

Making a difference: good practice and learning from the Volunteering for Stronger Communities programme

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A report to Volunteering England/NCVO

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November 2013

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Volunteering England/NCVO and the 15 Volunteering for Stronger Communities projects for their assistance and patience in helping us carry out the research. We are particularly indebted to all those who responded to our questions, whether as stakeholders, project staff or project participants.

We would also like to thank The Big Lottery Fund (BIG) for funding the Volunteering for Stronger Communities Programme over a three year period.



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Introduction

This Good Practice guide provides insights into good practice, innovation and learning among Volunteering for Stronger Communities (VSC) projects. It showcases some of the best examples of how projects have planned and delivered interventions to meet the VSC programme objectives of:

- **increasing levels of volunteering** within disadvantaged groups and communities
- **improving employability** through volunteering and other forms of employment support to help those outside the labour market move closer to, or into, employment
- **enhancing the skills, knowledge and resources of both Volunteer Centres and the Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs)** they support
- **strengthening the ability of Volunteer Centres and VIOs to influence** local, regional and national policies and practice through shared learning.

At the heart of each VSC project is, typically, a combination of volunteer brokerage, employment support and advice and support for VIOs on how to manage volunteers. VSC projects have been given considerable freedom and flexibility to innovate in order to respond to local need. This has seen new approaches piloted such as mentoring, Timebanks and placing volunteer co-ordinators within projects.

This diversity and innovation provides an opportunity to look closer at, and learn from, some of the most effective and unique of VSC activities. It is hoped this will inform and inspire any organisation looking to plan, commission or deliver a package of activities to promote volunteering among harder-to-reach groups.

It should be remembered, of course, that what works in one context may not always translate directly to another because of different social and economic circumstances, service infrastructure and a whole host of other factors. Nonetheless, it can serve as a source of ideas about new ways of doing things.

The guide explores ten core themes:

- identifying need
- outreach
- communication
- engagement and retention
- working with vulnerable clients
- improving employability

- mentoring
- working with partners
- supporting VIOs
- running a community event.

This report can be read as a standalone Good Practice guide but readers may also find it helpful to read the accompanying Final Evaluation of the VSC programme. This provides more information on how the programme works and what it has achieved.

Identifying need

Identifying need is essential to ensure projects understand the support required by participants and can tailor services accordingly. All VSC projects spent time at the planning phase talking to key stakeholders and looking at local data to help identify groups and areas of need and the best approaches for supporting them. A number of projects also continue to identify, reflect on and respond to needs emerging during the delivery phase:

- Hertfordshire has undertaken a survey of all Volunteer Centres in the county in both years of delivering the VSC project. These surveys fed into a Strategy Day where the Volunteer Centres explored emerging needs, learning, strategic approaches and options for sustainability
- Blackburn's Action Learning workshops with VIOs (see Box 12) helped them to see that VIOs wanted 'softer' support around motivating volunteers rather than more formal advice such as guidance on legal issues
- Lincolnshire have run a rolling series of focus groups to identify needs among existing and potential participants (see Box 1 below).

Box 1: Identifying need on an on-going basis

The Lincolnshire VSC project have continued the process of identifying need beyond the planning phase. This involves running a rolling series of focus groups with stakeholders, VIOs and existing or potential volunteers from vulnerable groups including the unemployed, those with mental health issues, individuals with learning disabilities, prisoners, NEETs and migrant communities. These focus groups have highlighted three key needs:

- a lack of confidence as the main barrier to volunteering and a subsequent need for 1-2-1 support to address this
- a lack of awareness of potential volunteering opportunities
- a perception among volunteers that VIOs are not aware of, or do not understand, their particular needs.

Lincolnshire responded to these key findings by:

- ensuring mentoring support was available to individuals with low levels of confidence.
- reviewing their approach to promoting volunteer opportunities by exploring new options including Facebook, texting, Easy Read formats and producing materials in other languages.
- implementing a programme of 'bite size' workshops for VIOs including sessions on 'Valuing Differences'.

