

Telling tales of volunteering: Organisational insights

A research findings briefing paper

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Highlights

We undertook secondary analysis of 78 interviews with volunteers and third sector workers in order to explore the changing dynamics of volunteering. Here we focus on the importance of organisational contexts in shaping volunteering.

A change in the ways in which volunteering is conceptualised and organised, including the roles and responsibilities, can affect the space for and nature of volunteering.

Volunteering is a relational activity, and these relationships are not always equal. Changes in the relationships between volunteers and services users, volunteers and paid staff, or amongst volunteers themselves can fundamentally affect the experience and outcomes of volunteering.

Getting and keeping volunteers can be crucial to organisational sustainability, and it can be hard and require considerable investments of time and energy. Whatever the organisational setting, maintaining a sense of efficacy, being valued, appreciated, making a difference, and developing positive relationships seems central to retention.

It is not uncommon for volunteers to help out with more than one organisation. This can assist inter-organisational relationships but can also create challenges and tensions, for organisations and individuals.

We have highlighted four particular implications of these findings:

- Organisational change affects volunteers and ensuring that they are supported along that journey and involved in decisions about it is important.
- Paying greater attention to the relational aspects of volunteering may be important for volunteer recruitment and retention.
- Volunteering is not cost free – recruiting and retaining volunteers requires time and money – but investment is likely to pay off.
- Volunteers represent more than a pool of unpaid workers. Paying greater attention to the different ways in which volunteers may contribute to organisational outcomes may be beneficial to all.

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Introduction

Expectations are high for the potential of volunteers to deliver services, create resilient communities and contribute to a thriving civil society. The Big Society and Localism agendas in particular put great store in the potential power of volunteering. Repeated drives to increase participation seem based on the assumption that there is an army of volunteers willing and able to get involved alongside a set of structures and organisations waiting expectantly to welcome them. And this is taking place in the context of severe funding cuts. It is also set against evidence of long-term static levels of volunteering (Staetsky and Mohan, 2011), a decline in the average amount of time spent volunteering (Clark, 2014), and that a few people make a disproportionately large contribution to formal civic engagement (Mohan and Bullock, 2012). Questions have been raised as to the ability of volunteering to live up to the great expectations placed upon it. What do we really know about how volunteering works and how the contexts within which it is situated affect its potential?

All too often studies of volunteering decontextualize it. They freeze volunteering in time and space by focusing on individuals' engagement in one particular voluntary activity or at one point in time. Volunteering is not, however, static or isolated. It is dynamic. It is a 'situated practice' (Cornwall, 2002). A process which is positioned within and shaped by the multi-layered contexts within which it occurs: individuals' life histories, their families, organisations, and communities (Omoto and Snyder, 2002).

This set of briefing papers provides insights into the changing processes of volunteering from the stories of individuals, families, organisations and communities. They have been produced as part of the Changing Landscapes for the Third Sector project (see changinglandscapes.leeds.ac.uk). They are based on secondary analysis of 78 qualitative longitudinal interviews selected from the Real Times (see Macmillan, 2011) and Pathways through Participation (see Brodie et al, 2011) projects. Real Times was primarily concerned with organisational change; Pathways with changes in individual's participatory histories. Both were set up to explore specific but contrasting questions, united by a focus on changes over time. Although not the specific focus of either, together they provide insights into the dynamic ways in which volunteering unfolds over space, place and time, throughout individuals' lives, family, organisational and community histories.

This paper is part of a series of four, each of which focus on one of these evolving participatory contexts. Each paper starts by sharing individual stories from the studies, before drawing out cross-cutting themes and identifying key implications. The focus of this paper is on contextualising volunteering within organisations.

Situating volunteering in organisations

Out of all the different contexts within which volunteering is situated organisations have received the greatest attention. It remains relatively rare, however, for studies to explore the ways in which organisational developments impact upon volunteering over time; how organisational change shapes opportunities and motivations for participation, the volunteering experience, and outcomes. Organisationally based studies of volunteering tend to focus on larger, more formal, staff-based organisations, to the neglect of smaller, volunteer-led groups and organisations. The recognised dominance of one paradigm of volunteering within research and policy, and of one model of volunteer management within volunteering practice (Rochester et al, 2010), suggests that it is important to explore further how different organisational contexts shape volunteering, and how this changes over time. The Real Times and Pathways data provides valuable insights that can add to our understandings. We begin with three short stories, before drawing out crosscutting issues.

Hollyhock is a volunteer-owned and run community shop and café based in a deprived, ex-mining, community in the Midlands, England. It is run under the umbrella of a community association, which also runs a number of other services.

