



Volunteering Development in Birmingham

“What’s it Worth?”

How valuable is volunteering?

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Foreword

Throughout the course of this project we have sought to gain a more informed view about voluntary activity in Birmingham and how best interventions might be designed that can support and promote volunteering. Our earlier desk research and public attitudes survey compared the state of volunteering in Birmingham with that nationally.¹ This indicated that:

- The level of volunteering in Birmingham – whether considered as “formal” volunteering or “informal” voluntary activity – may be as low as only one-half to one-quarter of that nationally. This may indicate that Birmingham is a volunteering “cold spot”, but there is also some evidence to suggest that by failing to distinguish adequately between respondents’ past and present volunteering, national surveying methods may historically have tended to overstate volunteering levels.
- When the numbers of people indicating that they had volunteered in the past were compared with those who said they were still engaged in voluntary activity, there was a consistent falling off across all activities – in some cases by up to two-thirds.
- While greater numbers of people were engaged in informal volunteering and for increasing periods of time, the evidence suggested that formal volunteering – i.e. that conducted under the auspices of an established voluntary or community organisation – was more sustainable, with volunteers maintaining their involvement consistently in the longer-term.
- Birmingham has an ageing volunteer force, with voluntary activity highest in the 45–60/64 age group. In the 16–29 and 30–44 age groups there was the biggest falling away in numbers between those volunteering in the past and those volunteering currently.

While important for the detailed picture of voluntary activity in Birmingham that this provides and for its implications for the volunteering support infrastructure, it also serves to illustrate some of the fundamental difficulties – and contradictions – in how volunteering is identified and subsequently valued.

Although models of assessing and valuing voluntary activity have over the past few years become more sophisticated, they remain essentially statistical, seeking to measure either the numbers volunteering, the duration of this activity, or its notional economic value. There is no doubt that the mass of statistical data generated by periodic surveys of volunteering – such as those conducted every six or seven years by the Institute for Volunteering Researching (IVR) – has been instrumental in convincing Government of the importance of volunteering, it is also the case that the public policy agenda regarding volunteering has shifted. Government now places much less emphasis on calculating the financial ‘worth’ of volunteering and instead locates volunteering in the very broadest sense as one of a range of community-based actions that can contribute to stronger communities and a more active and engaged citizenship. This is perhaps nowhere more clearly stated than in the Home Secretary’s two recent pamphlets explaining and promoting the ‘civil renewal’ agenda.²

¹ See *Because We Want To...: Volunteering Development in Birmingham*, ISBN 1 898902 27 5, BVSC [2003].

² See *Civil Renewal: A New Agenda, The CSV Edith Kahn Memorial Lecture, 11 June 2003* and *Active Citizens, Strong Communities: Progressing Civil Renewal*, Rt. Hon. David Blunkett MP, Home Office Communication Directorate [2003]. Both at: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/comrace/active/civil/index.html>.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to look more critically at the whole issue of ascribing value to volunteering. What do we mean by ‘value’? Value to whom and according to whose value-system? And why, exactly, do we need to ascribe value to volunteering in the first place – what does this help us to decide or do? It is also a timely point at which to revisit some first principles – this may aid us in considering the often complex array of interlocking issues that are involved in volunteering. Why do we think volunteering is worthwhile? Why does it have such a central, defining role in this thing called the “voluntary sector”?

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

What has become increasingly evident during the course of this research project is that assessing the value of volunteering is the tip of the iceberg. What at first appears a reasonably straightforward aspiration in fact rests on top of a complex mass of questions – of the value, worth and contribution of volunteering, the wider social benefits it creates, its relationship to the state, and the role played by the personal attitudes and value-systems of those who volunteer or, indeed, choose not to volunteer. In setting the broader context of this paper it is necessary to at least touch on these briefly.

Let us pose the question again in the same way that the title of this paper does: “What is volunteering *worth*?” Perhaps more accurately, where does its worth derive from? Why do we consider volunteering to be *good*?

