# “We must understand volunteers and volunteering”

## *How former Volunteer Development Officer Helen Bull managed the struggles and triumphs of bringing order to a little volunteering chaos*

**Within weeks of starting work as ACE’s first Volunteer Development Officer covid struck. In the spring of 2020 the Dusty Forge and the CAER Centre closed their doors to all but the essential services and most volunteers were sent on an extended enforced holiday.**

It was hardly an auspicious start to a much-needed job to bring order to activities which were becoming just a little chaotic.

Helen had been involved in volunteering all her working life – in church, in family care, in a major business, and in Cardiff Food Bank. She enjoyed working with people and making a difference to their lives. But what she encountered in ACE was not entirely what she anticipated.

“I thought there would be more systems in place. It was not as organised and cohesive as I expected,” she says. “There was no whole volunteer team.”

### No common goals

What she faced was a variety of separate activities involving enthusiastic volunteers who did not seem to have common practices or goals – the result of years of spontaneous and largely uncoordinated development.

Voluntary work had exploded into life in 2015 when ACE moved to the Dusty Forge. Then the brakes were off from 2018 onwards after ACE became independent of the restrictions of the Communities First programme and free to run an expanding range of projects which actively encouraged community involvement. Helen had to deal with the fallout from all this excitement.

“I wanted to put a shape on it, and instil some vision in volunteers so they would understand what it’s about and why,” Helen explains. “But I quickly realised that not one size fits all. It had to be quite bespoke.”
The huge variety of ACE’s activities – in health, family care, financial advice, the environment, archaeology, arts and crafts, training and more – is in some ways its greatest strength. But Helen’s challenge was to deliver a common approach that would be flexible enough to organise and support volunteers across the whole organisation

## Clear staff responsibilities

Under the system of “lead volunteers” which she introduced half a dozen volunteers are trained to liaise between paid managers and teams of volunteers to create clear lines of responsibility for directing their work and providing for training and welfare.

Helen says getting lead volunteers fully in place took a long time, and subsequent experience has shown that this has to be carefully maintained by the Volunteer Development Officer. But there is little doubt that her work has transformed the experience of volunteering for everyone.

Alongside this revolution in volunteer management, Helen pulled off an even more extraordinary achievement – securing prestigious Investors in Volunteers (IiV) status for ACE. IiV is the UK quality standard for good practice in volunteer management in areas such as volunteer roles, inclusion, recruitment, supervision and training.

Plenty of charities and community organisations baulk at the hard work, time and perseverance required to develop and operate the systems needed to earn the badge.

Helen says that by the time she left there was huge difference among the paid staff in their understanding of volunteering and the way it should be managed to ensure people and their contributions are properly valued. But perhaps not everyone was so easy to persuade.

She makes the point that ACE should have reacted earlier to growing tensions with its most independent-minded volunteering projects who felt disinclined to follow the rules. “I tried to convince management. But I felt that I was stepping on toes and overstepping my grade. It wasn’t always easy.”
This could be a message for other organisations introducing IiV standards to bear in mind.

Helen doesn’t expand on the details of what went wrong or how it was resolved. (See an exploration of these issues on the "It's a Tough Job” page.) But they made for a slightly bitter-sweet conclusion to her hugely important term, as Helen’s family circumstances and plans for leaving Cardiff led to her resignation in 2023.

“I felt really fulfilled in the job, and was chuffed we got Investing in Volunteers. We were all proud of what we achieved,” she says. “I was happy at ACE, but it was frustrating at times.”

For a while there was a new tougher expectation from ACE managers that volunteering should be all about personal progression towards transferable skills and employment. It was a worthy aim, and would discourage the emergence of cliques.

## Value volunteers for themselves

Yet this wasn’t going to be enough after the principles of Investing in Volunteers had been taken on board.
Helen agrees that ACE shouldn’t allow itself to be used to avoid paid work but insists that it’s unrealistic to treat everyone the same. “The purpose of people volunteering has to be

appreciated from the outset. Some people want to come and go, others want to progress and others want responsibility," she says.

"Individual volunteers must be valued for themselves." At the same time she also argues that it's essential to understand the way that volunteering contributes to the spirit of organisation as a whole. It's not "either/or". Thanks to Helen's energetic groundwork and skills, and the understanding she brought to ACE, this is very much the vision that the charity has naturally arrived at today.