



Something for something: A national youth action programme

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"Everybody can be great because anybody can serve." Martin Luther King Jr

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1. Introduction

There has been growing interest recently, both at home and abroad, in the possibilities of youth volunteering and civic service. Across Europe politicians and commentators have been debating the abandonment of national military service, as they have done in France, and re-inventing it as a form of civic service, as they are doing in Italy. In the United States, Bill Clinton created the national youth service programme, AmeriCorps, and claims it as one of his most valuable legacies.

Here in the UK, the government wants to promote youth volunteering and to stimulate civil renewal. Recently, Chancellor Gordon Brown (2004) said the government plans to consult on a national framework of community service for young people. The Chancellor said: “We want to examine...whether we can, through making it a national priority, engage a new generation of young people in serving their communities”¹. The Home Secretary, David Blunkett (2003) has argued that: “civil renewal must form the centrepiece of the government’s reform agenda in the coming years”.

We take civil renewal to be an articulation of the achievement of civic engagement, where civic engagement means participation by citizens in the public realm. In this paper, **we are interested in the role youth action might play in promoting lasting civic engagement and other valuable ends. We use ‘youth action’ as an umbrella term to describe the full range of voluntary activities including ‘volunteering’ and ‘civic service’.**

We have concentrated our thinking on programmes for young people (defined here as those between the ages of 14 and 24 years). We recognise that the success of a programme in meeting its objectives depends on its ability to meet the specific interests and needs of the target group and these interests and needs vary across age groups. This makes it important to focus initially on a particular age group. We recognise too that, given scarce resources, government has to prioritise certain groups so it might be useful for us to concentrate our thinking in a similar way. We

¹ The Labour Party’s ‘Big Conversation’ (2003) also asks how better support and encouragement can be provided for voluntary activity. The former Health Secretary, Alan Milburn (2003) has urged ministers to explore making voluntary activity a part of the

choose to focus on young people because this is where the political interest appears to lie and there are substantial opportunities to impact the lives of young people and generate long-term civic engagement.

The aim of this paper is to present arguments for how effective and progressive public policy on youth action might be developed. Below, we briefly outline our understanding of civil renewal and recommend that civil renewal could be a strong motivating idea to guide the future development of youth action. In the second section, we look at current youth action policy and practice highlighting lessons from the United States (US), Europe and the UK. We identify a range of policy objectives that lie behind these programmes. In the third section we consider the implications of our analysis for public policy. We address the key high-level policy questions which need to be addressed by government and outline three potential youth action programmes.

This paper builds on the ippr/Innovations in Civic Participation essay collection, 'Any volunteers for the good society?' (eds. Paxton and Nash 2002). It also draws on the discussions and presentations made at an international volunteering conference hosted by ippr in October 2003 and debate at a roundtable discussion at Labour Party Conference the same month.

The role of public policy in stimulating civil renewal

Civil renewal (or civic renewal as it is sometimes called) is a complex term invoked to cover a range of events and experiences. David Blunkett (2003b) uses the term civil renewal "to describe the policy framework that flows from a belief in active citizenship", he says:

Civil renewal is about educating, empowering and supporting citizens to be active in their communities, socially and politically...Civil renewal and active citizenship is about creating the conditions for people to take control of their own lives, with the state acting as enabler, a supporter and a facilitator

secondary school national curriculum to: "enhance the lifeblood of the voluntary sector and inject new life into active citizenship in our country."

It is outside the scope of this paper to fully interrogate the concept of civil renewal. For the purposes of this paper, we follow Nash (2002) and take the concept of civil renewal to be an articulation of achieving civic engagement, where civic engagement means participation by citizens in the public realm. In particular, **we are interested in the role youth action might play in promoting lasting civic engagement and other valuable ends.**

Youth action here might refer to formal and informal volunteering or more intensive and longer term civic service. We use the term youth action as a way of being inclusive of the many different forms activities may take and how they might be organised.

There is recognition of the link between youth action policy and civic engagement within government. For example, when the Active Communities Unit in the Home Office was re-launched in May 2002, David Blunkett talked of volunteering as part of a wider agenda on civic engagement. And in February 2004, Gordon Brown said: “the advantages [of service] for young people are clear, [it helps people] to...become more active citizens.”

Often though youth action is presented as an intrinsic good, something that should be promoted for its own sake. This is what leads to targets focused simply on increasing the numbers of volunteers or the number of hours they spend volunteering. Youth action can indeed deliver benefits to both the participant and the beneficiary of the action and this may be a reason for public policy intervention to increase the level of youth action.

We argue, however, that **public policy should be both more focused and more ambitious in what it seeks to achieve by promoting youth action rather than simply seeking to increase the numbers of volunteers.** This is because **youth action has the potential to generate lifelong habits of civic engagement**, as we will see in the next section. Civic engagement, as it is generally understood, comprises at least three forms of engagement. These are: informal social engagement with family, friends, neighbours and colleagues; participation in voluntary and community organisations, including self-help groups, charities, sports teams, clubs, women’s organisations and churches; and participation in governing and running of public bodies and government services. Clearly, civic engagement can cover a great breadth of activities and relationships.

It is desirable to bring about increased levels of civic engagement. Civic engagement benefits both those who get engaged and the community as a whole. Robert Putnam (2000) and others have shown that people who are socially and politically active are healthier, happier and more prosperous; they find it easier to find a job and have a larger pool of friends and acquaintances to call on when things go wrong. At the same time, active communities are also safer, more attractive communities, able to pull in public services, and fight for their needs and advance their interests in other ways. David Blunkett (2003a) has argued that central to his political beliefs is a concept of active citizenship or civic engagement:

the idea that individuals achieve their full potential when they are active as citizens in shaping their own lives and contributing to the governance of the community of which they are a part

Blunkett also connects civic engagement with freedom, saying: “unless we are active in the public realm, as citizens helping to shape the world around us, we are not really free. That is why active citizenship is so fundamental”.

