

## THINKING ABOUT VOLUNTEERING IN A RURAL CONTEXT

### The times we are in

The pandemic has created both challenges and opportunities in the field of volunteering. Many mature to very mature volunteers have had to step back due to the pandemic. Having to stop volunteering due to the lockdowns seems to have given people the opportunity to reconsider their lives and their priorities. In uncertain times, while it appears that while some people are less likely to commit, others may welcome an opportunity to do something new and to reconnect with people and exert some agency over things, however small, at a time when many people feel disempowered by everything that has happened and is continuing to happen.

Over recent years the level of volunteering has decreased in many countries. This may well reflect the busy lives that many people currently lead where time is perceived to be a very precious commodity. A feature of this is the increase in the number of grandparents who regularly care for their grandchildren in England. This, and other examples of supporting other generations of one's family, can reduce the capacity for community volunteering activities. However, the radical changes in life that the pandemic has brought about, not least in working from home for many people, may have the potential for people to want to spend time away from their computers, to get outside, and to be with others.

It is important to remember that there are still many people who are already deeply committed to volunteering for issues to do with food poverty, to take one example, and there are always people who might like to volunteer and are wondering how they might do this and for whom and with whom. There is an altruistic thread in many people which well targeted, interesting, and enjoyable opportunities to volunteer might engage with.

### How might one recruit and retain people?

- Be able to state clearly what is good about your organisation and how its work is of benefit.
- Undertake a major review of all the volunteering activities you have. It can be useful to ask if they are all essential and if other areas might prove more fruitful. Many churches are caught in the cycle of the way in which they do things, which requires the voluntary input to keep going. What if we only pursued those areas where there are volunteers with energy and passion for that area, and simply reduced or stopped those areas where the volunteers are not there?
- Aim for maximum clarity over what you are seeking.
- Offer a range of opportunities.
- Talk to other local organisations such as schools, WI, and charities to share experiences and insights. Might one consider forming a joint social and fundraising group with PCC and other village groups such as the Village Hall Committee and Sports Association, and running joint events rather than competing?
- Remember that some people are more inclined to offer to help with a one-off activity or for a limited period of time.

- Consider how ideas relating to volunteering may be connected with thinking regarding generosity.
- Review your induction and mentoring procedures.
- Update and refresh this part of your website.
- When people move into your village, seek creative ways to engage with them early on. Many newcomers not only want to feel they are part of village life, but they may have creative and useful new ideas to offer.
- Stress the benefits of volunteering, not least that it can be fun.
- Offer the possibility of becoming part of a team or community of volunteers, with the potential to meet new people.
- Seek to publicise what you are doing and its contribution to the wider common good.
- Look at what is most important to do, rather than trying to keep things going because they have always been run.
- There are various levels of volunteering, and it may be helpful to bear this in mind, for example, level 1 is being an office holder, while level 2 involves serving as a committee or council member which entails sharing responsibilities with others, level 3 organising an event or activity, and level 4 contributing to an event or activity. At level 1 we have 'professionalised' volunteering which involves much more training than in the past. There is also a more litigious trend in society so people may fear being personally liable. These changes mean that many feel they do not have the capacity or capability to take on these level 1 roles. The skill here may be to try and recruit more people at level 4 initially, such that the pool for the other levels increases.
- Ensure the tasks you are seeking volunteers for are regularly prayed for.
- Nominate someone to be your Volunteer Supremo.
- Regularly review how you support, reassure and affirm your volunteers. If one has an annual celebration of village life, to affirm everyone who volunteers in any way for any organisation, is often much appreciated.
- Inform people how you are handling the risks associated with Covid-19.
- Be honest about the challenges you are facing.
- Consider what volunteer resources you currently have and try and match them to what you need, rather than the other way round which has been a common approach in the past.
- Work to a shorter time scale.
- Pitch the training such that it is appropriate to what is being sought.
- Be prepared to ask for less from people.
- Seek volunteers' observations.
- Provide evidence of indemnity against personal liability.
- Consider if you can offer flexibility regarding timings, roles, and tasks.
- Ensure you thank volunteers for what they are contributing.
- Keep in touch with those who are not volunteering at present.

I hope this short paper may facilitate some fresh thinking on recruiting and retaining volunteers in your context. If you would like to discuss this further, do please make contact with me.

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