Introduction

The 2010s witnessed the most significant renegotiation of social welfare provision in England since the consolidation of the welfare state after the Second World War. In the 1940s context of war, austerity and considerable deprivation in the UK, the Beveridge Report proposed a series of measures to address the five giant evils (Beveridge, 1942). The subsequent establishment of comprehensive welfare services led to far-reaching changes in the role and purpose of many voluntary and community organisations and to intense debate about the moving frontier between the state and voluntary action. It was a discussion that involved policy makers, the wider public (Deakin and Davis Smith, 2011) and the leaders of voluntary organisations (Brewis, 2014). That discussion contributed to a growing consensus both about the extent of previously hidden needs and the collective responsibility for meeting them. While there was difference of opinion as to where that collective responsibility should lie, there was widespread support for an expansion of the state’s role in welfare provision. Some hoped, while others feared, that the state would take over all responsibility for welfare services, leading to the
Image 7.1: Imagery from Children England’s campaign for a ‘childfair state’, launched in 2018

ChildFair State
A society that has children at heart is a better society for everyone

demise of voluntary action. Instead, the notion of partnership became a commonplace description of the relationship between the state and the voluntary movement. While the state was expanding its role in welfare, voluntary organisations were consolidating their positions, including through the strengthening and establishment of new umbrella bodies. The idea of a ‘movement’ enabled voluntary organisations to speak with a more unified voice to government and in this context ‘partnership’ became a reassurance that voluntary action would still have an important role to play. Voluntary organisations argued that, despite changed conditions, their work would continue because it was essential to a free democracy. The state recognised that ongoing post-war austerity meant voluntary action was necessary to meet need, while volunteers and voluntary organisations were seen to humanise services. A pragmatic partnership was secured, overcoming suspicion on both sides: a settlement of convenience in recognition of the scale of need, the urgency of working together to address it, and the different roles and contributions that voluntary action, the state and others could make. Voluntary organisations developed new areas of service delivery and were intrinsically involved in policy design.

In the 2010s there was a similar convergence of major national and international events, which included the ongoing impact of the global financial crisis, and the prevailing political and economic response involving an austerity programme of public deficit reduction. Since 2010, Conservative-led governments have presided over considerable changes in the ways in which welfare services are provided, coordinated and financed (Alcock, 2011; Taylor-Gooby, 2012; Lawton et al, 2014), underpinned by an ideological reassertion of limited government and ‘open public services’ involving a plural market of providers. Such developments refuelled debates about the growing levels of unmet needs and the balance of provision in the mixed economy of welfare. This intensified discussion about the role of voluntary action in the delivery of public
services (Macmillan, 2013; Woolvin and Hardill, 2013) and in welfare provision more broadly. Conservative thinking identified the welfare state itself as a problem, characterising it as bureaucratic and prescriptive, with an approach to the delivery of public services that stifled innovation and deepened rather than resolved social problems. This emerging narrative of state failure was echoed by others, including some within the voluntary sector, albeit with different understandings of the causes and nature of that failure and what the response should be.

The promise of a Big Society and ‘open public services’ appeared to offer new opportunities for voluntary action. And there was a continued acknowledgement that voluntary action was an essential component of society – part of the fabric of the nation – including a central role in service delivery. Yet this was not to be a simple story of a shrinking state and a growing voluntary sector, or of an ever-closer alignment between the two. The Big Society soon became mired in scepticism (from the media, the public and the voluntary sector) that it was a cover for austerity, as government funding to the voluntary sector faltered, while private sector involvement in public service delivery continued to grow. The suspicion was that the government’s interest in the voluntary sector (its preferred terminology in the 2010s tended to be ‘the social sector’ and ‘civil society’) was a disguise for lower-cost services and extending the reach of public service markets. A series of high-profile media attacks on the pay, fundraising, governance and leadership practices of charities was augmented by government efforts to limit the campaigning role of voluntary organisations, leading to claims that charities were being silenced. The political and policy context in which the sector was operating appeared to become decidedly chillier (see, for example, Independence Panel, 2015; Civil Exchange, 2016). While Conservative governments spoke of expanding the role of voluntary action in public service provision, at the same time they restricted and reshaped funding to the sector, significantly weakened
voluntary sector infrastructure, and moved away from the partnership approach to the policy development characteristic of the pre-2010 Labour governments (Kendall, 2003; Lewis, 2005). The voluntary sector felt increasingly fragmented, with competitive tendencies fuelled by commissioning processes, further affecting its collective voice. In the face of rising levels of unmet needs and increasingly polarised views on how to address these needs – including a growing emphasis on individual (blame and) responsibility – the state and voluntary organisations continued to work together, but the relationship, we suggest, became one of *antagonistic collaboration*.

