

Campaigning for Older People: A Case Study Approach to the Input of Voluntary and Community Organisations in the Policy Process

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Third sector or civil society organisations are seen by many as important routes through which citizens contribute to the development and implementation of public policy and to the democratic process. This contribution has been acknowledged in the UK in the requirement for their participation across a range of new government policies and programmes. But how far are these claims justified? This paper explores, through a case study approach focusing on issues relating to older people, how voluntary and community organisations input to the policy process. It argues for a clearer balance between state and voluntary sector, based around ‘creative tension’.

Third sector or civil society organisations are seen by many as important routes through which citizens may contribute to the development and implementation of public policy and to the wider democratic process. Robert Putnam has linked the activities of voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) with the development of social capital, or the bonds of trust and civic norms which, he argues, form the basis of effective local governance. (Putnam, 1993, 2000) Paul Hirst suggests that third sector organisations can balance the power of both state bureaucracies and the free market via a form of associational democracy, and in so doing can provide more localised, responsive and therefore more effective decision making in economic and social governance. Voluntary organisations are thus ‘the primary means of both democratic governance and organising social life’ (Hirst, 1994: 26). In 1996 the Commission on the Future of the Voluntary Sector described the sector as ‘the backbone of civil society’ and ‘the essential precondition of a healthy society’ (CFVS, 1996).

This contribution has been acknowledged in the UK in the requirement for participation by the voluntary and community sector across a range of new government policies and programmes and in the direct delivery of public services.¹ The national compact between government and the sector in England also acknowledges the right of the sector to ‘campaign, to comment on Government policy and to challenge that policy’ (Home Office, 1998). New Labour clearly sees an important role for the sector as contributing to the ‘Third Way’. In February 2001 Home Secretary David Blunkett opened his keynote speech to the NCVO National Conference thus: ‘Voluntary activity is the cornerstone of any civilised society. It is the glue that binds people together and fosters a sense of common purpose. It is an essential building block in our work to create a more inclusive society’ (Blunkett, 2001).

But how far are these wide-ranging claims justified? Whilst they undoubtedly contribute to the expression of different interests in public life, there are questions over the extent to which the new windows of opportunity are giving VCOs and their constituencies real power in the policy process. There are also concerns that involvement in partnerships may threaten the very characteristics which voluntary organisations are expected to bring into the policy sphere, by divorcing them from their constituencies and diverting them from their core purpose. Research has drawn attention to power imbalances between the sector and the state and to the dangers of explicit and implicit co-optation by official partners who may also be paymasters. (Hulme and Edwards, 1997) Thus in his influential 2001 Goodman lecture, Ralf Dahrendorf warned of the dangers that awaited the 'weaker partner' in this 'seemingly mutual embrace'. Their 'flirt with political power' could, he argued, stifle the independence that is the 'oxygen of charity' (Dahrendorf, 2001).

So how do the voluntary and community sectors see their role? This paper explores, through a case study focusing on issues relating to older people, how such organisations understand their role in contributing to democracy. It seeks to raise important questions about their input to the policy process. The findings are based on a two-year study of the role of VCOs in the democratic process in the UK.² The research took place between April 2000 and April 2002. It included approximately 90 interviews with VCOs in four localities and at the national level, together with respondents from national and local government. Whilst the study did not set out to directly access the views of elderly service users, many of those people interviewed were senior citizens. Three issue-based case studies followed to examine the emerging themes in more depth – these involved a further 50 interviews at local, regional and national levels around the issues of pollution, the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, and policies relating to older people. Whilst this paper focuses on the role of those organisations campaigning on behalf of older people, it also draws on the cross-cutting findings of the full study.

VCOs and democracy

The findings from the study suggest that many VCOs see themselves as contributing significantly to democracy. However, they did not contribute to representative democracy as commonly understood. Instead, they considered that they contributed to participative democracy and to the development of social capital. They outlined that contribution in several ways: by capacity building and community development work, enabling a wider range of people in expressing views on policies and services by providing skills, knowledge, advice, confidence and self-esteem. Groups representing elderly people were giving a voice to the users of services and their carers both by speaking on their behalf but also by organising training days, local and national conferences and other empowering activities with the intention of facilitating their self-representation in both local and national policy fora.³ They also provided a platform for 'hard-to-reach' and 'marginalised' groups and they enlarged and refreshed debate, raising issues which would not otherwise break in to mainstream agendas:

Imagine what it would be like if there weren't any voluntary organisations and all we had defining the role of older people in our society was central and local government, it would be utterly dire (national VCO respondent).

