

Formative evaluation of v, The National Young Volunteers' Service Interim Report: Executive Summary

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Foreword



Since our launch in 2006, I have maintained a passionate commitment to the robust and independent evaluation of v's work. I strongly believe that external analysis of our performance is vital in enabling us to deliver an honest and transparent account of v's role in investing public and private sector funds in young people and communities across England.

The decision to commission a formative evaluation of our work is deliberate and responds directly to our ambitions to be a reflective and responsive learning organisation. The National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) has provided the intellectual and academic rigour required to independently evaluate v's work, bringing together nine separate qualitative and quantitative research methodologies and engaging a wide range of key stakeholders to fully assess the impact of v's activities on the youth volunteering landscape in England.

The results presented in this interim formative report provide compelling evidence of v's outstanding achievements in delivering a coherent and inclusive national young volunteers' service. The evaluation confirms that through our national network of delivery partners, v has exceeded the youth volunteering opportunities target originally set out in the Russell Commission report. Perhaps more importantly, the report provides strong evidence that v's programmes have engaged a diverse cohort of young people to participate in community service opportunities, including socially excluded groups.

v has also played a key role in building the capacity of the public and charity sectors to engage young people effectively in their work. From grassroots community organisations to large national charities and Local Authorities, v has engaged a wide range of partners, including those with previously little experience of volunteering. A strong brand and innovative programme design, combined with an unwavering commitment to youth-led action has enabled v to drive real change across the youth volunteering landscape, affording young people real opportunities to transform their communities.

v remains committed to forging exciting partnerships between government, business and charities, creating national policy solutions which maximise our shared investment in the next generation of young people. Indeed, helping young people to stay connected to society and develop the leadership and employability skills that will support their successful transitions to adulthood is one of the most urgent and critical tasks of the next decade.



This interim report provides an important and timely opportunity for v to reflect on its successes and plan for the future. I would like to extend my thanks to all those who have participated in the evaluation, sharing their views about our work, and I would also like to pay tribute to the outstanding contributions of all our partners who share our achievements and will join v in acting on the learning and insights contained in this report.

I greatly value the resources entrusted to us by our funders and supporters, and I sincerely hope that this formative evaluation demonstrates the ways in which v has maximised the impact of these investments to benefit young people and society.

Terry Ryall

Chief Executive Officer

v, The National Young Volunteers' Service



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Executive summary

In 2004 the Russell Commission was launched to develop a new national framework for youth action and engagement. The Commission's headline recommendation was the creation of a dedicated, young person-led, independent, implementation body to deliver this framework. This body is now known as **v** - The National Young Volunteers' Service.

v was launched in 2006 and was tasked with implementing 12 of the Russell Commission's 16 recommendations. Together, the recommendations were designed to deliver a step change in the quantity, quality and diversity of youth volunteering in England. In response to one of these recommendations, **v** commissioned two evaluations of its activities. This report presents interim findings from the second, formative evaluation of **v**. Formative evaluation is designed to help with the development of the programme it is evaluating by sharing learning that can be incorporated into future design and development. This report presents findings from the first year of the evaluation only. Full and final findings will be published in summer 2011.

This summary gives an overview of the key successes and challenges highlighted by the evaluation so far and draws out the implications of the research for **v** and its audiences.

Key successes

Engaging with young volunteers

- **v** has exceeded the targets for the number of youth volunteering opportunities set for it by the Russell Commission. The Russell Commission report suggested that a step change in volunteering could be defined as 'an additional 700,000 to 1 million young people volunteering at least once per year'. It also indicated that **v** would need to directly commission a total of 412,160 youth volunteering opportunities over five years. Monitoring data indicate a total of 930,000 opportunities have been commissioned by **v** to date; outcome data in February 2010 indicated that 637,000 opportunities had been taken up (out of 930,000 commissioned).
- Recruitment of volunteers has been highly successful, indicating a desire of young people to become involved in activities made possible by **v** funding. Accreditation is also offered to volunteers at the majority of projects, although it is not compulsory.
- **v**'s activities have attracted a diverse group of young people particularly in relation to ethnicity. **v**'s activities are also reaching young people who experience various dimensions of social exclusion. The proportions of volunteers who are or have been homeless, in the care system, lone parents, low income, offenders, and refugees, are significantly higher than would be expected. This positive finding indicates that **v**'s model of funding has been successful in cascading volunteering opportunities to

young people less likely to volunteer.

