

**Institute for  
Volunteering  
Research**

# A Gateway to Work

The role of Volunteer Centres in supporting the link between volunteering and employability



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The Institute for Volunteering Research, 2009

Written by **Colin Rochester**

Research manager: **Nick Ockenden**

Research team: **Kim Donahue, Jurgen Grotz, Matthew Hill, Judith Unell**

### Acknowledgements

Our thanks go to Capacitybuilders for providing the funding to make this piece of research possible. We would also like to thank the eight Volunteer Centres who participated as case studies, and the 220 who responded to the telephone survey, for sharing their views and experiences. Thanks also go to the individuals who undertook the research for the study: Kim Donahue, Jurgen Grotz, Matthew Hill and Judith Unell. Finally, we would like to thank BMG Research, who completed the telephone survey of Volunteer Centres.

The images within 'A Gateway to Work' are for illustrative purposes only, they do not necessarily feature people who were unemployed at the time of the photograph.

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# Executive summary

## Introduction

This research explores the role of Volunteer Centres in supporting the link between volunteering and employability. It was funded by Capacitybuilders and undertaken by the Institute for Volunteering Research in 2009. It is based on a telephone survey of 220 Volunteer Centres and eight in-depth good practice case studies of Volunteer Centres.

## Part one: getting involved

There is growing evidence to suggest that volunteering can improve employability through building confidence, developing 'soft' skills such as team work and communication, advancing 'hard' skills such as language, IT and management, and demonstrating job readiness to potential employers. Research suggests that volunteering is not, however, a 'magic bullet' or a direct route into employment.

Over one-third of Volunteer Centres are currently undertaking work in this area. The work reflects many of the underlying values of volunteering and Volunteer Centres, and can benefit volunteers, volunteer-involving organisations, and the Volunteer Centres themselves. Such work can, however, involve capacity issues for Volunteer Centres, challenging relationships with Job Centre Plus, and difficulties in securing funding.

## Part two: delivery

This agenda is primarily relevant to three groups: the long-term unemployed, the more recently unemployed, and the 'aspirational' unemployed.

The work of the case studies tended to focus on the recruitment and referral of these groups, and providing ongoing support for volunteers and organisations. Some schemes also offered the volunteers access to education and training. The majority of Volunteer Centres had integrated their employability work with their general work, while others had discrete projects funded by specific sources, such as the National Lottery, or commissioned on contract by other bodies.



### **Part three: partnerships and management**

The majority of Volunteer Centres undertaking work in this area had partnerships with their local Job Centre Plus. To get the most out of this often challenging relationship, Volunteer Centres recommended building ongoing relationships with key members of staff and devoting resources to persuade them of the value of volunteering.

The most common source of funding for these activities was the Volunteer Centre's Local Authority. Demonstrating the impact of their work was often seen to be an important part of securing further funding. It was, however, recognised that it could frequently be difficult, if not impossible, to say that someone had gained employment as a direct result of their volunteering. Furthermore, recording 'soft' impacts, such as confidence, self-esteem and fulfilment, was seen to be an important part of demonstrating how far volunteers had progressed on their journey towards employability.

### **Part four: key lessons**

The evidence from the research suggests that Volunteer Centres should:

- Consider how engaging in the employability agenda would contribute to delivery of the core functions, and is part of their mission and values
- Base activities on good relationships with volunteer-involving organisations that have sufficient capacity to host and support volunteers
- Devote time to building good relationships with Job Centre Plus
- Recognise that ongoing and comprehensive support that is focused on the individual can lead to the most positive outcomes for volunteers
- Ensure that all volunteering is based on genuine freewill.

<sup>1</sup> IVR is an initiative of Volunteering England and the University of East London.

## Foreword

**After a long period of high employment the number of people out of work and seeking employment is rising. As well as dramatically increasing the scale of the need overall, this will also mean that it will become more difficult for the long term unemployed to access the job market. There will be a significantly higher demand for help from those who have lost their jobs more recently. Volunteering can make a major contribution to addressing these growing needs.**



Volunteer Centres are already playing a pivotal role in this area. We know of innovative projects which are helping the long term unemployed gain – and keep – jobs. We are aware of ongoing work to get people ‘job ready’. And we see activities which offer people a meaningful alternative to employment. But we are also seeing a new interest from throughout the network to do more.

This short guide has been produced to help meet this growing demand. It is based on evidence collected from case studies of the experience of eight good practice Volunteer Centres; the results of a survey which drew responses from 220 members of the network; and a review of the relevant literature.

The guide is in four parts. The first discusses the link between volunteering and employability, and why Volunteer Centres might – and might not – take it on board as part of their daily activities. The second part of the guide looks at a variety of ways of engaging with the employability agenda by exploring the different groups or categories of people who might be served, the kinds of provision that could be made and the various organisational arrangements that sustain them. Part three focuses on some key aspects of managing the work – relationships with partner bodies; resources and funding; and evaluation. The guide finishes by summarising key lessons for good practice and making suggestions about sources of further information and advice.

In our current climate, a guide of this type is timely. I hope you find it a useful and interesting read.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Justin Davis Smith". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**Justin Davis Smith**  
Chief Executive  
Volunteering England

# 1. Volunteering and Employability

## The relationship between volunteering and employability is not straightforward.

It is true that some kinds of volunteering can lead directly to employment: over 80 per cent of the full-time volunteers involved with the National Trust move on to employment or further training<sup>1</sup>, while 45 per cent of BTCV's 'Key Volunteers' found jobs in the environmental sector in 2004<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, the National Survey of Volunteering and Charitable Giving found that in 2007 just under a quarter of volunteers (24 per cent) reported an important personal benefit of their volunteering to be that it gave them a chance to improve their employment prospects<sup>3</sup>. A separate survey found that of those individuals looking for work, 88 per cent of respondents said that they believed that volunteering would help them get a job, while 41 per cent of those in employment said that volunteering had helped them get their current job<sup>4</sup>.

