

# It's time to talk

## Voluntary action, the state and welfare provision

**This briefing presents findings from a collaborative research project on the changing role and contribution of voluntary action in social welfare in the 1940s and 2010s.**



## Summary

- The 1940s and the 2010s were significant periods of transformation in the shape and direction of social welfare services across England. In both periods assumptions about the responsibilities of citizens, the state, voluntary action and the private sector became open to debate.
- Both decades were also transformational times for the voluntary movement, involving coming to terms with new realities and rethinking its part in welfare provision.
- Comprehensive discussion in the 1940s about the new role and responsibilities of the state in social welfare has not been matched in the 2010s.
- In the 1940s the voluntary movement and the Labour government consolidated a pragmatic partnership that overcame initial suspicion on both sides, while the 2010s were marked by a more antagonistic relationship between government and the voluntary sector.
- It's time to talk. A national conversation, which tackles the issues and seeks to build consensus on our welfare future, is needed.
- We invite you to be part of this new debate, by reflecting upon, sharing and acting on this research and its implications.

## Transformational moments for the voluntary sector and the state

We are currently experiencing the most significant renegotiation of social welfare provision in England since the consolidation of the welfare state after the Second World War. The 2010s and the 1940s can be interpreted as 'transformational moments' in which boundaries between

have been reshaped under the Coalition and Conservative governments from 2010. At both times, fundamental questions have been raised about who is responsible for the provision of welfare services, and what should be the roles of citizens, the state, and voluntary action.

You can't have it both ways, you can't have the state withdrawing and expecting the voluntary sector to step in when you are slashing their resources at the same time.

Steve Reed MP, as Shadow Minister for Civil Society, 2019

citizens, the state, voluntary action,<sup>1</sup> and the market have been rethought. William Beveridge wrote in his 1942 Report that, 'a revolutionary moment in the world's history is a time for revolutions'. The term 'revolutionary moment' has also been used to describe the context in which welfare services

Both periods may be seen as transformational for the voluntary movement. Driven in part by a desire to present a more united voice to government, the 1940s were marked by greater collaboration amongst voluntary organisations. This included the formation of new umbrella bodies for specific fields of social welfare, notably the Council of Associated Children's Homes and the National Old People's Welfare Committee. In the 2010s, there have been several mergers and some closures of umbrella bodies, alongside growing pressure to strengthen voluntary sector leadership, governance and regulation. Funding regimes have contributed to competition and fragmentation within the voluntary sector, affecting its collective voice.

## Our project

Within this context, the Discourses of Voluntary Action study has examined how different actors – the state, voluntary organisations and the general public – create narratives about what their role, position and responsibilities are or should be. These become important

interventions used by different actors seeking to shape moving frontiers between the state, voluntary action and others. Frequently these involve the use of history to make sense of the present and argue for a vision of the future.

<sup>1</sup>We prefer the term *voluntary action*, to encompass the work of voluntary organisations, volunteers and activists. However, defining voluntary action is complex, and never more so in a period of increasingly blurred boundaries. We use the term *voluntary movement* to refer to voluntary organisations collectively in the 1940s, as it would be anachronistic to use today's preferred phrase *voluntary sector*. The terms *third sector* or *civil society* are also widely used, but the general public is probably more familiar with the term charity sector. Indeed, we ask about charity in our Mass Observation questions (see footnote 2).

## Ongoing debate about the role of voluntary action

Across the different roles and contributions that are identified for voluntary action within social welfare, we identify two over-arching narratives. The first positions voluntary action at the heart of British democracy and society: it is a fundamental part of **who we are** as a nation. The second positions voluntary action as a key actor in the provision of welfare services: it is part of **what we do** to meet needs within society. This apparent consensus and continuity, however, masks considerable difference.

