



Environmental Volunteering in the UK: The Policy Context and Practical Implications

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Summary

This paper is written from the perspective of a large scale, practical volunteering delivery organisation. BTCV makes no claims to policy or research expertise - we are primarily a "doing" organisation. But our daily front line experience with thousands of volunteers and community groups does perhaps give us insights that are not so easily available to purely "thinking" organisations. This paper makes that case that:

- Environmental volunteering is a crucial component of sustainable development. Environmental volunteering is at the heart of what we do, but we do not see it as an end in itself.
- The policy context for environmental volunteering is cross-governmental. We are in regular dialogue with at least six different government departments on matters relating to environmental volunteering.
- Joined up policy is still a long way off. The environment, social and economic sectors are still largely demarcated, and struggle to understand one another.
- Joined up practice delivers multiple policy outcomes. People on the front line of environmental volunteering start from personal interest and/or community need, but still end up delivering outcomes right across the policy agenda.
- The priority policy is: Save Money. In the foreseeable future, any government will have to constrain public spending.
- Third sector research must focus on proven track record and cost effectiveness. If the overriding policy priority is "save money", the overriding policy research question must be "how?".

Environmental volunteering is a crucial component of sustainable development

BTCV's vision is "A better environment where people are valued, included and involved". Fine words indeed. But that statement matters to us, and it is worth, at the start of this paper, looking at what it actually means.

BTCV is an environmental charity. Over the course of our fifty year history, we have worked with literally millions of conservation volunteers and have improved tens of thousands of green spaces around the UK and overseas. But what our vision statement says is that for us, "better environment" is not enough.

We are not interested in "better environment" for its own sake. We are looking for a better environment where people are valued, included and involved. In other words, we are looking for a world in which environment, society and economy can be brought together for mutual benefit.

BTCV's newly published strategic plan, "Investing in Sustainable Futures", is based on the premise that we cannot go on living beyond our environmental and economic means. It states that BTCV will invest in a more sustainable future by achieving four main outcomes from our work: Better Environment, Environmentally Active Citizens, Improved Health and Wellbeing, and Employment and Skills.

Again, it is important to explain what these outcome statements mean. As an example, the target for our employment and skills outcome is 50,000 people into jobs over the four year period of our strategic plan. That is an ambitious target – but we are confident that we can do it. Our other strategic plan targets are similarly stretching – but they are not idle boasts. BTCV has a solid track record as a UK-wide organisation that delivers to scale.

So although environmental volunteering is at the heart of what we do, we do not see it as an end in itself. For us, environmental volunteering is a crucial component of sustainable development – with outcomes across environment, society and economy.

The policy context for environmental volunteering is cross-governmental

The casual observer might assume that an environmental volunteering organisation would look primarily to Defra for relevant policies. And it is true that BTCV has an interest in Defra policies on matters such as biodiversity conservation, access to green space, and local food.

But as a sustainable development organisation, BTCV looks much wider than just Defra. We understand that quality of environment is directly related to quality of life. And because of that, we also look to Communities and Local Government for policies on urban green space and on regeneration. We look to the Department of Energy and Climate Change for policies on climate change. We look to the Office of the Third Sector for policies on volunteering. We look to the Department of Health for policies on physical activity and mental wellbeing. And we look to the Department for Work and Pensions for policies on employment and skills. And woven through all of this are cross cutting policies - for example on social cohesion, on youth action and engagement and of course, on sustainable development.

So for BTCV, the policy context for environmental volunteering is cross-governmental.

Joined up policy is still a long way off.

Looking outwards from BTCV at the policy context for our work, we look across government. But we sometimes feel that there are not many others who take such a wide ranging view.

A very telling comment about our own sector – the environment sector - is that "*The more mainstream environmental groups in the UK have typically been 'socially blind' in addressing home-based environmental concerns*"¹. In other words, the focus is all on habitats and species, with little interest in social or economic matters. And this observation is reinforced in other research – for example, examination of the environment sector's engagement with minority communities found that "*There is an evident lack of clarity and confidence in using the existing language of diversity, with little understanding or consistency in its use by service providers*"².

