Volunteering Matters – written evidence (CCE0242)

Introduction

Volunteering Matters welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee. We wish to set out the existing and potential role of volunteering and social action in supporting citizenship and civil engagement.

Volunteering Matters develops and delivers volunteer-led solutions to some of the most significant challenges facing individuals and their communities today. We know, through years of successful work, that investing in people through the power of volunteering makes a tangible difference, building stronger, more cohesive communities and achieving lasting results.

We would welcome the opportunity to provide further evidence in person to the Select Committee. If the members thought this useful and interesting we would aim, as part of verbal evidence, to ask one of the young women who set up and run the WASSUP project (described in our answer to question 12) to attend alongside us.

Question 1 - What does citizenship and civic engagement mean in the 21st century? Why does it matter, and how does it relate to questions of identity?

1.1 Volunteering and social action are key forms of civic engagement. For us, civic engagement means the ways in which citizens can and do play an active part in one or more of the communities they are part of. In this submission, we will focus primarily on forms of civic engagement whereby people act, individually or as part of a group, to try to enhance the way their community functions.

1.2 Volunteering becomes part of a person’s identity, how they see themselves. They are no longer just defined by the music they listen to, the political or religious beliefs they have, the job they do or once did. Their volunteering, their civic engagement, is part of their identity, how they think of themselves. Once that happens, volunteering becomes a long-term, sustainable engagement and that is to the benefit of both the individual and the society they live in.

1.3 When people volunteer they do more than help the ‘beneficiary’ of their activities. There are significant benefits to the volunteer, which in turn has a benefit to the local community and the UK as a whole. Volunteering has a role in providing routes out of poverty through the acquisition of skills and confidence, social integration and employment. This benefits those at the margins of the labour market, such as recent migrants.
1.4 In 2016, working with University College London, Volunteering Matters delivered a comprehensive survey encompassing the views of 607 of our volunteers. The results revealed that:

- 62% reported increased confidence in their own abilities following volunteering (rising to 90% for volunteers aged 13 to 25 years old).
- 86% said their sense of making a positive contribution increased through volunteering.
- 59% said their sense of feeling part of the community increased through volunteering.
- 56% said their appreciation of other people’s cultures increased through volunteering – rising to 74% for people from black and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds.

**Question 2 -** Citizenship is partly about membership and belonging. Are there ways we could strengthen people’s identity as citizens, whether they are citizens by birth or naturalisation? Could citizenship ceremonies or events throughout the educational process play a role? Should pride in being or becoming British be encouraged?

2.1 Government can play a strong role in nurturing the environment in which civic engagement can flourish and this should include supporting a continued drive to promote and support the development of volunteering amongst all UK citizens, so that it is seen more clearly by all as a valued characteristic of British citizenship.

**Question 3 -** Civic engagement can be seen as both a responsibility and a right of citizenship. Beyond the existing legal framework, should citizens have additional formal rights and responsibilities? How do you see the relationship between the two? Should they have the force of law individually or be presented as reciprocal duties between citizen and state? How should they be monitored and/or enforced?

3.1 Civic engagement is at its best when it is freely chosen. Civic engagement is something people should choose to do.

**Question 5 -** What should be the role of education in teaching and encouraging good citizenship? At what stages, from primary school through to university, should it be (a) available, and (b) compulsory? Should there be any exemptions? Should there be more emphasis on political participation, both inside and outside classes? How effective is current teaching? Do the curriculum and the qualifications that are currently offered need amending?
5.1 Education has a role in teaching and encouraging good citizenship. A key part of effective citizenship education is supporting the pupils identify challenges or problems within their communities with a view to contributing their time to make things better.

5.2 Government can better promote and facilitate volunteering amongst school age children. According to the National Youth Social Action Survey 2015:

“Young people who report starting to participate in social action at a younger age were more likely than those starting later to be classified as ‘committed’ to social action. There may be some advantages to encouraging children younger than 10 to get involved in social action, in order to establish a habit of social action among the cohort of interest.”

