



RETHINKING VOLUNTEERING IN RURAL AREAS: the contribution of national voluntary organisations

October 2022

1. BACKGROUND

As part of the STFWV work programme, CEOs agreed in September 2021 to undertake a focused review on volunteering in rural areas. This short paper sets out the findings from this piece of work and makes several recommendations for CEOs to consider.

2. CONTEXT

The pandemic highlighted the critical role played by civil society organisations and volunteers. It is estimated that 12.4 million people stepped forward to help at the height of the pandemic¹, and 3.8 million were first time volunteers. Shaping the Future with Volunteering (STFWV) is a group of 26 of the larger volunteer-involving organisations. Many are involved in rural communities, for example through their locations, such as RNLI or National Trust, and through supporting clients through local services volunteers. We are keen to learn from our collective experiences through the pandemic and how we the larger charities involved in Shaping the Future best support future volunteering in rural areas. The levelling up agenda is pitched around north versus south, but we argue that we also need to consider levelling up in rural areas given some of the challenges faced².

An article by Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE, 2020) set out some important contextual distinctions of civil society in rural areas³; specifically, the closeness of local government (e.g. Parish Councils) in civil life, the depth of community involvement in physical assets (ie. Locally owned and run pubs, community shops and village halls), and the critical role of mutuality - where there is an overlap between who is giving and who is receiving. The formal notion of 'volunteering' is perhaps less recognised generally speaking in rural communities, it is 'simply part of the social contract, and tradition, that comes with living in a village' (5pg).

3. RESEARCH SCOPE

We collected case studies of rural volunteering from our member charities to better understand the type and scope of activities (see Annex B: Case study template). In April 2022, led by the CPRE the countryside charity, STFWV hosted a roundtable with experts in rural volunteering and civil society (see Annex A – List of

¹ <https://www.britishfuture.org/time-running-out-to-harness-benefits-of-covid-19-volunteer-spirit-new-appg-report/>

² <https://acre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Rural-civil-society-an-ACRE-perspective.pdf>

³ <https://acre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Rural-civil-society-an-ACRE-perspective.pdf>

participants). The roundtable reviewed the case studies, reflected on the challenges of volunteering in rural areas and the differences from urban settings. They sought to gather some fresh thinking on how the Shaping the Future members might better support volunteering in rural areas, recognising the essential role civil society plays in the social fabric of rural life⁴. The key question posed for discussion in the roundtable was:

- *What role can larger national charities play in supporting the work of smaller charities in rural communities for mutual benefit?*

4. IDEAS

The webinar generated a range of practical and innovative ideas; a few of which were presented in a short article for Civil Society in June 2022⁵. This section sets out five ideas raised and discussed in the webinar – these are:

- Sharing Infrastructure
- Economies of scope vs scale
- Collaboration for national good
- Volunteer progression
- Modernisation

A. *Sharing infrastructure*

According to the Pro Bono Economics Charity Tracker (April 2020- March 2021), during Covid-19 charities undertook several operational and strategic transformations in order to survive – 42% stated they ‘collaborated more with other charities’ and ‘58% stated that it increased their appetite to try new things’. A potential positive outcome of the pandemic – which we should aim to play forward - is greater sector collaboration and working in new ways; with the potential of the STFVW group extending their collaboration to include the wider voluntary and community sector in rural areas.

A key opportunity for greater collaboration is around volunteer infrastructure; larger charities have been able to invest in volunteer processes around marketing and recruitment, and then the vetting (where this is required eg for safeguarding) and training of volunteers at scale. Smaller organisations are less likely to invest in digital platforms to recruit and onboard volunteers, develop training, or be able to invest in on-going volunteer co-ordination and day-to-day support and management. Being ready for new volunteers is however critical to retaining people beyond an initial settling in period.

We recognise that smaller charities, groups and organisations have a vital role to play in community services, and they might have greater access to community resources and assets, and be more engaged in local governance structures e.g. Parish Councils which are beneficial for bringing people together, connecting with existing services and critically facilitating community involvement in service/activity design. Each charity – large or small - brings elements of infrastructure which could be mutually beneficial.

Given the transformation that happened to quickly onboard volunteers during the pandemic we think it should be possible for other charities to simplify recruitment and onboarding and also explore how to recognise training

⁴ <https://acre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Rural-civil-society-an-ACRE-perspective.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/voices/jeremy-hughes-and-dr-allison-smith-rethinking-volunteering-in-rural-areas.html>

and accreditation from kindred organisations. The aim here is to reduce the costs to charities in setting up volunteering and to reduce the time taken by people to transfer between charities.

