



Priorities for Active Communities



Report of a consultation

by Peter Taylor, Scottish Community Development Centre
for The Volunteer Centre

The government's Active Communities initiative aims to promote the value of community involvement, and to encourage more people to become involved as volunteers. The Volunteer Centre (VC) sees this initiative, with its associated additional funding, as a major opportunity to develop its services.

But there are hard choices for the VC to make on which priorities it should pursue. It wanted to base its decision on information on the preferences of the people it works with, and to listen to what they have to say about the feasibility of achieving results.

To help it to make these choices, the Centre commissioned the Scottish Community Development Centre to carry out a consultation of a wide range of groups and agencies. This is a summary of the report of that consultation.

We posted a questionnaire to all 530 organisations that are listed with the VC as actually or potentially interested in taking on volunteers. Most are voluntary organisations, but a substantial minority are in the public sector. One third replied, with lots of helpful extra comments.

We spoke in more detail to a sample of 18 of those who replied. We also interviewed 37 people from a wide variety of public agencies, voluntary organisations and private companies who are supporters or partners of the VC, or have in depth experience of particular issues.

THE ISSUES

The VC had already identified seven of the priorities in the Active Communities Strategy as issues that it might concentrate upon. These were all things to which it would ideally like to devote more resources, but between which a choice of priorities was needed. The issues were these (we have given a short 'label' to each so that we can refer to them below).

"Help to involve people from ethnic minority backgrounds, including refugees, as volunteers" (Ethnic Minorities)

"Encouraging volunteering by people with extra support needs, including disabilities" (Extra Support Needs)

"Developing opportunities for volunteering by young people, particularly socially excluded young people" (Young People)

"Developing an increased level of employer supported volunteering" (Employer Supported)

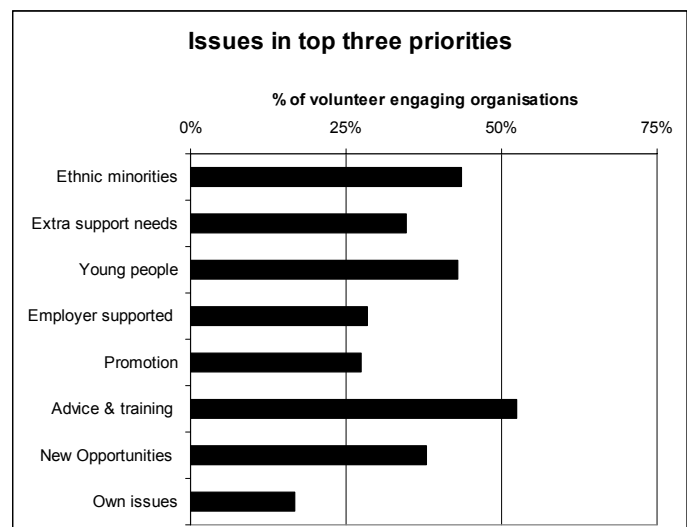
"More and better promotion of volunteering and Volunteer Centre services" (Promotion)

"Good practice advice and training for organisations and training for volunteers" (Advice & Training)

"Developing new opportunities for volunteering and community action with Social Inclusion Partnership and other excluded communities". (New Opportunities)

We were not surprised to find a strong tendency for people to think that all or most of these issues were high priorities. Whatever combination of actions the Volunteer Centre chooses, it will have strong support from its stakeholders.

But we also asked the 'volunteer engaging organisations' to restrict their choices for the VC to three top priorities, with the results shown here.

