Making room for voluntary action

Introduction

Accounts of the shifting balance of roles, expectations and resources within contemporary social policy discussions of the mixed economy of welfare tend, with some noticeable exceptions, to be rather state centric (Finlayson, 1990; Macmillan and Kendall, 2019). Although there has been renewed interest in the historic and ongoing contribution of voluntary action to welfare provision in England (see Chapter One), these accounts rarely consider the extent to which developments in welfare provision have been shaped by debates among different actors about the appropriate balance of responsibilities. The previous chapters of this book have examined the role, position and contribution of voluntary action in welfare provision. This chapter examines, in more detail, the ways in which different narratives about voluntary action and the provision of welfare have been constructed, articulated, contested and circulated. These narratives may be regarded as field-shaping discursive interventions (see Chapter Two), indicative of struggles over the boundary between the state and voluntary action, particularly during transformational moments.
The chapter explores how narratives have been strategically deployed during periods of unsettlement in the 1940s and 2010s to make and shape ‘room’ in social welfare – the space and legitimacy to operate – for individual organisations, areas of work, or for voluntary action in general. It considers two emblematic moments from our analysis of documents in these two decades. These emblematic moments constitute key
issues, themes or policy developments that appear particularly significant and which bring debates about the role, position and contribution of voluntary action into sharp relief.

A new partnership with the state in the 1940s: the NOPWC and the National Assistance Act

The first emblematic moment highlights the elaboration of a stronger (pragmatic) partnership between voluntary action and the state in the 1940s, particularly in the development of the post-war social legislation and the emergence of the comprehensive welfare state (see Chapter Five). The focus in this example is on older people, the role of the newly formed NOPWC and the shaping and consequences of the National Assistance Act 1948, although examples from other fields could also be used. From the start, the NOPWC was proud of its role in forging the Act. Its first historian reflected in 1970 that this voluntary organisation’s role in framing the Act was an exceptional contribution to social legislation (Roberts, 1970: 52) and it has been accepted as such by scholars including Means and Smith (1998). Our analysis seeks to extend and deepen earlier accounts by offering a theoretically informed discussion of discourses of voluntary action, drawn from our analysis of multiple sources and narratives.

The emergence of the NOPWC

From the beginning, the NOPWC was a partnership between the statutory sector, represented by the Assistance Board, and the voluntary movement, represented by the NCSS, but firmly located in the latter. Its work and subsequent relationship with government reflect these origins. The NOPWC was set up in response to the heightened sensitivity to poverty and unmet needs experienced by older people during wartime, particularly around housing, health and loneliness, as reported by Assistance
Board officers. Whereas concern for the welfare of children and families had been a long-standing concern of the voluntary movement, it has been argued that the Second World War and its aftermath showed how older people ‘can shift from being a low priority group for resources to the focus of a “moral panic” about the need for society to show care and concern’ (Means, 1995: 198). The Blitz on London from September 1940 increased homelessness and led to concern that ‘old and feeble’ people were sleeping in air raid shelters, leading to a joint effort to evacuate older people from the cities.

The NOPWC encouraged the formation of local Old People’s Welfare Committees to help find accommodation and support for evacuated older people as well as research their experiences. Often these local groups emerged in connection with local councils of social service. These groups set up visiting schemes, clubs and home help schemes, as well as small voluntary-run homes for those no longer able to live independently. They were supported by financial aid, information and guidance from professional staff located in the NCSS’s Bedford Square headquarters. The number of small voluntary homes grew steadily in the post-war period, although progress was slowed by limited access to capital. In tandem, the first meals-on-wheels service (enabling continued independent living) was pioneered in 1943 and expanded thereafter, responding to difficulties of older people queuing for rations.