These organisations saw themselves as providing a counter to a progressively less democratic environment and they led by example of their own democratic practices. They communicated information up and down the system, they kept issues in the public eye and stimulated debate. They also undertook research that informed or challenged policy decisions.

Older people – the changing policy context

VCOs had seen a sea change in attitudes towards older people over the past decade. That was in part due to demographics – the ageing population, the greater percentage of older voters and the fact that older people were increasingly prepared to demand their rights. It was also, in part, the result of the concerted campaigning and empowerment activities of VCOs both nationally and locally:

In the early 1980s there was a movement for every local area to have its own forum and I think everywhere does have one, that local authorities see as the local consultative body with pensioners (local VCO).

These area forums had forged nationwide links, assisted by the increasing availability of computer technology and electronic networking: 'They are helping to pull the pensioners movement together' (local VCO).

There was a clear sense of optimism in the sector as a result of ever-increasing opportunities to engage in policy consultations at both national and local levels. What was widely seen as the decreasing ideological basis to politics and the move in government circles towards an emphasis on evidence-based policy had assisted this process. There appeared to be a genuine and widely held belief amongst ministers and civil servants that 'in an increasingly complex government structure', they would only be able to deliver if stakeholders were 'involved from the outset' via broad consultation at the pre-legislative stage right through to implementation (senior national politician).

A range of mechanisms had been established by New Labour to increase links between government and the sector, and create new sites of governance (Rose, 1996) including the House of Commons Social Security Committee work on pensioner poverty, the Better Government for Older People Programme (BGOP),⁴ and the Department of Work and Pensions Partnerships Against Poverty elders' sub-committee:

It's a different style of government. More open. More consultative. Whereas before we spent quite a lot of time arguing to be at the table, it's now a foregone conclusion. The whole status of the voluntary sector has changed over the last few years (national VSO).

The change of administration had also brought welcome changes in emphasis for government attention and direction:

Previous governments have been very reluctant to talk about poverty at all, so we have a government now that does talk about poverty and about poverty levels and of getting people out of poverty... of tackling poverty and social exclusion with older people and all sorts of groups, which to us is a great step forward (national VSO).

Some respondents felt that serendipity had also played a part. The media had picked up on the 'do not resuscitate'⁵ scandal because a journalist had been personally affected by it – groups had known about the tendency for years but had had no 'hook' to place it on

until that particular journalist opened the national debate. That had been followed by the 'miserly' 75p pensions increase, which again the media championed:

It was a nice simple issue that everybody could understand – and were justifiably outraged about – then you got rumours and speculation and that keeps the story up . . . That's how the media works (national VSO).

Locally there had been real gains which were being institutionalised through developments such as: VCO representatives on local authority overview and scrutiny committees for health, housing and social services, so that the impacts on older people were being considered in all these policy forums; VCO involvement in Primary Care Trusts; BGOP, which had provided a direct link between the sector and politicians as well as placing an obligation on organisations to give older people ownership of decisions on policy and service provision:

It's worked wonderfully in terms of giving resources to get older people together, so their voices can be heard . . . true community development old fashioned style – bring people together and allow them to define what their own issues are and express those, and that bit has been brilliant (local VCO).

One of the really superb outcomes of BGOP is the way that's been developed in some areas. The way elected members think, the way officers think and the way older people think has completely changed and they are talking to each other on the basis of trust (national VSO).

VCOs had little doubt that both individually and collectively they had helped to shape the tone of the broad debate. For instance the Social Security Select Committee's deliberations on pensioner poverty, 1999–2000, were held to be highly influenced by, amongst others, Age Concern England's campaign for a rise in minimum incomes for pensioners, which a senior politician believed 'was an element in waking the government up and making them realise they had to redress the balance'.

The Royal Commission on Long Term Care, 2000, had been similarly influenced. There had been substantive gains in the health field:

A few years ago if you raised an issue on health and older people being treated very badly in hospital, they would say age discrimination in the Health Service is illegal so it doesn't happen . . . but now there is a realisation that things have got to change and they've appointed an older person's Tsar, they've got a National Service Framework, loads of things are changing and there's real progress (national VSO).

Other achievements claimed included the substantial pensions increase, the introduction of the Minimum Income Guarantee, widows' SERPS entitlements: 'we influenced the government quite successfully to the tune of quite a few billion', halting VAT on fuel, and the whole shape and approach of BGOP.