On the other hand, volunteering is not a 'magic wand' or direct route into employment for many people, especially those who have been unemployed for some time and those whose difficulties entering or re-entering the job market are compounded by other problems – such as ex-offenders, people who are physically incapacitated, and those with mental health issues. Studies have found that unemployed people actually volunteer slightly less than those in paid employment (35 per cent and 38 per cent respectively<sup>5</sup>) and that volunteers can have longer durations of unemployment than non-volunteers<sup>6</sup>.

**'There is a growing body of evidence about what people gain from their volunteering in terms of employability.'**

But what volunteering can do instead for a wide range of people is to improve their employability – to provide them with a better chance of entering the labour market. This might involve acquiring or retrieving skills; learning or re-learning the habits and discipline of employment; and improving confidence and self-esteem. This process is often described as a 'journey' which will vary in length

according to the circumstances in which the volunteer finds him or herself at the outset, and in which volunteering may only be one stage.

While research has so far failed to produce convincing statistical proof demonstrating that people who volunteer have an advantage over non-volunteers in the job market, there is a growing body of evidence about what people gain from their volunteering, much of it provided by the volunteers themselves. The benefits include: gaining practical experience and testing new career paths; acquiring skills; accessing training which, in some cases, might lead to a recognised qualification; demonstrating commitment and reliability; as well as becoming more confident and improving inter-personal skills.

1 <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-trust/w-volunteering/w-fulltimevolunteering.htm> [accessed March 2009]

2 <http://www2.btcv.org.uk/display/volunteerofficers> [accessed March 2009]

3 Low, N., Butt, S., Ellis Paine, A. and Davis Smith, J. (2007) Helping out: a national survey of volunteering and charitable giving Cabinet Office: London

4 Hirst, A. (2000) Links between volunteering and employability: Research report RR309 DFES: London

5 Low et al (2007) *ibid.*

6 Hirst (2000) *ibid.*

## 2. Why Volunteer Centres should address issues of employability...

**A significant number of Volunteer Centres have already engaged with volunteering and employability. Our survey found that 37 per cent of the 220 Centres which responded had carried out 'work, projects or activities around volunteering and employability during the past 12 months'. Why have they become involved and why should other Volunteer Centres follow their example?**

The first explanation is that employability offers a means of pursuing some of their core functions. Work on employability can be an extension to the Volunteer Centres' brokerage role; it may involve, as we shall see, developing the number and range of

**'Thirty-seven per cent of Volunteer Centres in our survey had carried out work, projects or activities on volunteering and employability in the past year'**

opportunities for volunteering; and it will provide the opportunity for marketing volunteering to a largely new audience – the staff of Job Centre Plus and other agencies with an interest in employment.

Secondly, the employability agenda reflects some of the underlying values of volunteering and the mission of Volunteer Centres. At the heart of this is the belief that every potential volunteer can expect to gain something from volunteering, as well as making a contribution to an organisation or cause. Employability offers a route

for the involvement of a number of groups of people who are under-represented in the volunteering population, but found in numbers among the ranks of the long-term unemployed. They include people seen as experiencing social exclusion, such as those with limited experience of the educational system; people with long term limiting medical conditions; lone parents; people from minority ethnic communities, and ex -offenders.

And thirdly, work on employability issues is of clear value to three core groups – the volunteers themselves; the organisations with which they are involved, and the Volunteer Centres.

### **What the volunteers had to say**

Volunteers thought that the most important impacts on their employability were: increased confidence, communication skills and team work, learning to be sensitive and non-judgemental, increased discipline and order to life, and practical skills such as IT, media and language. Other impacts included waking up in the morning and doing something productive, and confidence in formal situations such as interviews and applications. The removal of a sense of isolation that many volunteers had previously experienced was a very important benefit of volunteering, especially for single mothers and those suffering from mental ill-health. Crucially, many of the volunteers thought that the development of these skills was facilitated by the supportive and people-centred ethos of voluntary organisations. They also felt that the flexibility of a volunteer role meant that they could develop gradually – especially important for those who are isolated and/or have low confidence.

### **The value for volunteers**

Our case studies underline the value of the work to volunteers. While some of them did go on to paid employment, the benefits were more widespread: 45 per cent of the volunteers involved in the project run by Birmingham Voluntary Service Council found work, but 90 per cent of them thought that the project had been a positive experience. Across the case studies there was a considerable measure of agreement about the key benefits of the experience volunteers gained:

**Confidence and self-esteem** this was seen as key to the whole process. In one Volunteer Centre it was felt that since *'many of the volunteers might be vulnerable or face multiple exclusions, the raising of the confidence and the recognition of their potential seems to be the most important initial impact' and this 'has been experienced as life changing'*. This was associated in another Volunteer Centre with *'the removal from isolation especially [in the case of] single mothers and those suffering from mental health problems'*.

**'Soft' employment skills** including communication skills and teamwork, learning to be sensitive and non-judgmental, and other social or interpersonal skills.

**'Hard' employment skills** such as practical skills such as IT, media and language.

**Evidence of employability** including commitment to the role; ability to sustain a working routine (*'getting out of bed in the morning'*); a CV; a reference; and, possibly, accreditation from training.

### **The value for volunteer-involving organisations**

Work on employability issues can provide volunteer-involving organisations with a significant source of additional volunteers and people who, as well as needing support, also bring a range of different experiences and knowledge with them. One volunteer, a man in his 40s who had been a carer for many years, was placed in a carers' organisation where his expertise was eventually recognised by his appointment to a paid position. Organisations have also developed their expertise in working with vulnerable people in collaboration with the Volunteer Centre.

### **The value for Volunteer Centres**

As well as enabling a Volunteer Centre to pursue its mission and making a contribution to the delivery of some of its core functions, engagement with the employability agenda may bring other – more specific – benefits.

Firstly, it can raise the profile of the Volunteer Centre and of volunteering. This can operate on a number of levels. In Cornwall, for example, it has led to a high profile involvement in local partnerships at both operational and strategic levels. In Kensington & Chelsea *'possibly the most dramatic impact... is the profile it has generated, which has enabled the Centre to build on and attract other projects'*. And it has *'significantly widened'* the Volunteer Centre's network in Newcastle.

