Volunteering in Tower Hamlets

Local Perspectives on Volunteering Trends and Issues

Kim Donahue
Volunteer Centre Tower Hamlets

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Volunteer Centre Tower Hamlets
Formerly Volunteer Action Tower Hamlets

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Introduction

The Tower Hamlets Volunteering Research Project was commissioned by Volunteer Centre Tower Hamlets (VCTH) in order to create baseline information related to volunteering locally and to explore the scope and quality of volunteering in the borough. It is the first time that volunteering trends and activities in Tower Hamlets have been measured and has the potential to serve as a model for other London boroughs. Further information and statistics can be found in the full report which includes a detailed methodology, demographics and motivations of volunteers, volunteering charts and tables, VCTH client profile, socio-economic impact of volunteering, survey questions and references.

The project was funded by the London Borough of Tower Hamlets (LBTH) via the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund through the Tower Hamlets Partnership. It specifically addresses the Local Area Agreement, Stronger Communities target for increasing volunteering and improving volunteer management (THP, 2006). The specific research goals included:

- **Mapping baseline levels of formal and informal volunteering in Tower Hamlets of residents who are over sixteen, their demographics and the type and frequency of formal volunteering;**
- **Understanding the motivations and barriers experienced by volunteers in Tower Hamlets;**
- **Understanding volunteer retention levels and barriers to volunteering for volunteer involving organisations (VIOs) in Tower Hamlets;**
- **Understanding conversion rates (the percentage of clients who start volunteering after brokerage) of VCTH individual clients;**
- **Understanding the VCTH client profile (both individuals and VIOs) and a limited exploration of the socio-economic impact of volunteering on the community and volunteers in Tower Hamlets.**

While there are two national surveys of volunteering activity in the UK and a vast amount of research on the topic of volunteering, there is very little data available about volunteering in specific areas, particularly in any London boroughs. This research breaks new ground in this regard and hopes to encourage other localities to follow suit in mapping their particular communities.

The project began in November 2006 and was managed in four distinct phases: planning and desk-based research, data collection, analysis and report writing. A steering group was formed to advise and assist with research direction. There were several target groups for data collection: Tower Hamlets adult residents (over sixteen years old), VCTH individual volunteers and VIO clients and other VIOs operating in the borough. The majority of the research is focused on formal volunteering and it should be noted that this does not necessarily reflect ‘civic duties’ such as being a magistrate or a school governor. Research instruments included telephone surveys, an e-survey, focus groups and VBase (a database of volunteers using VCTH brokerage services).

Key Results

Results indicate that 29% of Tower Hamlets residents who are 16 years old or older have participated in formal volunteering in the previous year. Based on the 2001 census, this would translate into 43,852 formal volunteers residing in the borough. The survey also indicates that more than half the adult population (51%) have formally volunteered at some point in their lives. **Informal volunteering is even more common in the borough, with 63% of adults in Tower Hamlets participating in informal volunteering in the previous year.** These statistics are comparable nationally to volunteering numbers in areas with high levels of deprivation.

Women volunteer more than men, representing approximately 64% of volunteers in the borough. The majority of volunteers in the borough are under 50 years of age, with a roughly equal split between the age groups that are 16-49. The ethnicity of volunteers for the most part follows the pattern in the population, with more than a third Bangladeshi (36%), and the total number of Black or Minority Ethnic (BME) volunteers at 48%. This is also true of religion, where volunteering patterns follow the local population numbers. The majority of volunteers are Christian (40%), Muslim (33%) or do not have a religion (20%).

"Volunteering is a good thing…everyone should do it, it's a fantastic way to build the community"

Research Project respondent, February 2007

When asked about the frequency of their formal volunteering activities, more than half (51%) the volunteers gave at least two hours of their time per week. Of these 'regular' volunteers, respondents averaged 13 hours of volunteering in the previous month. Based on that data, it could be estimated that there are at least 22,466 regular formal volunteers in the borough, contributing over 100,134 seven-hour days of work each year. This is the equivalent to more than 2,000 full time staff each year. Based on the average hourly London wage, this represents a value of £51,939,595 per year, before taking into account any costs associated with volunteering. It is important to note that this represents only a minimal figure for volunteering, as it does not include volunteer work that happens seasonally, as a 'one-off' or any informal volunteering activity.