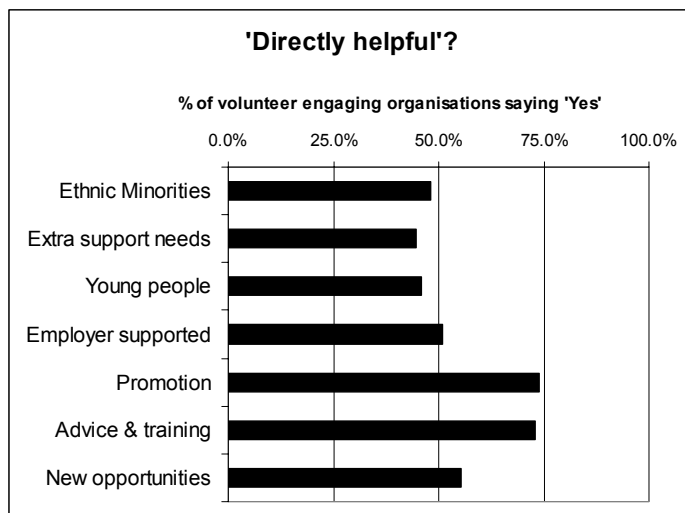
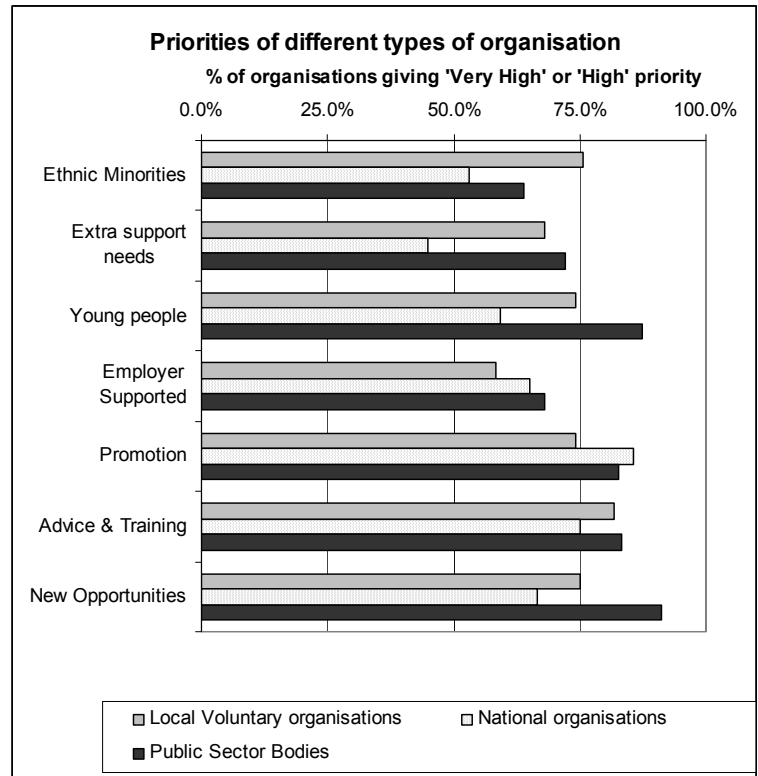


There was still, on this basis, a strong basis of support across the board - well over a quarter in each case - for each of the potential priorities. More than half made 'advice and training' a top priority. 'Ethnic minorities', 'Young People' and "New Opportunities' came next.

Organisations were also offered the opportunity to identify additional issues of their own, and to include these amongst their three top priorities if they wished. Only a relatively small minority identified additional issues -many closely related to the seven - and even fewer listed them as top priorities.

The views of organisations about the practical benefits of these issues are also important. Services guided solely by abstract values and priorities would not be used. Large proportions saw work on each of the issues as directly helpful, with 40% for even the lowest rated ('Extra Support Needs').

There were some major differences between the ranking people gave to issues in terms of 'helpfulness' and their 'priority' choices. 'Advice and Training' was high on both lists. But 'Promotion', though also seen as helpful by almost three quarters, was less likely to be seen as a priority for the VC.



Around a quarter of the people who place a very high priority on 'Ethnic Minorities' or on 'Extra Support Needs' do not necessarily see it as directly relevant to them, and over a third of the people who place a very high priority on 'Young People' have a similar reaction.

Different types of organisations might have different priorities. We looked at the differences between locally based voluntary organisations, branches or projects of national organisations, and people in public bodies (Council, NHS etc.) who take on volunteers.

Public bodies made 'New Opportunities' for socially excluded communities their top priority, followed by 'Young People'. National organisations valued practical support such as 'Promotion' highly. Local voluntary organisations did this too, especially 'Advice and Training'. But their second highest priority was support for volunteering by 'Ethnic Minorities', even though only a small minority of them are organisations that work principally in or for ethnic minority communities.

Next we look at each issue in more detail, based on the comments of our interviewees.

ETHNIC MINORITIES

The possibility of special efforts to encourage volunteering by local residents with an ethnic minority background, and the distinctive issue of involving more recent refugees and asylum seekers aroused a great deal of comment.

Amongst the volunteer engaging organisations there was a general feeling that this is something that they do not have much experience of and would like more to be done about. Some dealt with a number of clients from ethnic minority communities and would like to offer more 'peer' support to them. Others felt they did not attract an equal share of minority group clients and needed to overcome

this. Others just felt that the principles of equality and inclusion were important.

“Having volunteers from an ethnic background may help break down any existing barriers, as we do not receive any referrals at present from the large population living in our catchment area.”

The groups and agencies working closely in and with ethnic minority communities pointed to the facts that:

“There is tons of voluntary activity in the ethnic minority community, though a lot of volunteer work is not recognised as such”.

and that the potential of volunteering to help people find employment had proved particularly interesting, especially to younger people.

But the idea of volunteering for an organisation where you have no previous connection may need more promotion, directly to people in ethnic communities. Perhaps larger organisations could form direct links with ethnic community groups; others might need help to jointly promote and offer a sufficiently focused range of opportunities.

Several interviewees emphasised the *“massive potential benefit in volunteering by refugees”*. But this raises some distinctive practical issues ranging from language to child care.