The idea for Hollyhock arose after a couple of volunteers from the community association had been successfully selling donated items on a stall set up in a community centre. When shop premises became available in the village the community association took on the lease and invested £2,500 for set up. A committee was set up to run the shop. Alongside the two founders, a recruitment drive led to eight others coming forward, four of whom were already known to the association, four of whom were new.

In its first few years the shop flourished. It received donations of goods from the local community, which were sold or passed on to another charity if surplus to requirements. The few teas and coffees it was selling to customers soon expanded into a thriving community café, with an outside catering and takeaway service. Turnover from the café soon outstripped that from the shop. The rota of regular volunteers grew to 14, with more on a waiting list. The volunteers influenced the success of Hollyhock in more ways than one: “people come here because of who works here, or they don’t come here because of who works here”. The revenue being generated by the café and the shop was being used to support other services provided by the community association.

Fortunes, however, can change rapidly. Halfway through the process of negotiating taking over the lease for a vacant premise next to the shop, the owners changed tack by leasing it to a private individual to be run as a Delicatessen. The Delicatessen is in direct competition with Hollyhock. Customers have not seemingly remained loyal and takings have declined rapidly. To add to the frustrations of Hollyhock’s leaders, the Delicatessen owner is a local resident (‘related to half the village’) who, along with other community members, appears oblivious to the effects of their business on the café, and to the consequences to the association and the wider community if the shop fails. Hollyhock has also struggled to keep hold of its volunteers: ‘...people come and people go, don’t they, they either like who they’re working with or they don’t like them, and somebody upsets them and ‘I’m not having that’ kind of thing’. Two of the eight original volunteers remain. Responsibility for the shop rests mainly on the shoulders of the two people who set it up. They are close to burn out. The future of the shop is in doubt.

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Daisy is a newly formed social enterprise, based in a deprived area in south west England. In 2010 Paula and Justin got together with an idea to develop a horticultural project that would be both commercial and therapeutic by involving unemployed people, ex-offenders, and people with mental ill health as volunteers and paid workers. The idea was to provide participants with training and volunteering opportunities which would contribute to their mental and physical wellbeing, and potentially lead to paid work. In return the participants would grow the fruit and vegetables which would then be sold, with profits reinvested into the company.

The location for the organisation was chosen not because it was on the Directors' doorsteps, but because of perceived level of need in the area and the availability of grants. As soon as the area was selected Paula and Justin set about making themselves known. Paula was particularly energetic in building networks and driving Daisy forward. By the end of the first year they leased two plots of land, accessed free professional help to apply for planning permission, received start up grants, and hosted a public meeting for local stakeholders.

During the organisation's second year a stream of funding applications was submitted, work began on developing the land, efforts to build networks were continued and participation began to grow. Two interns were enrolled from a local university and a paid farm manager recruited, quickly becoming central to the organisation's future development. Engagement with the local community had to be handled sensitively. There was some scepticism among local residents about the intentions of outsiders coming into the area to develop such a scheme and of the value of creating volunteering opportunities when what the area needed, it was felt, was paid jobs.

Daisy's growth was exponential in year three. Justin stepped down as director and was soon replaced by an active local resident. An advisory group was set up, consisting of key stakeholders. Funding was received to deliver various courses for its volunteers, paid staff and others, ranging from confidence building through to healthy eating and woodwork. They employed a number of part time paid staff, and nearly 20 volunteers, including people with severe learning disabilities and their carers, and people on community service orders. There were no division between volunteers and service users, and all worked alongside paid staff on the horticultural side of the organisation. Paula felt that while she had been able to involve a good mix of people, so far they had tended to stay in their own groups and this was something she hoped to change.

Daisy's growth has continued. As of 2014, several contracts have been secured, including one to employ 11 apprentices. None were without challenge. Funding had been secured to develop a mental health buddying programme, which included the creation of a volunteer coordinator post. A volunteer with depression had already come to the organisation shortly after being diagnosed with a serious illness and subsequently losing his job. He had quickly proved his worth to the organisation and Paula was pleased to have been able to offer him a part time paid position. These opportunities had transformed his life. His experience and that of other volunteers and participants were providing Daisy with an evidence base that had enabled them to win more grants and contracts. Paula organised a group to re-establish a village show, attended by over 800 people. About 30 people volunteered to help on the day, including volunteers and staff from Daisy and from the local community. It was hoped this had helped to break down barriers and to build involvement.

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Poppy is a large, well established local information, rights and advice organisation based in an urban area in the north of England. It is part of a network of other similar organisations, all of which provide generalist and specialist support by appointment or drop-in.

