Volunteering Voice and Engagement Programme, Newcastle, Quarter 1 Report

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Introduction

In 2023, Connected Voice embarked on a Volunteer and Social Action Programme for Newcastle, funded by the Government's UK Shared Prosperity Fund through the North of Tyne Combined Authority and is now administered by the North East Combined Authority. As part of this, we have been consulting with VCSE organisations operating across the city to highlight the challenges and barriers that they are facing in their volunteer-involving work. Through this consultation, we have also highlighted pockets of success that need to be celebrated, shared, and built upon.

This report will provide a snapshot into the Volunteering Voice and Engagement work so far. We have consulted with over 30 volunteer-involving organisations across the city and have already gathered a wealth of insights. These include 10 micro to small organisations with a predominantly volunteer-led structure, 16 medium-sized organisations and 5 large and/or national organisations. They span a wide range of different purposes and aims, including health support services, community arts projects, youth work, supporting families, children and young people, developing and managing community green spaces, tackling food waste, LGBTQIA+ inclusion and support, mental health support and religious spaces. We are continuing to reach out

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to more organisations to gain the most representative picture of the shape of volunteer activity in Newcastle.

We have been heartened by the enthusiasm and hunger that organisations have for developing a better offer for volunteering in the city. While we will not be able to comment on the outcomes of every conversation, we acknowledge and thank everyone involved for the time that they have given us and their ongoing commitment towards volunteering development. In addition to our consultation with volunteer-involving organisations, we have also sought out connections with key networks and partnerships across the city that have an interest in reaching out into communities to support the volunteering endeavour. To date, we have engaged with the Newcastle Work and Thrive Partnership and have taken a role in their strategy group to inform on volunteering and its place in supporting those who are economically inactive with their journey to meaningful work. We have also engaged with the West End Children's Community (WECC), a partnership across voluntary organisations in the West End of Newcastle that deliver services to support babies, children and young people to discuss how supporting local people into volunteering can help to bring the voice of the community into the services they deliver.

In this report, we will be discussing the key challenges and barriers as well as highlighting some of the success stories that show the potential of volunteering as an initiative. We will also touch on what these initial findings mean for the trajectory of the work moving forward, outlining the next steps and areas that can be explored further.

Key Challenges and Barriers

1. Volunteer Recruitment and Retention

Despite the benefits that volunteering brings, recruitment and retention of volunteers is harder than ever for most of the organisations we spoke to. Organisations discussed significant drops in volunteer engagement since the COVID-19 Pandemic and the cost

of living crisis. Practical barriers associated with the upfront costs of traveling to a volunteering role, accessing on-boarding processes such as a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks and wider costs associated with completing volunteer duties. In most cases, organisations were able to offer reimbursements at a later date, but this still poses a significant barrier to those on low incomes who do not have the ability to meet these upfront costs. As a result, organisations anecdotally commented that the vast majority of their existing volunteers were financially comfortable and economically active. Although volunteering has the potential to support people into paid work through the development of employability skills, those in most need of this, and who therefore have less disposable income, were least able to access volunteering.

Access to volunteering is not only hindered by practical barriers but can also be impacted by the way volunteering is perceived in society as a whole. The pandemic showed that our communities are keen to reach out and support each other through mutual-aid activities, e.g. buying shopping for neighbours who needed to self-isolate. However, these activities were often seen as “helping out” in an unstructured, and therefore low commitment, way. Organisations commented that many feel taking this commitment further into a formal volunteer role would be overwhelming and too time consuming for them to manage. Discussions around the development of micro-volunteering roles brought up challenges around developing these roles in a way that still allowed organisations to meet the needs of their projects and the lack of time for role development itself.

Those who are not in paid employment could be a perfect match for taking on a volunteer role and as we discussed above, this comes with the mutual benefit of developing key employability skills. From ONS data, around 51,400 people or 26.0% of the population aged 16 to 64 years in Newcastle upon Tyne were "economically inactive" in the year ending September 2023. However, the effect of long-term unemployment on self-confidence and self-motivation can often mean even taking that first step into a voluntary role can be too daunting and complex without support and structure. Social prescribing is an initiative that is being increasingly used to support those whose health and wellbeing could be improved by connecting them with their

community. Volunteering is increasingly being seen as an activity that can be "prescribed out" to those who may benefit. However, organisations have discussed that these individuals need support, to both complete the recruitment and on-boarding and training process and stay in role whilst their confidence improves. Some organisations mentioned small pockets of supported volunteering where capacity allowed and the power this had to help volunteers with low confidence stay in role and improve their skills and outlook. This is only possible with a paid volunteer coordinator in place offering a robust structure where experienced volunteers have the lived experience and skills needed to support new volunteers. However, more often than not organisations are finding themselves lacking the capacity to provide such support and therefore volunteers in this category are few and far-between.