We would argue that there are at least four quite distinct areas for examination in volunteering:

- First, there is our essentially “political” commitment to the concept of voluntary action. A core value of the voluntary and community sector, it can be stated and adhered to as a guiding principle, but is not very amenable to measurement.
- Second, there is the impact achieved by and the effectiveness of the volunteering infrastructure – the support and promotion mechanisms, interventions, campaigns and activities to foster the growth and good health of volunteering.
- Third, there is the wider social or community benefit attributable to voluntary activity. (Indeed, we might also add to this the personal gains attributable to volunteering – for both the donor and the beneficiary – but we will consider this briefly in the section on the “Volunteering Contract”.)
- Fourth, there is the as yet largely unexplored, we believe, dimension of a cost-benefit comparison of voluntary and statutory provision.

While the latter three are more amenable to measurement this, as we argue later in the paper, would be at significant cost, inevitably raising the issue of resource allocation and priorities. In passing, however, this serves to illustrate the complexity of the issues involved in ascribing value to volunteering.

Volunteering – a core value

Let us look a little more closely at the central role that volunteering plays in our conception of what the voluntary sector is about. **As an expression of neighbourliness and mutual aid**, volunteering *is* central to the values of the voluntary sector. Freely given and elective, volunteering is a personal choice that comes down on the side of **social solidarity**. It emphasises collective aid and reciprocity and because volunteering, by definition, is non-commercial, it favours mutuality over individual consumerism. It is inconceivable, then, that volunteering would not be central to the ethos of the voluntary and community sector.

Volunteering's elective nature must also be emphasised: organisations may be *committed* to volunteering, but it is individual volunteers who choose to involve themselves in the personal transaction of volunteering, freely donating their time, energy and effort. In this sense, the freely chosen *voluntary* nature of volunteering is a crucial value underpinning the act and strongly informs our views about how closely or otherwise volunteering can or should be tied to the aims of the state. We would argue that while it is legitimate to utilise the benefits of volunteering to help achieve some greater, overarching good – more cohesive communities, for example, or more widespread active citizenship – anything that detracts from or compromises the *voluntary* nature of the act will tend to be viewed unsympathetically by those most likely to engage in volunteering.

What this suggests to us is that while the voluntary sector and Government do indeed share some common interests in extending and maximising the benefits of volunteering, these interests are not strictly co-terminous. The voluntary sector also has a duty to safeguard the *voluntary* nature of volunteering and ensure that in any closer harnessing to the state's social policy objectives it does not become expected or *required*. We must also be vigilant in avoiding any blurring which might occur between voluntary services *freely given for community good* and the potentially punitive notion of *community service*. These concerns are brought into sharper relief by the Chancellor's recent call for the establishment of Commission to report on the way forward for a National Youth Volunteering Strategy. This he clearly sees as a key instrument for building notions of civic responsibility in the longer-term.³

Writing in its *Manifesto for Change 2003*, BVSC highlighted the dangers that exist for the voluntary sector in its ever closer relationship with the state: "The more the sector wins the arguments, the more it finds itself incorporated into the fabric of social provision it evolved to challenge." This is as true of volunteering per se as it is of the wider sector, but with an added danger. Many voluntary organisations are equipped to handle any such debate robustly; they have many years experience of 'fighting their corner' and will never simply walk away from the complex relationships modern society demands of them. But this is not true of volunteers, of the millions of individuals who, propelled by a complex set of motivations and attitudes, volunteer every day of the year. For them it would at least seem plausible that there is a tipping point, a step too far in state intervention which could simply switch off the volunteering impulse.

It is against these wide voluntary sector responsibilities that we consider the role and worth of volunteering in the rest of this paper.

³ See Gordon Brown's speech to the NCVO national conference 2004 at: <http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/asp/search/ncvo/main.aspx?siteID=1&subSID=206&sID=18&documentID=1942> and the response by the Fabian Society at: http://www.fabian-society.org.uk/press_office/news_latest_all.asp?pressid=296

2.0 WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ‘VALUE’?

Over the past few years, efforts to assess the value or impact of volunteering have tended to focus on those things that can be counted: the numbers of people volunteering, the duration of their volunteering and the notional financial worth of this voluntary activity. Few would doubt that this effort has been instrumental in raising the profile of volunteering and in establishing the central role that volunteering can play in adding value to statutory and voluntary services and more widely to communities themselves.

