

Briefing Paper 65

Voluntary sector organisations working at the neighbourhood level in England: patterns by local area deprivation

David Clifford

The potential for unevenness in voluntary sector activity has been a prominent theme in research, and policy debate, for many years. In 1978, for example, the Wolfenden Report argued that ‘some social and geographical contexts seem to provide a much more fertile soil for voluntary action than others’ (Wolfenden, 1978: 58). However, there has been very little national-level empirical work to show whether or not this is indeed the case – and much that does exist describes patterns in the geography of volunteering (for example, Mohan et al., 2006) rather than the geography of voluntary organisations, or focuses on organisations but not on variation between local contexts. **We are not aware of any studies, in any country, which use nationally representative data to describe local variations in the prevalence of voluntary organisations. Therefore, this paper uses recently available nationally representative data for England to compare the prevalence of ‘local voluntary organisations’ (those working at the neighbourhood level) between different kinds of local areas according to the nature of local area deprivation.**

There are two main reasons why geographical differences in the prevalence of local voluntary organisations may be important. First, to the extent to which local organisations are involved in providing services and amenities, the differences have implications for the equity of provision (Milligan, 2001; Bryson et al., 2002). Second, these differences may translate into variations in the opportunity to participate in voluntary group activities (Milligan and Fyfe, 2004). Voluntary participation is considered a structural element of social capital – associated with the cultural aspects consisting of norms, values and trust (see McCulloch et al., 2010) – which is a characteristic

of communities that facilitates ‘co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit’ (Putnam, 1995: 67).

These themes are particularly topical given political developments in the UK emphasising the importance of the voluntary sector to the building of a Big Society, in which ‘people come together to solve problems and to improve life for themselves and the community’ (Conservatives, 2010). The government’s reform agenda is designed to give new powers and rights to neighbourhood groups in order to help communities address local issues (for example, in being able to bid to take over the running of community amenities, such as parks and libraries, that are under threat). One of the stated ambitions is that ‘every adult in the country becomes an active member of an active neighbourhood group’ (Conservatives, 2010). **This paper provides an important perspective on the variation in the existing capacity of the local voluntary sector – and therefore helps us understand the context within which current developments in the UK are taking place.**

But these themes are also of wider and enduring significance. The potential for unevenness in voluntary activity keys into discussions about the role of the voluntary sector in the provision of services, and about the relationship between government and the voluntary sector. Where voluntary organisations focus on particular subgroups of the population this can allow responsiveness to their community of interest (Smith and Lipsky, 1993), but this need not in the aggregate tie in with broader social goals of ensuring equity of access to public services and amenities (Smith and Gronbjerg, 2006). For Salamon (1987), an important role for government

is to provide financial support to the voluntary sector so that these gaps can be addressed.

Therefore, an original feature of this paper is to examine the relationship between government funding and the geographical distribution of voluntary organisations, by disaggregating the overall spatial patterns by whether or not organisations receive public income.

The analysis available in the full Working Paper presents patterns in the prevalence rate of 'local voluntary organisations' (voluntary organisations working at the neighbourhood scale) per 1,000 people. It compares the prevalence rate of local voluntary organisations between less deprived and more deprived local areas (measured by the Index of Multiple Deprivation at the Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) level). This requires information on 'occurrence', the number of organisations, and 'exposure', the population size, within these areas.

The aim of this paper has been to provide empirical research to complement and test existing theory about the potential for unevenness in voluntary sector activity – and to test it at a local level, where there is particular theoretical basis for expecting variation. It shows, for the first time, the very real geographical differences across England in the prevalence of voluntary organisations working at a local scale. Next we ask three important questions about these results – are they robust? What processes underlie them? And what are the implications – do they matter?

Robustness of results and challenges for inference

In this paper we use information from a survey to make inferences about geographical variations in the prevalence of local formal voluntary sector organisations across England. We make conclusions about patterns in the population of these organisations from patterns in our sample – and there are two main challenges to the robustness of this inference.