This programme of rolling focus groups ensures that Lincolnshire is continually aware of, and able to respond to, emerging issues. It highlights the value of embedding procedures to identify need within the delivery phase rather than simply the planning stage. The project identified two key lessons learnt from this approach:

- 'piggy-backing' on existing events such as the Volunteer Centre's mini conference for the VSC project is an effective way of running a number of focus groups in a short space of time.
- setting up focus groups is a time-consuming process. With hindsight, Lincolnshire feel their target of running 27 focus groups was too high given the demands on staff time.

Outreach

Many VSC projects undertake **outreach work to target vulnerable individuals** who might not otherwise seek out the services provided by projects. Organisations that projects have worked with to deliver outreach include Work Clubs, churches, libraries, community centres, Jobcentre Plus, Work Programme providers, supported accommodation and organisations targeting vulnerable groups such as individuals with mental health issues. Specific activities include:

- **holding interactive workshops** at the premises of external organisations to introduce clients to the benefits and practicalities of volunteering (see Box 2 below). One project noted that external workshops are often better attended than those held on the project premises.
- **running 'drop-in sessions'** to provide advice and information on volunteering. Exeter, for example, has a regular two-hour slot at a number of supported housing venues when residents *'know we are going to be there'* and can see the project manager for a 30-45 minute appointment.
- **working in partnership with community-based organisations** to promote and deliver activities to support volunteering. Building these relationships can take time and patience, particularly for projects that have not previously had much presence in an area. The VSC project in Sheffield found that setting up a steering group made up of key local organisations was a valuable way of securing buy-in and commitment to their work in the area (Box 2 below).

Outreach was widely regarded as an effective way of engaging individuals who might not otherwise consider volunteering or use Volunteer Centres. However, there are challenges in undertaking outreach work. One issue noted is that IT does not always work which can make it difficult to view volunteering opportunities online.

Box 2: Workshops on volunteering

Most VSC projects hold 'Introduction to Volunteering' workshops to induct new participants into the project. The Bristol VSC project has also been delivering these sessions on an outreach basis for external organisations that support disadvantaged groups including the Salvation Army and various mental health and substance misuse support services. The aim is to inspire often quite vulnerable clients to consider volunteering.

Bristol use these sessions to discuss options for volunteering and to dispel some common myths. These include the notion that volunteering over 16 hours a week can affect benefit payments and that volunteering '*is just charity shops and the blue rinse brigade*'.

The project feel outreach work works best when:

- support workers are also present as many harbour the same misconceptions as clients. Their presence can also have a reassuring and motivating effect on clients.
- structured around a series of activities rather than a '*mini-lecture*'. Bristol have developed a template for these sessions which includes group activities to:
 - come up with a definition of volunteering using pictures of volunteers to stimulate discussion
 - explore motivations for volunteering by putting ideas on Post-it notes and then grouping similar reasons on a flipchart
 - consider the diverse range of volunteering opportunities through a '*jigsaw*' exercise where participants have to match role titles and descriptions
 - discuss how individuals can find out about volunteering and what the recruitment process might involve.

Box 3: Securing the buy-in of community-based groups

The Sheffield VSC project aims to promote volunteering and support VIOs in the Manor Castle neighbourhood which is one of the most disadvantaged areas in the city. It took time to secure the 'buy-in' of community organisations which, although supportive, had concerns there might be some duplication of their own activities. Sheffield found that setting up a steering group to include community-based organisations helped members take ownership of the project whilst developing the reputation of the project in the area. The group meets once every six weeks and has included the VSC project manager, councillors and representatives from Community Assemblies, the Manor library and the Green Estate (the biggest VIO in the area).

There were initially good levels of participation and discussion in the Steering Group. Meetings focussed on the availability of volunteering opportunities locally and how organisations can use volunteering to benefit residents in the Manor Castle area. They also generated useful ideas for developing the project. For example, one suggestion was for volunteers to have a 'skills book' to record and showcase skills gained through voluntary activities.

Over time, attendance at the Steering Group declined and meetings have now stopped. Sheffield see this as a natural process with some organisations withdrawing once their 'buy-in' had been secured in the first phase of delivery. The focus has switched now onto how project activities can be sustained and transferred. Sheffield reflected that, with hindsight, one of the key lessons learnt is that it would have been useful to implement a project cycle from the start. This would have helped in thinking about exit strategies for the Steering Group at an earlier stage.

