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Community Network: Volunteering

A chance for the Voluntary Community and
Social Enterprise Sector to come together.

Tuesday 27 February, 6:30–8:30PM



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Feedback Report

Introduction

The Community Network Event was held on Tuesday 27 February 2024, at the Bedford Harpur Suite. Bedford Borough Council and Community Voluntary Service Bedford (CVS) welcomed 66 participants from 59 different local organisations and charities, for an informative and interactive conversation around volunteering and volunteer management.

In previous Community Network Events, the voluntary sector has shared with us that one of the main struggles that they face are regarding volunteer recruitment and retainment. For this reason, we felt it was important to discuss the support that is available for the

voluntary sector, as well as celebrate the good work that is happening within the Borough.

We were joined by His Majesty's Lord-Lieutenant of Bedfordshire, Susan Lousada, who opened the event by thanking the voluntary sector and the volunteers of Bedfordshire. We recognise that in most cases, the local organisations and charities that support so many within our community would be unable to function without the dedicated support they receive from passionate volunteers.

Volunteering – The National and Local Picture

Community Voluntary Service (CVS) is a voluntary and community sector support organisation, offering a range of services, enabling local organisations and communities to make a difference in Bedfordshire. They provide advice, information, training and facilities, supporting organisations in the local voluntary, community and social enterprise sector. They promote volunteering and match volunteers with local opportunities. They also encourage organisations in the local voluntary sector to work together, and in partnership with the public and private sector, connecting and sharing knowledge and expertise.

On the CVS website, hundreds of volunteering opportunities can be found and posted through Simply Connect. **Simply Connect** is the volunteer recruitment dashboard where organisations and groups can upload volunteer opportunities, manage current volunteers and match volunteers to opportunities. *If you would like to sign in, or to register as a new voluntary organisation, please click [here](#).* The resource is used by Job Centre Plus and social prescribers on a regular basis and could support charities in recruiting volunteers. This is a free service that the CVS would like to encourage organisations and charities to use, they also have a **volunteers newsletter** that can be utilised by the voluntary sector.

Volunteer Co-ordinator Network Events are another opportunity for the managers and co-ordinators to share best practice. There are three local events taking place across Luton and Bedfordshire:

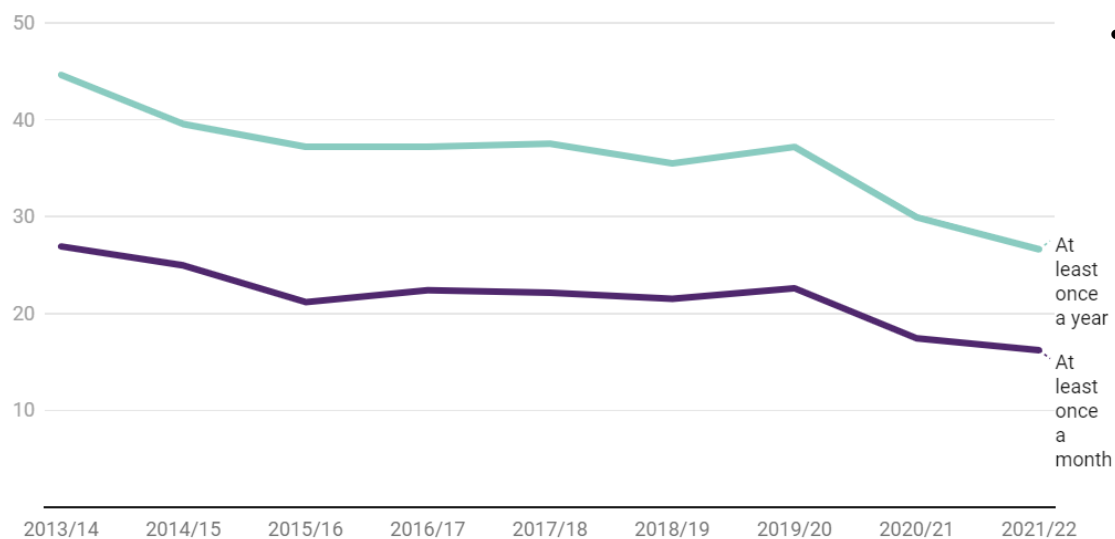
- Bedford - Tuesday 16 April (1pm-3pm)
- Central Beds - TBC
- Luton - Tuesday 14 May (10.30am-12.30pm)

Martin Trinder (CVS Bedfordshire) went on to discuss the national stats for volunteer recruitment. Below, the chart shows the current formal volunteering rates. This has declined steadily over the past 10 years, and seems to be continuing to do so.

The national picture also tells us that:

- People aged between 65 and 74 have the highest level of formal volunteering across all age groups.
- Recent declines in the level of volunteering have only been among those below the age of 65.
- The lowest levels of formal volunteering are among those aged between 25 and 34.
- Older people and those living in rural areas are more likely to volunteer formally compared to those below the age of 65, and those in urban areas.

