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# Volunteering: a valuable pathway to employability

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## *Future of Public Services*

NCVO's 'Future of Public Services' series uses learning from our members to review the role of voluntary organisations in the delivery of public services. With the increasing use of new types of partnerships, contracts and payment models in public service design and delivery, how can we ensure local needs are met and the most disadvantaged not left behind? How can volunteers and voluntary organisations provide much needed engagement with local people? This series aims to tackle these questions and provides real examples of how services can be commissioned in a way that truly enables community-led delivery.

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### Introduction

Designing interventions which support long-term jobseekers in their paths to the labour market and employment is very challenging, given the range of barriers they face.

Long-term jobseekers may need to develop both soft skills – confidence, self-esteem, motivation to work – and hard skills – office skills, IT capability, updated job-specific skills – in order to make a successful transition into the labour market. At the same time, support, advice and mentoring are likely to be needed.

This report:

- highlights evidence from an independent evaluation of the Volunteering for Stronger Communities project<sup>1</sup>, delivered by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), that demonstrates how volunteering has helped people gain employment
- draws on an internal survey by NCVO of the national Volunteer Centre network with feedback on the relationships at local level between local Volunteer Centres and Jobcentre Plus branches
- makes recommendations for how the benefits of volunteering in supporting people on the road to employability can be better realised.

Drawing on the evidence from the Volunteering for Stronger Communities project and the NCVO survey of Volunteer Centres, there are a number of key recommendations which should be taken forward to further develop the role of volunteering in supporting employability.

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<sup>1</sup> Bashir, N, Crisp, R, Dayson, C and Gilbertson, J (2013). *Final evaluation of the Volunteering for Stronger Communities programme*. Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University

## Summary of Recommendations

### For the Department for Work and Pensions

- In reviewing the Work Programme and developing future employability provision, the Department should work with NCVO and voluntary organisations to develop proposals to enable more jobseekers to benefit from volunteering.
- To spread the effective support offered by the Volunteering for Stronger Communities project more widely, the Department should establish a fund to support innovative local employability projects by Volunteer Centres and other local voluntary organisations. This could provide a key match funding option for European Social Fund activity at the local level with the new Local Enterprise Partnership led strategies for local growth.
- The Department should actively champion the importance of local Jobcentre Plus branches working in partnership with Volunteer Centres to build on the strong partnership working in some areas.
- The Department should re-issue guidance to Work Programme contractors to make clear that contractors referring clients to Volunteer Centres and other voluntary organisations should pay a fair price for that service.

### For Jobcentre Plus

- Jobcentre Plus should review its staff training and internal communications to ensure that frontline Jobcentre Plus advisers have accurate and up to date knowledge of volunteering and benefits.
- Every Jobcentre Plus branch should engage with the local Volunteer Centre to work together to ensure jobseekers have access to high-quality volunteering opportunities.

### For voluntary organisations

- Where a partnership is not in place, Volunteer Centres should engage with Jobcentre Plus branches to try to broker joint working on employability issues.

## Project Summary: The Volunteering for Stronger Communities Project

The Volunteering for Stronger Communities project is a £1.9m programme funded by the Big Lottery Fund, which ran from October 2011<sup>2</sup> to December 2013. The project aimed to:

- increase levels of volunteering within disadvantaged groups and communities
- improve employability through volunteering and other forms of employment support to help those outside the labour market move closer to, or into, paid work
- enhance the skills, knowledge and resources of both Volunteers Centres and the volunteer-involving organisations they support
- strengthen the ability of Volunteer Centres and volunteer-involving organisations to influence local, regional and national policies and practice through shared learning.

The project was delivered by 15 Volunteer Centres across England in areas selected according to the economic deprivation of the area and the ability of the proposed project to deliver. The Volunteer Centres were funded through the programme to create and broker volunteering opportunities for the participants in partnership with local voluntary and community organisations, the Jobcentre Plus and other agencies, and to provide additional support to the participants in their volunteering and in the development of skills in CV writing and job applications.

Of participants in the project, 78% were defined as disadvantaged, and 53% had no GCSEs or equivalent qualification.

The project succeeded in assisting 22% of participants into paid work. Of those who had not found a job, 69% were actively seeking employment and 80% felt, as a result of participating in the programme, they were now more confident about finding paid employment.

