



Theme: What are the effects of demographic development on the number of volunteers needed to maintain a European network?

BACKGROUND

This report is based upon work completed in workshops by delegates from 26 countries belonging to the European Charter of Rural Communities (the Charter). Meetings of delegates took place in Desborough over the period 25-27 November 2011. The full schedule of the meeting is included in Appendix I. The remit of the workshops was to examine the issues involved in organising voluntary groups and to share ideas and solutions relating to the issues, with a focus on the changes in demographics in our communities. The delegates were divided into 7 groups, designed so that neighbouring countries were not placed together.



DAY 1 – Workshop Session I – Friday 25 November 2011

After an overview and an excellent presentation by delegates from Cashel relating to volunteering in Cashel, the 7 groups from different countries considered the issues faced by those who organise voluntary groups and then reported back to the main meeting.

FINDINGS

Of the many issues which were examined and discussed the following were prominent:

How to encourage involvement in volunteering

Most countries, but not all, found it easier to recruit older rather than younger volunteers. Volunteering had to be made attractive for both young and old and volunteers had to be convinced that the work was worth while for the community and themselves. It was often particularly difficult for young people to commit to the time involved in voluntary work. In many communities it was the same group of people who were doing most of the voluntary work and, consequently, there were limits to their capacity to undertake the work required.



Raising finance

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This was an issue for most countries. However, it became obvious that some countries had more assistance from central and local government than others. For most countries, money-raising was likely to remain an issue especially because more uncertain economic times would make it more difficult to raise funds from both public and private sources.

Training

A mixture of skills, abilities and experience was required by voluntary groups and it was often difficult to recruit the right mixture. Some work required skills which few possessed and, therefore, volunteers often had to be trained. Training was often expensive in terms of time and money and sometimes the thought of training made people less willing to volunteer.

Time

Many people felt that they did not have the time to carry out voluntary work. This was particularly the case with younger people who were working and rearing young children.

Venue – A place for voluntary activities

This was an issue for some of the working groups and it was felt that it was preferable for there to be a focal point in the community in which voluntary activities could take place.

Recognising the Effort

It was felt that voluntary groups could become more successful in terms of work achieved and recruitment of volunteers if the work of the volunteer was more widely recognised. This did not necessarily mean financial rewards but other awards and recognition.

DAY 1 – CONCLUSIONS

There were issues which were common to most countries and it was felt that in the second workshop the groups should attempt to answer the following questions in order to provide solutions to these issues:

- *How do we involve different age groups in voluntary work?*
- *How much finance, if anything, should the municipality or government provide?*
- *How do we train volunteers and in what?*
- *How do we solve the problem of commitment of time?*
- *Is there a need for a focal point for the community's voluntary activities?*
- *How do you recognise the effort of your volunteers?*



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DAY 2 – Workshop Session II - Saturday 26 November 2011

There was a brief presentation (related to the Hepstedt presentation) about the nature of the Desborough Twinning Association, its voluntary status and its involvement in local events. The delegate groups were then asked to consider the questions arising from Day 1, with reference to voluntary groups in general and more specifically to Twinning and Friends of Europe groups.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

How do we involve different age groups in voluntary work?

Different age groups need to be encouraged to volunteer in different ways.

Youngsters can be drawn in to groups by involving families.

Young people speak a different language and it is felt that they need to recruit other young people using methods such as the Internet, Facebook, etc.

Key youngsters need to be identified, as do key leaders, who would then work through the youngsters.

Youngsters and their interests need to be targeted.

Young volunteers must be given work which is of interest to them.

The recruitment of young people could be achieved by publicising work undertaken by voluntary groups at schools and colleges.

Voluntary groups must produce publicity which emphasises the advantages of volunteering to all age groups, e.g. meeting new people, contributing to a CV, learning new skills, work experience and enjoying an activity associated with a voluntary organisation.

Those within a particular organisation should make strides to converse with their peers.

A range of events should be provided covering different age groups.

How much finance, if any, should the municipality or government provide?

There were many different models in the countries represented by the delegates.

Funding from the government/municipalities was often easier to obtain for youth issues.

A disadvantage of receiving money from the government or municipality was that it was often given with rules about how it should be spent. This can often be unpopular with voluntary organisations. Many organisations, therefore, preferred to raise money from other sources as this means more independence.

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It is likely that, in the near future, it is going to be more difficult to obtain money from government and municipalities because of the economic crisis and, therefore, other methods of fundraising will have to be used.

It is possible to raise finance independently from government and the groups discussed other fundraising methods including using social activities and events, charitable activities, asking for donations from business and sponsorship.

The view was expressed that it is very difficult in Eastern Europe to recruit volunteers. They need to be able to give rewards, but are unable to do so.

Current times are hard. If groups work together they have a greater pool of people with a wider range of experience and skills.

How do we train volunteers and in what?

Many activities undertaken by voluntary organisations do not require advanced training.

Much training can be undertaken on the job whilst doing the voluntary work.

