

# **How government definitions over-estimate levels of volunteering**

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### Introduction

Volunteering has been a key part of the Labour government's strategy for the voluntary sector since it came to power in 1997. Not only has it invested a considerable amount of money in promoting volunteering, but it has also used levels of volunteering as an indicator of a healthy society.

For example, in 2006 Home Office minister Paul Goggins publicly praised the levels of volunteering<sup>1</sup> as an indication of strong communities and strong neighbourhoods. In the release the minister said:

*"Volunteers really are the lifeblood of our communities..... It is great news that their numbers have been growing over the last few years"*

In addition levels of volunteering are one of the key government targets (PSAs) for the sector. Given this importance for volunteering it makes the levels of volunteering an important barometer of the success of both government investment in volunteering and the number of active citizens overall.

This briefing looks at how government measures the levels of volunteering in the UK (and touches on measurements of civic participation) and suggests there are a number of ways in which the current research methodology is over-estimating the level of volunteers.

In our previous briefings we have analysed both our own figures<sup>2</sup> on the level of volunteering as well as the government figures<sup>3</sup>. We demonstrated that volunteering levels have been roughly flat from 2000-2007, according to the government's own figures from their citizenship surveys as well as from our own data through our charity awareness monitor. This is a disappointing result and does not reflect well on public investment in volunteering. We also believe that there is a fundamental problem with the government's figures on volunteering. We have looked in detail at how the government defines volunteering and are concerned that the levels are routinely overestimated.

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1. <http://press.homeoffice.gov.uk/press-releases/make-it-your-year-to-volunteer>

2. [http://www.nfpsynergy.net/includes/documents/cm\\_docs/2008/v/volunteeringtrendsjan08.pdf](http://www.nfpsynergy.net/includes/documents/cm_docs/2008/v/volunteeringtrendsjan08.pdf)

3. [http://www.nfpsynergy.net/mdia\\_coverage/nfpsynergy\\_in\\_the\\_news/volunteering\\_numbers\\_virtually\\_static\\_since\\_2001\\_despite\\_investment.aspx](http://www.nfpsynergy.net/mdia_coverage/nfpsynergy_in_the_news/volunteering_numbers_virtually_static_since_2001_despite_investment.aspx)

## How is volunteering defined by the government?

The definitions of volunteering were designed with the intent of being fully inclusive: covering a range of activities which a survey respondent might not automatically think of as being volunteering at all. In order to get a measure of all possible volunteering activities that are going on, ways of measuring volunteering were drawn up which encapsulate the broadest possible footprint of activities. This will, quite rightly, draw in the good neighbour helping the old lady next door and the retired football enthusiast coaching to coach the local girls' team. The danger of this is that broader measures of volunteering blur the line so that joining a social club or driving your children to a football match can see you classed as a volunteer.

### **Box 1: Definitions of volunteering and civic participation<sup>4</sup>:**

**Informal volunteering**- Covers unpaid help that was given to other people, apart from any help given through a group, club or organisation. This could be help for a friend, neighbour or someone else but not a relative

**Formal Volunteering** - covers volunteering within official groups, clubs or organisations

**All Volunteering** - Includes all formal and informal volunteering

**Civic Participation** - Engaging in one of the following activities:

- Contacting a local councillor, Member of Parliament, member of the Greater London Assembly or National Assembly for Wales;
- Contacting a public official working for a local council, central Government, Greater London Assembly or National Assembly for Wales;
- Attending a public meeting or rally;
- Taking part in a public demonstration or protest; and
- Signing a petition.

All this matters because when ministers claim that 73% of the population is carrying out some kind of volunteering on a regular basis, these statements need to be based on research methodology which measures activities which most people would call volunteering. They also need to be based on activities which are done sufficiently frequently to make some kind of tangible difference.

## The challenge of social desirability bias

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4. <http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/corporate/citizenshipsurveyaprjun2007>

Research into volunteering, along with researching patterns of donating money and drinking alcohol (for example) are fraught with difficulty. When confronted face to face with an interviewer and a series of questions about what are generally seen as socially 'worthwhile' or antisocial things to be doing, the issue of social desirability rears its head. Most people want to be seen as pleasant and community minded, and will take any opportunity to be seen as 'good people'.

When asked by an interviewer whether we give money most people like to think that they must have made a donation. The longer the time frame the researcher asks about, and the broader the definition of giving, the easier it is to say 'yes'. The same is true for questions about volunteering. In nfpSynergy's research about volunteering we simply ask people whether respondents have volunteered in the last three months. This produces a positive response of between 16-18% of the public.