The work of the NOPWC grew steadily – there were 70 local committees (OPWCs) by 1944 and 270 local and 17 county-level committees by 1949. In 1950 official state encouragement to establish more committees came in a Ministry of Health circular, which urged that ‘all local authorities should do everything in their power to encourage further voluntary efforts to meet the needs of old people, especially those living in their own home, and that there should be close and continuous collaboration between all the statutory and voluntary agencies working for their welfare’.
The circular emphasised the value of voluntary social services and that ‘fruitful cooperation has been established’ between welfare and health authorities and OPWCs. There were 831 local committees by 1952.\(^5\)

As it became more established the NOPWC began to get involved in wider advocacy for older people, and in post-war planning and reconstruction. In 1942 it submitted evidence that informed the Beveridge Report and in 1944 published \textit{Old Age in the New World}.\(^6\) This report looked forward to the post-war period by promoting the interests of older people against earlier neglect: ‘The fact is that the older section of the community has in the past been an inarticulate group which society as a whole has been content to neglect’.\(^7\) The report drew attention to the poor conditions faced by older people in local authority-run public assistance institutions, building on a press furore that had erupted the previous year when a letter called ‘A Workhouse Visit’ was published in the \textit{Manchester Guardian}.\(^8\) From 1946, the NOPWC began organising a regular conference that was attended by hundreds of organisations and individuals involved in older people’s work; they were drawn from local authorities, central government departments and the voluntary movement.\(^9\) Means and Smith (1998: 75) note that the original idea for the influential Nuffield Foundation investigation into the problems of ageing and the care of older people, chaired by Seebohm Rowntree and published in 1947 (\textit{Nuffield Foundation, 1947}), came from the NOPWC. The report’s publication and favourable media response coincided with discussions well under way on the National Assistance Bill.

\textbf{Passing the National Assistance Act 1948}

A good test of the broad renegotiation of roles between voluntary action and the state in the 1940s is the introduction of the National Assistance Act 1948. This was the final plank in the overall social legislative programme to implement the
1942 Beveridge Report’s proposals for ‘cradle-to-grave’ income maintenance. The foundation was a comprehensive national insurance scheme, but for those neither able to work nor make contributions, a safety net – National Assistance – would be provided out of general taxation. Significantly, Part Three of the Act gave local authorities new powers and duties to provide welfare services for older and disabled people, including the duty ‘to provide–residential accommodation for persons who by reason of age, infirmity or any other circumstances are in need of care and attention which is not otherwise available to them’.10

The 1948 Act had great significance for two main reasons. First was its symbolic description and opening declaration. It was ‘An Act to terminate the existing poor law and to provide in lieu thereof for the assistance of persons in need by the National Assistance Board and by local authorities’11 and, as a result of its introduction on 5 July 1948, ‘The existing poor law shall cease to have effect’.12 It abolished the hated workhouse, or public assistance institution, against which the NOPWC had campaigned. Basic safety-net provision in the form of cash payments would be nationalised and provided through the National Assistance Board (Timmins, 2017: 136). It was intended to mark the end of the stigma and shame attached to Poor Law provisions. Second, locally, the new powers and responsibilities for councils to promote the welfare of older and disabled people became the cornerstone of post-war personal social services and social care in the welfare state. Timmins (2017: 136) saw these as precursors to subsequent social services departments. Crucially, they also created a space for ongoing voluntary provision: ‘A local authority may make contributions to the funds of any voluntary organisation whose activities consist in or include the provision of recreation or meals for old people.’13

It is noteworthy that MO writers, responding to questions fielded in 1947, did not refer to the National Assistance Bill, which had been omitted from the King’s Speech in 1946.
Speaking about its omission Barbara Castle suggested this would ‘cause tremendous disappointment and some cynicism, or a sense of defeatism, among people in my constituency and in other parts of the country, who are suffering very gravely from social insecurity at the moment’. Castle referred to the Bill being hampered by confusion, lack of consensus and the need for further work. Given these difficulties, it is perhaps unsurprising that those writing in April 1947 did not discuss the Bill, its fit with other planned legislation, how it might meet the needs of those who were likely to fall between the cracks of the other new legislation, and what this might mean for concepts of class and citizenship for those needing assistance.