EXTRA SUPPORT NEEDS

According to the Scottish Volunteer Bureau Network at least one third of Volunteer Bureau clients are estimated to have extra support needs. But that includes a broad range of needs, extending to issues such as the impact of long-term unemployment. Few if any of our respondents had such a broad definition in mind. They were talking about people with physical disabilities, in some cases people with learning disabilities, and in probably fewer cases people with mental health problems.

A priority for this issue has some enthusiastic supporters in the voluntary sector, Social Work etc. Several were keen to emphasise the potential for their own service users to move in to volunteering. However, relatively low proportions of respondents expected to gain direct benefit from work on this issue. Some of the reasons involved concern about the resources and burdens that might be involved.

Much of this support has to be delivered directly to the volunteer within their placement, and probably cannot come from a central organisation like the VC.

YOUNG PEOPLE

A greater involvement of young people in volunteering is seen by many as another ‘equalities’ issue - the need to include all sections of the community. But they have a special importance: *“They are a huge human resource, the adult volunteers of the future”*.

Although some feel *“The image of volunteering generally is old”* others have seen the benefits of young people working either with other young people, or with the elderly.

Several commented that different methods for promotion, training etc would be appropriate for young people. The potential scale of the task of influencing young people across the city means that partnerships with all the services and organisations that currently work with young people are required.

EMPLOYER SUPPORTED

Although ‘Employer Supported Volunteering’ attracted large numbers of endorsements in our survey as a high priority and of direct benefit, it was clearly the issue where respondents were least likely to have experience and understanding. Even organisations active on employment issues were unfamiliar with it.

But the companies we interviewed gave practical illustrations of how they promoted volunteering opportunities, sometimes linked to fundraising, and even included it in training. They wanted more support to identify and promote suitable opportunities.

Quite a few volunteer engaging organisations, especially amongst those who gave this the highest priority, saw employees as a source of volunteers with specific skills and abilities that were in short supply.

PROMOTION

A large majority of volunteer engaging organisations thought that it would be beneficial for there to be more promotion of volunteering, for one overwhelming reason - they hope that it would bring them more volunteers.

A few wanted the Volunteer Centre to promote itself more. Some had perhaps unrealistic expectations of its ability to provide a regular flow of referrals adapted to their needs.

We were offered a range of comments on the difficulties of attracting volunteers, but limited practical guidance on how the VC might overcome these.

ADVICE AND TRAINING

Generally both survey respondents and interviewees placed a strong emphasis on the development of advice and training roles.

The obvious difficulty is that a wide variety of desires and expectations are expressed. Different respondents focus on training of organisations for management, or of individual volunteers, and on different training needs for those volunteers. The range of possible activities includes advice and guidance, direct training provision, and the co-ordination of training by others.

One type of response emphasises the need to improve the management and practice of organisations, including linked training of management and volunteers.

“What rights do volunteers have and how can we meet that as managers? What commitment is there to and from the volunteers?”

But some are looking for help in developing a range of basic skills and knowledge in volunteers. One common desire is for help in training volunteers in the particular attitudes and skills required for working with specific client groups. There are clearly many smaller organisations that are looking for something that is beyond their own capacity to provide, and these needs should be investigated to see if shared or partnership solutions are possible.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES

This issue attracted high priority ratings, though comments on practical benefits were relatively thin on the ground. A range of relevant issues need to be properly unpacked and distinguished before deciding how to tackle this area.

- How proactive should the VC be in ‘**gap analysis**’ - identifying and finding ways of meeting deficiencies in the range of volunteering opportunities that exist?

- Should work in **Social Inclusion Partnership areas** be a priority for its own sake, perhaps because of the underdeveloped state of volunteering in some of these areas?
- The Active Communities strategy seeks to develop the potential for **community action** - people getting directly involved in addressing the problems faced by their own areas or groups - as a form of volunteering. *“The VC needs the ability to work in frameworks that allow people to make changes and access levers of power”* said one partner.
- The VC faces choices about how far to remain directly involved in **service delivery** and/or to manage externally funded **special projects**. Several see a continuing role, but there is concern that projects should offer new opportunities for volunteering, and that the first priority should be the transfer of experience from existing services to other areas and the city as a whole.

OVERVIEW

The purpose of the report was not to make detailed recommendations for the VC’s operations, but to obtain and summarise a wide range of views from the people it must work with. The fairly even balance of people’s priorities does not make the VC’s task any easier.

We made our own very tentative selection of what the priorities for action might be, though the VC’s final choice may legitimately differ..

- ‘Ethnic Minorities’: because this work is relatively underdeveloped locally, there is a clear demand from partners, and considerable support amongst the broader ‘volunteer engaging’ community.
- ‘Advice and training’: because the demand is overwhelming. But the priority may be building partnerships and networks, not direct provision.
- Possibly ‘New Opportunities’, because this has the endorsement of key sponsors and wide general support. But the agenda needs clarification.
- An alternative selection would be ‘Young People’. That would bring the selection of issues into line with the top choices of survey respondents; more importantly it would address an issue of great long-term strategic significance for the development of volunteering.

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