Effective public policy needs a motivating idea. That is, it is important to be clear about what objective we want public policy interventions to achieve. The objective of promoting lasting habits of civic engagement is a desirable objective for public policy interventions in youth action.

However, we do recognise that promoting civic engagement is just one of a number of possible motivating ideas for public policy intervention to boost youth action. Other objectives might be enhancing life chances or improving public services. Clearly, though, there is a need to prioritise and promoting civic engagement and achieving the goal of civil renewal is a strong contender for the priority objective. This is partly because it has already been shown to have **significant potential for success** in this area. And it is partly because although increased levels of civic engagement are clearly desirable, **there are very few public policy levers available to bring this about, so we have to maximise the use of those that do appear to be promising.**

In the next section, we examine current youth action policy and practice to assess the extent to which it is up to the challenge of delivering lasting civic engagement.

We also consider what lessons we can learn from overseas to inform the development of youth action policy in the UK.

2. Current policy and practice

From time to time over the past decades, academics, commentators and politicians have argued that we in the UK would benefit from some sort of volunteering, service, 'gap year' or citizenship programme for young people (see, for example, MacCormick 1994). Recently we have seen a renewed interest, within government, in the potential of these sorts of programmes, especially for young people from less well-off and disadvantaged communities. For example, the idea of an Experience Year proposed by Chen and Bell (2002), Paxton's (2002) proposal for linking civic involvement with asset-base welfare or the government pilot project, Young Volunteer Challenge. Discussion has also centred around concerns that such programmes stigmatise participants.

The discussion in the UK finds echoes all over the world. In fact, many would argue that the UK lags behind developments in some European countries and the US. In Italy, for example, laws have been passed to create a new voluntary non-military national service programme for young Italian men and women.

In programmes across Europe, the US and the UK, a host of different policy objectives are evident, although in some cases these objectives are not clearly articulated. We consider it essential to have a clear understanding of the different goals that programmes would pursue. Once the goals are established, the best structures for the achievement of those goals can be identified. Too often thinking in this area is not rigorous enough; as Michael Lind (2003) has said, 'service' is often 'a solution without a problem'. Only if we have a firm grasp of our goals and the models that might best meet these goals, can we have an informed discussion about the options available to us. Below we very briefly describe some international examples, their goals and their lessons for the UK.

International lessons

Military and civic service

Until very recently compulsory forms of military service were common across Europe. However, compulsory military service has never been popular in Britain. At the end of the 18th century, it was established as an important feature of the British unwritten constitution that the state did not have a right to demand service of its subjects, except in dire emergency. Conscription divided The Liberal Party and was largely opposed by the Labour Party in the First World War. There was more support for conscription during the Second World War, but strong reservations persisted. Military service continued into the mid-1950s, but its passing was little opposed or mourned (Weight 2002).

Certainly we would reject the idea of compulsory military service outright. Nonetheless, it has delivered benefits in some countries through the creation of compulsory civic service programmes as an alternative to military service for conscientious objectors. These have in turn provided the template for the development of large-scale voluntary schemes.

In Germany, for example, this has given rise to state-regulated volunteering schemes. The Voluntary Year of Social Service (the FSJ) was established in 1964 and the Voluntary Year of Ecological Service (the FOJ) in 1993. The schemes are open to young people aged 17/18 to 27 and in 2002 over 15,000 young people were enrolled. Participants serve in different welfare institutions in and outside Germany for 12 to 18 months. The main goals are to enhance social awareness and responsibility amongst volunteers. The German government (Federal Ministry 2003) advocates the FSJ and FOJ for social and professional development.

The National Youth Service (NYS) in Israel allows young people, who are not conscripted into the Israeli Defence Forces, to volunteer for one or two years performing various civic duties. A longitudinal study (Gal et al 2003) found that after a year of service volunteers showed: “an intensification of positive attitudes toward tolerance, volunteering and community involvement”. Volunteer’s attitudes to government and democracy showed no significant change.

Non-governmental schemes have grown up alongside government-run schemes in many countries. Unis-Cité, for example, seeks to promote “active citizenship and personal development” in France. Volunteers work full-time for six or nine months and placements aim to balance service and personal development. The goal of

projects is to reduce exclusion and social divisions and they range from renovation and environmental work to mentoring children. An evaluation indicated that 88 per cent of volunteers “better understand society after their service year” (Trelln-Kane 2002). This programme sits alongside a government sponsored voluntary civic service programme which replaced compulsory military and alternative service in 2002. The programme gives young French or European citizens aged 18 – 28 the opportunity to volunteer full-time in areas of civil defence and security, social cohesion and solidarity, international co-operation, development and humanitarian aid, for a period of six to 24 months (Davis Smith 2002).

We acknowledge that there are barriers to transferring such national civic service programmes to the UK, where we do not have the same legacy of military service. The evidence of the impact of most programmes is also fairly weak. Nonetheless, we do think there are pointers we can take from the experiences of other countries. The examples of Germany and Israel show **government can take a strong role in supporting large scale youth action programmes which are popular and from which participants report real benefits**. Such programmes can exist successfully alongside equally ambitious programmes which are not administered by government, as in France. These examples also **emphasise the need to balance personal benefits and wider social benefits**. The programmes are explicitly underpinned by an ethos of citizenship and service; nonetheless, they also warn us that we cannot simply assume that they will deliver change in all areas of civic engagement. For example, **we cannot simply assume a period of service delivery will lead to greater political engagement**, as the example of Israel shows.