Here are some examples from during the pandemic:

- *Royal Voluntary Service (RVS) and St John Ambulance (SJA) collaborate on the national vaccination programme*

The vaccination programme needed to be rolled out at scale and pace in January 2021. On the back of the infrastructure set up to support the mass recruitment and mobilisation of the NHS Volunteer Responders in March 2020, RVS worked with SJA to quickly recruit almost 28, 000 vaccination volunteers. Just under 16, 000 of these volunteers came from existing NHS Volunteer Responders. This collaboration enabled rapid recruitment of volunteers at a critical time and when need was greatest.

- *Collective action to support rural recruitment - Mitcheldean Scouts*

The group were looking for support with restarting Beavers and Cubs following the pandemic, and with a senior leader for their Scout group. They needed help recruiting new leaders to allow the groups to run. The Scouts were able to rally a team to support with promotion and searching for volunteers by developing and implementing a plan to engage people in the surrounding villages. The team were able to support in making adverts, assisting with online promoting, engaging with local schools/assemblies, and running open events in the community. Following this targeted promotion, nine potential volunteers came forward to support the restarting of these local clubs.

B. Economies of scope versus scale

Charities in STFVW are already looking at working together on the shared development of volunteering opportunities – including Girlguiding with Scouts; Royal Voluntary Service with St John Ambulance and British Red Cross. However, generally speaking there is a sense that charities – both large and small - can have a rather territorial view of volunteers – specifically, there is often common reference made to ‘our volunteers’.

A valid point raised in the webinar was that in volunteering we tend to think about *economies of scale for volunteering, rather than economies of scope*. In other words, we tend to look at many volunteers are engaged in a specific activity rather than a few volunteers doing many activities...

In rural areas, where much of civic society hinges around institutions like church, school, pub, and village halls etc, often a small number of people do a large number of different roles (economy of scope). Some may be formal (councillor) and some informal (delivering shopping). We hear that there is a ‘civic core’ of older people carrying out the majority of the voluntary roles on rural communities. We are therefore asking ourselves is there any role that the national charities can play here? For example can we help those institutions attract more people by sharing our volunteer manager’s experience in supporting new volunteers? Or can we help by advertising roles?

In addition, we need to recognise the possible differences in the relationship – and hence motivations - of those volunteering in rural areas; where there is ‘place’ based civil involvement by individuals within their community versus ‘issue’ based volunteering of national charities with a narrower cause and purpose. The fundamental context might be a balance between general volunteering for a community and specific volunteering on an issue.

We saw the ‘economy of scope’ in some of the case studies we collected as part of this work. Those volunteering in rural areas appear to undertake multiple activities and/or appear less fixed to a single cause or

charity. This suggests we should and would benefit from working better together to nurture and facilitate better coordination of the support provided to volunteers– either within charities or across charity boundaries.

- *Royal Voluntary Service's Ceredigion Country Cars service is more than just a transport service.*

The rural setting of Ceredigion presents additional logistical challenges to the county's older or more vulnerable people when it comes to travel. Public transport coverage can be patchy and the cost of inevitably long taxi journeys can be infeasible. The service not only provides essential practical support for people to get to and from critical medical appointments, weekly food shops or to visit family/friends in hospital but has wider social and welfare benefits. Coordinator and volunteer at Ceredigion Country Cars, Bob Evans, views all trips carried out by the team as vital to supporting the health and wellbeing of Ceredigion communities. Whether taking a client to their weekly food shop, to visit a loved one in hospital, or to and from cancer treatment, Bob understands that every trip can have a positive impact on a client and should be approached with the same compassion.

Bob said: "Ceredigion is a very rural area. It's at least a 30 mile round trip wherever we go with Ceredigion Country Cars. I'd say it's one of the most rural counties in Wales and the lovely rural landscape makes it a popular place for people to come and retire. The problem for a lot of the people that we support is that often they live 'in the middle of nowhere', in small cottages or down long treacherous country lanes. So, buses aren't always close enough, quick enough, or safe enough, and taxis are often not realistic options for our clients' budgets. I definitely feel that if it weren't for the willing and the warmth of our volunteers, a lot of the people that we support would be at risk of not leaving the house at all for necessary appointments and supplies".

"We train our volunteers to know that a lot of the people we support are very isolated or vulnerable, and that is exacerbated by the difficulties of living in such a rural setting. We encourage our volunteer drivers to appreciate the social and companionship element of their role, as much as the practical. They are encouraged to build trusting relationships with the people that they drive. They get to know them, and they build bonds. We are the eyes and ears of our rural community – creating a vital service – which helps to improve the health and wellbeing of some of the county's most vulnerable and isolated people.