The legislation was steered through Parliament without much contention over the winter of 1947–8 by Aneurin Bevan (Minister of Health) and James Griffiths (Minister of National Insurance). Richard Silburn (1983) refers to its passage through Parliament as ‘a tranquil affair’ (p 133) which was ‘seen as a simple and necessary measure to round off the social security programme’ (p 135). National Assistance was intended to be a temporary residual measure, which would gradually be eclipsed by National Insurance as contributions accumulated and coverage increased, within the context of a policy of full employment for all (Glennerster, 2007). Most subsequent commentary and social policy analysis has found in practice that the opposite happened – claims for National Assistance steadily rose in the post-war years, in part because the rates of contributory benefits were set too low, and other costs were not covered. Beveridge had recommended phasing in insurance benefits at subsistence rates over two decades, but the Labour government opted instead for immediate implementation, giving ‘precedence to conscience and compassion over financial probity’ according to Roy Hattersley (1997: 15). The heavy focus on National Assistance (in Part Two of the Act) at the time and subsequently has meant that the local provisions for elderly and disabled people (in Part Three of the Act) received far less attention, contributing to the idea that personal
social services and social care had become the marginalised ‘Cinderella’ of the welfare state. Yet it was precisely here that the role of voluntary action gained more of a presence.

The NOPWC and field-shaping narratives

The NOPWC’s remit to investigate the experiences and needs of older people and to promote responses to them, in practice and policy, already sought to locate it in a position of influence – this was part of its raison d’etre. In its first decade, it broadened its focus from immediate wartime needs to wider social policy affecting older people, particularly in the emergence of the post-war welfare settlement. The division of labour between the state and voluntary action was evolving rapidly at this time, in recognition that neither voluntary action nor the state was sufficiently equipped to meet the scale of need (Chapters Four and Five). While the state took on a centralised role in income maintenance through national insurance and assistance, and in health and education, Marilyn Taylor (1995: 220) suggests that opportunities arose in non-priority areas such as leisure, youth and services for older people, where there were ‘no local authority empires in these fields immediately after the war’. Voluntary agencies could therefore find ‘room’ to operate in the new context, as ‘pioneers, supplementers and niche market specialists’ (Kendall, 2003: 162; see also Chapters Three and Five).

The task for the NOPWC, and its parent body the NCSS, appears to have been twofold and, in a discursive sequence, created a strategic narrative around securing room for voluntary provision. First, the NOPWC highlighted the needs and interests of older people (see Chapter Four); but then, second, it promoted voluntary action in response to these needs. This was encapsulated in the title of the 1949 handbook on welfare work with older people produced by the NOPWC (an expanded version of a guide first published in 1946): Age is Opportunity. Ostensibly implying that old age
should be a period of opportunity, the subtext was that older people’s welfare work was an important new opportunity for the voluntary movement, even as other roles in welfare provision were receding. Robin Means (1995) argues that organisations including the NOPWC, the British Red Cross and the WVS ‘had developed strong welfare roles during the Second World War and were keen to play a strong part in the reconstruction process’ and that ‘they “planted” many of the “moral panic” stories about workhouses and food rationing as part of this strategy to emphasise their potential role, while they, also, lobbied central government in the 1950s against allowing local government increased powers’ (1995: 207). This interpretation underplays the extent to which these bodies were, in many cases, hybrid organisations that defy binary definition as either purely ‘voluntary’ or ‘statutory’; rather in its formation, structure and operation the NOPWC encapsulated the pragmatic partnership of the 1940s (Chapter Five).

The NOPWC sought to bring its expertise to bear in discussions on the emerging legislation, in particular on the provision and funding of non-residential welfare services. At that time, the main preoccupation for the Ministry of Health was the provision of residential care for older people, but it saw that voluntary organisations could provide supplementary non-residential care services. Local Authorities were given the power to fund voluntary organisations to provide the sort of meals-on-wheels schemes and other auxiliary services pioneered by local OPWCs and the WVS, which ‘already had national networks that were well placed to exploit these opportunities’ (Taylor, 1995: 220). The NOPWC made a series of specific suggestions and amendments which were incorporated into the final legislation, including recommendations regarding the registration and inspection of homes for older people and changes that enabled a wider range of local authorities to fund clubs and meals services (Roberts, 1970: 52).15 Fred Messer later suggested that the result was ‘a better Act because of amendments made by NOPWC’ (Roberts, 1970: 52). In its
publications the NOPWC detailed its contribution to the Act, noting it ‘warmly welcomed’ the new provisions.