Studying both periods together highlights how in such transformational moments, when developments and debate intensify, the moving frontier between the state and voluntary action can appear to make a decisive shift in one direction or another. However, these should be understood as particular moments within the context of an ongoing, long-standing discussion of the mixed economy of welfare (Lewis, 1999a). Further, the notion of a moving frontier suggests a firm, singular boundary dividing two separate spheres. Instead, our analysis has demonstrated that there are multiple, fluid and permeable *frontiers*: between the state, voluntary action and forms of welfare, such as that provided through the private sector; between different fields of welfare activity, including services for children, youth or for older people; and covering different kinds of frontier relationship, such as provision, finance and regulation. These frontiers are subject to constant change in multiple directions, and to contestation. Different ways of understanding the changing relationship between the state and voluntary action have developed, in part reflecting different levels of analysis and in part different theoretical and political framings. In this, our conclusions chapter, we revisit our three theoretical perspectives to argue for a recognition of the variability, fluidity and complexity which challenge fixed understandings of the roles, contributions, positions and relationships between voluntary action and the state and
highlight the role of strategic narratives deployed as discursive interventions to shape moving frontiers.

Accounting for change

Social origins theory suggests that the voluntary or non-profit sector is deeply embedded in specific national contexts, its role and size linked to different welfare regimes (Salamon and Anheier, 1998). In this model the UK is considered a liberal civil society regime, with a comparatively large voluntary sector and low welfare spending, but retaining some social democratic features (for example the National Health Service) based on pro-state attitudes fostered during the Second World War and associated with the working class mobilisation that underpinned the Attlee government from 1945 to 1951.

While helpful in distinguishing cross-national differences in welfare models, social origins theory presents a somewhat static picture of relatively fixed unchanging regimes, with enduring roles for the state and voluntary sector, identifiable through comparative analysis of high-level data. Others have argued for the need to look at a smaller geographical scale, to recognise variations within nations. Arvidson et al (2018), for example, introduced the idea of local civil society regimes as a way of allowing for spatial variations within nations, although still within the overall framework of welfare regimes and social origins theory. Our analysis has highlighted variations over time and just how contentious these variations can be. These dynamic processes and contentious debates involve active work to frame discussions of the role, position and contribution of voluntary action. They become animated and intensified during significant moments of transformation, and are hard to accommodate within the relatively fixed and stable understanding provided by social origins theory.

This book has also argued that accounts of the shifting balance of roles, expectations and resources within contemporary discussions of the mixed economy of welfare tend (with some
Challenging the Moving Frontier?

notable exceptions) to be rather state centric (Finlayson, 1990; Lewis, 1999b; Macmillan and Kendall, 2019). There is a risk of underestimating the historic and ongoing contribution of voluntary action to welfare policy and provision and oversimplifying the fluid and variable versions of mixed economies that may exist over time and at any one time. They present a relatively static picture, or they assume a ‘zero-sum’ picture where the growth of the state simply crowds out voluntary action or vice versa. They rarely consider the extent to which such developments have been actively shaped by debates among different actors about the appropriate balance of responsibilities. Yet in the analysis presented in this book we have found these to be highly significant.

Further, contemporary writing on the relationship between the state and the voluntary sector can become rather one-dimensional (focusing on who provides services) and often seems to proceed in one direction (state withdrawal opening space for voluntary, and private, sector providers), again not fully allowing for variations. Successive governments have, over some three decades, sought to advance the role of the voluntary sector in social welfare delivery, as part of an ongoing series of public service reform efforts. For the Coalition and subsequent Conservative governments of the 2010s, this was initially couched 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. The moving frontier between the state and voluntary action would, in this vision, shift decisively to contain the former and expand the latter. However, beyond a first glance, disruptions to this broad vision readily begin to arise.

variation and contestation

Rather than decisive unidirectional shifts between the state and voluntary action, we have evidenced variations, complications
and counter-currents. We have focused on three areas of social welfare – services for children, young people and older people. Informed by strategic action field theory, our analysis has foregrounded the complexity of these overlapping fields, all of which have fuzzy and porous boundaries, and the contention and struggles which exist around them.

