

Volunteering: the 20/20 vision

Let's Talk Volunteering: Community & Innovation

Blog by Mike Locke

The Covid-19 pandemic has shaken the world of volunteering. How we volunteer to help each other. How we organise and support volunteers. I don't believe we can yet be confident about what has changed or how we should respond. But I'm convinced we will need to adapt some of our thinking and practices in working with volunteers, developing questions from the blogs in the Vision 20/20 July newsletter from Faye Smith and Tracey Robbins.

The pandemic produced a huge awareness of the significance of volunteering in national policies and in our everyday lives. It produced headlines as 750,000 people put themselves forward to volunteer with the national NHS Responders programme. Many of them, perhaps the majority, were never given much or anything to do as volunteers, but it was nonetheless an extraordinary demonstration of people's willingness to help. So too was the evidence of how tens of thousands of people were actually helping others in their local communities simply calling on neighbours or organising online in 'mutual aid' associations. It was all a boost to our confidence in our sense of community and to the place of volunteering. How can our society build on this?

However, the kind of ways in which people have helped their neighbours have not mapped closely onto the dominant view of volunteering. People have done small practical tasks – going for the shopping, collecting medical supplies, a weekly phone call and so on. These tasks were not generally written down as a 'role description' (Faye Smith questioned that kind of language last month). They were straightforward jobs, done in an emergency, and they were not generally seen to need the organisational systems we have created as 'good practice' in volunteer management. How could it be, for instance, that a volunteer in the pandemic response might be sent on a task which in the normal processes of volunteer management required a DBS and well-thought-through safeguarding and support?

One question is whether we may have over-complicated volunteer management – at least for some kinds of volunteers and volunteer tasks. Do we need so much guidance on 'good practice'? Would some volunteers prefer to be 'told' rather than 'managed'?

Mutual aid and other groups formed to respond to the pandemic have recruited and organised volunteers directly through social media, Facebook, NextDoor, WhatsApp. They have communicated directly with the volunteer and the people needing help. This raises another awkward question about the need for voluntary sector

infrastructure, such as a volunteer centre, or an established charity to match volunteers and the opportunities to help.

Perhaps we could be more direct, simpler. This kind of helping should be treated as more 'informal', more about how as an individual we help another individual, rather than the 'formal' structure of organised volunteering. As Tracey Robbins discussed last month, informal volunteering develops from a web of relationships and can be supported by people's connections to each other, which may be made, for instance, through the Big Lunch.

However, the pandemic raises worrying questions for 'formal' volunteering too, and as Tracey Robbins argued we need to value and support 'formal' as well as 'informal' volunteering.

We may find when we look back at these past months much damage done to formal volunteering. We may have lost volunteers' commitment or preparedness to carry on. Hundreds of thousands of volunteers have been laid off as charities locked down on activities in which volunteers were involved, and many volunteers have had to shield themselves. They have lost a mainstay in their social life and their sources of fun and satisfaction; probably very many feel bereft. Some volunteer managers have done wonders with alternative activities to support their volunteers, such as a virtual coffee morning. But many volunteer managers have been furloughed, in effect closing down volunteering for their organisation. We may expect volunteers to be eager to pick up the pieces, but some will not want to adapt to new risk assessments, social distancing and online contacts. How do we develop 'good practice' in volunteer management to look after volunteers who can't carry on?

On the other hand, how can we take positive lessons from the pandemic, not just about the effectiveness of digital communications but about some service-users now preferring digital contact, some services working better online?

Beyond that, and to an extent I don't believe we can even estimate yet, we will be losing big numbers of volunteers where charities are making staff redundant, in some cases 20-25 per cent of their workforce or more, due to loss of income. There won't be the staff to manage volunteers or run the activities where volunteers are involved. Some of those charities will rethink how they meet the needs of their beneficiaries and will develop new activities where volunteers will have the larger part to play, conceivably in local community – arguably more informal – settings.

A rebuilding of formal volunteering poses difficult questions about how to adapt activities and services and adapt 'good practice' in volunteer management to the changed circumstances. Do we know how the volunteers are feeling after their experience of the pandemic and what they are prepared to do?

Some evidence which would be helpful would be to know how many of the million people who during the pandemic applied to the NHS Responders programme or got involved in mutual aid associations were actually those who previously volunteered in established charities. It'd be helpful to understand too how many of those who applied to NHS Responders were alienated by not getting the chance to volunteer and won't want to bother next time.

You could say this is nothing new. The volunteering world has always coped and achieved wonderfully with extraordinarily different individuals doing extraordinarily different things. How do we apply the learning from generations of volunteering to the unfamiliar new times?

Mike Locke is co-author of *The Complete Volunteer Management Handbook* (4th edition) with Rob Jackson, Eddy Hogg and Rick Lynch, published by Directory of Social Change, 2019

VOLUNTEERING
the 20/20 vision