As a consequence of the periodic national surveys carried out by the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) and more recently by the Home Office,⁴ we now have a better picture of national trends in volunteering than ever before. But such surveys are extraordinarily costly. IVR, for example, is usually only able to conduct a national volunteering survey every six or seven years – the last was 1997 – and is currently trying to raise the funding necessary to conduct the first twenty-first century survey.

Similarly, more sophisticated economic models for assessing the contribution of volunteering within individual organisations – such as IVR’s ‘VIVA’: the Volunteer Investment and Value Audit – while clearly useful to larger volunteer-using organisations that want to know the economic contribution that volunteering makes to their own operation, are unlikely to be within the budget or capacity of those at the smaller and poorer end of the voluntary sector spectrum.

And yet, it is not surprising that quantitative surveying and audit methods such as these have predominated. Measuring anything beyond numbers, duration and economic value – the *social* contribution of volunteering, for instance, or the personal gains experienced by volunteers and beneficiaries, or the community-building contribution of voluntary work – is methodologically complex and may in addition be open to wide interpretation. Underlying social and community benefits are resistant to measurement. They do not lend themselves to standardisation or repetition and may depend to a large degree on personal testimony.

Perhaps for these reasons, social indicators which would enable a more thoroughgoing evaluation not just of volunteering but also of a wide array of social policy objectives have become a kind of holy grail. While at a national level they may be of crucial importance, at a local level amongst cash-strapped voluntary organisations whose primary aim is direct service delivery, they will rarely be perceived as the most pressing priority for investment.

Value or *values* – a personal matter?

It must also be emphasised that *value* means different things to different people: personal motivation cannot be dismissed from the equation because to a great extent it determines how people view their voluntary effort.

Our findings from amongst focus groups carried out with Birmingham volunteers, for example, show that few if any think of the *monetary value* their volunteering might represent, but they do consider the *values* on which their volunteering is based. And while some volunteers may talk about “giving something back to the community”, or of “wanting to make a difference” it is perhaps not surprising that

⁴ See *Active Communities: Initial Findings from the 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey*, Prime, Zimmeck & Zurawan. Home Office [2002]. At: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/voluntary1.html>.

few if any speak of their volunteering in terms that have now become familiar in public policy – community empowerment, for example, active citizenship, or civil renewal.

This is not to say that these concepts have no broader validity, of course, merely to acknowledge that they are not generally speaking for popular consumption. But there are important implications in this for how volunteering is promoted – for how we ensure that the right messages reach the right people. At ‘street level’ it is vital that the volunteering message reflects and speaks to the values of volunteers and potential volunteers themselves.

As the Birmingham survey illustrated, most volunteers do so out of personal or family experience. They respond to an often fairly simple desire to put something back into the community. Some volunteer in support of a specific service, illness, condition or disability that they have some personal or family experience of. Others volunteer because of experience gained in a period in their own past – raising children as a lone parent, for instance, or homelessness, or sight or hearing impairment. Personal experience is a powerful motivator and most volunteers we spoke with seemed to consider volunteering an essentially personal choice, even when conducted under the auspices of an organisation or volunteer agency of some description.

Volunteers, then, respond most positively to the one-to-one relationship of voluntary help – the real, tangible freely given service. And they respond most powerfully to its *voluntary* nature: proscription is inimical to volunteering’s good health.

Segmentation

It is possible that a quite different picture might be gained if one were to examine a specific *sector* of volunteering, such as that attached to regeneration programmes such as New Deal for Communities. Here, it might be argued that a much clearer relationship exists between *personal volunteering* and *community benefit* and it may be the case that volunteers in these kinds of situations do in fact make a stronger connection between their voluntary effort and the wider community good.

Indeed, as we discuss later in this paper, in operational terms there may be a case for drawing a much clearer distinction between volunteering that is primarily personally motivated – such as one-to-one care, support or befriending, for example – and that which arises primarily as a response to *conditions in a particular community*. It may be that the latter does have a clearer “community empowerment” dimension to it, but again this is to argue for a greater precision, a greater segmentation, in thinking about voluntary effort. While very different kinds of volunteering have shared characteristics, not all voluntary effort arises from the same motivation and the respective values and perceived consequences of different kinds of volunteering will appeal to very different types of people. WE explore the implications of the further segmentation of volunteering in sections 3.0 and 4.0.