Cooperation and alliance

Groups were increasingly willing to combine their campaigning activities. Policy officers regularly shared both research findings and information on potentially supportive contacts in government, maintaining a constant flow of informal, behind the scenes joint working

and ensuring that positions tallied on key policy areas:

If Help the Aged, Age Concern England and the National Pensioners Convention are all saying the same thing then it is more powerful and the press do notice that (national VSO).

Other allies were the trade unions. At the national level groups had undertaken joint work with them on pensions and on minimum incomes. Local VSOs also relied on trade union support for some of their campaigns:

I think our partnership working with the unions, be they workers or retired union people is very much around the fact that unions are very much pro-active . . . They do tend to breed very articulate people who are well informed as well . . . (local VSO).

Groups had also established close contacts with/commissioned work from various university departments and research institutes and had worked with professional bodies such as the British Geriatric Society.

A range of strategies

Groups and organisations varied their strategies to meet different contexts and situations. Larger organisations felt able to mobilise substantial memberships around public campaigns at the same time as having a formal place at the policy table. Whilst all those national VSOs interviewed pointed to the benefits of forging long-term, cordial relationships with politicians and civil servants, they all felt equally at liberty to criticise where they felt criticism was due and to use the media to publicise those criticisms:

Certainly within the DWP you don't kind of get the impression that people get huffy with you because they've got bad press on a particular issue.

An officer at the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) confirmed:

As I see it, partnership with the voluntary sector is about identifying those areas where your agendas come together and looking to work constructively to move those agendas forward, it doesn't require you to agree on everything and you can even accept that you will publicly disagree on things.

Some VCOs had been strident and at times controversial in their campaigning. A 'Heating or Eating' campaign by Help the Aged launched in November 1998 featured a widely publicised photograph of rows of bodies with tagged feet lying in a morgue, culminating in an electronic image of the photo being projected from a boat on to the Houses of Parliament. The government responded by announcing a huge increase in the level of winter fuel payments and a new home energy efficiency scheme targeted at the over 1960s (Help the Aged, 1999).

At times, however, VCO's activities had been considered distinctly unhelpful and counter-productive. Several VCO respondents asserted that the jeering of the pensions minister at the Annual National Pensions Rally, 2001 had been one such tactical error. A

senior civil servant concurred:

older people have got a real champion in government, I mean he's doing his best! He's doing a lot! And so perhaps a few words of encouragement and support would be a much more effective way of achieving your objectives rather than berating them.

There was a general point here. A civil servant:

I remember being booed by 200 people once. It wasn't the best use of my time or anyone else's. It was a legitimate point of view they were putting across but it didn't encourage me to seek them out again.

Several commentators asserted that civil servants were 'cherry picking' who to consult with and that, whilst large national organisations such as Age Concern England and Help the Aged were clearly 'insiders' in the policy arena, certain groups remained outsiders. (Maloney *et al.*, 1994; Marsh and Rhodes, 1992) Some had been 'frozen out' because they were perceived as 'old Labour' or pushing on non-negotiable policy issues:

those more traditional groups like the National Pensioners Convention who tend to come across as almost single issue in terms of their dealings with Government, you know, it is like a record, and that is quite difficult for us to engage with constructively because it is clear that the priority that they are pushing is not one on which ministers are prepared to move publicly and we can't actually have a dialogue with them (senior civil servant).

The limits to engagement, national and local issues

Most VCOs saw their increased involvement as very much the first, and often a limited step, having their feet under the table was one thing but a qualitative leap towards more meaningful engagement was required.

There were clear barriers to such engagement. At the national level there had arisen a new managerialism and a concomitant centralisation of power within the Treasury, which VCOs, civil servants and politicians tagged as parsimonious, and where the arguments from VCOs were not even aired:

It used to be the Department (DSS) which was the repository of ideas and controlled the policy agenda; now it is the Treasury, driven by Gordon Brown, which is the main source of new ideas and driving government policy, in a new way which not only overrides the DSS and established corporate wisdom of the department, but overrides everything else . . . If this a problem for the DSS/DWP it sure as hell is a problem for the voluntary sector trying to get influence over what is going on (national politician).

VCOs also bemoaned incessant tokenism. Timescales were too short:

A consultation period is normally about two or three weeks, so it's not real consultation – 'This is what we are going to do, what do you think about it?' They don't give you chance to go back to users and carers or to go back amongst yourselves as organisations to decide whether there are alternatives (national VSO).

Decisions were taken in pre-meetings and post-consultation feedback was virtually non-existent. Whilst VSOs could point to clear gains in terms of influencing the broader debate and specific policy initiatives there were few cases where they felt they had influenced longer-term strategic policy and there was limited evidence of real impact.

