

The TUC Charter for Strengthening Relations between Paid Staff and Volunteers — then and now!

Introduction

The *Charter for Strengthening Relations between Paid Staff and Volunteers* (TUC 2009) was published towards the end of Britain's New Labour government and just before the advent of the Conservatives' austerity programme. The Charter is an agreement between Volunteering England—England's national volunteering development agency at the time—and the Trades Union Congress (TUC) about principles to strengthen relationships between paid staff and volunteers. The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), which has incorporated Volunteering England, and the TUC are currently developing a new Charter (National Volunteer Forum 2020). To understand its value and limitations, we need to consider the 2009 Charter's origins and aims. The Charter focuses on establishing a fair and productive relationship between volunteers and paid staff, recognising that organisations using volunteers have a responsibility to support and develop them. Volunteering is viewed primarily through the lens of social capital: for society, it's an important link in sustaining social cohesion and for the individual volunteer, a means to develop social and employment skills. In this, the Charter reflects key New Labour themes. However, just after its publication New Labour was replaced by a right-wing Conservative/Lib Dem coalition, which initiated an ideologically inspired programme of public sector service cuts and a call for 'The Big Society'—reducing the state's role and encouraging charities and volunteers to step into the void. In the subsequent election the Conservatives retained a majority, and continued with their austerity programme and an emphasis on volunteerism. After a decade of austerity, organisations, paid staff and volunteers struggle to provide services. Government has pushed the idea of volunteers filling the gap. Paid workers see volunteers as potential substitutions for professional and stable services. In examining the Charter's continuing role and value, we should ask how it can still address relations between paid staff and volunteers, in a policy context which has shifted from a focus on social capital to leveraging in social resources to fill the gap in social provision.

The 2009 Charter

The Charter sets out basic principles of good practice in organising volunteering in the workplace and ensuring constructive relationships between volunteers and paid staff.

Its starting point is the different nature of volunteers and paid staff and, arising from this, the particular value and contribution of volunteering to society. Volunteers give their time free, rather than for financial gain, while paid staff are employed within the organisation and work under its close

direction. This distinction is central to understanding the core themes that guide the Charter's principles. Volunteering is a matter of choice: a commitment made not from financial motives, but from to benefit a community. People shouldn't be pressured to volunteer, and while, unlike paid workers, volunteers are not financially compensated for their work, they may have out-of-pocket expenses, which should be covered by the organisation.

The Charter's second theme is clarification of the role of voluntary staff as complementary and supplementary to that of paid staff. Their role is not to replace paid staff or to undercut their terms and conditions. They bring something to the organisation and to their work which is quite different from the contribution of paid staff. Recognising this, the Charter emphasises that to promote good relations, volunteers should not be used to cover the work of paid staff during industrial disputes. It also calls for organisations seeking grants or applying for work commissions to be clear about the role of volunteers as over and above the basic service, and not use their role to try and reduce contract costs.

The next theme recognises that volunteers, in doing their work, require continuing support and development, and should have access to this in the same way as paid workers. Their physical and emotional work environment should be safe and healthy, and non-oppressive, free from intimidation and discrimination. Volunteers should have access to appropriate training and development opportunities; and these services should be costed and properly resourced by the organisation.

The final theme of the Charter relates to good organisational citizenship. Volunteers, paid staff and their representatives should be able to participate in developing relevant policies and practices around volunteering work. There should be a transparent and robust process for resolving misunderstandings and disputes, in relation to tensions both between volunteers and organisations, and between volunteers and paid staff.

To understand the Charter's strengths and limitations, we must consider two things: a fundamental difference between volunteering and voluntary organisations and how this informs concerns about relations between volunteers and paid staff; and the continued change over the past century of the relationship between the state and the voluntary sector.

Volunteering and volunteers' concerns

As well as volunteers working with public sector and private employees, the Charter is also concerned with those working alongside paid voluntary sector employees. The vast majority of volunteers (65%) work in the voluntary and community sector, compared to 23% in the statutory sector and 11% in the private sector. (Low et al 2007) Most work in areas such as education, recreation and health and

disabilities. The voluntary sector changed significantly in the two decades leading to the late 2000s, under the influence first of comparative tendering and more recently the promotion of the third sector as a complement to public sector provision. While the overwhelming number of voluntary organisations are small and local, there is also a significant corporate voluntary sector of large organisations. Over 80% of voluntary sector income is accounted for by 6,000 corporate voluntary organisations, while the remaining 70,000 organisations account for under 20% of the sector's income (NCVO 2020). This division in income echoes a cultural division in the voluntary sector in reaction to the government's funding shift from grants to contracts and the expectation of more business-like approaches. Many small voluntary organisations retain an ethos of independence, needs-focused and informal, but there is also a group of organisations that has embraced the contract culture, business attitudes and an entrepreneurial approach (Buckingham 2010).

It's useful to review the strata of conceptions of the relationship between the state and the voluntary sector in Britain over the last century.