AmeriCorps, US

AmeriCorps gives financial assistance to over 50,000 school leavers each year for service with 2,100 non-profit and faith-based organisations and public agencies. The programme provides accommodation, a weekly stipend and an educational award in exchange for a year of full-time service in activities such as youth mentoring, running after school programmes and cleaning up parks. The goals of AmeriCorps are to meet human and environmental needs, renew the ethic of civic responsibility, expand educational opportunities, expand and strengthen existing service programmes and provide tangible benefits in the community where service is performed.

By 2003, 300,000 young people had participated in the programme and the aim is to increase participants to 75,000 a year from 2004. In 2001, 50 per cent of members

were from Black and minority ethnic groups (Abt Associates 2001). In 2001, the average age of members was 27.5 years.

A study of AmeriCorps participants indicated that, after their period of service, volunteers were significantly more likely to become involved in local community groups or to attend public meetings. A change in volunteers' expressed personal and social values was also identified. The programme has been found both to increase individual opportunity and to serve community needs (Simon and Wang 2000). Whilst these findings are encouraging, the methodology used to conduct this research was not sufficiently robust to place too much store by them, for example, there was no effort to establish the counter-factual (such as a control group).

AmeriCorps was established in 1993 under the auspices of the Corporation for National and Community Service which administers the programme and provides about 80 per cent of programme costs and administration. The remainder of the costs are met at state and local levels. The budget for 2004 was set at \$441 million.

AmeriCorps has gained a high level of popularity amongst the public and a high level of bipartisan political support (see Dionne et al (eds.) 2003). AmeriCorps and other service programmes have benefited from strong political leadership stretching back to John F Kennedy's inaugural speech making his famous call to service. In January 2002, George W Bush issued his own call to service and asked every American to commit at least two years to the service of others in their lifetime. In the UK, Gordon Brown and David Blunkett have demonstrated their willingness to provide political leadership in this area and their readiness to make similar calls to service (see Brown 2004).

AmeriCorps is just one of a range of youth action programmes for young people in the US. Other programmes include: loan forgiveness programmes, the Freedom Work-Study programme and the National Health Service Corps. Some elements of such a breadth of provision are in place in the UK, for example, citizenship education and government-supported programmes like Millennium Volunteers and Young Volunteer Challenge. What is lacking is the overarching coherence and full scale and range of programmes designed to appeal to different personal interests and community needs.

Like the UK, the US has only limited experience of compulsory military service, but in the US they have a much more developed concept of intensive periods of civic service. In the UK we appear not to have a developed concept of service or of the government's role in supporting it in the same way as our American and European counterparts. However, the Chancellor (2004) has recently said that we should learn from American programmes to build on existing UK pilot programmes. We welcome this suggestion.

There are some striking lessons from AmeriCorps. Those of particular interest to us include the fact that members who are part of programmes with clearly visible results have been found to be most positively affected in terms of a sense of on-going civic responsibility (Aguire International 2001). Many steps have been taken to ensure the accessibility of the programme. For example, funding is set aside for the recruitment of and programmes that engage disabled people as participants, a means tested childcare provision is available, health insurance is provided for those not covered, and the weekly stipend covers basic living expenses (Stroud and Sofer 2003).

UK programmes

It is not the purpose of this paper to describe the full range of youth action programmes in the UK. Rather we highlight some of the key trends in youth action in order to understand the foundations upon which new youth action programmes might be built.

'Gap years' taken before or after going to university emerged in the 1960s, but numbers have swelled dramatically since the late 1990s. In 2002, 160,000 people took gap years (www.yearoutgroup.org.uk). Most gap years involve spending time away from home (on average four months) and have an average cost of £3,000. Gap years are often only available to wealthier young people because of the relatively large amounts of financial and social capital required. Gap years can include formal and informal forms of voluntary action but do not necessarily include any and many gap years are primarily about leisure. They can involve travel and exposure to new cultures, work experience, building of networks, study in a new setting, or typically, a combination of more than one of these. The most prominent provider formal volunteering opportunities overseas is Volunteer Service Overseas (VSO).

There is much to be gained from overseas travel. However, it has been argued (Simpson personal communication) that gap years tend simply to reinforce traveller's expectations of a place and fail to take proper account of the interests of the host community. There are also reasons for prioritising local action. If the objective of youth action is civil renewal, then it is important that the action is grounded in the community and engenders a pattern of local participation (as VSO's youth exchange programme aims to do). But perhaps more important than this is the recognition in recent years that sending relatively unskilled or inappropriately skilled young people to parts of the developing world to undertake voluntary work could be unhelpful to wider development objectives. Many international non-governmental organisations now believe such practices send out ill-founded messages that Western young people are better able to take on work than local people.

Another of the strongest trends in domestic youth action in recent years is the rise of **youth advocacy and projects led by young people**. This trend has emerged from a growing appreciation that young people have a right to be listened to and taken seriously and to shape their own activities. The growth and success of such programmes suggest that government would be wise to give close consideration to how such programmes might be built on. In particular, though it is worth noting two things here. Firstly, research has found that many youth action groups fail or become unstable because adult facilitators are not available, sometimes as a result of precarious funding situations (Roker and Eden 2003). Adult facilitators, such as teachers, youth workers or social workers take a wide range of roles within groups but are often crucial in promoting and maintaining the group. Secondly, there is a lack of clarity about the term 'youth-led' or 'youth managed' and adults and young people often interpret its meaning differently (Roker and Eden 2003; IVR 2001).