Secondly, work on employability can bring about the development of new expertise: in Birmingham there was a perception among staff that this type of project has been a catalyst for learning around engaging with and supporting certain client groups, most notably those with mental health issues, and the socially isolated. In Broxbourne, staff gained qualifications in *'delivering information, advice and guidance about learning and work for adults'*.

Thirdly, there have been financial benefits. In one case the funding for employability work was generous enough to subsidise other activities, but this was unusual. On the other hand, other Volunteer Centres reported that *'while the project does not generate a surplus it recovers its full costs and assists by improving the economy of scale for the Centre's core'*.

#### **A wide range of benefits**

Volunteer Centre Broxbourne and East Herts provides information, advice and guidance to people with low or no income, living in isolated areas, to help them make better-informed decisions about their learning and work plans.

Many of the volunteers using the service might be vulnerable or facing multiple exclusions. The raising of confidence and the recognition of their potential appears to be the most important impact. Developing volunteers' self esteem above this initial threshold has been perceived as life changing, and in some instances as life saving. Further practical benefits can include interview skills, team working, goal planning, stress awareness and social interaction.

As part of the work, the staff of the Volunteer Centre were required to complete the National Open College Network qualification in 'Delivering, Information, Advice and Guidance about Learning and Work for Adults' as well as achieving the 'matrix' quality standard. As well as developing staff skills, this has helped to raise the profile of the Volunteer Centre.

It is also felt that the Volunteer Centre's work has helped to overcome outdated perceptions of volunteering amongst funders, particularly in the private sector.

[www.bvsda.org.uk](http://www.bvsda.org.uk)

## **...and why they might not**

### **There are a number of difficulties in the way of engaging successfully in work on employability.**

The first of these is the challenge of *capacity*. This is partly a simple matter of numbers: volunteer-involving organisations may not need or may not be able to cope with additional volunteers. It seems, however, that more is being asked of Volunteer Centres recently. Eighty-seven per cent of those surveyed in our research had experienced an increase in the number of enquiries about volunteering over the past six months. It is, however, also about the kinds of opportunity available; one case study project could

**'There is a risk that funders and other agencies may confuse volunteering opportunities with work experience placements.'**

not find openings for men who were over 40, and had to work with partner bodies to create new opportunities. Sometimes also, there was a geographical mismatch, with opportunities concentrated in one part of the area where there were few potential volunteers. Some fields of activity are particularly over-subscribed but there are signs that competition for placements is becoming more general, leading to organisations 'cherry picking' the most attractive applicants.

These problems can be exacerbated if the Volunteer Centre has not developed a strong relationship with volunteer-involving organisations. They may be reluctant to accept volunteers from among the long-term unemployed, and may lack the expertise and resources to meet the needs of volunteers who require additional support. Their managers may also harbour understandable concerns about the ability of untried volunteers to ensure that the organisation can deliver the appropriate level and quality of service to users.

In some cases the level of bureaucracy involved meant that opportunities were unsuitable. Project staff were anxious to get new volunteers started and could find themselves frustrated by Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checks or lengthy selection or induction procedures.

The second challenge is managing the relationship with Job Centre Plus and other bodies. While 51 per cent of those who responded to our survey reported that their relationship with Job Centre Plus was 'positive' or 'very positive', participants in our case studies had experienced a lack of interest in, and understanding of, volunteering on the part of Job Centre Plus staff and, in at least one case, outright hostility.

The third set of difficulties are related to funding. As well as the primary concern of securing the necessary funding and ensuring that it covered the full costs of the activity, there are issues about working with funders. For some this will bring '*a whole new language and culture to deal with*', while others find the demands of monitoring and evaluation onerous. This is especially problematic for smaller Volunteer Centres with comparatively basic systems of financial management and administration. And, as more than one of the participants in our case studies observed, '*we still have to do the day job*' of carrying out the Volunteer Centre's core functions.

The sometimes fraught nature of negotiations with funders may also be a product of very different views of volunteering and what it can contribute to employability. Funders and other agencies in the employment field can take a very instrumental approach, in which volunteering is the means of meeting simple, concrete goals, such as reducing the numbers of people who are out of work, or increasing the numbers of those achieving specific vocational qualifications. They may confuse volunteering opportunities – which offer people the chance to contribute to the work of an organisation or cause – with work experience placements, which are intended to progress directly from unpaid work to employment in a specific occupation or sector.

As is hinted above, engagement with the employability agenda may detract from the delivery of Volunteer Centres' core functions rather than enhancing them. Meeting funders' requirements may contribute to a drift away from the Volunteer Centres' mission. Meeting the needs of unemployed people may provide a stronger force for a change of emphasis from brokerage and promotion to the provision of direct services for this group of people. Finally, engagement may also lead to a change in the image or reputation of a Volunteer Centre. Rather than catering for the whole community, there is a danger that they will be seen as a specialist agency for the kinds of disadvantaged groups found among the ranks of the long term unemployed. Other 'reputational risks' are associated with the perception that some at least of the 'volunteering' carried out by the unemployed is, in fact, mandatory and people have little, if any, choice in the matter. Volunteer Centres wishing to engage with the employability agenda will need to negotiate these issues carefully.

### 3. Identifying the need

**The first step towards engagement with the employability agenda is to identify the need and differentiate between the kinds of people who are the potential participants in activities of this kind. The literature offers a range of different ways of categorising them, but our case studies have enabled us to identify three broad types; the long-term unemployed; those who have lost their jobs more recently; and people who are in employment but are looking to move into more skilled jobs with better prospects.**

#### **The long-term unemployed**

Long-term unemployed people are those who have been out of work for at least six months but many of them have been out of the job market for considerably longer. Much work can specifically focus on this group of people: of those Volunteer Centres currently undertaking work around volunteering and employability in our survey, 82 per cent said that their projects targeted the long-term unemployed. During recent years of high employment the long-term jobless tend to be either concentrated in geographical areas where unemployment is unusually high or experience issues and problems that affect their chances of obtaining work. Many of them may be described as socially excluded or vulnerable and they may have one or more of the following characteristics:

- living in disadvantaged communities
- membership of a minority ethnic community
- aged over 50
- low educational achievement
- lone parenthood
- physical or mental disability
- long-term limiting health condition
- homeless
- ex-offender
- alcohol- or drug-related problems

Greater competition for jobs brought about by rising unemployment means that many of the long-term unemployed, and especially people from socially excluded and vulnerable groups, will struggle to find employment. Volunteering may be a means of overcoming their disadvantage in the job market but here too they may find themselves competing for opportunities with those made redundant more recently who may be more attractive to some volunteer-involving organisations.