We appreciate that there will be community transport schemes up and down the country providing similar services to people living in rural areas. Some of these will be provided by large charities, like RVS in this case study, or by local schemes, like Bakewell and Eyam Community Transport.

- *Met Office employee and St John Ambulance volunteer supported to do multiple roles*

Rob Gent is a degree apprentice with the Met Office in Exeter, but the last year has seen him spending his free time travelling all over Devon in all weathers, as a St John Ambulance vaccination volunteer. The 20-year-old, who lives in a village of just 110 houses in north of Dartmoor, answered the call when St John appealed for people to step forward and join the vaccination programme in late 2020: "I saw an advert for volunteer vaccinators on Facebook and figured 'I could do that'," says Rob. "Ten months into the pandemic, I was as fed up with Covid as anyone and I wanted to be part of doing something about it, rather than sitting at home doing nothing."

In addition to doing his bit to beat the coronavirus, Rob is looking at other volunteer activities with SJA. He has already trained as a first aider and attended the Great North Run and London Marathon as part of a pilot project where the charity is developing a reserve of volunteers who support big events. And, he is currently spending almost every weekend training to volunteer as a member of ambulance crew with St John.

Throughout his time with St John Ambulance, the Met Office has been generous with volunteering leave, and the organisation is encouraging other employees to volunteer. If Covid-19 has a positive legacy, it will be people like Rob who stepped forward to serve during a national health emergency and decided to stick around as a health volunteer for the long term.

Whilst many charities are keen to engage employers in providing day release volunteering opportunities for their staff, fewer focus on volunteering for the charity's own employees. Volunteering with local organisations in rural areas would provide a good opportunity for shared learning and development of individuals.

C. Collaboration for national good

We continue to live with uncertainty and face significant challenges on the long term sustainability of many activities by voluntary organisations— so how might greater collaboration between charity partners address some of the key societal and national challenges particularly faced in rural communities?

A suggestion from the webinar was that national organisation might look to consider 'rural proofing' their annual reports. This would ensure consideration and recognition of rural areas. This might include commitments on fundraising – where monies raised in rural areas are shown to be supporting people living in rural areas– or support for employees living in rural areas to volunteer for local groups/charities.

One suggestion is an initiative between rural VCS organisations and national organisations help towards addressing and alleviating rural poverty. The national charities can offer scale and resources and the smaller charities bring a depth of community connection. By working together it may be possible to achieve a step change in addressing a lack of opportunities and disadvantage in rural areas.

- *YHA collaborates with North Lindsey College to boost employment opportunities for young people*

YHA has partnered with North Lindsey College to give students practical work experience, alongside their course work helping develop skills to address rural poverty. The college encourages students to undertake a minimum of 30 hours work experience at the charity's network of youth hostels across Lincolnshire, Derbyshire, Lancashire and Nottinghamshire. They learn practical skills – such as painting and decorating, general housekeeping duties, gain food service knowledge – and get experience on the day-to-day running of a business. For both YHA and North Lindsey College the collaboration is of mutual benefit.

CEO James Blake: "Working with North Lindsey College has allowed us to pilot new ways to develop and grow youth volunteering and it has been hugely successful. As a charity we rely on volunteers to enable our network of youth hostels to operate financially sustainable and continue to provide affordable stays in our fantastic accommodation for young people and their families. Importantly, our volunteering programme is also a brilliant opportunity to help young people gain meaningful work experience and training that will help them have access to many more opportunities. We feel passionately about being part of the vision for civil society so I am delighted that through this partnership, North Lindsey College students can build ambition, have a more positive outlook and show their true talent."

Hasina Kamali, Work Placement Team Leader at North Lindsey College, said: "Over the last couple of years ... Our students have gained some extensive skills which has helped with project skills, team building and their self-confidence. Last year over 90 students from various curriculum areas visited the different hostels, bringing a unique industry experience to add to their CVs. This new partnership will now bring new and existing opportunities for our students to further develop their skills to support the leading charity."

There is also the opportunity for larger and smaller charities to join forces to address national challenges which impact them both? For example, a recent campaign (July 2022⁶) by Community Transport Association (CTA) – had a coalition of 11 charities sign a letter petition the Chancellor to increase the Approved Mileage Allowance

⁶ <https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/government-urged-to-stop-spiralling-fuel-costs-from-putting-off-volunteers.html>

Payment (AMAP) for volunteers given the vital role they play in support some of the most vulnerable. The current mileage allowance could deter recruitment and undermine retention of volunteers at a time when need is greatest across all charity partners.

