

**Environmental volunteering: practice and policy (Themed Panel Session)**  
(Submission to the 15<sup>th</sup> VSSN/NCVO “Researching the Voluntary Sector” Conference)

*‘Blue sky thinking or grounded in reality? Applying ‘good management’ frameworks to environmental volunteering’*

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## **Introduction**

Volunteer Development Scotland (VDS) is Scotland’s Centre for Excellence in volunteering. We provide research, policy and practice guidance to volunteer involving organisations, support a national network of Volunteer Centres and influence UK and Scottish Government policy.

The VDS research team has conducted research in environmental volunteering; this paper will draw on three studies:

1. Jarvis, S (2007) *Environmental Volunteering – an impact assessment*

Six organisations of varying sizes (including two non-departmental public bodies) adapted and implemented the Volunteering Impact Assessment Toolkit (developed by the Institute of Volunteering Research). The toolkit allows organisations to survey staff and volunteers about the impacts of volunteering on a range of issues. In doing so, it gathers views on aspects of management and volunteers’ experiences such as access to training, expenses and support for volunteers.

2. Volunteer Development Scotland (2006) *Volunteering and the Natural Heritage – A Review of Current Status and Opportunities*, report commissioned by Scottish Natural Heritage

This study surveyed 204 volunteer involving organizations in the environment sector. The survey asked organisations about numbers of volunteers, volunteer hours given as well as a range of questions on volunteer and volunteering management practices.

3. Reilly, C. (forthcoming) *Updating the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy Engagement Indicator E4*, a report commissioned by Scottish Natural Heritage

For this study we re-surveyed organisations who took part in the 2005 survey to identify any shifts in numbers of volunteers and hours given. This data will be used by Scottish Natural Heritage to indicate levels of engagement in the sector. This survey did not ask organisations about management practices, however we are able to use the responses to make comment on the extent to which organisations collected data on their volunteers.

In addition to this research we will also draw on information from Volunteer Centres collected via a central database.

This paper will use these pieces of research to make comment on management practices in the sector, drawing on the final piece of research to comment on the state of volunteering in the sector. Findings presented are the reported experiences of the organisations that participated and may not be representative of the entire environmental sector in Scotland.

### **Volunteer involving organisations in the environment sector**

The sector in Scotland is mostly made up of small organisations (defined as those with income of less than £10K per annum); this includes organisations with no reported income. We did not ask specifically whether these organisations were 'volunteer led', however findings discussed below suggest that many of these organisations are likely to be run by volunteers.

All volunteer involving organisations undertake a diverse range of activities to meet their purpose, the most frequently reported being habitat management and education and training. Coverage ranges from small local areas, to local authority areas to the whole of Scotland.

### **Management of volunteers and volunteering in the environment sector**

One of VDS's key roles is to enhance the practice of volunteers' and volunteering management with the aim of helping others improve the quality of volunteers' experiences. To do this we use evidence to inform policy and practice and provide guidance in volunteers and volunteering management to volunteer involving organisations. We also work in partnership with the Scottish network of Volunteer Centres who provide good practice guidance locally.

We distinguish between volunteers' management: the management of individual volunteers and volunteering management: the strategic development of volunteering at the organisational level.

We assume that 'good' practice in these aspects of management will have a positive impact on volunteering evidenced by high numbers of volunteers, wide diversity of volunteers and good quality volunteer experiences.

Our findings in relation to volunteering and volunteers' management suggest that organisations face particular challenges in relation to the following aspects:

- volunteer management structures
- volunteer management policies
- volunteer management training
- collecting volunteer data
- volunteer training
- recruitment strategies

#### *Volunteer Management Structures*

The environment sector appears to rely on volunteer effort to manage volunteers to a much greater extent than other volunteer involving organisations across Scotland. The majority of volunteers' and volunteering management in the sector is unpaid. Where paid staff are responsible it is only one aspect of a wider remit. Sometimes the paid role is funded by project rather than core funding; many organizations reported that funding for volunteers management is difficult to obtain. The smallest organisations are less likely than their larger counterparts to have volunteer and volunteering management structures in place.