Communication

Projects have taken a **proactive approach to communication** and are in regular contact with clients through face-to-face and telephone chats as well as 'text messages' (SMS) and emails.

Projects also use a number of methods for **promoting services and recruiting clients** including e-bulletins and Volunteer Centre websites, referral agencies, word-of-mouth recommendations, newspapers, local radio, Job Fairs, posters in shopfronts and community venues, promotion at community events, 'door knocking' and advertising on websites such as Do It.

Some projects have used social media such as Facebook (a social networking site) and Twitter (an online feed of up-to-the-minute information) to disseminate information and to promote volunteering to individuals, especially young people. Exeter has been particularly active in its use of social media (Box 4 below). Texting is also considered a valuable tool with Nottingham and Lincolnshire both finding that it increases the chances of individuals attending meetings.

Box 4: Using social media to broaden appeal

Exeter set up a Facebook page and Twitter account to post information on a range of activities and opportunities including:

- upcoming community events
- free training opportunities
- job vacancies
- inspiring stories about volunteering
- important changes to government policy or volunteering
- and anything else '*we think our target group may find useful, interesting or enjoyable*'.

Volunteer Outreach Workers on the project were responsible for updating the Twitter feed and Facebook page. This proved a valuable exercise in itself as it gave volunteers experience in designing and uploading content for these websites that could be useful when applying for jobs.

The initiative proved successful: The Twitter account has over 300 'followers' and the number of 'Likes' on the Facebook page is constantly going up. This success encouraged the project to expand the role of volunteers to include updating pages for the wider Exeter CVS website.

Engagement and Retention

Engaging and retaining clients is one of the **key challenges** faced by VSC projects, particularly as projects target some of the hardest-to-reach groups. One barrier commonly identified is the perception by those unfamiliar with volunteering that it just attracts the *'blue rinse brigade'*. Some projects try to overcome this by developing or presenting activities so they appear less like formal volunteering. For example, Exeter sought to enlist residents in organising a Play Day (see Box 14 later) by describing it as a chance to help run an event for local people. They feel individuals are more receptive to this message than they might otherwise have been if presented as formal volunteering: *'It's not like, "you're volunteering" - it's just "can you help out?"*.

Projects also identified crucial **'hooks'** for attracting participants:

- Cornwall found that offering employability-related training such as First Aid, Health and Safety and Food Safety was highly effective in attracting new participants: *'When we first put out a flyer we couldn't believe the level of interest'*
- Blackburn anticipate high levels of demand for its forthcoming ASDAN accredited Introduction to Volunteering course because of the perceived value of formal training in enhancing employability (see Section 7).
- Sheffield have placed a 'before and after' CV of a real participant on their website to show how volunteering can increase employability.

Retaining clients is also a key challenge faced by projects, all of whom go to considerable lengths to keep in touch with participants through telephone calls, text messages (SMS) and emails. This can be time consuming which is why Islington recruited a volunteer specifically to ensure clients were contacted regularly to keep them engaged with the project.

The Bristol project noted that **maintaining regular contact with referral agencies is one way of minimising the risk of 'drop-out.'** Not only does it enable them to track client progress better but also, in some cases, to get back in touch with clients where contact lapses. For example, they recently re-engaged a client who had been *'going through a bad patch'* by returning to the support agency that referred them originally. This *'triangulation of support'* is considered vital in retaining clients. Bristol also observed the importance of confidentiality and data protection in working with other support agencies in this way. Clients must give initial written permission for contact to take place.

Another way of keeping volunteers involved is **to create on-going opportunities for them to meet and provide mutual support.** Nottingham has addressed this by setting up a volunteer club (see Box 5 below).

Box 5: Keeping volunteers engaged through a Volunteer Club

Nottingham set up a weekly Volunteering Club to provide a forum for volunteers to interact with peers and discuss experiences and concerns. Initially it felt a little unstructured but this was improved by bringing in external speakers from organisations such as the NHS, Childline and National Careers Service to provide insights around topics of interest.

The Volunteering Club provides a regular but relatively resource-lite way of helping volunteers stay in touch with one another. This helps to reduce the risk of volunteers dropping out in periods when they do not have 1-2-1 contact with project staff. As intended, volunteers have increasingly taken on responsibility for running the Club. One volunteer, for example, takes responsibility for greeting and looking after speakers. Nottingham hope that the Volunteer Club can continue to run on this basis even after VSC funding ends. The Volunteer Centre will simply have to provide a room and refreshments and ad-hoc support where appropriate.

