

In or against the state? The changing role of the voluntary and community sector - recent evidence from the UK.

Professor Pete Alcock, University of Birmingham, UK

Civil society is often conceived as the social space occupied by those organisations existing between the state and the market – hence the ‘Third Sector’. However, most commentators also point to the overlap and inter-connection between these different sectors. There are no clear cut boundaries here, and relations across the sectors are complex and sometimes fraught. The focus of this paper is on the changing nature of relations between the state and the third sector in the UK in the early twenty-first century. This is a relationship which has thrown up some major dilemmas both for policy makers within the state and for practitioners within the sector.

In the UK, the sector has traditionally been referred to as the voluntary and community sector (VCS); and to some extent it is just these aspects of its structure and culture which have been most challenged by the changing nature of relations over recent years – symbolised, perhaps, by the change in the name of the State agency primarily responsible for relations to the *Office of the Third Sector*. Does this signify a shift from the voluntarist ethos?

The history of VCS relations with the UK state is a long and shifting one. The paper will review this historical context; but will focus primarily on the significant changes in these relations in the early twenty-first century, and the rising political and policy profile which underpins this. This is a product of important new government policy initiatives aimed at promoting a mixed economy of welfare and supporting civil renewal – although, as will be discussed, these are potentially contradictory developments.

The wide range of new policy initiatives underpinning these twin goals will be summarised and their implications for the VCS identified and explored, drawing on recent qualitative research with voluntary organisations in the UK and on the wider policy and research literature in the country. This will focus specifically upon the impact of diversity within the sector on relations with the state.

The paper will conclude by examining the contradictory tensions that exist in this new policy framework and the challenges that this provides both to policy makers and those working in and across the VCS. The tension between service delivery and civic renewal will be highlighted by posing the question - is the VCS in or against the state?