5.3 Government should encourage and recognise volunteering within schools; it should become the norm – part and parcel of being a good community school. Already volunteers in schools help and support teachers in improving outcomes for the most disadvantaged pupils. For example, in 2016-17, 40 schools across the UK were supported by volunteers from the corporate sector in our Employee Volunteering schemes alone. Over 600 students were supported with literacy, numeracy, foreign languages and general mentoring. 98% of students stated they had seen an improvement in their volunteer-supported subjects.

**Question 6 -** Do voluntary citizenship programmes such as the National Citizen Service do a good job of creating active citizens? Are they the right length? Should they be compulsory, and if so, when? Should they include a greater political element? Should they lead to a more public citizenship ceremony? Are they good value for money? What other routes exist for creating active citizens?

6.1 Full-time volunteering schemes such as the National Citizen Service and our own Full-Time Volunteering Programme (which has been running since 1962) can be very successful in engaging young people as active citizens. They should therefore be encouraged and supported but participation should not be made compulsory. Compulsion would undermine their ethos and could be counter-productive. Low levels of formal volunteering in most former Eastern bloc countries appear to be linked to historical suspicion of government ‘volunteering’ schemes which were not fully voluntary. Attention should also be given to what happens after a full-time volunteering placement has been completed. An understanding of other forms of ongoing volunteering opportunities should be imparted wherever appropriate.

**Question 7 -** How can society support civic engagement? What responsibility should central government, devolved and local governments, third sector organisations and the individual have
for encouraging civic engagement? What can the Government and Parliament do to support civil society initiatives to increase civic engagement?

7.1 Government has a unique responsibility to lead and create an enabling environment. Its previous proposal to introduce a statutory right to volunteering leave could have been symbolically and practically important. The proposal should be brought back for further discussion. Please also see our response to Question 12 where we outline some of the projects we run that encourage greater civic participation.

**Question 9 - Why do so many communities and groups feel “left behind”? Are there any specific factors which act as barriers to active citizenship faced by different communities or groups - white, BME, young, old, rural, urban? How might these barriers be overcome?**

9.1 Disabled people often face multiple exclusions. Their potential to contribute positively to the life of their community is often overlooked by a negative focus on capacity. This is a cultural and attitudinal problem, which imaginative investment can begin to overcome. Our Choices programme offers independent living support to a wide range of people, including people with disabilities and learning difficulties, older people and families. With the support of full time volunteers from the UK and abroad, who are available for support with a wide range of tasks, including domestic tasks, companionship, supported holidays, enjoying an active social life and accessing the community, those who previously could not live alone are able to live and feel independent. Results from a recent evaluation of the project show that 79% feel more actively engaged within their community following their involvement in the programme.

9.2 Our work also supports disabled people to volunteer. Active and Supported Volunteering is a project which empowers adults with a disability, or long-term physical or health condition, to capitalise on their skills, interests and goals for the future.


**Question 12 - Can you give examples of initiatives and role models that have helped promote a positive vision of British Citizenship within a tolerant and cohesive society?**

12.1 WASSUP (Women Against Sexual exploitation and violence Speak UP) was set up in 2012 by a small group of young black or minority ethnic (BME) women in Ipswich working with Volunteering Matters. They felt strongly that there needed to be more support for women who have experienced sexual exploitation, honour-based violence or domestic abuse and wanted to break down cultural barriers that prevent young women from accessing support.
The WASSUP group consists of 20 young women who between them deliver 170 volunteering hours a month. They have developed an interactive toolkit comprising a workshop and training package which is designed to be delivered in schools and to professionals to raise awareness of the issues of domestic abuse, trafficking and sexual violence within communities and to help to create safer pathways for reporting these crimes and improving professional’s practice.

