

Institute for Public Policy Research



A THIRD SECTOR TRENDS BRIEFING >>

THE VALUE OF VOLUNTEERING IN THE NORTH

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and Jack Hunter**

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THE FUTURE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE NORTH

This report is part of a three-year programme of work by IPPR North on the state of civil society and the voluntary sector in the north of England.



ABOUT THE THIRD SECTOR TRENDS STUDY

The Third Sector Trends study is the only large-scale longitudinal survey of the third sector running in the UK. It covers third sector organisations across the north of England comprising the North East, Yorkshire and the Humber and the North West regions. The study was conceived and originally commissioned by Northern Rock Foundation with research conducted by the universities of Southampton, Teesside and Durham. The Community Foundation Tyne & Wear and Northumberland was a co-funder of the research, and is now responsible for its legacy. The Community Foundation is now collaborating with partners including St Chad's College at Durham University, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and IPPR North to expand and continue the research across the whole of the North. Funding from the Community Foundation was in partnership with Esmée Fairbairn and Garfield Weston Foundations.

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INTRODUCTION



The bedrock of civil society is its core of small and informal groups where people have come together to make a difference to their local areas. Most of these organisations have no employees and their financial resources are often very limited. But they survive and thrive because of the hours of work put in by their unpaid volunteers.

The ability to draw upon people's capacity to volunteer their time freely and without expectation of financial remuneration is one of the ways that people consider the 'third sector' to be distinct from the private and public sectors. Charities and other such organisations can tap into a pool of expertise and experience that others cannot – something which also adds a moral dimension to charitable activity – because people give their time for other reasons than getting paid.

In reality, of course, the third sector does not have a monopoly on good will. People freely give their time and go the 'extra mile' in all parts of life – indeed, we have previously argued that this constitutes the fabric of civil society as we know it.¹

But nonetheless, the value that volunteers provide through third sector organisations is considerable. This is the focus of our report.

In the first report from the Third Sector Trends 2016 study², we found that the contribution of third sector volunteers to the Northern economy is significant. In this short briefing paper we will build upon this, in order to explore in greater depth:

- 1 the extent of volunteering in the third sector in the North of England and assess the value of its resource in terms of the voluntarily given time: that is, its 'people power'
- 2 the characteristics of those third sector organisations that are most reliant on volunteers, and how this varies by place
- 3 lessons for policy makers from this analysis.

The Third Sector Trends survey

The Third Sector Trends survey draws on data from a total of 3,594 third sector organisations (TSOs) in the North³, including 1,462 from the North West, 1,083 from Yorkshire and the Humber and 1,012 from the North East. This represents a response rate of 12.7 per cent across the North. Full details of the methodological approach and assessment of the representativeness of the survey sample are detailed in previous reports⁴.

1 Hunter J and Longlands S (2016) Understanding and redefining civil society in the North: laying the groundwork. IPPR <https://www.ippr.org/publications/understanding-and-redefining-civil-society-in-the-north-laying-the-groundwork>

2 Chapman T and Hunter J (2017) Third Sector Trends in the North: A summary of key findings <https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/third-sector-trends-in-the-north-of-england-a-summary-of-key-findings>

3 Throughout, we refer to third sector organisations (TSOs) to refer to the voluntary and community sector (including registered charities), social enterprises and mutual/co-operative organisations.

4 See <https://www.stchads.ac.uk/research/research-news/third-sector-trends-north-west-england-report-published-17th-august/>

1. THE SIZE AND SHAPE OF VOLUNTEERING IN THE NORTH

The contribution of volunteers to civil society in the North is huge. As table 1 shows, there are close to 1 million volunteers in the third sector in the North⁵. Collectively they produce almost 70 million hours of voluntary work which, if it involved payment at 80 per cent of the average regional wage, would be valued at over £800 million a year (see table 1 below).

