Chasing a ‘loose and baggy monster’: almshouses and the geography of charity

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This paper goes some way towards redressing the lack of geographical literature on charity through exploring the geography of the British domestic charitable sector. The size and geography of the third sector is outlined, followed by an analysis of how almshouses can be understood as inherently geographical and deeply embedded in local social networks of inclusion as well as exclusion.

Key words: UK, charity, third sector, almshouses, embeddedness, welfare

Introduction

Despite an extraordinarily long history and recent growth, ‘... there has been a remarkable paucity of academic research into ...’ (Hurd et al. 1998, 4) the complex geographies of charity (Wolch and Geiger 1985). Wolch’s early work on charity in Los Angeles did not stimulate a charity-based research agenda in British geography (Wolch and Geiger 1983 1986; Wolch 1989 1990). Instead, the focus of attention remained on understanding state–private sector relationships (Patterson and Pinch 1995; Pinch 1997). Whatever the reasons for this neglect, Tony Blair’s landslide election victory in May 1997 shifted charity voluntary work to the centre stage of the political agenda with New Labour’s ‘Third Sector/Third Way’ project (Kearns 1995; Blair 1999). Two years into the new government, two policies had been introduced to support the third sector. First, the new government’s first budget of 1997 introduced a Treasury-led charity tax review that eventually led in 1999 to a new range of extended tax reliefs on private giving. Second, in late 1998 a Compact was published between the government and groups representing the interests of the third sector (Home Office 1998). The Compact recognized that the government and the third sector have distinct but complementary roles. In policy terms, the third sector was on the agenda for the first time. The enhanced visibility of the third sector resulted in the organization of a special session on ‘Geographies of Voluntarism’ at the RGS/IGB conference in 2000. Charity is once again on the geographical agenda (Milligan 2000).

One of the problems with the third sector is its long history (Owen 1964), complexity and ultimately its heterogeneity. In fact, it is debatable if such a thing as a ‘third sector’ exists in the sense of a group of stakeholders that have reached some kind of consensus. Kendall (2000, 544) notes that the development of the ‘third sector’ as a recognizable category had to precede the creation of a political policy agenda. The sector’s heterogeneity undermines its coherence (6 and Leat 1997) leading Kendall and Knapp (1995) to describe it as a ‘loose and baggy monster’. The sector includes major international charities that provide humanitarian aid and...
overseas relief, as well as thousands of small local organizations (Mellor 1985). International charities have been the focus of a research agenda in development geography (Mercer 1999), but the United Kingdom’s domestic charitable sector has been largely ignored.

The intention of this paper is to go some way towards redressing the lack of geographical literature on charity through exploring some neglected facets of the geography of the British domestic charitable sector. The paper, therefore, has two aims. First, to outline the size and functions of charities in contemporary Britain and, secondly, to demonstrate how one type of charity – almshouses – can be understood as both inherently geographical and deeply embedded in local social networks of everyday knowledge. Almshouses are difficult to define. The simplest definition is that they are an endowed home for old and poor people, providing communal living, in self-contained units typically in a collegiate-type building.

Our research, although being grounded in the UK, reflects broader trends that are evident in advanced economies concerning the changing relationship between the public and third sectors. The ‘universalist’ model of the welfare state has been slowly recast (Patterson and Pinch 1995; Barnett 1999) to resemble a fragmented or ‘pluralist’ model (see Gottschalk 2000 for an American perspective). Alongside the reinvigoration of private-sector players in the fields of health, social care and housing, a ‘third sector’ of charities and voluntary organizations, beyond the direct control of government, has become important for understanding the delivery of these social goods. In the UK, a mixed economy of welfare has emerged (Charlesworth et al. 1995; see also Wolch and Geiger 1983 1986; Wolpert and Reiner 1985; Geiger and Wolch 1986; Wolch 1989 1990; Warrington 1995; Hurd et al. 1998; Mercer 1999).

