

Case study Voluntary Action Sheffield



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About the Organisation:

VAS is a local infrastructure organisation that supports the development of the voluntary and community sector in Sheffield. It provides a wide range of services, including specialist support, advice and training, to its membership of over 900 voluntary and community organisations. Its volunteer department, Volunteer Centre Sheffield (VCS) is accredited by Volunteer England, and works to connect prospective volunteers with those organisations that are looking for volunteers. VCS has an online database of volunteer placements that the public can search directly, and also runs a drop-in service three days a week: here advisors help people to work out what kind of volunteering would suit them best, and VCS then matches them with organisations that might benefit from their time. VCS also runs a dedicated project for asylum seekers and refugees, who may require more intensive support and follow-up programmes. Overall, VCS is dedicated to matching volunteers with placements that are right for them, which it believes is the key to a highly rewarding experience for both volunteers and voluntary organisations.

Feeling the impacts of the recession...

on the organisation itself:

VCS has seen a dramatic increase in the number of people wanting to volunteer since the recession began: “Many more people are coming in,” says Julia South, the Volunteer Centre Manager, “We got more enquiries about volunteering in the first five months of 2009 than we did for the whole of 2008.”

In response, VCS is looking to expand its own volunteer team (due to limited funds, VCS has only four paid members of staff; of whom only one is full-time), and is also planning to start a telephone brokering scheme. However, volunteer staff of course need some funding, which Julia says is hard to come by. “VCS is chronically underfunded anyway,” she explains, “and what people don’t realise is that taking on new volunteers requires expenditure on training and management.” VCS’ core funding from the City Council amounts to £28,200, whereas core costs are £64,000 and so VAS has to find around £36,000 each year from other/unrestricted income; it is not clear how much longer this can be sustained. The rest of the VCS’ income amounts to about £125,000, but much of this consists of grants with impending time limits; grants that Julia fears may not all be reviewed.

Another change during the recession has been the type of prospective volunteers coming in to the centre: “There seems to be a new generation of ‘recession volunteers’,” Julia notes, “who are highly skilled and are looking at volunteering as a way of furthering their personal and

professional development.” That brings both advantages and drawbacks, she explains: “On the one hand these volunteers are very ready to start; they don’t require as much induction and training as other volunteers, and so can begin to make a difference almost straight away. On the other hand, some organisations worry about taking these people on, because they may just leave again as soon as they are able to find paid employment.”

VCS’ strategy for dealing with this has been to discuss carefully with people what their expectations of volunteering are. “As long as we align their expectations with the needs of the organisations, then the experience can be a success for all concerned.”

on individuals and local communities:

Julia feels that an increase in volunteering could be one of the few positive impacts of the recession: “If people have more time to try volunteering, and to think about what they really want to do, then that could be something good to come out of all this.”

What’s more, if volunteers are kept engaged, Julia hopes that they may build volunteering into their future lifestyles. “Of course I’m not talking about job substitution,” she makes clear, “but often it’s not a question of *either* paid work *or* volunteering. Many people fit in both.”

Julia is convinced that this could benefit individuals, organisations and communities. If the match is right,” Julia smiles, “volunteering releases a myriad of benefits for volunteer and organisation. Furthermore, surely that’s the kind of society we want to live in: one where people are willing to give some of their time to what they see as a worthy cause.”

Looking to the future:

There are two main things that Julia thinks can be done to support volunteering during the recession, and to make sure that the maximum benefit is reaped from this opportunity.

Firstly, Julia thinks that those who take on volunteers must adapt their programmes wisely when dealing with the new influx of volunteers. She recently ran a workshop at VAS’ *Beating The Recession* conference, advising organisations on how to use volunteers efficiently. “For example, we’re advocating a modular approach to volunteer training at the moment. Organisations should give people basic training and then offer optional further training at a later date. That way they can meet any increased demand on their services that they’re facing right now, and don’t invest too much in volunteers who move on fairly quickly.”

Secondly, she would like to see more funding to organisations that use volunteers.

“Volunteering can solve lots of problems for lots of constituencies, but obviously it has resource implications,” she says, “It’s frustrating that, under a lot of schemes, money for volunteering has been made available but not in quite the right way. Often resources have been tied down to job objectives, which overlooks the fact that volunteering is a gift that benefits all partners involved. Funding should stimulate and encourage volunteering in its own right, not just as a means to the end of getting points on peoples’ CVs.”

Contact:

Voluntary Action Sheffield
The Circle
33 Rockingham Lane
Sheffield, S1 4FW
Telephone: 0114 2536600
Fax: 0114 2536601
Email: info@vas.org.uk

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