TABLE 1
Weighted estimated volunteer numbers and replacement values

	Estimated number of volunteers	Estimate of hours worked	Nominal financial replacement cost at National Minimum Wage	Nominal financial replacement cost at 80% average regional wage
North West	440,000	32 million	£230 million	£380 million
Yorkshire & Humber	340,000	25 million	£180 million	£300 million
North East	150,000	11 million	£78 million	£130 million
North of England	930,000	67 million	£480 million	£810 million

Source: Third Sector Trends survey 2016

In addition, the value of volunteers to third sector organisations is obvious. Responses to the Third Sector Trends survey suggest that:

- 81 per cent of all organisations agree (57 per cent strongly agree) that they “could not keep going” without the contribution of volunteers
- 83 per cent agree (35 per cent strongly agree) that they are mostly reliant on people who volunteer “on a very regular basis”
- 60 per cent agree (14 per cent strongly agree) that they rely “mainly on volunteers who can work unsupervised”
- 59 per cent agree (18 per cent strongly agree) that many of their volunteers are service users and/or beneficiaries.

The most visible examples of volunteering are often those organised through national charities and events such as Comic Relief. However, the results of this survey suggest that the bulk of volunteering is organised through the smallest third sector organisations. As shown in table 2, the very smallest TSOs (with annual income below £10,000) produce about a third of all volunteering opportunities, and over two-thirds (67 per cent) of all volunteering hours are through organisations with an annual income below £100,000.

⁵ This number is a conservative estimate of the contribution of volunteering in the North. The Community Life survey, for example, estimates 29 per cent of adults volunteer at least once a month. Our analysis is derived from the perspective of third sector organisations based in the North. Because of this, it does not include, for example, volunteering and fundraising organised through national campaigns, such as Comic Relief, volunteers in the public sector, such as police support volunteers and those in the NHS, or corporate volunteering schemes that are organised without third sector input. However, because it is based on reporting from organisations, it is arguably a better measure of the *value* that volunteering brings.

TABLE 2

Weighted estimates of volunteer opportunities produced by TSOs of different sizes

	Micro (income below £10,000)	Small (income £10,001- £100,000)	Medium (income £100,001- £500,000)	Larger (£500,001 or more)	Total estimates for North of England
Estimated number of TSOs (using Charity Commission income categories)	306,600	319,600	170,000	134,700	931,000
Estimate total hours of voluntary work provided*	22 million (33% of total)	23 million (34%)	12 million (18%)	10 million (14%)	67 million

* Using Charity Commission UK data, weights were calculated to equalise the percentage distribution of TSOs in each column, where 47.6% of TSOs have income below £10,000 (TST Sample 31.6%); 33.4% between £10,001 and £100,000 (TST sample 33.9%), 12.7% of TSOs with income £100,001 - £500,000 (TST Sample 20.6%); and 6.3% TSOs with income above £500,001 (TST Sample 14.0%).

Source: Third Sector Trends survey 2016

But these results highlight the limitations of using a blanket measure to understand volunteers' contribution to society. While using an estimate of hours worked is useful insofar as it provides a sense of the very significant scale of volunteering across the North, this analysis on its own is also clearly a huge oversimplification.

Rather than assuming that each volunteer, and each volunteer-hour, is interchangeable, it is worth noting that the value that any one volunteer brings varies hugely— according to the experience, skills and expertise that an individual is able and willing to contribute, and the extent to which an organisation allows them to maximise this, as well as the nature of the relationship between a volunteer and their host organisation.

As the statistics above suggest, there is a degree of variability in the extent to which volunteers are an essential part of a third sector organisation's continued success: although many see volunteers as indispensable to their day to day activities, many do not. The majority of third sector organisations, particularly the smallest organisations, do not employ staff and are, as a consequence, entirely reliant upon volunteers to manage organisations and deliver the work needed. But as organisations become larger, they rely much more heavily upon employees – even though volunteers can continue to play an important role in their governance and the delivery of aspects of their work.

The following section explores the characteristics of organisations that are most reliant upon volunteers in greater depth.

2. WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ORGANISATIONS THAT ARE MOST RELIANT UPON VOLUNTEERS?

In this report, we develop a measure of the level of reliance on volunteers for third sector organisations - defined in four discrete categories ranging from 'very strong reliance' to 'little reliance'. This has been achieved by combining data from several responses to Third Sector Trends survey questions including:

- the extent to which they “could not keep going” without the contribution of volunteers;
- the extent to which they rely on regular volunteers;
- the extent to which volunteers work independently;
- the extent to which they rely on trustees to run the organisation on a day to day basis
- the ratio of volunteers relative to the number of paid employees (if they have employees).

