The Learning & Development Needs of Volunteers in the Children's Workforce

Paper[1] presented to the 16th NCVO / VSSN Researching the Voluntary Sector Conference, University of Leeds, 6th & 7th September 2010

Martin E. Purcell (Leeds Metropolitan University, Carnegie Leaders in Learning)

Murray Hawtin (COGS, Communities & Organisations: Growth & Support)

Contact Details:

Carnegie Leaders in Learning Partnership
Churchwood House
Headingley Campus
Leeds
West Yorkshire
LS6 3QS

Tel: +44 (0)113 812 6138

e-mail: m.purcell@leedsmet.ac.uk

---

[1] This paper is presented as work in progress; please do not quote without the authors' permission.

Abstract

Although estimates of the number of volunteers engaged in the children's workforce vary, it is clear that large number of people (in excess of five million) give of their time to provide support to children, young people and families in a range of settings across the country. These volunteers are engaged by VCS and statutory and private sector organisations in a multitude of roles, either working alongside or independent from paid staff and professionals. While significant resources have been invested in restructuring the children's workforce, and in providing training and development opportunities for paid workers, the needs of volunteers have not – as yet – received substantial targetted investment.

This paper reports on a research project undertaken on behalf of the Children's Workforce Development Council to investigate the core training needs of volunteers in the children's workforce. The project started with a review of the literature on volunteers' training needs and the selection of two case study areas, Derbyshire and Rotherham, where the involvement of representatives from the Children's Trust and third sector infrastructure organisations was sought. In each case study area, interviews were carried out with staff involved in identifying and responding to volunteers' training needs, along with a number of volunteers in the children's workforce; additional interviews were conducted with representatives of national VCS organisations. These interviews were used to secure a range of views on the way in which volunteers in the children's workforce are perceived / perceive their role, and to explore the ways in which their training needs are identified and addressed.

As the paper reports, the research concluded that local agencies are engaged in a range of activities to provide targeted support to volunteers in the children's workforce; and a number of examples of ways in which volunteers have been supported in identifying and accessing opportunities for learning and development were identified. Nevertheless, it appears that Children's Trusts remain unclear about the full extent of volunteering in this part of the workforce, and have only limited appreciation of the nature and extent of volunteers' learning and development needs. The paper includes recommendations about ways in which these needs might be identified and addressed more effectively in future.

Context for the Research

Since 1997 successive legislative and policy changes have created new structures for the planning and delivery of services for children, young people and their families, all of which have created opportunities and pressures for the voluntary and community sector (VCS). At the heart of these changes has been the desire to create more effective, more integrated and higher quality services, in particular through reform of the children's workforce, in which the VCS has traditionally been involved (Hudson, 2005; Mason, Morris & Smith, 2006).

The children's workforce can be defined as all those who work with children, young people and their families, including those responsible for managing and directly assisting frontline workers and for planning such services locally (DfES, 2005a). The children's workforce is large, diverse, spans the public, private and VC sectors, includes both those with high level professional qualifications and those with no qualifications at all and also both paid employees and significant numbers of volunteers. It is suggested that there may be as many as 5 million volunteers in the young people's workforce[2] alone (CWDC, 2009, p.62). While this figure reflects volunteers engaged by VCS organisations, they are also being engaged increasingly by statutory sector organisations and – to a lesser extent – private / independent agencies[3] to assist in the development and delivery of their services, including those provided for children and young people.

The Children Act 2004 placed a duty on local authorities to foster cooperation between statutory agencies, voluntary and community groups, and private providers, to safeguard and promote the wellbeing of children (see Kirk & Broadhead, 2007). Similarly, the Childcare Act 2006 required local authorities and their partners to provide integrated services under the leadership of a Director of Children's Services. Other initiatives paralleling this, and which rely on the contribution of the VCS and volunteers included the development of Extended Service Schools, the Children's Fund, Sure Start and Children's Centres.

Although likely to be superseded by the coalition government's own policies in this area – potentially increasing opportunities for VCS organisations to develop and deliver services for children and young people (e.g. as plans for the Big Society roll out[4]) – the aims enshrined in the Children's Workforce Strategy (DfES, 2005b; revised DCSF, 2008) are likely to remain relatively unchanged. This strategy aims to

---

[2] Including youth workers; Connexions personal advisers; school and college based learning mentors; educational welfare officers and attendance workers; youth justice staff; and various youth support workers and a wide range of other job roles in relation to substance misuse work and drugs rehabilitation, housing, health (including mental health) and emotional well-being, leaving care workers and outdoor sports leaders.

[3] See Volunteering Magazine, October 2009 for a discussion of some of the issues around the recruitment of volunteers by private sector organisations.