2. Limited capacity for volunteer coordination and a number of organisations operating as an entirely volunteer lead capacity

A dedicated and paid Volunteer Coordinator role is intrinsic to providing robust volunteer support, engagement and management. However, many organisations cite a lack of capacity for this and limited funding streams to allow an increase in capacity. Many of the organisations are operating with only a part time or, in some cases, no stable volunteer coordinator. Some of the organisations we spoke to are entirely volunteer run and have experimented with volunteer coordination as a volunteer role in itself. This only works to a degree and leaves that support structure in a fragile space.

3. Lack of networking across VCSE organisations in Newcastle and a space to discuss volunteering

As is commonplace in the VCSE sector, the organisations we spoke with were busy places where project and service delivery is understandably the top priority. This means that most of them had not found themselves able to connect with other VCSE organisations to discuss challenges and share best practise. Every organisation

consulted within this project expressed a desire to join a Volunteering Network for Newcastle that met regularly. Organisations noted and welcomed the networking and training events already offered by the Volunteer Centre Newcastle, but have asked for a network that meets more regularly and with a dedicated focus on networking and allowing time for VCSE organisations to share their views and needs. There were also discussions about running smaller network groups themed around geographical locality and/or organisational focus and aims. We trialled a small network group in the Ouseburn Area, inviting the Ouseburn Trust, Ouseburn Community Farm and Wild Roots Community Garden to a mini-networking meeting, hosted by Ouseburn Farm. All who took part commented that they have never been able to find time to get together until then and really valued the time and thinking space that it brought.

4. Representative and diverse Trustee recruitment

There have been mixed experiences with recruiting to Trustee positions within organisations that we consulted with. Some expressed issues with finding volunteers with the confidence and skills required to take on key roles. Finding a Chair was a challenge raised on a few occasions and other concerns including planning for Trustee succession as those in post completed their terms. Another key area of development was recruiting Trustees with lived experience of the issues addressed by the charity's work. Newcastle Carers' CEO, Luke Bramhall, spoke to us about development and review work on their board structure that they are about to undertake this year. Luke discussed that making sure Boards of Trustees are diverse and representative can be a common issue across the VCSE sector and that this often due to lack of opportunity, access and knowledge of the role of Trustee for those experiencing social inequity.

5. Recruiting skilled volunteers

Skilled volunteering has the potential to open up volunteer opportunities across the city but is not something that most of the organisations we have spoken to have accessed in a significant way. Northern Pride organise the region's largest Pride festival in Newcastle city centre every year and is entirely volunteer lead. Their Volunteer Coordinator, Frances Easter, herself a volunteer, came to the role in retirement after a long career managing staff and volunteers in the Arts and Culture industry. She discussed significant problems with recruiting to key skilled volunteer positions such as Marketing Officer, Finance Officer and Fundraising. Frances highlighted challenges with finding skilled individuals who had an interest in LGBTQIA+ community and were willing and able to volunteer their time in a role that they normally are paid for. She discussed with passion about how, as a retired professional, she gained a lot of personal satisfaction from volunteering her professional skills and using her free time to show allyship to the LGBTQIA+ community.

This theme of volunteering in retirement came up in a number of conversations; in particular the Gosforth and Jesmond Community Minibus, a small charity that run a low-cost minibus service for the community in and around Newcastle, are entirely volunteer run and their board of Trustees are all retired professionals. Their Secretary, Francirecys Mogg, discussed how important it was for him to keep active and to continue utilising his professional skills after retirement. He also commented on the need for more outreach to employees in the corporate sector who are soon to be retiring to highlight the benefits that volunteering professional skills can bring.

Connected Voice has experience connecting skilled volunteers with the VCSE sector through the Sector Connector programme. This programme connects businesses in Newcastle and Gateshead with the VCSE organisations to support and develop employer-supported volunteering from their skilled workforces. There is definitely room for growth and development of this programme to ensure that more organisations can benefit from Sector Connector, but also to look into the expansion

through connecting retired skilled professionals with the VCSE sector.