Our analysis of the Third Sector Trends data suggests the following five learning points:

1 Volunteer-reliant organisations are much more likely to be small in size

As might be expected, the smallest organisations rely most heavily on volunteers. As shown in table 3 below, as many as 75 per cent of the very smallest TSOs have strong or very strong reliance on volunteers compared with 38 per cent of the largest organisations.

TABLE 3
Reliance of TSOs on volunteers⁶

	Micro (£0- £10,000)	Small (£10,001- £50,000)	Medium (£50,001- £250,000)	Larger (£250,001- £1m)	Big (£1m or more)	All TSOs
Very strong reliance on volunteers	40.7	42.0	28.8	14.3	17.6	32.2
Strong reliance on volunteers	34.0	32.8	34.2	28.9	21.0	31.8
Some reliance on volunteers	15.5	18.7	27.7	41.1	45.6	25.7
Little reliance on volunteers	9.8	6.5	9.3	15.7	15.8	10.3
N=	856	728	722	453	272	3,031

Source: Third Sector Trends survey 2016

⁶ These data exclude TSOs which are 'wholly' run by trustees, board or committee members.

In addition, those organisations and groups that work only at the very local level are most reliant on volunteers (73 per cent) compared with those working beyond the boundaries of a local authority/county council district (56 per cent).

2 Volunteer-reliant organisations are prevalent across both rich and poor areas

It has often been asserted by commentators that poor areas are characterised by their dearth of volunteers and indeed of charities themselves (so-called ‘charity deserts’).⁷ However, Third Sector Trends research finds little evidence to sustain either argument.⁸

Overall, TSOs in the poorest areas tend to be *less likely* to be ‘very’ or ‘quite’ reliant on volunteers (56 per cent) than those working in the richest areas (62 per cent), but this can be largely explained by the fact that there tend to be a higher frequency of large TSOs operating in the poorest areas⁹. In fact, among the very smallest organisations, 70 per cent of TSOs in the poorest areas rely heavily on volunteers compared with 62 per cent in the richest areas.

3 Volunteer-reliant organisations tend to be less dependent on public funding

Table 4 below suggests that those TSOs that are most reliant on volunteers tend not to use public funding in comparison with other third sector organisations with a different staffing profile. Instead, they tend to source their funding income from the local community and/or charitable foundations.

As shown in table 4 below, just 19 per cent of organisations that are most reliant upon volunteers say that their most important source of income is the public sector, compared to 31 per cent of those who are quite reliant and 44 per cent of those who show little or no reliance.

7 The term ‘charity deserts’ in less advantaged areas has caught the imagination and has entered the lexicon of policy discourse in recent years, but often without commentators fully recognising how the term has been used by academics and the empirical basis upon which such claims are made. For a useful detailed appraisal of the term see Mohan, J (2015) ‘Charity deserts and social justice: exploring variations in the distribution of charitable organisations and their resources in England.’, in Morvaridi B (ed) *New philanthropy and social justice: debating the conceptual and policy discourse*, Bristol: Policy Press.

8 See Third Sector Trends regional reports for Yorkshire and Humber, North West England and North East England, available here: <https://www.communityfoundation.org.uk/knowledge-and-leadership/third-sector-trends-research/>

9 Anecdotally this is because large national organisations tend to work in a targeted manner, by prioritising the most deprived parts of the country

TABLE 4**Reliance on different income sources by reliance on volunteers**

	MAINLY DEPENDENT UPON...		
	Public sector funding	Private sector funding	Community sector funding
Very reliant	19%	12%	69%
Quite reliant	31%	10%	59%
Little or no reliance	44%	15%	42%

Source: Third Sector Trends survey 2016

In addition, volunteer-reliant organisations are highly unlikely to be interested in delivering government contracts. Given the way that government contracts are structured this is perhaps to be expected. Indeed, under one in 10 (9.6 per cent) of those that are most reliant upon volunteers say that they are involved in delivering or bidding for contracts. This compares to 33 per cent of those who have little or no reliance on volunteers.