These issues are explored here in an account of charity in the UK that has been developed as part of a project on one of the oldest forms of charity – almshouses. Like all charities, almshouses form a heterogeneous sector with considerable variations in size, characteristics and foundation. To capture this diversity, a two-stage research methodology was deployed. First, to ensure that regional and organizational differences were identified, a postal survey of all almshouses in four counties was undertaken: West Midlands, Warwickshire, North Yorkshire and Surrey. These counties were chosen as they contain a reasonable number of almshouses and have different histories of wealth accumulation and hence almshouse foundation. One hundred and seventy-three almshouses were included in the survey and a response rate of 61.8 per cent (107 cases) was achieved. Non-responses were evenly distributed between the four regions. Second, in-depth face-to-face interviews were held with trustees and clerks of 25 almshouses and 14 interviews were held with residents.

**Charity and almshouses – some dimensions**

Theoretically, the third sector can be considered as a conceptually coherent, albeit blurred, ‘sector’ that operates on a not-for-profit basis and is relatively independent of governmental and corporate interests. The sector’s independence is relative, as charitable organizations operate within the constraints set by national and local governments. Such constraints are partially undermined by the complexity of the sector’s income streams (public, private, endowments, etc.) and by social and welfare concerns that are determined by the charities rather than by government. National governments may set the context within which charities must operate but, in the UK, government does not control the sector. The reason for this contradiction is founded in English charitable law that protects and preserves the original intentions of a charity’s founder. At one level, charities are independent entities, whilst at another they can be conceptualized as part of a shadow state (Wolch 1990).

There is no single measure of charity. This is not surprising; there is ‘no statutory definition of charity and the courts have refrained from attempting to provide one’ (Cairns 1993, 1). Charity is usually understood to be actions performed by an individual or individuals for public benefit rather than for private interest, and should not involve the pursuit of profit (Picarda 1995, 16). This inclusive definition also sounds a note of caution about attempts to ‘measure’ the sector (see Knight 1993, 64–82; Kendall and Knapp 1995 1996). Determining the size of the UK’s third sector is a difficult task. The simplest definition includes all organizations that are registered with the Charity Commission, the regulator of charities (188 000 charities). However, this definition underestimates the sector’s size by excluding voluntary organizations (between 200 000 and 400 000 organizations) that are too small for
registration (Etherington 1996; Hems and Passey 1998). There are also a growing number of non-governmental organizations (there are 29 000 international NGOs, see Economist 2000, 25) that are established to provide welfare, distribute relief and promote issues (Mercer 1999). The difficulty is that each part of the third sector is itself complex and there is unknown overlap. This paper is only concerned with registered charities and is not concerned with voluntary organizations (Milligan 2000).

It was commonly thought that, with the establishment of the welfare state, the ‘voluntary sector would wither away at the end of the 1940s’ (Knight 1993, 22). Such a withering did not occur; the number of charities in the UK has continued to grow, especially since the 1970s. The growth of the Charity Commission’s Register of Charities has been relentless, rising from 122 000 charities in 1976, to 157 000 in 1986 and 188 000 in 1998. The Charities Aid Foundation (CAF) has estimated that the income of the top 500 charities is growing at around 9 per cent per annum (CAF 1999). Registered charities had an aggregate income of £19.7 billion (1998) and the register shows that charities remain active in all welfare areas (Table 1). It is important to place charitable income within the context of public expenditure on welfare. In 1999, UK government expenditure on social security benefits amounted to £97 billion (The Treasury 2001), whilst the Department of Health spent £48 billion. The National Health Service, however, has always depended on a mixture of public and charitable funding. Thus, in 1993, nearly 10 per cent of the value of new medical equipment was donated by charity and dependence on charity is particularly important in diagnostics, cancer medicine and neonatal care (Lattimer 1996, 11).

Nevertheless, charitable expenditure in comparison to public expenditure is relatively small, but the important point is that it is targeted at particular people and needs (for example, cancer and medical research) and has its own localized and uneven geography. The significance of charitable welfare activity is clear but, crucially, geographically variable (Table 2). The overwhelming majority of charities are small, locally orientated organizations with limited resources. There are a few giants that represent fewer than 2 per cent of all charities. These few command three-quarters of all charity income (Table 3). Oxfam, one of the best-known charity ‘brands’, for example, generated an income of nearly £100m in 1998 (Economist 2000, 25). What is particularly interesting about large charities is the diverse nature of their income streams. Whilst the public perception of charity is that it is the general public who provide most of the sector’s income through donations, this represents only around 36 per cent of charitable income. Significantly, the remainder is made up from income garnered from contractual transactions with various contracting-out public sector agencies (Flynn 1996; Jones 1996), and income generated from a portfolio of investment, currently valued at around £24bn (NCVO 1996).