What do we want to measure and why?

Although we can observe that communities which have a well developed voluntary and community sector, where volunteering and community activity are frequent and levels of good neighbourliness high, are somehow more robustly cohesive than neighbourhoods where these things are under-developed or in decline, the precise contribution that volunteering makes to the overall health of communities remains an extraordinarily complex question. More sophisticated counting or measuring of voluntary activity obviously gives us a clearer picture of what and how much is going, whether this helps us better understand the contribution that volunteering is making to the overall social or community mix, especially at a local level, is another matter. More importantly, perhaps, quantitative surveys of

volunteering rarely help us to understand how best voluntary activity can be encouraged, or supported when the need arises, or most effectively be helped to flourish in those communities where it is absent. These are pressing issues, especially for agencies involved in the voluntary sector infrastructure.

But the messages we wish to project about volunteering may also determine what we seek to measure or assess. At a local level, for example, organisations may wish to assess the value, effectiveness and impact of particular volunteering projects or interventions, perhaps within a specific community or neighbourhood in mind. There may also be an argument for as yet untried cost-benefit analyses of volunteering that seek to assess the respective voluntary and statutory costs and benefits of service provision. This would be demanding and methodologically challenging research; it would also be costly. But it would also bring to the volunteering debate a dimension that at present is missing.

Alongside this, however, it must also be emphasised that volunteering is not just about money. There are personal gains for the donor, quality of life gains for the beneficiary, community and neighbourhood gains and – as Government now increasingly emphasises – broader social gains in the form of social cohesion and active citizenship.

The ‘volunteering contract’

‘Value’ is spread across what we have called the “volunteering contract”. Not only will all parties to this contract be unlikely to share the same notion of *value*, it is also quite possible that they will have different *value-systems*.

There are three main parties to the volunteering contract: the *donor*, the *beneficiary* and the *commissioner* of the volunteering (at least in cases where the activity is formally organised by an agency). We have already seen that for the donor, there is a strong likelihood that the motivation will be primarily personal – as much to do with what they get out of and put into volunteering and how this makes them feel as it is any broader notion of community benefit.

For the beneficiary, value will be much more likely to revolve around what the help or assistance they get means to them – how it affects them, how it improves their quality of life, the degree to which they can depend on its availability, and what would happen if this voluntary service ceased. The value – or values – of the transaction are strongly informed, therefore, by personal circumstances.

Organisations that commission volunteering will again take a different perspective on value and it is here that the social significance of volunteering in its wider context might be considered and longer-term strategic objectives come into play. Again, a very different interpretation of value.

There are other partners to the volunteering contract, however, and these have been of increasing importance over the past few years. A fourth category might be funders of volunteering initiatives, where again different expectations will prevail. In some cases, funders may be synonymous with a fifth category – the local or national state. It is here that voluntary activity will most clearly be harnessed to broader social policy aims – as can be clearly seen in the Home Secretary’s writings on civil renewal.

The notion, then, that the value of volunteering changes according to one’s place in the volunteering contract is an important one, with implications that go far beyond how we value volunteering and touch on all aspects of the volunteering debate – the language we use to describe volunteering, how (and where) volunteering is promoted, what people think their voluntary action is for and is meant to achieve, and the role they feel the state can legitimately claim to play in the volunteering arena.

In this context it is important that we again remind ourselves of a few key facts:

- The last IVR national survey of volunteering (1997) showed a decline in the numbers volunteering of around a million – despite the proliferation of new routes into volunteering and nationally backed volunteering campaigns.
- The single most effective means of promoting volunteering is word-of-mouth: people respond most readily to direct appeals to volunteer and this is especially the case when the appeal is made by someone they know or someone already involved in voluntary activity.
- And research has shown that public awareness of volunteering agencies of all kinds is abysmally low.