Lewis (1999) identifies three significant shifts in this relationship. In the early twentieth century social services — largely provided by the local state — were local and limited. The voluntary sector was a major force in filling gaps in provision; volunteering was driven by charity and seen as a vehicle for the volunteer's moral fulfilment. Following Attlee's post-war government reforms, the state took on provision of welfare services, and the voluntary sector became marginal, focusing on developing new services on the margins of public provision and campaigning for unmet needs. The relationship again changed as part of Thatcherism's war on the welfare state from the 1980s. In seeking to shrink the state, Conservative governments saw the voluntary sector as a prime candidate to take over formerly public services. In a sense this reflected the status quo in many European states, where civil society actors had for some time played a key role in service provision. However, for the Conservative governments this was not a social strategy, but an economic move to create a mixed economy of services, with access to volunteers providing the voluntary sector with a competitive advantage. In this context voluntary organisations were encouraged to be more business-like and to professionalise their approach.

At the turn of the new millennium, New Labour introduced another shift – or perhaps blur — in the relationship between volunteerism and the state. While it carried over elements of the previous Conservative government's business approaches to the voluntary sector, it promoted voluntary provision as a positive force alongside the state. Voluntary provision was seen as innovative, promoting social cohesion, linking services to communities and enhancing citizens' social integration through volunteering. New Labour matched this commitment with resources. The government significantly increased public spending to support voluntary provision; in the first decade of the 2000s, public funding for the voluntary sector increased from £11bn a year in 2000/01 to £17bn in 2009/10 (National Council for Voluntary Organisations 2020).

A national study of people's experiences of and attitudes to volunteering (Low et al 2007:10), undertaken just as the Charter was being drafted, noted that: 'Never before has the UK government directed such attention to volunteering, or invested so heavily in initiatives to promote it.' It found that volunteers felt appreciated — volunteering, as the Charter notes, has the potential to enable individuals to feel connected and useful. However, the study also found concerns among volunteers about key aspects of their relationship with the organisation. A quarter of respondents didn't feel able to stop their voluntary work because they knew there was no one to step into their role. There were also significant concerns about poor organisation and bureaucracy: 77% were not reimbursed for out-of-pocket expenses; and while training, when it was given, was viewed positively, 79% received none. In relation to health and safety in the workplace 27% of volunteers reported that they had not received information on risk reduction.

The Charter is clearly framed by assumptions that volunteering promotes social inclusion. It also reflects these concerns from volunteers, with an emphasis on volunteering and choice; noting that, while not paid for their work, volunteers should receive expenses; and underlining the need to provide adequate training and continuing support, and a safe working environment. Union concerns about volunteers replacing paid staff or undercutting terms and conditions are present but as a possible danger rather than an immediate concern.

The Big Society, Austerity and Volunteering

The Charter was published a year after the 2008 financial crisis. Within six months of its publication the new Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition swept aside Labour resistance to public service cuts, marking a severe right-wing shift in economic and social policy. It imposed '... cuts upon the welfare budget, the police force, libraries, Legal Aid, the Citizens Advice Bureau and in particular Local Authorities...[which were] ... made "politically feasible" by talk of the Big Society.' (Gibson 2015:45) The public was assured that cuts in services would be mitigated by Burke's 'little platoons' of volunteers.

On the face of it, the coalition's policy towards the voluntary sector seemed to be a continuation of New Labour's. David Cameron talked about the 'big society', placing a great emphasis on the importance of volunteering and voluntary organisations (Gibson 2015). However, while voluntarism had been seen by New Labour as a support and supplement to public sector provision, Cameron saw it as an alternative. The Big Society sought to shrink the state and assumed that the voluntary sector would rush in to fill the vacuum. This idea looked back to Victorian England and the early 20th century, when most social services were local and voluntary. Cameron harked back to Thatcher's views on public spending and charity's role in meeting social needs. Under austerity, funding has been

reduced from £17bn a year in the last year of New Labour to around £15.7bn per year, and the proportion of funding from private sources increased from 60% to 70% (NCVO 2020).

The Big Society provided cover for the government's fundamental agenda of austerity (Gibson 2015). Austerity was a political decision to cut public services: it '...was a clear move to the right: an intensification of the neoliberal project to roll back the state' (Wren-Lewis 2016:10). Even in the NHS, which was supposedly 'protected' from cuts, there was a failure to match demographic change and increasing demands arising from draconian cuts in local authority services such as social care and housing (Kerasidou and Cribb 2019)

The public sector was to be reduced to a night-watchman state, and services such as youth services, community arts and library services were seen as candidates for the voluntary sector to pick up. While many in the voluntary sector were concerned about this move others were not. In a speech at the Labour Party Conference the chief executive of Volunteering Matters complained that 'One of the criticisms meted out at our part of the sector is that volunteers are replacing paid staff; I would put it to you that the jobs they're doing are never going to return under any administration.' (Weakley 2016)

The effect of a greater use of volunteers is noted in a Joseph Rowntree Foundation report (Hastings 2015) on austerity's early impact. It notes volunteers' resilience in response to the cuts; but also clear impact on service quality—volunteers do not have the skills of paid workers— and growing resentment among paid workers of the impact on services and their colleagues' jobs. The report (Hastings et al 2015:80) notes tensions building in relations between volunteers and paid workers: 'One library services provider described how a flagship library had been closed and then reopened using volunteers "to the eternal shame of the city council"'. It also describes some paid staff's anger towards volunteers (in the library service): 'They've got nothing to do with us. We won't take their books in, because we've had good friends who've been made compulsorily redundant.'