4 Conversion Rates

To understand how many clients began volunteering with VIOs (the conversion rate), a phone survey was carried out among VCTH clients. Results revealed that overall, 25% of clients began volunteering. However when the data is broken down by face-to-face appointments and online volunteers, the conversion rates are 38% and 17% respectively. This can be compared with the overall national conversion rates of online volunteers experienced by Do It of 20% (2007). The picture that emerges suggests that approximately half of all VCTH clients attempt to contact VIOs but fail to begin volunteering, predominantly due to not hearing back from VIOs or extremely long wait times. Another quarter of VCTH clients do not attempt to contact VIOs at all due to lack of time or the loss of interest. The remaining quarter successfully begin volunteering.

"You come across people from all backgrounds, ages, professions and you are able to interact with all of them, you appreciate the difference and work together in harmony…you learn to become non-judgemental…it's been a wonderful experience"

Research Project respondent, February 2007

Once VCTH clients begin volunteering, they appear to be having positive experiences. Most of the phone survey respondents who had started volunteering were given an induction and 12 out of 15 volunteers were volunteering one day per week or more. VCTH volunteers averaged over five hours per week of volunteering.

Barriers

The number one barrier experienced by current volunteers or those currently attempting to volunteer is the lack of or slow response from VIOs to volunteer enquiries. In addition to this key barrier, other factors at play include an unwelcoming organisational environment, the lack of flexibility of VIOs, extensive training requirements, lack of clarity as to roles, poor volunteer management skills, lack of support for volunteers, high levels of competition for volunteer posts, low numbers of 'desirable' volunteer posts and low self-esteem among volunteers. These factors, if present, are likely to cause volunteers to leave or limit the extent of volunteering within a VIO.

In terms of volunteering and volunteer management, VIOs face barriers in areas related to resources, training and development, organisational culture and the clash of needs between volunteers and organisations. The scarcity of resources is interrelated with the lack of appropriate training and skills development related to volunteer management. Low levels of resources in VIOs often means there are not enough staff and most staff are juggling multiple roles, such as being the receptionist, volunteer coordinator and office manager in one post. This phenomenon is bound to have an effect on the quality of volunteer recruitment and management. Opportunities to take up training related specifically to volunteer management are not maximised. This, combined with a lack of time and resources among VIO staff, create an under-skilled sub-sector of volunteer managers who are often struggling to meet the demands of an under-resourced organisation.

Retention

Retention levels among VIOs are extremely difficult to gauge, as many organisations do not fully monitor information about their volunteers, such as start and end dates. It also presents a problem because there are different time periods of activity among volunteers, with some doing one-off or episodic volunteering for example. This research has attempted to provide a snapshot of volunteering levels over the course of one year for VIOs. In this time period, the 67 respondent VIOs worked with a total of 11,814 volunteers. The median (middle point in a range of data) number of volunteers among respondents was 23. Of the total number of volunteers, 9% were inactive over the course of the year, 11% were 'new start' volunteers and a further 5% stopped volunteering. It would be reasonable to estimate from these numbers that there is an overall small net gain of volunteers among respondent VIOs over a year. VIO focus group respondents commented on a possible correlation between the length of training required of volunteers and volunteer commitment. There may be lower retention among volunteer posts with high training requirements but these volunteers may make longer commitments. Posts with lower skill or training needs may have lower levels of long-term commitment.

Conclusions

This research has clearly shown that volunteering in Tower Hamlets has an important place within the vibrant and diverse communities and neighbourhoods, as well as the voluntary sector. Volunteering is a lifeline to those receiving services, Volunteers Involving Organisations and for the volunteers themselves, who gain so much. Volunteering is not only important to the people and organisations who benefit from it but it is also a key element to improving public services, building social inclusion, enabling greater citizenship and fostering better communities that are more tolerant – factors that should be very interesting to local government and the voluntary sector in Tower Hamlets. Lastly, it is critical that there be an open dialogue regarding volunteering costs and benefits to organisations and to minimise the number of VIOs experiencing a net loss in relation to volunteering. Organisations should be equipped to make an informed decision as to whether or not volunteering is appropriate for them. The full costs of volunteering need to be made visible along with the clear gains of volunteering so that both volunteers and VIOs can be fully supported to reach their goals.

Recommendations

The research findings have produced a wealth of information related to how much and what type of volunteering takes place in the borough, the needs of VIOs and the role of the Volunteer Centre.

