

VAN Briefing

The voice of the Voluntary Arts

Recognition!

VAN / EXPERIENCE CORPS



In this briefing we will look at the contribution cultural volunteers make to society and to their local communities and the ways their own participation brings them positive rewards. Recognising the positive contribution of cultural volunteers is an essential step in securing support for the work of the voluntary cultural sector. Without recognition, the cultural volunteer remains invisible, and all too often under resourced and un-represented when decisions affecting arts activity are being made.

This is one of four briefings on volunteering to celebrate Volunteer's Week 2002. This briefing looks at the social and economic impact of volunteering in the cultural sector and identifies some of the many ways in which volunteering in the arts and crafts has a positive impact at every level.

For most organisations, cultural volunteers can be easily translated as 'members', for example, members of a choir, orchestra, quilting group, drama group, etc. and those managing, on a voluntary basis, these activities. In this briefing we will use the term volunteer to mean cultural volunteer or member and also voluntary board member or managers supporting arts and crafts activity.

Applause! Applause!

Imagine an evening when your local amateur dramatic society are just taking the stage for their final curtain call at the local, professionally run,

theatre. They have put on an early work by a famous contemporary writer who granted them special permissions for the performance. Because the work isn't often in production now, he's come down from London to see the show and is sitting in the audience tonight. Tonight's performance is a gala night, raising money for a local children's charity and the auditorium is full to bursting. As the applause rises to a crescendo, the audience get to their feet, and the actors take their final bows.

Who is being applauded?

Recognising the contribution of volunteers in the cultural sector, means recognising just who and what is being applauded.

For the evening we've described here, we could include: the actors, lighting engineers, stage management, costume designers, scenery designers and builders, company board members including the wife of the secretary who obtained the permissions and invited the writer and the husband of the chair who organised the sponsorship of the programme with his company, to mention a some of those giving their time voluntarily to the production. Then there's the theatre, its staff and marketing department who publicised the production and who know their audience figures benefit from the many supporters, members and participants in local amateur arts activity. Then there's the local authority, who subsidise the use of the theatre by non-professional local groups and are glad their subsidy extends to community activities such as this one. And then the writer, who started out writing for his own local amateur dramatic society and whose success he puts down



to the learning how to write for the stage by seeing his work performed by the local amateur dramatic society. The charity benefiting from the evening is certainly applauding, as the appeal is now financially much better off. And perhaps the audience are giving a cheer for their own enjoyment and support of the event, they've had a great evening and many of them know the actors on stage as colleagues, parents, and friends...

This example is typical of many, many cultural volunteer events. The applause may ring out, at a performance, production or festival, or may be the silent appreciation of an exhibition, a class well taught, or a publication filled with valuable information. It is applause that recognises the extensive benefits of volunteering, for those taking part and for the wider community as well.

Why recognise this contribution?

Recognising the massive contribution of volunteers is an essential management activity in raising and bidding for funds, making the case for including cultural volunteers in local cultural strategies and contributing to policy making at local, regional and national level. By recognising the many ways volunteers give, and the ways they gain from participating in arts and crafts activity, managers of voluntary arts activities can support and improve these benefits for everyone.

Here are some of the ways in which volunteers contribute and we hope you recognise your contribution, as managers of voluntary cultural organisations or as a participant, and pass the good news on!

Local action, local networks

Voluntary cultural activity supports communities in many ways. Successful voluntary arts organisations become part of the fabric of communities and their productions, concerts and events become regular and much appreciated events in the social calendar. These arts organisations also provide a valuable reservoir of experience and skill and these skills can often be successfully transferred to other community ventures. For troubled or divided communities, participatory arts activities can be a valuable remedy for reducing tension and promoting good will. Volunteers are united in a

common interest, and this can overcome differences of race, religion or politics. Participating in the arts offers volunteers a neutral space to get to know one another, make new contacts and make friends. Old fears are broken down and replaced with a new understanding, respect and trust.

Refreshing the parts professional arts activity can't reach

Everywhere from the highlands of Scotland to the most densely populated parts of our inner cities, there are gaps in cultural provision that can only be filled by volunteers. In rural areas travel times make nonsense out of professional theatre, the only solution is to do it yourself, whether that's putting on a concert, a play or an exhibition. In densely populated areas the same is often true, professional venues may not be accessible to some communities for a variety of reasons, not just economic, and here again, volunteer arts activists bridge the gap, bringing cultural experience to their communities. Other arts events involving professionals rely for their very existence on the work of cultural volunteers. These may be art galleries, museums and other attractions, reliant on volunteer guides and workers, or music festivals relying on volunteer security, ticket sales, ushers and many more willing helpers. Many of these events have voluntary management boards often with representatives from the highest levels of management in business and the arts who give their skills and experience to ensure the success of the venture. Without these committed volunteers, many organisations and events in the arts would no longer be viable and many professional artists would lose important bookings and income as a result.

As well as the work of volunteers many other events would not exist without the participation of professionals on a voluntary basis. Many specialist interests, from contemporary music to restoration comedy, enjoy the freely given support of professional artists and craftspeople in making events, performances, festivals, exhibitions and workshops happen in circumstances where they are not commercially viable.