4 However, public funds are an important income stream for those in the poorest areas

Dependence upon public funds varies significantly by place. As table 5 shows, 46 per cent of TSOs in the poorest areas (IMD 1-2) are mostly reliant upon public sector funding compared with just 18 per cent in the richest areas (IMD 9-10). Although the smallest organisations (which rely more heavily on volunteers) are generally less reliant upon public funds, those in the most deprived areas are substantially more likely to be reliant than those in the richest areas (24 per cent against 7 per cent).

TABLE 5**Reliance on public sector funding by TSOs in richer and poorer areas by size of organisation**

	IMD1-2	IMD 3-4	IMD 5-6	IMD 7-8	IMD 9-10
Micro (£0-£10,000)	24.2	17.4	10.7	10.3	6.9
Small (£10,000-£50,000)	29.5	20.4	15.9	10.0	12.0
Medium (£50,000-£250,000)	45.3	37.0	36.5	22.3	26.2
Larger (£250,000-£1m)	70.1	65.9	51.9	58.5	52.0
Biggest (£1m or more)	72.0	64.6	50.0	44.8	65.2
All TSOs	45.8	34.7	22.1	18.9	18.1

Source: Third Sector Trends survey 2016

5

Volunteer-reliant organisations might be more financially resilient

Overall, there is some indication from the data that, across the North, organisations that are most reliant on volunteers have more stable finances than others. This cuts both ways – while they are less likely to be in a weak financial position, they are also less likely to be in a strong financial position (see table 6 below). Further work is necessary to understand why this might be, however it could suggest that (perhaps because of the resource and value that they are able to draw upon via their volunteers) these organisations are more likely to ‘keep going’, neither shrinking or growing, despite changes in wider society and the economy.

TABLE 6

TSOs financial health (only includes organisations which have some paid employees)

	In a strong financial position	In a stable financial situation	In a weak financial situation	Experiencing mixed fortunes financially	N=
Very reliant	7%	59%	18%	15%	501
Quite reliant	10%	53%	26%	12%	604
Little or no reliance	12%	54%	23%	11%	1,009

Source: Third Sector Trends survey 2016

22 per cent of TSOs which are heavily reliant upon volunteers in the least affluent areas are struggling financially compared with only 15 per cent in the richest areas.

3. LESSONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

This briefing paper provides some modest insights into the extent and nature of volunteering in the north of England. Because of this, it arguably provides more questions than answers. Nonetheless, our analysis suggests some areas for consideration by policymakers:

1

Firstly, we should recognise the vitally important role that volunteers play in supporting the third sector in the North

The analysis from the Third Sector Trends survey is further evidence of the substantial value of voluntary activity to civil society in the North. Perhaps contrary to the perception among the public of volunteers as well-meaning but often ineffective individuals, it is clear from the data that a large proportion of third sector organisations would simply cease to operate without the ongoing commitment of unpaid volunteers. This includes a sizeable chunk who rely upon volunteers to work unsupervised.

The voluntary sector, and civil society more generally, plays a foundational role within the North's economy. As this fact is belatedly being recognised by policymakers,¹⁰ it is important that the value of volunteering is acknowledged as central to the strength of much of the third sector.

2

Secondly, we should be realistic about the extent to which policy can 'grow' volunteering capacity – and whether this is desirable

Successive governments have invested significant funds in aspects of volunteering based on an assumption that a large 'untapped resource' of volunteers exists. Most recently, for example, the government's Civil Society Strategy restates a commitment to helping to "mobilise the time and talents of people of all ages", and to removing the "obstacles in the way of people becoming the active citizens that many wish to be".

This intention, while laudable, might be slightly misplaced.

In the first instance, there is little evidence that successive interventions have made any difference to the headline rates of volunteering. The government's own figures demonstrate that levels of volunteering in the UK have remained consistent over the last two decades¹¹.

But more fundamentally, the policy aim should not simply be to increase the number of volunteers. While there may be health and social benefits for individuals that

¹⁰ For example, see GMCA Memorandum of Understanding between GM Health & Social Care Partnership & the Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise Sector <http://www.gmhsc.org.uk/about-devolution/partnership-agreements/>.