- Very positive impacts on young volunteers engaging with v funded opportunities have been identified. These include the development of work skills; the development of life skills (such as ability to communicate with diverse groups of people); and increased confidence and self esteem. A sense of enjoyment from engaging in volunteering activities and a sense of belonging to a community were also reported. These outcomes could have a significant impact on young people who are experiencing a dimension of social exclusion.
- There appears to be a relatively good awareness of v among young people aged 16 to 25 with almost a fifth of young people surveyed having heard of v or v-inspired.
- The digital media v uses to communicate with young people (including the website) is generally liked and well received by young people. The logo and overall identity of v are successful and popular and quality of marketing material is identified by grant recipients as being high.

Developing and supporting volunteering

- Organisations have benefited from v funding. Key benefits identified include greater capacity to involve young people and volunteers in a structured manner.
- Being involved in a v project has been reported to open new doors to local partnership working among v funded organisations. Levels and impact of youth involvement / youth-led activity are also developing positively within organisations as a result of v funding.
- Experiences of v's grant application process and help and guidance received were very positive. Eighty-five to 94 per cent of grant recipients (depending on funding stream) were 'very' or 'fairly satisfied' with the application process.
- Local networking events with other v funded project staff were viewed very favourably by grant recipients. v facilitates and supports this networking.
- v has also implemented **Reach**, an organisation-wide quality accreditation. Grant recipients identified the value of such accreditation for improving their volunteering practice.
- v's monitoring processes for the funded network were initially felt to be onerous. However, in response to the first evaluation commissioned by v, the frequency was reduced. The new system has been praised by grant recipients and the process indicates v's willingness to adapt and listen to their network.
- Projects are confident about the future impacts of v's investments on their

organisations, and additional funding has been secured on the basis of v funded activity.

- The Match Fund programme has allowed links from the volunteering to the corporate sector to develop and funds of over £42 million to be generated from the corporate sector to support volunteering.

Key challenges

For project implementation

- v funded organisations identified several challenges with project set-up stage, including recruitment of staff, a lack of funding for management of projects and getting to grips with and understanding project targets. In relation to overcoming these challenges mixed views about communications and the levels of support available from v were reported. In some cases the advice assisted, but in others was felt to be heavy handed and unhelpful. This suggests that the funded network has diverse needs that can not always be adequately addressed by v.
- v's perceived focus on numbers of new volunteers, created concerns for grant recipients, including: squeezing time and quality of service and disincentivising work with harder-to-engage groups. This was especially felt to be the case with vinvolved teams, who are particularly charged with brokering new opportunities.

For v to address

- There was a tension reported by grant recipients regarding the need to incorporate diversity *and* to recruit a certain number of volunteers. Achieving one outcome (overall numbers) could be seen as being at the expense of another (diversity, including the recruitment of harder-to-reach groups). This perception indicated that greater awareness of the importance of explicitly promoting diversity could be disseminated to the grant funded network.
- There are concerns from grant recipients and project staff that the marketing campaigns are not appropriate for all young people and can inadvertently alienate or exclude (for example, if they are overtly sexual). Given the high quality of material, staff feel it is a 'wasted opportunity' if the material is not appropriate. This points to a need for greater segmentation of marketing material to different audiences of young people.
- **Reach**, is not yet fully implemented among grant recipient organisations and there was confusion regarding the extent to which organisations have to achieve the **Reach** quality standards.

For the evaluation

- Despite reported improvements in the monitoring system it appears to remain a

challenge for project staff to monitor the characteristics and activities of volunteers. This has led to poorer quality monitoring data being available than may have been anticipated with which to evaluate v.

- Measuring qualitative impacts on the wider community remains difficult and grant recipients struggled to identify tangible benefits despite implicitly sensing they do occur.

Emerging implications for v

- v could benefit from adopting a greater degree of openness in its communications with stakeholders and grant recipients. This also includes communicating organisational and network success. This would help v's diverse audience to 'buy in' to its future vision and promote collaborative working between v and youth organisations.
- Experience from existing projects is fundamental to help grant recipients overcome challenges. v may want to consider routes for further enhancing information sharing and networking between members of the funded network.
- v may want to consider adopting online monitoring tools for individual data alongside existing monitoring arrangements. This would assist with providing more individual data on volunteers and provide opportunities for more feedback to projects on the uses and outcomes of volunteer monitoring.
- Volunteer retention, rather than recruitment, is time-consuming and challenging. v may want to consider allowing flexibility on the funding available for management activities to support this. This could ensure projects build in enough time to work retaining young people rather than focus on recruitment targets. v may also want to consider lobbying government about the need for more flexible financial support for young volunteers.
- The youth-led element of v's funded projects is emerging as very positive. Given the success so far in this area, v may want to dedicate resources to supporting projects in defining and progressing their youth-led activities.
- Young people are not an homogenous group. Further segmentation of marketing and communications to young people could maximise the positive impact v has when communicating to young people and lower the risk of negative impacts. This segmentation could be cascaded via the funded network by promoting:
 - A budget for local marketing materials being provided alongside project funding;
 - Templates for projects to adapt themselves provided alongside this;