A closely linked trend is the development of '**service learning**', particularly following the introduction of citizenship education to the secondary school curriculum in 2002. Service learning is:

a teaching/learning method that connects meaningful community service experiences with academic learning, personal growth, and civic responsibility (Duckenfield and Wright 1995)

Schemes might involve students working in partnerships with local communities running alongside a structured programme of learning. Service learning might take

the form of work-based learning similar to job training. There is clearly potential to further exploit the opportunities presented by the introduction of citizenship into the school curriculum and expand forms of service learning. In the US, for example, high school students are encouraged to volunteer in return for high school credits

There is, of course, also a vibrant **volunteering sector offering a variety of opportunities often within the voluntary and community sector**. One of the largest and most widely respected voluntary organisations running youth action programmes is Community Service Volunteers (CSV, see box below).

CSV (2004) is “dedicated to giving everyone the chance to play an active part in their community through volunteering, training, education and the media”. The principle of extending opportunity to all underpins CSV and everyone who applies for a placement is accepted.

CSV projects offer full-time volunteering opportunities away from home (or part-time closer to home) for those aged 16 to 35, in exchange for a modest weekly allowance, travel expenses, food and lodging. Vacancies are available on over 1000 projects. In 2003, over 3,000 participants served full-time away from home and 32,000 participated part-time or occasional basis.

A longitudinal study (Roker and Eden 2003) of 22 youth action groups² found evidence of the ability of such programmes to influence levels of civic engagement and sense of civic responsibility. The study found that as a result of their group participation young people felt they could try and bring about change in society and their participation had impacted on their sense of who they are and their understanding of political and social issues. Interestingly, many young people felt significant change could be achieved locally but they felt national change would be much harder to achieve. The researchers suggested that it might therefore be valuable to focus on the possibilities of local change. A second important finding was that most young people did not see the activities they were involved in as ‘political’ and viewed the world of party politics very negatively. Nonetheless, they did feel young people should exercise their vote.

² 74 individual interviews were supplemented by group interviews and weekly diaries.

The government has mainly focussed its own efforts on the creation of two programmes: Millennium Volunteers and Young Volunteer Challenge. **Millennium Volunteers (MV)** is an award scheme funded by the Department for Education and Skills established in 2000 for young people aged 16 to 24. The programme was designed to promote a commitment to 200 hours of voluntary action within one year. An award of excellence is given to those completing a 200-hour placement, delivered through non-profit organisations or a self-designed project. Recognition is also given for service of 100 hours. By 2004 130,000 young people had joined MV.

The UK-wide evaluation (Institute for Volunteering Research, IVR, 2002) identified a number of significant successes of MV, as well as some areas where it might be improved. MV was largely successful in delivering experiences that reflected what young people wanted and that delivered benefits to both volunteers and the communities in which they volunteered. The evaluation found that 84% of volunteers agreed MV had increased their confidence and 65% believed MV had increased their employability. **Crucially for engendering civic engagement, 80% reported that they were more aware of the needs of others and 68% agreed that they had become more committed to volunteering, owing to their involvement in MV.**

MV aims to be inclusive of everyone but particularly those with no previous experience of volunteering and those vulnerable to social exclusion. MV is similar to almost every other youth action programme in attracting more females than males. MV has had some success here. It attracted people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and was very successful in attracting young people who were unemployed (nearly one fifth) and nearly half had no previous experience of volunteering.

However, it was suggested that the one-year timescale is insufficiently flexible to allow people to fit their hours around other commitments. This lack of flexibility may have a disproportionate effect on groups from 'marginalized communities' and students. **Another evaluation suggested that drive to meet scheme targets means that harder-to-reach groups who are less likely to become volunteers, or who may need greater support to volunteer, are neglected (Volunteer Development England and Youth Action Network 2003).** The key challenges identified to MV becoming more inclusive were: minority language constraints, lack of financial resources and time for outreach work; and especially, a

tension between investing in inclusiveness and achieving numerical targets (IVR 2002). MV provides a good basis for the future development of youth action programmes and suggests the excellent potential of youth action programmes to generate lasting civic engagement (although longitudinal research is needed to fully understand the extent of this).

However, there are two issues that must be tackled at this stage in the life of MV. The first is the distortions that are created by the focus on numerical targets. The focus on targets of 100 or 200 hours within 12 months makes the programme less attractive to some groups. Similarly, the focus on targets does not easily take into account the time and financial resources that may be required to involve young people from harder to reach groups, which militates against inclusiveness. If we want youth action to become the norm for young people, we need to acknowledge these barriers and take them seriously in order that participation is as wide as possible.

The second question is around the long-term future of MV. There appear to be a lack of confidence within government and amongst organisations delivering the scheme about the long-term future of the programme. Certainly, it is frequently noted that the name 'Millennium Volunteers' sounds inappropriate in 2004 and there has been recent uncertainty about funding after April 2004.

One programme cannot necessarily meet the needs of every young person. There may be scope to retain the advantages of the MV programme, but overcome its inflexibilities, by rolling it up into a more flexible and wide ranging programme in the future, as we discuss in the next section.

Young Volunteer Challenge (YVC) is a government-designed and funded pilot programme offering opportunities for 18 and 19 year olds from low-income backgrounds to undertake voluntary work on community projects in nine areas across England. The programme aims to test the effect of financial incentives on young people's participation in youth action. Young people who have received an Education Maintenance Allowance or were eligible for Income Support whilst undertaking vocational training are eligible to participate. The pilot began in nine areas of England in May 2003 and will run to March 2005. It is a full-time experience, which lasts up to nine months. Participants receive a weekly allowance of £45 a week and a lump sum end of experience award of £750. The pilot was expected to engage 1,200 young people (Parsons 2003).