There is no doubt that our narrow definition of volunteering does not capture all volunteers as many volunteering activities many not be seen as such by the interviewee. However it has the advantage of being simple, consistent and allows the respondent to self-define. The risk is that broader definitions allow too many people to answer questions which then identify them as volunteers. And because volunteering is seen as a socially desirable activity, then respondents to surveys are quite happy to be classified in that way. This will artificially raise the levels of volunteering in government surveys. We give examples of how we think this is happening in the Citizenship Survey in the next section.

## **How informal volunteering is measured**

Box 2 shows the questions that respondents to the Citizenship survey are asked in order to ascertain levels of informal volunteering. The Citizenship survey is a broad-ranging survey covering a host of issues including attitudes to community, race, neighbourliness, as well as volunteering.

For us the major issue with this question is that some of the categories are so broad as to capture almost any form of interaction between neighbours, friends or community members. For example, the category of 'giving advice' covers such a wide range of activities as to be meaningless, we believe, in measuring informal volunteering. A second issue is that many of the categories don't cover volunteering at all, but more mutual self-help. If somebody looks after a neighbour's pet while the neighbour is away, because they know that the neighbour will do the same for them, then it is questionable whether this is really volunteering.

## Box 2: How the Citizenship survey measures informal volunteering<sup>5</sup>:

**Informal volunteering** – The following question was taken from the citizenship survey questionnaire (our red highlighting):

*Now I want to ask you about any unpaid help you, as an individual, may have given to other people, that is apart from any help given through a group, club or organisation. This could be help for a friend, neighbour or someone else but not a relative. In the last 12 months have you done any of the following things, unpaid, for someone who was not a relative?*

- (1) Keeping in touch with someone who has difficulty getting out and about (visiting in person, telephoning or e-mailing)*
- (2) Doing shopping, collecting pension or paying bills*
- (3) Cooking, cleaning, laundry, gardening or other routine household jobs*
- (4) Decorating, or doing any kind of home or car repairs*
- (5) Baby sitting or caring for children*
- (6) Sitting with or providing personal care (e.g. washing, dressing) for someone who is sick or frail*
- (7) Looking after a property or a pet for someone who is away*
- (8) Giving advice*
- (9) Writing letters or filling in forms*
- (10) Representing someone (for example talking to a council department, or to a doctor)*
- (11) Transporting or escorting someone (for example to a hospital, or on an outing)*
- (12) Anything else*
- (13) NO HELP GIVEN IN LAST 12 MONTHS*

Web reference: <http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/doc/5739%5Cmrdoc%5Cpdf%5C5739userguide.pdf>

(Our emphasis in red)

## How these measures could mis-estimate (informal) volunteering levels.

Here are four portraits of the kind of people who could be covered by this kind of question.

**The advice-giving gardener.** Imagine the scene. A visitor to a town has got lost coming to see friends. They spot somebody tending their garden and wind down the window and ask for directions – and the helpful gardener advises them how to get to the street they are looking for. They have just 'given advice' and that advice covers the definition set out in this question. Is the gardener really a volunteer?

5. <http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/doc/5739%5Cmrdoc%5Cpdf%5C5739userguide.pdf>

**The helpful neighbours.** Two next-door neighbours both have busy social and work lives. They both have cats and one has a goldfish. So they each ask the other to look after house and pets while they are away. It works very well. They are good neighbours but are they really volunteers?

**The chat-room moderator.** The internet is a whole new form of community developed over the last ten or so years. And it has bought about a whole new type of volunteer – those who set up and moderate on-line communities. The citizenship survey doesn't appear to account for (or even have heard of) online volunteering. So the enthusiastic individual who moderates a chatgroup for the parents of disabled children is certainly a volunteer but unlikely to be picked up in this survey

**The helpful mums and dads.** There can be few parents who haven't given and received help from other parents while bringing up children. The informal child sitting, the baby-sitting circles, the passing on of clothes and toys and so on. However it is a very moot point whether people who help each other with childcare as they bring up children are in any sense volunteers. They help others because they know that they in due course will be helped.

Perhaps the biggest question that arises out of the way that the Citizenship survey measures (informal) volunteering is what are they measuring and what should it be called. Our view is that much of what the citizenship survey measures is not volunteering at all, but the strength of social capital in neighbourhoods and communities. We believe it would be much better to rename informal volunteering as neighbourliness or social capital.