The success of the VSC project has been creatively illustrated in the following short video: [youtu.be/vVDgnSnbnQk](https://youtu.be/vVDgnSnbnQk).

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<sup>2</sup> The project was initiated and run in Volunteering England until the merger with NCVO in January 2013.

## Section 1: The role of volunteering as a bridge to employment – lessons from the Volunteering for Stronger Communities Project

### 1.1 Barriers to volunteering for the long-term unemployed can be overcome

- People who face barriers to employment – low self-esteem, isolation, health problems, low levels of social capital – are often prevented by the same barriers from participating in volunteering and other activities. In order for jobseekers to benefit from volunteering, organisations with experience of helping volunteers overcome such barriers need to be involved in supporting successful progress towards the labour market.
- Drawing on the long experience of the Volunteer Centre network in helping hard to reach groups into volunteering, the project succeeded in securing progression into volunteering, with: ‘many individuals crediting VSC [the project’s] support with moving them closer to, or into, volunteering through making volunteering accessible.’<sup>3</sup>

### 1.2 Volunteering can tackle underlying barriers to participation in the labour market

- Health and well-being can be an important barrier to participation in both volunteering and employment. Both physical health and mental well-being issues of self-esteem and confidence can prevent people’s progress to the labour market. The project evaluation found ‘notable improvements in outcomes around confidence and self-esteem’ and reported improvements against other health and well-being measures.
- Participants reported that ‘these positive changes in perceived health and well-being were sustained for at least 12 months following their initial engagement with a VSC project.’<sup>4</sup>

### 1.3 Volunteering can support successful transition into employment

- One in five (22%) participants said that they had found paid work since taking part in the project. The evaluators found this to be a ‘credible performance, especially when benchmarked against outcomes achieved by national programmes.’<sup>5</sup>
- The project was found to be successful in supporting long-term unemployed people into work, with evaluators finding the project ‘clearly effective in supporting individuals some distance

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<sup>3</sup> Bashir, N, Crisp, R; Dayson, C and Gilbertson, J (2013). Final evaluation of the Volunteering for Stronger Communities programme. Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University. page 20

<sup>4</sup> ibid; page 26

<sup>5</sup> ibid; page 21

from the labour market.’ Of those who found paid work following participation in the project, 58% had been out of work for over 12 months.<sup>6</sup>

### 1.4 Volunteering can develop the skills needed to get back into work

- ‘The most notable change was associated with the practicalities of finding work.’<sup>7</sup> Participants were surveyed three times through the lifetime of the project and saw improvements of between 40% and 60% in ‘skills and experience, completing job applications and confidence in attending interviews.’<sup>8</sup> Even more positively, the evidence suggests that these ‘positive outcomes are sustained over time.’<sup>9</sup>
- Participants linked these improvements directly to their involvement in the Volunteering for Stronger Communities Project, with between two-thirds and four-fifths reporting the project had made some difference on ‘motivation to find work’, ‘confidence in holding down a job’, ‘skills and experience to find a job’, ‘completing job applications’, and ‘confidence in attending interviews’.

### 1.5 The project was successful in engaging hard-to-reach jobseekers

- The evaluation found that the project had ‘effectively reached disadvantaged individuals’<sup>10</sup>, with ‘78% of people who have engaged with the programme meeting its definition of being disadvantaged in the labour market’: ‘This shows that the project is engaging with some of the most marginalised or isolated in society.’
- Of those engaged with the programme, 15% had a disability, 23% were from minority ethnic backgrounds, 53% had no GCSEs or equivalent, and 90% were out of paid work.
- Delivering the project through locally based organisations with strong local community connections allowed the project to deliver responsiveness and flexibility. Organisations implemented or expanded outreach activities, engaging with long-term unemployed residents at community centres, local organisations working with vulnerable groups, job fairs and at Jobcentre Plus branches.
- In addition, the project was able to offer intensive one-to-one support for new participants to explore needs, aspirations and experience. Five of the projects offered mentoring to deliver intensive support.

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid*; page 21

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*; page 23

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*; page 23

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*; page 23

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*; page 18

## Section 2: Barriers preventing volunteering being used successfully as a local pathway to employment

The Volunteering for Stronger Communities project pointed to the importance of local collaboration using volunteering successfully to develop employability. The project, and a recent survey of NCVO Volunteer Centre members, has identified a number of barriers to stronger local partnerships around volunteering.