Working with vulnerable clients

All VSC projects have worked with **clients facing multiple barriers** to volunteering or paid work. This includes ex-offenders, recovering substance misusers, individuals in supported accommodation and those with severe mental health conditions or learning disabilities. Projects identified a number of approaches that prove effective in working with this group:

- **outreach** (Section 3) and **mentoring** (Section 8) were both considered effective approaches in engaging and supporting hard-to-reach groups.
- ensuring barriers such as debt or benefit issues are dealt with early on by **signposting** to appropriate support services is sometimes necessary before individuals can volunteer: *'We try and sort out benefits first. There's no point on embarking on something that needs commitment if you are up in the air'* [Durham].
- developing **good links with support workers** has helped projects gain a better awareness of the barriers faced by, and support needs of, participants. Outreach work is particularly useful in terms of building relationships with support workers in host venues.
- providing **flexible volunteering opportunities** that do not require attendance on particular days can help engage individuals who would struggle to hold down a regular placement. One project supporting a recovering substance misuser noted that a placement on an organic farm offered the flexibility she needed given on-going health issues: *'It's really important to have one-off opportunities where [more vulnerable clients] can go in whenever they're ready'*.
- Bristol have started to use the Wellness Recovery Action Plan to structure the support planning process around identifying client needs and capabilities (see Box 6 below).

Box 6: Planning support using the Wellness Recovery Action Plan

Bristol have recently introduced the Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) into the support planning process. They feel it offers a structured yet unobtrusive way of identifying client needs and, importantly, capabilities. It involves asking users questions to assess themselves such as: *'What are you like when you're well? How do you get there? How do you respond to particular situations? What do you do to help yourself in particular situations?'*

This planning process identifies practical techniques and strategies that can help clients during placements and other social situations: *'We wanted a positive approach that was not just about symptoms. You need to know how a condition affects people and how they deal with it'*. Bristol undertake the exercise with mentees and, with permission, show the write-up to mentors and to host VIOs. The aim, therefore, is to move beyond merely identifying barriers to preparing mentees, mentors and VIOs for potentially difficult situations.

More details on the principles underpinning the WRAP can be found at <http://www.mentalhealthrecovery.com/wrap/>

Improving employability

One of the core aims of the VSC project is to **increase the employability of disadvantaged individuals** to improve their longer-term job prospects. Projects identified a number of ways to provide effective support to achieve this:

- **mock interviews** between project staff and participants are seen as a valuable way of giving honest feedback about strengths and weaknesses. Staff in Blackburn observed that it enabled them to pick up mannerisms such as talking too fast or poor body language that would be difficult to discuss in another context. They also feel clients often value this feedback despite any initial reservations about doing mock interviews.
- **formal information, advice and guidance (IAG)** can be a powerful tool for helping participants think about employment options (see Box 7 below).
- **providing accredited training:** Blackburn have contracted Accrington College to deliver an ASDAN accredited Introduction to Volunteering course. It is free to participants as the college receives external funding to cover the costs of delivery. They see accreditation as important as it gives participants an additional sense of achievement as well as something tangible to put on CVs. It also helps secure commitment to attend the six three-hour sessions as the sense of working towards an accredited qualification *'gets clients in the mode of responsibility and commitment'*.
- **signposting to informal training:** Many VSC projects have mechanisms for signposting participants to formal training or educational opportunities, often delivered by local colleges, to improve employability. The Hertfordshire VSC project also emphasise the capacity of informal training delivered through local venues to boost the skills and experience of volunteers (see Box 8 below).

Box 7: The benefits of Information, Advice and Guidance

The Durham VSC project provides relatively formal IAG sessions as part of its volunteering brokerage service. They see it as a core part of their offer and essential in helping them *'tease out'* skills and experience from individuals who sometimes believe they have little to offer. Staff recognise it involves asking *'awkward'* questions but do not feel these are intrusive or inappropriate. The Volunteer Centre is MATRIX accredited (a quality standard for IAG providers) which they feel lends a degree of professionalism to their work without being *'too corporate'*. All staff and volunteers who provide IAG have a minimum Level 3 IAG qualification.