In the last year, the toolkit was delivered to 260 children in ten schools in Suffolk as well as to young people in Belgrade, Nantes and Strasbourg and to Suffolk Police and a national conference on domestic abuse. The school sessions have been particularly aimed at young people with English as a second language and in areas where teachers have identified child sexual exploitation (CSE) and violence as issues. The workshops can now be delivered to young males as well as females but always in a single gender group.

All young people who participated in the sessions reported that they were relevant to them and that they felt more informed about CSE and knew where to go if they needed support. WASSUP also deliver public-facing campaigns via Twitter and the use of flashmobs. They work closely with the police and other agencies to identify young people who may benefit from taking part.

12.2 LEARNING MATTERS

Learning Matters is a study programme aimed at 16-19 year olds and delivered by Volunteering Matters with funding from central government. The programme is a blend of academic study and community engagement so that the young people involved not only learn skills but also begin to participate more in their local community. The academic aspect includes ESOL, English, Maths, Employability, Business Administration and how to access independent advice and guidance. The ‘enrichment’, or community engagement, aspects include civic life sessions with local MPs and councillors, sessions to enable them to navigate the NHS, understanding their rights (supported by local police), money management, social action volunteering, life skills, and sport (supported by Ipswich Town FC). The blend of the two is very important as it is part of an attempt to change the narrative from not ‘what I need from the state’ to ‘what I can contribute to my community?’.

There are currently 61 learners from diverse backgrounds: 46% are in care or are ‘looked after children’; 15 different nationalities are present; only 2% identify as white British; 40% are unaccompanied asylum seeking children.

The programme was established after we recognised that no-one else was doing anything like this. Ten of our students went onto to take part in the National Citizen Service (NCS) and four of them are now preparing to train as youth workers.

Following the success of the Learning Matters study programme, a number of Further Education (FE) colleges have followed what we have done and are now beginning to set up their own courses - so many of our own alumni will graduate into a formal FE college education. As the FE sector expands this area of work, Learning Matters is likely to re-focus slightly and
concentrate on those young people very recently arrived in the UK where we feel the need for the programme will be greatest.

12.3 KEO

The KEO (Knowledge Equals Opportunity) project supports migrant families in Suffolk with primary school-aged children. It aims to help families new to the UK by creating the right conditions for learning. Topics discussed with parents include: dealing with mental health problems and isolation; understanding the role of a Police Community Support Officer in the community; understanding how maths is taught in school so the parents can help their children at home; highlighting school policies and practice; advice about healthy snacks for the school lunchbox; how to encourage learning through everyday activities; educational places to visit with children.

The project has seen much greater engagement of the parents with the school (one is about to start as a volunteer helper in the classroom) and more support for learning in the home for children.

12.4 GRAND MENTORS, SPORTING CHANCE and RSVP

These three projects have outlets around the country. Grand Mentors pairs volunteer mentors over the age of 50 who will spend 1-2 hours each week building a relationship with a young care leaver who needs guidance and support to realise their potential and gain new skills through education, training or employment. Sporting Chance recruits volunteers, also 50 and over, to provide others in the same age range with opportunities to improve their health and reduce social isolation through various forms of exercise including walking football, table tennis, cycling and armchair exercises. Our Retired and Senior Volunteering Programme (RSVP) which began in 1986, operates a wide range of projects in many parts of the country. Our volunteers go in to schools to help during literacy hour and numeracy hour; they run driving schools to enable less mobile citizens attend medical and other appointments; they act as lay assessors of day care centres; they run activities in sheltered housing.

12.5 Recruitment and retention: In all our projects, volunteer co-ordinators will talk with each new volunteer to understand their motivations and interests and the skills and experiences they bring. Placements that work best and last longest are those where a good match can be made with the individual’s profile and the needs of the project/potential beneficiary. In general terms, from our 2016 survey (see 1.4) that the biggest motivation for people aged 50 and over, for example, to volunteer was a desire to help people, improve things and make a difference in their communities (96%) while other high-scoring motivations include: using existing skills; having the spare time and availability to do it and to meet people, make connections and build friendships. Motivations for younger age groups often gave greater emphasis to other motivations.