And providing:

- Simple, basic but high quality, generic material being provided alongside targeted campaigns.
- **v** has innovative and high quality material and campaigns with which to communicate with young people, however, there is a need to plan campaigns well in advance and segment audiences to ensure maximum impact. This includes:
 - Ensuring the potential of the internet is exploited by, for example, tapping into conversations about **v** related events elsewhere on the web.
 - Supporting grant recipients to acquire new skills regarding their marketing and communication.
 - Cultivating young people, actively giving them the tools to bring people to the **v** cause ('deputising to the willing'). To do this, **v** needs to understand what prompted young people to get involved in distinct campaigns such as the bigvbus, what might motivate them to campaign for **v** and how they can be rewarded for their efforts.
- While **v** projects are successfully achieving diversity in a number of areas there is a view across the funded network that there is too much emphasis on numbers of volunteers. **v** should consider communicating its overall success in engaging a diverse group of volunteers to the funded network and also to disseminate that the focus on numbers of volunteers recruited has come from the government directives rather than directly from **v**. The ongoing evaluation will also need to probe this issue in more detail to understand why grant recipients feel that there is too much onus on numbers of volunteers, given **v**'s attempts to promote quality and diversity.
- **v** is already working closely with the private sector through the Match Fund scheme. However, doing more work directly with employers to promote the value of volunteering in acquiring skills that are transferable to the workplace may be of value.

Emerging implications for grant recipients

- There is some evidence that internal communication within projects is not always working. Volunteering projects applying for grants may want to be clearer about roles and responsibilities from the outset.
- The project set-up phase and volunteer retention are emerging as time-consuming, challenging aspects of running projects. Grant recipients may want to consider requesting additional funding to support these areas in future applications to **v** or

other funding bodies.

- The evidence suggests that being stretched by targets and ambitious project planning from the outset can have the effect of developing organisations and lead to positive outcomes and capacity building that otherwise may not have occurred. Targets may therefore be viewed as an asset rather than an obstacle to progress.
- While it can be an additional challenge to ensure that monitoring and diversity data for volunteers is of high quality, this is vitally important for both demonstrating the impact and progress made by funded projects and for identifying areas for future development. This is the key measure of how successful both individual projects and the funded network as a whole has been in reaching a range of volunteers.
- **v** can provide a range of high quality marketing material and provide digital media and information for young volunteers. Exploiting these materials involves active engagement from grant recipients. This engagement includes having an awareness of what is available from **v**, providing advice and insight to ensure that material is targeted appropriately at young people, and informing young people of the **v** brand and website.
- **v**'s funded network is well placed to work with local employers to educate them about the benefits of volunteering. There may be opportunities to share good practice around this at regional meetings and other networking events.

Emerging implications for government

- The context in which youth volunteering operates has changed since the Russell Commission objectives were set. Within this context, government has a role in articulating how volunteering and national service initiatives can continue to support young people's skills development, citizenship and community cohesion by drawing on achievements to date.
- Given the success **v** has had in engaging a diverse range of young people not usually associated with volunteering (such as those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, different ethnicities, young people who have been homeless), **v** provides a model for working with young people who may be deemed harder to reach. Engaging with these young people as a route to tackling social exclusion is likely to continue to be a key policy priority in the future. **v** could play a role in building a model that extends this engagement to even greater numbers of young people.
- The **v** implementation model illustrates how funding can be streamlined via one coherent programme rather than a number of competing programmes, and the extent to which charities can develop significant programmes of youth engagement in a relatively short time scale, given the resources and freedom to do so.

Concluding summary

With high expectations from the outset from government and the third sector, and a challenging context of short timescales, **v** has delivered a coherent, nationwide youth volunteering service. **v** has exceeded its targets for volunteering opportunities set by the Russell Commission and there is strong evidence that **v** funded volunteering opportunities are being taken up by a greater diversity of young people than is normally the case, including socially excluded groups.

However, challenges remain, and with a relatively small staff team **v** has ambitious aims to achieve, centering on the Russell Commission key words of quantity, quality and diversity. The implications set out in this report (the first of two from the formative evaluation of **v**) provide a framework from which **v** can identify and develop priority areas to focus on and move forward in a manner that maximises successes and begins to address the most pressing challenges.

The report has also set out implications and findings that have resonance for **v**'s key stakeholders, ensuring that the achievements and learning identified through this formative evaluation can be shared and influence those who are committed to the future of youth action and engagement in England.