In terms of what we understand to be good practice, this lack of resource may have negative consequences, some of which are evidenced by our research.

A few organisations participating in the toolkit studies reported that lack of dedicated resource manifests in a "lack of strategic planning around volunteering" (Jarvis, 2007). There was a lack of formal management practices in the sector (discussed below) particularly in smaller organisations and a lack of attention to developing and enhancing volunteers' experiences. These findings may also suggest a lack of focus on volunteering and volunteers' management at the organisational level.

Some organisations stated that lack of volunteer management capacity means they are unable to take on more volunteers.

#### *Volunteer management policies*

In 2005 a relatively small proportion of the 204 organisations had written policies for practices such as health and safety, training and induction. The formality of policies varied depending on the size of organisations and whether they had paid staff; smaller organisations were less likely to have formal policies in place. They reported this was due to a lack of time and information to develop policies or desire to work in a less formal way.

In 2005 around half of the 204 organisations surveyed stated that they paid out-of-pocket expenses to volunteers which compares negatively with the wider Scottish picture. Some volunteers participating in the toolkit studies expressed concern that expenses given may not cover the true cost of volunteering, for example some tasks require specific types of clothing which are not supplied.

Given the informal implementation of volunteering policies it is difficult to ascertain how well policies are understood and implemented. However, in 2005 our research concluded that many of the policies in place reflected concern with the environment volunteers work in, for example Health and Safety and insurance cover, rather than ensuring volunteers have a good experience. The findings from this research and the toolkit studies also suggest that there is a lack of consistency across the sector.

#### *Training for volunteers and volunteers' managers*

Only a small number of organisations reported that they provided training in volunteer management.

In terms of training for volunteers there appeared to be some confusion over what constituted 'training' and in particular how much training is required to fulfil a particular volunteering role. Many organisations reported that they valued training for volunteers, but even when subsidised external training was considered prohibitively expensive. A few organisations also reported that volunteers did not want to, or could not give additional time to attend training.

This suggests that there are particular challenges faced by organisations to use training as a means to develop the skills of their volunteers, which can help enhance the quality of volunteers' experiences and contributions. A lack of training given to volunteer management could also be indicative of the lack of priority given to volunteer development across the sector.

### *Using data to improve practice*

In 2005 and 2009 we found that smaller environmental organisations are significantly less likely than their larger counterparts to collect data on their volunteers. Organisations reported that funders did not encourage them to do so.

Where data is collected, it is most likely to be on the amount of time spent by volunteers rather than about the volunteers themselves, e.g. age, employment status. Information on the hours given by volunteers can be useful for organisations to demonstrate in-kind support to funders.

Without data on volunteers organisations may not be monitoring useful information such as: who their volunteers are, why they are involved, what they seek to achieve through volunteering and what experience or skills they bring to the role. This type of information could assist the organisations in developing volunteers' management practice, for example to enhance the volunteers' experiences and ensuring they are reaching all groups in their local community. It would also help inform the management of volunteering at an organizational level, for example helping to direct resources and development of volunteer programmes.

Organisations appear to collect data which helps them face external demands and report that their data collecting activities are driven by funder requirements, rather than collecting data which could help inform and develop management practices.

### *Recruitment strategies*

Most organisations and groups stated that they recruited volunteers through word of mouth and local networks, providing them with a pool of potential volunteers. A small number of large organisations reported that lack of volunteer management capacity is the only factor limiting the levels of volunteer involvement suggesting that recruiting sufficient numbers of volunteers is not a problem for organisations.

Many organisations and groups also reported that they contact interested individuals directly to offer a range of opportunities arising from which individuals could opt in or out. Some of these organisations reported that they felt this strategy made opportunities more flexible, by encouraging involvement of people who felt unable to commit time regularly.

If we look at data from Volunteer Centres, volunteer involving organisations in the environment sector have a low uptake of their recruitment services; consequently Volunteer Centres report low levels of available opportunities in the environment compared with other sectors such as health and sport. This means that there are less environmental volunteering opportunities advertised to communities accessing Volunteer Centres. In addition, given that Volunteer Centres are the sole contributors to the National Volunteering Scotland website, there are fewer opportunities in this sector advertised to a national audience.