During the **1940s**, the Second World War and post-war reconstruction revealed previously hidden social needs and accelerated changes in the nature and extent of state-provided welfare. Yet the new social legislation retained important roles for voluntary action in many fields of welfare, and particularly for older people's care and for children deprived of a normal home life. Voluntary organisations argued that despite changed conditions their work would continue because it was essential to a free democracy. The state recognised that ongoing post-war austerity meant voluntary action was necessary to meet need, while volunteers and voluntary organisations were seen to humanise welfare services.

Amongst the public, debate was stimulated through Beveridge's 1947–48 inquiry into the voluntary social services and associated media coverage. The social research organisation Mass Observation<sup>2</sup>, which collected regular observations from members of the public on a variety of topics, found broad agreement on the desirability of a collective response to welfare needs, although there were different views on whether this responsibility lay with the state alone, or with voluntary action. Many of the respondents in 1947 felt much charitably provided welfare ought to be unnecessary and welcomed the expanding role of the state. However, writers also felt that the freedom to give to good causes was important, and that there were many times – particularly in emergencies, or for animals or overseas causes – where charity was still needed.

Finally, a **pragmatic partnership** was cemented between the state and an increasingly united voluntary movement, with voluntary organisations intrinsically involved in policy design and new areas of service delivery.

In the **2010s**, there is continued acknowledgement that voluntary organisations are integral to social and political life in England – part of the fabric of the nation. Public service delivery is again recognised as a central function of the voluntary sector. In 2018 we commissioned Mass Observation to investigate the views of the public about charity and welfare, and found

resonances with the 1940s. The public sees voluntary action as an essential component of society and there is strong commitment to people being able to give time and money to causes that are important to them.

The voluntary spirit is the very lifeblood of democracy... voluntary associations have rendered, are rendering, and must be encouraged to continue to render, great and indispensable service to the community... to-day there is a clearer recognition all round, to which the Government certainly subscribe, of the truth that the statutory and voluntary social services are not contradictory but complementary, and that neither will be able to fulfil its highest purpose except in partnership with the other.

Lord Pakenham, speaking for the Government, House of Lords, 1949, HL Deb 22 June 1949 vol 163 cc75-136

Yet, while the decade started with the Big Society and Open Public Services agendas, both of which had the potential to significantly increase the role of voluntary action, government funding to the sector has reduced while private sector involvement in public service delivery has grown. Many commentators argue that austerity has increased the demand for the work of voluntary organisations at the same time as reducing their resources, undermining any wider ambitions to increase their role and contribution.

