Voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) are seen by policy-makers and scholars as an important route through which individual citizens can contribute to the democratic process, but relatively little research has been carried out on how VCOs influence policy. Such research as has been conducted has been piecemeal, focusing on specific aspects of policy influence such as the role of pressure groups or the place of VCOs in partnerships.

Much has been written about the downward trend in voting figures in the UK and elsewhere. But the electoral process is not the only way in which people engage in democratic life in this country. VCOs have always played a role in giving voice to the different interests in society and shaping policy agendas. This has been recognised by the New Labour government, with its emphasis on voluntarism, civil society and community action as important routes to civic engagement. VCOs are encouraged, as they were under previous Conservative administrations, not only to participate in service delivery, but now, through recent government initiatives, to engage in policy-making and development through partnerships and other forms of consultation. But what contribution are they best placed to make? How seriously do they think this contribution is taken? And what is their claim to legitimacy?

This research summary reports on a two-year study which explored the role that voluntary and community organisations play in the democratic process. It was carried out by the Universities of Brighton and Hull over the period 2000-2002 and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council through its Democracy and Participation Programme. The study focused on three policy areas: environmental policy (with a particular focus on pollution), regeneration (looking especially at neighbourhood renewal), and policy in relation to the care of older people (with a particular emphasis on incomes policy). If you are interested mainly in the key findings of the study, you can now turn straight to the back page of this summary final report. Alternatively, inside you will find a more detailed account of the study's final phases. For further information and details of other reports and papers produced or planned by the research team, please contact any one of the following:

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The development of the study

In the early stages of the study, and drawing on the work of earlier researchers in the field, a simple basic taxonomy of strategies adopted by VCOs, was developed as outlined below:

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Advocacy

However, it became clear at an early stage that this type of analysis could not be done in a vacuum. The rapidly changing policy environment was redefining the rules of engagement and thus the choices that VCOs were making. This shifting policy context also required us to draw on a wider range of literature and commentary including, for example, work on new social movements, on the partnerships which had emerged in the last few years, on political opportunity structures, on the policy process and on regime theory.

The nature of our inquiry required a qualitative approach which focused around a mix of interviews with individuals (and some small groups) in VCOs (eg staff, trustees, activists), and with those in government (local, regional and national) who were working with the voluntary and community sector (VCS) on policy issues. Literature reviews were also carried out. The data obtained through these sources were recorded and analysed using rigorous social science methodology). The project was also guided by two overarching principles (in addition to conventional social research ethics):

- **accountability to users.** The project worked with an Advisory Group, selected to represent the views of major potential research users, and covering major VCO organisational and policy interests. The Group met several times at key points in the development of the study and provided key useful guidance and comment.
- **inclusiveness.** Particular efforts were made to ensure that the research included the views of the most excluded groups, particularly black and minority ethnic groups. This strongly influenced the choice of locations (for the initial case studies) and of organisations to interview nationally and locally.

The main phases of the study

The four main stages to the study were:

1: **mapping stage.** Literature reviews (eg on new social movements, political theory and the policy process, as well as on the three policy areas on which the study focused: environment, welfare of older people and urban regeneration) and scoping interviews with about 20 national representative organisations.
2: geographical case studies. Five locality-based case studies to assess the contribution of the voluntary and community sector (VCS) within different local ‘political opportunity’ structures. Around 90 interviews were conducted in four localities in different parts of England, and at a national level. Interviews were carried out with VCO staff and trustees, politicians and civil servants.

3: issue-based case studies. Three issue-based case studies to narrow down our policy focus and examine the emerging themes in more depth. This stage involved a further 50+ interviews at local, regional and national levels. The case study issues were:
- pollution (environmental policy area)
- minimum income for pensioners (welfare of older people)
- the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (regeneration)

4: dissemination. The project has made it a priority to discuss and share findings as they emerged, through presentations and publications including:
- five dissemination events to feed back results to participants (one national event and one in each of the four localities we studied)
- many other presentations and papers to academic and policy conferences
- an Interim Summary of Findings, circulated to all respondents and others interested in the study
- a final report for the ESRC as the funding body
- several articles in academic and professional journals
- a book is planned covering the detail of the study, with a projected publication date of 2004.

Following the first two of these phases, in summer 2001, the research team produced an Interim Findings (copies available from G.Craig@hull.ac.uk). The project noted then that:
- the policy environment had opened up to voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) but government decision-making was more centralised;
- VCOs welcomed this but wanted to keep their autonomy;
- the growing range of invitations to participate in partnerships or in policy fora was stretching VCO resources of time and staff;
- VCOs were concerned about legitimacy and accountability but there were tensions between legitimacy and effectiveness, and between giving leadership and maximising participation;
- alliances helped small organisations ‘punch above their weight’ but individual organisations wanted to keep a distinctive voice; and
- VCOs did make an important contribution to democracy beyond traditional forms of representative democracy: they mobilised a wider range of people and helped to shape agendas in ways that were based on notions of participative and deliberative democracy.