Based on the data collected and the findings, a series of recommendations are set forth below and grouped by target audience. The overarching themes that run through the recommendations are in the following areas:

- Overcoming communication barriers that prevent volunteers from starting and help to increase conversion rates
- Supporting volunteers with extra needs
- Clarifying roles and expectations
- Training and accreditation needs
- Capacity building and resources for volunteer management
- Making informed organisational decisions based on an accurate understanding of the costs and benefits of volunteering
- Monitoring and tracking progress of volunteers and volunteering

8 Recommendations to Volunteer Centres

VCs should develop systems to support and monitor volunteers throughout their volunteering experience. This should specifically include monitoring to find out if the client has started volunteering, how long they stay, the quality of their experience and reasons why they leave volunteer posts.

Levels of communication and coordination between VIOs and VCs should be increased. This is especially important with regard to expectations, updates of information and feedback. The Do It website should be updated regularly with information about VIO volunteering contacts and current opportunities.

Improve systems for capturing demographic and equalities information about clients that include age, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and gender.

The creation of specific guidelines for VIOs as to how to work with volunteers and associated good practice would help alleviate some of the barriers present for volunteers.

Volunteers would benefit from support groups or events where they could share their experiences and support each other in a friendly atmosphere. VCs are also in a good position to understand training needs and to develop or facilitate training for volunteers in generic areas that their VIO clients would find useful and appropriate (i.e. fundraising).

It should be recognised that some volunteers need multiple appointments and extra support in order to begin volunteering. VC procedures should allow for this, as and when necessary.

A large number of VIOs are still unaware of or unclear about the services and benefits of VCs. Increased publicity about the role of VCs and services available to VIOs should be undertaken, especially highlighting brokerage, training and advice available.

Considering the recurrent issue of low resources available to VIOs; more information, training and capacity building specifically related to funding a volunteer programme should be developed and shared.

VCs should take the lead in providing direct capacity building support to VIOs related to volunteer management, even if it is in partnership with a capacity building programme, for example with a CVS.

VIOs would benefit by having guidelines related to volunteering and the Olympics from VCs.

Governing body volunteers such as trustees and management committee members should be more consciously included in outreach and volunteering support activities from VCs.

VCs should regularly capture feedback from VIOs so as to benefit from their practical experience, particularly in terms of best practice development.

VCs should design into events and training for VIOs more information sharing and networking among groups.

VCs should clarify their role within the volunteering sub-sector as well as their expectations of volunteers and VIOs so that everyone is clear about roles and responsibilities.

Create local volunteer recognition annual events.

VCs should create more partnerships with the private sector and organisations working with the private sector to encourage professional volunteers to share their skills within the voluntary and public sector as volunteers.

Recommendations to Volunteer Centre Tower Hamlets (VCTH)

Consider developing a method of identifying people who need additional support.

Volunteers who attended appointments should be contacted after a month to follow up with them regarding additional support needs they might have and to find out if they started volunteering.

VCTH should develop additional feedback mechanisms to encourage volunteers to comment on and evaluate their services.

VCTH should provide more opportunities to enable their VIO clients to do more networking, information sharing and partnership exploration.

Creation of an annual volunteer managers' award programme could highlight best practice in volunteer management across the borough, publicise VCTH and highlight training needs within the sector.

Services provided by VCTH should have wider publicity.

Creation of a volunteer leadership award given to an outstanding member of a governing body in Tower Hamlets could help to highlight trustees and management committee volunteer roles.

VCTH could provide clients with a 'drop-in' time for volunteers to come to VCTH and access a range of resources and support.

The building where VCTH is currently housed could use better signage that directs volunteers to VCTH. It would also be useful to have information about volunteering available to passers-by and visitors to the building.

Volunteers with extra support needs may need more direction or targeted placements when being matched with a VIO.

It should be acknowledged that volunteers with extra support needs may need additional guidance and time from VC staff in order to develop a good match.

In order to increase staff capacity and efficiency VCTH should explore new ways to support volunteers.

VCTH should review and amend their equalities monitoring form for volunteers, particularly in relation to disability, religion and sexual orientation, as these areas are probably being misrepresented by under-reporting.

10 Recommendations to VIOs

Response to potential volunteers who have contacted your organisation about volunteering must be quick and must reach all those who have contacted the VIO. Although factors such as CRB disclosures, training and references may slow down the volunteering process, volunteers should be contacted initially as soon as possible (ideally within 48 hours) in order to let them know what the process involves, who the contact person is and the anticipated wait time.

Publicity about VIO volunteer opportunities and needs should be easily and widely available in areas such as Do It, the VIO's own website and other appropriate places. VIOs who are registered with VCTH should update their opportunities and contact information on a regular basis.