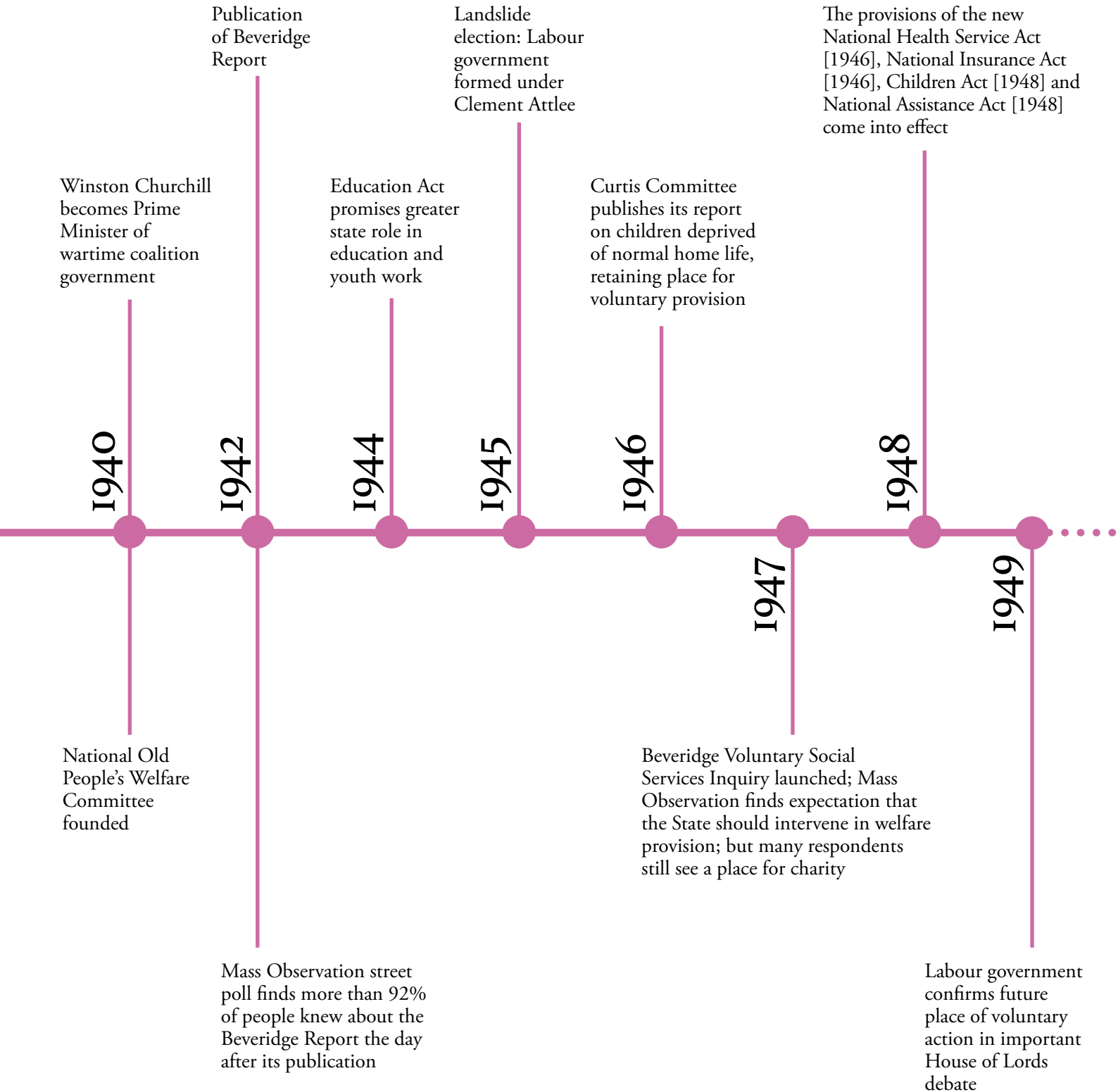
Beyond service delivery, voluntary organisations also perform advocacy, educational and campaigning roles, which are held to inform public debate, influence policy and strengthen democracy. Some in the voluntary sector feel these roles are under threat, not least through the effects of the 2014 Lobbying Act and the introduction of 'anti-advocacy' contract clauses – they argue that charities have been silenced.

As the sector has spoken out against the damaging social effects of some government programmes the relationship between government and charities have become more tense, with political attacks on the sector's motivations, structures and standing. Yet campaigning is embedded in the history of voluntary organisations in the UK, we have no intention of being silenced!

NCVYS, 2014

<sup>2</sup>Mass Observation is a social research organisation specialising in everyday life in Britain. It was first set up in 1937 and relaunched in 1981. For this study we have analysed material from the 1940s and in 2018 commissioned a new directive on 'Charity and the Welfare State', which was sent to the panel of around 400 volunteer writers. The questions were designed to echo those asked in 1947, when Beveridge asked Mass Observation to research the public's views on charity. We received 118 in-depth written responses. You can read the full set of questions asked here: <http://www.massobs.org.uk>

# Timeline



Inconclusive general election: Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition formed

Open Public Services White Paper signals greater role for voluntary sector in running public services

Welfare Reform Act introduces key reforms to benefits system

First roll-out of Universal Credit begins

'Lobbying Act' seeks to restrict influence of third-party campaigners, including charities

Conservatives win general election, with small majority

Government introduces 'anti-advocacy' clauses into grant agreements to restrict use of public funds for campaigning; EU referendum – UK votes to leave the European Union