In 2010, as the research began, they had a turnover in excess of £2m. They had a relatively new CEO, who was a charismatic and galvanising force within and beyond the organisation, although not without controversy. Over the next couple of years, the organisation went through a funding crisis, which resulted in restructure and redundancy, all of which was happening at the same time as demand for services was increasing. More recently, Poppy has secured a couple of short term funding contracts and grants which has temporarily put it on a more financially healthy footing, although the future sustainability is uncertain.

The organisation is (arguably) reliant on volunteers. In 2011 it involved about 150 volunteers, calculated to represent a wage-equivalent value to the organisation of approximately £600,000. Just before this time, however, the CEO acknowledged that 'by the time you get down to, you know, the volunteer level, you're not sure whether anybody's got a vision or not'. Indeed, beyond reflecting on the trials and tribulations of working with a board of trustees, volunteering scarcely featured in discussions with the research team about the organisation, its resources, successes and challenges.

Things began to change when the organisation was hit by the funding crisis, a time which coincided with a wider policy and funding environment that was encouraging volunteering, with an emphasis on volunteering as a route to enhanced employability. The organisation was struggling to balance the loss of funding with a growth in demand for its services. They considered reducing the number of paid staff employed, and compensating for this by increasing the number of volunteers involved. They were concerned, however, about the costs of recruiting and supporting volunteers, and the viability of running services through volunteers without staff to support them.

One response to this was to rethink the services provided by the organisation, moving from providing advice to providing information and signposting. This, it was suggested, would enable the increased use of volunteers, albeit in down-graded roles which would require less specialised skills and so less training and supervision. The rationale put forward was that Poppy couldn't afford to pay staff to support volunteers to provide more complex services, and the support could not be provided by volunteers as they would not come regularly enough or put in enough hours to provide the consistency of support that was required.

As the organisation grappled with these issues, there was a growing recognition amongst some of the leadership that through the comprehensive training programme the organisation provided for its volunteers, it did a lot to skill up volunteers and that its volunteer involvement could be considered an employment programme. It was also acknowledged that providing such training and support for volunteers requires resources. Reframing volunteering within the organisation as an employment programme might help to bring in resources, recruit new volunteers, and pay for volunteer training. This led to the submission of an application for funding to develop their volunteering programme, which included a subtle shift in staff roles from overseeing services to supporting and developing volunteers.

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A few months later Poppy found itself 'awash' with short term funding, including funding for volunteer support. By badging volunteering within the organisation as a training and employability programme they had been able to access funds which paid for the volunteer training and support which had traditionally been core funded. The organisation was being funded not directly for its service provision, but for its volunteer programme which in turn delivered its service provision.

Unfortunately our data does not tell us what the volunteers thought of these changes to their roles, responsibilities and support structures, or how they had navigated the wider organisational trials and tribulations. There are, however, hints of some concern. Poppy's leadership team have recently been looking to develop a new vision statement for the organisation. This has included running a series of development days, one of which was targeted at volunteers. A lack of interest from volunteers led to the day being cancelled. It was suggested that this 'speaks quite loudly about the motivation levels in the service'.

The significance of organisational context

As these short stories suggest, the organisational contexts within which volunteers are involved are diverse and ever changing. Such differences can affect volunteering practices in some fundamental ways. Here we distil some of the crosscutting issues affecting volunteering when we situate it within diverse and evolving organisational settings.

Volunteering paradigms: In lots of voluntary groups and organisations the volunteers are the organisation – they are the owners and the workers. In other, generally larger, voluntary (and public sector) organisations volunteers are a smaller part of the organisation's workforce. In some organisations volunteers are also the service users; volunteering is a way of delivering services while also being a service in itself. Rochester et al (2010) suggest that there are three distinct, but overlapping volunteering paradigms: volunteering as unpaid work/service; activism/mutual aid; and serious leisure. These different models operate on an individual and organisational level. Our stories indicate that different models of volunteering tend to dominate within different organisational settings. They also suggest that within organisations the model of volunteering may vary across individual volunteer roles, and change over time as the organisation develops. *Changes in the ways in which volunteering is conceptualised and subsequently organised within organisations can affect the space for and nature of volunteering within the organisation, with potentially significant implications for volunteering experiences and outcomes.*

Relationships: Whatever the setting, the relationships between those involved in organisations are crucial to the practices of volunteering and indeed to its outcomes. Changes in the nature of the relationship between volunteers and services users, volunteers and paid staff, and amongst volunteer themselves can fundamentally affect the volunteering experience. For organisations grappling with the dual tensions of reduced income and increased demand for their services, any consideration of growing the volunteer base can raise issues of job substitution, which can put the relationship between paid staff and volunteers under strain. For volunteer-led organisations, introducing or growing the number of paid staff can have equally significant implications for future participation. Within community groups in particular relationships amongst the volunteers are significant both for the experience of existing volunteers and for perceptions of the organisation amongst community members. While these relationships can be incredibly positive and productive, it is hard to escape disputes, personality clashes and power struggles. *Relationships between*

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volunteers and services users, volunteers and paid staff, and amongst volunteer themselves are often unequal, and in flux. Changes in these relationships can fundamentally affect the volunteering experience and the outcomes of volunteering.

