

Involving volunteers from underrepresented groups

Survey evidence suggests that young people, older people, unemployed people, disabled people and people from black and other minority ethnic communities are underrepresented as volunteers in mainstream organisations. Research carried out by the National Centre for Volunteering found that some organisations have addressed the barriers that face potential volunteers from these groups and secured their involvement through the adoption of practical measures and a real commitment to equality of opportunity. The key points of the study were:

- f** The study found two main reasons why people from the five groups were underrepresented as volunteers: the image and culture of volunteering, which was perceived as a predominantly white, middle-class activity, and practical barriers, such as not being able to finance voluntary activities themselves.
- f** The organisations studied found the following effective in recruiting people from the five groups: specifically targeting recruitment strategies at particular groups; highlighting the personal benefits of volunteering; adopting a policy of not rejecting potential volunteers; demonstrating a commitment to equal opportunities, for example, by employing paid staff from a diverse range of backgrounds.
- f** Where they had successfully recruited volunteers, case study organisations sought to ensure they would retain them in a variety of ways, such as providing volunteers with challenging and enjoyable roles, paying out-of-pocket expenses and providing appropriate training and support.
- f** The author concludes that while most barriers to involvement may be overcome through adopting practical measures, some require broader policy change, particularly the inconsistent interpretation of benefit legislation affecting unemployed people and disabled people who wish to volunteer.

Introduction

The National Centre for Volunteering undertook a major study looking at the strategies adopted by organisations who had succeeded in involving volunteers from one of five groups traditionally underrepresented in formal volunteering. The five groups were younger people, older people, unemployed people, disabled people and people from black and minority ethnic communities. The aims of the study were to examine why people from each of the groups were not volunteering to a greater extent and to offer practical recommendations on how volunteering could be made more attractive and accessible to them.

The common themes

Removing the barriers

The evidence from the study indicated two key reasons why people from the five groups were underrepresented as volunteers: the image and culture of volunteering and practical difficulties.

Many volunteers in the five groups had previously been convinced that volunteering was not for people like them. This was probably due to the persistent myth that volunteering is an activity largely carried out by white, middle-aged, middle-class women. The organisations involved in the study had begun to successfully break down the stereotype through:

- advertising and recruitment talks which make it absolutely clear that volunteering is open to everyone;
- recruitment campaigns targeted at the specific group(s) they want to attract;
- adopting non-rejection policies for all people who come forward as potential volunteers (apart from any standard safeguards for those working with children, etc.);
- employing paid staff from a diverse range of backgrounds, thereby reflecting real commitment to equal opportunities.

But practical barriers were also restricting the involvement of people from the five groups; the study organisations had taken steps to address these, including:

- making sure they pay expenses;
- offering flexible types of involvement to meet the needs and exploit the potential of individuals;
- organising transport where necessary;
- accommodating disability;
- creating an open and welcoming environment which works for everyone.

The message from the organisations involved in the study was that adopting practical measures had been effective in making it easier for people from the five groups to volunteer.

A good experience

Although these measures can go a long way to opening up volunteering, offering an experience which is attractive and fulfilling is also extremely important. Volunteering can offer many members of the five groups a chance to do things from which they are often excluded in mainstream society. The organisations in the study clearly advertised the advantages that volunteering can bring; for example, young people may gain useful 'work' experience while for older volunteers meeting and making new friends is seen as an important benefit.

Retaining volunteers

Once people have volunteered, organisations found that ideally work should allow for personal development and carry some responsibility for decision-making. Tasks given to volunteers were of a wide variety, and with the right kind and level of training and support they were encouraged to take as much control over the way they did them as possible. Just as importantly, volunteering tasks should be sociable and fun to do.

Specific interests

While there were similarities among the five groups, some issues were of particular concern to a specific group:

Younger people - a start in life

For young people volunteering may be the closest thing to paid work that many are able to experience, and it offers many of the same benefits: the chance to acquire useful skills; to get used to working with other people; to learn how to accept responsibility and make decisions; increased self-confidence and improved career prospects. The organisations in the study emphasised these potential benefits to young volunteers. One young volunteer with the British Youth Council commented, *"I've really benefited from having a say in political processes ... This can only improve my chances of being paid to do the same kind of work."*

Older people - never too old

Older people face the problem of overcoming the stereotypes based on their age as opposed to their abilities. Many organisations impose an arbitrary retirement age on their volunteers and take a narrow

view of what activities are 'suitable' for older volunteers. However, the organisations in the study found that they could benefit from older people's experience and that, given appropriate support, older people are capable, if they choose, of taking on voluntary work that is both physically and mentally taxing. One volunteer counsellor said of her voluntary work, *"I'm 87. I have a lot of life experience but also a lot to learn. It will be a real challenge."*

