

## **Stephen Maxwell – Associate Director SCVO**

Summary of the main points of Keynote Speech at Volunteer Centre, Glasgow  
AGM at the Teacher Building, St Enoch Square on 31<sup>st</sup> October 2008

Notes taken by Fiona Sinclair/Julian Clarke

### **Key Points**

We are living in extraordinary times with the recent collapse of the banking system. It is difficult to predict how a recession will affect voluntary organisations and volunteering. Over the last couple of decades, we have seen significant growth in the role of voluntary and community organisations in society and volunteering is now a key concern of public policy.

The increase in demand for services provided by voluntary organisations has its origins in the failure first of social markets then of state provision creating the need for Government to step in to organise or formalise volunteering.

This represents a shift in thinking among politicians and those who influence policy from the traditional or purist view that volunteering was a self starting activity that reflected the diverse values and moral priorities of society. There is also now a recognition that volunteering can contribute to economic and social development through fostering skills, confidence and employability in those who volunteer. The purist view, however, holds that volunteering is important in its own right, not necessarily as an instrument of public social policy.

If we look at the current situation in Scotland, 17% of those who volunteer are not in work while 34% are employed. However, the newly unemployed do not automatically define themselves as “unemployed”. Those who self identify as unemployed volunteers tend to be long-term unemployed. If the “new unemployed” come from the same social background as those represented within the 34% of the employed who currently volunteer, (the Scottish Household Survey data tells us that there are lower levels of volunteering for people who are unemployed) then we may see an increase in demand for volunteering opportunities.

The areas identified as most likely to see an increase in demand for volunteer action and opportunities include : Money Advice/Debt Counselling, Credit Unions, Time Banks, Exchange Trade Schemes, LETS, Healthy Food Initiatives and Allotment/Grow your Own schemes, healthy living initiatives. In the broader economy, we could see a return to mutuality and smaller scale organisations against the background of disillusion with the conventional financial and economic models which have created the current crisis.

The dilemma for the traditional/purist approach to volunteering is illustrated by the latest phase of welfare reform focused on Incapacity Benefit and

Supported Employability Schemes (No One Written Off: reforming welfare to reward responsibility DWP 2008). These proposals are designed to secure a return to employment by 1 million of the 2.6 million on Incapacity Benefit, but this target is almost certainly unrealistic at a time of economic recession and rising unemployment.

A number of Scottish voluntary organisations providing employability programmes are putting forward the case for a distinctive Scottish approach. They argue that Scottish Government working with a consortium of Scottish stakeholders would be better able to use the available funds to address Scotland's particular problems.

There are a number of differences between the Scottish scene and the UK contexts:

- A higher Scottish employment rate of 76% (pre-recession)
- Higher incidence of low pay
- Particular concentration of people on incapacity benefits (at 17%, Glasgow has the highest level of IB claimants in the UK).
- A high incidence of multiple social, health, and educational barriers to getting into employment.

It has been proposed that the Scottish approach should include a community based option which would offer greater flexibility for those experiencing multiple barriers to finding and keeping jobs.

The new UK scheme will involve independent assessors, but if we consider that two-thirds of those on incapacity benefit suffer some form of mental illness, to what degree will independent assessors be experienced and qualified in assessing such needs and how flexible will criteria be?

The Scottish Option would allow for people facing such obstacles to work in a more flexible way taking full account of their complex needs and aspirations. By its experience and record the Scottish voluntary sector is well positioned to deliver a range of high quality and varied opportunities sympathetic to the needs of people facing multiple barriers to mainstream jobs.

Three conditions for the success of such a community option have been suggested:

- That it be a genuinely voluntary option, free of benefit sanctions
- That it provide for continuity of benefit income
- That providers be paid up front rather than outcomes

The introduction of a community allowance would offer an increased incentive for people to become active in their communities. They would be paid a community allowance in addition to benefits. A similar idea called CREATE is

currently being piloted in England. The most recent UK government proposals seem to leave room for such an option.

Of course this raises the question whether participants on such schemes should be regarded as volunteers or paid workers – you could call it the Project Scotland question.

The key concern is around the long term value to society of volunteering; however, given that social change has resulted in a narrower cross section of the British population engaging in volunteering, it may be that the purist argument around volunteering is under threat. Should we take the purist or the pragmatic approach to the future development of volunteering?

There are three strands which a Scottish option might include:

1. Conventional route back into the labour market through voluntary organisations but managed in Scotland rather than centrally
2. Community based voluntary organisations offering “volunteering in the community” with a community allowance.
3. Further investment in mainstream volunteering opportunities.

In this economic crisis, necessity is forcing new thinking on government. Let's hope that extends to the provision of new and sympathetic opportunities for those groups of the population who have too often been pushed to the back of the queue.