The IAG process involves looking first at an individual's current position and aspirations as well as discussing options for training, volunteering and paid work. This leads to an action plan seen as the *'best bit'* of IAG. Action plans lay out next steps: advisers might commit to researching volunteering opportunities whilst clients could agree to write a CV or contact organisations about placements. Durham believe this process plays an important role in retaining clients as formalising next steps through action plans *'binds clients in - it's important that everyone has a way forward. This helps retention'*. Intensive IAG work can also cross over into a mentoring role where advisers help participants develop confidence and motivation.

Box 8: Learning by the back door: the value of informal training

The Hertfordshire VSC project signposts volunteers to informal training delivered through local community centres. This includes courses on ICT and using technology such as mobile phones and skype. The project feel this local, informal provision has a number of benefits including:

- appealing to individuals who might otherwise be reluctant to attend formal learning or training at a college or other similar provider
- enabling participants to develop skills such as literacy and numeracy as a by-product of activities
- being accessible through local community venues
- allowing participants to *'connect with their community'* by meeting other residents.

Mentoring

A number of VSC projects recruit and train mentors to support clients with extra support needs. Mentors play a number of roles including motivating clients; building confidence; providing advice and guidance around volunteering; supporting clients to make contact with, or visit, VIOs; and completing application forms. This intensive support can be critical in **engaging and retaining more disadvantaged individuals**.

Projects identified a number of areas of **good practice** in running a mentoring service including:

- **providing adequate training:** Sutton require mentors to attend a 2½ day training course which covers all the different aspects of mentoring such as advice, boundaries, child protection, activities, and how to build relationships.
- **careful matching:** mentors need to be matched with participants on the basis of some combination of common interests, shared experiences or the ability of the mentor to support an individual: *'It's not a simple off the top of that pile and off the top of that pile and throw them together'* [Sutton].
- **involving trusted adults or support workers where appropriate:** mentoring with vulnerable people, especially children or those with mental health issues, can often work best if a trusted individual such as a parent, carer or support worker is present. This helps build initial trust and minimise any fears about the process of mentoring.
- **allowing mentors some autonomy:** Sutton observed that mentoring works best when mentors have scope to work creatively with mentees to plan activities to meet agreed goals: *'Once they're up and running then they almost decide as an autonomous unit what do they need to do. We help them with goal-setting and planning through the development plan but how they achieve it, we don't tell them any of that. They have a framework within which to work and we want them to be as creative as they can be in achieving those goals'*.
- **ensure participants are fully briefed on the role:** The Bristol VSC project provides potential mentees with an FAQ sheet about mentoring to help them decide whether they wish to take up the service.
- **make sure that mentees are quickly matched to mentors:** mentees may drop out if they are not quickly matched with mentors. This highlights a need to train up a pool of available mentors to increase the speed of matching.
- **establishing clear boundaries:** Bristol help mentors and mentees draw up ground rules such as how often to see each other and appropriate times to contact one another. If things do not work out, mentees and mentors can go

back to the agreement as the basis for discussion and resolution. The intention is to develop the mentoring relationship as *'two adults working together to achieve a goal. It's not about doing it to someone'*.

- **sharing experiences and learning:** Bristol have set up and chair a good practice forum locally for projects doing mentoring and befriending. This helps to make links and to share ideas around good practice.

Projects also identified a series of **lessons learnt** in running a mentoring service:

- **mentoring is resource intensive for the project manager:** *'you could spend five days a week running the mentoring project'* [Bristol]. It is also more expensive initially compared with other approaches because each mentor usually spends all their time supporting one client. However, when it works well, it can make a big difference to the confidence, self-esteem and aspirations of mentees. In the long-term, these benefits may generate real cost-savings through, for example, reduced use of health or other support services.
- **managing mentors takes time:** Bristol has tried to make the process more efficient by providing three one-to-one meetings with mentors over the course of the six months with the remainder of supervision provided through monthly group sessions. This eases the workload slightly for the project manager.
- **turnover can be high among mentors:** Liverpool noted that a recurrent issue is mentors leaving volunteer positions to take up paid work. This may be one, potentially unresolvable, tension with recruiting individuals who are qualified enough to undertake mentoring but also, by definition, highly employable.
- **retaining mentees can be difficult over longer periods of time:** Sutton had originally planned to offer a one year programme of mentoring activities that gradually prepared mentees for work or other forms of activity. However, experience showed this needed to be condensed to increase retention (see Box 9 below).