During the 1940s, we have suggested, there was less sense of separation between voluntary organisations and the state. The separate spheres advocated by older traditions of Victorian philanthropy, and epitomised by the Charity Organisation Society, had given way to a more interdependent relationship (Macadam, 1934). There was closer integration, through, for example, a high degree of cross-over of personnel, in which the governance committees of leading voluntary organisations were chaired by politicians. Indeed, there was considerable involvement by MPs in the establishment of umbrella bodies which helped to consolidate the voluntary movement during wartime. Voluntary organisations were called upon to provide evidence on need, which directly influenced government thinking, and they made significant contributions to the subsequent formation of welfare policy: they were integral to the policy process. In the 2010s we witnessed something of a different relationship, within which the boundaries and interactions between voluntary action and the state looked somewhat different. Certainly, there was much talk of collaborative arrangements, and some raised concerns at what they saw as a loss of distinctiveness in welfare service delivery. Yet at the same time there was a separation of the state and voluntary action in policy terms, signified, for example, by the dismantling of infrastructure engagement mechanisms such as Strategic Partner programmes. The result was that voluntary organisations looked to influence the development of government policy from afar, more as outsiders in the policy process, rather than being integral to its design.

Further, at any one time there is not just one field of voluntary action and/or one field of welfare, but multiple,
nested and overlapping fields. We have focused specifically on children, young people and older people’s services – three fields in which voluntary organisations have long since played a significant, although varied, role in the provision of welfare. There are, however, significant differences between them, not least in the contrasting historic and contemporary positions that both voluntary action in general, and individual voluntary organisations, occupy within those fields, and the extent and nature of ‘unsettlement’ experienced over the last decade. There were clear differences, for example, between youth and older people’s services. Older people’s services settled somewhat following the formation of Age UK in 2009 and maintained relatively close and influential relationships with government. Youth services, meanwhile, saw a dramatic reduction in funding and the associated closure and merger of key voluntary sector umbrella bodies, alongside the dismantling of statutory provision – evidence of far greater disruption to existing roles and positions. These differences may in part be reflective of the more peripheral location of youth services in policy terms compared to older people’s services. Exploring, comparing and contrasting the sector’s position and influence within all three fields has enabled a more nuanced understanding of moving frontiers through highlighting their varied, fluid and contested nature. We have seen how the leading voluntary organisations within these fields have been positioned, and have positioned themselves, within these dynamic fields, and how this has changed over time.

These variations and shifts are contentious. Struggles over boundaries between the state, the voluntary sector and other actors form one area of contention within a field. Field change occurs through ‘unsettlement’, both from ordinary internal shifts such as competition, collaboration, innovation and strategic manoeuvring by different organisations, but also from rarer exogenous shocks such as war (as in the 1940s), economic crisis (preceding austerity in the 2010s) and (as at the time of writing) pandemics. Our analysis has highlighted the fluid and
highly contested nature of moving frontiers, and particularly the active work of voluntary and state actors in constructing persuasive arguments and credible narratives for their positions.

This recognition calls for a consideration of the ways in which different narratives about voluntary action and the provision of welfare have been constructed, articulated, contested and circulated. We suggest that these narratives should be regarded as field-shaping discursive interventions (see Chapter Two) indicative of struggles over the boundaries between the state and voluntary action, particularly during transformational moments.

The work of narratives

To take this thinking forward, by drawing on ideas from discursive institutionalism, we have highlighted the ways in which narratives are used strategically in a direct attempt to shape fields of welfare and voluntary action (Schmidt, 2008). We have seen how at moments of crisis, or unsettlement, narratives become important field-shaping interventions, in the ways in which they organise ideas, evidence and argument, to make sense of contemporary developments and frame imaginable futures. Narratives are also involved in the struggle for room, as dominant commonsense ways of articulating change and providing persuasive and settled visions for the future. Multiple actors are involved in efforts to understand configurations of the fields of social welfare – what they look like, who is doing what, with and for whom and how well; and also to shape/reshape them – what they should look like, who should be involved, what their relationships should look like, and how outcomes could be improved. Strategic narratives are part of these ‘field-shaping’ efforts, undertaken routinely by all actors in a field.