The 1950 Ministry of Health circular argued that there was ‘an urgent need for further services of the more personal kind which are not covered by existing statutory provision and which indeed can probably best be provided by voluntary workers actuated by a spirit of good neighbourliness’. These services included regular home visiting, helping with shopping, letter writing and minor domestic repairs. In Parliament, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Health stressed:

Our desire is to encourage in every way the cooperation between local authorities and the great variety of welfare organisations that are already doing most valuable work in this field. … We want to encourage in every way the local authorities to work together with the voluntary organisations to avoid overlapping as far as possible. Yet there were complications. Local authority responsibilities in the National Assistance Act were limited to residential care and home care and did not embrace the full range of welfare services. This was based on the assumption that care of older people remained a family responsibility, with the gendered concern that daughters would ‘abandon elderly relatives to the state’ (Means, 1995: 201). In this way the moving frontier between the state and voluntary action was complicated and overlain by other dimensions, such as assumptions about the role of informal and family care (see Chapter Five).

The 1940s saw the establishment of comprehensive ‘cradle-to-grave’ welfare provision, with the state taking the primary role in income maintenance, through national insurance and assistance, as well as in other services. But this was not the end of voluntary action in welfare services, and neither was it a direct transfer of existing services from voluntary to statutory provision. Voluntary action sought and found specific roles
within the new welfare settlement, at least in part to meet new needs, or hitherto ill-addressed needs.

For voluntary organisations representing and serving older people, this involved almost unlimited possibilities for cooperation with local authorities, securing support for the voluntary provision of non-residential services for older people, such as lunch clubs, meals on wheels, home helps and recreational activities.

Navigating a decoupled relationship in the 2010s: reforming children’s services

We move now to discuss our second emblematic moment, which took place in the 2010s.

Debate on the relationship between the state and the voluntary sector can become rather one dimensional, focusing primarily on who provides services. Since the 1980s this debate has seemed to proceed in one direction – state withdrawal opening up space for other providers (see Chapter Five). The 2010–15 Coalition government couched this in terms of the ‘Big Society’, and later in its ‘open public services’ agenda, seeking new ways, models and financial mechanisms to ‘open up’ public services to new providers from the private and non-profit sectors. Whereas in the 1940s the moving frontier between the state and voluntary action shifted decisively towards the former, the 2010s vision sought shifts in the opposite direction by containing the state and expanding voluntary (and commercial) provision.

By focusing on the emblematic moment of reforming children’s services in England, however, we suggest some complications and counter-currents, as voluntary organisations sought to navigate changed relationships in the welfare mix. The discussion proceeds along three, interrelated, dimensions. First, it looks at the ways in which organisations construct and deploy strategic narratives both to make sense of an unsettled environment and to find ‘room’ within it. Next, it examines
the (re)active construction of different narratives during the 2010s for the role, position, resourcing and contribution of voluntary action and its relationship to others. Finally, through the specific example of the reform of children’s social care in the period 2014–17, we bring together voluntary and state narratives to consider the dynamic and contested nature of the moving frontier of welfare provision.

**Back to basics: positioning Children England**

The Associated Council of Children’s Homes – the forerunner to Children England – was established during wartime in the context of poverty, population dislocation, and heightened public concern for children’s welfare (see Chapter One). The Council brought together the key voluntary sector organisations working with looked-after children at the time, all of which recognised the ‘necessity of combined action in negotiation with Government Departments’. At first, war-related problems dominated proceedings, such as staffing shortages, training needs and the rise in illegitimacy, with the Council liaising with other voluntary organisations, including the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and the NCSS on these matters. However, this was soon combined with a desire to influence the government’s emerging children’s policy, particularly when the Curtis Committee began investigating conditions for children deprived of a normal home life in 1944. Indeed, the Council argued that its members’ extensive experience of caring for ‘thousands of homeless children’ entitled the Council to assume a serious ‘place and weight in the counsels of our legislators’.

In 1944 the Council appointed a ‘parliamentary agent’ – a protective strategy to advise it of any legislation relevant or challenging to the interests of children’s home providers. Members of the Council were concerned at what they saw as a misrepresentation of facts in media coverage, and particularly at a growing assumption that foster care was always a better
option than children’s homes. The Council discussed financing a film to inform the public of the ‘real conditions’ in children’s homes. The Council secured representation on the Curtis Committee and established a sub-committee to closely monitor the passage of the Children Bill, raise questions in Parliament, confer with the Home Office and prepare amendments. Like the NOPWC with the National Assistance Act, many of the Council’s recommendations passed into law in the form of the Children Act 1948.

