

Volunteer and Outreach Workers in Neighbourhood Management

An overview

The purpose of this paper is to indicate how local volunteers and resident outreach workers can help towards engaging local communities and responding more appropriately to their needs and aspirations as well as bringing personal benefits to the individuals involved. The note has been produced as part of the National Evaluation of Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders, though an action learning set, and is based upon Pathfinders' experience. However, the findings reinforce the conclusions from other studies of community-based initiatives.

Who is involved?

The people participating in volunteering and/or outreach range along a spectrum of types of involvement, including:

- volunteers in local community groups and forums;
- community representatives on the governance structures of the Neighbourhood Management initiatives;
- members of the local community doing specific types of outreach work for the Pathfinder in return for training, expenses and/or reimbursement;
- local residents whose involvement began as volunteers but who have progressed to becoming paid members of staff.

Activities

Individuals and teams are variously involved in a wide range of activities:

- as Board and theme group members;
- as officers in local groups;
- undertaking local audits – e.g. of community facilities or groups;
- involvement in other regeneration activities, such as stock transfer;
- neighbourhood walk-about to identify problems;
- organising and supporting outreach or community events;
- preparation of publicity and outreach materials;
- arranging training taster events;
- undertaking training;
- mentoring;
- participatory appraisal approaches to reflection, analysis and action planning.

Boxes 1 and 2 give more detailed examples of pieces of work undertaken.

Box 1: Community Involvement Team (CIT)

One Pathfinder has set up a Community Involvement Team administered by the community development team of the local Community College. This has given the scope to estimate the value of such outreach work and demonstrate the business case for incorporating a similar approach in mainstreamed activity after the end of the Pathfinder. The Team comprises about 20 residents who are also representative of the spread of BME groups in the area, many of whom are multi-lingual. Members have accredited training as well as undertaking a few hours paid activity per month in the community. The Team works with the College tutors involved to plan their programme and allocate the work. It links selectively with various schemes relating to worklessness in the area, picking ones they think will ensure positive outcomes. This is unique because it allows service providers to tap into the extended networks of the Team's friends, neighbours and work colleagues who may not be responsive to more traditional forms of outreach such as leafletting and attending events.

The Team helped to arrange taster courses based on a learner database for which they gather and collate the information. They feed into local mainstream provision from different adult education

providers in and around the Pathfinder area. The Team do follow up as well as encouraging others to attend.

The Team members have also contributed to local community cohesion partly through arranged community events, such as The World Fair and themed events to target different sections of the community. In addition, the Team acts as a focal point where people from various communities can work together for the common good.

Integral to the Team's work is the community consultation/research that they conduct within the Pathfinder area. Members have undertaken training in Participatory Appraisal, which has enabled them to obtain qualitative information from the local community not accessed by other research methods. This has informed the provision of local services e.g. recycling, Anti Social Behaviour, Health and Education as well as views of the area.

Box 2: Learning Co-ordinator

The Learning Co-ordinator employed by one Pathfinder was previously a volunteer and is still a local resident. She is ideally placed therefore to argue convincingly that voluntary activity is often the first step *en route* to paid employment. She has particularly focused upon supporting residents into training and persuading local training providers to respond to local needs and interests. In her work with local people, she has been effective in encouraging them to participate in training, enabling them to begin from their own interests and then subsequently widen out. She has developed a database for recording the uptake of courses/learning events and individual progression. She has developed a group of volunteers who have undertaken a mix of accredited and non-accredited training and are now able take part in buddying and mentoring schemes with other trainees. They have also taken on activities such as local audits, designing questionnaires and administering a fund to allocate grants to community groups

Her work with providers has led to a wider range of provision being offered to encompass courses better matching local interests and demand. The Service Level Agreement with the local college also now specifies a shorter response time for meeting course requests. The development of course options also takes into account people's progression needs and includes community led/oriented training. Refurbishment of a computer centre for community use has not only enabled a widening of the range of courses on offer but also made them more accessible. Work with the local 6th Form College has resulted in the extension of admissions criteria for NVQ IT training from being solely work-related to include voluntary activity.

What is the added value for the Pathfinder?

There are numerous ways in which having residents involved in outreach approaches can contribute towards Pathfinders fulfilling their goals more effectively. Although they are active in a variety of contexts, groups and situations, the roles they fulfil are essentially similar.

- First, this type of outreach can enable neighbourhood management initiatives to reach groups not reached by the usual mechanisms or forms of communication. They provide a personal way in to local people in general and, often, to specific population or interest groups. More targeted communication not only saves time and is more effective, it also underlines that there is commitment to the local area and demonstrates the value put on local views. This helps to build trust and strengthen links between the initiative and the local community.
- Secondly, this can be a better way of obtaining well grounded local intelligence about local problems, opportunities and experience of local service delivery. It provides scope for two-way communication: giving out more detailed information, receiving feedback in greater depth and drawing more directly upon people's personal stories.
- Thirdly, this form of activity itself contributes to building social capital. It develops advocacy skills. It produces a cohort of role models, exemplifying different attitudes towards education, training and work, towards neighbourliness and community ties. In

other words, it is a means of effecting culture change. It represents investment in strong relationships and developing community capacity to influence and shape the future of the area.

What is the added value for individuals?

Involvement in volunteering and outreach also brings benefits for the individuals concerned. In general, these derive from the training they receive, the increased confidence they gain in their own skills, the greater feelings of satisfaction and self worth associated with what they are doing. However, putting it in this way does not capture the extent to which this has been a wholly transformative experience for some. They may previously have led very isolated lives, suffered from a severe lack of confidence about their ability and had very constrained horizons about what might be possible for themselves, their families and their communities. Participation pays dividends in terms of better health and personal morale, the discovery of previously unrecognised talents, higher aspirations for themselves and their families and improved employability.

Mainstreaming resident outreach

Although there are many demonstrable advantages of resident outreach, two issues need to be addressed in making a business case for mainstreaming the approach. First, it is said to be resource intensive. Certainly, volunteers need to be supported and trained. However, the financial as well as the social value of the volunteer activity needs to be set against these costs. Secondly, it may appear relatively small scale and it can be difficult to measure its effectiveness. It is therefore necessary to define 'soft' outcomes that represent the intermediate steps on the way to the 'hard' outcomes, such as employment and qualifications. They may be core soft outcomes relevant to most projects and client groups: indicators relating to attitudinal, personal, practical and key work skills. Or they may be ones specific to a target group such as young people, women wanting to return to the labour market or people with a background of drug or alcohol abuse. People have individual needs and will advance at different rates but these sorts of soft outcomes provide a way of measuring their progress. The database held by the Learning Co-ordinator in Box 2 is an example of a way of evidencing change over time. In addition, there is scope for measuring the strength of community activity and the social networks in the area that can contribute to greater community sustainability.

The capacity to measure soft outcomes and distance travelled is relevant whenever organisations are working with people and communities experiencing multiple disadvantages. Residents with personal knowledge of the obstacles encountered can contribute significantly to developing the tools and techniques required to assess the effectiveness of different sorts of intervention.

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