### Table 1 Distribution of registered charities by principal function

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Charitable function</th>
<th>% of registered charities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Culture and recreation</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/welfare</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious activities</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General charitable purposes</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental/animal welfare</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing/accommodation</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Charity Commission (1997)*

### Table 2 Distribution of charities by region (1996)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>12 435</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rest of the South East</td>
<td>29 951</td>
<td>23.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Anglia</td>
<td>8480</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South West</td>
<td>17 741</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Midlands</td>
<td>12 106</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Midlands</td>
<td>11 907</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yorkshire and Humberside</td>
<td>10 097</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North West</td>
<td>11 077</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>6825</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>6750</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Ireland</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>127 369</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Charity Commission (1996)*
The Office for National Statistics (ONS), using a more exclusive ‘general charities’ definition, estimate that the 120,000 general charities manage assets in excess of £35bn (ONS, in NCVO 1996).

Like most charities, the majority of almshouse charities are small, with a mean size of 20.7 residential units. In 1947, The Nuffield Foundation completed a study, *Old people*, conducted under the chairmanship of B.S. Rowntree. This study revealed that in 1943 there were nearly 1500 almshouses charities accommodating over 22,000 people, of which endowed almshouses accounted for 12,000 people (Rowntree 1947). By 1999, the Almshouse Association, the national association of almshouses in the UK, represented the interests of 1748 member charities that manage 2599 groups of almshouses, providing accommodation for 31,421 residents (1994 figure), in 31,300 dwellings. Over the period 1943–1994, the number of people living in almshouses grew by 43 per cent, whilst between 1994 and 1999 the number of almshouse dwellings increased from 26,000 to 31,300, an increase of 20 per cent. It should be noted that almshouses, whilst not making a significant contribution to the overall national supply of housing for older people, often provide accommodation in rural villages and locations that have limited supplies of other types of sheltered housing.

### Table 3 The distribution of registered charities by income band

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income band</th>
<th>% Reg. charities in band</th>
<th>% of all charitable income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>£0–£100 000</td>
<td>91.4</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£100 000–£1m</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>16.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£1m–£10m</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>35.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£10m</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>40.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Charity Commission for England and Wales (2000)

The local embeddedness of almshouse charity

It is a well-known cliché that charity begins at home. This is one of charity’s advantages and disadvantages. It is also one of the rationales for the establishment of the State Welfare System. Commenting on one of the earliest studies of London’s charities undertaken by Sampson Low in 1872, Charles Loch noted that London’s charities stand, one by one, isolated like light-houses; but unfortunately not, like lighthouses, placed with care precisely on those points of the dangerous coastline of pauperism, where their lights will save from shipwreck the greatest number of distressed passers-by. (Loch 1882 cited in Woodroffe 1974, 23)

From 1948, the emphasis shifted from charity to a focus on the state as the means for securing social well-being (Deakin 1995). New Labour’s identification with a ‘Third Way’ (Blair 1996 1998; Giddens 1998) for welfare provision, and the resultant emphasis that this places on the third sector, revives a series of arguments concerning the role of charity that were well rehearsed during the nineteenth century, as well as by Beveridge in 1948. Social reformers in the nineteenth century considered charities to be an uncoordinated and localized form of welfare support. Beveridge, in a little discussed sequel to his report which established the UK’s welfare state (1942), noted that voluntary action ‘is needed to do things which the State is most unlikely to do. It is needed to pioneer ahead of the State and make experiments’ (1948, 301–2). New Labour’s ‘Third Way’ represents a return to Beveridge’s conceptualization of the role of charity in the welfare system. Charities should play an important role, but it is one that should supplement rather than replace state provision. A welfare system heavily dependent on charity is undermined by the localized and uneven geography of much charitable activity.

