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BULLETIN

Volunteering in later life: perspectives of voluntary organisations

This Bulletin summaries the key findings of a qualitative study on volunteering in later life, drawing on interviews with representatives of voluntary organisations in England. The study investigated policies and practices towards recruitment and volunteer management, with a specific focus on opportunities and any restrictions for older people. Among others, it also sought to elicit views on the impact of extending working lives and care responsibilities of older people on volunteering. It was conducted as part of a larger programme on Activating Senior Potential in an Ageing Europe (ASPA), which was funded under the Socio-economic Sciences and Humanities Theme of the EU's Seventh Framework Programme. This research adds to the "relatively neglected theme of volunteering by older people in Europe" (Ehlers *et al*., 2011, p.1).

Background

In many EU countries societies are ageing and at the same time people are, on average, living healthier lives for longer. Promotion of active ageing through extending working lives and engagement in volunteering is a key policy response to these developments. The European Union designated 2011 as the European Year of Volunteering and 2012 as the European Year of Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations. The former aimed to both celebrate the work of volunteers and to encourage more people to volunteer and the latter aims to raise awareness of the contributions older people can make to society and the means by which they can be enhanced.

In England, about 26% of older people aged 50-64 formally volunteer at least once a month compared with 29% of 65-74 year olds, 21% of those aged 75 plus, and 25% overall. At age 65-74 when volunteering participation rates peak, people also volunteer most hours (DCLG, 2011). With the first generation of baby boomers soon to retire, there will be potentially an increased supply of older volunteers for voluntary organisations to tap into to meet their requirements. Against this background, the ASPA project conducted both a literature review on volunteering in later life and case studies in voluntary organisations. This Bulletin focuses on the latter.

Research method

The research is based on eight case studies in three sectors that attract the most older volunteers in England: culture and recreation; social services; and education and research. The percentage of older volunteers in these organisations ranged from low (26%) to high (61-100%). Semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2010/11 with senior representatives at head office and, in some cases, at the local level; two to three interviews on average were conducted.

Overall, the case studies provide a mix of voluntary organisations in terms of their size (although focusing on larger charities with at least £1m annual turnover), organisational structure, the type of services provided, the volunteering roles supporting it and the ratio of staff to volunteers, but it is not intended to be representative. The research included two organisations providing either services for older people or offering volunteering opportunities targeted at older people, a scheme unique in the UK.

Recruitment of volunteers

Most of the case study organisations have a diversity policy or statement (which include age) and are aiming to attract a more diverse volunteer base (e.g. in terms of age, gender (in some areas), ethnic minorities and the vulnerable groups for which one organisation

campaigns). The volunteer roles were reported to be open to anyone who matches the required capabilities and skills, with job-specific training often being provided through the organisation. There were no age limits for volunteering in any of the organisations interviewed. As a matter of fact, some people continued to volunteer well beyond their 80s and one organisation particularly encouraged older volunteers in their 80s to engage in volunteering.

Volunteers are recruited through a range of methods, including word of mouth, the national profile of the organisation, local advertisements in supermarkets or libraries, local media and, to a lesser degree, local volunteer centres. Where recruitment initiatives or campaigns took place they rarely targeted older people. An externally-funded temporary recruitment initiative for older people was run in one organisation, alongside recruitment initiatives for younger people, with a strategic goal of conducting research on how best to recruit older volunteers. Providing volunteering opportunities for older people is as much part of this organisation's mission as providing support for older people. While this organisation was keen on attracting further external funding, another organisation had abandoned attempts to recruit particular groups, including older volunteers, because trying to meet sponsoring organisations' targets had not proved to be cost-effective. Some organisations had no need for specific campaigns for older volunteers as they had enough (older) volunteers coming through their existing recruitment channels or simply felt it not appropriate as their volunteering roles suit all ages.

The advantage of specialist recruitment for older people in one organisation was seen in setting out 'a new deal', conveying a contemporary picture of volunteering. There is some evidence that the future generation of older volunteers may no longer want to volunteer routinely in a relatively low skilled role. They may prefer flexible opportunities that allow them to bring to bear their professional skills and to continue to develop skills through their volunteering roles.

