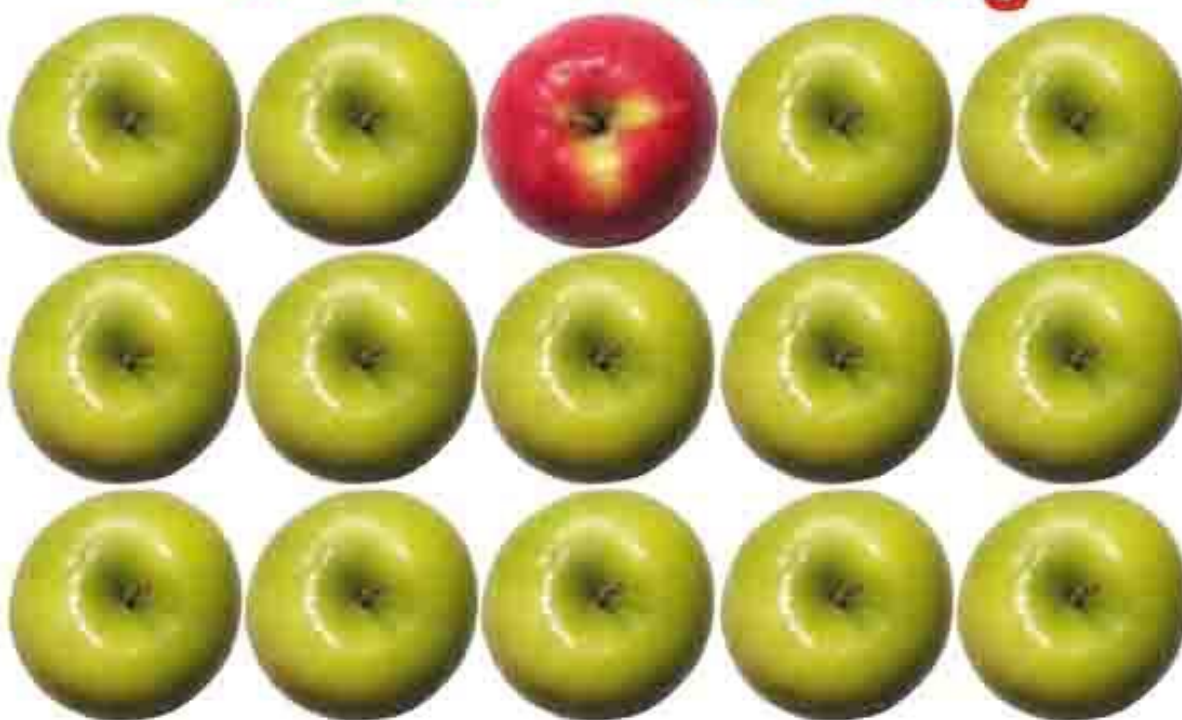


fresh thinking



Executive Summary

A Modernising Volunteering report

It is through adapting to our changing environment that we will not only survive, but work together to ensure that volunteering becomes part of the DNA of our society. Communication, relationships, giving time to meet needs, ensuring that volunteering is acknowledged - *Fresh thinking* looks at how we communicate with others in the volunteering movement, whether volunteers, Volunteer Managers or volunteering support services; it returns to the heart of volunteering – volunteers who lead their activity; and looks at how to support raising the status and value placed on volunteering at a local level.

The role of social network services in supporting volunteering

The introduction and subsequent growth of online social networking has represented one of the biggest social developments of the past five years, affecting the way the way that people in the UK and across the globe communicate and interact with each other. In April 2008, OfCom reported that of the 61% of the UK population that regularly use the internet, 71% have a social network profile which they access at least every other day. With a million new households gaining internet access each year, this figure looks set to continue to rise.

Social network services have been described as 'friends of friends' networks and have, for several years, been the toast of new media with their principal strength seen as being the ability to involve tens of millions of users. In this section we explore the role of social network services as online peer to peer networks in which people with similar interests or connections are able to interact with each other via the internet.

With Wikipedia providing a list of 148 major active social networks it describes as notable and well-known and acknowledging that this list is not exhaustive we have not explored each one. Rather this section of the report focuses on the two most frequently identified in our research and which appear to be the most well known within the volunteering movement - FaceBook and MySpace – each of which has over 200 million active users worldwide, together with Twitter, which is currently seeing a rapid increase in general usage and is beginning to be more widely used by voluntary and community sector organisations.