### 2.1 Lack of clarity about the definition of ‘volunteering’

- Staff in some Jobcentre Plus branches appear to be unclear about the definition of volunteering. This uncertainty can lead to confusion about appropriate volunteering roles for jobseekers and undermine attempts at closer partnership working between Jobcentre Plus branches and the voluntary sector.

‘There are some very strange definitions of volunteering still floating around and being used by Jobcentres... They also only recognise volunteering when it's for a charity, yet many volunteering roles these days are with the NHS, public sector, local government, emergency services, etc. Someone in Government needs to do some updating of what constitutes volunteering in today's world.’ (VC1)

- At local level and among individual advisers, there is sometimes confusion about the voluntary nature of volunteering and difficulty in distinguishing volunteering from unpaid jobs and community work placements.

### 2.2 Inconsistent Jobcentre Plus engagement with the voluntary sector

- Volunteer-involving organisations delivering employability programmes can find it difficult to engage with local Jobcentre Plus branches. Relationships are not always strong at a local level and can vary significantly within, and between, local areas. Evidence from the programme and NCVO's internal survey demonstrates that practice can vary significantly both within and between Jobcentre Plus districts.
- An example of the issue was the significant variation in the approach taken to the Volunteering for Stronger Communities project by Jobcentre Plus branches – some branches recognised the value of the project and made regular referrals while others chose not to engage with the project at all.

‘One project found [the Jobcentre] to make more appropriate referrals on the basis that they did not want their clients to lose access to volunteering opportunities. Others have



found ... staff difficult to access or unreceptive to requests to change their referral approach.’<sup>11</sup>

‘Jobcentre Plus and in particular Work Programme providers were seen as failing to make referrals despite the potential value of the Volunteering for Stronger Communities support to their clients.’<sup>12</sup>

- A particular difficulty in some relationships is an assumption by the Jobcentre Plus adviser that they can demand information from the Volunteer Centre about volunteers.

‘We have had enquiries in the past to see if people have attended from the Jobcentre - our policy is clear, we offer a confidential service to individuals and we do not release any details without the client’s permission.’ (VC3)

- Given the barriers many long-term jobseekers face engaging with volunteering and other activities, there is a need for concerted and resourced action among local agencies.

‘I think that many individuals are just perhaps getting lost in the system due to their support needs (be it confidence, language/ learning difficulties etc) and we do not have the resource to provide supported volunteering.’ (VC7)

### 2.3 Knowledge of frontline Jobcentre Plus staff

- Knowledge of volunteering and local volunteering provision is not always strong among local Jobcentre Plus staff. This can lead to inappropriate referrals to Volunteer Centres and other volunteer-involving organisations. It also means that inaccurate advice is sometimes given to jobseekers – for example, that volunteering is not compatible with receipt of benefits. There is evidence of confusion and uncertainty about regulations and how they apply to volunteering.

‘Our relationship is very good with senior managers in DWP but we still have some problems with front-line advisers. We are continually told that jobseekers are encouraged to volunteer by the Jobcentre, but we still get regular complaints from potential volunteers that the Jobcentre has frightened them off volunteering – usually by giving out of date information about how many hours someone can volunteer and the threat of losing benefits. What advisers often fail to recognise is many people seeking jobs are lacking confidence, and just a little time volunteering could set them up to apply for paid work further down the line.’ (VC1)

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<sup>11</sup> ibid; page 13

<sup>12</sup> ibid; page 13

## 2.4 Application of regulations and sanctions

- The ways in which regulations and guidelines are applied varies between Jobcentre Plus branches as noted, and sometimes appear to act against the best interests of the jobseeker in moving towards employment.

‘A major problem ... is the way JC advisers stop people volunteering and make them undertake short term work experience or a training programme without taking consideration to a) the amount of time, money and effort that has gone into securing the volunteering opportunity and b) the value of the volunteering experience compared to what JC are asking the person to do. Advisers I have spoken to say they have no flexibility in how they deal with job seekers and what they are doing.’ (VC4)

‘One of our “vols” has just been following up registrants and reported large numbers saying “I only registered because JC+ told me too”.’ (VC9)

‘Jobcentre Plus was criticised by a number of projects for referring individuals under threat of benefit sanctions.’<sup>13</sup>

- A particular problem for Volunteer Centres and their collaboration with Jobcentre Plus branches is what is presented in terms of sanctions.

