

Modernising Volunteering National Support Service

Briefing: Volunteer led activity

Overview

Researchⁱ indicates that there are 865,000 civil society organisations in England, most of these 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 £10,000ⁱⁱ. These figures indicate that many organisations have no paid staff or very limited staff time and are dependent on volunteers for all of their activity. In these situations volunteers will not be managed by a paid Volunteer Manager but will lead their own volunteering.

In diversity/equalities-related sectors volunteer led activityⁱⁱⁱ is often the only way for services and development to happen at a local level due to a variety of factors, including ongoing community ownership and lack of funding; yet these are often the most innovative and user-focussed services.

Anecdotally we know that incidences of volunteer led activities are high amongst minority communities, with many Asian, black and minority ethnic and faith communities not viewing their activities as volunteering rather as an expression of who they are as people and communities. We are aware that these alternative perspectives of volunteering often slip under the radar of support services. We also know that people in minority communities can also be geographically isolated, especially when they live outside major population centres and in rural areas.

Youth led volunteering activity has become increasingly recognised and established, with Youth Action Network as its national umbrella organisation; the principle of youth led volunteering is also core to activity funded by v.

A number of large charities support local volunteer led groups that are related to their causes. These groups can be involved in supporting association, self help, advocacy, campaigning, and fundraising.

The Commission on the Future of Volunteering identified stagnation in the availability of volunteering opportunities, which is dominated by the marketing of existing predetermined opportunities. Research undertaken for the Commission revealed that non-volunteers perceive opportunities currently on offer not to be good enough to meet their expectations and motivations. The Commission suggested that there should be a dynamic interchange of needs and skills including the ability of potential volunteers to promote themselves, their abilities and their passions to volunteer involving organisations. *Building on Success: strategy for volunteering infrastructure in England 2004-2014* identified the need for volunteering infrastructure to develop ways of supporting potential volunteers to associate together to develop activities that build on their passions to meet local needs.

Dr Justin Davis Smith, Chief Executive of Volunteering England, has spoken on a number of occasions (including the National Volunteering Convention and the Association of Volunteer Managers Annual General Meeting) about the concept of co-production in volunteering. He believes that a challenge facing the volunteering movement is the need for development that enables volunteers to own and shape their volunteering activity.

Anecdotally we know that many volunteers leading volunteer activity will not perceive themselves or the people they lead as volunteers. Similarly, many will not be aware of support services available for them.

We know that some providers of volunteering infrastructure support volunteer led activity; however this support is not yet widely available. Existing volunteering infrastructure, especially at a local level, finds it difficult to support the development of new volunteer led activity using existing methodologies; this is exacerbated by the substantial under-resourcing that it experiences.

Potential volunteers who see a need and a way to meet it can find it difficult to build a critical mass of people to take action, especially if their immediate relationship networks are not able to provide initial impetus. It can be difficult for these people to know where to find support for their idea, especially if they identify support services that are only available for limited hours during working days. Good practice information and advice available on websites tends to be predicated on an organisational model that can be too formal for volunteer led activity, especially in its early stages, such as expenses, equal opportunities and health and safety policies.


Although some volunteer led activity is using social networking sites to support their work, this can be difficult to identify, which makes it hard for people to make connections or for volunteering infrastructure providers to offer support.

What the Modernising Volunteering National Support Service plans to do

We believe that it is essential to look at volunteers as the beneficiaries of support services, especially for volunteer led activity, as well as the providers of direct services. This perspective was highlighted by the Commission on the Future of Volunteering

By March 2009 we will:

- Seek to gain an understanding of the development and support needs of volunteer led volunteering activity, and particularly of those who initiate and lead it
- Seek to learn from existing volunteer led activity, especially amongst diverse and hidden communities
- Identify existing exemplars of good practice in the support of volunteer led activity
- Examine how more informal networks and possibilities of association can be developed to support and encourage volunteer led activity

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A joint initiative to strengthen support services for the third sector

Modernising Volunteering will give support providers the resources, evidence and good practice they need to deliver help to the frontline.

 **Volunteering England**
Giving Voice to Volunteering

 **NNVIA**
The Network of National Volunteer-Involving Agencies

 **red**
FOUNDATION

 **Nationwide Foundation**
Supporting communities nationwide

 **Inspiring a million more young volunteers**

- Research the role of online social networking in enabling new and supporting existing volunteer led local activities
- Prepare a publication that examines these issues in greater depth including through case studies, good practice guidelines and recommendations for further action.

Based on this year's work we will pilot identified new ways of support and promote exemplars of current activity in order that volunteer led volunteering can be supported more effectively.

How you can participate in this work

We would welcome your input, you can:

- Complete our online survey at www.improvingsupport.org.uk/volunteering on the 'get involved' page by 8th January 2009
- Let us know what you are already doing by emailing us at nss@redfoundation.org or calling on 0845 299 7162 and choosing option 2
- Sign up for the Modernising Volunteering National Support Service newsletter by emailing volunteering.nss@volunteeringengland.org

We look forward to hearing from you.

Modernising Volunteering National Support Service is a Capacity Builders funded programme to give support providers the resources, evidence and good practice they need to develop front line services – led by Volunteering England, in partnership with v, Red Foundation, CSV and the Nationwide Foundation. More information about this strand of work and how to get involved can be found www.improvingsupport.org.uk/volunteering

References:

- i Reichardt, Oliver; Kane, David; Pratten, Belinda; Wilding, Carl, *The UK Civil Society Almanac 2008*, National Council for Voluntary Organisations, London, February 2008
- ii 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
- iii The Consortium of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Voluntary and Community Organisations estimates that over 85% of LGBT groups are entirely volunteer led and have no dedicated staff time