However our biggest concern is about how, and what, is measured in the area of formal volunteering.

## **Formal volunteering**

As the definition of formal volunteering set out at the beginning of the paper makes clear it is unpaid help given through clubs, groups and organisations. Our concern is that the categories prompted in the survey question (shown in box 3) encompass a set of activities that might at best be better included in informal volunteering and at worst are just good parenting or being a supportive partner or friend.

The key flaw in the survey question is that while in the informal volunteering section it is made clear that help '*for someone who was not a relative*' was relevant, no such caveat is included in the survey on formal volunteering.

As a result the Citizenship Survey overestimates the level of volunteering in many different ways. The questions in the government's survey could include volunteering as any of the following:

## How these measures could mis-estimate formal volunteering levels.

Seven examples of ways in which these figures over-estimate formal volunteers:

**The sport-supporting grandparent.** A grandparent who goes to watch their grandchild play sport of any kind and gives them a lift fits easily within the definitions set out. The same would also apply to a parent or other family member.

**The union activist.** Trade union activity is clearly covered in the survey. It is clearly unpaid help and indeed most trade union activities are covered in the suggested activity types in box 3. So on this basis somebody on a picket line would be boosting government volunteering targets!

### Box 3: How the government measures formal volunteering

*In a moment I'll give you some cards. Please pick out the ones which best describe any groups, clubs or organisations you've taken part in, supported or helped, over the last 12 months. On each card are some examples, although what you do may not be on the cards. (Our red highlighting and our addition of the 'Type of activity' and 'type of help' headings)*

#### **Type of activity**

- (1) *Children's education/ schools*
- (2) *Youth/children's activities (outside school)*
- (3) *Education for adults*
- (4) *Sports/exercise (taking part, coaching or going to watch)*
- (5) *Religion*
- (6) *Politics*
- (7) *The elderly*
- (8) *Health, Disability and Social welfare*
- (9) *Safety, First Aid*
- (10) *The environment, animals*
- (11) *Justice and Human Rights*
- (12) *Local community or neighbourhood groups*
- (13) *Citizens' Groups*
- (14) *Hobbies / Recreation / Arts/ Social clubs*
- (15) *Trade union activity*
- (16) *Other*
- (17) *NONE OF THESE*

*Now I would like you to look at this showcard. In the last 12 months have you given*

*unpaid help to any groups, clubs or organisations in any of the ways shown on this card?  
(Our red highlighting)*

**Type of help**

- (1) Raising or handling money/taking part in sponsored events
- (2) *Leading the group/ member of a committee*
- (3) Organising or helping to run an activity or event
- (4) *Visiting people*
- (5) *Befriending or mentoring people*
- (6) *Giving advice/information/counselling*
- (7) Secretarial, admin or clerical work
- (8) *Providing transport/driving*
- (9) Representing
- (10) Campaigning
- (11) Other practical help (e.g. helping out at school, shopping)
- (12) *Any other help*
- (13) NONE OF THE ABOVE

Web reference: <http://www.dataarchive.ac.uk/doc/5739%5Cmrdoc%5Cpdf%5C5739userguide.pdf>

(our emphasis in red)

**The religious lift-giver.** Religion is one of the categories in the types of activity in box 3. It is fair to assume that this is designed to include regular church-goers and so anybody who gives a lift on a regular basis to another church-goer would be a volunteer.

**The conscientious parent of a schoolchild.** Any parent of a primary school-child will know that the list of activities for which parental help is needed is almost limitless. So a parent who helps their child prepare for the nativity play or reads in their class would not be a volunteer in our view – whereas the retired civil servant who does the same for their local school would be a volunteer in our view. The reason for doing unpaid work is absolutely critical, so the omission in the question pre-amble in box 3 in order to '*exclude help for relatives*' is a critical oversight.

**The football loving woman and her supporter husband.** For most of the types of activity in box 3 we can see how the intention was right but the implementation poor. However the inclusion of those who play or watch sport leaves us flummoxed (whereas the coach is undoubtedly a volunteer). A person who plays sport or watches is most unlikely to be a volunteer. So a football loving woman who plays every Sunday is not a volunteer in our view – and nor is her husband or boyfriend irrespective of his motives!

**The bridge-playing pensioner.** There are many people who enjoy a social club or hobby or recreation. Does this make them a volunteer? In most cases we think not. The regular bridge-player is probably not a

volunteer but the secretary who organises the sessions and the occasional match probably is a volunteer.