Success Stories

Despite the challenges faced, the VCSE sector is resourceful and supported by committed people who have long seen the benefits that volunteers bring to their programmes and have been working hard to find solutions to better engage and empower them. This programme has highlighted a few pockets of success already and we will showcase some of them below:

Spotlight Case Study: The Journey from Service User to Volunteer, Blue Sky Trust and Oswin Project

The Blue Sky Trust (BST) is a charity that supports individuals who are HIV positive. The people who use their services, known as members, receive vital holistic support that addresses all aspects of life while living with HIV. We met with their Volunteer Coordinator, Caroline Emmerson, who spoke of how the service needs to be personalised and flexible to meet the complex needs of their diverse membership. Caroline described the use of an annual member residential weekend away to Minsteracres Retreat Centre in Consett, County Durham. The retreat has become a pivotal moment in members journeys at BST, providing a focal point where they learn to trust each other and open up about their experiences. Through this the members develop a sense of community and ownership over the work at BST. Caroline was clear that this final point, feeling a sense of ownership over a charitable or social action initiative, was key to inspiring people to step up into volunteer roles and this is reflected very clearly in the fact that almost all of BST's current and active volunteers are member volunteers. The member volunteers take on roles from the running of regular events and social groups, providing 1:1 support as Peer Mentors and collaborated with Helen Anderson, Director of BST to develop HIV awareness Training informed by lived experience. The residential trip is now considered so essential by BST volunteers that when it was at risk of not going ahead in 2024 due to a lack of funding, a group of

member volunteers proposed, planned and are delivering on fundraising activities to generate the money needed for the trip to go ahead. In Caroline's own words:

"Even though they had already been on their residential, they saw it as so important to the experience at BST that they didn't want new members to go without it".

Caroline also discussed the continued journey that member volunteers go on that often eventually leads them into paid work. There are many reasons that individuals take on a volunteer role, but one significant one is the desire to develop employability skills and confidence for entering into the job market. A number of the organisations proudly spoke of volunteers who have found paid work within the same organisation they volunteered for as a result of their experiences.

The Oswin Project are a charity that support those who are in prison and those who have left the criminal justice system, know to the charity as Clients. They run Café 16, located inside Newcastle Cathedral and provide a space for Clients to experience working in a café environment in a volunteer capacity whilst receiving one to one support. We met with their CEO, Fiona Sample and Operations Manager Emma Turnball. Both expressed how vital "Client Volunteers" were in creating a space where clients felt supported, understood and welcomed. These Client Volunteers started as clients, solely attending for their own support needs who were able to stay and support newer clients as they grew in confidence and experience. They said that volunteers were often the first to hear from clients if there are struggling and in need of support, ahead of the paid professional support workers that they have in post. This journey from Client to volunteer also played a key role in extending the client support experience as they took on new responsibilities in an environment where they felt safe and understood.

Both organisations were proud of the pathway they had created for their service users to take on volunteering roles but were clear that this has come with significant planning, and commitment to a robust support structure.

At Blue Sky Trust, Caroline has been developing this pathway for over three years and this initiative came from a desire from the charity's leadership to use the voice of the

members in a more significant way to inform the way the service runs. The member-cum-volunteer initiative came off the back of this and Caroline was clear that support and buy-in from the charity's senior leadership was pivotal in enabling her to develop the key training and support structures needed to make the pathway the success that it has become. In her own words, she said:

"It has taken a few years and a lot of hard work to get to where we are now and we have found that, while their responsibility level might differ to that of a paid member of staff, it is incredibly important to ensure that volunteers are empowered and listened to".

Similarly, at the Oswin Project, Fiona was clear that the organisation deeply understood that their clients needed long-term, flexible support as they navigate life outside of prison and that volunteering in the café was a key part of extending that journey and supporting the skills and confidence they gain along the way.

Children North East: Volunteering for Employability, the value of volunteer for insight and skill development

Children North East is a medium-sized charity that delivers on a broad range of projects that support families, babies, children and young people, with a particular focus on those living in poverty. Their Volunteer Coordinator, Amie McDonald, is one such member of staff. Amie began her time at CNE as a volunteer for their Families Team, supporting Parent and Toddler groups. Amie says:

"That experience as a volunteer gave me the skills and confidence I needed to apply for a paid job, once in post, they realised my time as a volunteer gave me the insights needed to take on a role as Volunteer Coordinator. I'm now using what I know to help make volunteering here as accessible as possible."

Amie's work includes developing strategies to make volunteering accessible to people with English as an additional language. With the support of a keen experienced volunteer, Nadia, Amie has established a new English for Speakers of Other

Languages (ESOL) group. The group meet weekly and Nadia leads sessions to help new and prospective volunteers develop confidence with the language used in volunteer training. This is a great example of empowering a committed existing volunteer to tap into their specialist skills that in turn allowed them to feed into a more enriching and inclusive volunteer experience.

Wild Roots Community Garden: The value of support and collaboration across VCS organisations

It is worth finally noting a small but not insignificant success that has been uncovered through the support of a grass roots established community garden by a much larger established charity. Wild Roots is the brainchild of founder Nick Figgis who has spent the last year growing a sustainable community garden on a piece of disused land in the heart of the Ouseburn Valley. Nick told of the story of how this garden developed and spoke candidly about the challenges of the early months:

"There were many times I had put a call out for volunteers, people would sign up but then for one reason or another would drop out. It's like throwing a party and no one turn up."

