Volunteer Now – written evidence (CCE0173)

Volunteer Now works to promote, enhance and support volunteering across Northern Ireland. Volunteer Now is about connecting with individuals and organisations to build healthy communities and create positive change.

Volunteer Now enhances recognition for the contribution volunteers make, provides access to opportunities and encourages people to volunteer. We provide training, information, guidance and support to volunteer-involving organisations on issues of good practice and policy regarding volunteering, volunteer management, safeguarding and governance. Volunteer Now has extensive experience in recruiting volunteers for a wide variety of roles including governance based roles. For example Volunteer Now has delivered the volunteer recruitment, selection and management for a range of events such as the World Police and Fire Games, Giro D’ Italia, Tall Ships and Irish Open.

Volunteer Now has compiled this response based on feedback from a group of 14 young people who are graduates of the National Citizen’s Service in the Omagh area in the past two years. This feedback was provided at an event kindly hosted by Fermanagh and Omagh District Council also involving Councillor Chris Smyth and Chair of the Council, Councillor Stephen McCann.

Question One – Summary of Discussion

The young people found the language of citizenship and civic engagement difficult to relate to. Several members of the group, who were active volunteers, explained that their volunteering had helped them to develop as a person and to understand their own values. They felt that it had helped them become more confident and established and to stand up for what they believe. Prior to volunteering there had been limited opportunities for the group to engage with local elected officials and both Councillors and young people had found the engagement beneficial. The group had undertaken a social action project on young people’s mental health and this had resonated with local councillors. It seemed much easier for the group to relate to this practical example of active citizenship than the abstract concept of citizenship and civic engagement.

Question Four – Summary of Discussion

The majority of the young people felt that they would like to vote at 16 but would need better education in school about voting and broader aspects of citizenship to support them in this process.

Question Five – Summary of Discussion

Without exception the young people, who had attended a range of different post primary schools, felt that education had an important part to play in teaching and encouraging good citizenship. It should be delivered pre-16 to all young people. However current teaching was not reported as good, it seemed to depend on the individual teacher and their own level of interest. It was not seen as being an important subject in comparison to more academic ones. There was discussion of the approach taken in Southern Ireland of a transition year, after GCSE where young people while still in school had a basic timetable freeing them to undertake volunteering and in some cases optional study visits. This transition year gave them time to get more experience of life before going straight into an A level course which may not be best for them. It also provided more time to develop a greater understanding of citizenship.

Question Six – Summary of Discussion

The young people in the group were all graduates of the NCS programme and had all had a very positive experience. Overall, they felt the programme should have been longer with more opportunities to continue engagement when the programme came to an end. The group had undertaken youth social action programmes when the formal NCS programme had come to an end and this was beneficial. There was some discussion as to whether NCS should be compulsory and on balance the group felt that it shouldn’t be. However one participant who had not been
that keen on the programme before it began explained how much she had gained from it so there should perhaps be tasters to get reluctant participants to give it a try.

**Conclusion**

Language is important and often people may not understand concepts such as citizenship and civic engagement. It does not mean that citizenship and civic engagement do not relate to identity but simply that people are focussed on issues and do not always think in these terms. Volunteer Now’s experience shows that by focusing on meaningful local issues and through volunteering, providing a practical response to these, participants do develop a greater sense of identity and values.

Voting age could be lowered if citizenship education was more effective in schools. Citizenship education is often not given sufficient priority and really depends on one teacher taking an interest. This does not lead to effective delivery in all schools.

Programmes such as NCS were very effective and should be longer while retaining the voluntary participation element. They should be offered to a wider group of young people.

It is Volunteer Now’s view that all levels of government and all third sector organisations can support civic engagement by enabling people to play an active role in their communities. This can support a greater understanding of the needs of the community and can build a greater sense of connectedness and understanding of other people. In the current climate of austerity, a greater value needs to be placed by policy makers on programmes encouraging active citizenship and volunteering. These are often the first to be threatened with cuts and yet for relatively small amounts of money can provide real community benefits.

*8 September 2017*