We still need to find effective ways of reconciling broad social policy aims with popular messages about volunteering; we still need ‘street level’ messages that ‘sell’ the volunteering experience, reflecting and speaking to the values that volunteers and potential volunteers consider most important. These are vital considerations for an organisation such as Birmingham Volunteer Action and for the wider network of volunteer placement, referral and brokerage agencies.

3.0 THE SOCIAL POLICY ENVIRONMENT

Although since 1999/2000 there have been a plethora of Government initiatives to support or encourage volunteering, particularly amongst specific age groups, such as young people (Millennium Volunteers) and the over-50s (Experience Corps), it is evident that Government thinking on volunteering, certainly as regards programmes directly engaging with or supporting individual volunteers, has changed markedly. Some 90 volunteering schemes supported by the Home Office are currently under review and at time of writing a number of these look set to lose all or some of their funding, including Experience Corps, which the Government will cease funding in March 2004, and Time Bank, the skills/service exchange scheme targetting the most disadvantaged communities.⁵

This does not indicate that volunteering per se has fallen from popularity, however. Rather, it is the emphasis that is changing – and nowhere is this more evident than in the Home Secretary’s two recent pamphlets to promote his vision for ‘civil renewal’.⁶ Voluntary community action lies at the heart of this vision.

But it is an extraordinarily broad and sweeping vision. Its central thesis is that renewal of civil society and the public realm demands a new contract of active citizenship – a contract between a “progressive, activist state” and empowered communities that are “increasingly capable” of “defining the problems they face and then tackling them together”.

While individual volunteering is certainly not absent from these policy statements, a clear shift in emphasis is nonetheless apparent – away from programmes to support and encourage *individual*

⁵ See *Regeneration & Renewal* [8 August 2003].

⁶ *Civil Renewal: A New Agenda, The CSV Edith Kahn Memorial Lecture, 11 June 2003* and *Active Citizens, Strong Communities: Progressing Civil Renewal*, Rt. Hon. David Blunkett MP, Home Office Communication Directorate [2003]. <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/comrace/active/civil/index.html>.

volunteers and much more towards **communities of volunteers**, “active citizens” engaged in a mutual effort to build community solidarity and work for the common good.

This is perhaps most clearly expressed in the later of the Home Secretary’s pamphlets, *Active Citizens, Strong Communities: Progressing Civil Renewal*. Where there is specific mention of voluntary activity – as opposed to civil renewal’s key notion of the engaged citizen acting for the common good – it is noticeable that rather than generic volunteering this tends to be voluntary activity in quite specific *civic* contexts: within the youth justice system, schools, hospitals, fire stations and prisons, for example.⁷

Alongside this emerging civil renewal agenda, the Government is still pledged to increase voluntary and community sector activity amongst socially excluded groups by 5 per cent by 2006. But more recently the Chancellor has added his voice to the volunteering debate with a controversial and much longer-term aim of establishing a youth community service scheme, the assumption being that voluntary activity in youth will grow into active citizenship in later life – a continuum of engagement measured in decades rather than simply the here and now.

There is little doubt, then, that a new perspective on volunteering is emerging within Government. The scattergun approach to funding numerous volunteer support programmes – which broadly coincided with the UN International Year of Volunteering in 2001 – would seem to be over. **In its place is an emphasis on active citizenship and the role of engaged communities, what we might call a kind of “civic volunteering”, in which there is a much clearer relationship between voluntary effort and the building of civil renewal and community solidarity.**

Overarching values?

One of the most interesting things about the Home Secretary’s civil renewal agenda is that it is recasting a set of social ideas – solidarity, mutuality and co-operation, for example – in what has become New Labour’s characteristic language of civic rights and responsibilities. The agenda, then, is not significant necessarily for its *newness*; **what is significant is the determined detachment of these particular social values from the old municipal socialism which would previously have been their most likely political underpinning.**

There is also a further significant dimension to this attempt to formulate a new and more widely understood language of social solidarity, however. One of the problems that has bedevilled such attempts previously has been the tendency to fall back on ‘imported’ and often highly contested concepts such as ‘social capital’. Although *Active Citizens, Strong Communities* does use this term, it is used on only three occasions and then somewhat in passing. Blunkett says that new forms of social capital should be recognised and supported by Government, that Government has a role to play in assisting communities to “build social capital” and, in the longest reference, that the social capital lost during the forced march of industrial restructuring under Thatcherism in the 1980s must be restored and reinvigorated. There is no attempt to locate social capital in a more theoretical or academic context, as some other commentators have done⁸ and it is used almost as a synonym for ‘community spirit’ or simply ‘sense of community’. What emerges with a much higher profile – a central notion in civil renewal – is community cohesion.

