

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

SUBMISSION FROM THE VOLUNTEER DEVELOPMENT SCOTLAND

Introduction

1. Volunteer Development Scotland is the National Resource Centre for volunteering. We welcome the opportunity to provide a written submission to the Committee's call for evidence.
2. Volunteering is not a narrow range of activities and it may be helpful to the Committee to begin with a very brief outline of the different perspectives on volunteering as it has developed in the UK. Generally volunteering activities can fall into three broad categories: service delivery; activism and serious leisure. It is the first of these categories, service delivery, which has been the dominant paradigm. Essentially this means that most volunteering takes place within a 'formal' organisation (this very definitely includes public sector organisations; volunteering is by no means exclusive to the voluntary sector) and that the volunteers are involved in delivering the services which help the organisation to achieve its overall aims and objectives. As such volunteering is already orientated towards service delivery in an organisational context and therefore must be considered in any debate on the future delivery of public services.
3. Since 2007 Volunteer Development Scotland has been a strategic partner is taking forward the refreshed strategy for Volunteering in the NHS. This has provided us with a unique and first hand insight into volunteering within a key area of public service provision in Scotland. Additionally we have begun to work with Stirling Council to develop a 'whole authority' approach to volunteer development; again this has provided us with crucial insights into the involvement of local people in public services. As such the evidence base for our submission comes largely from our direct experience and also from our analysis of both research evidence and the existing literature.
4. There are two key arguments in our submission, which we urge the Committee to consider carefully and to take forward with the both Local and National government – although we believe in a bottom up approach to reformed public services in the long-term, in the short to medium term there is a key role for Local Government in providing strong leadership in enabling a paradigm shift in the delivery of public services. Firstly, there is already significant involvement of volunteers in the delivery of public services and volunteers already have a positive and direct effect on outcomes. This has to be recognised more explicitly across Local Government and the resources and services which currently create the conditions for volunteering must be maintained - it is these services which are often particularly vulnerable to downward pressure on budgets. Secondly, the current context offers an

unrivalled window of opportunity to expand the involvement of citizens (as volunteers) in the design and delivery of public services.

The Citizen at the Centre

5. Volunteers are already involved to a significant extent in the delivery of public services: good examples of this are the Children's Hearing system, victim and witness support, literacy and numeracy services and First Responders in the Ambulance Service, which all fundamentally depend on the involvement of volunteers. VDS' analysis of the Scottish Household Survey and our own research evidence suggests that over 50% of all volunteering activity in Scotland involves the delivery of various forms of public services.
6. The involvement of volunteers must be given increased recognition within public service providers, particularly Local Authorities. By taking a 'whole of authority' approach the value of involving volunteers becomes more visible and thus the resources need to support it and make it sustainable are much more likely to be maintained.
7. Our experience of working with the public sector has convinced us that there is a great willingness by people in Scotland to give of their time and energy. Currently this is not always matched by the availability of suitable opportunities.
8. Local government and the NHS together account for almost 70% of the Scottish Government's expenditure. This represents a huge resource within which volunteering can be supported directly – with the NHS and local authorities increasingly acting as bodies which directly engage volunteers in frontline services – and in partnership with voluntary organisations and those businesses which also enable volunteering to happen.
9. Local Government must enhance its capacity to involve citizens as volunteers. Examples from health and social care include new and expanded role for volunteers in helping to ensure early release from hospital and helping people to live independently for longer (reducing hospital admissions in the first place and so reducing pressure on the acute NHS sector). However, we do not believe that people want to 'take over' public services in the ways suggested in much of the rhetoric surrounding the Big Society and the new Localism Bill in England: rather people want become more involved in the design and delivery of public services. In our view most people believe that the state should continue to be primarily responsible for delivering the most important public services.
10. Our experience with the NHS and Local Authorities has demonstrated very clearly that this new approach will require significant cultural change: a bold vision and inspired leadership are vital but also a very practice-based up-skilling of staff to provide sufficient, well managed volunteer placements that achieve the desired outcomes. Many Local Authorities, for example, are ready and willing to move in this direction but would welcome practical guidance –

some do's and don'ts for the times we're now in. It is vital that progress flows beyond Community Planning Partnerships – where progress often becomes bogged-down - to directly engage service providers in this reform agenda. Here, the challenge will be to match those 'professionals' who run our schools, health and social care services, parks and libraries with those who have real expertise in volunteer involvement. There are barriers that affect the demand for greater participation from citizens themselves such as a lack of confidence, time and skills. There are also barriers that result from the way the state is organised and operates public services – for example, rules, professional attitudes and red tape.

