be true.

## No voluntary services here – the job of the state

It is the job of the state to be responsible for the needs and rights of its citizens, individually and collectively; to safeguard and sustain the environment; to create and maintain national and international relationships and infrastructures; and mediate between conflicting interests and decide on competing needs. To carry out its job, some responsibilities must rest with the state:

- democratic governance and public accountability, law and order, safeguarding the capacity of civil society and protecting the public domain;
- human needs and development such as education and learning, the arts, culture and heritage, health and social care, shelter and housing, income support, poverty reduction and a distribution of wealth that is just and promotes equality;
- economic and fiscal management and the regulation of markets;
- national and international responsibilities, including infrastructure and transport planning, international aid and development, foreign relations, defence and security, environmental safeguards.

These responsibilities require services and activities that are: universal, comprehensive, consistent, equitable, sustainable, reliable, financially efficient and democratically

accountable. The ability to fulfil these functions requires legislative powers, political and moral authority, governance and adequate resources.

Voluntary services are in no position to take on these responsibilities or offer such service characteristics and safeguards. Like private businesses, they are neither universal nor democratically accountable or equipped for the job. Only the state has a chance to be equitable and sustainable in tackling the essential needs of people and planet when imperatives such as universality, scale, competing priorities, pluralism and ideology are in play.

Voluntary services cannot be relied on, structurally or operationally, to meet these responsibilities. The point of voluntary action is that it is *voluntary* (discretionary) and not statutory (a duty by law). The requirement by law for activities places a much higher bar than for those which can come and go, depending on funding or inclination. When it comes to my rights, health and wellbeing I don't want to be reliant on the market or on the ebb and flow of voluntary services. There are no protections when they fail (which they increasingly do); and who will then blow the whistle on poor voluntary services? Conversely, I don't want voluntary services to be prescribed and determined by statutory requirements, as this compromises the "ungoverned space" of civil society.

Depriving the state of its necessary responsibilities undermines its own capacity and competence to look after its citizens; as well as jeopardising the function of voluntary services within civil society – a double whammy. Voluntary services exist to do the things that governments cannot, will not, or should not, do to meet social needs. Their proper role is to augment and complement state services, and to ensure that the state takes responsibility for its citizens. A voluntary agency providing essential public services as a sub-contractor to either the state or a private firm is fettered in its freedom to challenge excesses of power and poor policy; or to offer services of no interest to either the state or market; or to offer a place of organising, debate and action outside the watchful eye of powerful interests. Such organisations compromise their unique structural and democratic jobs and can become instruments for other agendas.

At this point I need to make the distinction between taking over responsibility for state functions as sub-contractor; and offering services or activities under the Third Democratic Job (unmet need and innovation), for which the state might provide financial or other support. The former leads to an abrogation of state responsibility and undermines the democratic role of voluntary agencies. The latter supports civil society in its self-determination. The nature of the interplay between state and civil society is complex and dynamic, but they are separate players with different functions.

This is not to say that the State does a good job in carrying out its responsibilities. It is the job of civil society and voluntary services – to shame and expose poor practice, abuse and wrong-doing; and to suggest and model how to do things better.

## No Government here – voluntary action only

There are services and activities which, in principle, should only be provided by those outside the control of the state and the market. This applies to what I have called the Second Democratic Job. Rights work, advice and advocacy, extending and ensuring the rights of people, scrutiny, whistle blowing and campaigning activities need to be

independent of the state simply because much of this activity relates to the poor policies and practices of statutory bodies and the private sector (and increasingly of voluntary services under contract to provide state services!).

I would also argue that the First Democratic Job - initiatives designed to bring citizens together to create their own agendas and activities, their own-governed space - should also not involve the state.

## Shifting boundaries

It may be tricky to reach a point where we might agree the activities which should, on principle, sit with the state and those which, on principle, should be that of voluntary action. However, it becomes a mind numbing exercise to consider activities which, appropriately, might be undertaken either by the state or by voluntary services, or by both according to circumstances. It is here – the Third Democratic Job to meet unmet need - where we find contested areas and where so much confusion lies, in the field and at policy level.

Below I consider some of the circumstances where it might be appropriate for either or both the state and/or voluntary services to have a role.