⁷ *Active Citizens, Strong Communities: Progressing Civil Renewal*, p.12.

⁸ Most notably the American academic Robert D Putnam. See *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Touchstone Books/Simon & Schuster, NY. ISBN 0-7432-0304-6 [2001].

Community cohesion has risen up the political agenda in the wake of Ted Cante's report on the race riots that took place in some northern former textile towns during the summer of 2001⁹ and is seen as central in Blunkett's vision for civil renewal. The pursuit of civil renewal, he says, must "be backed by a resolute commitment to break down barriers to the realisation of our shared citizenship": communities that are cohesive, that are not divided by "mutual suspicion or misunderstanding of diverse cultures", are seen as a prerequisite platform for progressing civil renewal.

And community cohesion is being resourced. The Home Office has committed £6m to funding Community Cohesion Pathfinders in 37 local authorities, aimed at driving community cohesion measures into the mainstream of service delivery; the Department for Education & Skills is making funding available to support community cohesion in schools, enabling them to take action which will build bridges, especially in areas where there are "clear fractures within the community"; and the Connecting Communities grants programme – which includes proposals for race equality support programmes – is supporting 75 projects from 2003 to 2006.¹⁰ It is only, says Blunkett, "by setting a clear legal framework for citizenship, and developing practical initiatives to promote its realisation that we will strengthen communities through strengthening their cross-cultural relationships."

Does this begin to suggest a different approach towards thinking about volunteering and community activity and how their value should be judged? We think it does and discuss this more fully in the next section.

4.0 VALUING VOLUNTEERING – THE CHARACTERISTICS OF COHESION

This shift in emphasis now taking place in Government policy suggests that gauging the duration, frequency and notional financial value of volunteering may no longer be the most important objective. Rather than quantitative measurement, we now need something that can assist us in understanding the broad contributions that volunteering can make in pursuit of civil renewal's core objectives of:

- Community cohesion
- Active citizenship
- Cross-cultural working

And yet this also highlights the difficulties. While efforts to develop community cohesion indicators, for example, are ongoing – the Home Office, the Community Cohesion Unit and the Local Government Association¹¹ have all published guidance of various kinds – large-scale community cohesion surveys are beyond our capacity and resources to implement in Birmingham, specifically for the volunteering sector. (This is to set aside for a moment the widely acknowledged difficulties that exist in designing successful methodologies for measuring community cohesion.)

⁹ *Community Cohesion: Report of the Independent Review Team*, Chaired by Ted Cante [Home Office 2001]. See <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/comrace/cohesion/>. Also see Guardian for key findings of Cante and links at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/racism/Story/0,2763,617138,00.html>.

¹⁰ *Connecting Communities: Proposals for Race Equality Support Programmes*, Home Office Communications Directorate [March 2003]. See Community & Race link at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/>

¹¹ The LGA's *Guidance on Community Cohesion* states, for example: "Working with the Audit Commission, the CCU has captured the essential qualitative element of community cohesion in a survey question that has been included in the Quality of Life indicators. The headline indicator of community cohesion is number 25 and the indicator is 'percentage of people surveyed who feel that their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds and communities can live together harmoniously'." LGA [2002]. ISBN 1-8409-313-5.