Black and minority ethnic people - separate traditions

Many people from black and minority ethnic communities have a different concept of volunteering; this is often characterised by informality, motivated by altruism and encouraged by a sense of belonging. The study shows that black people wishing to volunteer in mainstream organisations may face particular difficulties with bureaucratic ways of working, a clash of cultures, tokenism and racism. The organisations that have successfully recruited and retained black and minority ethnic volunteers are those who have shown black people that volunteering will enable them to contribute to the whole community, working in an atmosphere of equality where other black and minority ethnic people (staff and volunteers) are clearly visible. Commenting on her first impressions of a community centre a volunteer says, *"I could see all the different people here and I knew I too could help. I could be part of things and feel satisfied."*

Unemployed people

The interpretation of welfare benefits legislation still means that those who are unemployed (many of whom fall into the other marginalised groups) can find their receipt of benefits under threat if they take up voluntary work. However, the research found examples of organisation that make a point of developing a good relationship with local benefits agency staff. The volunteer co-ordinators at the Family Project sit on the local Benefits Agency Committee and say, *"There are a lot of inconsistencies in what people are told about their benefits and this committee is one way of clearing them up."*

Disabled volunteers

Negative attitudes about disability often result in the isolation and segregation of disabled people from the rest of society. Taking up voluntary work is one way in which disabled people can demonstrate their independence and their skills. The organisations in the study, by offering appropriate support and training, provided volunteering opportunities which

allowed disabled people to get out and meet other people, and achieve something on their own initiative. As one volunteer says, *"everyone was helping me all the time ... now I can help people too."*

Conclusions

All of the groups in the study are not only underrepresented in volunteering but are often disadvantaged in many other areas of life, yet they have enormous unfulfilled potential. The evidence from this study suggests that, as organisations which involve volunteers increasingly look towards expanding their pool of volunteers and meeting the diverse needs of their communities, drawing volunteers from these five groups will be of very real benefit not only to the organisations but to individuals and communities as well.

However, securing the involvement of people from excluded groups requires a real commitment to equal opportunities and the implementation of effective practical measures. The study suggests that the following are seven key measures for organisations recruiting from marginalised groups:

- reject the stereotypes that often inform thinking around people from marginalised groups;
- target recruitment campaigns specifically at particular groups;
- be proactive about informing and gaining information about the existing social relationships and activities of these groups, what their potential/needs are and how they can become involved in volunteering in traditional mainstream organisations;
- be careful not to make empty promises and be sure to deliver what is offered;
- be committed to attracting and supporting volunteers from a broader base within the community;
- be aware of the benefits and the barriers to increased involvement of people from marginalised groups;
- monitor recruitment activities to get an idea of what works and what doesn't.

To retain volunteers:

- devise a range of tasks that are personally fulfilling for the volunteer, both physically and mentally;
- reimburse out-of-pocket expenses;
- provide appropriate training and support;
- value volunteers and utilise the skills they bring.

About the study

The research was undertaken by Filiz Niyazi of the National Centre for Volunteering. The study involved 25 organisations, looking at the strategies they had adopted in order to recruit and retain volunteers from the five groups identified as underrepresented in formal volunteering: younger people, older people, unemployed people, disabled people and people of black and minority ethnic communities. A key aim of the project was to capture the experience of volunteers and allow them to speak for themselves. Fieldwork for the study was conducted between August 1995 and June 1996 and involved semi-structured interviews with volunteer co-ordinators, and focus groups with volunteers in each of the 25 volunteer-involving organisations identified across England and Wales.

Further information

Further information is available in a series of 5 booklets under the title, A Route to Opportunity - Younger People; Older People; Unemployed People; Black People and Disabled People. These are available from the Publications Unit at The National Centre for Volunteering, 183 Eversholt Street, London NW1 1BU. Price £5 each (inc. post and packing).

Related Findings

The following *Social Policy Findings* look at related issues:

- 51 The payment of volunteers (Jun 94)
- 74 Mixed fortunes: the funding of the voluntary sector (Mar 95)
- 75 The determinants of volunteering (Mar 95)
- 76 Managing the voluntary sector (Apr 95)

The following *Summary* is also relevant:

- 9 The future of the voluntary sector (Jul 96)

For further information on these and other *Findings*, contact Sally Corrie on 01904 615905.



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