Springboards

Many professional artists, crafts people and performers started out as volunteers. They learnt



the skills of performing and exhibiting, grew in skill, experience and confidence and used their participation in the voluntary arts to give them opportunities to develop they would not otherwise have enjoyed.

Many volunteers learn skills or discover talents that lead them naturally into areas of work they may not have imagined before their volunteer experiences. Volunteering can be a springboard to opportunities in the arts and business. Involvement in the arts and crafts as volunteers and learning new skills and gaining contacts, experience and insight, enables others to pursue professions related to their activities, as teachers, managers, arts administrators, fundraisers, publicists and others.

Keeping traditional culture alive

If it were not for committed volunteer enthusiasts, many cultural activities peripheral to the mainstream would now be lost and forgotten. This is true of traditions in dance, music, art and craft. For many volunteers involved with traditions their work goes further than simply keeping something alive. They become actively involved in its development and growth, building new audiences, involving younger people, introducing styles to professionals who incorporate this knowledge into their own work and incorporate it into more mainstream work.

Making money

Taking part in the arts as a volunteer has real benefits in hard cash terms for the community. Transport, childcare, and all manner of services are involved in supporting arts activities, everything from dry cleaners to printers, and the money usually stays in the local economy, supporting local business rather than being siphoned off by national and multi-national concerns. As well as services supporting arts activity, more specialist shops, such as music shops, art suppliers, craft shops are all usually small independent concerns, usually run by fellow enthusiasts and practitioners. These specialist shops often act as important links in a network of arts activity, connecting teachers with pupils and publicising courses and events, as well as being a source of advice. Local businesses like these are more likely to reinvest their profits back into

their own communities, unlike large corporations whose profits may not even be reinvested in the same country.

Cultural melting pot

The arts and crafts offer a unique opportunity for mixing and transforming cultural experience and outlook. Because volunteers are engaging with creative work, cultural difference adds rather than detracts from the work in hand. Cross fertilisation of ideas and techniques is seen as a positive outcome from working across cultures and volunteers in the arts and crafts often actively search out opportunities to learn from other cultures. This diversity of approach cuts across young and old volunteers and new and traditional arts and crafts activities, for a quilter is just as likely to appreciate a fresh perspective from another culture as a drummer. Many volunteers actively search out opportunities to take part in art and craft forms from other cultures, for example the musical traditions of samba or the dance traditions of jazz. The contribution that volunteering in the cultural sector makes to supporting and creating a tolerant and diverse society that respects and includes many cultural traditions should be recognised as activity of value to us all.

Feel good factor

There's no escaping the fact that volunteers enjoy personal gains from the experience of taking part in the arts and crafts. Health, happiness and self-esteem all seem to follow on from rolling up your creative sleeves and getting involved in arts and crafts activity. Volunteering demands a level of social interaction, whether singing in a choir or entering a picture into an exhibition, and this has benefits that come from overcoming isolation and sharing experience and skills. Volunteers discover their own value, both learning from others as well as offering their own skills and experience to others ready to learn from them. There is also plenty of fun to be had in creative endeavours, and having a laugh is good for us all.

We need to recognise the many ways volunteering benefit the individual and so benefits us all. It offers a means of making sense out of experience, exploring new possibilities through



creative work and gives us a sense that we can change the world and make it a better place to live. These benefits are of value socially, volunteers learn that they are effective and can contribute things of value to others, whether these consist of an experience, like listening to a performance, or something more tangible, like seeing a piece of work or buying a craft item that gives pleasure to the owner for years to come.

Learning: lifelong and informal

Volunteering in the arts and crafts gives access to a wonderful network of informal and formal learning opportunities. Many voluntary arts organisations now offer ways of formalising learning in their art form, from accreditation through NVQ's or examinations from external organisations such as City and Guilds, or Royal School's of Music and Drama. However, as well as qualifications, most volunteers access an informal learning system allowing them to learn skills and gain knowledge relevant to their own personal interest. This informal learning environment has great value in lifelong learning, bringing many into learning who might not otherwise participate. It is non-threatening – many volunteers wouldn't describe their experience as learning, they would rather say they were doing what they enjoyed and taking part in their art or craft form. As such it is accessible to those who find more formal learning situations threatening or uninviting and therefore stay away from traditional learning environments such as colleges and adult education centres.

Give and take

Volunteering is especially important to older people. Once the pressure of work is off and retirement beckons, volunteering offers an opportunity to give back to an activity of personal interest and delight some of the time, skill and experience previously committed to work. Volunteering adds meaning to what can sometimes be seen as a uncharted expanse of time once the rhythm of working life is taken away. Volunteering also offers a valuable opportunity to contribute to the common good, to give something back to the community whilst thoroughly enjoying the experience. It is an opportunity to reconnect with the community and regain a sense of place, something that the 'daily grind' of work and domestic duties can easily erode.

Resources

www.volunteering.org.uk

National Centre for Volunteering. Up to the minute information on all aspects of volunteering, including plenty of good information on volunteering good practise.

www.ivr.org.uk

Institute for Volunteering Research. Lots of information, including research reports to download.

www.volunteersweek.org.uk

Everything you need to know about volunteers week, what's happening, where and how you can take part. Includes a useful section on ideas, with files to download on recruitment issues amongst others.



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