The first centres on any biases introduced by differences between the sampling frame and the population of organisations on the ground.¹ We know that, by definition, organisations which are 'below the [regulatory] radar' (see, for example, McCabe and Phillimore, 2009) will not be registered with the Charity Commission or with Companies House, so will not appear in the sampling frame. The concern is not so much that we are missing more informal, community based groups *per se* – since they are not in our target population – but that there may be systematic

differences in the propensity to register, reflecting differences in the level of formality of activity, between different kinds of areas. Williams (2003) argues that while questions on volunteering tend to record the formal associational activity of those of higher socio-economic status, the more informal neighbourliness of localities with people of lower socio-economic status is less well captured. In terms of organisations, Knight (1993: 135-136) argues that associations rather than institutions, relying on informal contacts more than formal office systems and constitutions, are particularly characteristic of less affluent areas. Therefore, any analysis considering the implications of differences in formal voluntary activity according to levels of area deprivation should be sensitive to this concern. We argue that it is a particular issue when considering the implications in terms of opportunities to participate in voluntary activities, but less of an issue when considering implications in terms of equity in service provision – since the kinds of organisations providing services tend to be institutional in character.

The second challenge for inference centres on any biases introduced by non-response: organisations which were selected to be in the survey but which did not respond to the questionnaire. The unit response rate was 47%: questionnaires were sent out to 104,931 organisations and 48,939 organisations responded. While this is a reasonable response rate to a survey of this kind, it remains a significant issue. Weights were used to adjust for differences in the probability of responding to the survey between different forms of organisations and between local authorities, but bias would be introduced if there was a systematic difference in the probability of responding to the survey according to level of area deprivation. However, some of the key features of the results – including the size of the difference in prevalence between different kinds of areas, the shape of the relationship between deprivation and prevalence, and the heterogeneity of patterns of prevalence such that the relationship with deprivation is in a different direction for different kinds of organisations – make it implausible that they are simply a reflection of differences in response-rates.

Overall, note that our survey dataset provides only a partial perspective. It provides information on voluntary sector organisations, but not all of voluntary activity. It doesn't include unregistered organisations. In focusing on organisations that work within one local neighbourhood, we do not capture the activity of organisations that work

across the country in a variety of local contexts. It does not include most places of worship, which are often a hub for community activity. On the other hand, the patterns do illustrate differences across the country in the prevalence of an estimated 60,000 registered organisations working at a local scale.

Processes underlying patterns

The patterns described here provide strong empirical support for Salamon's (1987) 'theory of voluntary sector failure'. In particular, by illustrating the much higher overall prevalence of local formal voluntary organisations in less deprived areas than in more deprived areas, it provides support for how the theme of resource insufficiency plays out spatially: 'the resources are frequently not available where the problems are most severe' (p. 40).

Therefore, understanding the distribution of local voluntary organisations requires consideration of how resources, as well as needs, come to vary spatially. A key feature of this analysis has been to show how the prevalence of voluntary organisations varies *locally* between levels of different area deprivation, even within similar kinds of local authority. In turn, this focuses attention on the processes underlying local differences in deprivation, and in particular to the role of labour and housing markets in sorting people over space and concentrating deprivation: while the relatively affluent can choose to live within certain kinds of neighbourhoods, the less affluent cannot (Meen et al., 2005; North and Syrett, 2008; McCulloch et al., 2010). While this serves to concentrate financial resources, it also serves to concentrate human capital, with further implications for the sector's capacity. Clearly while the patterns in prevalence of formal organisations were observed at one point in time, they are an outcome of a longer process. This is consistent with the importance of deprivation since patterns of local deprivation tend to persist for considerable periods of time (McCulloch et al., 2010).

Implications of patterns: equity of service provision

The results, showing differences in the prevalence of local formal voluntary organisations between different kinds of areas, represent some of the strongest empirical evidence for the unevenness of formal voluntary sector activity to date.² But do these differences matter? Different arguments can be made. One of the clear findings of the paper is that not only is there a higher prevalence of local organisations in less deprived areas – but that

this reflects a higher prevalence of certain kinds of organisations (Working Paper figure 3 and figure 4). **Groups involved in culture and leisure, and education and lifelong learning, are more prevalent in less deprived areas than in more deprived areas – and, since these are amongst the most numerous kinds of local organisations, this means that the prevalence of voluntary organisations is highest here too.** If the overall pattern simply reflects the formalisation of leisure and cultural activities in less deprived areas, there may be no desire for equity in local voluntary provision. After all, from a liberal perspective, the voluntary sector doesn't just provide services, but acts as a forum for individual and collective freedom of expression (Kendall, 2003: 112). Therefore, one view would be that, as Gladstone (1979, paraphrased by Deakin, 1995) argues, even given the potential for unevenness in voluntary sector provision, isn't this better than 'the drab disabling uniformity of a state sector in decline'?