In Chapter Three we identified two dominant narratives of voluntary action which endure across both time periods: voluntary action is part of both who we are and
what we do. The variations in where emphasis is laid within these narratives, and in wider narratives of need, rights and responsibility, however, have all been used in attempts to both carve out and restrict room for voluntary action in varied ways by different actors over time. Some would see, for example, the distinctive characteristics identified for voluntary action—such as innovation, reach, voice and person-centred approaches—as strong reasons and powerful arguments to make more room for voluntary action. For others they are not. Underpinning both these similarities and differences are important questions about how voluntary action is understood (what is being imagined when different actors talk of voluntary action, charity, and voluntary organisations), ideas of the distinctiveness of voluntary action and whom/what it is being compared to and distinguished from (the state, private business, family).

Claims about the fundamental roles of voluntary action, highlighting its importance to a healthy society, assume greater significance at moments in time when those very roles are perceived as being under threat. In the 1940s the expansion of the welfare state led to concerns to preserve room for voluntary organisations as welfare service providers. Narratives were constructed to emphasise the distinctiveness of voluntary action, including its innovation, reach and humanity, and to emphasise the extent of need and the need for partnership in order to address it. The establishment of new umbrella bodies and associated deepening of collaboration among voluntary organisations enabled a more united, powerful voice. In contrast, in the 2010s, the opening up of public services and support for a Big Society appeared to offer the potential to expand the role of voluntary action in welfare provision. At the same time, however, funding was cut, partnership programmes were dismantled, attempts were made to silence voluntary organisations, and funding regimes contributed to competition and fragmentation within the voluntary sector, affecting its collective voice. The sector pushed back: it claimed it would not be silenced; it argued for a recognition of distinctiveness
and interdependence; and at times it resisted attempts to roll back the state.

More specifically we highlighted two **emblematic moments** from our analysis of debates across both time periods which demonstrate more precisely the work of strategic narratives in practice, fundamentally shaping the changing welfare mix, albeit in rather different ways. In the 1940s the NOPWC was active in shaping debates, lobbying on behalf of older people to influence the creation of policy in a way which secured a place for voluntary action in the new state-centred welfare settlement. In the 2010s we focused on the narratives articulated and circulated by Children England as it pushed back against attempts to move frontiers in ways which represented a retrenchment of the state and a transfer of statutory responsibilities for child protection.

Narratives, then, can be perceived as work to secure positions within unsettled (nested) fields. They also seek to reorder fields. They do so through claims of significance, distinctiveness, independence and interdependence. The significance of narratives is heightened during moments of transition, but rather than always working in one direction they may be used to push back, or pull forward, moving frontiers depending on context. Alongside differences over time, there are also differences between fields as the varied dynamics of those fields leave voluntary organisations with more, or less, room for manoeuvre.

One of the narrative strategies adopted by commentators is the use of history to make sense of the present and to argue for a vision of the future. This is evident in both periods. In the 1940s voluntary leaders regularly referenced the movement’s long history of innovation and service delivery, and its role in establishing public services taken on by the state, as part of their strategy to secure a continued role within the shifting landscape of welfare provision. In the 2010s voluntary sector leaders drew on examples of individual organisations’ historic roles in creating the welfare state as part of a strategy to defend
and rebuild a welfare state they considered under threat from an ideologically opposed government pursuing a policy of austerity.

**COVID-19 and the emergence of a partnership of necessity?**

While our research focused on the 2010s, this book was written during the pandemic in 2020 and early 2021. The response to the pandemic prompted the adoption of wartime analogies from the Prime Minister downwards, with references to a so-called ‘Blitz spirit’ becoming commonplace (Irving, 2020). And in much the same way that the Second World War changed the lives of all citizens (albeit unevenly) and revealed the previously unrecognised need, the pandemic shone a light on new and enduring needs, including hunger and food poverty, and exposed and exacerbated pre-existing inequalities. There was widespread public support for initiatives such as extending free school meals to cover holiday periods, reflective of a wider growing sympathy with ‘the position of those of working age who find themselves in need’ (Curtice, 2020: 103) and suggestive of greater support for the welfare state.

