



The Opportunities & Challenges to Meaningful Youth Volunteering for 14-25 year olds.

Conference Report, 8 December 2021

Background

Volunteer Now has been encouraging and supporting young people to volunteer for over 50 years and over those years we have seen the interest and demand for high quality and meaningful volunteering opportunities for a much younger age group increase. These young people are also more focussed and have specific ideas of where they want to volunteer in order to meet personal expectations.

Over the years young people have told us that they want to make a meaningful difference within their local community or the cause that they give their time to; they wish to develop their skills, particularly their soft skills; they want to meet new friends, widen their connections and share the skills that they have already. However, there are challenges and barriers within the volunteering environment for young people with the main reasons including school and work pressures as well as a lack of opportunities that are available and of interest to them.

Organisations have also shared the immense benefits that the involvement of young people can have on their ability to deliver their goals but also of the challenges particularly around support, training, insurance and confidence to involve.

Volunteer Now are delighted that the Education Authority agreed to fund this conference as part of their objective to 'support and embed sustainable regional development':

This event has informed our own future strategy for the involvement of young people with meaningful volunteering opportunities irrespective of perceived barriers and we hope that it will inform and support volunteer involving organisations to do likewise.



The event

The conference was opened by Lauryn Kane a young volunteer from Matt Talbot Youth Club. Denise Hayward CEO of Volunteer Now set the scene outlining the key aspects of volunteering, the benefits of engaging volunteers at an early age and the evidence that has been gleaned throughout the years as to the barriers and challenges of creating meaningful roles within volunteer involving organisations for all ages of young people.

Denise also outlined the recent research that will be launched early in the New Year (Learning from Today, Prepared for Tomorrow: Mobilising Voluntary Action) that has delved into the impact of covid and the pandemic on volunteering. The research has told us that whilst there was a huge surge in the numbers wishing to volunteer at the beginning of the pandemic that in the long term the number of potential volunteers has declined. There is a great need for new volunteers to come forward to meet the needs within the NI community as those who are older, vulnerable, burnt out etc step away or reduce their commitments. There is a clear need for organisations to involve more young people who have key skills, enthusiasm, time and energy.

Valuing Young Volunteers

The thoughts of young people:

The conference heard from a range of young people throughout the event representing different experiences in a variety of settings. Their presentations can be watched and listened to however common themes and experiences came to the fore. It was clearly emphasised that volunteering can bring enormous benefits to the young person; from learning new skills, gaining confidence and new experiences, making new friends and knowing that they had made a real difference in the lives of other young people or the organisation that they supported. They also talked about the barriers from school pressures, the need to undertake paid work, time management and not being trusted by older members that they could do the role effectively. It was clear that volunteer involving organisations needed creativity in being able to develop roles to support their learning but also to address the potential barriers. Each presentation talked about the importance of support from older volunteers, comradery, fun and recognition.



The organisation perspective

Paul Deighan (EANI) recognised that the youth work sector wouldn't exist without volunteers and in the majority of youth clubs involvement starts around the age of 14 with the hope and aspiration that they will stay as young leaders for many years to come. The impact that young volunteers had throughout the pandemic was testament to their resilience, determination and creativity but it was also recognised that new opportunities were needed to ensure that young people were nurtured, supported, recognised and retained so that they were able to sustain their commitments whilst juggling their other priorities. Involving young people as volunteers, irrespective of their roles or organisations that they volunteer within, also connects them into their community and it has been noticeable the positive impact that young people can have through the campaigns and lobbying that they have pioneered over recent months, such as LGBTQ+, the environment etc. In her closing remarks the NI Children's Commissioner noted that "the biggest incentive are the ones that speak to our individual motivations" and that is what we should focus on when encouraging and supporting young people to volunteer.



Workshops

The workshops re-emphasised the content of the presentations with attendees noting that those young people who had a supportive family, friends and organisation were more likely to volunteer than those who hadn't. Volunteering gave the young people access to a wide range of skills that would stay with them throughout their lifetime and would support their own personal, education and employability goals. Volunteering also widened their social network, gave them an opportunity to have their voice heard and make a meaningful difference to a cause/organisation that they care about. The barriers are stark though with organisational bureaucracy,

education, employment and a lack of knowledge/access to meaningful and youth focussed roles being cited.

All workshop groups agreed that young people needed to be encouraged and supported to volunteer; opportunities needed to meet their needs (short term, creative and meaningful) but also that of the organisations that involved them. Recognition and opportunities for training is important and less agreement was gained around incentives.

Notes of the workshops can be found in Appendix 1.

Concluding Remarks

The Minister of Education, Michelle McIlveen MLA brought the conference to a close recognising that time is a precious commodity and therefore it is important that volunteer involving organisations ensure meaningful opportunities embed good practice learning in tandem with good practice in volunteer management. It is important to recognise that our young volunteers contribute to better futures and outcomes for children and young people throughout NI.

Denise paid tribute to Lauryn (our brilliant young compere for the evening), the organising group of young people, Volunteer Now staff members and to all the speakers and contributors. It was very humbling to hear from each of the young people about their own individual journeys and the thoughts of the organisations who support them. Denise also noted that Volunteer Now has just commissioned QUB and University of Kent to explore the state of youth volunteering in Northern Ireland and this conference has provided a great start.

The audio of the conference, including all presentations and videos can be found on Volunteer Now website: www.volunteernow.co.uk/volunteering/youth-volunteering/organisations/training-support