Box 9: Delivering support in appropriate timescales

The Sutton VSC project provides mentoring support to disadvantaged young people up to once a week. It aims to build up their aspirations, skills and experience to prepare them to take up volunteering, paid work, a college place or apprenticeship. They initially planned to deliver mentoring support over a full year through a four-part programme of support:

- Quarter 1: Getting to know each other and exploring needs and aspirations
- Quarter 2: Identifying gaps in skills and experience and researching options for training or other activities that will move them closer to longer-term goals
- Quarter 3: Addressing gaps in skills or qualifications identified in Quarter 2 through appropriate training
- Quarter 4: Finding a volunteer placement matched to the young person's career aspirations.

Sutton soon found, though, that young people often left the project before completing the full year of support. They redesigned the service, therefore, to compress all four parts into a three month model of support, much of which is group based. Individuals can then receive a further three months of mostly 1-2-1 support to help achieve goals. This redesign enables Sutton to deliver the full package of support originally devised but in a far shorter timescale that reflects the commitment levels of young people.

Working with partners

Partnerships with other Volunteer Centres or external organisations play an important role in generating referrals, providing signposting opportunities, supporting outreach activities and, in some cases, developing tailored learning opportunities (Box 10 below). Partnership can also help partners to pool knowledge to create useful resources. Blackburn has worked with the Police to produce a document which lists organisations where they can both signpost individuals facing particular issues such as housing problems or risk of self-harm.

Organisations delivering VSC projects as lead partners within a consortium of Volunteers Centres identified a number of advantages to this approach including extending project reach, sharing knowledge and expertise and benefiting from complementary strengths. However, some noted that this relationship has to be carefully managed to ensure all partners are clear about expectations, roles and responsibilities. One project highlighted **two areas of good practice** in working as the lead partner in a consortium:

- **putting a Service Level Agreement (SLA) in place helps to clarify roles and responsibilities:** one advantage of drawing up the SLA was that it provided a neutral and detached way of negotiating the partnership. This helped defuse initial tensions among partners when they realised that the consortium was to be managed by a lead partner rather than through a more horizontal partnership.
- **managing financial risks by making payments to partners dependent on outcomes:** this is preferable to upfront payments as it mitigates the risk of Volunteer Centres in the consortium merging or closing before meeting delivery requirements.

Box 10: Working with partners to develop tailored learning opportunities

A number of Volunteer Centres have developed referral links with local colleges and other providers running appropriate courses. Sutton took this one step further by working closely with the local college to create a wholly new taster course for project participants who are undecided about career options. Project staff explained how:

'With one particular local college we've also developed the concept of a taster course where we deliver a six week course where each week is focussed on a different subject. So for those people who really don't know what they want to do they can go through the taster course and they might not still know at the end but they'll have seen six possible career options in a reasonable degree of detail'.

The course runs as and when the project identifies a minimum of five individuals who would benefit from participating. Overall, they describe their relationship with local colleges as a 'win-win' situation. Colleges are keen to enrol disadvantaged young people backed by the support of VSC project mentors and, in return, offer access to both bespoke and 'off-the-shelf' courses with start dates and content tailored to project needs.

Supporting volunteer involving organisations (VIOs)

One of the **key aims of the VSC Programme is to build the capacity of community-based VIOs**. To this end, projects provide a wide range of general support including guidance on managing volunteers, drawing up volunteer roles or policies and keeping volunteers motivated. However, some projects offer more intensive or innovative forms of support such as:

