A report on Volunteer Now Members' VOLT Sessions reflecting on "*Levelling up our Communities: proposals for a new social covenant*" (Danny Kruger MP September 2020)

November – December 2020

VOLT stands for Volunteer Organisations Linking Together. When a report for Government called "*Levelling up our Communities: proposals for a new social covenant** (Danny Kruger MP) was published in September 2020 we thought it was an opportunity for volunteer organisations to link together to explore some of the proposed concepts that had the potential to impact volunteering in Northern Ireland.

The report was Danny Kruger MP's response to a request from the Prime Minister to consider ways of sustaining the community spirit demonstrated during lockdown, into the recovery phase and beyond. Kruger based his proposals on the premise that the experience of the recent crisis - the willingness of local people to step forward and collaborate, the flexibility shown by public services and the social commitment of businesses, never mind the development of digital solutions - shows what is possible. He made proposals under the themes of People, Power and Place, putting communities at the centre of the national recovery and the great mission of levelling up our country. The full report can be found at https://www.dannykruger.org.uk/communities-report.

67 volunteer involving organisations joined us across three sessions to explore three of the proposals which Volunteer Now had identified as having the potential to impact volunteers or volunteering. The following is a summary of the views and comments expressed.

1.   Sharing Volunteers – Could volunteer passports work?

Proposal:
Volunteer Passport system to match the supply of and demand for volunteers, with options to: join a new National Volunteer Reserve to help with future emergencies and with environmental projects; deliver ongoing mutual aid to people in crisis; fulfil formal public service roles such as magistrates or charity trustees.

VOLT participant reflections:

- The theory of being able to do a quick transfer of volunteers between organisations without volunteers having to go through different recruitment processes, was appealing but not easy to implement in practice.

- There would be a need for the system to be tested by the sector before a full roll-out

- The participants could see how it may benefit certain groups of volunteers, i.e. youth volunteers who regularly engage with episodic volunteering opportunities, fundraising volunteers, events, drivers or any emergency response volunteers.

- The system would need buy-in from organisations so that it can be appropriately recognised.

- Some organisations already have a 'bank' of volunteers they can fall back on when needed.

- For most volunteer roles, the importance of finding the right volunteer with the right skills, specific to that role, is essential so passporting does not feel like it might deliver exactly what is needed.

- The system could reduce the bureaucracy around recruitment, however a lot of organisations were quite specialised and needed to follow strict recruitment processes, safeguarding requirements and Access NI.

- Access NI is not portable and is specific to the volunteering role, so just because you have an Access NI check for one role does not mean it is relevant for another.

- While IT infrastructure would allow for the system to work effectively, it would also exclude a large number of people, who don't have access to IT.

- The volunteers' motivations influence the type of organisation they volunteer with – they may be interested in a certain area or topic and want to volunteer solely in that area.

- The idea would also give a false impression of flexibility, there would be a great deal of education needed for volunteers to understand that they cannot just volunteer anywhere they want.

- There is a need for standards, particularly around recruitment, to ensure that the selection process would be as rigorous as possible, and therefore it was felt that the idea did not fit within the sector comfortably.

- Who would the cost burden fall on? Training volunteers can be expensive, so it is frustrating when you get someone trained up and they move on!

- Will volunteers be allowed to return to an organisation they had previously volunteered with, if their new role isn't a good fit?

- Would there be any tracking of volunteer performance? So for example if you have concerns about someone can you go back to groups they have volunteered with previously.

- There was discussion on what exactly the problem was that the report was trying to solve. It may be a lack of understanding of volunteer management and the role of volunteer managers, or the lack of capacity in the sector to deal with a surge in volunteers, as seen at the start of Covid.

- The issue of responsibility and liability – who is ultimately responsible for the volunteer and liable for any issues that arise?

- A standard suite of training could ensure all volunteers are trained to the same high standards to volunteer in any organisation.

- It was felt that the idea might work well for eg. safeguarding trainers – where an organisation does not have capacity to deliver training, they could use a trainer from another organisation.

- Overall, participants were not particularly enthused by the idea. They recognised that the idea could work in some situations, but not for the majority of roles.

2. Service Opportunities for Young People – Are they the answer to Recovery and Renewal

Proposal:
Service opportunities for young people, funded through the Kickstart programme, to work on a variety of social and environmental projects. Young people would be paid via Kickstart to help established voluntary organisations that are in need of help. Projects would be organised by civil society working with local authorities and businesses.

VOLT participant reflections:

- There was concern that the Kruger report was not well informed, it did not build on existing work and that the contents could possibly pose a threat to volunteering in NI.

- It was felt that the strategies within the report were merely a reactive design to the new economic and social challenges.

- The report intends to make young people a part of the social infrastructure which will help them financially, but it is not right to link it with volunteering

- The report mentions a National Volunteer Reserve - essentially a database of volunteers that organisations can use (see Volunteer Passporting).

- The report outlines the Kick Start Scheme, which would encourage young people to become involved in community and social action projects for payment.

- The group were concerned that it could not be defined as 'volunteering' if it was paid, rather a placement. The group emphasised that the scheme should not be called volunteering.

- The report implied that existing projects such as NCS, #iwill, Step Up to Serve, would need to become paid placements.

- The group felt that young people may not want the structure of paid work, and that a motivation for volunteering is that it is done freely. There was a concern that the expectations placed upon the young people with commitment and hours could negatively impact their volunteering experience.

- Volunteers consistently report that a key motivation for volunteering is solely recognition/thanks so is there an appetite for this sort of scheme?.