In any case, we would question whether attempting to replicate such surveys on a smaller scale in Birmingham is necessarily a useful investment of resources. If policy-driven indicators do have a role to play in helping to assess the contribution of volunteering at a local level, then it may be more useful to use them as the basis for developing a *volunteering framework* that can be used to guide **the kind of interventions that are made to support, promote and encourage volunteering.**

What this would suggest, rather than a set of measurable indicators to enable the *counting* of units of volunteer activity, is a *framework* linked back to key policy objectives (and these could be national or local objectives – the approach is inherently flexible), which will help in identifying voluntary activity which *has particular characteristics*. By looking for volunteering that has particular characteristics we can begin to manipulate the interventions made in support of key policy objectives. For example, it would be possible to design a volunteering framework linked specifically to civil renewal, as in the table below:

| A Volunteering Framework to Contribute to Civil Renewal | |
|--|--|
| Headline policy objectives | Identify activities with the following characteristics |
| Cross-cultural working: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Activity that encourages people from different backgrounds and/or different communities to meet and help each other¹² ❑ Activity that encourages cross-cultural volunteering – i.e. groups assisting people from a different community to themselves |
| Community cohesion: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Activity that helps people to identify more strongly with their local area ❑ Activity that helps people from different backgrounds and communities to live together more harmoniously ❑ Activity that draws in and/or involves excluded groups |
| Active citizenship: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Activity that adds to the overall sum of community engagement ❑ Activity that promotes more effective or more direct engagement with broader community issues |

¹² The LGA Guidance recommends “Using the networks of statutory and voluntary agencies to develop cross-cultural contacts at all levels and reviewing the funding of VCOs in order to provide incentives to promoting community cohesion and cross-cultural contact and understanding.”

While far removed from a quantitative or measuring approach to valuing volunteering, this is a means of ensuring that local interventions in volunteering support and development are informed and guided by key policy objectives (wherever they might derive from). This is very much in keeping with the kind of ‘segmentation’ approach we advocated in earlier papers, but takes the process a stage further. This is a logical point at which to consider in more detail the implications of such an approach for BVA.

5.0 ROLE OF BVA

We have long argued that BVA should take a more segmented view of volunteering and that this, when linked back to key policy objectives, will assist significantly in modelling interventions that make a more critical contribution to supporting and developing voluntary activity in Birmingham. Nothing that we have so far advanced in this paper contradicts that view; however, there are one or two areas in which further thought is required in order to fine-tune BVA’s operational priorities.

Developing a strategic framework for volunteering interventions

We have seen the shift that has taken place in public policy regarding volunteering away from individual volunteering programmes in favour of *communities of volunteers* – the emergence of the active citizenship and civil renewal agendas. We have also highlighted the Home Secretary’s emphasis in *Active Citizens, Strong Communities* on what we have called *civic volunteering*. This clearly has implications for how BVA operates.

One possible operational change that BVA could consider is whether its volunteering priorities should be themed. (Let us emphasise again that this is for BVA’s internal operational guidance and is not necessarily amongst the messages it would project to the outside world and especially to prospective volunteers.) We have so far in this paper drawn a distinction between *personal volunteering*, *community volunteering* and Blunkett’s vision of *civic volunteering* (police, health, fire, schools, youth justice system and so forth). It might assist BVA to focus on specific strategic objectives if its own priorities were similarly ‘themed’, so that effectively it had three ‘departments’:

- Personal volunteering – for all activities that involve personal service delivery to a beneficiary or group of beneficiaries (most care, befriending, visiting, elderly support and the like would come under this heading).
- Community volunteering – activities with a direct relationship to the wider community good, such as tenant/resident groups, regeneration, community groups, local campaigns, development trust-style activities, environmental activities and so forth.
- Civic volunteering – specifically aimed at voluntary activity in statutory or civic services (health, education, police, justice system, fire services etc).

While there would probably be some overlap and also some grey areas – is volunteering to read to children in a local school in one’s own community “community volunteering” or “civic volunteering”, for example – these would be no worse and certainly no more of an obstacle than the overlaps and grey areas that have persisted over the years with just about any definitions or categorisations of volunteering one might choose to examine.

The advantage of such an approach however is that it could be very neatly linked with the “Framework” approach outlined above, thus enabling strategic or policy-related objectives to be set within each volunteering category.

Measuring volunteering – is it over?

One other matter that we should comment on at least briefly is the future need for further local volunteering surveys in Birmingham. Our view is that the kind of ‘generic’ volunteering survey conducted as part of this research has, in the longer term, only limited utility and is perhaps not the best use of resources, certainly on a repeated basis.