‘We have had a number of recent instances of us being named in Job Seekers’ Agreements... eg “You must attend X Volunteer Centre and explore options for volunteering.” We have also had instances of people being told that they must volunteer or they will have their benefits stopped.’ (VC5)

## 2.5 Relationships with Work Programme contractors

- Issues about the implementation of the Work Programme have included difficult relationships in some areas between programme providers and local voluntary sector organisations. In particular, some prime contractors have sought to use Volunteer Centres to find placements for their clients but have not been prepared to pay for this referral service.
- This refusal to pay a fair price for a service comes despite clear guidance concerning the payment of subcontractors through the Merlin standard and a statement by a previous Minister for Employment which clarified: ‘Providers and their sub-contractors should not be approaching voluntary organisations if they have not entered into, or are intending to enter into, an agreement with them and they are outside of the supply chain’ (2 November 2011).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid*; page 13

<sup>14</sup> [www.volunteering.org.uk/images/stories/Volunteering-England/Documents/Policy/Benefits\\_employment/response\\_from\\_chris\\_grayling\\_mp.pdf](http://www.volunteering.org.uk/images/stories/Volunteering-England/Documents/Policy/Benefits_employment/response_from_chris_grayling_mp.pdf)

'[This Volunteer Centre] has a contract with a Work Programme Provider but we have never managed to make the contract work or make any money from it. Other Work Programme providers send people to us to get volunteering and training when they should be doing it themselves or engaging properly with us to provide this service. When we have tried to speak to these contractors they tell us that as the Volunteer Centre is funded by the council and everyone can access its services for free, why should they have to pay?' (VC4)

## Section 3: How volunteering could play a bigger role in supporting people on the pathway to work

### 3.1 Use volunteering to tackle the underlying barriers to work

- The independent evaluation of the Volunteering for Stronger Communities project found that participation in volunteering can contribute positively to increased self-esteem, confidence and other important underlying factors which are needed to successfully enter the labour market.
- The Volunteering for Stronger Communities project demonstrated how engaging in volunteering was a major factor for improvements in: 'skills and experience to find a job, overall health and well-being, feeling useful, feeling good about themselves, getting on well with the people they meet and getting out of the house to speak to people.'
- Given the challenge that underlying well-being and health concerns pose to employability, employment programmes and investment should recognise the ability of volunteering to contribute to improved health and well-being.

### 3.2 Recognise the role of Volunteer Centres in supporting people into volunteering opportunities

- In many cases people need to be supported to access volunteering opportunities.

'Our research has shown that within disadvantaged groups ... individuals do not realise the many benefits of volunteering; they do not know how to access information on volunteering; volunteering is not valued within their own social networks... Currently there is not a joined up approach within [this area] in supporting people who are unemployed, or who have low skills and lack self-confidence, to volunteer.' (VC3)
- A local Volunteer Centre has a key role to play as a supportive broker not only between potential volunteers and placements but between Jobcentre Plus branches and local volunteering organisations. Voluntary sector programmes to get people back into work will have more impact if Volunteer Centres are supported and resourced in this role.

'A key issue facing participants [in this VC's work experience programme] was a lack of current work experience compounded by a lack of basic skills. ... We tackled this by providing intensive 1:1 support to get people into work, along with the opportunity to access structured work experience placements within the local Third Sector... These were developed according to need, help embed behaviour change and be based around developing skills to build employability within a safe, flexible and supportive environment.' (VC6)

‘The project we are proposing will strengthen partnership working. We aim to establish lines of communication so referral agencies have a greater understanding of the benefits of volunteering and the range of opportunities required.’ (VC3)

### 3.3 Draw on the successes of existing partnership working between the Jobcentre Plus network, Volunteer Centres and the voluntary sector to spread this success more widely

- NCVO’s survey of the national Volunteer Centre network found good examples of strong and sustained collaboration between local Volunteer Centres and local Jobcentre Plus branches. In the most successful areas, Volunteer Centres are working closely with Jobcentre Plus to jointly deliver services including drop-in sessions, training for Jobcentre staff and their clients, information leaflets on volunteering for jobseekers and joint stalls at job fairs.

