

Volunteering and civic participation

Lorna Booth

Efforts to increase public involvement in local communities and public services may face challenges

During the election campaign there was much discussion of the idea that people should be more active in local communities and even public services. Do people currently get involved? And is there enthusiasm for doing more?

Most people are already involved in some type of voluntary or civic activity, at least occasionally.

THE LEADERSHIP OF LOCAL PUBLIC SERVICES

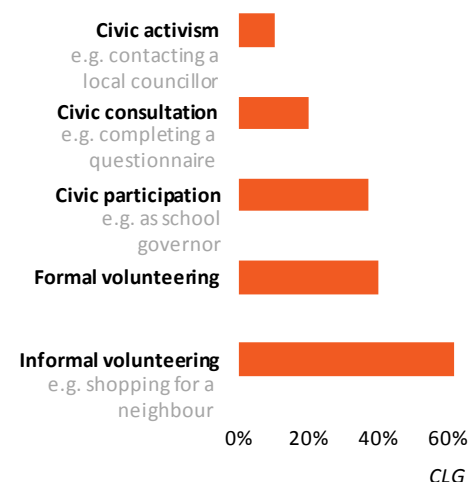
While people can vote for local councillors or the governors of their local NHS Foundation Trust, the leaders of many other local services are not directly elected. There are a number of proposals to change this: for example, the Conservatives have suggested making the police accountable to a directly-elected individual and the Liberal Democrats have proposed the direct election of local health organisations, police authorities and part of National Park boards.

People are more likely to want to get involved in running a public service if they or their family know that service well, perhaps as regular users or staff. The main parties all have proposals that would allow staff to be more involved in running services.

Plans for greater public involvement in the running of public services appear to be intended to provide incentives for and pressure on providers to perform well without the need for central control. They are in line with moves to increase consumer choice, and access to redress and public information.

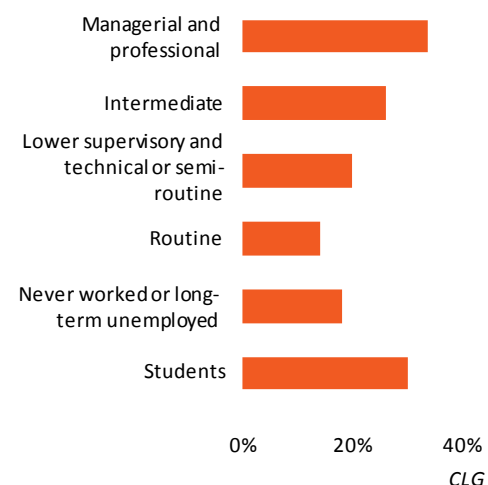
Many people are already active in their communities

Percentage of people taking part each year, England



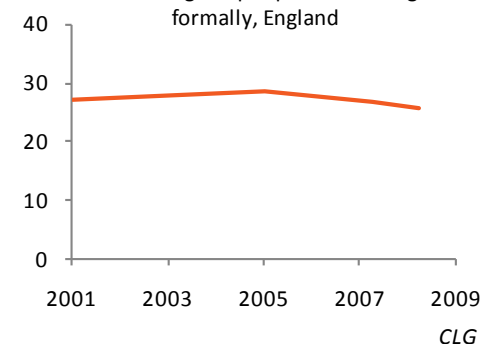
Volunteering varies by socio-economic group

Regular formal volunteering, 2008/09, England



Volunteering levels have been flat for the past few years

Percentage of people volunteering formally, England



CHARITIES AND PUBLIC SERVICES

Charities are earning more of their income providing public services. General charities earned £7.8 bn from statutory sources in 2006/07, 87% more than in 2001/02 in real terms. Grant income from statutory sources, by contrast, has not risen.

DELIVERING PUBLIC SERVICES

It is relatively rare for members of the public to get involved regularly in the day-to-day delivery of public services, although it does happen: for example, lay magistrates are often volunteers. It is more common for services to be run by charities, voluntary organisations or social enterprises.

Involvement of the voluntary system may result in more diverse and responsive public service provision. It can also contribute to community engagement. However, previous government initiatives to strengthen the voluntary sector's

role in public services have had limited success and there is little evidence on the performance or value for money achieved.

VOLUNTEERING AND CHARITABLE GIVING

There is broad support for increasing volunteering and charitable giving. The Conservatives have an ambition that every adult in the country be a member of an active neighbourhood group. The Liberal Democrats have suggested ensuring volunteers need only one criminal record check by making checks portable. Labour has proposed a National Youth Community Service with all young people contributing at least 50 hours to their communities by the age of 19.

Increasing the number of volunteers may be a challenge: despite various initiatives to promote volunteering, neither the number of volunteers nor the time they spend volunteering has risen.

By far the most common reason for not volunteering, or only volunteering occasionally, is lack of time. Other reasons that volunteers commonly cite include being put off by bureaucracy, worry about risk and liability, not knowing how to go about getting involved and not having the right skills and experience.

There are notable variations in participation rates between socio-economic groups, which suggests that there may be a risk that certain groups are under-represented in any further extension of volunteering or civic action. This may be a particular challenge if the role of the public in the running of public services is to be increased.