On-going monitoring evidence indicates that the weekly stipend is proving a greater incentive and facilitator to participation in this programme than the lump sum payment at the end. Evidence from AmeriCorps concurs in suggesting that the lump sum end-of-service payment does not incentivise people to stay in the programme if they don't think it's worthwhile. The project has also experienced difficulties in attracting young people to participate (partly due to the affect of the stipendary payment on benefit entitlement) and to stay engaged with the programme. It is hoped that the full evaluation of YVC will provide insights on the best way to develop youth action targeted at disadvantaged groups. Evidence from work experience programmes may also provide useful insights into the risks associated with programmes that are highly targeted.

Meeting objectives

These examples from the UK have shown that whilst the connections are sometimes made between youth action programmes and lasting civic engagement, the empirical evidence to demonstrate this link is grossly under-developed. This means that we need to develop a policy framework explicitly prioritises the achievement of lasting civic engagement. These examples illustrate the wide range of objectives that lie behind current programmes. Any one programme may aim to achieve one or more objective. These objectives could be grouped together according to whether they aim to achieve personal, community or instrumental objectives.

Personal objectives often focus on enhancing the life chances of the individual undertaking the voluntary action and promoting equality of opportunity. The objectives may include building character and a sense of identity, providing experience of work, broadening horizons, building networks, easing transitions to adulthood or enhancing skills and experience. It is crucial that personal benefits are delivered to ensure people sign up to programmes. These benefits will also make it more likely that people will develop an on-going habit of civic engagement and in the process help to achieve the government's objective as well.

Community objectives come the closest to a direct focus on civil renewal. These might include encouraging the practice of volunteering as a form of civic engagement, promoting international understanding, building local or national

identity, developing skills, knowledge and values for active citizenship or giving young people the opportunity to exercise choice and make decisions.

Instrumental objectives focus on the delivery of practical change. For example, through the provision of volunteers to enhance the capacity of the voluntary sector or in the public sector, improving the condition of those who are helped by volunteers or improving the quality and efficiency of public services through the use of volunteers. These objectives can deliver personal and community benefits at the same time although these will not be the primary drivers.

It should be clear that whilst there may be overlap between these sets of objectives, not all practices and programmes promote all these ends, or at least not to the same degree. So a programme like Young Volunteer Challenge does little to build shared identities. Some argue that compulsory national service does not do much to encourage volunteering. Domestic programmes do not do much to help international understanding.

We have suggested that youth action should be designed to deliver lasting civic engagement. We have found that current practice, whilst showing considerable potential, is not yet matching up to this challenge. So in the next section we look at what public policy can do to help practice meet this challenge.

3. Implications for public policy

Below, we consider six key policy questions³ which must be addressed if youth action policy is going to match up to the challenge of delivering lasting civic engagement. These questions relate to image and language, what young people want, targets, building on existing programmes, who to engage, and delivery. Finally, we outline three potential youth action programme options.

We do not claim to be able to categorically answer all these questions. As we have observed, the evidence relating to the impact of different forms of youth action is by

³ At the ippr conference in October 2003, Geoff Mulgan, head of policy at 10 Downing Street, identified a series of questions which need to be addressed in youth action policy. We have sought to address each of these questions in this section.

no means comprehensive and more robust evaluation of outcomes needs to take place. In the meantime, we present our assessment of the best way forward and possible ideas for future youth action programmes.

1. Image and language

Definitions of volunteering, whilst varying between cultures, tend to rest on three core elements (Davis Smith 2000): the activity is unpaid, freely undertaken, and is of broad community benefit as well as of benefit to the volunteer. The term 'civic service' is sometimes used as an alternative to volunteering, a commonly used definition is:

An organised period of substantial engagement and contribution to the local, national or world community, which is recognised and valued by society, and for which there is only minimal monetary compensation to participants (Sherraden 2001)

A number of commentators (for example, Cnaan et al 1996) have argued that voluntary action should be viewed as a continuum along which different forms of volunteering exist with 'traditional' volunteering at one end and civic service at the other. Although perhaps a matrix would be a more accurate descriptor as participant's activities vary in the nature and level of intensity and over time (Stroud, personal correspondence).

However, our concern here is not with the differences between volunteering and service, but rather the criticisms that unite them. Both have been criticised for representing control of the volunteer or server over others through a one-way process (Brav et al 2002). Those who participate in volunteer and service programmes tend to be more highly educated and have a higher income than average, with those from the highest socio-economic groups almost twice as likely to take part in a formal voluntary activity as those from the lowest (IVR 1997).

