

Community participation and volunteering in rural transport projects

Summary

Through its demonstration schemes the Countryside Agency has grant aided a wide range of rural transport projects, many of which are dependent on local volunteers to succeed. The goal has been to learn lessons for others to adopt. This study looked at the experiences of both the volunteers and the project operators, in order to identify best practice in working with volunteers on rural transport projects. There were differences in perception between the two groups; for example, project operators felt that the key to retaining volunteers was regular rewards and recognition of volunteer time, whilst volunteers rated the organisation of the project more highly. The experiences of both groups established some reliable, low cost recruitment methods that project operators could use to attract volunteers, including:

- word of mouth, through current volunteers;
- media articles, such as 'A Day in the Life of a Minibus Driver'; and
- the inclusion of project and volunteering details in retirement plans from local businesses.

Main findings

Background

The general barriers to volunteering have been well researched. However, there was less information available on:

- specific motivations to volunteering for rural transport projects;
- the experiences of the volunteers themselves; and
- case studies showing the different recruitment and retention techniques used in rural transport projects.

The Countryside Agency developed research to correct this gap and to draw lessons and best practice from its rural transport programmes. The key objectives were to:

- engage with volunteers and project operators from a range rural transport projects to discuss volunteering;
- listen to the experiences of the volunteers themselves;

Research Findings

Volunteer motivations

- The two most popular motivations for volunteering were individuals wanting something to do with their spare time after retirement (36 respondents) and wanting to help others (35 respondents).
- 78 out of 81 volunteers were either satisfied or very satisfied with their voluntary position.
- Those who were not satisfied attributed this to the work not meeting their expectations, not receiving enough work, or the project being poorly organised.
- The main perceived disadvantage of volunteering was that it became time consuming.
- Interest in transport issues was an important motivation to some of the respondents (see Table 1).

- identify good practice and lessons learnt from a range of existing Countryside Agency-funded transport projects, particularly those designed to include the recruitment of new volunteers; and
- develop case studies illustrating the different recruitment and retention techniques used in a range of rural transport projects.

The research was sensitive to the difference between 'volunteering' and 'participation', as these terms are often used to indicate different types of activity. For the purpose of the study, '**volunteers**' were defined as individuals who took part in a fixed activity over a period of time with a consistent role without which the scheme would be unable to run. '**Participants**' were described as individuals who took part in a process.

Table 1: Most popular motivations of respondents from different types of schemes

Bus Drivers (n = 16)	Car Drivers (n = 33)	Committee Members (includes participants)(n= 8)	Other (eg. co-ordinators, finance, recruiting, promotion, participants)(n= 24)
(1) Retired and seeking something to do (56%)	(1) Retired and seeking something to do (51%)	(1) Altruism – helping the community (37.5%)	(1) Altruism – helping the community (75%)
(2) Enjoyment of driving (50%)	(2) Altruism – helping others (58%)	(2) Retired and seeking something to do (37.5%)	(2) Interest in transport (62.5%)

Recruitment methods

The most effective method of recruitment was word of mouth (see Figure 1).

- One word of mouth technique proposed was for each member of local groups or parish committees to think of six people who might be interested in volunteering and then to contact them direct. This allowed potential volunteers to receive information from a familiar source.
- Both volunteers and project operators saw notices on local boards as effective, but staffed exhibition stands were seen as less effective, as project operators felt that they did not bring in more volunteers.
- Volunteer bureaux were seen as a valuable resource, as they hold a list of volunteers willing to take part in different activities.
- Local company retirement plans were suggested as a source of recruiting volunteers, as these can tap into specific skills (eg. driving).
- Articles in local papers, such as 'A Day in the Life of a Minibus Driver' (focusing on the role of a volunteer), were rated more highly than adverts.
- Door to door leafleting was deemed a less effective recruitment method, because leaflets could be dismissed as junk mail. The Internet was also felt to be less effective, although the focus groups agreed that it might develop into a viable option in the future.

Training for Volunteers

- 42% of volunteers/participants in the telephone interviews had received some form of training for their voluntary position. Of those volunteers who had not received training, over half felt that it was not necessary.
- The project operator focus group revealed that potential volunteers might be discouraged if extensive training were required, particularly for those in full time employment who only volunteered occasionally.

Table 2: Volunteer/Participant Preferences for Projects

Likes	Responses
Well organised	36
Flexible	28
Friendly	26
Supportive	21
Good communication	9
Social events	5
Involvement in interesting ideas	4
Team work	3

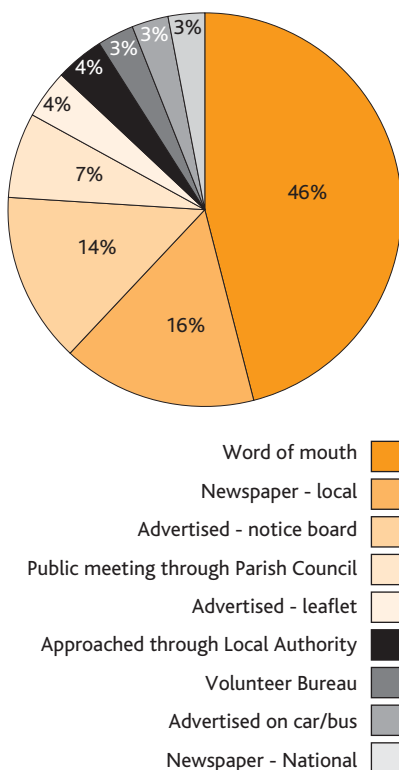
- Project operators concluded that non-essential training was dependent on the resources available and on the volunteers' willingness to be trained. Asking all volunteers periodically if they required training was good practice.