It is widely accepted that using word of mouth and established networks as methods of recruitment while excluding channels which could reach wider audiences can have a negative impact upon the diversity of volunteers. Overall organisations did not report a wide diversity of volunteers; however it was interesting to note that organisations focusing on a social agenda have the widest range of involvement across different demographic groups.

### *Summary*

According to our research the sector faces particular challenges regarding management of volunteers' and volunteering. These findings suggest that these aspects of management do not appear to be, or not able to be prioritised and as a result are generally under resourced. This may result in lack of motivation or capacity to instigate training, data collection and use of data, widen recruitment strategies and consistent implementation of policies which address quality of experience and development of volunteering.

Our research also suggests that there are differences in practices between small and large organisations. Challenges such as lack of funding, volunteers and volunteering management capacity, training, difficulty developing and implementing volunteering policies and restricted recruitment methods all appear augmented for smaller organisations which comprise the majority of volunteer involving organisations in the sector.

### **Volunteering in the environment sector**

Given our assumption of what constitutes 'good' volunteer management practice and its positive impact on volunteering, we might predict that volunteering in the environment sector is not in a healthy state. However what information we do have about volunteering suggests the opposite.

Between 2005 and 2009, the number of volunteers involved in our respondent set of organisations had almost doubled while the number of volunteer hours given had increased by one third<sup>1</sup>. This rise was evidence in both small and large organisations.

This suggests that environmental volunteering is engaging new people in activities and receiving more volunteer time. It is notable, however, that the hours given by volunteers are

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<sup>1</sup> Please note these figures are based on organisations who estimated volunteer numbers and hours, as well as organisations who collect data on numbers and hours.

not rising at the same rate as the rise in the number of volunteers involved; suggesting that volunteers are giving fewer hours than previously, perhaps enabled to do so by higher numbers of volunteers.

It is not clear what has instigated this rise, or whether volunteer management practices have contributed to it.

### **Issues raised for future research**

The apparent contradiction raised by our research raises questions which we would like to address in future work in the environment sector and beyond.

*Do we need to re-think what constitutes 'good' volunteers management?*

Our understanding of what constitutes 'good' volunteers management, and in particular our assumption about its impact on volunteering may need revisited. We would like to explore what volunteers' perspectives on, experiences of and expectations are of 'good' volunteers management, to understand its role in retention, recruitment and quality of volunteers experiences.

For example, volunteers may feel that their experience is less important than the outcomes of their contributions. Consistent implementation of policies and development of policies to enhance their experience may be interpreted as overly formal and bureaucratic.

*In evaluating standards of management practice do we need to differentiate between small and large organisations?*

We assume that 'good' volunteer and volunteering management practice can be evidenced using a survey tool. We develop categories for organisations to choose from which we believe identify whether or not they are applying the principles of good management practice. We may need more sophisticated questions which allow for the variety of ways in which different organisations may apply the principles of good management, appropriate to their context.

*Are we using the right information to make a judgement on whether volunteering in the sector is 'healthy'?*

By concentrating on measuring numbers of volunteers and hours given by volunteering, we are painting a positive picture of a sector with growing levels of volunteer involvement. We may be over-simplifying what constitutes 'healthy' by *counting* numbers of volunteers rather than studying the qualitative experiences of volunteers and volunteers' managers.

We have a lack of knowledge around what constitutes a 'quality' volunteering experience and the link between this and good management.

*Is the impact of volunteers' management a longer term issue?*

Our research has been conducted over the last five years, however, it may take longer to understand what the impact of volunteers' management is on sustainability of particular organisations and programmes reliant on volunteers.

For Volunteer Development Scotland these issues have real practice and policy relevance in terms of how we advise umbrella bodies to develop volunteering across the environment sector. We have a responsibility to engage our external clients with the above research issues to encourage support to investigate qualitative experiences of managers and volunteers and to question the acceptance that 'good' levels of volunteers and hours given are an adequate indicator of 'healthy' volunteering. We hope to overcome these challenges, continuing to develop volunteering research to help understand and develop volunteering across the sector.

*References*

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