VIOs should create a welcoming and friendly environment for volunteers.

Volunteer managers should spend an adequate amount of time with volunteers up front in order to clarify and expand the volunteers' understanding of their role and the organisation. Volunteer managers should also clarify what kinds of support the volunteer can expect from them or other staff.

Volunteer managers should give a thorough induction or orientation to the volunteer and also explain how they can tap into other opportunities to get to know the organisation.

VIOs should have a volunteer recognition programme which is inclusive, regular and appreciative of volunteer efforts across the organisation.

As much as possible, volunteer managers should allow for flexible schedules in volunteer activities.

Every organisation that capitalises on volunteer labour should have a central paid volunteer coordinator post within it. Additionally, the governing body of the VIO should appoint a volunteering 'champion' to promote and lead volunteering efforts within their organisation.

Volunteers within VIOs should be given regular feedback on the quality of their work and they should be given the opportunity to comment on and evaluate the activities of the VIO.

Paid staff within VIOs who recruit, supervise or manage volunteers should be required to attend volunteer management training and development on a regular basis (e.g annually).

VIOs should develop volunteering evaluation methods for their programmes so as to demonstrate the impact, costs and benefits of volunteering.

Recommendations to Regional and National Infrastructure Bodies

Create a mechanism for pan-London groups to access the services of VCs without having to register with each borough.

Do It should amend their database to enable VCs to adequately monitor equality strands such as sexual orientation and religion.

Do It should develop a follow up survey for VCs that would track volunteers after their initial contact with the VC through their volunteering experience.

Co-ordinating national volunteer recognition and award events. This could also include funding for volunteer training and accreditation schemes in particular areas of focus such as young people on governing bodies, disabled volunteers, BME fundraising volunteers, etc.

Campaign for additional resources to be directed toward volunteering efforts, particularly for VCs to provide services to people with extra needs.

Recommendations to Volunteers

Volunteers should be responsible and reliable. Not only do volunteers need to abide by the policies and procedures set forth by the VIO, they also need to seriously consider what kind of commitment they can make to an organisation and then do their best to honour that commitment. If VCTH volunteers experience any problems volunteering or starting to volunteer, they should contact VCTH immediately.

If training is offered as part of a volunteer placement, the volunteer should consider the cost of the training to the VIO and ensure that the volunteer time they give back to the organisation will outweigh the costs associated with training and preparation, so that there is a 'net gain' for the VIO.

Volunteers have a responsibility to do their best to understand their own needs and to articulate those needs to VC and VIO staff in order to develop a successful volunteer placement. This means volunteers need to be honest and clear about their expectations, skills, circumstances and other commitments.

Recommendations to Funders

When funding organisations, funders must consider the 'full cost' of volunteering and volunteer management within VIOs. This includes a portion of the volunteer managers' time, volunteers' direct and indirect expenses, training costs and recruitment costs.

Funding agreements could include volunteer management training as part of the funding arrangement for projects that have high volunteer components.

Funding arrangements should either build staff time for monitoring into the funding, provide extra support for monitoring or create a more streamlined system that is easier and less time-consuming for volunteer managers.

Funders should focus on funding volunteer programmes that are clearly producing results and benefitting the community rather than a requirement to re-invent new projects.

Volunteer Centre Tower Hamlets

Mission Statement

Volunteer Centre Tower Hamlets (VCTH) provides a comprehensive and responsive volunteering infrastructure service to Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) and volunteers in Tower Hamlets.

Our Aims Are

- To provide volunteering brokerage, matching local people to volunteering opportunities
- To market volunteering, encouraging everyone to participate
- To develop good practice in VIOs by providing training and advice
- To develop a wide range of high quality volunteering opportunities in the borough
- To respond to policy and to campaign on volunteering issues
- To develop volunteering strategically in Tower Hamlets

This document is an Exective Summary. To obtain a copy of the full research report, "Volunteering in Tower Hamlets, Local Perspectives on Volunteering Trends and Issues", please visit www.towerhamlets.org.uk/volunteering where you can download the pdf, or call Volunteer Centre Tower Hamlets on 020 7377 0956.

Volunteer Centre Tower Hamlets
1st Floor, Norvin House
45-55 Commercial Street
London, E1 6BD
T. 020 7377 0956
F. 020 7426 9979
E. info@towerhamlets.org.uk
W. www.towerhamlets.org.uk

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