We also need to recognise that some long-term unemployed people are not seeking work and others have no realistic chance of getting a job because of factors such as disability or long-term illness. In these cases involvement in volunteering may be the goal rather than a means to employment, and can provide a meaningful alternative to employment.

### **The more recently unemployed**

Many of those made redundant as the result of rising unemployment will be looking to return to the job market very quickly – although some may find this difficult. Their interest in volunteering may be based on making sure they do not lose their employability by:

- keeping active and involved between jobs
- maintaining their skills by using them
- ensuring that there will not be a gap on their CV

Alternatively they may be interested in equipping themselves for new forms of employment by:

- gaining new knowledge and developing new skills
- tasting or testing new careers

And they might simply want to find ways of coping with being unemployed by:

- occupying their enforced leisure time with purposeful activities
- enjoying social interaction with other people

It can be important to maintain sufficient flexibility to respond to changing patterns of unemployment; many newly unemployed people may have different and comprehensive skills sets which could be seen as an opportunity for volunteering organisations.

### **The aspirational employed**

Our third group are looking to move into different – and ‘better’ jobs. They find their current occupation unsatisfactory for one or more of the following reasons:

- low pay
- insecurity
- poor prospects and lack of opportunities
- lack of skills

### **Differences**

The three different groups of people can benefit from volunteering in different ways, and they need different kinds of activities and services and different levels of support. It is also important to recognise the differences within the three ‘types’; some people who have been unemployed for a long time may have considerable experience of volunteering, for example, and they would not all describe themselves as being ‘in need’ or excluded.

## 4. Designing activities and services

While the activities and services delivered by the case study Volunteer Centres varied greatly, a common thread running through most of them was the placement of unemployed people as volunteers. Four of them were aimed at long-term unemployed volunteers in general and one focused on unemployed ex-offenders. The scheme in Birmingham was fairly typical in seeking to place 50 people in organisations where they would commit to a minimum of 30 hours' volunteering over a period of 12 weeks. There were, however, variations in the way the schemes operated.

**'The scheme in Birmingham was fairly typical in seeking to place 50 people in organisations where they would volunteer for 30 hours over a period of 12 weeks.'**

*Recruitment or referral:* some Volunteer Centres were responsible for, and actively engaged in, promoting the scheme and recruiting volunteers while in other cases participants were referred by other agencies such as Job Centre Plus.

*Support for volunteers:* the extent of support provided by the Centres varied from occasional 'trouble-shooting' on the one hand to regular contact from a member of staff, backed up by financial assistance with travel, child care, equipment or tools and specialist help with issues such as mental health or debt advice.

*Other kinds of help:* some schemes offered help with accessing employment including job search, help with applications and preparation for interviews. One scheme led to the provision of a reference which could be used to support a job application.

*Support for volunteer-involving organisations:* most schemes offered support in setting up the placement and ensuring the right kinds of support were in place. In one case the Volunteer Centre worked with agencies to develop new kinds of opportunities for volunteering. Financial support for equipment and materials was available in some cases.



### **Ongoing support**

Volunteer Cornwall's work with employability is funded through the New Deal, the European Social Fund and Department of Work and Pensions. Volunteer Cornwall employs a team of one manager and five project support officers (PSOs). The PSOs are based in Job Centre Plus for one afternoon each week and their staff arrange referral appointments for the PSOs throughout the week.

The PSO undertakes an initial needs assessment with the participant in which they discuss their experience, interests and barriers to employment. The volunteer placement is then brokered by the PSO and the host organisation. The organisation will often provide the volunteer with a taster day. On the first day of the placement the PSO will visit the organisation to establish the relationship and develop a written contract/pledge to agree terms and responsibilities.

Throughout the placement Volunteer Cornwall provides a range of financial support to volunteers (to cover travel, childcare, equipment and tools) and to the host organisation for any necessary supplies. Training is provided to volunteers by Volunteer Cornwall on a range of relevant topics – such as first aid or food hygiene – either in-house or externally contracted. Volunteer Cornwall can also provide specialist support on issues such as mental health or debt relief.

The PSOs also provide ongoing support by visiting the volunteers every four weeks during their placement. They can also be contacted by the volunteer for additional assistance. Support can include help with CV writing, job searches or interview skills. Job clubs are also provided for volunteers, and the transport to these is provided by Volunteer Cornwall. This support is resource-intensive, but it is thought to be a key element in the project's success.

[www.ccfv.co.uk](http://www.ccfv.co.uk)

A second, less common, theme running through the case studies was education and training. Some of this provision is linked to placements, and may take the form of pre-placement and 'on the job' instruction as well as professional training. In Cornwall, for example, a project funded by the European Social Fund and the Learning and Skills Council Convergence Fund – which is open to the employed who wish to improve their skills, as well as to the unemployed – might place a volunteer in a children's centre and provide childcare support training. Another example is provided by Volunteer Centre Liverpool (VCL), where much of its work is focused on the recognition of skills and experiences. VCL is an accredited body with ASDAN and is the only organisation in Liverpool offering awards to all residents of Liverpool. VCL offers several ASDAN awards – Certificate in Community Volunteering, Community Involvement and Volunteering Award and a new Employability Award. ASDAN awards are a precursor to more formal learning and can be an effective way of getting people back into education or employment. The awards provide foundation work and underpinning knowledge for people wishing to explore careers and undertake NVQs.

