

# Research Bulletin

## Volunteering for All? Exploring the link between volunteering and social exclusion

The question of whether volunteering is inclusive, and the broader link between volunteering and social exclusion, has been a key theme for the volunteering movement in the recent past. It has caught the attention of practitioners, researchers and policy-makers alike, particularly in the light of the growing realisation that while all types of people volunteer, some people are more likely to volunteer than others - at least as far as formal volunteering is concerned.

The report summarises the findings of research, undertaken by the Institute for Volunteering Research with financial support from the Community Fund, which set out to explore this issue. It looked at what volunteering can do to reduce social exclusion, the challenges faced in making volunteering more inclusive and the steps taken by organisations in overcoming these barriers.

The report highlights the barriers to formal volunteering faced by individuals from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups, disabled people, and people with a record of offence - all of whom have been identified as being under-represented in formal volunteering and as being at risk of social exclusion.

### Methodology

The research was conducted in a number of phases, and used a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods:

- A review of the literature;
- Consultation and interviews with key stakeholder organisations;
- Questionnaire surveys with volunteers, non-volunteers, and organisations in three regions: 98 organisations, 203 volunteers, and 40 non-volunteers responded;
- Case studies with selected organisations including 78 in-depth interviews with staff and volunteers;
- Focus groups with volunteers and non-volunteers from the three target groups.

### Key findings from the research

Is volunteering too exclusive?

- Fewer than half of the organisations surveyed said they had enough volunteers, and a majority said that members of BME groups, disabled people and ex-offenders were under-represented among their volunteers.

- A range of psychological and practical barriers to volunteering was identified. While the organisations focused more on the practical barriers, the individuals felt the psychological barriers were more damaging. Most of the barriers identified were crosscutting; they were common to all three groups. Some, however, were more pertinent to certain groups and regions than others.

#### *Psychological barriers*

- Volunteering still appears to have something of an image problem, which puts some people off getting involved. In particular, myths exist which equate volunteering with: activities undertaken by certain ‘mainstream’ groups within society; and a narrow range of activities within formal organisational settings. This stereotypical view, however, is increasingly being challenged.
- Among people from BME groups volunteering was common, but was often undertaken on an informal basis. It was not volunteering itself that was exclusive, but certain kinds of formal activity.
- Some of the disabled people we spoke to had chosen to reject what they saw as the ‘traditional’ model of volunteering based on a ‘helper and helped’ power relationship, which they felt had cast disabled people as passive recipients of help, rather than as active volunteers in their own right.
- Rather than offering an alternative model of volunteering, the ex-offenders we spoke to were generally more vague about what volunteering entailed, or felt that it had little relevance to their lives.

“Volunteering still appears to have something of an image problem.”

- People’s perceptions of time – both of the amount of their ‘spare’ time available and the time demands of volunteering – created barriers to involvement. This was particularly problematic for some disabled people when the nature of their impairment made committing to regular schedules difficult, and for some ex-offenders who found it hard to sign up to regimented activities.

- Lack of confidence was found to be a key barrier. It was exacerbated for individuals who had experienced exclusion in other areas of life, and when volunteering took place in unfamiliar environments.
- Other people’s attitudes also created barriers. The perception (rightly or wrongly) that organisations would not welcome them puts some people off volunteering; this was particularly true among ex-offenders. Prejudices and stereotypes held by staff, other volunteers and service users put some people off staying involved.
- A fear of losing welfare benefits was found to be a significant barrier to volunteering.

#### *Practical barriers*

- Many people still did not know where to go to find out about volunteering, or had simply never been asked to volunteer.
- Over-formal recruitment and selection procedures were off-putting to some people, particularly to those whose first language was not English, for people with visual impairments, and for people with low levels of literacy.
- Delays in the recruitment process were particularly discouraging – without a prompt response many potential volunteers might simply walk away.

- A physically inaccessible environment created an obvious barrier, particularly for disabled people with mobility-related impairments.
- The failure of organisations to fully reimburse out-of-pocket expenses meant that some people could not afford to volunteer – this was particularly problematic among disabled people and ex-offenders, who were often unemployed or on a low wage.

### How organisations have worked towards overcoming the barriers

Among the organisations we spoke to, a number of methods to overcome the barriers to volunteering had been tested or at least mooted.

- By promoting volunteering in ways that individuals from excluded groups could identify with, and by running targeted recruitment campaigns, some organisations had been successful in countering the stereotype of volunteering as being restricted to certain types of people.
- Building relationships and partnerships with community groups and specialist organisations had enabled organisations to access, and subsequently involve, people from under-represented groups.
- Some organisations had taken steps to build individual capacity among people who lacked the confidence or skills to volunteer.
- By ensuring that recruitment processes were user-friendly, some organisations had successfully made the volunteering experience seem less daunting.
- Creating an inclusive environment – including running diversity, disability and cultural awareness training, and improving physical access – had enabled organisations to create a more diverse and welcoming environment.
- By recognising individuals' 'capabilities' not 'disabilities' and turning the traditional approach of fitting the volunteer to the role on its head by matching the role to the volunteer, organisations had become more flexible and inclusive.

### How volunteering can reduce social exclusion

Where the barriers to involvement had been overcome, individuals were benefiting considerably from their volunteering. Through volunteering, various aspects of social exclusion were being addressed:

- Volunteering was helping to combat feelings of personal isolation, which for some people can be a key factor in their experience of social exclusion.
- Volunteering was empowering individuals, giving them the confidence and the skills to change their environment and themselves.
- Getting involved and making a contribution to society through volunteering enhanced people's sense of self-worth.
- People were acquiring a range of hard (vocational) and soft (interpersonal) skills through their volunteering.
- For some people volunteering provided a route to employment, for others it provided an alternative to employment.
- By providing services, in many cases to socially excluded groups, by challenging stereotypes, and by bringing people from different backgrounds together, volunteering was having a wider impact on the symptoms and causes of social exclusion.

## Conclusions and implications

What can we conclude about the relationship between volunteering and social exclusion? And where do these conclusions lead us?

- Volunteering is an effective way for many people to alleviate the symptoms of social exclusion, and can help to address some of the causes.
- Volunteering is not yet fully inclusive. There are a number of underlying psychological and practical barriers that are stopping people getting into volunteering. These barriers need to be addressed, but it needs to be acknowledged that the volunteering movement alone cannot address the structural causes of exclusion. The capacity of organisations to involve volunteers from marginalised groups, for example, needs to be considered more seriously, by policy-makers, practitioners and researchers.
- There is also a need, in the jargon of the day, for more joined-up thinking. The micro-policies of volunteering and the macro-policies for tackling social exclusion need to be working together in unison. For example, Access to Work legislation could be extended to include volunteering, as could all anti-discriminatory legislation. Benefits regulations need to be made clearer and promoted better. Tackling the bigger issue of our work-life balance could also open up access to volunteering.
- Finally, while this report has focused on volunteering within organisational settings (as Government has tended to do), it is apparent that if this is the only form of volunteering which is promoted and recognised then, rather than combating social exclusion, 'volunteering' could arguably reinforce it. We need to understand more about the myriad ways in which people are participating in formal and informal ways in their communities and the links between different forms of participation.

## The full report

To receive a copy of the full report, or for more information about the Institute for Volunteering Research, call 0845 305 6979 or e-mail [instvolres@aol.com](mailto:instvolres@aol.com).

This research bulletin is available in large print format on request.