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Volunteering and the Big Society

Context

Voluntary activity is the bedrock of the VCS and this is a time of dramatic change for volunteering as it is given a more prominent role in the Big Society agenda. The Citizenship Survey shows that 41% of the UK population volunteer formally once a year. It is estimated that an even larger number of people volunteer informally, by giving unpaid help to people who are not relatives (outside any formal setting). Based on a survey of volunteering across the East Midlands carried out in September 2010, around 15,000 people have been supported into formal volunteering roles in the last year with more than 20,000 volunteering opportunities still available.

Case study

New Parks Community Boxing Gym

Based in the New Parks area of Leicester, the New Parks Community Boxing Gym was awarded funding by the Leicester Sound V Project to engage 30 young people, aged 16 to 25, in volunteering within the gym in return for gaining recognised qualifications including First Aid training and an ABA boxing tutor qualification.

The funding allowed the volunteer coach and founders of the gym to attract new and younger volunteers, many of whom have remained with them or successfully moved on to employment and further education.

The gym also runs ISSP (intensive supervision and surveillance programme) for young people on the verge of going to prison or who have been recently released, work experience to students in their final year of school, after-school boxing clubs, and a stop smoking and get active programme for local residents.

Initially opened with £10,000 funding from Leicester, Leicestershire & Rutland Community Foundation and The Safer Leicester Partnership, the gym is now self-sustainable through aluminum can recycling, subs and memberships.

“We work on fitness, respect and self-esteem for all people in the community, regardless of colour or faith.” *Serina Leane, volunteer coach and gym founder*



East Midlands Dimension

There are more than 50 volunteer centres and volunteer support organisations in the East Midlands.¹ Volunteer centres offer a wide range of activities including:

- Providing information, advice and brokerage;
- Signposting to volunteering opportunities;
- Recruiting volunteers;
- Providing training to volunteers and volunteer co-ordinators;
- Peer support/networking;
- Promotion of volunteering.

The East Midlands EVDC network has a membership of over 100 organisations that includes volunteer centres, volunteer involving organisations and volunteer support groups. The membership also includes local authority partners and other volunteer involving agencies in the public sector. Two key funders and supporters of volunteering activity, Big Lottery and Capacitybuilders are also members of the network which is led by an independent chair.

The network has undertaken:

- mapping work into which volunteer involving organisations exist and what services and support they provide (April 2010);
- a volunteering survey which shows numbers of volunteers, volunteer vacancies and evidence of the role and value of infrastructure in enabling volunteering to happen (September 2010);
- and continues to work with Volunteering England and the 2012 Legacy team.

Lincolnshire profile

There are over 26,000 regular volunteers within Lincolnshire-based third sector organisations (there are numerous volunteers who give their time outside the third sector e.g. Special Constables and school governors).

The balance between paid employees and volunteers varies considerably between the sectors in which third sector organisations operate. Education, the biggest third sector employer, supports almost 3,000 jobs across over 800 organisations, but with only 2,200 volunteers. The healthcare, advice and support and sports/leisure sectors all support relatively few direct jobs, but rely on vast numbers of volunteers.

The third sector across Lincolnshire is a very important part of the county's economy. It consists of at least 2,800 organisations supporting over 7,000 jobs and generating over £400 million each year. The community focus of the third sector ensures added value through helping to raise aspirations, getting people back to work and supporting disadvantaged groups within Lincolnshire.

Source: Economic Significance of the Third Sector in Lincolnshire, Lincolnshire County Council, May 2010

Challenges and opportunities

The opportunities for volunteering are likely to be broadened through the Big Society. The challenge is to maximise opportunities for volunteers and maintain the quality of the volunteer experience for the volunteer and, crucially, of any beneficiaries. Public spending cuts could threaten the ability of volunteer centres to continue placing volunteers at the current level and standard. A growth in volunteering can only be achieved with well resourced volunteer support and infrastructure that is accessible to communities in their locality.

¹ East Midlands EVDC mapping 2010

Access to information is very important if people are to be encouraged and motivated to volunteer. People require information about opportunities and support services available, and also expert professional information that can help them take the initiative and be at the forefront of identifying needs and activities that are essential for service delivery in their localities.

The Big Society has cast volunteering as a core element of the strategy to encourage **community social action** and self responsibility. The Big Society highlights the role of neighbourhood working and identifies social enterprises, charities and cooperatives as having a valuable role in running public services. As a result there is an expectation to utilise more volunteers and create more volunteering opportunities. Existing community based volunteer centres have years of experience providing support to groups and individuals and encouraging people to volunteer. This provides a good foundation and support system for the Big Society to promote and progress the role of volunteering.

The capacity and motivation for volunteering varies between individuals, groups and communities. Some people will be more ready and able to engage with their communities than others and some have more control over their time than others. Some people experience additional barriers to volunteering because they have additional needs, including people with physical and learning disabilities and those who cannot afford the upfront costs of volunteering (expenses are rarely paid for in advance).

Volunteer centres offer an effective mechanism of supporting people with additional needs and traditionally 'hard-to-reach' groups into volunteering.

Volunteering is a recognised mechanism in the pathway to developing personal skills, knowledge, workplace experience, confidence and movement from worklessness into employment. However, it must be recognised that individuals all have different starting points along this pathway and have concomitant support needs to be met.

While the government talks about wanting to increase the role of the voluntary sector in public service delivery there is a need to maintain existing infrastructure and resources for use in future service development and volunteer maintenance. There are allied costs to recruiting and maintaining volunteers which need to be taken account of as plans for delivering the Big Society are developed. Training, support and capacity building work has to be embedded in any future delivery strategy.

While the VCS has experience in delivering public sector commissioned and contracted work, this tends to be the big sub-regional, regional and national organisations. Small groups might not have enough knowledge and experience of working in partnership with public bodies and the expectations from the two sectors may conflict. Involving local communities through volunteering to deliver public services will therefore require a change in the working cultures of both public sector organisations and the VCS organisations charged with supporting volunteering and community action.

Impact of National Policy

As delivery of the Big Society agenda is a responsibility for all government departments in essence national government has to ensure that all public services are transparent and accountable and support community participation in delivery. However, any developing national policy which relies on voluntary activism for delivery must take account of the principle that volunteering is by nature 'voluntary' and is not therefore a replacement for paid work – especially when supporting services for vulnerable people.

Conversely, any policy which reduces the individual's capacity and motivation to participate in voluntary activity will directly undermine the Big Society. Examples may include raising the retirement age, removal or reduction of benefits and loss of support grants which meet the additional support needs of some volunteers.