¹¹ Cabinet Office (2016) Community life Survey <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/community-life-survey#2016-to-2017-survey>

get involved in volunteering;¹² our analysis suggests that, more than aggregate numbers of volunteers, what is most important to most third sector organisations is the *quality* and *depth* of support they receive, rather than additional numbers of volunteers. The very smallest TSOs are the most likely to rely upon the committed and sustained relationships with a small number of volunteers that are trusted to work regularly and independently. Recruitment of volunteers is often along 'tried and tested' methods - suggesting that most organisations might have little interest in taking on volunteers from other sources and especially so if their contribution is likely to be a one-off or at best sporadic.

Rather than support to help them grow their volunteer base, such organisations are more likely to value financial and in-kind support to keep going, including pro-bono advice, reduced rates for room hire, help with fundraising, back office support etc. This should also involve support for organisations such as local Councils for Voluntary Service (CVS) and similar 'infrastructure' bodies that can provide external support to help manage volunteers and associated issues.¹³

It is true, of course, that big government funded programmes such as the National Citizen Service or the former Social Action Journey Fund supply bigger TSOs with the financial wherewithal to produce volunteering opportunities - especially for young people. The same point applies equally well to many of the private sector's corporate social responsibility programmes - where bigger charities become the agencies to deliver or broker volunteer experiences. Much of this work, however, produces 'ephemeral' volunteering experiences. And while robust claims are made that programme participants may then be more likely to go on to do more volunteering - there is not much convincing evidence available to say that this is the case.¹⁴

3

Thirdly, any successful approach will be place-aware and targeted

Organisations that depend most heavily on volunteers seem to be relatively less reliant on public funding than other parts of the third sector. Their income tends to be quite stable but they rely on small sums of money, mainly grant funding, to work successfully.

However, public funds are an important source of income for many of those working in the poorest areas, and the compound effect of years of austerity risks undermining the civic core of voluntary action that other places might be able to take for granted. For this reason, funders that are interested in maintaining this civic core should be place-aware and targeted in their approach.

¹² Summarised here <https://blogs.ncvo.org.uk/2017/04/07/does-volunteering-improve-mental-health/>

¹³ For more on this see <https://www.ippr.org/publications/civil-society-support-in-the-north-of-england>

¹⁴ Most evaluations of volunteer programmes are completed by the end of the intervention. Consequently, evaluation reports necessarily rely on self-reported statements on potential future volunteering. Clearly, it cannot be certain that such intentions will be acted upon in the longer term. For evaluation of the National Youth Agency's government funded Social Action Journey Fund project, for example, see: <https://www.stchads.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/SAJF-NYA-PROJECT-EVALUATION-REPORT-FINAL-25th-June.pdf>

4

Finally, we should learn to value the civic core for what it is

The bedrock of civil society is its core of micro and small organisations which work mainly at a neighbourhood level. They are independent-minded and tend to get on with their work with limited income but rely on their trustees/committee and volunteers to keep going. Unlike larger TSOs they have relatively little interest in formal partnership working and rule themselves out from getting involved in service delivery by contracts either on principle or because they do not have sufficient capacity to do so.

This is particularly true for those that are most reliant on volunteers.

It can be difficult to assess in conventional evaluation terms the impact of small civil society groups¹⁵. But just because it is hard to measure their contribution does not mean that it should not be valued¹⁶ – so local funders need to keep this in mind when allocating money to local charities – they may not be able to measure the impact of what they do – but they would, like as not, be able to recognise the loss to the locality if they were no longer there.

Many funders, particularly charitable funders, can sometimes talk of wishing to fund transformational change in communities (that is, they want to see a radical difference in communities as a result of their funding). This is laudable but sometimes it is a question of learning to value what is there now and learning how to support its continuation.

These worthy pursuits may not look very enticing to funders. They cannot promise to produce newsworthy ‘rags-to-riches’ outcomes that will secure column inches in the local paper or on the radio. But given the role that small groups of dedicated volunteers play in a thriving civil society and a healthy community – then it is arguably money well spent.

¹⁵ Hunter J and Cox E (2016) Too small to fail. IPPR <https://www.ippr.org/publications/too-small-to-fail>

¹⁶ Or indeed, that efforts to measure impact are fruitless. For example, see <http://www.twine-together.com/> for an example of an attempt to develop a platform for small organisations to develop workable ways of measuring and analysing their impact.





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