[4] See http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-10680062.

build a world-class workforce for children, young people and families through an integrated collaborative approach. The vision articulated in this policy is of a children's workforce that:

- Strives to achieve the best possible outcomes for all children and young people, and to reduce inequalities between the most disadvantaged and the rest;
- Is competent, confident and safe to work with children and young people;
- People aspire to be part of and want to remain in, where they can develop their skills and build satisfying and rewarding careers; and
- Parents, children and young people trust and respect.

The revised version of the Strategy incorporates a vision of the children's workforce, in which everyone who works with children and young people should be:

- ambitious for every child or young person;
- excellent in their practice;
- committed to partnership and integrated working;
- respected and valued as professionals

Implementation of the Strategy requires a focus on moving towards closer joint working between planners and providers of children's services at the local level.

To achieve a future world-class workforce for children, a greater understanding of the differences within this complex group of workers is needed. In particular, previous work (Broadhead, Purcell & Gilchrist, 2007) has highlighted the need to identify the learning and development needs of all staff in the children's workforce, in order that appropriate measures can be put in place in pursuit of the goal of creating a highly qualified, integrated workforce. Volunteers are an important component of the children's workforce although their contribution is again diverse and fragmented; nevertheless, if the real benefit of their contribution is to be effectively realised, their learning and development needs should be known and addressed.

Research Aims & Methods

This paper discusses the findings of a study, commissioned by the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) and conducted by the Policy Research Institute at Leeds Metropolitan University, to explore the core training needs of volunteers in the children's workforce. As part of their ongoing commitment to addressing children's workforce training and development issues, the CWDC is working on the development of a Volunteer Strategy, and commissioned this qualitative study to enhance their understanding of volunteers' training needs as this strategy evolves. The study sought to identify:

1. A typical range of activities undertaken by volunteers in the children's workforce.

2. The availability of infrastructure support – with a focus on those engaged in the provision of children's services – to:
   - VCS organisations
   - volunteers
3. How data on volunteers in the children's workforce are collated and used by Children's Trusts.
4. The current levels of skills, competence and qualifications among volunteers in the children's workforce.
5. The typical current and future training needs of volunteers.
6. The value attached to the development of the skills of volunteers in the children's workforce.
7. The availability of training to volunteers working in the children's workforce, and differences in access to this depending on the sector within which the volunteer is engaged.
8. The effectiveness of local interventions in identifying and addressing the training and development needs of volunteers in the children's workforce.

The study used a range of qualitative methods in order to address these research questions, accessing a variety of sources to allow for findings to be triangulated and conclusions to be drawn. The approaches taken were as follows:

- A rapid review of the literature;
- Interviews with a limited number of national stakeholders.
- Fieldwork (including data analysis and interviews with local stakeholders and volunteers) in two case study areas (Rotherham and Derbyshire).

Findings

Volunteers' Contribution

The contribution of the VCS to the provision of children's services is widely acknowledged, as is that of volunteers engaged in the children's workforce both in the VCS and the statutory sector. While the link between the impact of their work and formal outcomes[5] may not always be explicit, there is recognition that volunteers make a significant contribution towards the attainment of enhanced outcomes for children, young people and families. They also provide added value to host organisations and the services they provide in a variety of ways, including:

- Delivering services they wouldn't ordinarily be able to deliver.
- Increasing the breadth / richness of experience of the clients.

---

[5] such as the five *Every Child Matters* outcomes forming the basis of the previous government's agenda for children's services (see the Children Act 2004); these aim to give all children the support they need to: be healthy; stay safe; enjoy and achieve; make a positive contribution; and achieve economic well-being.

- Enhancing the capacity of services to reach more children, young people and families.
- Drawing on volunteers' enthusiasm, energy, motivation, skills and knowledge to complement / supplement that of their staff.
- Involving communities in the delivery of services, and helping organisations to remain rooted in the community they serve; providing linkages between the community, clients and the organisation.
- Giving services an informal touch, making them more accessible to clients.

In many cases, host organisations rely on their volunteers in order to be able to provide any kind of service at all, suggesting that volunteers can be crucial to the delivery of a service.

