

UKSPF Volunteering & Social Action Project

Executive Summary

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Delivered by Goodlabs Consulting

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Executive Summary

The UKSPF Volunteering and Social Action Project was a significant regional initiative aimed at increasing volunteer participation, strengthening local voluntary sector organisations, and supporting the thriving of local communities.

This evaluation finds that the project was very successful in meeting its key output targets, delivering meaningful social impact across Northumberland, Newcastle, and North Tyneside. It reinforced the vital role of volunteering in the life of local communities, demonstrated its usefulness in terms of social inclusion and hinted at interesting possibilities for improving the employability prospects for people disconnected from the productive economy.

Key Highlights

The project delivered a range of positive outcomes, significantly exceeding many of its initial targets:

- Over 500 new volunteer roles created – Expanding opportunities across a diverse range of sectors and causes.
- Hundreds of volunteers supported – Helping individuals gain skills, confidence, and connections.
- Strong partnerships strengthened the voluntary sector – Seven major VCSE organisations collaborated to deliver high-quality volunteer support and organisational development.
- Organisational Health Check proved highly effective – Supporting VCSE organisations to improve governance, volunteer management, and sustainability.
- Social action projects engaged new audiences – Providing meaningful volunteering opportunities for young people and underrepresented groups.
- Volunteer training increased capacity and confidence – Ensuring both volunteers and the organisations supporting them were better equipped.
- These achievements demonstrate that volunteering remains a powerful tool for supporting individual empowerment and underpinning the foundations of thriving communities.

Key Findings

Whilst the project was successful in achieving its aims, the evaluation also identified a number of areas for future improvement:

- Volunteer engagement exceeded expectations – A diverse range of people were supported into volunteering, though systematic tracking of long-term retention and impact was limited.
- Stronger VCSE organisations – The Organisational Health Check proved to be a valuable tool, helping organisations improve governance, volunteer management, and sustainability.
- Effective partnership model but room for improvement – Delivery partners worked well together, but opportunities exist to strengthen knowledge-sharing and strategic learning.
- Flexible but untargeted inclusion model – The open-access approach ensured broad participation, though a smaller proportion of volunteers came from the priority groups identified in the UKSPF funding rationale (e.g., young people, individuals with additional needs, and those furthest from the labour market).
- Funding model challenges – The payment-in-arrears system created financial strain for some partners, suggesting a need for more sustainable funding structures in future programmes.

Key Recommendations

The evaluation makes a number of detailed recommendations, all of which are outlined in Section 6.2 of this report. Significant amongst them are to:

- * Improve tracking of volunteer outcomes – via systematic follow-up surveys at key intervals to assess retention, skills gained, and broader impact.
- * Strengthen strategic learning within partnerships – Future Steering Groups should dedicate time to knowledge-sharing and strategic reflection, not just operational oversight.
- * Digitise and standardise monitoring tools – A shared CRM/database would improve efficiency in tracking volunteer engagement and organisational progress.
- * Develop clearer pathways from short-term social action to sustained volunteering – Ensure social action projects are designed to lead into ongoing opportunities.
- * Reconsider the funding model – Explore staged or advance payments to ease financial pressures on delivery partners, particularly smaller organisations.
- * Consider inclusion strategies for key target groups – If the project continues, funders and partners may wish to explore whether targeted entry criteria could enhance impact for young people, individuals with additional needs, and those furthest from the labour market.

Key Policy Implications

The project has demonstrated that volunteering should be seen as an integral part of local economic and social policy, not just an isolated initiative. Section 5 contains a detailed discussion of important policy themes, including the Purposeful Collaboration report and the opportunities presented by the Procurement Act 2023. A full set of strategic policy proposals are presented in Section 6.3.

In short, future investment ought to:

- Recognise volunteering as a route to improved wellbeing and an important stage on a journey from economic inactivity into productive employment.
- Provide sustainable investment in VCSE infrastructure, ensuring that voluntary sector organisations have the capacity to support volunteers effectively
- Encourage cross-sector collaboration, particularly with local businesses, to expand employee-supported volunteering
- Strengthen monitoring and evaluation requirements in funded programmes, ensuring outcome-focused learning and impact assessment
- Ensure procurement and funding models support voluntary sector sustainability, making full use of the flexibility provided under the Procurement Act 2023 and the LTR to enable smarter, fairer commissioning.