Some groups suspected they were primarily invited in order to smooth the implementation of government policy by providing technical data and expertise, or to provide an early warning system for government by enabling them to identify any potential conflicts. There was little sense of setting agendas:

Quite frankly ministers are not interested in take-up when it comes to anything other than Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG) or pension credit. So even in the delivery they are only interested in improving the delivery of the things that are their shiny new schemes – the old boring housing benefit yawn and attendance allowance yawn, oh no, we don't want to get involved with them, they're not sexy and New Labour enough for us (national VSO).

Civil servants and politicians acknowledged that they saw the primary role of VCOs as providers of information and feedback from the grassroots rather than as primary shapers of policy, some however, felt that was at least in part due to the failure of NGOs to press their case more effectively:

There are issues in terms of the effectiveness of pension products in meeting the needs of women, which I suppose I might have expected that to have come across a bit more strongly than it has and when we were doing the Green Paper discussion at that point I sort of drafted in my mind a whole section of the Green Paper on women's pension needs but it never actually sort of took off and nobody raised it (senior civil servant).

Whilst Black and minority ethnic groups also welcomed the new opportunities to engage in this policy area, the DWP Partnerships Against Poverty elders' sub-committee being singled out for particular praise, these relationships were at an early stage and debates had not yet moved into some of the most difficult areas such as the development of culturally sensitive public services (e.g. food in hospitals). VCOs felt that locally and nationally politicians and civil servants knew too little about the range of BME communities of interest, or of how to reach out to them, to be genuinely inclusive. Senior civil servants and politicians acknowledged that deficit.

'We know provision is often crap and pathetic and everywhere we go I try to get Committee to get evidence from such groups but how do you find them?' (senior politician). There remained 'gaps in our understanding' (senior civil servant). The Home Office was accused of attempting to develop a single BME infrastructure body and government had failed to fund communities of interest to form networks at the local and regional level. There were clear differences between the policy level, where engagement was welcomed, and the delivery level (e.g. in benefits offices) where overt racism was still experienced.

In those localities where local authorities warmly embraced the sector, input to policy was healthy; where they did not, influence was limited, engagement tokenistic, feedback non-existent. Too much depended on individual personalities and on fluctuating departmental agendas. Respondents bemoaned the lack of appropriate mechanisms for engagement:

What seems to be happening is that whenever we challenge, in the gentlest possible way, what is being done, it seems to be taken very, very personally because there isn't actually any way for us to link in and influence policy in an appropriate way (local VSO).

This was a common refrain. VCOs felt that for them to have a meaningful input to policy, statutory agencies would have to accept that they did not 'always know best'. One national VCS respondent argued for a 'creative tension' between government and the VCS: for the

right to campaign whilst simultaneously engaging in meaningful policy debate, where disagreement was not automatically viewed as counter-productive, where there was a willingness on the part of statutory representatives to respond to criticism without the threat of sanctions. At the local level some respondents felt government could go some way to operationalising this by firming up the Compact process, in part by making it compulsory for local authorities and other public bodies to forge compacts with the sector, in part by giving additional focus and gravitas to the Compact code of practice on 'Consultation and Policy Appraisal' and specifically to the right to engage and criticise as equal partners.

Some local authorities were moving back towards a commissioning agenda redolent of the 1980s. Contractual relationships around service provision based on 'suffocating accountability', where previously there had been trust, were making it more difficult for VCOs to broaden debate or to criticise statutory provision. Echoing long-standing concerns of VCOs becoming 'prisoners' of the state (Grant, 1995) groups spoke of the dangers of 'instrumentalism', of having to follow government agendas and funding streams to the detriment of organisations' own core objectives. Several respondents expressed the fear that the sector might facilitate incorporation into 'how things are' rather than promote innovation and change.

Competition within the sector for funding streams and projects was preventing co-operation, whilst the bidding process was leading to a lack of joined-up thinking and service delivery. Some groups had 'most favoured' status whilst others were frozen out of both funding streams and policy debates.

It was also clear that the financial circumstances of local authorities were preventing more meaningful engagement. One VCO told of the council 'always running out of money', of it being 'seedy, understaffed, under-resourced'.

The needs of older people were not always perceived as a 'sexy' issue. There remained more pressing priorities:

Because local authorities have such large statutory duties towards young children and teenagers, where you get more and more pressure on that budget you'll find they'll take it from the older person's budget. In our area for example every year the children's budget has overshot by about £1m, and they've taken that money directly from the budget for older people. Children are more attractive than elderly people – it's what we call the Walt Disney factor (local VSO).