When we think of volunteering using the vignettes we have outlined above, most of us would object, to some, if not all of these activities being included. However we don't pretend that defining a volunteer is easy. The activities set out or suggested by the survey form a spectrum ranging from those which clearly are volunteering to those which clearly aren't (in our view at least). We believe that the current Citizenship Survey draws the line in a way which is too inclusive for too many activities. At the heart of what is and isn't volunteering is self-interest.

For us, many of these activities are worthwhile and their perpetrators good neighbours, good parents, good citizens, good church-goers or good workers – but simply not volunteers. When a parent looks after another child because they know that they will need a similar type of help in the near future then it is hard to see that it is volunteering. The motive is too clearly self-interest. Similarly calling the cheering supporter on the sidelines a volunteer masks and overshadows the contribution of the volunteer coach whose contribution is so much more important.

We believe that the current approach over-estimates the number of volunteers and masks a wider failure to increase the levels of volunteering despite the high level of investment in volunteering by the government.

## **Civic Participation**

Alongside formal and informal volunteering the Citizenship survey measures the number of people who take part in what the survey calls "civic participation".

Box 4 shows the way that the Citizenship Survey asks about these issues. We believe that the way these questions frame engagement civic participation is likely to over-estimate the number of people who actually influence 'local affairs'.

The only personal issue cited as an exclusion in the question pre-ambule is 'housing repairs' which we believe is unlikely to be clear enough to exclude all those who have contacted a local government official for a multitude of reasons: being their bins haven't been collected, to find out about benefits, to complain about their council tax.

### **Box 4: How the government measures Civic Participation**

*Now thinking about whether you can influence political decisions and local affairs.*

*In the last 12 months have you contacted any of the people listed on this card? Please exclude contact with councillors or council staff for personal issues such as housing repairs, and contact through work.*

*CODE ALL THAT APPLY*

*(1) Local councillor*

*(2) Member of Parliament (MP)*

*(3) Public official working for local council*

*(4) Government official*

*(5) Elected member of the Greater London Assembly - including the Mayor of*

*London*

*(6) Public official working for the Greater London Assembly/ Authority*

*(7) Elected member of the National Assembly for Wales - including the*

*First*

*Minister*

*(8) Public official working for the National Assembly for Wales*

*(9) NONE OF THE ABOVE*

## **Recommendations and conclusions**

### **Recommendation 1: Re-christen informal volunteering as neighbourliness, community-spirit or social capital**

Our first recommendation is that what is currently called informal volunteering is re-christened community-spirit, neighbourliness or social capital. We believed that it is misleading for several reasons but perhaps most importantly because the kind of activities that are included are not part of a popular definition of volunteering. It would be more accurate to call them one of the titles we suggest. They are laudable activities and the more of them there are, the greater the health of many communities. They simply aren't volunteering.

### **Recommendation 2: Stop integrating informal and formal volunteering**

A second reason we believe that "informal" should not be called volunteering, is that including them in the wider volunteering figure gives an artificially positive picture of the overall level of volunteering in the UK. For this reason we recommend that 'all volunteering' from now on should simply be formal volunteering. The citizenship survey would then measure citizenship, social capital (however labelled) and volunteering.

### **Recommendation 3: Tighten the survey definitions to exclude loop-holes**

We have pointed out many loop-holes and anomalies in the way that the Citizenship survey measures volunteering. We believe that the questions on the survey need to be re-engineered to exclude the loop-holes that we have identified. We also believe that this would be a good opportunity to discuss the measurement of these pro-social activities with a range of relevant groups.

### **Recommendation 4: Report on volunteering with a more fine-grained approach**

The loose definitions make changes in levels of volunteering difficult to measure. If a parent who routinely drives their children to sport started to volunteer regularly for a charity this would not register as a difference in volunteering under the current government definitions. This makes tracking changes in volunteering far more difficult, and perhaps explains why so little shift has been seen in volunteering levels.

More important the way that volunteering is measured should relate to the investment that is made in volunteering. The current investments by government do little to promote informal volunteering, nor politics, nor campaigning, nor citizenship. So government targets for volunteering should relate not to all volunteering but just formal volunteering. Otherwise increases in informal volunteering or citizenship could result in the achievement of government targets despite the fact that investments by government may have little bearing on their levels.

### **Conclusion**

A more detailed picture of what is happening with volunteering is desperately needed. Further research into how effective government investment in volunteering has been will allow us to assess the current approach and maximize future efforts to get people involved.