While the data gathered provided a greater level of intelligence specifically about Birmingham volunteering than has ever before been available, the potential of such surveys to inform and shape **strategic interventions** in volunteering is actually very limited – partly because the response rates across cohorts (age, gender, ethnicity; formal or informal volunteering) or across volunteering activities are very much smaller than in a national survey and therefore drawing conclusions based on these can be problematical.

But having said this, there is also an issue about the level of data on city-wide volunteering trends that other parties expect BVA to be able to furnish. Many automatically make BVA their first port of call in seeking facts and figures about volunteering in the city and BVA therefore needs to consider how it meets this expectation and the relative priority it should have within their operational budget.

There is a further consideration, of course, and this is that in future BVA may choose to be partners to research without necessarily conducting it themselves. Indeed, there might be an argument to say that such a division of labour would be both logical and effective, leaving BVA free to focus on what it has developed as core activity - being an action-based placement, referral and brokerage volunteer agency, challenging the boundaries of ‘formal’ volunteering and providing organisations who host volunteers with key infrastructural support.

However they might be handled, we have identified four priorities for research and activity:

- The development of effective strategic interventions in volunteering support and development
- Assessment of the effectiveness and/or impact of such interventions
- Assessment of the contribution made by volunteering against specific policy or strategy objectives (as outlined in the *volunteering framework* concept on p.15, for example)
- And investigation to see whether research adopting a cost-benefit analysis approach (comparing volunteer provision with statutory service provision) can be viably developed and carried out.

In our view, the usefulness of this approach is that it focuses on covering the key operational concerns that BVA and BVSC share:

- The design and delivery of effective volunteering interventions – i.e. improving and strengthening the support infrastructure.

- Evaluation of the effectiveness and impact of such interventions.
- Development of a policy-linked volunteering framework as a guide to prioritising action.
- And the more innovative notion of cost-benefit analysis of volunteer provision.

The ‘customer relationship’

Finally, something should be said about BVA’s continuing role as a promoter and advocate of volunteering directly to the public and its signposting, referral and brokerage role to the wider voluntary and community sector. While a more strategic *volunteering framework* that can inform the nature and intention of BVA’s volunteering interventions is crucial, the direct delivery elements of BVA’s work – its support, signposting, referral and brokerage roles — are also vital to the continuing health of volunteering in Birmingham. These should be seen as complementary, each reinforcing and informing the other.

However, while it is clearly important that BVA’s interventions are guided by a strategic framework, at ‘street level’ it is crucial that volunteering is presented – as we suggested earlier – in a way that resonates with, and plays to the values of, volunteers and prospective volunteers. BVA is uniquely well situated to combine these roles and adopting a more ‘departmentalised’ approach – distinguishing, as suggested, between personal, community and civic volunteering – could play an important part in ensuring that the right kind of messages reach the right kinds of volunteers.

6.0 CONCLUSIONS

In the final analysis, then, certainly as far as BVA and BVSC are concerned, available resources will to a large extent determine the future of both volunteering interventions and research. But there is a broader point to be made here. We have said that those supporting and promoting volunteering from *within* the sector share a common interest with Government in seeking to spread the benefits that derive from volunteering, but that these interests are not strictly co-terminous. The voluntary sector also has a duty to safeguard the *voluntary* nature of volunteering and to ensure that it does not become proscriptively attached to the state’s social policy agenda. This is not only necessary, it is a legitimate role of the sector.

A fruitful relationship has been developed in Birmingham between BVSC and the Active Communities Directorate and this has enabled us to think more systematically, more critically and more creatively about volunteering in the round than has ever previously been the case. It has facilitated the instructive process of utilising research to inform and modify the actions and priorities of Birmingham’s main volunteer agency and has enabled us to examine a number of different options for BVA’s future work.

But how Government fosters, resources and keeps open the channels of this debate present something of a challenge. There must be room for dissenting views and for the healthy scepticism that comes so naturally to the voluntary sector.

There must also be space to develop new ideas rather than fall back on the comfort of preconceived ones. Indeed, without a wider debate conducted in this spirit, it is unlikely that Government can rise to the biggest challenge of all: how to harness volunteering to its longer-term social policy goals without compromising the very principles and values on which it is founded and which to a great degree motivate individual volunteers.