The increasing danger of incorporation was also noted by national VSOs, where for instance, there were concerns that the DWP would attempt to persuade Citizens Advice Bureaux to engage directly in the processing of claims and the delivery of pensions.⁶

There were also concerns relating to organisations' relationships with their own constituencies. Several groups spoke of having raised expectations which went unfulfilled. Much of the initial government resourcing for BGOP had now begun to wane, generating a growing suspicion of it having been a temporary political strategy or fad:

There will always be a tension there in terms of really involving older people and getting their views and yet (having) to say to them that we've heard what you've said but I'm afraid at the end of the day we can't deliver, we just haven't got the resources to deliver. That's something that the local authority is struggling with too (local VSO).

Groups told of a 'tiring cynicism', of 'a conspiracy of laziness' amongst decision-makers; of nothing ever happening; of system constraints; of VCOs having to play watchdog on

statutory services to ensure they make good their promises/public statements; of always having to respond to the pace of change, of being reactive rather than proactive; of perennial tick-boxing to satisfy funders; of there being no easy fit between their own agendas and what they were being asked to get involved in; of constantly moving targets, frameworks and structures; of a lack of transparency in statutory bodies and partnerships; of being overstretched.

There were anecdotes of MPs and junior ministers turning up at election times to be photographed with as many elderly people as possible and then rushing off without speaking to them. Previously accessible opposition MPs had ceased to be so once they became the party of government – that being particularly true of ministers or junior ministers.

Conclusion

The policy environment has undoubtedly become more open over the past several years for VCOs in the sense that new initiatives have widened the windows of opportunity to engage in policy discussions. VCOs working with and on behalf of older people have increasingly tended towards cooperation as they have honed both their campaigning and their networking skills and the engagement has provided new allies in government and services at both national and local levels, creating, as one respondent put it, ‘chinks’ in the process which organisations can exploit.

There remains, however, cynicism (which is growing) about the capacity or the will of government to act on the outcomes of consultation, a gap between rhetoric and reality. There are many areas from which the VCS remain excluded and VCO respondents feel that, for all their gains, democracy has continued to be eroded. Some blame the impact of globalisation, some the endemic unwillingness of politicians and civil servants to share real power over decisions. Whilst it is now seemingly easier to raise concerns, it remains extremely difficult to effect real social change. There are also growing concerns in relation to groups’ ability to maintain an independent and critical voice and around the danger of being ‘sucked into’ others’ agendas.

It is clear that a new balance is being struck between the state and the VCS in the policy process. It is also clear that more thought needs to be given to the distinctive roles and legitimacy of different partners, and of how representative and participatory democracy relate to each other, so that the strengths of each can be fully realised. One national VCS respondent argued for a ‘creative tension’ between government and the VCS: for the right to campaign whilst simultaneously engaging in meaningful policy debate, without fear or favour. Our research suggests that, while this creative tension exists in some pockets of policy debate, it is not yet a central feature of the relationship and there are still places where VCOs are still merely expected to do as they are told. It is perhaps towards this creative tension that emerging new forms of governance should be aspiring.

Notes

1 As reflected in the Treasury’s cross-cutting review on *The role of the Voluntary and Community sector in Service Delivery*, HM Treasury, London, September 2002.

2 The study was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council's *Democracy and Participation* programme. ESRC Project ref: L215252049 (Details at <http://www.shef.ac.uk/pol/democracy.htm>)

3 One particularly positive national initiative was *The Debate of the Age*, sponsored by Age Concern, which from 1998, sought to achieve policy change in favour of meeting the needs of older people more effectively, and to portray and engage older people as active participants in that process. See also Tony Carter and Peter Beresford, (2000) *Age and change, models of involvement for older people*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York.

4 See *Our present for the future*, the Older People's Advisory Group's perspective on the BGOP programme; All our futures, the report of the BGOP Steering Committee; and Carol Hayden and Annette Boaz, (2000) *Making a Difference*, the programme evaluation report (all accessible at www.bgop.org.uk/)

5 Whereby in some hospitals ward staff were left instructions by doctors not to resuscitate elderly patients should they suffer cardiac or respiratory arrest. In 2000 Age Concern issued a dossier of 50 cases where patients had received a DNR order without their families knowing.

6 See Voluntary sector: 'Doubts remain over government's proposals for service delivery role', *Community Care*, 5–11 June 2003, pp. 16–18.

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