Volunteers' Motivation

The study highlighted the fact that volunteers come from a diverse range of backgrounds, and bring to their roles a variety of skills and competencies. Their motivation for volunteering is likely to have a significant impact on what roles volunteers undertake, and on their learning and development needs. As the following summary indicates, the study grouped volunteers' motivations into a small number of categories, although in reality they are almost as varied as volunteers themselves:

- Establishing / safeguarding services needed in volunteers' own communities
- Providing support to their own children and their peers in services used by them
- Responding to an altruistic desire to contribute to society
- Accessing opportunities to socialise and access mutual support networks with other people from the community, with parents of other children
- Enhancing self esteem, through external (and personal) recognition of their contribution
- Developing skills / gaining experience to assist in accessing paid employment

Volunteer Roles

While it proved impossible to characterise the 'typical' range of roles undertaken by volunteers in the children's workforce, the study highlighted the fact that they are almost as diverse and numerous as the volunteers themselves. Volunteers participating in the study were engaged by host organisations from across the VCS and statutory sector; supported group and one-to-one activities with children in pre-school and school-age children as well as young people; and provided services in a range of settings, including nurseries, children's centres, play groups, uniformed and informal youth groups, sports clubs, peer support services and outreach. The study did not find any significant differences between roles in the different sectors included in the case study areas, with volunteers engaged in broadly similar activities in both the VCS and statutory sector. It appears, however, that they may be called upon to

fulfil more roles in services provided entirely by volunteers, a situation only likely to arise in the VCS.

There is also evidence to suggest that volunteers assume differing levels of responsibility in the different roles they fill, depending on their capability, their motivations / aspirations and the needs of the host organisation or service engaging them. While some volunteers, for example, may be content with providing refreshments at a parent and toddler group each week, others are responsible for the management and funding of entire services as well as aspects of delivering services. This diversity in volunteers' role will inevitably impact on their learning and development needs, both in terms of their starting point and in relation to the end point in their engagement with training opportunities.

Support

The study highlighted the fact that volunteers in the children's workforce are offered a substantial amount of support, provided in a range of contexts, all of which is focussed on strengthening the services they provide to children, young people and families at the same time as seeking to contribute to the volunteers' own personal development. This support can be characterised as coming from three primary sources: the host organisation (usually from the volunteer manager, providing support and supervision to the volunteer in relation to their role); the local infrastructure organisation (offering generic opportunities to VCS organisations, which volunteers can access as needed); and the local authority / Children's Trust (where – in both study areas – there is a member of staff with responsibility for VCS / volunteer support and development).

This support has been found to have greatest impact – both on the quality of services provided and on the development of volunteers' skills and competencies – where it is offered in a highly personalised manner. In practice, this means that, having identified barriers to their engagement in learning and development opportunities, volunteers have been helped to overcome these most effectively when those people providing support to them are able to respond to their concerns on an individual basis. For instance, high participation rates have been ensured on key training in disadvantaged communities by arranging delivery times around the availability of potential participants; providing a range of childcare solutions that allow different people to access whatever style suites them best; and by accompanying individual volunteers to the first session to help them overcome any insecurities they may have. The role of volunteer manager was highlighted in the course of the study as being best placed to deliver tailored support.

Data Collection

The study showed that, although the collection, maintainance and analysis of data on volunteers in the children's workforce is valued, Children's Trusts do not prioritise this work. Data collection was felt to be important for the following reasons:

- Ensures volunteers' safety, and provides them with appropriate roles.
- Enables volunteer managers to match volunteers to roles; generates confidence about volunteers' basic level skills; ensures quality of service provision; guarantees the safety of volunteers and clients.
- Reassures clients of volunteers' capability, and ensures their safety.
- Provides Children's Trusts / Local Infrastructure Organisations (LIOs) with a rationale for providing volunteer training to plug skills gaps; allows for provision of co-ordinated support to volunteers; ensures consistency of provision across the sector.

There is no evidence of a systematic approach being taken to collecting and analysing data of this sort, either at a local level or nationally. It is recognised that this work would make significant demands on the resources of Children's Trusts, and that the throughput of volunteers is likely to create such demands on an ongoing basis. Host organisations are best placed to undertake this kind of data collection and analysis, but there are insufficient mechanisms to allow the sharing of such intelligence.

Volunteers' Skills, Competence and Qualifications

The study highlighted the fact that the nature of an individual's motivation for volunteering, and their personal characteristics and circumstances play a major role in determining the level of skills they bring to a service, and the training and qualifications to which they aspire. There is evidence that volunteers in the children's workforce bring significant skills to bear on the services they deliver; however, many individuals do not necessarily see the need to hold a qualification to prove they have these skills, nor do they express a desire to obtain qualifications.

Volunteer Training Needs

Recognising that training is a core element of the wider 'learning and development' process, the study highlighted the importance of understanding volunteers' training needs alongside their other developmental needs. The need for host organisations to maintain detailed records about the skills and training needs of their volunteers was highlighted, and extensive practice in this area was discovered. Less data on volunteers' training needs is held by intermediary bodies, including Children's Trusts and LIOs, while very little data is held at a national level. Hence, while service providers have a thorough understanding of the needs and capabilities of their own volunteers, awareness of the needs of volunteers in the children's workforce at a strategic / service planning level is more limited.