D. Volunteer progression

People who volunteer are vital for any thriving civil society – but they appear even more critical in rural areas where communities rely on participation and reciprocity. In rural areas residents might have to take on more responsibility and get involved local governance and civic matters – such as Parish Councils. Given the critical role played by those living in rural communities is there scope for larger charities to support the progression of ‘volunteers’. This could include progress to more responsible, local leadership and/or paid employment. Such a collaboration could be highly valuable for rural communities – in that it could help to further strengthen and grow civil society.

- *Citizens Advice volunteer becomes a critical campaigner on rural issues*

Nick Hubbard, has been an enthusiastic volunteer with Citizens Advice Sedgemoor since early 2010. Nick is retired following several careers. He started volunteering initially as an adviser and then moved into a Research and Campaigns role to pursue his passion for improving policy that negatively affects our clients. Nick is also the Research and Campaigns face of the Rural Issues Group at Citizens Advice; The Rural Issues Group is a network group of local Citizens Advice that identifies and raises awareness of issues around delivering advice and ensuring Citizens Advice policies work in rural areas.

The Rural Issues Group has campaigned to improve rural bus services, and recently the Government has announced a Bus Back Better initiative, with funding. Nick said “It wasn't all our work, but we were there, being noisy. We are waiting to see how it works out.”

I am keen to encourage the volunteers coming behind me - particularly if they have an interest in Research & Campaigns and Rural Issues. I'm not ready to give up volunteering yet and my enthusiasm remains - although my original promise was to stay for a year!”

E. Modernising

The pandemic appears to have also changed the way people want to give their time or volunteer. The rise of micro-volunteering and more digital platforms is allowing volunteers to have more control and flexibility -e.g. when they do their training, what time they give, and what activities they opt in or out of. If we wish to move beyond the traditional civic core and play forward a new, more diverse group of volunteers we might need to do things differently. We need to look at the language we use to describe volunteering and the structures we have created (e.g. formalised committee meetings, client vs volunteer) to make sure it is more inclusive of all the ways people can give their time and make a contribution. This can then help support a broadening of the ‘civic core’; for example, how might we make committee or council meetings more attractive to younger people, how might we support a ‘client’ to volunteer, and how do we adapt roles/activities to open volunteering up to more people irrespective of geography, health, etc.

There is a need to ensure that we are fully embracing the opportunities for remote volunteering to support people in remote areas and/or with health conditions. For example, in the NHS Volunteer Responders

programme, some 'Check In and Chat' telephone volunteers (n=740⁷) were 'shielding' because of clinical vulnerabilities to Covid-19 – but they were able to actively participate in the national response to the pandemic.

- *RNIB client becomes a lifelong volunteer*

Janette Scott lives in Stirling with her guide dog Esme and has been a long-term volunteer for RNIB. She is 61 years old and has retinitis pigmentosa and glaucoma; Janette wasn't registered as blind until age 17. Her coping mechanism growing up at a mainstream school was to pretend that she wasn't blind, learning things very quickly so that people wouldn't notice.

Growing up in a remote village in Scotland, support was lacking for Janette. But with help from RNIB she went on to do an HNC in Business at Elmwood College in Cupar, Fife. Later she did the Living with Sight Loss course with RNIB and met her husband on the course, with whom she had two children. The course led to voluntary work for RNIB, and she secured a job as a fundraiser for Scotland and Northern Ireland for over seven years.

After her husband passed away, Janette went on to do the ECDL in computing course with RNIB. She continues to do a lot of voluntary work, teaching people how to use mobile phones and computers.

5. SUMMARY

The pandemic highlighted the critical importance played by active citizenship or volunteering⁸, working alongside the state to buffer the impact of Covid-19; central to our thinking should be 'how do we play this forward' and strengthen what we do. We still face significant challenges - both in terms of recovering from the pandemic and continued geopolitical uncertainty; for those living in rural areas, they might face additional cost pressures and access to resources because of geography. Given this, it is important to better collaborate – with each of us pooling our knowledge and resources for the greater good.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Shaping the Future with Volunteering position statement sets out four areas for action – a) Understanding, b) Inclusion, c) Support and d) Partnership. The recommendations below fulfil these commitments. STFWV includes some of the national charities with the greatest reach into rural communities. Together – in partnership with local charities - they can increase the value they add to the promotion and support of volunteering in rural communities.

We have set out three recommendations below which we feel deliver mutual benefits and maximum impact; these do not necessarily cover all of the ideas raised in the webinar but provides a strong start to build a foundation for greater collaboration and partnership working.