By 2010, with an expanded membership and considerable growth and partnership working under New Labour, the Council, now known as Children England, delivered a broad programme of activities. The subsequent decade saw considerable change, both within Children England and in the wider field of children’s services, following the formation of the Coalition and subsequent Conservative governments, and a context of austerity, declining resources, growing demand and gradually deteriorating relationships between government and the voluntary sector. Attempts by the Conservatives to ‘de-couple’ themselves from the voluntary sector (Macmillan, 2013) led to the dismantling of structures such as the Strategic Partner programme (see also Chapter Five).

However, Children England has also spoken of developing a deliberate strategy to move the organisation away from government funding: to be more independent and to be able to speak more freely. During this time Children England reduced its range of activities and narrowed its focus towards keeping ‘children at heart’ in society and creating a sustainable voluntary sector economy. Renewed emphasis was placed on its ‘campaigning core’ on developing ‘a powerful public voice’ and raising its profile as ‘thought leaders on the challenges faced by children and the voluntary sector’. Children England suggested that an independent, powerful voice was needed within the context of an otherwise silenced voluntary sector (see Chapter Three). While frontline organisations might have been constrained in what they felt they could say
(for example by implicit or explicit contract requirements), a lack of government funding, combined with a mandate from members, freed Children England to challenge the government in, for example, moves to transfer statutory duties for child welfare onto others:

Our members now require us to be a more independent voice for them, separated financially from government, championing the role of the children’s voluntary sector and raising concerns about the conditions in which they are seeking to sustain their services and efforts for children … it’s essential that we as their umbrella body campaign for society to ‘put children at heart’ in order to make decisions that improve, rather than damage, children’s welfare.\textsuperscript{29}

The focus on voice and advocacy was similar to the 1940s, but the direction of the argument was different: rather than working with government to help with a transfer of responsibilities for children’s welfare from charities to the state, and to retain room within the new welfare settlement, the emphasis in the 2010s appeared to be more on resisting government’s attempts to transfer the state’s responsibilities to the voluntary sector and beyond, while at the same time silencing the sector through, for example, the Lobbying Act 2014 (see Chapters One and Three).

\textit{Constructing strategic voluntary sector narratives}

Our study has identified four interrelated narratives constructed and articulated by Children England through its various reports, papers, articles and consultation responses, with each in turn becoming broader in scope and ambition, pushing back against state-led interventions and narratives for the role, resources and contribution of voluntary action and the welfare mix.
First: the voluntary sector was under threat from commissioning. Children England became increasingly vociferous in its argument that commissioning was not working – particularly for small charities – arguing that: there were inconsistencies across local authorities; competition acted as a barrier to collaboration; it led to reduced continuity for service users and sustainability of providers; there were hidden costs of tendering; and, it contributed to increasingly distant and formal relationships between funders and providers. There was a need, they argued, ‘to find a better way’.  

Second: children’s services were under threat of market failure. Market-based approaches, it was argued, do not and will not work within the field of children’s services. Children England suggested that marketisation fundamentally changed (for the worse) what charities do, and how they do it, while also presenting a significant threat to their long-term viability. Underlying this was a deeper concern that services with only one buyer (the state), relatively few suppliers, and no power for children as ‘consumers’ were doomed to failure, with little evidence that public sector markets provide financial savings, sustainability or improvements to quality and outcomes.

