Volunteering Principles for Scotland

‘Embedding volunteering across policy agendas in Scotland’

1. Volunteering is a free will activity and the definition and application of volunteering will be respected.
2. Volunteering represents a valuable contribution to society which helps deliver stronger, more resilient, communities.
3. Volunteering is not job replacement.
4. All public policy should consider its impact on volunteering.
5. Public services should be planned in a way that is enabling of volunteering.
6. Volunteer Involving Organisations are supported to build their capacity and support and manage volunteers effectively.

Defining Volunteering

In 2004 the then Scottish Executive commissioned a significant piece of work to help set a strategic approach to embedding a robust culture of volunteering in Scotland. The ‘Volunteering Strategy’ set a useful benchmark for volunteering policy and brought volunteering to the fore. In the 10 years since the strategy was created we have seen the importance of volunteering to society increase, particularly in light of the financial crisis and subsequent austerity measures. However, we have not seen the requisite embedding of volunteering across national policy areas, both at a UK and Scottish Government level, in a way that recognises its contribution and potential whilst protecting the principles of volunteering our network holds dear.

The definition of volunteering has not changed in the interim period. Its application, however, has. Much of what we seek now is to define what is not volunteering, where the line is drawn to ensure individuals are not being exploited or ‘voluntold’.

For Voluntary Action Scotland (VAS) volunteering has three clear characteristics which must be present and respected in all cases:

1. Volunteering is a free will activity. It must not be undertaken through coercion and under no circumstances can it be mandatory.
2. It is not undertaken for financial gain. Outwith reasonable expenses there must be no financial transaction to encourage someone to volunteer.
3. It is a public and civil good undertaken for the benefit of the community, society at large or an individual other than the volunteer.

In setting out an internationally recognised definition of volunteering we create distinct criteria which policymakers must meet when considering the role of volunteering across different policy
areas. This makes a clear, unambiguous, statement of what we see as being the bedrock of volunteering.

From ‘Volunteering’ to ‘Voluntold’

Recently there has been a growing concern about the increase in instances of what appears to be ‘mandatory volunteering’. One particular example being the introduction of Community Work Placements which has seen individuals being coerced into volunteering roles for fear of benefit sanctions. This goes against the very ethos of volunteering as we would see it, removing free will and leading our network to coin a new term; being ‘voluntold’. Welfare reform is the highest profile example but for some time Third Sector Interfaces (TSIs) have noticed a gradual increase in people being ‘sent’ to volunteer. This approach places undue pressures upon TSIs and volunteer involving organisations, stretching already limited third sector resources to the potential detriment of volunteer, recipient and organisation. Experience or internships with an organisation can be of great benefit to the individual and the organisation but this is not volunteering and should be treated appropriately.

Welfare may become a devolved matter in the near future presenting all supporters of the principles we set out with a unique opportunity to influence the policy and design of a system consistent with these principles. However, we do not know the extent of this reform or whether a devolved system may be dependent on the wider UK system (as in Northern Ireland). It is therefore essential that the Scottish Government brings influence to bear on the Department of Work and Pensions to establish national protocols for the referral of potential volunteers to third sector interfaces and volunteer involving organisations from Job Centre Plus. Currently TSIs have very different experiences dealing with their local Job Centre Plus, some have a healthy relationship which has led to the emergence of useful local protocols. Sadly this is not the case throughout Scotland and therefore this would benefit from a national strategic approach.

Why good volunteering principles matter to Scotland

These principles that we set out matter for two reasons. Firstly they are held dear by many people including our network and the thousands of volunteers and volunteer involving organisations they support. Secondly, volunteering is important to the social fabric of Scotland and has great potential to build this social fabric stronger still. The referendum showed the potential for greater participation, for an ‘active citizenship’ that – whatever its view – wanted to contribute and make change. Policy therefore needs to be enabling rather than controlling and live up to these principles if these benefits are to be realised.

Research undertaken by Volunteer Scotland, based on the Scottish Household Survey 2013, found that 28% of adults in Scotland volunteer, this amounts to 1.25 million people in Scotland undertaking a formal volunteering role. Other countries have higher rates of volunteering and TSIs work hard to open up volunteering to those traditionally not having access to it. Volunteering therefore has great

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potential to grow if supported by efficacious policy, resources and the development of the most enabling environment possible for the third sector and volunteers.

Government and statutory services in particular have a role to play. These principles seek to avoid seeing volunteering being treated as ‘cheap labour’ or as a compelled activity. But in seeking to help people and communities volunteers goals often align with those of public services, be they third or statutory sector. TSIs are often involved in brokering the relationships across sectors and different types and scale of organisations to realise the benefits of volunteering. When volunteers introduce new activities or befriending in a care home they don’t replace a public service but add to it by improving outcomes for the residents. As with the third sector more broadly, realising this potential requires a combination of ‘letting go’ but at the same time supporting new and innovative activity. Our principles should assist Government and public services to realise that potential in an enabling and supportive fashion.

Why good volunteering principles matter to TSIs

The Scottish Government supports the third sector and volunteering locally through its investment in our members, Scotland’s 32 Third Sector Interfaces. This investment in infrastructure helps pave a way into volunteering for the general public and provides support for volunteer involving organisations. TSIs are also charged with building bridges to the statutory sector via community planning and often via a range a public service reforms. The TSIs are therefore a vital element in creating the most supportive environment for volunteering in accordance with these principles;

1. The TSI provides an entry point for members of the public who wish to volunteer and therefore need the backing of agreed principles for volunteering. It helps the individual find the right volunteering opportunity for them and acts as a support throughout this process. This is important as it helps promote longevity in volunteering; placing someone in appropriate volunteering is more likely to ensure they are better engaged and able to make the most of their skills, talents and knowledge for the community’s gain. It is also important for helping new people into volunteering, especially those less likely to volunteer or who need support and assistance to do so.

2. The TSI supports volunteer involving organisations who will also benefit from nationally agreed principles for volunteering. Volunteering is about more than giving up your time to carry out a task, a volunteering opportunity should be of a high quality and worthwhile to all involved. In supporting volunteer involving organisations, TSIs help to create the best environment for high quality volunteering opportunities. They provide the vital support structures and deliver calibrated support based on the needs of organisations and often accredit organisations through recognition schemes such as Volunteer Friendly³.

3. TSIs work hard to build relationships with the statutory sector locally via community planning and wider opportunities emerging from public service reform. In so doing they provide a uniquely valuable ‘front line’ in making the case for the most enabling environment for volunteering based on the principles established here. This means that TSIs are important in helping the statutory sector

³ http://volunteerfriendly.org.uk/
understand how volunteers can help improve outcomes for people locally and broker the arrangements that can lead to more and better volunteering opportunities and volunteers.

**Good volunteering principles and public service reform: going further**

In some areas in Scotland work has been undertaken to identify how volunteering fits into the policy landscape locally, such as in Edinburgh where the Edinburgh Compact Partnership has produced a volunteering strategy which sets a shared vision between public and third sector partners for volunteering. In creating local strategies the value and potential of volunteering is becoming recognised in those localities.

However this also needs to be reflected in the national policy arena. The distinct principles we support and the environment for volunteering we wish to see needs to be embedded not just in one policy area but reflected across all relevant policy areas at a national level, whether this be in health, education, community empowerment or elsewhere. A cohesive cross-policy approach will help maximise the potential of volunteering and allow consideration of how volunteering can make a positive impact, this is particularly relevant in the context of public service reform. We have therefore identified six key principles for volunteering that we will be encouraging the Scottish Government and others to adopt and consider when creating public policy:

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