Almshouse charities are locally embedded on multiple levels, in terms of the clients they serve, the management that directs the organization and the legal frameworks in which they operate. Local geographies are implicitly and explicitly constructed by the functioning of the charity. All charities are governed by a deed of foundation which enshrines the founder(s)’ wishes and usually regulates the geographical extension of the charity’s activities (‘Area of Benefit’). This is most often intended as a means of determining those who may (or may not) benefit. The deed of foundation for Yardley Great Trust, an almshouse charity based in the West Midlands, is typical of this type of close geographical language. The foundation deed determines that the charity’s:

- Area of Benefit shall mean the wards of Hodge Hill (south of the river Cole), Shard End (south of the river...
Charities with particular functions in particular places. Certainly, such geographical articulations represent founders’ attachments to particular places. These attachments become fixed in space with little regard for actual need. The ‘sentimental space’ of Yardley Great Trust manages to exclude applications from residents of five contiguous wards that are amongst the ‘most deprived’ wards in England (see DETR 1998). This geography certainly differs radically from geographies of local government and administration that might otherwise limit access to resources. It is a geography unique to this particular institution. Certainly, such geographical articulations offer an opportunity to construct an historical geography of charity, following the establishment of charities with particular functions in particular places.

It has become almost a cliché to suggest that geography is malleable and ever changing. This applies as much to the geographies of charities where, despite the detailed cartographic precision of many charity schemes, the actual boundaries of the charity become difficult to identify in the face of changing administrative and physical geographies. Contemporary interpretations of a charity’s space—and hence a potential client group—may be difficult to identify. The following example, from an interview with an almshouse administrator in south-east England, illustrates this problem. The charity’s area of giving was clear to the eighteenth-century lawyers who drafted the deed of foundation, but today the trustees have found it difficult to delimit the charity’s geographical identity:

some of the edges have been blurred, though it’s easy on one side for example, which is the canal is straight-forward. But we also have “the old oak tree, down Fairwood Road” – the oak tree is still there but its on the golf course now. There is another oak tree down the other end, opposite the Shell petrol station and I’ve seen it’s still there, but is it the right one? [We’ve] pored over these maps for many, many hours and we’re in fact just going to decide and have [the map] laminated and that will be it. But one of the things I have very much in mind [is that] the real poor nowadays in this area are not actually in this parish, but just outside the parish, where there wasn’t a parish before, but half a mile on . . . (interview with trustee)

Charity administrators, through a geographical–legal articulation, (re)construct the notion of ‘local community’ through a complex interlacing of founders’ wishes and contemporary interpretations, but are also mindful of modern urban and social developments and, of course, charity law. In this case, the changing perceptions of locality produce historically and socially differing notions of the ‘local’. It clearly demonstrates how shifting broader geographies over time can heighten the need for some charitable functions whilst rendering others redundant. The geography of need and the geography of charity established to meet that particular need do not necessarily coincide. They may even run counter to each other.

For charities, geography matters, or more importantly precise local geographies matter, as these are one of the barriers imposed by founders on the community included in a charity’s area of giving. For charity, it matters on which side of a street one lives or whether a house was to the left or right of an oak tree that existed in the seventeenth century. The geography of almshouse charity is closely related to the historical and localized accumulation of capital (Figure 2). Almshouses were founded by wealthy individuals and families and their location mirrors former geographies of private wealth. In some respects, the uneven distribution of charitable organizations in the UK reflects Massey’s (1984) well-known geological metaphor of historical accumulation of layers of capital investment. The distribution of charities reflects previous rounds of capital investment as well as forms of patronage ranging from old established families to royalty. The earliest English almshouses were closely linked to the church, but were also founded during the feudal period by the Lord of the Manor and quite frequently by women of high rank. The majority of pre-reformation almshouses were closed by 1540, as a consequence of the dissolution of the monasteries.
Figure 1 The localized geography of Yardley Great Trust, Birmingham, UK
From the sixteenth century, almshouses continued to be established by the aristocracy, by members of the new merchant class as well as by individual companies. These trends help explain the concentration of almshouses in London and the South East (36.3%), the South West (14.8%) and the East and West Midlands (11.4% and 10.2%) (Figure 2).