Third: local systems were under threat by a failure to respect interdependence and distinction. In this narrative, the voluntary sector’s distinctive qualities – accountability, governance, mission, and multiple roles as ‘changemaker’, advocate, campaigner, innovator and provider of both highly specialist and universal preventative services – were presented as being threatened by austerity-induced cuts to local authority budgets, competitive commissioning models, anti-lobbying legislation and a climate of critique against charities who speak out. A case was made for appreciating the interdependent roles and responsibilities of statutory and voluntary sectors: ‘We want to reframe the relationships between public servants and the voluntary sector, based on a mutual respect for the unique roles and capacities of each, and a rediscovery of what we have in common’.
Fourth: the welfare settlement was under threat, and the welfare state should be redesigned. A final narrative extended existing arguments by seeking to defend fundamental welfare principles, practices and models of provision, which had been undermined by the Conservative-led governments’ project to shrink the state. There was, Children England argued, a need to redesign the welfare state, redefining the roles and responsibilities of the state and the voluntary sector to meet a ‘hierarchy of needs’:

Children England is in what William Beveridge once called ‘crusading spirit’. We’re on a mission to fundamentally review and redesign the welfare state in Britain – so that it can work better, more sustainably for the 21st Century; and so that it can better serve the rights and needs of its youngest citizens. … The voluntary sector was the inspiration, the creative precursor, and the key agent of change, in the creation of the 20th Century welfare state. We must step up to the plate and do so again, for the 21st Century.32

A line in the sand: resisting the moving frontier

Children England used these four narratives to make targeted interventions in live policy debates during the 2010s, including children’s social care reform over the period 2014 to 2017. These reforms highlight the dynamic and contested nature of the moving frontier of welfare. In spring 2014 the focus, resources and institutional structures of child protection and support for children and families gained headlines in the mainstream media in the UK. A government consultation on proposals to enable local authorities to delegate or outsource core children’s services – including child protection – to third parties, which included private companies, was framed by the media as permissive, enabling innovation in a system under increasing pressure.33 It was couched in the prevailing language
of ‘state failure’ (see Chapter Five), invoking the need to try something different.

Children England responded by joining others in a campaign against the proposals. The consultation, it argued, was rushed, narrow and lacked detail or supporting evidence. More fundamentally, the possibility of profit making from child protection was inappropriate and there would be a lack of accountability within the newly proposed structures. It argued that child protection is a fundamental human right and one of ‘the most powerful duties of the state’, which ‘must never be open to the real, or even perceived, risk of being done in the pursuit of profit’.34 In response to the campaign the government agreed to ban profit making from any changes to child protection.35 And the proposal was amended: the regulations indicated that any such delegation must only be to not-for-profit providers, thus (ostensibly) ruling out private providers.

Despite this, the wider issue of delegated power and third-party involvement did not go away. In 2014 the government had argued that local authorities and others did not have the freedom or power to develop, test and implement radical new approaches in children’s services. In 2015 the newly elected Conservative government reiterated this. The Prime Minister argued that ‘efforts to extend opportunity have been undermined by a tolerance of government failure’.36 He indicated that child protection ‘would be a big focus of the next 5 years’.37 A subsequent speech by Cameron on ‘the smarter state’ indicated that significant reform was in the air: ‘we will say to any local authority failing its children: transform the way you provide services, or those services will be taken over by non-profit trusts or other partnerships’.38 It would be transformative: ‘one of the big landmark reforms of this Parliament … show[ing] how serious we are about confronting state failure and tackling some the biggest social problems in our country’.39
A January 2016 vision document produced by the Department for Education proposed that government would support the emergence of new not-for-profit children’s social care organisations as part of a more dynamic and diverse range of provision … we will support those local authorities who wish to establish organisations, mutuals and trusts covering all, or part, of their children’s social care functions, working with children’s charities to explore the scope for their involvement.  

A more substantial policy paper in July 2016 highlighted variations in practice across local areas. It argued that: ‘The current system, where the vast majority of children’s social care services are delivered by in-house local authority teams, is not delivering consistently excellent practice’ and ‘innovation has not been given the space to thrive’. To remedy this, the paper expresses the government’s ambition that ‘by 2020, over a third of all current local authorities will either be delivering their children’s services through a new model or be actively working towards a different model’.