This concentration on education and skills is also key to the work undertaken by the Broxbourne and East Herts Volunteer Centre in delivering Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) services. These are targeted on both employed and unemployed people, and are intended to provide them with ‘the skills they need to be both employable and personally fulfilled’. The core activity takes the form of one-to-one advice sessions during which the potential volunteer is helped to develop an action plan. Where possible, the Volunteer Centre will provide the placement, training or coaching to enable the user to follow this plan and, where not, it will work with a range of partners to make it possible.

#### **A diversity of support**

Education and training is at the heart of a very different approach adopted by Volunteer Centre Liverpool. This has three main elements.

**Outreach:** the Volunteer Centre works with the 20 Job Centre Plus offices in its catchment area. This involves speaking to the staff, meeting each of them about once a year; keeping in touch with the key advisers; and making contact with their users at the Job Cafes run by the Jobs, Education and Training (JET) Centres.

**Preparing to Volunteer sessions:** the Volunteer Centre’s outreach work highlights these ‘group interview sessions’ which involve up to 12 people and are held every six weeks. They are seen as an efficient method of brokerage and recruitment.

**Accredited training:** As well as helping to place volunteers, the Preparing to Volunteer sessions also feed into the Volunteer Centre’s training programme, which offers a flexible and accessible route into learning, enabling people to explore careers and go on to take NVQs.

[www.volunteercentreliverpool.org.uk](http://www.volunteercentreliverpool.org.uk)

The Wirral provides us with another approach. The Council for Voluntary Services’ (CVS) Learning Guide programme involves volunteers in supporting hard-to-engage people in community settings. The Volunteer Learning Guides offer a friendly point of information for the less confident adult learner, and act as a signpost to learning opportunities at local colleges and volunteering opportunities at the Volunteer Centre.

### **The learning guide**

Sarah became a Volunteer Learning Guide in order to obtain the practical experience she needed to obtain her NVQ Level 4 qualification in Advice and Guidance. She was working full time as an administrative assistant to the Advisor Team at a local Further Education college, and had already obtained her NVQ Level 3. As a Volunteer Learning Guide, her main placement involved visits to local schools where she made contact with parents, helping them to identify learning opportunities and looking at the broader implications of these, for example in terms of child care and benefits. She also spent three months as a Learning Guide at a Job Centre Plus during her lunch hour, approaching job seekers to discuss education and volunteering options. Volunteering as a Learning Guide provided her with the necessary experience to progress to Level 4, and she was subsequently able to achieve her immediate career goal of moving out of administration into a direct advisory role at the college. She said:

*'To have the placement enabled me to enhance those skills, because when I originally did the placement I was working a lot behind the scenes, as I was just in an administration role and didn't go out to see clients. But actually being a Learning Guide enabled me to have that confidence to go and approach people and use those skills that I was being taught in Level 4.'*

(Sarah is not the volunteer's real name).

[www.volunteeringwirral.org.uk](http://www.volunteeringwirral.org.uk)



## 5. Different organisational responses

There are, broadly speaking, four sets of organisational arrangements through which Volunteer Centres have engaged in work on employability.

**An integrated approach:** more than three quarters (76 per cent) of the Volunteer Centres in our survey who had carried out work around volunteering and employability had undertaken some activities as part of their general work. The outstanding example of this approach among our case studies was Volunteer Centre Liverpool, who had engaged with the employability agenda and incorporated work on this issue into its overall programme.

**'Relationships between Volunteer Centres and the volunteer-involving organisations which provide the opportunities are generally based on goodwill and mutual respect.'**

**A wholly-owned funded project:** the outstanding example here is Wandsworth. The Volunteer Centre, building on earlier work, had secured a major lottery grant for its 'Activate' project, employing a project worker to liaise with local volunteer-involving organisations to increase the number and variety of volunteer roles available.

**A partnership:** while there are a number of collaborative arrangements through which Volunteer Centres can address the employability agenda, comparatively few involve formal partnership arrangements, but there are two examples highlighted by our case studies. Newcastle Volunteer Centre is one of the members of the Ouseburn Valley Volunteer Partnership which was set up to engage unemployed and economically inactive people in cultural volunteering activities. Similarly, Broxbourne and East Herts Volunteer Centre has received funding for its programme since becoming a full member of the Information, Advice and Guidance Partnership in Hertfordshire in 2002-03.

The fourth and most common organisational model involved the *commissioning of services* from Volunteer Centres by other bodies to whom they became *sub-contractors*. Kensington & Chelsea's programme, for example, is delivered as a sub-contract to WorkDirections. Similarly, Volunteer Cornwall delivers part of a wider programme as a sub-contractor to an organisation called Working Links.

Relationships between Volunteer Centres, who are engaged in work of this kind, and the volunteering-involving organisations which provide the opportunities, are generally based on goodwill and mutual respect. In Birmingham, by contrast, the arrangements have been formalised and put on a businesslike footing by signing a service level agreement with each placement organisation.

### **A lottery-funded project**

The Activate Project is a three-year, £167,493 project funded by the Big Lottery Fund. Launched in April 2008, it aims to engage ex-offenders and those at risk of offending in volunteering and training in the community, as a stepping stone to employment.

Placements have included charity shops, painting and decorating on barges, and giving time in hostels as befrienders and administrators. Volunteering is for a minimum of three hours a week. Clients return to the Volunteer Centre every two months for a review of goals and to establish if additional support is required. Progression towards employment is expected after a year of volunteering.

Potential volunteers in these projects are likely to be vulnerable, for example, as mental health service users, ex-substance misusers or ex-offenders and may live chaotic lives. As a result, the service is focused on the needs of individual volunteers.

Partner agencies have begun to support each other by offering referrals and opportunities to one another. Training courses on topics such as mental health awareness, the requirement for volunteering training, and volunteering in prisons is delivered to the partners and volunteer-involving organisations involved.