In fact, it has been argued that the concept and term 'volunteering' have acted as obstacles to progressive policy development which seeks to bring about civil renewal:

the traditional language of volunteering implies too narrow a range of activities, borne from too limited a set of motivations to really have anything to contribute to the process of civil renewal (Nash 2002)

Another important objection to the use of the term 'volunteering' to describe the full range of voluntary activity, is that one of the defining features of volunteering, that it is unpaid, is undermined by using the term to describe activities which are in fact remunerated in some way. **Using the term 'volunteering' to describe activities that do not meet the unpaid criteria unhelpfully alienates parts of the voluntary and volunteering sectors and so should be avoided.**

It has also been argued that the concept and word 'volunteering' causes some groups to disassociate themselves from voluntary activities which they might otherwise engage in. For example, Little (cited in Kearney 2003) suggests:

the v-word...with its inevitable blue-rinse connotations of middle-aged, middle class women helping those less fortunate, alienat[es] young people and ethnic minorities

This notion was supported by Gaskin (1998) reporting a survey in which two-thirds of young people interviewed said 'volunteering' was not something people in their age group would do. Amongst other barriers to their participation peer pressure was cited and two-thirds of those interviewed said volunteering would be 'uncool'. The survey also found that many young people who dislike the term volunteering do, however, believe in the value of voluntary work for both society and themselves and 94% saw volunteering as a great way to gain experience. **To address this image problem programmes need a brand that young people can identify with and aspire to, this makes their involvement in brand design and development essential.**

If we want to make the widest possible range of opportunities available for young people to engage in civic society and to respond to their wide range of skills, needs and interests; we need to employ a concept which is sufficiently loosely defined and is not off putting to young people. In this paper, we have used the term 'youth action' for this purpose. It is an umbrella term to include activities which may be defined as 'volunteering' or 'service', as well as other activities we may be thought of as outside of the parameters of these concepts. We

acknowledge that 'youth action' may not be the ideal term but it suits our purpose in this paper.

2. What young people want

Whilst the evidence suggests that young people don't like the term 'volunteering', it also shows that they do like to change things and they do like to take decisions for themselves. A study in the US (Lopez 2003) found that most people volunteer because it makes them feel good. Studies also suggest that young people place a particular emphasis on skill development.

It is important that we recognise and promote the fact that youth action can bring a collection of benefits including: personal benefits to the volunteer, benefits to the recipient or subject of the action and benefits to civil society in the form of civil renewal. Youth action should be based on the principle of something for something. The Prime Minister (Blair 1999) acknowledged the potential range of benefits of voluntary action when he said:

It is good to do good. Good for those charities and organisations and neighbourhoods in which the good is being done. But good for the do-gooder as well

Gaskin (1998) has identified a number of characteristics that young people are looking for from youth action opportunities, these are:

- Flexibility (in working time, choice and spontaneity)
- Legitimacy (to combat peer pressure and negative associations)
- Ease of access (more information on where, how and when)
- Experience (offer stimulating opportunities and skills development)
- Incentives (tangible outcomes, references, certificates of achievement)
- Variety (in terms of types of opportunities available)
- Organisation (efficient but informal with distinction between paid and unpaid work)
- Laughs (to incentivise continuing the activity)

In a similar vein, young people in a German study (Federal Ministry 2003) said the essential characteristics of youth action should be: action, the chance to make

friends, no bosses telling them what to do, having fun, and being able to drop it if they feel it isn't worthwhile. This example would suggest youth action programmes that truly met the interests of young people would have little useful impact on preparing them for employment.

As the examples of international youth action programmes showed earlier there does need to be a balance between the achievement of personal benefits and civil objectives. This means that as well as meeting young people's demands, we also need to take account of the fact that some forms of voluntary activity are likely to do very little toward making a long lasting influence on people's civic engagement, while others might be more likely to make people think about the politics of their world or immediate community.

However, at present we do not have a sufficient level of empirical evidence on which forms of voluntary action are most likely to lead to on-going civic involvement. We also need to know if this civic involvement, or the voluntary action itself, boosts the life chances of those doing it through the personal benefits gained. So **in the short term, we should focus on the quality of voluntary opportunities as an aid to promoting further and continuing civic engagement as well as encouraging more people to engage. In the long term, government needs to contribute to building the evidence base on the civic impact of certain forms of volunteering.** Once we have established a decent evidence base, more ambitious programmes can be developed.

But it is important to note that the findings on what young people want from youth action and what appears to work in contributing to civil renewal suggest that **there is no obvious contradiction between what young people want and the civil renewal agenda.** However, there are indications that what young people want may not match the kind of programmes which would deliver other goals such as increasing their employability, for example. This makes it all the more compelling that we **consult young people in the development of all plans for youth action programmes.**

3. Building on existing programmes

Given the knowledge, skills and experience embedded in existing youth action programmes, it is crucial to ensure that all future developments build on existing

programmes. The programmes we recommend below illustrate how **programmes such as Millennium Volunteers and the Young Volunteer Challenge can be built upon and expanded to enhance their successes and minimise the weaknesses that have been identified.**

In the course of the development of youth action in the UK **it is also essential that the voluntary and volunteering sectors are consulted** (as the Chancellor has indicated will happen). It will be important for policy makers to emphasise that the aim is to recognise but the limitations and the successes of current policy and practice and to target scarce resources where they can have the greatest impact.

4. Who to engage

The objectives that a youth action programme is seeking to achieve are crucial to decisions about who the programme seeks to engage. Given that the most disadvantaged groups tend to be the least civically engaged (Fahmy 2003) and that participation can deliver personal benefits as well as greater civic engagement (IVR 2002), there is clear merit in targeting opportunities towards disadvantaged young people. Furthermore, experience tells us that programmes that do not specifically target disadvantaged groups tend to be unsuccessful in attracting them.

If we are going to successfully engage young people from disadvantaged groups, it is crucial to think about the cost of participation to young people.