- **providing a toolkit on how to engage 'hard to-reach' groups in volunteering:** Sheffield had previously developed a Nuts and Bolts Guide to Volunteer Involvement¹ through another project. This offers extensive guidance on how to support more disadvantaged volunteers including sections on agreements, task profiles, recruitment and induction. The tool is now actively promoted through outreach work with VIOs engaged in the VSC project. This involves 1-2-1 sessions where VIOs are supported to develop volunteer roles using the Guide.
- **raising the awareness of VIOs about the possibility of taking on disadvantaged clients:** Blackburn sought to increase the receptiveness of VIOs to supporting marginalised groups by changing the registration process. Forms now ask VIOs to identify both the barriers volunteers might face and how they might be inclusive in offering placements. Meanwhile Bristol have run workshops for VIOs on supporting volunteers with additional needs such as those with mental health issues. These workshops address any misconceptions about such groups whilst encouraging VIOs to reflect on their capacity to host volunteers with extra support needs.
- **committing local VIOs to sign up to a local pledge on volunteer management standards:** Hertfordshire developed a 'six point promise' which local VIOs can sign up to (see Box 11 below).
- **facilitating VIOs to share knowledge and good practice:** Blackburn recruited a dedicated trainer to deliver 'action learning' workshops to enable smaller VIOs to benefit from the support and advice of peers (see Box 12 below).
- **training volunteer co-ordinators:** Camden have pioneered a unique approach within the VSC Programme by training and placing voluntary volunteer co-ordinators in VIOs (Box 13).

¹ The Nuts and Bolts Guide to Volunteer Involvement is available at: http://www.sheffieldvolunteercentre.org.uk/UserFiles/File/ManagingVolunteers/Nuts_and_bolts.pdf

Box 11: The 6 Point Promise – Valuing Volunteer Management

The Hertfordshire VSC project recognises that formal accreditation through Investing in Volunteers can prove too expensive for smaller VIOs. To overcome this, they offer an alternative six point promise which local VIOs can sign up to by completing a checklist on their website. The six point promise is described on their website² as follows:

- **planning for volunteer involvement:** a Volunteer Policy covers all aspects of the relationship with volunteers. Role descriptions are produced and volunteering is open to everyone
- **recruitment process:** potential volunteers are contacted quickly and recruitment processes are fair, efficient and consistent
- **induction:** new volunteers receive thorough preparation for their tasks and have a named person for on-going support
- **support and safety:** volunteers are covered by insurance and are included in health and safety policies. Out of pocket expenses are met wherever possible
- **training and personal development:** volunteer motivations are met with appropriate tasks and those with extra support needs are enabled to volunteer wherever possible
- **involving, rewarding and recognising volunteers:** volunteers contribute to decision making and are fully involved in the organisations activities. Volunteers receive appropriate recognition for their efforts.

The promise has 'clout' as Dacorum Borough Council require any organisation they fund to have fulfilled the six promises. The Hertfordshire VSC project also use the promise as a resource to train or advise volunteer managers within VIOs. As part of the six point promise, the project has developed a suite of template documents on volunteering policy, health and safety, safeguarding, equal opportunities, and equality and diversity. VIOs are encouraged to adapt the templates as appropriate and have the final documents adopted by trustees to embed it within practice.

Box 12: Benefitting from peer support through Action Learning workshops

The Blackburn VSC project targets smaller VIOs with an annual income under £50k or no paid staff. To this end, they recruited a dedicated trainer to deliver Action Learning workshops. These comprise regular, structured workshops for 6-8 individuals from local VIOs. After initial ice-breaking activities, VIOs discuss a current issue or problem facing one of them. The issue holder listens to the suggestions of peers and then, after the workshop, seeks to implement the proposed action and report back on success at a later workshop.

The project sees Action Learning as a valuable way for VIOs to benefit from the skills and experience of others. This peer support can be more effective than 'lecturing' or giving hand-outs. Also, the trainer describes it as *'way more sustainable as it leaves responsibility with them. I'll make sure they have the skills at the end of it so they can self-facilitate. They've got the answers'*. The role of the project is *'hub and facilitator'*.

Running regular action learning workshops also enables the project to get continuous feedback on the needs of VIOs: *'It's not about writing a programme upfront on the basis of a single consultation and delivering for 12 months. Needs change and emerge'*. For example, workshops revealed a preference for support around softer skills in supporting volunteers rather than more formal advice such as legal advice on managing volunteers.