However, much of the concern about the potential for unevenness in voluntary sector provision does not centre on the 'expressive' role of the voluntary sector but surrounds the role of the voluntary sector in the provision of services and of welfare. From this perspective, an uneven distribution of voluntary organisations translates into inequitable service provision. In particular, there is concern that voluntary activity does not necessarily map onto areas of greatest need (Wolch and Geiger, 1983; Fyfe and Milligan, 2003a). Milligan (2001) notes the voluntary sector has no commitment to equity in service provision, and Bryson et al. (2002) argue that unevenness is a reason why charity should supplement, and not substitute, for state welfare provision. **Interestingly, the results presented here show that local organisations working in the field of economic well-being are actually more prevalent in the most deprived areas; that bigger local voluntary organisations are more prevalent in more deprived areas; and that – while in general less deprived areas have a higher prevalence of organisations delivering public services – the most deprived areas of all also have high prevalence rates.** We can be confident that this represents the situation on the ground since the kind of organisations providing services will tend to be institutional rather than informal, having 'an existence autonomous from their surrounding environment' (Cnaan and Milofsky, 2007: 2), and so should appear in our sampling frame.

But, to the extent to which these services are indeed matched on to areas of greatest need, this should be understood within the context of

patterns of funding. Importantly, for the first time, this paper has presented patterns in the prevalence of organisations that do and do not receive public funding. Thus, for each of the kinds of organisations with a high prevalence in the most deprived areas – including in the field of economic well-being and in the delivery of public services (Working Paper figure 7, figure 8) – this reflects the presence of organisations which receive money from government.

Conservative plans to give new powers and rights to neighbourhood groups in the UK should be understood within this context. For example, neighbourhoods ‘will be able to bid to take over the running of community amenities, such as parks and libraries that are under threat’ and ‘will be given a right of first refusal to buy state-owned community assets that are for sale or facing closure’ (Conservatives, 2010).

The analysis presented in this paper, by showing differences in the prevalence of local voluntary organisations in different kinds of areas, suggests that some communities will be much better equipped than others to take on these new powers. To the extent to which certain kinds of voluntary groups are more prevalent in areas of greatest need, this is in the presence of public funding – and even with public funding, more deprived areas lack the prevalence of local buildings and facilities (for example, community centres) that less deprived areas enjoy (Working Paper figure 8). These results therefore emphasise the importance of government funding to the voluntary sector, particularly in the more deprived areas. These results are of wider significance, beyond the UK and the current political context. In particular, they are consistent with Salamon’s (1987) argument that resource insufficiency, together with other voluntary sector failures, provides a strong reason for partnership between government and the voluntary sector,

and in particular for public funding of voluntary organisations.

Thus, while within a ‘mixed economy of welfare’ services may be provided by voluntary organisations (Harris and Rochester, 2001) – which may be well suited to personalise the provision of services and to operate on a small scale – government strengths complement voluntary sector weaknesses: government is ‘in a better position to finance needed services’, and is ‘in a better position to ensure the equitable distribution of those resources among parts of the country and segments of the population’ (Salamon 1987: 45).

Implications of patterns: voluntary participation

Considering the implications of the results in this paper for voluntary participation is more difficult: unlike those organisations providing services and amenities, many of the more informal community and neighbourhood groups would not be included in the sampling frame for the survey. Thus while voluntary participation is considered a structural element of social capital, we do not observe all relevant neighbourhood groups. Nevertheless, the results presented here do serve to illustrate the relative lack of opportunity to be involved in more formal local voluntary groups in deprived areas. This complements results showing lower rates of formal volunteering in deprived areas (for example, McCulloch et al., 2010). The results underline the association between formal aspects of voluntarism and levels of deprivation. Note that, to the extent to which volunteering opportunities are provided through formal local organisations, since fewer of these organisations exist in deprived areas there is a particular reliance on those organisations which receive public funds. In this respect, too, government financial support is important.

¹ This will arise also through branch structures – where subsidiary organisations working at a branch level under a central headquarters are not separately registered, in these cases only the headquarters would be included in the sampling frame. This would only affect the patterns presented here if there was shown to be a systematic tendency for neighbourhood organisations to be more likely to be an unregistered branch, rather than an independently registered entity, in certain kinds of areas than others.

² Note that the evidence is strong and detailed – but the perspective is *partial*. Clearly, examining the prevalence of local voluntary organisations in different kinds of areas only provides a partial perspective on the extent of total voluntary sector activity in these areas – given the work done at a local scale by organisations working across the country, across regions and across local-authorities.

This paper is part of the Third Sector Research Centre – Briefing Paper Series see www.tsrc.ac.uk for more details and a copy of the full Working Paper 65.

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