Policy makers and practitioners often talk about payments for youth action as rewards. However, many young people will only be able to participate in a programme if they receive some financial payment (the Young Volunteer Challenge pilot recognised this although it ran into barriers in the interaction of payments and the benefit system). **Payments can be about facilitating access to a programme, as much as they are about rewarding participation.**

As the evidence from Millennium Volunteers shows, it is also important to **take into account the additional resources that can be required by delivery organisations to attract and retain participants from more socially excluded and marginalized groups.**

There is a clear need to target those young people who are least likely to engage in civil society through other routes or ordinarily through youth action programmes. But

targeted programmes run the risk of becoming stigmatised as for ‘poor people’, for example (Open Agenda 2003). Clearly, this is undesirable in a programme designed to promote civic engagement. This is why it might be **wiser to develop universally accessible programmes which take particular measures to ensure that people from a diverse range of background can participate**. There may be additional advantages to such programmes. For example, programmes that bring people from different socio-economic classes together may help to build social networks across, as well as within, social groups.

All youth action programmes should seek to attract a diverse range of participants and should pay particular attention to ensuring that they attract and retain young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. **It is essential that participating in youth action programmes does not financially disadvantage young people. This means all expenses must be paid promptly, and in advance where possible, and there is a very strong case for making stipendary payments and exploring creative options around lump sum credits and payments.**

5. Targets: outputs or outcomes

The government set a target of increasing the number of people volunteering by one million by 2004. The target reflects the current policy focus on numbers of volunteers. The question that is usually asked by policy makers when beginning to think about youth action is either, how can we increase the number of volunteers, or somewhat less often, how could we use volunteers in service delivery. We have been arguing that the right question to start with is: why do we want people to engage in youth action? Or put another way: what’s the big idea? What’s the motivating idea? In the US the ‘big idea’ for Clinton in establishing AmeriCorps was active citizenship which underpinned a desire to promote responsibility, opportunity and community. Once we have our big idea - and we have argued it might be achieving civil renewal - we can then move on to the how we do it and how to measure if we have done it.

There is a role for targets. It is well known that what gets done is what gets measured and numbers are important. However, poor quality youth action experiences could be counter-productive. Some evidence does suggest that those young people who volunteer are often dissatisfied with their experience. In one IVR survey in 1997, seven out of ten of all volunteers reported dissatisfaction with the way their voluntary

work was organised, with younger volunteers most likely to be critical of their experiences.

This suggests targets need to be about more than sheer numbers of programme participants⁴. **Targets for the number of volunteers (i.e. outputs) might be supplemented by measures of change in quality of life or community impact, such as trust, young people's political involvement, youth crime or safety on streets (i.e. outcomes).** The Home Office target to increase community participation by 5% by 2006 is a step toward this. To measure success by these measures would mean building-in the ability to address these issues in the design of programmes (Open Agenda 2002). There may be a role for the young people who develop the programmes to develop the measures against which their success will be judged. It is not easy to develop measures assess community impact or quality of life, but it is necessary.

6. Delivery

A national policy framework is needed to provide the strategic direction for the development of youth action. Whilst we would not recommend the creation of a new governmental body or quango to create this, there are lessons here from the design and remit of the National Corporation for National and Community Service in the US. Since 1992, the Corporation has given coherence and direction to youth action programmes by taking a decisive lead in establishing a common framework for youth action including setting standards, removing barriers and piloting new ideas.

In the UK the necessary impetus could be delivered through existing bodies and partnership working. For example, the Active Communities Directorate in the Home Office is well placed to work with other parts of government (such as the Department for Education and Skills, HM Treasury or the Department for Culture, Media and Sport) and volunteering sector bodies (such as the National Council for Voluntary Organisations). The political initiative has been taken by Gordon Brown and David Blunkett and should now be translated into action on the key tasks.

The first task is to **identify the systemic barriers to youth action and propose remedies** to them. For example, barriers exist in the tax and benefit system (as

⁴ This more rounded approach measuring the impact of voluntary action is taken by Ellis 2000

experienced by those delivering the Young Volunteer Challenge) and barriers – sometimes put up by professionals - exist to developing opportunities for youth action within public services. There is much work to be done in improving the supply and quality of youth action opportunities. There is also a continuing need for a clear legal framework around the status of voluntary action and different forms of payment. This removal of barriers will demand effective cross-departmental co-operation across government.

The second task is to **identify funding sources for youth action programmes and manage that financial support**. The 2004 spending round for spending in 2006/8 is extremely tight, with a disproportionate amount of public spending having already been allocated to the health service. In the short term, it is possible that there is money available from the National Lottery under-spend and the funds currently allocated to Millennium Volunteers which might be expanded or rolled up into new programmes. The role of private sector in funding youth action also deserves full exploration. It may be possible to work in partnership with businesses that could either provide financing or donate goods in kind. For example, banks, music retailers or mobile phone companies could donate rewards for participation such as, free text messaging or gift vouchers or even a deposit into a savings, current or Child Trust Fund account. The benefits for companies may include brand loyalty and positive publicity. There may be lessons to be learnt here from the American scheme, Business Strengthening America, which aims to use the business community as “a booster rocket” to efforts by government and voluntary and community organisations to inspire Americans to serve in their communities. Amongst, other things the scheme has developed a business case argument for private organisations promoting a ‘service’ agenda.

The third task is to **identify infrastructure development and support needs in the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS)**. This has already begun with a Home Office consultation on this issue. The key will be to improve the coverage, quality and sustainability of its infrastructure. The infrastructural development should include ensuring the transferability of practice, including that which effectively links youth action and civil renewal objectives. It is also necessary to set out the common elements of youth action programmes. For example, setting standards in relation to monitoring and outcome-based evaluation and training. There is also a need for a systematic review of all evidence available on the relationship between voluntary action and on-going civic engagement.

The forth task is to identify gaps in current provision and suggesting programmes that might fill them. This would include the **development and funding of pilot programmes** designed to deliver civic engagement through youth action.

