The voluntary and community sector is the invisible glue that holds society together, builds social capital and empowers individuals to make a difference to people’s lives... the passion of people who give their time and talents is a great strength of today’s Britain” (Home Secretary Charles Clarke 2005).

Introduction
As the above quotation vividly illustrates, in recent years a particular emphasis has been placed by policymakers on the role volunteering can play in transforming the economic and social well-being of individuals, households and neighbourhoods/communities. Against a background of such heightened expectations around volunteering, we were awarded funding by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for a qualitative study to improve understanding of what it means to ‘do’ volunteering in a community setting. Voluntary work is increasingly cast as a form of self-improvement and retraining for the workforce. Yet our research in a disadvantaged community in the East Midlands uncovered the persistence of more traditional forms of volunteering associated with mutual support and identification with the needs of others.

Background
The community/neighbourhood has re-emerged in both policy and academic circles as an important setting for many of the processes which supposedly shape social identity and life chances, including local social relations, social cohesion and social capital (Galster, 2001; Forrest and Kearns, 2001). Volunteering as an expression of citizenship and civic participation is linked into current policy debates – nationally and regionally – about communities. Moreover, the voluntary sector plays a role in partnership working that is pivotal in community regeneration. In the Sustainable Communities Plan, for example, it is argued that sustainable communities are ones where there is a thriving voluntary sector; poor neighbourhoods in general lack the qualities of self help, mutuality and trust which could assist in their regeneration, and the spirit of community needs to be nurtured1.

Within the East Midlands there is a Local Alchemy scheme (www.local-alchemy.net) which is run jointly by the East Midlands Development Agency (EMDA) and The New Economic Foundation (NEF). Local Alchemy is a bottom up initiative designed to foster social capital in deprived communities.

Volunteering is usually associated with formal activities undertaken through an organisation. Such ‘third sector’ activity is distinguished by its context from informal giving of time on a one-to-one basis (sometimes referred to as the ‘fourth sector’ [Williams, 2003]). Connections between voluntary work carried out in a neighbourhood and more informal activities can be close and the boundaries are perceived differently by different groups. Informal neighbouring and care within kin groups have traditionally been key to the well-being of communities (Young and Wilmott, 1957).

Place-based differences in cultures of community engagement impact on strategies to promote volunteering (Fyfe and Milligan 2003). There is evidence that ‘fourth sector’ activity is much more prevalent than formal volunteering for groups likely to face social exclusion including some ethnic minorities, older people and those living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Knapp et al., 1995; Williams, 2003). Some argue that formal giving of time through volunteering is a subset of a more comprehensive array of relations of care (Schervish and Havens, 2002).

Today, more than ever is expected of voluntary organisations, and of people who volunteer. Volunteering has been promoted in terms of what the individual can gain from it, most typically experience and credentials that are...
marketable in the workplace (Baines, 2004; McDonald & Warburton, 2003; Parsons & Broadbridge, 2004). In the context of UK welfare-to-work policies the term ‘volunteer’ is, according to some commentators, becoming increasingly associated with unemployment and unemployed people (Wardell et al., 2000). Policy makers see voluntary action as stimulating a work ethic (Lister, 2002). Yet volunteering by individuals within communities can also be linked to the ethic of care (Williams, 2001; 2002) in that caring – doing things/looking out for others (non-household members) is part of citizenship.

Overall, those in paid work are much more likely to volunteer than those outside the labour market (Davis Smith, 1997). Statistically the most likely people to volunteer are middle-aged, in employment, live in affluent areas, and have relatively high levels of education (cf. Devine, 2003). Our study was designed to uncover what it means to become and remain a volunteer in a place beset by social and economic disadvantage.

In particular, we sought to explore how people understand and manage the ‘work’ of volunteering alongside (or instead of) participation in the labour market and other unpaid work such as informal neighbouring and caring within the family and community. To achieve this we adopted a ‘case study’ approach within a community we call ‘Brightville’. Case study research is sensitive to context, detail and complexity in ways that can help to unravel the chain that links (or fails to link) policy to outcomes for individuals and places.