Inconclusive general election: minority Conservative government formed

Government publishes Civil Society Strategy

NCVO celebrates its centenary

2010

2011

2012

2013

2014

2015

2016

2017

2018

2019

Launch of National Citizen Service

Launch of Big Society agenda

House of Lords Select Committee on Charities publishes report

Closure of National Council for Voluntary Youth Services after 80 years

Mass Observation respondents are critical of the performance of the welfare state with concern across political spectrum about food banks and homelessness; Independent Civil Society Futures Commission publishes report

Big Society Capital wholesale social investment bank launched. Mass Observation respondents see the Big Society as a cover for public service cuts; and say they cannot take on more voluntary activities

Labour Party issues its own Civil Society Strategy

## An antagonistic collaboration?

From the mid-2010s the relationship between government and voluntary organisations became more combative. This was not helped by criticism from some MPs of what they saw as an overly political approach by some charities, alongside a series of ‘charity scandals’ which made media headlines. The House of Lords select committee inquiry into charities placed concerns over governance and leadership at its heart.

In the government’s 2018 Civil Society Strategy, the relationship between government and civil society is reimagined as one involving collaboration and ‘co-creation’. This signals a more positive relationship

between the voluntary sector and the state, in which fears over lobbying and public service commissioning are acknowledged, if not fully assuaged. But there is greater blurring of boundaries. Civil society in this strategy is held to include many different actors from voluntary organisations through to mission-driven businesses. Government will play a convening role bringing together different sectors. Overall, the relationship between the state and voluntary action in the 2010s could be described as one of **antagonistic collaboration**.

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## Significant change – but where is the state in this debate?

While both the 1940s and 2010s saw rigorous debate about the role of voluntary action, there is a notable difference when it comes to discussions about the role of the state in social welfare. There was a comprehensive, nation-wide discussion in the 1940s about the new responsibilities the state would be taking on and the consequences of doing so. The popularity of the Beveridge Report (which sold over 600,000 copies, and saw people queuing around the block to buy it<sup>3</sup>), and the framing of the 1945 General Election around post-war reconstruction attest to this.

The focus on public service delivery has happened at the cost of charities’ role as a voice for their beneficiaries and their cause, as key contributors to the public policy discourse.

NCVO, 2016

By contrast, the 2010s involved no comparable debate on the role, scope and responsibilities of the state in social welfare. Significant reforms included the Welfare Reform Act 2012 which introduced Universal Credit, restricted Housing Benefit and strengthened sanctions in the social security system. These have had profound implications for individual citizens, as well as consequences for voluntary action. Despite such wide-

reaching changes, there has been scant attempt to reach a consensus in terms of who should be responsible for providing social welfare services in the twenty-first century and what levels of needs they should be meeting. Within the 2010s a cross-cutting narrative emerges that can be summarised as ‘state failure’, but with little agreement on what that looks like, why it is happening or what should be done about it.

Amongst state actors, views are divided. The 2011 Open Public Services White Paper, for example, argued that the centralised, top-down and prescriptive approach to delivering public services was ‘broken’ and outdated. Instead, it was suggested, opportunities should be opened for a wider range of organisations to provide innovative solutions to welfare needs.

While recognising the opportunities that this may bring for voluntary organisations, some within the voluntary sector instead argue for a reform of social welfare. The argument here involves a ‘defence’ of the welfare state, retaining state-funded and directed provision at its heart. This will ensure universal provision and equity of access, while recognising the distinct contribution that voluntary organisations can play in meeting social needs.