He turned to the Ouseburn Trust, a local development trust for the area, who have many links with local businesses and VCSE organisations. Their project officer, Cath Scaife, looks after greenspace volunteering as part of her role. Cath supported Nick by organising an employer supported volunteering day with a local architect firm. The firm brought a group of employees to the site to help Nick with many of the large scale jobs that he was struggling to complete alone. Nick remarked,

"The volunteers even helped to rebuild a path that I had installed badly, using their engineering skills to work out the best construction."

Cath has continued to provide support for Nick by providing advice and a listening ear to help give him the confidence to continue to grow the garden. Nick now has a core of volunteers from a wide range of backgrounds and ages. He commented on a recent

increase in volunteers in their early 20s helping consistently who are motivated by their climate consciousness and desire to support sustainability in their community.

The above example from Wild Roots and the support they received from the Ouseburn Trust is a great instance of how networking and collaborative working can help to support smaller VCSE organisations to navigate the increasingly challenging funding, and volunteer recruitment and retention environment that we are experiencing.

The Magic Hat Café: Empowering the voice of the volunteer and centring flexible approaches to volunteering

The Magic Hat Café are a branch of the food waste Community Interest Company (CIC), Project Bind. They run a low cost café where food destined for landfill is intercepted and reimagined into creative dishes. Their Volunteer Coordinator, Louie Ingham, discussed with us that their current model means that the café can operate in its entirety, whether volunteers are present or not. They see their volunteer programme as an additional activity that helps to bring the voice of the people to their work and spread their company aim of educating on the impact of food waste and how to reduce it. Their model means that when volunteers sign up, they can commit to as much time to the role as they are able to. This has helped to reduce the concern that some prospective volunteers have around time commitments and has led to the café having over 600 registered volunteers. The café have also recently developed monthly meetings for a volunteer steering group and volunteer working groups, both allow volunteers to take a deep role in advising on decision making and learning about key aspects of the organisation and its mission aims.

Summary and Next Steps

Our conversations show that volunteers are deeply valued by the organisations they serve. They help to enrich the delivery of social projects and bring with them passion, lived experience and new ideas. Volunteering activity enriches the lives of those who

volunteer by reducing isolation and loneliness, providing a sense of purpose and fulfilment and supporting the development of employability skills. Volunteering can form a positive part of someone's life post-employment, retired individuals forming an invaluable committed volunteer base that can also bring their wealth of life and professional experience.

However, organisations are struggling to put the support pathways in place to create an accessible volunteer experience. The further deepening of social inequity in the face of a cost of living crisis is only exacerbating the barriers preventing volunteer recruitment and retention. The unprecedented challenges in the funding climate that the VCSE sector is now experiencing means that finding capacity to support volunteers is harder than ever.

Our next steps will be to continue this process of one to one consultation and relationship building. In addition to this, we will work towards addressing the challenge of networking and a dedicated and regular discussion space to talk about volunteering strategy. With this in mind, we hope to use the next quarter to:

- Build upon Volunteer Centre Newcastle's work by developing a volunteer coordinator/manager network that meets on a regular basis.
- As a medium to long-term aim, creating a steering group of representatives from across the VCSE sector in Newcastle. The purpose of this will be to inform the planning of initiatives that will address the challenges and break down the barriers that are emerging from the consultation work.

We will also make plans to raise the profile and bring volunteering more into conversations across the city by seeking out further networks and partnerships. We will work towards building this conversation even further by utilising our social media platforms and those of our partners to showcase the success stories that we come across, empower the sector to plan events that encourage volunteers and host our own event for Volunteers Week in June 2024 at our base in One Strawberry Lane.

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With thanks to 35 volunteer-involving organisations that have contributed their voice and experience to this programme during Quarter 1:

1. Diversity Role Models
2. Ouseburn Farm
3. Ouseburn Trust
4. Wild Roots
5. Unfolding Theatre
6. Action for Children
7. Skimstone Arts
8. Albert Kennedy Trust
9. Oswin Project
10. Newcastle Carers
11. Wood Recycling Yard Newcastle
12. Nourish Food School
13. Newcastle Cathedral
14. West End Refugee Service
15. Northern Pride
16. Blue Sky Trust
17. Children North East
18. St Martin's Community Centre
19. Gosforth and Jesmond Minibus
20. ReCoCo
21. Daft as a Brush
22. Recyke Y'Bike
23. Northern Cancer Voices
24. The Men's Pie Club
25. Newcastle Mela
26. Altitude Foundation
27. The Magic Hat Cafe
28. The Sunshine Fund
29. Mindful Therapies

30. Greening Wingrove
31. St Oswald's Hospice
32. LGBT+ Northern Social Group
33. Gem Arts
34. Crisis Skylight Newcastle
35. NE Youth