Motivations to volunteer and benefits of volunteering

The organisations recognised that volunteering generates benefits for the person the volunteer helps and also for the volunteers themselves who may gain new (in some cases, even accredited) skills, maintain or widen their social contacts, sustain their interests, gain fulfilment as a result of the outcomes of their contribution or become more self-confident. Aside from genuinely altruistic motives (e.g. the young wishing to 'make a difference' and the mature wanting to 'give something back'), elements of self-interest also play a role. Younger volunteers were reported to be more driven by opportunities for skill acquisition, development of social skills or gaining work experience and older volunteers put greater emphasis on the social contact it affords, the

engagement in meaningful and purposeful activity and, in some cases, a continuing opportunity to learn.

Volunteer roles

At a national level the large organisations had a wide range of volunteering roles on offer that could exceed the figure of one hundred. Between them the organisations covered all three areas of the volunteering landscape identified by Rochester *et al.* (2010): unpaid work in the area of social welfare, activism and serious leisure. Depending on the type of organisation, examples of the volunteering roles include:

- befriending of or practical support to vulnerable people,
- helping children to improve their reading or other skills,
- supporting the organisation in its campaigns,
- governance and leadership roles and
- leisure-related activities (e.g. tasks in museums or knitting for good causes).

Age *per se* was not a consideration when allocating volunteer roles; rather, the focus was on interests, skills and general ability to perform the task. Some people were reported to want to change their tasks as they get older (e.g. moving on from direct youth work into administrative or organisational leadership roles). The example of a person aged 70 asking whether he would be considered too old to participate in volunteering, suggests that own perceptions can be a barrier. The scheme run by one organisation also allows housebound older people to participate in volunteering by knitting goods to be donated at home, which are then collected by a volunteer. Challenges can arise matching interested volunteers to volunteer roles at local level as travelling distances also need to be borne in mind to make volunteering viable. Proactively developing a new role in response to the local skills on offer is a possibility but will in any case take time to develop.

Some roles were reported to attract either more men (e.g. leadership roles or providing transport) or women (e.g. helping children with their reading or knitting), with the percentage of female volunteers in the case study organisations ranging from 34% to 84%. Volunteering opportunities vary in the degree of flexibility and commitment they require. The number of hours people commit to volunteering ranges from occasional or episodic volunteering for a few hours to regular volunteering for a few hours per week to a much more substantial time commitment.

Volunteer management

Organisations recognise the need to support volunteers at the point of joining as well as throughout their journey and to offer flexible volunteering opportunities that fit in with people's lives. Some organisations have developed a structured approach towards volunteer management and others are taking a more strategic approach or paying

more attention to selection, induction and training opportunities, mirroring the overall trend in the UK towards formalising or professionalising the volunteering role. There was some caution that this may not be liked by all volunteers precisely because the role is becoming more formalised. Where support is not in place this has, however, been shown to create potential barriers or may eventually lead to drop out.

There was some recognition that regular structured conversations between managers and volunteers of all ages provide an opportunity for a two-way conversation about the contribution of volunteers (including older volunteers), any changes in needs and capabilities, any support which may be required as a result of it, and the future role of the volunteer in the organisation. This can aid retention of volunteers and ensure that the needs of the organisation are being met when changes in capabilities among people of all ages are seen to affect task performance. While one organisation has had a regular review in place for some time, others are considering formalizing the currently informal conversations or recognising the benefits of it.

Overall, relationships between employees and volunteers were reported to be positive, although there could be some sensitive but non-critical issues at times. However, it was regarded as vital that employees do not see their jobs at risk of being replaced by volunteers and equally that volunteers can rest assured that they are not replacing employees as this may impact on their propensity to (continue to) volunteer.

Recognition and reimbursement

Recognition is generally seen as an important aspect of managing the volunteer workforce, often taking the form of social events or special thank you messages. In addition to long service badges a number of organisations mentioned, there is now also a trend of recognising the impact of the volunteer on someone's life. Recognition may be somewhat more subtle in some organisations. The case study organisations offer the reimbursement of reasonable out-of-pocket (travel) expenses (not all volunteers were said to claim in full) and in one or the other instance a 'freebie' to those who volunteered a certain number of hours.