In the 2010s the views of the public have become increasingly polarised, as the latest British Social Attitudes research confirms.<sup>4</sup> Among those responding to our Mass Observation directive in 2018 there is broad agreement that the state is failing in its funding and provision of

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<sup>3</sup>See our article for The Conversation (2018) ‘An end to “want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness”: Why the Beveridge report flew off the shelves in 1942’ <https://theconversation.com/an-end-to-want-disease-ignorance-squalor-and-idleness-why-the-beveridge-report-flew-off-the-shelves-in-1942-88097>

welfare for those in need. However, there is a lack of unity as to how the state should respond. Left-leaning respondents tend to favour more collective, state-provided responses to need although they also argue that charities are becoming increasingly important in modern Britain, playing a key role in making up for government failures as the state divests itself of responsibilities. Many of these writers are concerned about the impact of spending cuts on both public services and voluntary organisations. More right-leaning respondents see a role for the state in providing a minimum 'safety net' of care, but they disagree on what this basic level of support involves, and how it would be implemented.

Where we find consensus amongst respondents across the political spectrum it is in their expressions of concern about the effects of austerity, increasing levels of homelessness and rising use of foodbanks. This 'food bank narrative' emerges as indicative of the public's feelings about welfare failures in England today.

We cannot go on as we are and it is high time we had a proper national conversation about what our growing older population needs and deserves to live well and how we will pay for it.

Age UK, 2016

## Looking back, moving forward

Focusing on the different ways in which people talk about voluntary action provides new insights into how fluid, and contested, the boundaries between the state, voluntary action and other actors are. In the 1940s voluntary action was closely integrated with the state through, for example, a high degree of cross-over of personnel, in which leading voluntary organisations were chaired by politicians. Voluntary organisations adopted central roles in the formation of welfare policy and mobilised a pragmatic partnership in service provision. In the 2010s there has been a separation of the state and voluntary action in policy terms, combined with what some see as a loss of distinctiveness in service delivery, resulting in an antagonistic collaboration between voluntary action and the state. Narratives are constructed as strategic interventions in these unsettled periods; today parts of the voluntary sector, together with some of the general public, are resisting attempts to move the frontier between the state and voluntary action.

A key message emerging from these narratives is that the 2010s are witness to a failure in funding and providing for those in need. These concerns are shared by the public who agree that there must be change. A national conversation, which tackles the issues and seeks to build consensus on our welfare future, is needed. In short - it's time to talk.

Charities are the eyes, ears and conscience of society. They mobilise, they provide, they inspire, they advocate and they unite... their work touches almost every facet of British civic life.

House of Lords Select Committee on Charities  
Stronger charities for a stronger society, 2017  
HL Paper 133, 26-3-17, p.3.

## What can you do?

- Use this research to build a national conversation about the future of welfare, and the role of voluntary action within it.
- Share this summary report with colleagues.
- Invite the research team to share findings with organisations you work with.
- Write a blog or share your views with us by getting in touch (see overleaf).

<sup>4</sup>See <http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk>

## About the study

The study was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant reference ES/N018249/1), and supported by our partner organisations: Mass Observation, Age UK, Children England, NCVO, NCVYS and UK Youth. The research examined the debates that have taken place on the role, position and contribution of voluntary action in the provision of welfare in England over two time periods: 1940s and 2010s. It cut across four fields of activity: the voluntary movement in general, older people, youth and children.

We have drawn on data from a range of different sources:

### Public discourses

Mass Observation data. The Mass Observation project was established in 1937 and has since observed and recorded reactions from the public to various issues, including perceptions of charity and the voluntary sector. We have analysed written responses to sets of questions known as 'directives' issued in the 1940s and in the 2010s, including a new directive we commissioned in 2018.

### Political discourses

Policy documents, speeches and parliamentary debates. We have analysed green and white papers, commissions and inquiries, acts of parliament, speeches, press releases and parliamentary debates.

### Voluntary sector discourses

Key statements, policy documents, and publications. We focused on national umbrella bodies (NCVO, Age UK, Children England, UK Youth and NCVYS) and obtained from their private archives sets of policy documents, annual reports, board minutes and publications. We also revisited the original papers of Lord Beveridge's 1947 Voluntary Action Inquiry.

## Contact us

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<https://discoursesofvoluntaryaction.wordpress.com>



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