And while environmentalists stumble about in a state of "social blindness", social policymakers also seem oblivious to environmental matters: "*... the poorer quality of local environments in deprived areas appears to relate closely to past failure to understand the importance of these issues to local residents, resulting in a lack of measures to address them and reduced spending in deprived neighbourhoods, compared to more affluent areas*"³.

Economists fare no better. For example, the UK Poverty Indicators⁴ incorporate one hundred statistical indicators, not one of which refers to environmental inequalities (eg access to, or quality of green space). And while the HM Treasury Child Poverty Review (July 2004) recognised "Material Deprivation" as an important factor in child poverty, it had virtually nothing to say about the crucial role of good quality local environments in giving children the best possible start in terms of health, learning and social skills.

Back in the last century, this kind of demarcated thinking may have been acceptable. When Bill Clinton, campaigning for the US presidency in 1992, said "It's the economy, stupid", no-one batted an eyelid. But that year was also the year of the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit, at which sustainable development crawled out of the primordial political slime and onto the global agenda. Seventeen years on from that pivotal event, it is surely time for policymakers to start joining up their thinking.

Joined up practice delivers multiple policy outcomes

BTCV's strategic ambition is to generate four main outcomes from our work - Better Environment, Environmentally Active Citizens, Improved Health and Wellbeing, and Employment and Skills. But we do not have to run four separate project streams in order to achieve this. Often a single project can deliver multiple policy goals.

One example is our Environments for All programme (1999-2003), focussed on outreach to communities under-represented in traditional environmental volunteering. 38,000 people were involved in the programme, and the vast majority came from disadvantaged urban

¹ *Polluting the poor: an environmental justice agenda for the UK?* Sustainability Environment and Risk Research Group, Staffordshire University

² *What about us? Diversity Review Evidence Parts 1 and 2* Countryside Agency 2005

³ *Environment and Social Justice: Rapid Research and Evidence Review* Final Report Policy Studies Institute, December 2004

⁴ www.poverty.org.uk

areas. Almost half the beneficiaries were unemployed, 13 per cent were disabled, and nearly 3,000 were refugees or asylum seekers. Independent evaluation⁵ by the Black Environment Network described the programme as "the single most important development in the environment sector in relation to social inclusion".

Our People's Places programme (2001 – 2006) worked with over seven hundred community groups, more than half of which were located in the most deprived 24% of wards in England. Around 50,000 volunteers were involved, and independent evaluation found that 93% of groups reported a positive impact on local wildlife, while 91% reported that their project enabled people to gain new skills, and access to jobs⁶. And subsequent Social Return on Investment research⁷ found (somewhat to our amazement, as this was never an intended outcome) that the programme achieved crime reduction to the value of £19 million.

A third example is our Green Gym programme. In this case, independent evaluation⁸ has found that participation in the Green Gym increases levels of physical activity, improving muscular strength, and reducing the risk of heart disease and strokes by up to 50%. It also builds confidence and self-esteem and relieves stress, anxiety, and depression.

The underlying principle in all of this is that people involved on these kinds of programmes do not start with a debate about policy goals, and have little regard for whether their project would be classed as environmental, or economic or social. Their starting point is personal interest and/or community need – and any links with policy are, by and large, incidental. For BTCV, it is often frustrating to see policymakers inventing new programmes and funding streams in an attempt to get policy off the page and into practice. Politicians and policymakers could perhaps save time and money by simply bolstering existing activities that have a proven track record in delivering multiple policy outcomes.

The priority policy is: Save Money

Policy making is not an abstract intellectual exercise. There is no point in making policy that cannot be delivered. And for the life of the next government – if not the next two governments - the overriding test of deliverability will be affordability. Put more bluntly, the priority policy for any government in the foreseeable future will be: Save Money.

Key to affordability is a proper understanding of track record and cost effectiveness. And here, once again, we see a gap between policy and practice.

Politicians and funders have a mania for "innovation", and while the third sector has shown itself a consistent source of imagination and creativity, the fact remains that most basic services are the same year in and year out. BTCV's experience is that a huge amount of time and effort is wasted in repeated speculative and competitive bidding for short term funding streams coupled to bright new policy ideas. Projects that have proved their worth through years of successful delivery, combined with independent external evaluation, have no guarantee of continued support.