The Study Community

Brightville is located in the English East Midlands. It developed in the nineteenth century, and had a diverse industrial base spanning coal mining and textiles. It coalesced with the nearby industrial ‘Irontown’ but to this day Brightville’s residents retain a strong sense of identity separate from Irontown.

The old village is largely composed of nineteenth century working-class terraced housing (see figure 1). Brightville was radically transformed in the post-war period by the construction of two social housing estates, on farmland on the edge of the village, to serve Irontown. Today 60% of Brightville’s housing is owner occupied, 4% private rented and 36% is public housing (data provided by Experian, www.business-strategies.co.uk). Brightville is composed of two types of ‘poor’ area: one of largely working class nineteenth century terraced housing, and one of peripheral post war social housing, both were a poverty cluster since their inception (Lupton, 2003).

In common with so many smaller industrial towns, those industries and services which were once the cornerstone of urban living have been depleted and local residents have borne the brunt of social deprivation and unemployment (CRESR, 2002). While the old village of Brightville still has some local shops, and a few small employers, the two social housing estates have very few amenities, one shop and one pub between them.

Brightville, then, is very much a place-based community; those who do migrate to the area are either ‘placed’ there, from across the local authority district, in the social housing now run by a housing association, or they ‘choose’ to live in the old village at the start of their housing careers largely because prices are lower than in Irontown.

According to the Index of Multiple Deprivation, Brightville is economically deprived – the kind of place that typically tends to have relatively low levels of volunteering. Yet from a series of visits in the recent past we were aware of vibrant, active volunteer initiatives there. This led us to think of it as a place rich in the elusive quality of ‘community spirit’. Within Brightville we examined voluntary activity at four sites. These were: a community project (CP); a family support charity (FSC); a national government project (NGP), and a local community centre (LCC) (see Hardill and Baines, 2005).

What we did

At each site we employed a range of social research techniques within the overall case study approach. We interviewed: 19 volunteers (15 women, 4 men); 6 former volunteers, now paid workers (3 men, 3 women); and 2 paid workers in voluntary groups who also volunteer (2 women). We also interviewed 13 key informants (officers in local economic development and social inclusion, managers and workers in organisations using volunteers), collected documentary evidence and observed day-to-day activity and significant events (such as Annual General Meetings). We conducted two focus groups with volunteers. In box 1, we show some of the perceptions that people had of their area.
Results
People in the Brightville volunteer sites talked about their experiences of volunteering, how they came to participate in it and how it fitted into the daily working and personal lives. As a framework for organising the interview and focus group material we have drawn upon a three-stage model of volunteering (Omoto and Snyder, 2002): ‘antecedents’, ‘experience’ and ‘consequences’. Each stage operates at the individual, organisational and community levels. The following are key points under each stage:

Antecedents
• Becoming a volunteer
• Giving back for help received in the past
• Giving to ‘the community’ (generally or a specific group e.g. young parents)
• Wanting to be needed (personal reasons usually associated with a life event)
• Being asked by someone already involved as a volunteer or paid worker
• Changing direction – wanting a new career in a caring profession

Experiences
• Being a volunteer
• People call their volunteering ‘work’
• Structuring daily life – some volunteering needs to be managed like a job (e.g. finding childcare)
• Liberation from ‘just being at home’ for some volunteers
• Volunteers sometimes go beyond the formal remit of their role
• Volunteering can be a household activity rather than an individual one – some partners do volunteering together

Consequences and rewards
• Increased confidence (personal confidence in accessing public spaces as well as becoming ready for paid work and learning opportunities)
• Making a difference for others
• Having a role
• Accreditation
• Community participation for those beyond paid work

Understanding volunteering
Unpaid voluntary activity, although newly fashionable in UK policy, is of course not new. Indeed, it has traditionally been an important aspect of individual and community life, especially for women (Little and Austin, 1996). Historical accounts of volunteering in the UK identify two main impulses – philanthropy and mutual aid (Davis Smith, 1995). Mutual aid is characterised by individuals with a shared experience or situation working together to bring about change. Philanthropy is associated with altruism towards people who are perceived as outsiders (ibid). These two historical stances towards volunteering resonate strongly with the Brightville volunteers’ accounts of their attitudes and personal histories. We therefore borrow the terms ‘mutual aid’ and ‘philanthropy’ as shorthand labels to denote the main emphases of some of the volunteers’ narratives.
Volunteering in the study sites (especially the family support charity and the government project) could potentially help individualistic career aspirations because it involves training, an element of selection, regular commitment and a ‘professional’ approach. Yet interviewees in this study rarely explained their volunteering in terms of personal skills development – i.e. the language of government websites and reports. We refer to the minority who did so with the label ‘new individualism’.