11. Where public services are being delivered through explicit partnership with citizens – commonly called 'co-production' – there is evidence to suggest better outcomes and cash savings. At a time when state resources are squeezed it is vital to mobilise the 'hidden wealth' of citizens. Decreasing financial resources can be contrasted with the huge potential of time and energy available through volunteering. Ultimately an expansion in the involvement of volunteers will help to create a bottom-up reform of public services in Scotland.
12. For the providers and commissioners of public services, there is a wider role to identify where volunteers already make a difference to these services and develop further opportunities. The challenge is to do this for the right reasons and for the long-term – to support the capacity of citizens to do more in association rather than as a quick way to cut costs. If public agencies are to involve more volunteers in adding value to public services, the flip-side of this 'ask' should be their 'offer' in terms of staff time, skills, some resources and local venues. A useful next step would be to work with a small number of demonstration areas to extend volunteering in, for example, secondary schools, social care and advocacy.

What This Means in Practice

13. In its report *Capable Communities* (2010) the IPPR identifies some of the key things that policymakers locally and nationally should do if the barriers to expanding the role of volunteers are to be addressed and greater power and responsibility is to be handed over to individuals, families and communities. We would support several of these actions:
 - Local Authorities should ask people to come forward: most people have simply never been asked to volunteer, despite being willing to when probed. When asking people it is crucial to start small and to use personal contact. Frontline professionals should be trained in some of the techniques of community organising and development so that they routinely ask people come to forward.
 - Let people know what opportunities are available: people lack information about the opportunities available locally and often don't

know where to look or who to speak to. Local authorities should provide a central information point about the opportunities available in their area.

- Set up systems to coordinate time and skills within the community: people fear making too much of a commitment and so finding flexible systems such as Time Banks to coordinate people's time and skills is critical. Time-banking is an approach to volunteering whereby people can earn credits for making even small contributions offers a way of coordinating the activities of volunteers.
- Reward contributions: people don't want to be paid for making a contribution, but they do want to feel that their contribution has been recognised. Time-banking again offers a way of developing reciprocal relationships between citizens, putting something in and getting something out.
- Commission for participation: citizen participation is not typically an expectation among commissioners, but it should be made one.
- Challenge professional roles and attitudes: the way professionals see their role and that of the public needs to change. Any public organisation committed to this agenda needs to very proactively lead and train its staff in this direction.
- Re-think risk: risk aversion, disproportionate application of legislation and an unwillingness to trust local people are ongoing issues and public agencies need to consider whether citizens might be willing to sign up to accepting more risk in return for getting more of the public involved in delivery. Agencies need to consider whether they are being over-zealous in their application of rules and interpretation of legislation and guidance. Councils should consider whether they can themselves start insuring citizens so that they can participate.
- Training: people very often lack the skills or the confidence to take on new tasks. Public agencies should see people as assets and citizen training as a crucial part of achieving their goals, in part by using the talents and skills in the community itself.

Key Issues

14. There is public appetite for citizens taking on greater power and responsibility in both the design and delivery of public services. While some of the barriers to this agenda seem structural and entrenched, such as the pressures of work and family commitments on people's time, others are not. Public services themselves can be re-designed by Local Government and its Community Planning Partners to embed a stronger role for citizens and communities, and to foster a wider culture of participation and reciprocity. Cultural change within Local Authorities is a prerequisite for this new approach.
15. Looking at new and expanded roles for volunteers within public services is by no means unproblematic. It requires careful analysis of what are appropriate roles for volunteers, the level of training and support required and the need for buy-in from paid staff and managers and, of course, it needs resources. Additionally, there are crucial issues about job substitution and the perception that services are simply being delivered on the cheap. Volunteer Development Scotland recognises this and as a significant first step has developed a Charter on Volunteering with the STUC. It must be emphasized, however, that there is a danger that volunteer involvement actually decreases. As budget cuts begin to take effect it is often those posts which support volunteers and volunteer services which are vulnerable. This inevitably filters down to the Third Sector organisations which involve volunteers.
16. Local Government has a chance to demonstrate how Scotland's social democratic values can be maintained at a time of severe budget pressures in a way mostly neglected to date: empowerment, autonomy and a radical approach to sharing power as well as budgets. The language of co-production, just like the Big Society, has failed to take root in Scotland. But the principles involved matter just as much. Whether we talk about the full participation of users in design, delivery and evaluation of public services or the role of an 'intelligent' state in making volunteering more rather than less likely, one aim or theme of the Committee's work should be clear: we can't just batten down the hatches and wait for budget levels to return to where they once were. The real opportunity is for all of us as citizens (and as service users) to find our voices, become involved and develop our capacity to reshape services.
17. Volunteer Development Scotland looks forward to discussing these issues further with the Committee: we would be pleased to appear before the Committee to give evidence or to make a further written submission if this would be helpful.

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February 2012

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