How volunteering is still changing after all these years

SAM FROUD-POWELL has watched volunteering progress, not always smoothly, from a top-down add on to a trail-blazing strategy for local people to take control. And he doesn't want it to stop there.

Sam Froud-Powell was working alongside ACE volunteers before they became a significant force in the charity. Now as Operational and Development Manager (that's joint second-in-command to the Director) he has responsibility for a wide range of projects which involve volunteering activities. So he has a special interest in how it has developed and has witnessed much of the unfolding story.

Sam joined the Communities First team as a community energy officer in 2013, when there was just a handful of local residents helping some of the projects on an ad hoc basis.

Under the Communities First programme resident contributions were encouraged to some extent. But Sam suggests this was on a "top-down" basis, where volunteers had to fit into existing projects, which didn't give them much sense of control. And while the staff were based in a single cramped office at the old Council Housing Office in Grand Avenue there was hardly enough space to accommodate the paid workers; so it was not a place to engage with volunteers.

No job description or training

Sam cites the example of working closely with Doug Stowell, a local resident who shared his commitment to energy issues and was valued as "another pair of hands". But the arrangement was informal. Doug had no real autonomy, and he didn't have anything resembling a job description or formal training. This was typical of the way volunteers got involved.

Volunteering under Communities First was simplistic. "We had things to achieve dictated by the programme, and volunteers could help us achieve them," says Sam. "We wanted the experience to be useful for people and we didn't want to exploit them. But there were no systems for looking after them."

It's generally recognised today that it was hard to infuse the tick-box monitoring systems of Communities First with the principles of "co-production", even though the programme was intended to make communities and individuals more resilient. Co-production is more than a bit of jargon. It's a collaborative way of working underpinning the ACE approach to community development, where professionals and people who use services or are affected by them work together as equal partners to design, plan, and deliver the outcomes.

But that's easier said than done, and Sam concedes that the evolution of volunteering has not followed a simple trajectory since the generously-funded but restrictive Communities First regime ended in 2018. For one thing, initiatives evolved in different ways.

In particular, from 2013 onwards the enormously successful Caerau and Ely Rediscovering Heritage (CAER) project was systematically involving large numbers of local residents in heritage work including annual archaeological digs, producing exhibitions, films and artwork, and helping to process the finds. The project was designed to involve volunteers and greater flexibility came from the partnership with Cardiff University.

Culture change for the charity

But Sam describes ACE's move along Cowbridge Road from Cardiff Council's smart Community Hub to the Dusty Forge in 2015 as a significant culture change for the charity. "The Dusty was a bit of a mess when we started," Sam explains in generous understatement about the former youth centre and, earlier, disreputable local pub. "But we made it a place where the community could come and help to create something themselves. And this changed what ACE is."

Sam was part of a team dispatched to the Dusty in advance of the rest of the staff to sort the place out, who probably couldn't have done so without the help of volunteers. So the local people immediately had a stake in the building. The management team saw the potential in what they had unleashed.

Space changes culture, and the Dusty changed who ACE is," Sam reflects. "We were a younger organisation then. We had a mindset that said, 'Let's try that! People need to take command of their own projects.'"

The charity was suddenly running its own premises (on licence from the City Council) and not exclusively delivering projects for funders. The focus turned to giving people a role in how things were done, and recognising the different motives which brought them to the Dusty.

This hardly needed to be steered by ACE. The volunteers were keen to change things too. "They wanted to build Ace, create stuff," adds Sam. The Community Shop, a short-lived café, and community gardens adjacent to both the Dusty Forge and the CAER Centre are among the activities which emerged spontaneously from this impulse.

The projects moved away from being directed by staff and, though Sam insists that ACE cared about its volunteers and wanted the experience to be meaningful for them, he

concedes that there were no unified systems for looking after them. For a while the strategy of allowing groups to operate freely seemed to be a brilliant success. But neither the staff nor the volunteers could handle so much independence.

Within a couple of years the lack of control was leading to tensions between volunteers and staff and among volunteers themselves. Helen Bull who came in as the first Volunteer Development Officer *[Read the Helen Bull interview]* in 2019 was too often distracted from her job setting up new standards for volunteering by the need to resolve the problems of not having them.

Sam accepts that he and other members of staff should have been more vigilant, and sees ACE's belated and reluctant reaction as severe but necessary. Some volunteering activities were closed, and the volunteer team slimmed down from perhaps 80 to as few as 50 as priority switched to encouraging people into training and jobs. At the same time Helen Bull was working to secure Investing in Volunteers status for the charity, which involved a radical upgrade to policies and procedures to enhance the volunteering experience.

This could have been the end for the exciting free-spirited approach of the early Dusty days. But Sam sees the fallout as much more positive, with the emergence of a more mature regime led by Investing in Volunteering principles.

"There was a pendulum reaction to the show-down. Today we aspire to help people make changes to their own lives and the lives of others. But we also encourage them to have ideas for activities, and we support them to focus on getting help to put them into practice."

A good example is the regular Tuesday Lunch for 30 or so people at the Dusty established by volunteers frustrated by the sight of surplus food being thrown away after the separate FoodCycle project's community meals on Monday evenings. The differences between this initiative and the earlier free-for-alls is that ACE staff have set boundaries for its work and have a solid relationship with capable lead volunteer Sarah Standing.

A space for connections to happen

Another way in which volunteering is evolving is by enabling local people to advise and influence other existing community initiatives and services. Examples of this partnership approach include work with the joint ACE and Cardiff City Council "Shape Your Future" project, which helps working people to improve their employment prospects, and organisations such as Ely and Caerau Children's Centre.

This is happening in tandem with ACE's wider operational objective of building closer working relationships with other agencies. Sam quietly slips into the conversation his interest in ACE "being a space where we can catalyse connections to happen."

If that sounds a little cerebral, he brings it down to earth by citing the value of different bodies coming together to celebrate volunteering and exchange ideas.
It's part of a new process in which ACE will encourage people with different ways of thinking to meet up to explore the possibilities of co-production and, to put it simply, seeing what comes out of it.

Sam admits it “can be scary” because the results are uncertain. But the prize of mixing up ideas is the potential to come up with ideas which are “greater than the sum of their parts” It could prove enormously powerful.

He has thoughts on more immediate practical issues such as the way volunteering is managed overall in ACE. Since it has some part to play in almost all activities. It sits outside ACE’s separate departments for health projects, community support, the CAER Centre etc, and also within all of them.

Sam believes this makes it more difficult to “distil the magic” of volunteering in ACE. So he would ideally like to establish a new integrated staff team which would bring together ACE’s external training consultancy and its local networking role which has developed from the Ely and Caerau Community Plan as well as the work of Taela-Mae Davies as Volunteer Development Officer.

It remains to be seen what will emerge from these ideas. But the fact that Sam is thinking creatively in these terms clearly shows that, even after well over a decade of its evolution, ACE volunteering is in no mood to stand still.