‘We work closely with the local Job Centre and have done for many years. We used to be seen as the dumping ground for the long term unemployed that the Job Centre had no real idea what to do with, but in more recent times the Job Centre has come to understand that we are looking for people who genuinely want to volunteer, and who stand a chance of being taken on by volunteer-seeking organisations. It has taken a long time to get to this position.’ (VC1)

‘We have a very good relationship with the Employer Adviser at the Job Centre covering our area... . They have all been extremely knowledgeable and positive about a voluntary placement helping on a variety of projects... . JCP run quarterly partnership meetings which are very well attended by a variety of different providers, projects and organizations giving members a chance to network, promote services and be up to date with JCP developments.’ (VC2)

- However, as these cases show, whilst there are strong examples of good practice, in other areas Jobcentres are unwilling to engage with local volunteering organisations.

#### Case A

In this area, the Volunteer Centre has a strong relationship with one branch of Jobcentre Plus. Volunteer Centre staff are in regular contact with Jobcentre Plus advisers to provide advice and book appointments for jobseekers to broker them into volunteering opportunities. Volunteer Centre staff also deliver outreach interviews in the Jobcentre one day each month and run information sessions on volunteering for Jobcentre Plus staff and jobseekers.

However, the Volunteer Centre has a more difficult relationship with the other three Jobcentre Plus branches in their area. Problems include advisers incorrectly advising jobseekers that it is mandatory for them to attend the Volunteer Centre and take up volunteering, informing

jobseekers that their benefits will be suspended if they do not volunteer and referring jobseekers for commercial work experience placements which the Volunteer Centre has repeatedly made clear it does not offer.

### Case B

In this area, one Jobcentre Plus branch hosts monthly drop-in sessions, which are reported to be successful and stimulate a lot of interest from jobseekers. The Volunteer Centre has tried to replicate this success with other branches in the county, but has only found limited interest and not been unable to win support to replicate the successful service in other branches in the county.

### Case C

There is a good partnership between Jobcentre Plus and the Volunteer Centre. Jobcentre Plus is funding the Volunteer Centre and the Council for Voluntary Service for 18 months to provide a programme of volunteering, training and jobseeking support to the long-term unemployed. The Jobcentre refers long-term unemployed clients to the Volunteer Centre, who provide on-going support via a Work Club, help with job searching, access to training and basic skills courses and broker jobseekers into volunteering opportunities to help them develop new skills.

## 3.4 Improve knowledge among frontline Jobcentre Plus staff about how benefit rules apply to volunteering

- Training for frontline advisers should be improved to ensure that advisers are familiar with the ways in which benefit rules apply to volunteering. As noted, whilst some Volunteer Centres have reports of well-informed advisers, there are other cases where advisers are applying rules misguidedly and in ways that act against jobseekers' involvement in volunteering.
- This is particularly important given the roll-out of Universal Credit. Universal Credit has particular implications for volunteering, as claimants can count volunteering as half of their job-search activity. In order to successfully manage Universal Credit, advisers will need a more effective working knowledge of how Universal Credit regulations impact volunteering.

### 3.5 Invest in volunteering programmes as part of the mix for employability

- The Volunteering for Stronger Communities project demonstrates a strong range of positive outcomes and an impressive success rate. Its findings on the value of volunteering in helping people into employment are generally echoed by other research. This summer a report for the USA Corporation for National and Community Service found volunteering associated with a 27% higher likelihood of gaining employment.<sup>15</sup>
- The analysis of the positive and negative factors enabling volunteering to support pathways into work demonstrates the importance of effective local relationships in creating opportunities and support for volunteers. This analysis has identified strong examples of good practice in local relationships, and hence the potential to mainstream good practice.
- Underpinning this report is the fact that the Volunteer Centres in the Stronger Communities project were funded to do the work which has brought the successes. However, many Volunteer Centres are currently under great financial pressure as a consequence of restrictions in public expenditure in local government, and so attention must be given to how good practice can be spread despite tight budgets.
- The report does not claim that volunteering is a universal solution, but it demonstrates that volunteering has a valuable role in the mix of ways in which people can be helped to progress towards the labour market and employment.

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<sup>15</sup> Spera, C et al (2013) Volunteering as a Pathway to Employment: Does Volunteering Increase Odds of Finding a Job for the Out of Work? Washington, DC: Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Research and Evaluation.  
[www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/upload/employment\\_research\\_report.pdf](http://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/upload/employment_research_report.pdf)