The relationship between the geography of charities and the historical accumulation of wealth and its investment in pre-defined localities results in a very odd geography of charity; odd because some studies suggest very crudely that charity is available in an inverse relation to need. For example, a study by Knight (1993) found that the number of charities per head of population differed widely from one organization to every 165 people in a Scottish town to one to 361 people in an inner-city area. This study builds on the work of Hatch (1980) and Abrams et al. (1981), who show that there is more charitable and voluntary action in areas where apparently there is less need. Additionally, as we have seen above, charities may remain active in areas in which the need for that service has long since been met or removed. The consequence is the deepening of uneven geographies of welfare, where service provision may not reflect welfare need but historical
layers of wealth accumulation and charitable foundation. The uneven geography of charitable organizations in the fields of health, social care and housing makes service availability and quality to some extent a spatial lottery.

Preserving morality: from good character to necessitous widows

As we have seen in both of the above examples, these imaginary geographies demonstrate how the spatial contours of a charity may effectively exclude those most in need, clearly working against any notion of benign and philanthropic charity. Indeed, this is clear elsewhere in the geography of charity. The moral agendas of founders work their way into charity law and produce often bizarre restrictions, restricting access to particular religious groups or reflecting geopolitical struggles of their times. For example, the deed of foundation of an almshouse founded in Bradford in 1916 specifies that it provides:

Homes for aged or infirm persons, inhabitants of the ecclesiastical parish of Oakham, inmates not to be members or supporters of the Roman Catholic church, the Socialist Party or the Labour Party. (Register of Charities 243833)

Similarly, residents of an almshouse on the Isle of Wight must be:

English or Scotch by nationality and parentage and are not Roman Catholics or Jew. (Register of Charities 205293)

The workings of these requirements enable charities to become deeply embedded in local social networks of access and exclusion. Indeed, it is impossible to consider these organizations without reference to their position in local social networks. Beneficiaries of such charities are, by definition, ‘local people’—variously, often problematically, defined—and the charity not only draws from but also becomes part of local identities. In some cases, particularly those involved in accommodation, this work is explicit as the charity works alongside other local organizations, such as the churches or local authorities, to maintain local communities that are experiencing hardship or difficulty. The case of almshouse charities provides an excellent example of this process at work, enabling many older people to remain in touch with local friends and relatives (Bryson et al. 1999). In localities where such charities do not exist and in the absence of any alternative, many individuals would inevitably need to relocate, leading to the weakening of local communities. Strict regulation of resident recruitment and the locally situated nature of recruitment networks means that beneficiaries of charities are often drawn from very local areas, perhaps from just a few miles of a village or urban area.

Table 4  Proportion of almshouse charity deeds containing references to particular selection criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Place of residence</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>72.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>58.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>50.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of independence</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>27.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>22.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious beliefs</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capital</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational connection</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Postal survey

Geography is just one form of selection or exclusion practised by charities. In the search for new residents, almshouses try to remain as faithful to the intention of their founders as possible (Table 4). The founder’s intentions may well reflect antiquated forms of morality that are still protected by charity law. Unlike other social-housing providers, almshouse selection criteria can ignore current equality legislation. Newly established almshouses must conform to current legislation, but extant almshouses are excluded from equality legislation and the intentions of the original founder are sacrosanct. Founder restrictions limit the geographical extent of an almshouse to a village or district (72.6%) and specify that inhabitants must be poor (for example, in one case residency is restricted to necessitous widows) as defined by saving thresholds (50.9%). Just over one-fifth of almshouses have gender (22.6%) and/or denominational (21.7%) restrictions and 11 per cent have occupational restrictions (ship carpenters, shop assistants, miners, servants, teachers etc.). In addition, it is also common for residents to be required to be of ‘good character’ or in the case of Saint Ethelbert’s Hospital (Hereford) units are allocated to women of
‘exceptional character’ who have given service to the church. Good character is usually not well defined, and is potentially problematic. Typically trustees exercise these criteria with a degree of flexibility and with some account taken of individual needs. Good character is usually ascertained after an interview and a visit to the applicant’s current home. During the visit an assessment is made of the applicant’s lifestyle and hygiene habits.