[www.wvsda.org.uk](http://www.wvsda.org.uk)

### **Delivering services on contract**

Volunteer Centre Kensington & Chelsea's work with New Deal is subcontracted by WorkDirections, a private company and one of the main welfare-to-work providers in the UK. The Volunteer Centre must deliver the programme against set objectives in order to receive payment from WorkDirections. Objectives include finding quality volunteering placements and securing employment for at least three months.

The programme focuses on individuals who have been unemployed for at least six months. It aims to place a minimum of ten people per month into volunteering placements for a period of 13 weeks. It also sets out to provide support and guidance to 24 placement providers per quarter.

Once WorkDirections have referred the individual to the Volunteer Centre, an initial one-to-one meeting is held to develop an action plan. Participants are then given a volunteer placement in which they are supported for 30 hours a week for 13 weeks. Placements have, for example, included school classroom assistants, mentors and befrienders in drug and homelessness projects and administrative reception volunteers in doctors' surgeries. During this period volunteers are also assisted with the provision of job search facilities.

In the year ending March 2008, 24 per cent of volunteers had moved into employment and had kept their job for at least three months. The Volunteer Centre delivers placements for approximately five per cent of all of WorkDirections' clients.

[www.voluntarywork.org.uk](http://www.voluntarywork.org.uk)

## 6. Working with partners

### Job Centre Plus

The ability of Volunteer Centres to engage with the employability agenda depends on the quality of its external relationship with a wider range of bodies than those which provide the placements. One of the key organisations in this respect is the network of Job Centre Plus offices. As we have already noted, just over half of the respondents to our survey reported that they had a positive or very positive relationship with their local Job Centre Plus office. And 63 per cent of those who had carried out work on employability in the past year named Job Centre Plus as a partner in their projects.

Some participants in our case studies, however, had experienced difficulties in the relationship. It was felt that many Job Centre Plus staff had negative attitudes towards volunteering, based on a lack of understanding of the contribution it makes to society in general and to unemployed people in particular. Even when volunteering is not dismissed as 'a waste of time', it can be seen as a last resort when everything else has failed, or an option for the most difficult individuals.

**'Volunteer Centres stressed the importance of ongoing dialogue with Job Centre Plus staff.'**

However, these attitudes can be addressed and overcome. One participant in the case studies felt that the views of Job Centre Plus staff had shifted over the years, and that they were starting to see the benefits of volunteering, but there was *'still a long way to go'*. The problem was exacerbated by the high turnover of front-line staff, and a continuing information gap within the service about what volunteering could achieve.

There was agreement among case study participants that they had needed to address the issue on three levels. Initially, in the first place, there was a need to speak to the managers and persuade them to ensure the message that *volunteering could make an important and positive contribution to someone's employability* was passed on. This was well summed up by a member of staff at one Volunteer Centre: *'Don't sell yourself short. Don't ever think that volunteering is demeaning or second-best'*. Secondly, it was important to talk directly to the front-line staff at their meetings or individually. And thirdly, it was possible to identify key advisers within the Job Centre Plus offices and important to maintain contact with them. In some cases, Volunteer Centres had been able to arrange training for Job Centre Plus staff, but it was felt that more needed to be done. As part of all three of these points, Volunteer Centres stressed the importance of ongoing dialogue with Job Centre Plus staff, something that also helped to get round the problem of high staff turnover.

Opinions were divided about the value of a physical presence of Volunteer Centre staff in the Job Centre Plus office. On the one hand it was argued that, apart from meeting the need to meet job seekers face-to-face, regular attendance and contact with the staff built trust and helped to resolve problems. Time spent in this way could be seen as an acknowledgement that Job Centre Plus staff have their own function and targets and are not experts on volunteering; making it useful to have someone from the Volunteer Centre present who is able to provide expert advice. An alternative perspective is that a presence on the Job Centre Plus premises suggests that the

Volunteer Centre is 'part of the system' rather than an independent body. Liverpool offers a possible way of reconciling the different positions to achieve the best of both worlds. The city has a network of Jobs, Education and Training (JET) Centres which provide 'a more person-centred approach to employability' than the traditional Job Centre Plus network, and they organise 'job cafes' which provide an informal environment, which is an ideal venue for outreach and recruitment by Volunteer Centre staff.

### **Other partners**

Important as they are, the Job Centre Plus network is by no means the only significant partner with whom Volunteer Centres may need to work on the employability agenda. As well as the volunteer-involving organisations we have discussed elsewhere, these tend to fall into two categories; those which, like Job Centre Plus, are sources of referrals and those which offer additional services to unemployed volunteers.

Sources of referrals include Connexions and other employment agencies over and above the Job Centre Plus system, local authorities and Primary Care Trusts; and a variety of voluntary sector agencies whose users might benefit from volunteering in connection with employability.

Service-providing partners are a similar mix of statutory, voluntary and private sector agencies.

The numbers of organisations that might be involved, and the complexity of the relationships between them, is crystallised by the description of one fairly small project's environment as 'a spider's web of funders and partners' and 'a plethora of services involved in employability'. The case studies felt, however, that the benefits of engaging with such partners justified the effort involved.

### **A wide range of partners**

One North East's 'North East Volunteering' funding stream aims to engage unemployed and economically inactive people in cultural volunteering activities, and offers a progression pathway into employment or further training. It funded a series of pilot projects throughout the region, of which the Ouseburn Valley Volunteer Partnership is one example.

Newcastle Volunteer Centre is involved as a partner in this project. It received £10,000, to provide a range of different services for the project, for eight hours a week. These include recruiting volunteers, interviewing and selecting suitable candidates for referral to the project, and providing training on volunteering to partners.

The Ouseburn Trust, a development trust for the Lower Ouseburn Valley, is the grant holder and co-ordinator for the pilot. The referral agency is Newcastle Futures, which also provides a strategic co-ordination role to a range of providers across the city. More than a dozen further partners, such as Ouseburn Farm, Tyneside Cinemas, Seven Stories, Recycle Y' Bike, The Biscuit Factory and The Art Works Galleries are members of the partnership, mainly as volunteer-involving organisations offering placements.