⁵ *Environments for All Annual Review, 2002-3* Black Environment Network

⁶ SQW Ltd for BTCV, April 2006

⁷ nfpSynergy for BTCV, April 2008

⁸ *National Evaluation of Green Gym*, School of Health and Social Care, Oxford Brookes University.

In an era of economic crisis, with unprecedented pressures on the public purse, policymakers need to understand that constant calls for new delivery mechanisms undermine third sector stability and cost effectiveness. Short term funding prompts staff to leave rather than stay on with the risk of redundancy. Stop-go project delivery fractures relationships with communities and undermines confidence and capacity. Limited funding horizons create limited planning horizons, with no incentive to think longer term or on a bigger scale.

No third sector organisation expects an indefinite blank cheque for its activities. But if government knows an organisation to be an effective provider of a particular service, it seems nonsensical that it would jettison the service on the (often unproven) assumption that new policies require new delivery mechanisms. Equally nonsensical that it would require the service provider to repeatedly justify its case for funding continuation if existing monitoring and reporting evidence indicates a satisfactory track record.

Third sector research must focus on proven track record and cost effectiveness

Individual organisations aiming to demonstrate affordability can of course make their own case. A few BTCV examples would be as follows:

- The annual Department of Health spend on anti-depressant prescriptions is £400 million⁹. One quarter of one percent of this sum could enable development of a Green Gym (recognised in numerous Department of Health White Papers as a proven route to physical health and mental wellbeing) in every local authority district in England
- In 2010/11, public spending on flood risk and coastal management (part of the government commitment to tackle climate change) will increase to £800 million¹⁰. One quarter of one percent of this sum could enable mobilisation of a Carbon Army involving thousands of citizens – winning hearts and minds and changing behaviour towards more environmentally active citizenship.
- Expenditure on initiatives such as Green Gym and Carbon Army is not a cost – it is an investment. Independent research¹¹ has shown that every £1 invested by BTCV in community environmental projects yields a £4 return in social value – including health benefits, skills and jobs and even crime reduction.

The problem is that any organisation making claims of this kind could be seen as self serving. Policymakers could legitimately ask to what extent such claims are justified and to what extent they are mere sales pitches. This is where independent research comes in.

If the overriding policy priority is "save money", the overriding policy research question must be "how?". Unfortunately, this is a question that – in the context of the Third Sector at least – seems rarely to have been asked. A recent report for the Scottish Executive¹² contains a

⁹ *Up and Running: Exercise therapy and the treatment of mild or moderate depression in primary care*. Mental Health Foundation March 2005

¹⁰ *Flooding in England: A national Assessment of Flood Risk*. Environment Agency, June 2009

¹¹ *BTCV Impact Evaluation*, nfpSynergy, April 2008

¹² *The opportunities for environmental volunteering to deliver Scottish Executive policies: A discussion paper*. Jane Dalgleish for Scottish Executive (October 2006)

section on "The Financial Value of Volunteering", which states bluntly that "*There is scarcely any relevant research in this area*". The report goes on to say that "*Volunteering can deliver a variety of outcomes – individual, social and political as well as environmental and the real value may be seriously underestimated*".

Further evidence that the value of volunteering is underestimated comes from the fact that lottery and government funding sources commonly rate the in-kind value of a basic skills volunteer workday at £50. This figure has been in use for at least fifteen years. Can there be any other activity across the whole of the UK economy whose value has fallen in real terms every single year for the last fifteen years? And has the value of volunteer effort really fallen so low – or is it just that the value of volunteering is so poorly understood that policymakers and funders find it easier simply to ignore the question?

BTCV's conclusion – from its own experience as well as the available evidence – is that the value of volunteering to environment, to society and to the economy is much higher than most policymakers seem to realise. We believe that at a time of environmental and economic crisis, policymakers need a much better understanding of how community-led activities can achieve multiple policy outcomes. They need a better understanding of how to make strategic investment decisions, based on analysis of social return on investment. And they need to move on from the old approaches of demarcated thinking, coupled with short term funding, and poor understanding of value.

The challenge to third sector researchers is to help the policymakers on their way.