Skills Development

The study revealed a broad consensus among stakeholders – including volunteers themselves – on the need for volunteers in the children's workforce to develop their skills in order to continuously improve the quality of services provided and contribute towards enhanced outcomes for the children and families using the services in which they are engaged. The rationale for volunteers' skills development varies almost on an individual basis, depending to a large extent on what motivates volunteers to participate. However, the study identified a number of skills which need to be developed across all services and by all volunteers in the children's workforce, broadly reflecting the CWDC's Common Core and Induction Standards for paid staff in the children's workforce[6], including the following fundamentals of safe practice:

- Induction
- Child Protection / Safeguarding
- Health & Safety
- Hygiene
- Child Development
- First Aid
- Working with vulnerable children and young people

The study highlighted the significance of the impact of training on volunteers' self-esteem, particularly for those volunteers who have experienced exclusion from learning and development opportunities in the past. It is also evident that when volunteers train their peers, it consolidates their knowledge, further develops their skills and gives an additional boost to their self-esteem.

Training Provision

Volunteers pursue different routes into training, depending on their own needs / aspirations and those of their host organisation. The following summarises the typical routes available to volunteers:

- Generic volunteer training courses provided by LIOs / local authorities, some of which meet the needs of volunteers in the children's workforce.
- Local Children' Trusts / Children's Services devise and promote training courses of specific relevance to the children's workforce, more of which meet the needs of volunteers (alongside paid staff).
- Some targetted courses to meet the specific needs of volunteers in the children's workforce are provided, mostly by national voluntary organisations with clearly defined volunteer roles and large numbers of volunteers.

---

[6] See http://www.cwdcouncil.org.uk/common-core and http://www.cwdcouncil.org.uk/induction-standards.

The study revealed a number of barriers to training, including issues around timing, cost and location of training provision as well as support (such as transport and childcare).

Action Points

The study identified a number of action points for consideration by the CWDC and other agencies involved in promoting development of the children's workforce at national and local levels, including the following:

- Any action to support volunteers' learning and development needs to take account of the diversity of their background, motivation and current skills set as well as the variety of settings, roles and activities in which they are engaged.
- Resources should be targeted to support volunteer manager development, to ensure that they are equipped to provide the support individual volunteers require in developing their skills and competencies.
- Attention needs to be focussed on the collation of volunteer data at a local level by Children's Trusts and LIOs, starting with work to support host organisations in compiling information using a standardised approach. Analysis of this data should be used to ensure that workforce planners better understand the background of volunteers in the children's workforce, and that they can identify skills gaps and specific needs of volunteers, while ensuring inclusivity in volunteer recruitment and retention.
- The scope for developing a basic set of competencies should be explored, drawing on the fundamentals of safe practice detailed above.
- Opportunities for progression and accreditation should be made available for all volunteers in the children's workforce, though it is important to recognise the variation in their starting points, and there should be a presumption against compulsion. Different learning styles should be accommodated through the provision of a range of learning and development opportunities, including 'bite-sized' modules, 'taster' courses, mentoring and recognition of informal learning.
- Training should be provided locally, and be as accessible as possible, with workforce planners liaising with volunteer managers, volunteers and training providers to identify and overcome barriers to participation.
- Further research into the training needs of volunteers is needed, particularly in exploring with Children's Trusts the potential for collating better data, and in devising a set of fundamentals of safe practice aligned with the Common Core and Induction Standards.

References

Broadhead, P, M Purcell & D Gilchrist (2007); Recruitment, Retention & Rewards in the Children's Workforce; Leeds: CWDC.

CWDC (2009); A Picture Worth Millions: State of the Young People's Workforce; Leeds: Children's Workforce Development Council.

DCSF (2008); 2020 Children and Young People's Workforce Strategy

DfES (2005a); The Children's Workforce in England: A Review of the Evidence; London: Department for Education & Skills.

DfES (2005b); Children's Workforce Strategy: A Strategy to Build a World-Class Workforce for Children and Young People; London: Department for Education & Skills.

Hudson, B (2005); Partnership Working and the Children's Services Agenda: Is it Feasible? Journal of Integrated Care, 13(2), pp.7-12.

Kirk, G & P Broadhead (2007) Every Child Matters and Teacher Education: A UCET Position. UCET Occasional Paper No 17; London; Universities Council for the Education of Teachers.

Mason, P, K Morris & P Smith (2006); A complex solution to a complicated problem? Early messages from the national evaluation of the Children's Fund Prevention Programme; Children & Society, 19(2), pp.131 – 143.