

# Guidance note:

# Improving the support for volunteer led volunteering

The information in this paper is drawn from *Fresh thinking: An exploration of the role of social network services in supporting volunteering; improving the support for volunteer led volunteering; and developing the role of Volunteering Champions* which is available to download from [www.improvingsupport.org.uk/volunteering](http://www.improvingsupport.org.uk/volunteering)

## Background

Volunteering is often thought about in terms of involvement with organisations that have paid staff who manage their volunteering programmes. Research<sup>1</sup> indicates that there are 865,000 civil society organisations in England, of which 164,195 were registered charities. NCVO identified that *'most of these (civil society organisations) are small community based organisations that have little income'*. In 2006 over half of charities, which form part of civil society organisations, had an income of less than £10,000<sup>2</sup>. These figures indicate that the majority of volunteer involving organisations within the voluntary and community sector have no paid staff or very limited staff time and are dependent on volunteers for all of their activity; in these organisations, volunteering is led by volunteers. There are also volunteers within staffed organisations that manage other volunteers or who lead on specific projects.

In acknowledging the volume of volunteer led activity, we explored current thinking and the ways in which this form of volunteering is supported. We identified that, in communities across England, there are small volunteer led organisations doing a wide variety of things. These will have a range of structures and understanding. They will frequently be unaware of voluntary and community sector support services available to them, and will fly beneath the radar of the very services that are there to support them. It can be argued that volunteering in these organisations is the least supported within the voluntary and community sector. As one leader of volunteering activity said, *"I had not appreciated that there were places to find volunteers and support."* We also touched on the matter of co-production and the potential for volunteers to have a greater role in shaping their activity and the organisations in which they volunteer.

Using the results of our survey, focus groups, research and anecdotal evidence we examined the support available to volunteer led groups. Whilst these groups are finding some support, there are concerns that it is not always appropriate because of the different basis on which volunteer led activity happens. As we were told *"the people I work with do not see themselves as volunteers and do not recognise that they are being managed. As a small community group we are not a very formal organisation in structure or operations."* We also explore the information, advice and support needs that these groups have, where and how successfully they are met.

The subject of volunteering and faith communities is explored in depth in a separate report; we highlighted some important points relating to volunteer led activity from this. We also sought to identify some key points of transferable learning from the experience of Youth Action Network and its approach to supporting youth led volunteering.

Although the role of social network services in supporting volunteering is explored elsewhere in *Fresh thinking*, we identify that voluntary leaders of volunteering activity are positive about the potential this has.

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<sup>1</sup> Reichardt, Oliver; Kane, David; Pratten, Belinda; Wilding, Carl, *The UK Civil Society Almanac 2008*, National Council for Voluntary Organisations, London, February 2008

<sup>2</sup> Wilding, Karl; Clark, Jenny; Griffith, Megan; Jochum, Veronique; Wainwright, Susan, *The UK Voluntary Sector Almanac 2006: The state of the sector*, National Council for Voluntary Organisations, London, 2006

In summary, *Fresh thinking* concludes:

- Volunteer led volunteering is not well understood by many volunteering support services and is consequently not as well supported as it could be
- Volunteering support services should pay special attention to the specific needs of small informal groups and how to support them; including through the use of a community development approach and by making services more accessible to volunteer leaders, including outside of office hours
- Lessons should be learnt from well supported forms of volunteer led activity
- There is an identified need to support governance in small organisations and within groups that undertake volunteer led activity
- National volunteering support services should work with national organisations supporting volunteer led activity in order for both to support the development of successful relationships between their local partners/groups
- Volunteering support services should work with volunteer involving organisations in order to develop support for the emerging concept of co-production

### **What to think about when supporting volunteer led volunteering**

Volunteer led volunteering is not new and will be familiar to most people, even if it is not identified as such in their minds; after all, volunteer led activity is where most charities began. Approaching its support will take some thought but will bring new experiences to your work and a greater breadth of opportunities to your portfolio.