Blackburn have learnt a number of **lessons** from delivering Action Learning workshops:

- initially, they intended to run a series of six action learning workshops with the

² Full details can be found at: <http://www.volunteeringherts.org.uk/index.php/six-point-promise>

expectation that a small number of VIOs would commit to all of them. However, **getting a commitment to attend all six sessions proved harder than anticipated** so this requirement has been relaxed to allow VIOs to sign up for single sessions

- **it tends to be larger VIOs that sign up** - *'the usual suspects that already have volunteer programmes in place'* - rather than the smaller groups the project wants to prioritise for support. Blackburn suggested that smaller VIOs can perhaps only be engaged through extensive outreach work which is difficult with the resources available
- **charging fees for larger VIOs did not prove feasible** as bookings were low. This is probably due to funding cuts which means larger VIOs have limited training budgets. As soon as Blackburn waived fees, larger VIOs signed up again.

Box 13: Using volunteer co-ordinators

Camden train and place voluntary volunteer co-ordinators in VIOs to help develop their capacity to engage and support volunteers. Training for co-ordinators includes work shadowing with experienced volunteer managers. Volunteer co-ordinators initially commit to the role for six months for two days per week.

The project considers this approach highly successful. The lifetime target was to train up and place 24 volunteer co-ordinators and this has already been exceeded with a total of 33 placed to date. Some volunteer co-ordinators have also moved into paid employment.

The experience of running the project provides a number of lessons around using volunteer co-ordinators:

- **Volunteer co-ordinators are more likely to find work before completing training than other volunteers because of their high skill levels:** the project has been careful to recruit individuals with the right skills to undertake what is potentially a challenging role. The downside of this for the continuity of the project is that they are well-placed to find paid work.
- **VIOs need to be closely involved in developing profiles and recruiting co-ordinators:** Camden initially planned to train up a pool of volunteer co-ordinators and then place them with VIOs. They realised, however, that this process did not always ensure both sides were clear about responsibilities and committed to the role: *'I found the volunteers had no buy-in into the ethos of the organisation. At the same time the organisations were a bit divorced from the whole recruitment process as well'*.

Camden responded by changing procedures. They now work with VIOs to develop a clear role profile which can be used to recruit volunteer co-ordinators. This process also involves ensuring that VIOs can provide adequate practical facilities such as phones and desks as these have not always been provided in the past. Securing buy-in from staff at VIOs is also considered essential.

- **Co-ordinators prefer light-touch support at the host VIO:** Camden originally intended to run monthly Action Learning Sets but found co-ordinators considered this a distraction from their role. Project staff now visit co-ordinators approximately three times during the six month placement.

Running a community event

Strengthening communities is a core objective of the VSC programme. Most projects have sought to achieve this through promoting volunteering. This is seen as a way of engaging disadvantaged individuals and providing valuable services in low-income areas. A handful of projects have taken a more direct approach to working with communities. Exeter's work to set up a 'Play Day' (Box 14 below) is a prime example.

Box 14: Supporting communities - the Ilfracombe 'Play Day'

The Exeter VSC project sees working directly with communities as a central part of its remit. It took the lead role in organising a 'Play Day' in summer 2012 as part of a national scheme to encourage young people and parents to come together for a day of outdoor activities. The event included '*recession-themed*' activities such as how to make Play Dough and create necklaces from painted pasta shapes. The project even managed to get a local company to donate 58 toys for the day.

The event enabled residents to volunteer in two ways: planning the event or running activities on the day. Getting residents involved in this way is seen as an ideal means of encouraging volunteering for community benefit. It has the added advantage that it appeals to residents who are happy to '*help out*' locally but might not otherwise consider formal volunteering.

A number of areas of **good practice** were highlighted in running a community event:

- **organising events around children is a great way to hook in parents**, both to encourage volunteering and consult them on their needs.
- **having a range of local organisations involved increases 'ownership' and awareness of the event:** a project planning group was set up and attended by a number of local stakeholders including a councillor, NHS representative, a resident and a community activist. Three reminders were sent out for each planning group to boost attendance. Organisations unable to attend meetings were still given opportunities to feed in comments by phone or email to the project manager.
- **running events provides an opportunity to invite other organisations along who deliver activities that can benefit the community:** projects on dental hygiene and energy saving are among those who attended the Play Day.

There is also **one key lesson:** the project manager noted that working with communities to set up and run an event is very time-consuming. However, they also believe it can be highly effective in encouraging volunteering and is often undervalued as an approach.