[www.volunteercentrenewcastle.org.uk](http://www.volunteercentrenewcastle.org.uk)

### **Service level agreements**

Birmingham Voluntary Sector Council ran the 'Volunteering into Employment' project from October 2007 to July 2008 which was funded by the Learning and Skills Council. Support was provided to the volunteers through an initial interview, matching them with a placement and offering ongoing support.

The project formalised its relationship with host organisations through a detailed service level agreement, which was signed at the start of the relationship. Organisations providing placements received £450 for hosting a volunteer and for providing ongoing support. In addition, they received £20 travel expenses for each volunteer.

The Volunteer Centre felt that the agreement provided clarity of aims, roles, responsibilities and limitations within the partnership. The payment formalised the relationship, increased the flexibility of the hosts and provided them with resources to properly support the participants. Host organisations were also supportive of the agreement.

The Volunteer Centre has since developed a follow-on project called 'Volunteering and Wellbeing', which features employability as one of several strands. They have again put in place a service level agreement with partners, but have this time strengthened the agreement to include elements of quality assurance (e.g. health and safety procedures, induction, training).

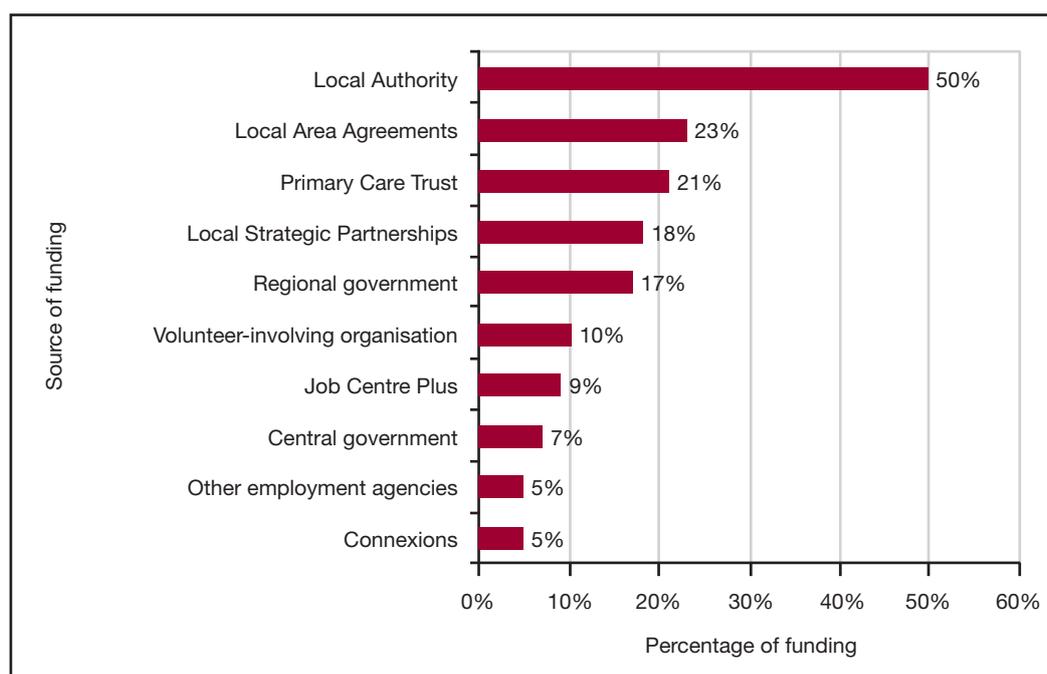
*[www.bvsc.org](http://www.bvsc.org)*



## 7. Funding and sustainability

To state the obvious, the ability of Volunteer Centres to carry out work on volunteering and employability depends on access to adequate funding. As we have seen, many of the activities captured in our case studies were commissioned or subcontracted out by larger agencies, many of which had much wider remits than Volunteer Centres and which looked to them for the provision of specialist services. Our survey identified the main funding sources for the work carried out by the 82 Volunteer Centres which had been involved in work on volunteering and employability (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Sources of funding for work on volunteering and employability.



Sample base: 82 (those Volunteer Centres carrying out 'work, projects or activities around volunteering and employability during the past 12 months').

The Volunteer Centres which took part in the case studies were, by and large, upbeat about continued funding. Their confidence was based on two main perceptions. The first of these was that, while the exact design or shape of funding programmes was subject to change, they expected that resources for work connected with employability would continue to be made available. And, secondly, they believed that they could demonstrate the value of their work and use that as a platform to gain future funding.

## 8. Measuring impact

In order to make the case for funding the Volunteer Centres acknowledged the need to measure the impact of their work. It was recognised that it was often very difficult, if not impossible, to say that someone had gained employment as a direct result of their volunteering. This was not, however, an argument for not attempting to measure the success of such work, and this would often involve the use of ‘hard measures’; nothing was more persuasive than statistics showing the numbers of people who had been helped into employment by volunteering. In fact, it was often felt that demonstration of such outputs and outcomes was a key step in securing further funding. Of those Volunteer Centres undertaking work around volunteering and employability, just over half (54 per cent) said they measured the number of volunteers who went on to find employment as a result; the most common response was between one per cent and 25 per cent of volunteers.

But hard statistics alone would not capture the full range of impacts; they also needed ‘soft measures’ which would help them to demonstrate how far volunteers had progressed on their journey towards employability. ‘Soft measures’ do not imply a less than rigorous approach to evaluation. Clear and systematic measurement of impact, moreover, will achieve more than demonstrating value for money; it will make the case for setting more realistic aims and targets for the programme than the numbers moved into employment alone. It was also felt that recording improved employment prospects should not be the only measure of success. Volunteering was considered

**‘The number of volunteers moving into employment should not be the only measure of success in projects on volunteering and employability.’**

to lead to a whole raft of social and cultural benefits for those taking part, and that such programmes should be designed, monitored and evaluated with an appreciation of the holistic benefits. The numerous benefits for the Volunteer Centre and partner organisations should also be taken into account when assessing the success of such projects. It is possible to effectively measure the impact of volunteering – on volunteers, on the organisations who involve volunteers and on the wider community – with the Institute for Volunteering Research’s ‘Volunteering Impact Assessment Toolkit’<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://ecommerce.volunteering.org.uk/PublicationDetails.aspx?ProductID=V309>