- Gain an understanding of your potential market
  - Do you know which of the organisations currently registered with you are volunteer led? If not, see if you can find out (you could use your next members' survey to ask for information about staff numbers – this will give you a big clue)
  - Do you know of volunteer led groups in your area that you are not working with? If not, your local council and/or library and/or Council for Voluntary Service and/or Rural Community Council will probably have a list of community groups, tenants associations, residents associations, etc
  - If you are not sure how to support volunteer led groups, talk to your local:
    - Involved team (they support your local Youth Action Team which leads youth volunteering activity)
    - Student Action Group if you have one (they support student led volunteering activity – if you are not sure if there is one in your area ask the Student Volunteering Team at Volunteering England or your local Students Union)
    - Rural Community Council (they support all of your local Village Hall Committees, which in turn often support grassroots volunteering in their villages)
    - Community Associations (many will work to support local grassroots volunteer led activity)
  - Also use these contacts to work out what support is needed in your area – don't duplicate something they are doing already, see if you can plug a gap in the market

- Work with the ones you know
  - Which of your services do volunteer led organisations currently registered with you use and which do they not?
    - Ask them for feedback on their experience of working with you
    - Ask them for suggestions about how you could support them more effectively
    - See if they would be willing to act as guinea pigs for the ideas that you come up with together (they might well appreciate seeing that they can help you to learn and develop services at the same time as benefitting themselves from your undivided attention)
  - Talk to the them, checking out whether the good practice guidance and support you give is appropriate
    - Are there things that should be changed? Can some things be lighter touch? Are there some things that are not covered?
- Prioritise which volunteer led activities you will seek to support first
  - The volunteer led groups in your area will be involved in a wide range of work, rather than using a scattergun approach to engaging with them, why not work out where your intervention will have most impact and start there?
    - There could be groups in one area of activity that no-one else is supporting
    - You could have a paucity of a certain type of volunteering opportunity or volunteering opportunities in a certain field and want to see if you can help to develop some new ones
    - There could be a geographical area within your locality where there are not many volunteering opportunities and/or there is a local strategic interest in seeing development (if the latter your intervention could earn you brownie points with your local authority)
    - You might have identified a real need in your local area and can identify some volunteer led groups which, through your support, can help to meet
- Develop relationships
  - Most volunteer led groups are founded on relationships and work with others on a relationship basis – to win their trust and respect you need to do the same with them
  - Develop partnerships that will help you to support volunteer led activity with others who are involved in this activity – you probably already meet to discuss broader voluntary and community sector or volunteering issues, spend regular time together thinking specifically about how to improve the support for volunteer led volunteering
- Think creatively and share your learning
  - Do you have to do all of this? Could you involve some volunteers in doing some research and developing some relationships? (In doing this they might well discover others that share a passion to meet an identified local need and set up more volunteer led activities)

- Are there practical things you can do? A spare cupboard, the use of a desk when it is lying vacant, etc could make all the difference to some volunteers – and if you've built a relationship you will know that you can trust each other
- Don't forget to let others know what you are learning, it will help them, and hopefully they will reciprocate – it will save everyone re-inventing the wheel...

### **What Modernising Volunteering is doing on this until March 2011**

- We have commissioned Volunteer Centres Devon to explore the nature of volunteer led volunteering within the county; work with volunteer-led groups to identify how best to meet their support needs; and review the current good practice guidelines for volunteer involvement in order to identify how they can be amended in order to be relevant to small volunteer led groups
- We will prepare and publish a detailed case study from the pilot, and publish interim case studies during the life of the pilot
- We will seek to identify/develop and promote/publish further case studies about volunteer led volunteering<sup>3</sup>
- We will update this guidance note with any additional learning and publish this online

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<sup>3</sup> If your organisation is using innovative ways of supporting volunteer led volunteering and wishes to contribute to this activity, please contact [chris@redfoundation.org](mailto:chris@redfoundation.org)