‘Unprecedented’ was the adjective *du jour* for COVID-19. Its long-term impact remains uncertain. For the voluntary sector, the pandemic represented an ‘unsettlement’ of a scale and pace unimaginable just a few months earlier. In England, as in the rest of the UK and beyond, voluntary organisations stepped in and stepped up as the first response to new forms of unmet need. As the crisis hit, people joined in community mutual aid efforts to support local people in isolation and need. The early months of the pandemic were marked by rapidly improvised new relationships between voluntary action and the state at local and national levels: what at first seemed to herald a new *partnership of necessity* (Macmillan and Ellis Paine, 2020), reminiscent of but substantially different from the mobilisation of voluntary action at the start of the Second World War. Unlike the 1940s, when the voluntary movement built on
good relations with government forged during its grassroots work to alleviate some of the effects of the Depression, this period followed a decade in which the relationships between government and the voluntary sector were far more strained. As the pandemic continued, and as voluntary organisations faced increasingly difficult combined pressures of rising demand, operational challenges that required rapid changes to service delivery models, and declining resources (Macmillan, 2020), tensions began to show. While government talked of the ‘gentleness of charity’ (Sunak, 2020), the voluntary sector countered that ‘in the toughest times, we do the toughest work’ (Acevo, 2020). In a joint effort to generate recognition and create room, the sector campaigned for greater government and public support, arguing that it was #NeverMoreNeeded. The voluntary sector’s role as a fundamental part of who we are and what we do to meet needs in the face of adversity began to feel more pertinent than ever.

**Rethinking welfare futures**

Focusing on the different ways in which people talked about voluntary action, in two transformational moments, provides new insights into how fluid and contested the boundaries between the state, voluntary organisations and other actors are. In the 1940s voluntary action was closely integrated with the state, and voluntary organisations were influential in the formation of welfare policy. This integration secured room for voluntary action within the newly expanding welfare state and helped to mobilise a pragmatic partnership in service provision. In the 2010s there was a separation of the state and voluntary action in policy terms, combined with what some viewed as a loss of distinctiveness in service delivery, contributing to an antagonistic collaboration between voluntary action and the state. The initial shock of COVID-19 in 2020 led to a partnership of necessity, in which the voluntary sector was at the forefront of responses to social need. However, as the pandemic continued
into 2021, and the financial impact on the charity sector became more apparent, this partnership began to falter, at least at the national level.

Narratives were constructed as strategic interventions in these unsettled periods. This played out in different ways at different times. Today, parts of the voluntary sector, together with some parts of the public, are resisting attempts to move frontiers between the state, voluntary action and others. A key message that emerged from such narratives in the 2010s, reinforced by the effect of the pandemic and responses to it in 2020, was that the state was failing to meet its responsibility to provide for those in need, contributing to a widening of inequalities within society. These concerns were shared by the public, who agreed that there must be change. As to what that change should look like, however, there was little agreement.

While both the 1940s and 2010s saw rigorous debate about the role of voluntary action, there was a notable difference when it came to discussions about the role of the state in social welfare. In the 1940s there was a comprehensive, nationwide debate about the new responsibilities the state would be taking on and the consequences of doing so. The popularity of the Beveridge Report and the framing of the 1945 general election around post-war reconstruction is an indication of this. By contrast, the 2010s involved no comparable debate on the role, scope or responsibilities of the state in social welfare. Significant reforms were introduced with profound implications for individual citizens, as well as consequences for voluntary action. Despite such wide-reaching reforms, and despite the strong opinions many people held about these changes, there was scant attempt to openly discuss and reach a consensus about who should be responsible for providing social welfare services in the 21st century, or what levels of needs they should be meeting. Views had become deeply polarised.

As we move further into the 2020s, the shock of the pandemic, its far-reaching consequences, and the depth of the response required and proffered by the state, voluntary action
and others has opened a window of opportunity to think – and talk – again about our collective responsibility to meet needs within society. As we move on through COVID-19, the issues raised in this book – roles, responsibilities, contributions, boundaries, frontiers, narratives, room and positions – will continue to be debated. It is our hope that the analysis we have provided may offer a toolkit – a set of concepts and ways of thinking – that may help to make sense of these debates and developments as they unfold.