At the same time volunteers are working with greater numbers of people and with increasingly complex situations, making volunteering—often presented by Government as a free good—costly. Organisations need the infra-structure and resources to support and train volunteers; but where are the resources to do this? A manager in a voluntary organisation points out 'When people like the council say "well they're free" – oh God, they're not, they take a lot of work.' (Hastings et al 2015:93).

Government now relies on volunteers as an answer to a problem— not just as plaster over public funding cuts, but a response to a crisis. This is illustrated by a recent short-notice demand by the Education Secretary that schools bring in volunteers to administer Covid tests for students. The National Education Union sees the plan as unworkable: 'Telling school leaders, on the last day of term, that they must organise volunteers and parents, supported by their staff, to test pupils in the first week of term, whilst year 11 and 13 pupils are on site for in-school teaching, is a ridiculous ask of

professionals who are exhausted by the unreasonable demands, backed by legal threats, that they have been subjected to this term.' (Daily Mirror 2020)

The past ten years, then, have created a very different context for understanding the relationship between public services and voluntarism. The government's agenda is for the replacement of public provision with charity, and of public sector jobs with volunteers. In this context, the 2009 Charter is unable to address the new pressures created by the last decade's socio-economic policies.

A Charter for the 2020s?

While the idea of volunteers' contribution and role in public services is positive, the reality is much more complex. Public funding for the voluntary sector has been reduced. While the rhetoric of the Big Society has subsided, voluntary bodies are expected to raise their own funds to fill the gaps in public services created by severe cuts. Relations between voluntarism and professional provision have changed for the worst. When the 2009 Charter was published the predominant sense was of the volunteers and voluntary sector services as a complement to paid staff and public services. Now volunteers are foisted on services by the government as a cost-free alternative to paid staff or as a panic response to a gap in strategic planning. Recent versions of volunteer/paid worker charters reflect concerns with these changes; while continuing to value the contribution of the voluntary sector, they now foreground concerns about potential threats to the quality of public services and to paid workers.

Two recent charters illustrate this move and suggest how the TUC charter needs to develop in order to respond to contemporary concerns.

Helpforce, a national organisation in England working in health and social care to increase volunteering, has agreed a charter with health unions to strengthen relations between the programme and NHS staff (Helpforce England and Joint Unions 2019). A core principle is that: 'the Healthforce volunteer programme will not undermine current or future paid roles in the health workforce, and tasks to meet essential health and care needs of patients and service-users will always be undertaken by paid staff.' In the specific context of the NHS, the charter clearly sets out volunteers' role: they should not be seen as substitutes for specific tasks undertaken by workers; their work shouldn't compromise paid staff by seeking to substitute voluntary work for therapeutic and emerging job roles; and volunteering boundaries must recognise paid staff's expertise and ethical responsibilities to service-users.

In Wales, TUC Cymru and Wales Council for Voluntary Action (2020) published a more wide-ranging charter extending beyond the NHS to address relations between voluntary and paid staff in public, private and voluntary organisations. It reiterates the value of volunteers' work seen in the 2009

Charter, but adds recognition that 'difficulties can arise, for example, when boundaries between paid worker and volunteer roles are not clear, when volunteers are felt to be exploited, or where paid roles are perceived as being threatened or undermined by the presence or activities of volunteers'. Concern that volunteers are pressured into filling gaps created by austerity, and that professional public services are threatened by the government's promotion of volunteering is clearly foregrounded. Accordingly, the charter adds to the 2009 TUC Charter's expectation. First, volunteering should not be a short-term response to crisis situations: it should be planned and recognised that volunteers need support, training and payment of expenses; and organisational managers should recognise the risk of resentment because of the use of volunteers. Second, there is a clear idea of voluntary and paid work as distinct, although complementary; and, while positive reasons are recognized for volunteers to be involved in service provision, cost-reduction is not a valid purpose, and the nature of volunteer involvement should be transparent in all costing. Volunteers are: 'not designed to conform to the usual working day. Volunteering is a matter of choice, and volunteers have the right to volunteer or, indeed, not to volunteer.'

The 2009 Charter focused on supporting volunteers and addressing paid workers' worries about the contract culture's excesses. However, the world has changed since 2009. Social investment in voluntary and public sector partnership has been replaced by austerity and the substitution of public services by volunteerism. The planned review of the Charter is likely to continue supporting volunteers' development but also to reflect newer concerns about volunteerism, and threats to professional services and paid staff's jobs and conditions.

3070 words

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