Retaining Volunteers

- 32 respondents knew of someone who had left their scheme. The most popular reasons for leaving were personal ones, including finding paid employment, illness, feeling too old and moving away from the area.
- Smaller numbers of volunteers/participants left because they felt they were unable to do their job properly or were unhappy with the project operator.
- The volunteers' key preference for projects was that they were well organised (see table 2).
- The project operators revealed the methods they used to retain volunteers, including giving support and recognition and allowing for feedback (eg. through an annual questionnaire). Supporting activities included:
 - social events (eg. coffee mornings);
 - giving small gifts and/or certificates (eg. one year safe driving);
 - sending birthday cards to volunteers.

It is likely that the supporting activities offered by the project operators help retain their volunteers, but the effective organisation of the scheme was more important to the volunteers in this study.

Figure 1: Methods used to recruit volunteers



Case Studies – Key Volunteering Issues

Pedal Back the Years, Cornwall – improving the health, skills and knowledge of local community members through cycling.

- Word of mouth has proved to be an effective recruitment method.
- The scheme is advertised in locations that people already visit, because they are interested in health and/or cycling.
- Participation has been encouraged through demonstrating the benefits of the scheme.
- Volunteers have been sought from those benefiting the scheme.

Weardale Railway, County Durham – reopening the Weardale Railway heritage line.

- A variety of recruitment methods have been used.
- Specific events with volunteers help avoid periods where volunteers have little to do.
- Giving recognition to volunteers has helped retention.

Norfolk Kickstart – providing residents with a Wheels to Work scheme.

- Volunteer bureaux were helpful when requiring a small number of volunteers.

Thirsk Community Car scheme – employing volunteer drivers to transport people around the areas of Sowerby and Hambleton.

- Funding may be needed to address recruitment and promotion problems.
- Leafleting may be unproductive as a recruitment method.
- Provide volunteers with support and gratitude.

The Countryside Agency research notes

Further reading

Compact (2003) *Compact Code of Good Practice on Community Groups*, Home Office/Compact.
www.crimereduction.gov.uk

Countryside Agency (2002a) *Get Your Community Moving: A Step-by-Step Guide to the Parish Transport Grant*.
www.countryside.gov.uk

Countryside Agency (2000) *People make the Difference: A Good Practice Guide for Involving Residents in Rural Regeneration*.
www.countryside.gov.uk

Countryside Agency (2002b) *Trends in Rural Services and Social Housing 2001 – 2002: Summary*.
www.countryside.gov.uk

Gaskin, K. (2003). *A Choice Blend – What Volunteers want from Organisation and Management*. Institute of Volunteering Research. www.ivr.org.uk

The Scottish Office Central Research Unit (1997) *Good Practice In Rural Development: No. 2 Community Involvement In Rural Development Initiatives*.

Home Office (1999) *Community Self Help*, Policy Action Team 9 Report.
www.homeoffice.gov.uk

IVR (2003) *What Young People Want from Volunteering*, Institute for Volunteering
www.ivr.org.uk

Martin, E (2000) *Volunteer Retention*.
www.suite101.com

Rochester, C et al. (2002) *A Review of the Home Office Older Volunteers Initiative*,
www.homeoffice.gov.uk

Supporting Rural Voluntary Action – NCVO, 2002.
www.nfucountryside.org.uk

This research was carried out on behalf of the Countryside Agency by TRL Ltd.

Norfolk Quiet Lanes – developing a network of Quiet Lanes to encourage shared use by vehicles and non-motorised users.

- Participants need to feel that the scheme is relevant to them.
- Use personal contact to motivate participants and communicate positive information to them.
- The level of promotion used on pilot projects may not be sustainable for future projects.

South Tyneside ‘Connect’, South Shields, Tyne and Wear – operating a community transport service for local groups.

- Where possible, use free promotion for the scheme to attract volunteers.

Recommendations for project/scheme operators

1. Project operators need to be **aware of volunteers’ motivations** when planning which tasks to give volunteers and also what recruitment methods to use. The key volunteer motivations revolve around the creative use of their spare time; volunteers are seeking **interest, enjoyment, contribution and satisfaction**.
2. There are a variety of **recruitment methods** available to attract volunteers, of which **word of mouth** is the most effective for transport schemes. Other effective measures include:
 - presentations by project operators to clubs;
 - media articles, such as ‘A Day in the Life of a Minibus Driver’; and
 - including details of local volunteer groups and projects in retirement plans from local businesses.
3. Project operators may benefit from contacting other schemes to find out what methods have been successful. Through **learning from other schemes**, operators can save time and money by using **effective methods for recruiting and retaining volunteers**.
4. Project operators may find it useful to **monitor recruitment and retention of volunteers** so that they can identify what works.
5. Project operators should be aware of volunteers’ perceptions of the **disadvantages of volunteering**, which include the **amount of time required**, and **not receiving recognition** for work done. Project operators should aim to **manage the expectations of volunteers** from the outset to reduce retention problems.
6. Project operators should be aware of **what volunteers like best about the projects they work for**. Projects should be **well organised, flexible, friendly, supportive, and based around good communication and social events**. These will assist with retention issues.
7. Project operators should **manage the competencies of their volunteers**; perhaps by interviewing volunteers before they join and **discussing what is expected of the volunteer and any training required**.

Countryside Agency Research Notes can also be viewed on our website:
www.countryside.gov.uk