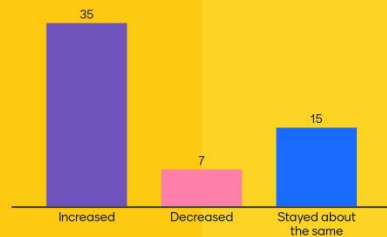
Chart 1: Formal volunteering rates, 2013/14-2021/22



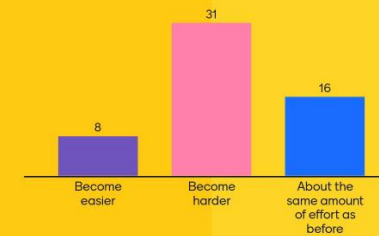
Source: Community Life Survey, 2021/22 • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

We then asked those in the room if this was reflective of their experience, and the answers show us that take up for volunteering within Bedford Borough is surprisingly higher than in the rest of the UK:

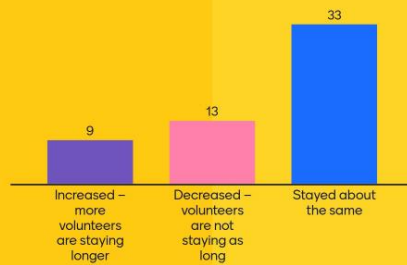
Over the past 12/18 months, has the number of volunteers involved in your organisation:



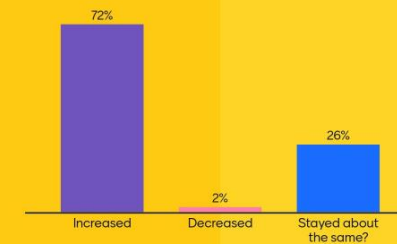
Over the past 12/18 months, has recruiting volunteers:



Over the past 12/18 months, has your retention rate for volunteers:



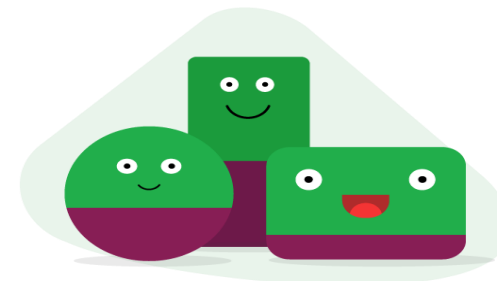
Over the past 12/18 months, has the amount of time you spend on managing volunteers:



Experiences From The Front Line

Carol Solaiman then shared her experience as a Volunteer Co-ordinator at Carers in Bedfordshire. Carol shared the importance of showing volunteers how much the organisation values their time, and that each volunteer is able to be supported by line managers once the volunteer co-ordinator has supported them throughout the recruitment and onboarding process. Some key bullet points that were shared regarding recruitment include:

- Be clear what you need – have easy and accessible role descriptions for volunteers.
- List everywhere – publicise both online and offline.
- Respond quickly to enquiries.
- What's their motivation? – match volunteers with roles that best suit their passions, strengths, and skills.
- Be flexible, informal and inspire confidence.
- Treat them as part of the team- ensure they have a staff link and regular 1-2-1s.



Group Discussion and Feedback

Participants were asked to think about what has been successful while recruiting and retaining volunteers within their organisations, as well as what further support they might need in order to effectively manage volunteers. Some of the things that were fed back as working with their organisations and charities were:

- Having a compassionate leadership approach
 - Having a personal approach to supporting each volunteer; being mindful of their time by being flexible and accommodating where possible, as well as making each volunteer feel that they have regular opportunities to have both informal and formal 1-2-1 catch ups with managers and peers.
- Wider Staff Involvement
 - Ensure that volunteers have been introduced to the teams within the organization or charity – incusing them in team meetings, and work socials and in house training.
- Clear Information and Training
 - On top of a clear role description, having access to sufficient training and encouraging self and professional development is important in retaining volunteers.
- Targeted promotion of volunteer opportunities

“There is something for everyone! We need to engage in community events and empower different groups to come forward and volunteer...”

“Social value - connecting with partners and community interest groups”

“Having a named person for volunteers has changed the game for us! A Volunteer co-ordinator is important”

“Building confidence in potential volunteers - addressing imposter syndrome; we do value your skills and experience, it IS enough!”

The barriers that people shared included:

- Difficulties in recruiting a diverse and reflective workforce and volunteer base
- Cost of living means that many people are struggling financially and although they would like to volunteer, they are having to find paid work
- As the volunteer population consists mainly of older people, the worry is that as time goes on young people will not be interested or able to volunteer – how do we engage young people and make the volunteer offer attractive from now

'1000s of volunteers getting older, how do we encourage younger people to get involved?'