Workers do, however, usually have to have good interpersonal skills and an ability to work together in groups.

Where highly-specialised skills are necessary, eg in finance, it is possible to recruit people with such skills. Voluntary groups must always plan, wherever possible, to recruit volunteers with appropriate skills.

There are some skills which are specific to the voluntary work where training is necessary, eg running a museum.

Training can be carried out by external agents or within the voluntary organisation but it can be expensive and time consuming.

Some delegates thought that, if training is offered by an organisation, it can encourage people to become volunteers. The offer to people of training in new skills can often attract people to voluntary work.

Different groups need to get together to share their experiences and skills. Skills need to be identified and managed effectively.

There may be a need in some cases for professional training, but coaching could be just as effective.

A list of those friendly to the group could be of help. This would consist of those sympathetic to the group and who would help as and when required.

Health and safety, dealing with emergencies and working with those with special needs are important aspects of the training needed by many volunteers.

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How do we solve the problem of commitment of time?

It was generally recognised that there is a problem in persuading people to give up their valuable time. Volunteers often have many other commitments, eg work or involvement with other groups. People should not feel overwhelmed by their commitment.

Voluntary organisations have to make it clear that people need only give a limited amount of time. It should be stressed that volunteers can give as much or as little of their time as they wish.

Employers, in some situations, should allow their employees time off work to do voluntary work. This could be of assistance to employers who wish to develop employees' skills in certain areas, as well as being good publicity for the employer.

Volunteers should be made aware of how much time is expected of them.

Wherever possible, voluntary activities should take place at times suitable for the volunteers.

People should be encouraged to offer a bank of time to complete a particular task or project. They should be asked: "What can you do and when?" Time offered should be entered into a bank of time and managed.

Organisations can sometimes help by arranging baby sitting for parents to enable them to attend events.

Is there a need for a focal point for the community's voluntary activities?

Ideally there should be one centre in a community where meetings can take place, information about activities can be advertised, fundraising activities can take place and, in certain situations, the core activity of the voluntary organisation can be undertaken.

It was suggested that one central focal point encourages communication between voluntary organisations which can then use each other's facilities and skills.

In some countries there are good, central community centres, but not in all. It is an expensive provision for government.

There could be a problem when resources are shared, eg Who is in charge? Who will provide the money? Will the bigger organisations take most of the available occupation time and money?

In many instances, there are a number of centres which belong to the voluntary organisations themselves.

Often voluntary work is successfully completed in less official places, eg in homes and schools and this informality is preferred.

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How do you recognise the effort of your volunteers?

All groups considered that the recognition of effort by volunteers was important to the organisation. Recognition of effort provides incentive and encourages recruitment.

Some group members do not require external recognition but receive esteem through undertaking a particular role or task.

Recognition needs to be something other than money.

People could receive recognition by publicity received through the media.

Certificates, medals, trophies, scrolls of honour could be presented.

Prizes could be provided by industry, including banks. They could include one or 2-day trips, theatre tickets, etc.

Internal recognition within the group should be encouraged with group members being thanked for their efforts. Everyone was agreed on the importance of saying: "You have done a good job."

There should be public recognition through the municipality at a special evening, a *Volunteer of the Year Award*.

There could be recognition on a town website.



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IN CONCLUSION

As can be seen through this report, a great deal of work was achieved. Delegates should be thanked for their co-operative, thoughtful and constructive work. It is hoped that this report will provide a basis for further investigation, collaboration and action by all countries involved. A copy of this report will be distributed to all delegates, and contributing communities.

As an additional output from the meeting, and the focus on volunteering in our communities, Desborough will collate and share a printed booklet listing key voluntary groups in each Charter member community. It is intended that this will help similar groups in each country make contact with relevant groups in other communities, thereby strengthening links across Europe.



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APPENDIX 1 – Charter of European Rural Communities – Desborough Meeting

SCHEDULE – Thursday 25 November to Sunday 27 November 2011

FRIDAY 25 NOVEMBER

10:00 WORKSHOP SESSION I: Kettering Borough Council Offices - Reception by Mayor

Overview, Volunteering in Cashel, What are the issues with organising voluntary groups in our communities?

13:45 Departure to Desborough – Primary School

15:00 Explore Desborough

16:30 Christmas Tree Festival - Tree decoration at St Giles' Church

17:00 Tea/Coffee served at the Catholic Church Hall, Victoria Street

18:00 Desborough Gala Evening

SATURDAY 26 NOVEMBER

10:00 WORKSHOP SESSION II: Loatlands School, Desborough

What ideas/solutions can we share? How do other Friends of Europe Groups work?
Summary of what we have learnt.

14:30 Session Close – Free-time, collected by hosts

18:45 Charter Dinner at the Three Swans Hotel, Market Harborough – Reception and Meal

SUNDAY 27 NOVEMBER

09:00 Mass at Catholic Church (optional)

10:00 WORKSHOP CONCLUSIONS – summarising workshop activities and preparing for report

14:00 Close and departures