

**Institute for
Volunteering
Research**

Volunteering to lead: a study of leadership in small, volunteer-led groups

A huge amount of volunteering takes place within groups that are led by volunteers. These groups can have a major impact on people's quality of life and living conditions, providing opportunities for democratic and grassroots participation. They function, and are led, in ways that can be very different to those found within larger volunteer-involving organisations with paid staff. Such groups can nonetheless be highly effective at what they do and successfully fulfil a community need that may not be met elsewhere. However, this does not always happen easily and groups may experience numerous challenges in the process including the need to guard against becoming exclusive.

Funded by



This study, funded by the Volunteering Hub, was carried out by the Institute for Volunteering Research between May 2007 and March 2008. It aimed to explore issues of leadership within small, volunteer-led groups and the challenges associated with their growth and development. It researched six volunteer-led groups in two geographical locations in England. The groups were drawn from the environmental and conservation, cultural and heritage, and sports fields. In each organisation, a series of interviews were completed with leaders and committee members and a focus group was held with a group of less senior volunteers.

The characteristics of volunteer-led groups

All of the groups had a structure in place, being led by a figurehead who was often defined by their external-facing role. However, this leader did not always occupy the position of chair. All groups had a committee and a wider membership of volunteers supporting the leader but the complexity of the structures varied between groups.

The groups commonly gave thought to recruiting new volunteers to maintain their mix of skills and to ensure the sustainability of the group. Recruitment tended to rely on word of mouth or personal contact. This could, however, risk excluding those outside the immediate social and professional networks of the existing volunteers and threaten the inclusiveness of the groups.

The groups functioned through a mix of informal yet structured systems of management. They had structures in place and adhered to protocol when necessary, yet did so in a way that suited their group and the volunteers. Moreover, groups often felt strongly that imposing more formal systems of volunteer management on them would be inappropriate and ineffective. Similar levels of informality were observed in the process of electing leaders and committee members, although protocol was followed in all instances. This may frequently be observed from an external perspective as somewhat chaotic, perhaps as a result of the bureaucratic lens through which much commentary may take place. While such systems may appear 'messy' from the outside, in each of the groups, they functioned effectively.

Groups were commonly opposed to the notion of employing a paid member of staff. This appeared to be linked to how highly valued volunteering as an activity was within the group, but could also be the result of past negative experiences and challenges. Employing paid staff seemed to have the potential to disrupt relationships within the group and the wider ethos of the organisation.

Barriers and challenges for volunteers as group leaders

Collective systems of group work were evident in all of the case studies to varying degrees, and the volunteers demonstrated high levels of involvement, commitment and passion. However, there was often a disproportionately high level of involvement from a smaller core of individuals, with an active committee and a less active wider membership of volunteers. Within the committee itself, commitment, drive and passion were generally much more pronounced amongst the leaders of the group.

Time was rarely identified as a barrier to leaders, and overburdening did not appear to be a major problem. This could be because there was often a blurred line between the activities volunteers undertook in their social life and within the group. Furthermore, the volunteers often saw participation as enjoyable. However, it is not easy to compartmentalise forms of voluntary activity and volunteering in activities that can be linked to leisure may be far more

fluid than those that occur in a more formal setting. In several instances, the negative impacts of workload were further minimised by the successful delegation of activities and tasks to other volunteers.

There were limits to the collective involvement of volunteers in the decision making process of the groups observed, with the majority of responsibilities falling to the committee rather than to all volunteers. It is possible that this could be exacerbated by the strength of the leader's personality and the effective influence of one individual's vision. This carries the risk that volunteers may be excluded unintentionally from decision making processes.

Impacts of ongoing growth and development

The groups were in different stages of their development, ranging from those that were less than a year old to one that was over 50 years old. Even in the more established groups, their evolution and growth tended to be slow and measured. Reflecting their grassroots nature, where growth did take place it was always in response to community needs and no groups appeared interested in growth for growth's sake. Furthermore, there was no evidence to suggest that this form of growth changed the remit or ethos of the group, possibly because of the stability of leadership within the oldest groups.

The cause and effect of growth and development can sometimes become blurred. Certain indicators and results of growth, such as acquiring new buildings and assets, employing paid staff, or introducing new structures to address power struggles, can themselves act as catalysts for further growth. Some groups, for example, may reach a size at which they require paid staff; and while the employment of staff can be a significant challenge for groups, it can also considerably increase their capacity for further growth.

Engaging with external bodies

Leaders within groups appeared to receive the majority of their support from their peers. Groups often tended to exist largely independently from other organisations and where external relationships were evident they were most commonly formed with specialist infrastructure bodies. They did not tend to access support from the generalist volunteering infrastructure bodies to the same degree. Groups generally felt that to access support, they needed to be proactive in identifying it. All groups had some relationship with their local authority and their experiences varied considerably. The success of this relationship often exerted a major influence over their day-to-day and longer-term existence. In some cases, the local authority could perform an enabling role, providing support and resources, while in one case it was seen to restrict the group's development.

Implications for stakeholders

Volunteer-led groups and volunteers

To become more effective, and to help ensure their longer-term sustainability, volunteer-led groups and their volunteers could consider:

- > how to develop recruitment processes to extend beyond a current reliance on word of mouth approaches that can limit the inclusiveness of groups
- > how to help avoid the overburdening and burnout of leaders through the successful delegation of responsibility and workload to other volunteers
- > how to recognise that some members of the group will not want to make, or are not able to make, the same level of commitment as the leader or committee members. All

members of the group should, however, be kept informed of developments and involved in decision making when possible

- > how to help minimise potential conflicts and problems when employing paid staff by providing specific and well-defined duties for all employees.

Volunteering infrastructure

To support volunteer-led groups and help them improve their access to the support that is on offer, the volunteering infrastructure could consider:

- > how to recognise volunteer-led groups as a form of volunteering that is as equally valuable to, and possibly more prevalent than, that which occurs in larger volunteer-involving organisations with paid staff
- > how to work towards removing obstacles to this form of volunteering, which can include help dealing with bureaucracy and red tape such as planning legislation
- > how to recognise that groups may not always welcome interference through further generic capacity-building initiatives or the imposition of models of management and volunteer support developed in larger organisations
- > how to become more proactive when offering support to groups, including promoting resources more widely.

Policy makers and government

To foster a supportive environment in which volunteer-led groups may operate, policy makers and government could consider:

- > how to ensure that policy at all levels recognises volunteer-led groups as a valuable and legitimate form of volunteering
- > how to recognise that the informal, non-corporate model of volunteering that often occurs within volunteer-led groups is valid and, moreover, works effectively
- > how to ensure that the volunteering infrastructure is properly resourced, enabling them to diversify the support they provide to groups. In particular, sufficiently fund specialist infrastructure bodies to support volunteering as well as the generalist volunteering infrastructure, as the former appears to be particularly popular with volunteer-led groups.

Nick Ockenden and Mark Hutin March 2008

A copy of the full report can be downloaded for free from www.ivr.org.uk.

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