Plans for future recruitment

Where organisations wanted to increase the number of volunteers in future a key driver was the planned expansion and development of services offered by the organisation, and this included services for younger and older people. In some instances this was coupled with a need to replace long-serving older volunteers who had left the organisation, largely due to health-related reasons, in order to meet the demand for services or to maintain/expand the number of branches. Moreover, there are deliberations in one large organisation to introduce a system that will help it better align service demand and volunteer supply. Expansion plans were also related to the drive to increase the ratio of volunteers to staff, with service managers reported to be more likely to deploy volunteers if there is a dedicated volunteer management they could rely on, which may be a role for a volunteer, given recent budget cuts. Expansion plans may, however, be dependent on securing public funding for service provision. Not all organisations saw a need to expand but they still need to recruit new volunteers as people drop out for a number of reasons.

Organisations with a high share of older volunteers were particularly recognising the need to attract more younger volunteers in order to diversify their volunteer base. This was driven by a range of strategic issues, including maximizing the potential of volunteers for the organisation by winning their intermittent support at an early age, offering opportunities to engage volunteers in inter-generational activities, passing on (craft) skills of existing older volunteers to younger ones or to enable succession planning more widely. Other factors included the desire to attract more people with IT skills which were seen as vital to promote charitable activities in digital media or the need to strengthen the attractiveness of volunteering at branch level for younger people by diversifying its age structure. There is an appreciation though that, alongside the drive to recruit more younger volunteers, older volunteers still need to be reassured that they are valued and that older volunteers, particularly retirees, are "the backbone of the organisation" with a generally strong volunteering ethos.

Ageing and volunteering – external influences

While there is anecdotal evidence that the extension of working lives and the caring responsibilities of older volunteers are affecting volunteering in some cases, they were not perceived to be a threat to these organisations. This was partly because they are adopting or developing mitigating strategies, such as flexible volunteering opportunities, or because they thought that there would be enough potential volunteers available through those retiring from work. Some organisations noted the (temporary) withdrawal or reduction in availability among older people caring for grandchildren. On the other hand, one organisation observed that a number of older people whose parent had received support from the organisation joined because they wanted to give something back.

Policy measures to better align supply and demand

Measures voluntary organisations suggested policy makers could adopt to help match the supply of older volunteers with the demand of the organisation were rather generic, such as recognising the value of volunteering, enabling the person to come forward and to make choices by providing easily accessible information

on volunteering opportunities or making the process of volunteer recruitment as streamlined as possible (e.g. correctly advising volunteers on job seekers allowances that they can take up volunteering whilst being unemployed).

Good practice strategies for promoting participation and inclusion of older volunteers in voluntary organisations

Nurturing and supporting volunteers throughout the whole engagement cycle was seen to be pivotal to stimulating the participation of any volunteer, including older volunteers. This means offering volunteering opportunities which match the motivation of the volunteer and the role requirements. So it was imperative to take into account volunteer flexibility requirements and requests to deploy, maintain or develop their skills, and where possible to give the volunteer the opportunity to help shape the volunteering role by being included in the decision-making process. When capabilities and needs change, offering support or other suitable roles enables the volunteer to continue to participate and contribute to the organisation. The provision of training enables volunteers to move on to different roles, thus maintaining their interest and retaining the volunteer from the organisation's point of view.

Volunteers provide their time freely but there are still significant management and training costs associated with the volunteer role and funding these will be more challenging in times of public sector cuts.

Summary and conclusions

The voluntary organisations interviewed recognised the contribution of volunteers, including older volunteers. Most organisations had attracted older volunteers through word of mouth and more formal strategies without directly targeting them through recruitment campaigns. Particularly those with a high share of older volunteers wished to attract more people of all age groups while continuing to value the contribution of older volunteers. In line with national developments, volunteer management has become or is becoming more formalised. This has a range of benefits as more attention is being paid to selection, on-going support and development, likely to strengthen retention as a result, but it may deter some volunteers who see this as being too much like 'work'. Between them the organisations offered a wide range of volunteering opportunities suitable for people of all ages. They particularly recognised the importance of offering volunteers a role which matches their interest while meeting the needs of the organisation, where possible in a flexible manner that fits in with the life-style of the person, including older

people pursing other interests and taking on other responsibilities. At local level, meeting this challenge and implementing some of the planned changes, may prove somewhat challenging.

Further information and acknowledgements

References

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