In the remainder of this Summary, we focus on the findings emerging from the three issue-based case studies and the general findings from the study as a whole.

Stage 3: The three issue-based case studies

The three policy areas were chosen to reflect differences in: political opportunity structure (open/closed); policy focus (broad/narrow); levels of government involved (supranational, national, regional, local); stage in the policy cycle (agenda framing, policy development, policy implementation); the dominant VCO ‘culture’; and consensus on agenda. This choice
allowed the research team to focus more on the broad themes emerging from earlier phases of the work and outlined above.

**Minimum incomes for older people**
The key features emerging here were the growing opportunities for influence particularly as government itself had created programmes and mechanisms for this to happen. Some organisations worked both as insiders and outsiders, participating in policy fora but also campaigning vigorously on sensitive issues. Some were still seen by government as outsiders, however, because they pursued policy agendas to which it was hostile. The Treasury was seen, by those inside Parliament as well as outside it, as dominating the policy agenda. There had been increasing VCS representation at local level in a variety of fora but some VCOs were wary of the rationale for this, feeling they were being used in a tokenistic way, often with pressurised timescales, and that statutory local health and social care agencies were still defensive about engagement with the VCS. Black and minority elders’ organisations were beginning to be involved but government found it difficult to respond effectively to diversity in policy engagement. Racism still shaped service delivery at local levels. VCOs often operated in alliances, but there was some concern about ‘branding’.

**National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal**
Strategy development had built on an unprecedented two-year consultation involving the VCS in various ways including representation on the Social Exclusion Unit’s Priority Action Teams, and involvement in the Local Strategic Partnerships, the key strategic mechanism for managing neighbourhood renewal at local level. This new openness was widely welcomed, but boundaries were unclear and some feared that VCOs would lose their sense of purpose or be diverted towards service delivery. Despite the involvement of a wider range of organisations and people, there was still a sense of privileged ‘insiders’ gatekeeping the VCS’ influence; and some concern about the sustainability of the huge demands made on certain parts of the VCS. However, the general feeling was that the VCS still had the capacity to respond rapidly to changing policy agendas, consult widely, and reach local people at both regional and very local levels. The strategy was still seen as ‘top-down’ especially where relationships between central and local government were poor. Local alliances could enhance the influence of the VCS but sometimes these were seen as more powerful actors ‘carving up’ the policy arena between key players, thus excluding others. The focus on generalised solutions meant that BME and other excluded groups might remain marginalised.

**Pollution**
This policy arena incorporated the widest range of VCOs and their strategies: insider and outsider, protest and participatory, service and campaigning, national, regional and local, around environmental exclusion/environmental justice/environmental equality agendas. It was also the key focus within environmental issues for activities by and on behalf of BME communities, and disadvantaged groups and communities. Key issues here were the huge widening of opportunities to access policy debates at central, regional and local government levels but which were not producing concomitant levels of policy change; a diversity of views within government, some seeing groups as providing high quality evidence-based advice, others viewing the VCS as oppositional and anti-business. Pollution was not generally seen as a party political issue. However, although VCOs recognised that government was not homogeneous, and divided departmental responsibilities made it difficult to identify targets, certain basic values were common across government, especially the primacy of economic growth and the new managerialism. The VCS was seen by some within government as an important counterbalance to private sector lobbies. Conversely the VCS was forming alliances with the private sector to develop new solutions to pollution.
The main findings of the study

- **Enhancing participatory democracy**

There were a limited number of examples where VCOs encouraged disenfranchised citizens to use their vote, or where people who first became active in the VCS went on to stand for political office. But generally VCOs felt their contribution was to participatory forms of democracy, bringing issues to the attention of the public and policy-makers, engaging people in public life, giving voice to the diversity of interests in society, acting as a watchdog on public policy and decision-making and demonstrating new ways of implementing policy on the ground.

- **New spaces for influence**

VCOs in the study welcomed what they described as a ‘sea-change’ or a ‘watershed’ in the way government operated, which offered unprecedented access to government policymaking. This new openness has opened new doors, creating significant new opportunities and important new spaces for influence. Secondments, ‘cross-over appointments’ and new advisory forums have made the boundaries between government and the sector more porous. The interest in evidence-based policy has provided real opportunities for organisations which can provide the evidence that government wants. This new openness has also opened up new opportunities for alliances both within the sector and between sectors. Many felt that it would be difficult to reverse this process, or, as one respondent put it, to ‘turn off the tap’.