- *Rural proofing – collaboration for the common good:* Like rural proofing of government policy⁹, STFWV members could ensure their policies and practices support rural communities. Each

⁷ https://www.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk/media/l1spwn3l/working_paper_two_volunteer_findings_271120.pdf

⁸ <https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/research-projects/beyond-us-and-them-research-project/>

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/delivering-for-rural-england>

member's annual report could reflect consideration of their work in rural areas in terms of their governance structure (e.g. urban vs rural balance), fundraising (e.g. money raised in rural areas, going to rural areas), volunteer recruitment, service delivery and policy (e.g. travel costs of volunteers living in rural areas). STFWV members could commit to supporting 'economics of scope' where additional volunteering opportunities are offered to existing volunteers and employees living in rural communities or in areas of greatest need. Rural proofing would demonstrate a level of commitment – and hopefully signal greater collaboration between urban and rural charities. Certainly, more rural representation - in terms of governance – will aid in greater understanding of rural issues and well as highlight opportunities.

- *A focus on volunteers - volunteer progression and modernisation:* Investment and progression of volunteers is of significant interest to STFWV members; the position statement sets out greater inclusion and support for volunteers as two out of the four areas for action. Given this, how might we collaborate with rural charities to support those that step forward to progression via access to training and opportunities to take up more activities and/or leadership roles. STFWV members could support via access to online training programmes and courses – such as safeguarding, manual handling, health and safety, impact evaluation. Perhaps making training and skills development more accessible for those living in rural areas. Members could also contact their existing stock of volunteers living in rural areas to offer additional volunteering opportunities via locally based charities. This could be advanced through the setting up of peer learning opportunities between staff of larger charities and local rural organisations.
- *Cost of living crisis – collaboration for national good and infrastructure sharing:* There is also a more immediate action that STFWV charities could take around supporting the cost-of-living crisis. Some member charities could agree to work with a handful of rural areas to support local charities, for example, where they are running warm hubs/centres, food banks, back to work programmes, etc. Local charities might be able to draw down on support (ie. fundraising, campaigns, etc), infrastructure (e.g. existing volunteers, national telephone support line for welfare calls, safeguarding teams, etc) and national influence (e.g. corporate partners) to leverage additional resources. This could be trialled in a couple of areas amongst a handful of STFWV charities (e.g. 5); this might be a good 'test' for greater partnership working and collaboration amongst charity sector partners (large and small) on future projects and/or areas of national challenge (e.g. rural poverty)

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Annex A: List of participants at Roundtable 8 April 2022

- Graham Biggs, Rural Services Network
- Crewenna Dymond, Roundtable coordinator, CPRE the countryside charity
- Harriet English, Plunkett Foundation
- Jez Hughes, Shaping the Future with Volunteering
- Jeremy Leggett, ACRE
- Jonathan Owen, NALC
- Ros Stewart, CPRE
- James Wakefield, YHA
- Glen Walker, Ramblers Association
- Tiger de Souza, National Trust

Appendix B: Case Study Summary

What's unique about volunteering in rural areas?

- Travel issues for volunteers and communities they support – cost and distances, poor public transport
- Social interaction when living in rural areas is less easy and older/vulnerable people appreciate the contact
- Commitment of local people to help in their community is key to success
- Older demographic might not find digital so easy
- Face to face support/contact in isolated areas is really important too for people benefiting from services
- Environmental/animal/agri charities are just as important in rural areas
- Lower population gives communities a greater sense of connection and dependence on each other for support
- More emphasis on taking support to people, rather than expecting them to come to towns/cities to access e.g. Advice Bus (CAB), Library drop services, mobile vaccination units
- People with disabilities or other support needs are just as likely to live in rural communities so services have adapted to include people wherever they live
- Demographic of population in rural areas may have an impact on what people are able to do in their volunteering roles, however people are often very well connected through other roles within the community (does this mean the same people do lots of things?)

Learnings/changes from pandemic

- Digital is just as important in rural areas for promotion and engagement with new audiences to recruit volunteers and also promote projects/initiatives/campaigns (to audiences online)
- Services disrupted by covid but orgs found a way around issues as best they could
- Pandemic saw people 'step forward to serve' and adaptations in how services are delivered to reach people in their community has helped people from rural areas volunteer more easily
- Keeping beneficiary in mind and taking service to them directly at home

Role of larger charities in rural areas

- Larger charities often run projects with different names that place the support in the community

- Volunteer organising – from a coordinator is helpful in planning/support and engagement/motivation of vols
- Collaboration and partnership between organisation is key to success – linking those in need with services to support them, to join up services needed in a holistic way
- The role of ‘connectors’ - people whose role it is to find/reach out/be the eyes and ears is super important for linking services/support with communities.