It would appear that the general slow adoption of new technology within the voluntary and community sector is mirrored in the use of social network services, with the vast majority of organisations not using them. The report explores some of the reasons for the slow adoption of social network services and provides case studies of voluntary and community sector organisations which are successfully using them.

From our survey sample we discovered that while less than 25% of volunteer involving organisations are using social network services, the vast majority of these have found them to be successful. Our research demonstrates an untapped potential for the use of social network services to support volunteering. *Fresh thinking* explores the benefits and barriers to using social network services to support volunteering and, through case studies, shows how they can be used as an additional communication and support tool.

The report includes tips on the use of social network services, together with appendices giving more detailed information about the use of specific social networks and providing links to further information and advice.

Summary conclusions:

- The voluntary and community sector and volunteering movement are not currently capitalising on the potential of the interactive communication opportunities that are available through social network services
- There is a lack of knowledge about the use of social network services within the volunteering movement

- There is an identified desire amongst the volunteering movement for online services in three areas: access to information; the ability to interact with information, be involved in its development and identify sources of support; and the ability to interact with others
- The utilisation of social network services to support volunteering is happening sporadically; each organisation taking their initial steps in social networking faces a steep learning curve - encouraging the sharing of learning about this could prevent each organisation reinventing the wheel and also help each organisation to utilise existing social networking sites, not specifically designed for this purpose, effectively and without compromising issues such as privacy
- We have found some appetite for a bespoke online social network service for our country's volunteering movement

Improving the support for volunteer led volunteering

The report explores what volunteer led volunteering is. It identifies that, with the majority of organisations within the voluntary and community sector having no paid staff or very limited staff time and being dependent on volunteers for all of their activity, volunteer led volunteering is the most common form of organisational structure within the voluntary and community sector.

In acknowledging the volume of volunteer led activity, the report explores current thinking and the ways in which this form of volunteering is supported. *Fresh thinking* identifies 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."*

The report touches 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 survey, focus groups, research and anecdotal evidence the report examines 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."* The report also explores 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; *Fresh thinking* highlights some important points relating to volunteer led activity from this. It also seeks to identify some key points of transferable learning from the experience of Youth Action Network and its approach to supporting youth led volunteering.

Fresh thinking offers guidance to volunteering support services wishing to improve the support they offer to volunteer involving organisations.

Summary conclusions:

- 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

Developing the role of Volunteering Champions

The report explores the Champion concept with examples of some schemes currently in operation. It identifies that there are a number of different ways in which the term Volunteering Champion is used: peer led recruitment and support for organisations; championing volunteering at senior and governance levels within organisations; and championing volunteering at a strategic level. Examples of each of these in action are given; however, there is little evidence of widespread adoption of any of these; rather the confusion about what a Volunteering Champion is causes confusion. The report explores the perceptions that volunteers, Volunteer Managers and Volunteering Champions have of the role; and identify reasons why it has not developed further.

Fresh thinking concentrates on the role of Volunteering Champions at a strategic level – the concept proposed by the Commission on the Future of Volunteering. It looks at what the volunteering movement would want from Volunteering Champion schemes and raises areas that need further consideration as the development of these is piloted over coming years.

Whilst there is little experience of Volunteering Champions to draw on, key areas for consideration have been prepared for those considering developing a scheme. Further work is to be done in this area, and additional guidance issued as this is undertaken.

Summary conclusions:

- There needs to be a consensus on what a Volunteering Champion is and what a Volunteering Champion aims to do
- Although a significant number of concerns about Volunteering Champion schemes have been raised; many of these can be resolved with greater clarity about what a Volunteer Champion scheme is and who is involved
- The potential for an online network of Volunteer Champions has been identified

About Modernising Volunteering

Modernising Volunteering is part of *Improving Support*, a Capacitybuilders funded programme to give support providers the resources, evidence and good practice they need to develop front line services. It is led by Volunteering England, in partnership with v, Red Foundation, CSV and the Nationwide Foundation.

Fresh thinking has been prepared by Red Foundation as a result of the first year of its work to explore new forms of volunteer engagement and supporting those that work with volunteers. It is one of a series published by the Modernising Volunteering as part of its three year work programme. The other reports that have been produced to date are:

- *Volunteering and faith communities in England*
- *Forging sustainable partnerships between businesses and communities*

For more information about the programme, together with downloads of all of the full reports produced visit www.improvingsupport.org.uk/volunteering