- **Some doors remain closed**

Nonetheless, most respondents felt that there were ‘no-go’ areas in policy:

- *first*, although there was an emphasis on devolution and decentralisation, the major policy decisions were, if anything, increasingly centralised – within No. 10 and the Treasury. Certain agendas, like the primacy of economic growth, the new managerialism in policy, and major changes to the social security benefits system, were strongly ‘off-limits’. This restricted the decisions that could be made at local or even government department level and hence the opportunities to have a real influence at these levels.

- *secondly*, variations between localities and policy areas meant that the new opportunities were not open to all. Whatever the intention from the centre (and most agreed that central government’s drive to change was creating new opportunities locally) many still experienced considerable resistance from officers and politicians down the line. ‘Old habits’, as one respondent put it, ‘die hard’ and localities where there was little tradition of participation had a lot of ground to make up. Poor relations between central and local government could also limit the voluntary and community sector’s ability to exert influence at a local level.

- *thirdly*, whilst key initiatives in the early years of the New Labour administration had created unprecedented new opportunities, particularly in relation to neighbourhood renewal and older people, some felt that the opportunities were now narrowing down, with the emphasis on policy implementation rather than setting agendas. Insofar as this was the case, VCOs were increasingly involved in what one respondent called ‘micropolitics’.
Access is easier for some than others

Although VCOs now had unprecedented access to the policy process, the very openness of the policy arena made it more crowded. Some argued that the growing army of advisors within government and the influence of favoured ‘think tanks’ could still make it difficult for VCOs to make their voices heard where it mattered. They were critical of the ‘thrill of the new’, and of what they saw as ‘celebrity politics’, with ‘talismanic’ individuals favoured over more representative groups. On the other hand, government also wanted access to ‘real people’ and this gave VCOs an important role. Nonetheless, some felt that this could be a two-sided coin. Respondents felt that government still preferred contact with individuals than with organised groups or ‘local activists’, and some VCOs felt that they were being sidelined by the emphasis on communities (although government was unclear as to what it meant by this term). Particular losers were organisations associated with trade union styles of organising whose approach did not fit in with the modernising style of government. The proliferation of partnerships and consultations was another two-sided coin – some organisations were simply overwhelmed. Many smaller organisations did not have the resources or infrastructure to exploit these new opportunities – and this was particularly true of the less well-resourced minority ethnic groups, which felt that more high profile Black and Asian groups were getting the lion’s share of attention in certain programmes.

The claim to legitimacy

Many VCOs considered that their major claim to legitimacy lay in their commitment to participatory and ‘democratic’ forms of organisation as well as their ability to give voice to citizens who would not otherwise be heard. They saw it almost as a ‘moral duty’ and were critical of those within the sector that they saw as unrepresentative. But government seemed more ambivalent about these forms of legitimacy. Whilst politicians and officials at national and local level might reject their critics as unrepresentative, our research suggested that representativeness was less important to them than the ability of VCOs to deliver the new agenda on the ground, to come up with good policy ideas, to present a case and to provide high quality evidence. Whilst government did see it as important that organisations that claimed to represent the sector could demonstrate legitimacy, there was also an impatience with what some government respondents saw as an ‘obsession’ with process.

Strength in numbers

Government respondents underlined the importance of VCOs speaking with a single voice. Fragmented voices make it easy, we were told, for government to do nothing. Alliances made it possible for organisations to deploy a variety of strategies and to capitalise on different forms of power and legitimacy, combining the resources of the larger organisations, for example, with the legitimacy (in the current policy environment) of community and user-based organisations. However, working in alliances can be difficult, as individual members struggle to ensure their distinctive values are taken on board. There were also problems with ‘branding’, projecting a clear identity. And alliances are not always appropriate. Government’s desire to hear a single voice can smooth over important distinctions between organisations and the need for different voices to be heard.

In summary, the policy arena was undoubtedly more open, but there was still work to do to turn new opportunities into real change. And new opportunities created new challenges. Principal among these new challenges were the following:
Maintaining a distinctive voice?

As they find themselves at the policy-making table, VCOs worry about losing their independence and their distinctive voice. Campaigning organisations in particular know that, if they are seen to lose their critical edge, they risk losing their membership. For this reason, some preferred to remain at arm's length from government. Others felt, however, that the choice did not have to be as stark as this. We found many examples where organisations were combining insider and outsider strategies, or where organisations who were at the table with government were also training community or service user organisations to have their own voice, providing ‘docking points’ into the policy process when needed, but allowing these smaller organisations to maintain their independent stance. Coalitions and alliances also allowed organisations to be critical where they opposed government policy. However, both strategies require sophistication if they are to be used effectively.