'People cannot afford to Volunteer anymore'

'Hours and cost of training/resources'

Bedfordshire and Luton Community Foundation: Local Focus, Lasting Change

Community Foundations are charitable organisations supporting a defined geographical area. They manage grant-making programmes that could be funded by businesses, wealthy individuals or families, local authorities, and national government funding.

Bedfordshire and Luton Community Foundation (BLCF) have expert knowledge and understanding of the issues within the local area, and how they can best deliver funding to tackle them and encourage local philanthropy. BLCF wants to see a Bedfordshire which is thriving, collaborative and inclusive – where there is opportunity for all and the lives of the most disadvantaged have been transformed through innovative, community-based solutions. Last year the local priorities in Bedford were **Mental Health, Poverty and disadvantage, and Life Skills and Aspirations**. They were able to award £259,512 through 30 grants to fabulous community groups across Bedfordshire. **To find out what support or funding you may be entitled to, please subscribe to their newsletter [here](#), or email Administrator@blcf.org.uk for support on how to set up or sustain your charity or organisation.**

Corporate Volunteering

Many businesses value corporate volunteering, and are open to supporting local voluntary organisations or charities to fulfil their social value ambitions. Corporate volunteering can be described as workplace initiatives where a business or organisation provides support and encouragement for its employees to volunteer within local community. You can find out more about the businesses that are working with the [CVS](#) to encourage corporate volunteering in Bedfordshire.

We invited participants to discuss what type of non-cash corporate support their organisations could do with, thinking about if they had one day of support from a corporate business, what would be helpful. Although there were a few comments made on supporting transportation of service users, tree planting or painting, there were an overwhelming amount of responses regarding these clear themes:

- Support with policy and strategy writing or reviewing
 - Many comments were made on support enhancing or creating the policies needed within a new organisation. This could be anything from GDPR policies, to marketing or business or planning strategies.
 - The majority of groups mentioned discussions and training around best practice
- Financial or accounting training or advice
 - The majority of groups felt that they needed financial and accounting advice or training to enable them to be sustainable charities, and upskill staff going forward.
- Marketing and Promotion Support
 - Groups felt that with the support of corporate comms, they would be able to get the word out on volunteering opportunities, services, and information much easier – reaching different people.

Sharing Skills: How can the Voluntary Sector support each another?

Below are details of groups that are happy to be contacted for support and would like to skill swap with other charities and organisations. Please connect with each other, and support each other using your expertise:

Name	Email	Organisation	Skill or expertise you can offer to another organisation, charity, or grassroots group	Skills or expertise that would be helpful for my organisation, charity, or grassroots group
Emma Foxley	info@letsgetgoingcic.com	Let's Get Going CIC	Movement seated exercise and creative sessions- chatting social	Social media, networking on LGG behalf, fundraising events, publicity
Martin Steers	martin@bedfordradio	Bedford Radio	Podcasting, presentation, communication, PR, presenter, and hosting	
Sonal Mehta	s.mehta@nhs.net	BLMK ICB	Staff have 5 days volunteering written into their employment contract- range of skills on offer	
Ben and Hannah	ben@uspcic.org	USP CIC	Trades training, street first aid training, entrepreneurial lived experience	
John Rutland	johnathan@beactivebeds.co.uk	Be Active Beds	Support any group who wants to inspire people to move more. Support with governance, funding and networking	More networking opportunities with community organisations
Zahra Adam	Zadam@maryseacoleha.com	Mary Seacole Housing	Homeless support, refugee support, volunteer opportunities	Everything
Cal Hopkins	callen@beactivebeds.co.uk	Street Tag/ Be Active	Engaging young people in gamification and exploring green spaces	
Helene Bolton	info@accessbedford.org.uk	Access Bedford	BSL training, deaf awareness training	IT, admin, fundraising
Robert Beckford	robert@nu-focus.co.uk	Nu Focus	Sport leadership, business enterprise for YP	Marketing

Feedback and Next Steps

Thank you to all of the amazing organisations, charities, and residents that were able to attend this event. We asked you to complete feedback so that we can continue to improve our events going forward. We are delighted to share the positive response we have had:

- 95% of feedback from attendees either agreed or strongly agreed that they felt that the Community Network was a valuable use of their time.
- 95% of feedback from attendees they felt the Community Network has inspired them to make any changes or implement new ideas within their organisation.

“The highlight of the event was the networking; speaking to likeminded people and making connections”.

“The key thing to take away from the event is to keep working on volunteer recruitment and retention. Don’t let it get squeezed out by ‘the urgent’!”

“There is a big network out there for support”.

“Anything is possible if you ask”.

Our next Community Network Event will be taking place in June, please sign up to our monthly e-bulletin [here](#) to stay informed about what is happening in Bedford Borough, and the dates of all events going forward.

There are a number of different consultation and engagement processes happening over the next year, please help us to gather opinions from our communities by sharing these opportunities with the communities you work with. You are also able to represent the community in decision making through our ‘your voice, your say citizens panel’ – find out more [here](#).