A key problem with the almshouse sector is that wardens and trustees are able to interpret and reinterpret the founder’s prescriptions in ways that distort the selection process. The warden of an almshouse located in the South East noted that vacancies are filled when they identify someone:

I like the look of, then we fill in the forms and I ring up the [housing manager] and arrange a home visit. [The housing manager] then goes to the lady’s house and has a cup of tea with her.

Initially this appears to be a straightforward process, but in this case the warden decides which applicants will be given the opportunity to apply formally for a place and which are excluded. There is an informal, unofficial selection process operating beneath the official selection process. The warden’s selection is made on the basis of an opinion of whether an individual will fit in to the almshouse community. The result is that when an Asian applies the ‘application is not sent on to [the almshouse charity] . . . it was only fair on all the other residents’.

The almshouse was located in an area that was 85 per cent Asian, but all the residents were white and it was increasingly difficult to fill places via recommendations from existing almshouse residents. The warden was afraid that if they advertise ‘we would have people round here all the time, you know, people from the so-called Asian community’.

Almshouse residents have a variety of housing backgrounds, including local authority housing (39.1% of residents), owner-occupation (25.7%), private rented sector (22.4%), housing associations (6.3%) and living with family (4.8%). A common almshouse requirement gives preference to applicants of limited income and capital. This, along with social security regulations that limit financial assistance to people possessing under £16 000 in capital (including the value of the home), explains the dominance of the rented sector. However, the complexity of the almshouse housing chain is explained by the search strategies used by potential residents to obtain an almshouse place. The majority of almshouses advertise locally at least once a year for new residents. Individuals responding to these advertisements are placed on a list and contacted when a vacancy occurs. Just over one-quarter of residents are obtained via this process. The most important source of new residents is, however, individual enquiries; many of these come from individuals with friends already living in the almshouse or through personal recommendations from significant local actors, for example clergy and general medical practitioners. Referrals from local authorities and housing associations are relatively unimportant. The majority of residents enter an almshouse via forms of ‘soft relationship networks’, rather than via official local authority placement practices. The prevalence of soft relationship recruitment networks means that entry to an almshouse is governed largely by processes of chance or ‘who one knows’ rather than by a rationale selection process.

Conclusion

Despite the rhetoric of state-led universalism and the under-representation of the third sector in the geographical literature, charity has remained a significant actor in the geographies of welfare and social action right into the twenty-first century. The continued growth and the emergence of personality-led charities (e.g. Children in Need, Comic Relief) and, in the UK, the establishment of a National Lottery and the development of New Labour’s Third Way, ensure that notions of charity will continue to circulate more widely in popular culture. The purpose of this paper has been to seize these opportunities and to argue for a more thorough consideration of the importance and distinctiveness of charitable activity. The widespread perception of charity as a declining or marginal sector has obscured both the long-term historical importance of the sector and its impressive contemporary contribution to the national economy. Even in these plain economic terms, charity is big business and deserves to be explored in more detail; yet, as we have suggested, a geography of charity could be about much more than this.

Our case study of one of the oldest forms of British charity reveals the way in which the resident selection process, coupled with an uneven geography, undermines their contribution to social welfare. It is individuals linked via relational networks and living in particular places that benefit from almshouse charities. This implies that parts of the
third sector exclude potential recipients of care by using antiquated informal selection procedures (for example, those necessitous widows). Both Wolch (1990) and Milligan (2000) have noted that the geography of voluntarism is highly uneven and this is also the case for most charities. Milligan’s research into informal care in Scotland describes how carers and cared-for ‘elevated the importance of voluntary-sector support in their lives [since] the voluntary-sector provided their main (often sole) source of advice, information, support and respite’ (2000, 55). The problem is that the uneven geographies of the third sector implies that access to the sector’s services and support is more about location and background rather than about real need. The implication is that the third sector should continue to play a supporting role in the provision of welfare, but the primary role must be undertaken or coordinated by local and national governments.

Acknowledgements

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