Routes in: Getting enough volunteers, or the right volunteers, can be a challenge for organisations across the board. As Haski-Leventhal and Meijs (2011) argue, organisations are increasingly competing over resources, including people's time. Getting 'young' (or at least new) volunteers and appropriately skilled volunteers was identified as a particular struggle. Evidence was more limited of organisations moving from a concern about people putting themselves forward, to seriously reviewing their volunteer recruitment strategies and processes or questioning the extent to which they/the organisation may inadvertently create barriers for potential volunteers. *Getting enough of the right volunteers can be crucial to organisational sustainability and effectiveness. This can, however, be hard and may require considerable investments of time and energy to work out the right volunteer recruitment strategy.*

Role and responsibility: The nature of volunteer roles and the level of responsibility given to volunteers vary considerably across organisations. They are also subject to change within organisations. In some cases, the organisations were seeking to involve more volunteers, but the roles they were offering were less complex or had less responsibility. In some cases levels of complexity and responsibility had grown considerably over time. There was a commonly held perception that it was difficult to find volunteers willing or able to take on either particularly skilled or particularly responsible positions; or that it was too risky to do so. *Changes to roles and responsibilities can affect the whole process of volunteering.*

Support and recognition: The ways in which organisations support their volunteers can make a difference to their ability to recruit and retain them, and to the consequences of voluntary action. Yet it is all too easy to take volunteering and volunteers for granted, or even to see them as something of a nuisance. What works in terms of volunteer support and recognition, however, is likely to vary considerably across organisations, and indeed over time as the demands of organisations, service users and volunteers change. *Not being able to recruit enough volunteers can jeopardise an organisation's future. So too can failing to ensure volunteers are appropriately supported. Whatever the organisational setting, maintaining a sense of efficacy, being valued, appreciated, making a difference, and being part of positive relationships seems essential for volunteers to continue.*

Multiple allegiances: It is not uncommon for volunteers to help out with more than one organisation, often within the same community. Situating volunteering not only within individual organisations but within an ecosystem of organisations highlights the significance of this dynamic. *'Sharing' volunteers can ease relationships and partnership working between organisations; it can also, however, create challenges and tensions both for the organisations and for the volunteers themselves.*

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Key implications for volunteer-involving organisations

Understanding the organisational context within which volunteering takes place, and how this changes over time, is important to our understandings of volunteering. As organisations evolve over time, developing new strategies and ways of working in response to changing fortunes and challenges, the spaces for and experiences of volunteering change. This can affect the recruitment, retention and outcomes of volunteering. We think there are four particular significant implications of these findings:

- Organisational change of any kind, including those to the model of volunteering that is dominant in an organisation, affects the whole volunteering process. Ensuring that volunteers are supported along that journey and involved in decisions about how organisations respond to their changing fortunes and challenges is important.
- Relationships within and between organisations are central to the volunteering experience. Changes that affect the quality of those relationships can fundamentally alter the volunteering experience. Paying greater attention to the relational aspects of volunteering may be important for organisations seek to grow and retain their volunteer base.
- It is important for organisations to recognise that the resources outlaid and risks taken in skilling up and giving enhanced responsibility to volunteers might well be necessary in order to recruit high calibre motivated volunteers, particularly in a challenging employment market. Volunteering is not cost free, but investment in it is likely to pay off.
- There are potential risks associated with organisations purely seeing volunteers as a resource, to be used and deployed as the organisation sees fit, without a consideration of the wider value of volunteering as a form of active citizenship, participatory democracy or personal development. Volunteers represent more than a pool of unpaid workers, or a resource to be used by organisations; paying greater attention to the different ways in which volunteers may contribute to organisational and societal outcomes may be beneficial for all.

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Changing Landscapes

Understanding the micro-dynamics of third sector organisations is vitally important in times of rapid social change. This briefing paper has been produced as part of a study called *Changing Landscapes for the Third Sector*, designed to enhance our understanding of the voluntary sector by bringing together evidence from a network of projects that 'walk alongside' third sector organisations as they navigate a shifting policy landscape. For more information, go to: <http://changinglandscapes.leeds.ac.uk>

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