The narrative invoked voluntary action in two ways: either drawing on specialist expertise through strategic partnerships between local authorities and charities or in the emergence of new ‘not-for-profit’ trust models. However, a parliamentary committee inquiry running alongside these policy developments argued, on the basis of evidence from two large, long-standing national children’s charities – the National Society for the Protection and Care of Children (NSPCC) and the Children’s Society – that ‘It appears that charities may not be as enthusiastic about taking on statutory services as the Government is to invite them to do so’. New legislation, which began its parliamentary process in May 2016, proposed that the Secretary of State could exempt or modify requirements under children’s social care legislation to...
enable local authorities to achieve better outcomes or the same outcomes more efficiently. This ‘power to test different ways of working’ was the focus of parliamentary debate. Children England worked with a coalition of 40 organisations and experts across sectors – Together for Children – to object to the proposals, which would, they argued, create a fragmented landscape of children’s legal protection and of social care practices, while also making the ‘prospect of marketisation and profiteering’ a real concern. A petition against exemption clauses gained 170,400 signatures.

The campaign proved influential. In November 2016 the House of Lords voted against the power to exempt local authorities from their duties to vulnerable children. Reflecting the objections raised by Together for Children, peers argued that the ‘exemption clauses’ were unnecessary, sweeping, risked fragmenting services, threatened children’s rights, compromised their safety, and circumvented normal legislative processes. They were also worried about paving the way for the greater involvement of private companies in children’s services. The government at first resisted, but eventually in March 2017 it was reported that the government had decided to withdraw the proposals entirely, after representations from opponents and the likelihood of further parliamentary defeats. The new legislation, now without the ‘power to test different ways of working’, was passed in April 2017.

On the face of it, a campaigning group involving Children England and others, working with sympathetic parliamentarians, had successfully challenged this particular attempt to pass legislation which would otherwise have helped move the frontier between the state and voluntary action (Tunstill and Willow, 2017). A state narrative bringing together inconsistency and ‘failure’ of existing public services, with the possibility of transformation through innovation, new leadership and a diverse range of alternative new models, had invoked the dynamism and creativity of the charitable and voluntary sector. Ironically, it was elements of the voluntary
sector in alliance with others, including professional bodies, which had defended, in this way and for the time being, the broad array of public arrangements and provisions built up since the Children Act 1948. Rather than taking the opportunity to expand their role within children’s services, to support government’s attempts to move the frontier, the voluntary sector, at least in the guise of Children England, had been actively involved in resisting it.

Summary

This chapter has examined how the ‘room’ for voluntary action is strategically narrated and negotiated, through detailed discussion of two contrasting emblematic moments of political and policy development.

In the 1940s the National Assistance Act 1948 came to symbolise much of the post-war Labour government’s approach to comprehensive welfare provision, in its bold claim to have finally dismantled the Poor Law. Yet at the same time, it opened the way for securing state support for auxiliary services for older and vulnerable people. The NOPWC was active in shaping the debates during the war around emerging and unmet needs of older people, and these partly framed the legislative response through the 1948 Act. It also actively lobbied on behalf of older people, with the result that local authorities were both encouraged to seek active partnership with local OPWCs and to fund the provision of personal services such as home visiting and meals on wheels. The emblematic moment highlights the efforts of voluntary organisations to secure or retain a place in the new state-centred welfare settlement and the role of strategic narratives in doing so.

For the 2010s the analysis focused on children’s services, and the move by Children England to develop a more critical stance and voice in relation to the direction of government policy. Here the government was deepening its pursuit of competitive public service markets. Harnessing the media
into utilising a narrative of a legacy of state failure, the state envisaged an expanding role for voluntary action in an era of ‘open public services’. Rather than deploy a narrative to advance this expanded role, Children England sought to contest and challenge state retrenchment, re-emphasising the valuable role of children’s charities alongside and in interdependent partnership with the public sector. It further sought to draw a line in the sand to prevent the government loosening regulations to allow more of a role for private firms and charities, particularly around child protection. It campaigned with others, successfully at the time, in the media and in Parliament, to prevent the government from reforming children’s social care services. Over time, a more proactive narrative emerged from Children England, seeking to start its own transformational conversation about the welfare state.

Focusing on emblematic moments sheds light on the careful positioning, manoeuvres and narratives developed by voluntary organisations in both decades to shape debates around social welfare, and to find, defend and secure an appropriate role or place in an emerging welfare settlement. This fits with theories on discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008) which hypothesise that these types of manoeuvres gain greater salience in moments of upheaval and transformation, and are witnessed and evidenced in both the 1940s and the 2010s, and arguably continuing into the 2020s.