## 9. Key points for good practice

**The evidence from the case studies and our survey suggests that Volunteer Centres should:**

- Consider carefully how engagement with the volunteering and employability agenda will contribute to the delivery of their core functions and is consistent with its mission and values. It is important that attempts are made to ensure that any work in this area does not result in 'mission drift'.
- Establish a successful programme of work on volunteering and employability based on firm foundations. The key factors for success identified by respondents to our survey are – apart from sufficient funding – the capacity of the volunteer-involving organisations (46 per cent); the effectiveness of the Volunteer Centre's relationships with them (33 per cent); and the quality of its relationships with Job Centre Plus and the other employment services (25 per cent).
- Be clear about which group or groups of people in need they intend to provide services or activities for. They should recognise that ongoing and comprehensive support to volunteers can often be fundamental in ensuring that the outcomes are as positive as possible for all parties, especially when volunteers are drawn from more vulnerable groups. It can also be important to adopt an individual-centred approach, concentrating on their specific needs and motivations and adapting support as necessary.
- Ensure that the motivations of those involved, both the volunteers themselves and the referring organisations, are based on a genuine understanding of volunteering and the element of freewill. Where volunteering is seen as mandatory or confused with work placements, success is likely to be more limited. Significant efforts should be made by Volunteer Centres to ensure all partners have a comprehensive understanding of the relevance and importance of volunteering to the employment agenda, in order that all organisations appreciate its value and, in particular, do not see it as a mandatory activity.
- Develop a clear focus on the kinds of services or activities they intend to provide.
- Explore the options in terms of organisational and funding arrangements and identify the most advantageous for them.
- Develop strategies for establishing and developing the ways in which they intend to work with volunteer-involving organisations who will provide the placements; the employment services and other sources of referrals; and other partners. The roles and responsibilities of each partner should be made clear, and if necessary and relevant, set out in a service level agreement with the funder or contractor.
- Be clear about the kinds of impact they intend to make and the ways – hard and soft – in which they can measure them systematically and rigorously. Including soft targets in monitoring may be more appropriate for some groups of people than recording the number of people moving back into work. Furthermore, it is important to adopt a holistic approach to the link between volunteering and employability. It should, for example, be recognised that some people may never be ready for employment, and that volunteering can provide a meaningful alternative to employment for many.

## 10. Sources of further information and advice

CEV (2007) Volunteering as a route (back) to employment. A report of the General Assembly 23.03.07 Paris CEV: Brussels  
<http://www.cev.be/data/File/CEV-GAParisReport.pdf>

Corden, A. and Sainsbury, R. (2004) Volunteering for employment skills: A qualitative research study Social Policy Research Unit: London

Gay, P. (1998) Getting into work: the role of volunteering in improving employability IVR: London

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Low, N., Butt, S., Ellis Paine, A. and Davis Smith, J. (2007) Helping out: a national survey of volunteering and charitable giving Cabinet Office: London

Ockenden, N. et al (2007) Volunteering works: volunteering and social policy IVR: London  
[http://www.volunteering.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/4D138A1D-022E-4570-9866-B8E3A4F86C20/0/Final\\_Volunteering\\_Works.pdf](http://www.volunteering.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/4D138A1D-022E-4570-9866-B8E3A4F86C20/0/Final_Volunteering_Works.pdf)

Volunteering England A route to opportunity: unemployed people Volunteering England: London  
<https://ecommerce.volunteering.org.uk/PublicationDetails.aspx?ProductID=V125>

Volunteering England information sheet on the accreditation of volunteering  
<http://www.volunteering.org.uk/Resources/goodpracticebank/Information/accreditationofvolunteering.htm>

# Methodology

**The research that informed this guide was carried out during March 2009 and consisted of three different elements:**

1. A literature review.
2. A telephone survey of 220 Volunteer Centres throughout England. This represents 58 per cent of all centres.
3. Eight case studies of Volunteer Centres demonstrating good practice in their work around volunteering and employability. For each case study, interviews with Volunteer Centre staff and partner agency staff were carried out, and discussions with volunteers on employability programmes were conducted. The eight Volunteer Centres were Cornwall, Birmingham, Broxbourne & East Herts, Kensington & Chelsea, Liverpool, Newcastle, Wandsworth, and Wirral.

## **The Institute for Volunteering Research**

The Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) is a specialist research and consultancy agency focusing on volunteering. IVR is an initiative of Volunteering England and the University of East London. It was set up in 1997 in response to the increased demand for research on volunteering. Over the past twelve years IVR has carried out a wide variety of research, consultancy and evaluation projects on many different aspects of volunteering. It has completed four national surveys of volunteering.

*[www.ivr.org.uk](http://www.ivr.org.uk)*

## **Volunteering England**

Volunteering England is the national volunteer development agency for volunteering and the accountable body for the network of Volunteer Centres. It promotes volunteering as a powerful force for change, for those who volunteer, involve volunteers and make policies that affect volunteers. Volunteering England works to support and increase in the quality, quantity, impact and accessibility of volunteering throughout England. It was formed in April 2004 following a merger between The Consortium on Opportunities for Volunteering, The National Centre for Volunteering and Volunteer Development England. Volunteering England provides the secretariat and accountable body functions for the Commission on the Future of Volunteering.

*[www.volunteering.org.uk](http://www.volunteering.org.uk)*

Published by the Institute for Volunteering Research and Volunteering England.  
Volunteering England is a Registered Charity No. 1102770.  
A company limited by guarantee Registered in England and Wales No. 4934814



**Institute for  
Volunteering  
Research**

Regent's Wharf  
8 All Saints Street  
London N1 9RL  
Tel: +44 (0)845 305 6979  
Fax: +44 (0)20 7520 8910  
Email: [ivr@volunteeringengland.org.uk](mailto:ivr@volunteeringengland.org.uk)  
[www.ivr.org.uk](http://www.ivr.org.uk)

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