However, **the decisions about how youth action should be delivered on the ground should be down to local partnerships** to ensure community ownership and young people's input into programmes.

Policy options

Three possible youth action programmes are briefly outlined below which would see the approach presented above translated into practice. In the short-term we suggest the piloting of youth action grants, in the medium term we suggest developing a Youth Action Programme which is delivered through VCS organisations and in the long term we suggest the development of a more ambitious programme of youth action career credits.

Youth action grants

A fund could be made available for grants to be made to young people in their communities to carry out certain activities. The grants might range from £500 to £10,000. The fund would be administered by VCS organisations able to meet a common set of standards determined by government.

Good practice already exists in this area with programmes like Millennium Volunteers and Youthbank awarding small grants to young people to develop their own ideas for voluntary action but there is potential for this approach to be significantly expanded. Building on the lessons from the self-designed MV projects and other studies of youth action projects (for example, Roker and Eden 2003), an expanded pilot of youth action grants could be developed.

One or more young people, with the support of the VCS organisations, schools or Connexions, would put together a proposal which could be submitted for funding consideration. The young people would have a certain length of time to complete their project and have to report back to the fund administrator on the work they had carried out. Outcome measures would be used to help assess the impact of projects.

The funding administrator would determine certain criteria that projects needed to meet depending on local issues and needs, these might be determined in partnership with young people.

The programme would capitalise on young people's interest and belief in their abilities to change their local communities. This could build on the potential that has been identified in youth action programmes to enhance participant's engagement in local politics.

The programme would also help support the kinds of youth action that young people would like to contribute to their communities. The programme could be developed to encourage young people to gain the skills of social entrepreneurs.

Evidence also shows that projects benefit from an adult facilitator. The example of Changemakers could be taken here so that an adult supports all projects. Secure and sustainable funding is also important so project fund administrators must be tasked with ensuring budgets are complete and realistic. Continuation funding should also be a possibility for successful projects.

The approach does risk grants being wasted if projects fail for whatever reason, but given the relatively small amounts of funding involved, they are acceptable levels of risk. It would also be challenging to establish the level of leadership that would be given to young people.

Youth action programme (YAP)

The YAP would be a new brand focusing on more intensive, long-term experiences. The experience would range from participation in existing programmes to specific local projects which would require seed funding to facilitate the participation of young people.

The YAP would build on the lessons from the Young Volunteer Challenge and be designed to ensure the longevity of the idea of government intervention to support engagement in youth action by young people who face financial barriers to participation. MV is a different kind of programme from Young Volunteer Challenge, as it is a part time universal, as opposed to a full time targeted programme. But MV

could also be rolled into this programme again ensuring the future if the best aspects of MV and providing a more viable future by expanding and re-branding the scheme and addressing current weaknesses.

The YAP would be universally accessible. Payments would be necessary so that those who would otherwise face financial barriers to participation could engage. However, payments would be offered to all participants so there was equal treatment of all participants. Means tested payments could be potentially divisive and would certainly add to administrative complexity. This set up could help to build social networks across, as well as within, social groups.

A lump sum payment would also be made at certain key milestones, for example, after one year of participation or certain achievements. Young people would be given a number of options on what to do with these relatively modest lump sum payments. Young people could choose to donate their payment to a charity or the payment could be made into their Child Trust Fund. Alternatively, they could keep the money which would come with information about how they might use, invest or save it.

The YAP would have the advantage of building on the learning from existing programmes, MV and Young Volunteer Challenge. The programme would also be set up able to support the participation of disadvantaged groups in a non-stigmatising way.

The YAP would have additional costs on top of existing commitments which would be rolled up into the YAP. Careful consideration would need to be given to the branding of the programme to avoid confusion with MV or other brands.

Youth action career credits

In the longer term both youth action grants and YAPs could become part of a wide ranging scheme offering young people a variety of different experiences over time. Such a scheme might work like a youth action career whereby young people progress through different forms of youth action over time accruing credits along the way. These credits might take the form of recognition or financial rewards. We might envisage that having received a certain number of credits could be seen as part of entrance requirements for higher and further education and used in the labour

market. The school diploma could include recognition for youth action. In addition, facilitating payments would be provided to young people on lower incomes.

This would complement the changes being suggested to the 14-19 curriculum by Mike Tomlinson. Close links could also be made to Connexions, youth services provided by local councils, modern apprenticeships and so on. Connecting up school teaching of citizenship with voluntary activity may engage many more young people in citizenship, as well as learning about it. There are lessons here from service learning activities in the US.

Existing schemes could be included in this overarching structure (e.g. MV, YVC, community service as part of citizenship in schools, overseas service and action in local communities). Activities that were recognised would include full time 'service', part-time activities and episodic volunteering. However, the type of eligible activities would need to be specified in a loose way by central government.

4. Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that there is a need for a more focussed and ambitious approach to public policy intervention in youth action programmes. Such a new approach must begin with clarity about the purpose of youth action. We have argued that the motivating idea behind public policy intervention in youth action could be the achievement of civil renewal. In particular, we recommend the focus be placed on bringing about long lasting habits of civic engagement, including amongst the most disadvantaged young people.

We have argued that there is a clear role for public policy to add value to youth action programmes. We have briefly outlined three schemes which could see these principles of public policy put into practice. However, we have also observed that there is a lack of robust evidence to show exactly how youth action should be developed in the future and this evidence base clearly needs to be built. What we do know is that there is significant potential for youth action to bring about lasting habits of civic engagement and the time has come to get a better understanding of how we might exploit this potential.

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