A strong personal factor in people’s accounts of their entry into volunteering was reacting to milestone events in their lives (e.g. retirement or change in family circumstance). We describe this as ‘old individualism’ to distinguish it from the more instrumental stance towards personal skills development. Table 1 summarises, according to the above typology, the emphases in the interviews with volunteers.

**Conclusion**

Volunteering is often presented in political and academic discourses as a panacea for a wide range of social and political problems including worklessness and lack of civic participation. There was little evidence in the Brightville volunteer sites of raised aspirations towards the labour market or of upskilling for employment. Volunteering was more likely to be an alternative to paid work than a pathway into it. Indeed, volunteering was embedded in an ‘ethic of care’ expressed in mutualism and respect of the needs of others (Williams, 2002). As such it offers a distinctive insight into citizenship that does not depend upon an ethic of paid work.

When people in Brightville were excluded from the labour market (by disability, age, or ill health), volunteering could help them to adapt to the absence of employment. In this sense it can be interpreted negatively as an individualised form of adaption to the weakness of the local economy. Yet in terms of building personal confidence that enables people to feel at ease in public arenas, the Brightville study concurs with some of the most positive expectations invested in volunteering. Volunteers recounted how they gained a role, a sense of purpose and personal well-being through their volunteering.

Women outside paid work described their participation in volunteering as a form of engagement in public space that contrasted with an alternative they dismissed as ‘just sitting at home’. It is possible that such new con-

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**Table 1: Meanings and explanations of volunteering**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main explanations of volunteering</th>
<th>Number*</th>
<th>Typical themes</th>
<th>Examples from volunteer interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mutual aid</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Giving back</td>
<td>I felt I needed to put something back because I’d had a lot when I was ill and I could put something back with the experience that I’d got as well as the [FSC] volunteer that I had (FSC, Claire)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>response to a problem or experience shared with the recipient’s</td>
<td></td>
<td>Personally asked to help Sense of self worth Empathy with recipients</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philanthropy</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Seeing an unmet need Responding to adverts or appeals for volunteers Being fortunate Making a difference</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good works, altruism – proactive; recipient not a member of the same group/community as the volunteer</td>
<td></td>
<td>I feel that I’m fortunate and perhaps I should be doing something to help other people who are less fortunate. (CP, Stella)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Old’ individualism</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Loss associated with life events (retirement/children growing up) Volunteer org. like a family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reacting to a personal need or circumstance or life event, form of self help</td>
<td></td>
<td>I retired in 2003. I’ve always been used to being active. I was talking to Jean [paid worker] and saying I sometimes get a bit fed up. She said, oh come and help us – which I did (LCC, Lily)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New individualism</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Looking for personal benefit Want to make a career change into care</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>developing skills and experience of value in the labour market</td>
<td></td>
<td>I thought it could be a foot in the door for social work (FSC, Grant)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* includes the 19 volunteers (15 women, 4 men) interviewed; 3 (one man, 2 women) of the 6 former volunteers who currently combine their paid work with volunteering; and the 2 paid workers in voluntary groups who also volunteer (2 women).
fidence and energy could support more active engagement in forms of civic participation, although our data cannot demonstrate this directly. However, during the research period the community bid successfully for Local Alchemy status. Local Alchemy is designed to maximise the energy that people already have, and turn it into a force for change to make a difference for their local economy (www.local-alchemy.net).

**Bibliography**


**Notes**

1. cf. www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_communities/documents/sectionhomepage/odpm_communities_page.hcs

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