Effectiveness or legitimacy?

For many VCOs, there was a potential tension between effectiveness in terms of impact on policy on the one hand and the participatory forms of organisation to which many of them aspired. The use of oppositional strategies did not always mean that government would not engage in dialogue with critical organisations. But this required some sophistication on both sides. There was an impatience in government with those who continued to ‘carp and whinge’, despite the new opportunities, and some VCOs criticised those in the sector who persisted in treating all in government as enemies, including those who were potential allies.

The relationship between participatory and representative democracy

Both VCOs and government needed to recognise the distinctive role that they play in the democratic process. VCOs were critical of the shortcomings of traditional representative forms of democracy and of ‘wounded lions’, particularly in some local authorities, which continued to block participation in policy. At the same time, many VCO respondents still saw an important distinction between their role and that of elected representatives. Overall, the VCS gives voice to many different interests in society. But as individual organisations, they will inevitably be particular and conflicting voices, however ‘democratically’ organised they might be. Some respondents argued that it was the role of the state to arbitrate and balance the different interests, taking a strategic view. There would always be a creative tension between the two, but there was some concern that central government’s preoccupation with participatory democracy might undermine the formal democratic process and favour particular voices.

The need to take a long-term view

A number of VCOs cited specific instances where they had influenced policy debates or achieved piecemeal changes. However, there were few cases where they felt they had influenced longer-term strategic policy and many where they felt their arguments had gone unheeded. Most found impact difficult to measure. Nonetheless, some referred to the ‘drip, drip, drip’ effect of campaigning, where environmental or civil rights campaigns, for example, had eventually established their arguments as mainstream thinking, with legislation inevitably following. Similarly, many in the regeneration field felt that government’s neighbourhood renewal policies embodied – at least in principle - many of the central arguments made by VCOs over the preceding years.
Summary Findings from the study as a whole

- **Enhancing participatory democracy**
  There were few examples of engagement with VCOs leading to enhanced levels of traditional (representative) political engagement. The strengths of the VCS lay in participatory forms of democracy, profiling issues, engaging with wider publics, giving voice to diversity, acting as a watchdog and demonstrating new ways of implementing policy.

- **New spaces for influence**
  VCOs welcomed the unprecedented access to government policy-making which has opened new doors, creating significant new opportunities and important new spaces for influence. Boundaries between government and the sector are more porous and interest in evidence-based policy has provided real opportunities for VCOs.

- **Some doors remain closed**
  Nonetheless, there are ‘no-go’ areas in policy partly because government policy-making is increasingly centralised and partly because there were variations in the degree of openness between policy areas and localities. Increasingly, too, it was felt the opportunities for influence are narrowing down, especially where policy streams move into implementation phases.

- **Access is easier for some than others**
  Although VCOs now had unprecedented access to the policy process, this very openness made it more crowded. The growing army of advisors within government and the influence of favoured ‘think tanks’ make it difficult for VCOs to make their voices heard; however, the VCS could deliver ‘real’ people and marginalised groups to engage with the policy process.

- **The claim to legitimacy**
  VCOs consider that their major claim to legitimacy lies in their commitment to participatory and ‘democratic’ forms of organisation as well as their ability to give voice to citizens who would not otherwise be heard. Government’s response however, often gave more weight to organisations which delivered policy ideas, quality evidence and what they saw as ‘best practice’.

- **Strength in numbers**
  Government respondents underlined the importance of VCOs speaking with a single voice. Alliances made it possible for organisations to deploy a variety of strategies and resources but working in alliances sometimes meant both that individual voices were lost sight of or that differences in approach were smoothed over.

*Implications for voluntary and community organisations*

These findings suggest that voluntary and community organisations will want to:
- maintain their independent voice and continue to keep open what is sayable and doable;
- find ways of ensuring that they do not get ‘sucked into’ other people’s agendas and continue to ensure that the voices of the most marginalised in society are heard;
- develop the sophistication to combine insider and outsider strategies;
- know when it is important to combine their voices and when it is important to give voice to different perspectives;
- take a long-term view of policy influence and develop ways of monitoring progress and effectiveness; and
- resist any move to return the voluntary sector to a role where service delivery dominates: given the emphasis in the recent Treasury cross-cutting review on the role of the VCS in service delivery, it is important to ensure that the wide range of activity revealed by our research is given equal weight in future funding, consultation and policy development.