How we managed to learn to manage volunteers

Personal thoughts on a rather tough job by Mel Witherden

I was nagging John Hallett, the co-founder of ACE and former Director for years before, in 2019, he eventually created the post of Volunteer Development Officer. John didn't need to be persuaded this was the way to go. He just had to be sure it was affordable.

I probably didn't appreciate fully at the time what a significant financial commitment this was for the charity. Partial funding for the post has from time to time been scraped cautiously from the budgets of other projects when this can be justified.

But basically the Volunteer Development Officer is paid from the impoverished "core" budget. That is, the money supporting the entire tier of senior admin, finance and management staff. ACE has to generate all this itself from rents, project management costs, very occasional grants and surpluses anywhere it can find them.

So employing a member of staff with an exclusive remit to foster volunteering for more than six years so far is a good sign of the importance of ACE's engagement with local people. It's at the heart of ACE's ambitions and its way of working.

I need to admit here that I have an axe to grind. I started working with volunteers in another local charity project back in the 1970s, and have always believed that their impact on the organisations they work with, and the impact on the volunteers themselves, can be as important as the services they provide to the community. This is certainly the case for ACE.

It is less well understood that organising and motivating a large unpaid workforce whose individual motives for turning up are as varied as the number of volunteers is actually a lot more demanding than managing paid staff. And a single talented Volunteer Development Officer can't "manage" 70-odd volunteers either, particularly as their activities range from archaeological digs to cooking meals and to helping local people face financial and health crises. So ACE has to be clever.

The mechanism which Helen Bull developed involves "lead volunteers", who provide a link between paid management staff and the volunteers in individual projects and activities. Their tasks include helping to ensure that fellow volunteers receive the training they need. This means that management workers don't have to spend valuable time overseeing the work of project volunteers. But they do need to understand their roles, and liaise with their lead volunteer.

That's an extra dimension to the work of paid staff which inevitably suits some better than others. So the management of the management of volunteers has to be managed too! It sounds cumbersome, but most of the time the system works well. The arrangement has the additional major benefit of providing opportunities for those who want it to develop management skills when they progress to the extra responsibilities of lead volunteers.

This structure did not suddenly emerge to transform the way volunteers are supported. Helen Bull, the original Volunteer Development Officer, and Sam Froud-Powell, the senior manager whose many roles include responsibility for volunteering policies, both concede that mistakes have been made, and primarily in one of the areas which matters most – helping local people to take control.

The idea of autonomy goes back to the earliest thinking of ACE founders Dave Horton and John Hallett – establishing a charity which didn't do things to or for disadvantaged people, but instead created the circumstances and opportunities for Ely and Caerau residents to do things for themselves – and to influence public policies. As Sam sees it, ACE should be "a place where people change their lives".

Initially there was a vision of the charity enabling the residents to set up and run community projects which would eventually be entirely independent of ACE. As an adviser who had seen many such efforts collapse elsewhere in Wales and Scotland, I had to persuade them that even the best initiatives can easily fail without the support of a strong and resilient core organisation.

The closest ACE has been to realising this aspiration is the self-supporting Dusty Shed project, a workshop and social environment for older men and women. Even here, the "shed" is a building inside the gates of the Dusty Forge, and close links remain between its volunteers and ACE which helped to set it up in 2015.

But what about releasing the initiative and energy of volunteers by helping them to launch autonomous activities within ACE? A café, a shop, environmental activities, social support groups. The possibilities were genuinely exciting. Surely this was an approach which would foster new skills, responsibility, leadership, and a greater sense of self-worth.

The pioneering spirit which burst out with the move to the Dusty Forge provided ideal circumstances for enterprising volunteers to spot opportunities, get a nod from the director, and get started. There was space in the building, there were eager workers, and the rules on volunteering hadn't been written yet.
It wasn't quite the Wild West, but now most people agree there was too much freedom. There's no question, that while working with unpaid workers is a gloriously rewarding experience most of the time, it can sometimes go wrong.

Other charities will probably be familiar with the features of this occasional painful unravelling of the ideal: a tight-knit volunteer team is seen as exclusive and unwelcoming by potential newcomers; some helpers who have demonstrated their fitness for work actually lose the incentive to move on to formal training and employment, and become resistant to change.

Volunteers who have worked hard to establish their “independent” projects may not take kindly to the host organisation telling them what to do, and pro and anti camps contaminate formerly sound working relationships. Staff time and energy can become dissipated in trying to resolve disputes. Service to the community tends to deteriorate.

As this scenario played out in ACE personal conflicts became more frequent and more distracting, until the Director Michelle Powell reluctantly insisted on a clamp-down. This included the closure of the Community Shop and a reorganisation of some services under staff control. Some volunteers left unhappily.

There was now an expectation that volunteers should be on a path towards conventional employment, and would be moved ahead if they became too settled. (This was always unachievable, given that many volunteers are not interested in paid jobs, and they benefit hugely from the experience in other more personal ways.) For a while it looked as if volunteers with initiative would no longer be able to start new projects inside ACE.

Some changes have been longer lasting. Since the shake-up there has been greater emphasis on training. The lead volunteer arrangement is maintained by the Volunteering Development Officer as people come and go, and managers are reminded of their roles in it.

Sam Froud-Powell acknowledges that the history of volunteering in ACE has been one long learning process. Support and management have improved dramatically over the past 12 years. So it’s easy to take this for granted as a lucky side-effect of the extraordinary growth and success of the charity’s grant-funded projects and activities.

But in some ways volunteering, with its marginal budgets, has succeeded in parallel with them – alongside, but separate from, the gargantuan efforts to sustain the paid staff and meet the requirements of 30 or 40 separate project funders.

This wouldn’t have been possible without volunteering’s own unobtrusive infrastructure - funding for a dedicated Volunteer Development Officer post, the co-operation of management staff, and continuing efforts of many others, paid and unpaid, to make volunteer management work. It is, after all, harder than employing paid staff.