1. Urgent humanitarian aid – there are numerous instances where neither the state nor the market are able, or willing, to respond to an urgent and immediate need. Here, voluntary services or mutual aid fill a void, either as a result of an emergency (e.g. floods, major incidents or war) or because the state has abrogated from its own job (e.g. homeless people). Such necessitous action can further develop in two ways: be taken over by the state and provided by public services and enshrined in rights (especially as a result of action under the Second Democratic Job of advocacy); or might remain with voluntary services, in a more or less easy (e.g. foster care) or uneasy (e.g. foodbanks) relationship with the state or market.
2. Power and control – there may be unmet need, or poorly met need, that requires action to be shaped and controlled by the particular communities or individuals directly affected. For example, self-directed care and mutual aid of the disability movements or where culturally sensitive services are required, or where trusting relationships and protection are critical and would otherwise be absent, such as in domestic violence. Depending on the particular situation, these requirements may be satisfied through either voluntary or statutory actions or both together.
3. Additionality and community identity – many community-based services have come about, and will continue to, because of the human need to connect and express common interests. Neighbours doing things for each other, learning new things, sharing experiences. These activities are not required by law, but expressed by the commons. Such services are not based on duties, but on powers to act outside of requirement. In this respect, the State is the People and the People are the State. Where the responsibility for such activities lie will depend on the particular relationships between the local State and the People in a given area. The Shetland Isles is very different from a London Borough.
4. Organisational nature – the characteristics of a particular organisational form may offer additional benefits or capacity to meet particular needs. It has been argued

that the ambiguity and flexibility of voluntary association might be better at tackling disadvantaged or stigmatised communities, and better at finding and testing innovative approaches. Conversely, the state bureaucratic and hierarchical role-based form might be best at dealing with financial and personal disadvantage. A case of horses for courses. But does form follow task or does task follow form? Perhaps we are simply seeing competence at work – whether it is found in voluntary or statutory services.

5. Terms and conditions – much of the blurring of democratic boundaries, and shifting of responsibilities, between the state and voluntary services has been influenced by the terms and conditions of funding arrangements and power relations between the two parties. Not only what services to provide, but how these services should be run. A fruitful relationship for communities, individuals and democracy might be achieved if terms and conditions allow for the self-determination of community-led services or equally the taking of proper responsibility of the state for its citizens.

I sense danger in shifting boundaries and contingency. It is easy to drift with the tides of fashion and ideology and be tempted by expediency. So I return to the anchors of the democratic roles: to what extent will a contingent decision undermine the fundamental structural role of the state and that of voluntary action. Welfare pluralism, in which state, voluntary services, and increasingly the market, are all seen to have a place (aka “whatever works best”) has led to unclear boundaries between distinct sectors with different functions, with resulting murky political compacts and an underlying assumption that “anything goes”. Beware shifting boundaries.

## A formula for practical and principled decisions

But what does all this mean for frontline services and those scratching their heads trying to work out how to take principled decisions in practice?

I am left thinking that it might be useful to construct a matrix of factors against which we can judge - in any particular instance – whether committing ourselves to a service or activity compromises the higher principles that we hold dear. In a way, this is similar to the approach taken by HMRC, the tax people, to work out whether or not I am indeed self-employed. Not one factor, but several, which taken together will indicate a probable answer. To answer our question, “what services should voluntary organisations run”, we might consider whether the decision:

- provides for “own governed” space and activities;
- allows the freedom to speak out, defend and extend citizen rights, and tackle state and market malpractices;
- ensures that the state carries out its responsibilities towards its citizens;
- provides additionality to, but does not replace state responsibilities;
- responds to community needs which the state does not;
- where required, ensures self-directed activities and mutual aid;
- allows for the safety and protection of specific individuals and communities;
- provides for ways of working and community benefits not otherwise available;
- ensures that the terms and conditions for service provision will safeguard the respective responsibilities of the state and of voluntary action;
- and does not create private profit.

These are some of my principles. The point is to *have* principles against which to judge decision making, and for principles to be visible in this process.

## A final thought

There is no doubt that there are individual voluntary groups that can make a fist of offering good quality services to the people who need them. But in the current context of privatisation, outsourcing and reduction of public services and rights, it is no longer the case that voluntary services are “good” by definition. People involved in voluntary services worry about service quality. They also need to worry about the less visible, arguable more important, quality of their democratic job. Are they being led by the State, the market or by their beneficiaries and communities? Who are they accountable to in practice? Who scrutinises and can blow the whistle on them? Do they blow any whistles themselves when they see wrong-doing or poor practice? Are they organisationally democratic?

Do they take ‘voluntarism’ at its word: to “freely choose” what, how and when they do what they do?

### Acknowledgements

Teasing out the “proper” job for voluntary services is a daunting task. I can’t pretend that I’ve cracked it, by any stretch. I hope that these thoughts at least contribute to other discussions and to the fraught decisions facing people working in voluntary services. My wonderings have been helped along by my colleagues and friends at NCIA. I particularly want to thank Colin Rochester and Dexter Whitfield who from time to time gave me constructs that helped me make sense of the cut and thrust of grassroots activism. I also want to acknowledge Andy Benson, for our mutual sounding board. Thanks Colin, Dexter and Andy. My confusions remain mine alone.

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