- Schemes like this may make some young people get involved in an opportunity solely for the money, not based on their passion or desire to get involved in their communities or to support a specific cause.

- In relation to youth volunteer leadership, it was felt that in order for the Kick Start Scheme to adhere to this, young people would need to be involved in the terms of reference and design of the placements. They would need to be given the space and support to lead and implement projects.

- 'Paid volunteering" - there could be issues around national insurance, tax, social security benefits, as well as issues with trade unions.

- The report does not mention the infrastructure that would need to be in place to support this scheme.

- Overall, the group largely felt that the themes of the report have been brought up previously but have seen no progression. The report had a lack of recognition of what is already in place and did not seem to fully understand the motivations of young people who volunteer. It was agreed that the introduction of the scheme may potentially dilute the definition of volunteering.

3.   Incentivisation & Volunteering – is it a paradox?

Proposal:
Alongside service opportunities and passporting, subsidise under employed young people and provide advice and training, a system to record time credits which earn rewards, including mutual help for others or discounts in shops, in a similar way to Young Scot in Scotland.

VOLT participant reflections:

- It was explained that Young Scot's scheme was not designed to incentivise young people, but to connect them with opportunities and experiences they otherwise may not have.

- The scheme was developed in partnership with young people and aims to give all young people access to the same opportunities.

- The scheme works in partnership with other organisations to deliver the rewards system – these are not exclusively volunteer organisations.

- Young people tended to repeat engagement with opportunities, as a way of building up points, or working towards another reward.

- The rewards are not always goods of a monetary value but can also be experiences.

- The scheme did not see a notable drop off after young people received the awards.

- The Be Collective system has in place a Social CV, available to all users; certificates and a credits system, available to Be Collective plus users. Work is ongoing with the Be Collective team on how the credits system can be implemented in NI.

- The Young Scot scheme is connected to the Saltire Award (Scottish version of MV) and reward points are issued when a young person reaches a certain number of hours. This could possibly work well with the credits and certificate features within Be Collective.

- This issue has been discussed in the sector for many years, but there is a fear around the introduction of incentives affecting the spirit of volunteering. Volunteering is about choice, the motivation to volunteer is usually because you want to help.

- It is always recognised that volunteering is a two-way process, it benefits the person doing the volunteering but not in a material way.

- There was a concern from the group that the exchange of goods could potentially imply a contract of employment, and it was agreed that this would need to be considered in any further discussions.

- Volunteering is a non-financial relationship. Are schemes like this payment in incentivised clothing?

- Some schemes that offer incentives have increased recruitment from under-represented groups into volunteering

- It is hoped that people who get a taste for volunteering after initially doing it to get the reward or credit – may actually stay on

- It was felt that young people on the Young Scot scheme are generally already interested in the opportunities they take part in and that the rewards are an added bonus.

- The scheme is a good tool to recognise the work young people are already doing and that their participation is valued.

- Overall there was a feeling that we do want to maintain the distinctiveness of volunteering albeit accepting that the world around us is changing and we may need to look at ways to make volunteering more attractive by rewarding those that do it.

Conclusion

Overall, a key message coming out of all three sessions is that people value volunteering and do not want to lose the spirit of volunteering. There was a strong sense that volunteering does and will continue to have a very important place in our society. This was evidenced clearly through the COVID19 pandemic when the volunteer response to the crisis was without doubt phenomenal and without volunteer input our communities would have been so much poorer.

Interestingly this motivation to help was highlighted as a key concept through the 3 sessions. It was clear that people recognised that volunteering works best firstly when people have identified their reasons for volunteering, and secondly when the volunteer motivation and needs are acknowledged and recognised. While there may be a place for other schemes, placements, programmes (paid, incentivised or otherwise), there was resounding support to maintain the voluntary ethos in a range of activity and enable people to do things because they simply want to help. This does not mean that volunteers do not benefit - quite the opposite in fact – there was a true sense of the personal, physical, educational and social benefits of volunteering.

It therefore suggests that what volunteer involving organisations need to consider and what funders need to invest in are ways to make volunteering more attractive and accessible. In a post COVID world we need to explore how we can maintain this spirit of volunteering, how we can encourage people to continue to volunteer and how we can get

new people to volunteer. This may involve rethinking how we communicate the need and how we promote the benefits. It could be very rewarding to do things differently! It may involve building on the digital solutions that emerged during 2020 both in terms of spreading messages but also in terms of online processes for eg recruitment. Of course, no matter what is developed there needs to be an understanding of the diversity that we need to embrace within volunteering and not create processes that are exclusive. Recognising and communicating this diversity is essential and will help raise the profile of volunteering and its benefits.

An important and reassuring theme coming though in these sessions was that organisations wanted and respected standards in volunteering and volunteer management. They reported on the need for good recruitment and selection processes in order to get the right volunteer for their roles. While welcoming the theory of faster and less bureaucratic processes and recognising that this may be a necessity in times of crises where you need a quick surge of volunteers, organisations identified that in practice they needed to invest in their procedures to ensure the safety of those they were helping and indeed the volunteers themselves. They felt that good recruitment, selection, induction, training and support, taking cognisant of all safeguarding good practice, was essential and could not be minimised. There may be new and different ways of meeting the standards e.g. in partnership with other organisations or through digitalised systems, but effective volunteer management could not be ignored. More work maybe needs done in this area and linking in with the newly revised Investing In Volunteers quality standard for volunteer management may be a first step to help organisations get recognition for their good practice and explore new methods of getting the best from, and giving the best to, volunteers.