



Children, Schools and Families Select Committee NEET Inquiry

December 2009

1 About v

- 1.1 v is The National Young Volunteers Service. We fund and work with national and local organisations to provide hundreds of thousands of volunteering opportunities to 16-25 year olds in England; helping to harness the skills and talents of young people by matching them with a relevant volunteering placement.
- 1.2 With growing recognition of the vital role that volunteering can play in supporting young people to build confidence, self-esteem and transferable skills, and with rising levels of youth unemployment, v is committed to developing new opportunities that respond to the needs of young people, especially the needs of more vulnerable and disadvantaged young people.

We have:

- Worked with over 500 local and national organisations to create 900,000 volunteering opportunities, share good practice and network
- Developed vinvolved, the National Youth Volunteering Programme. Through vinvolved, we are investing over £75m over three years in:
 - 107 vinvolved teams across every local authority area in England to build local networks and broker young people into opportunities
 - Youth Action Teams, groups of young people who work alongside vinvolved teams as local ambassadors for youth volunteering
 - direct delivery of new youth volunteering opportunities through 158 organisations
- Created v talent year – a new structured full-time volunteering programme with support and training to assist progression into employment, education or training.
- Launched our youth fund vcashpoint, putting funding directly in the hands of young people developing projects for community benefit.
- Built partnerships with the private sector to raise over £40 million for youth volunteering
- Developed the vinspired awards and national awards to recognise and celebrate young volunteers
- Created vinspired.com where young people can find out all about volunteering and be part of an on-line youth community

- 1.3 Over the last 12 months v has seen a surge in demand in volunteering opportunities - online applications to vinspired.com have increased by nearly 200%. Volunteering is proving to be a lifeline for young people to contribute their talents to their communities, develop their skills, gain experience, make friends and have fun.

2. Strategies for the identification of young people at risk of falling into the "NEET" category. Falls outside of v's experience and expertise.

3. Services and programmes to support those most at risk of becoming "NEET", and to reduce the numbers and address the needs of those who have become persistently "NEET"

3.1. Much has been done to increase and improve training, education and pre-employment programmes, apprenticeships and jobs for young people, however v believes far more could be done to harness the potential of structured volunteering to support those at risk of becoming NEET, to reduce the NEET figures and to address the needs of those that have persistently become NEET.

3.2. v supports a range of volunteering projects from one-off volunteering opportunities to longer term full-time volunteering opportunities. v has 107 vinvolved teams covering every local authority area in England to broker young people into volunteering opportunities and work with organisations to create new volunteering opportunities. The teams work with a range of local partners, including Connexions Services, to promote volunteering.

3.3. One of the difficulties that some vinvolved teams encounter when working with Connexions is that volunteering does not count as a 'recognised outcome' for young people. As a result Connexions does not always refer young people to vinvolved teams when volunteering might be more beneficial than other activities that do count as a 'recognised outcome'.

3.4. **We would urge flexibility in what counts as a recognised outcome to include volunteering in order to ensure that the best interests of young people are met.** Volunteering should be recognised as a key vehicle for helping NEET young people to re-engage into society and gain skills and experience to help them back into education or the work-place.

3.5. v is committed to developing new opportunities and interventions that respond to the needs of young people, especially more vulnerable and disadvantaged young people. One such intervention is v's £20 million vtalent year programme, being piloted in 32 local authorities, 28 Further Education colleges and 2 charities. The aim is to give almost 2,000 volunteers aged 16-25 the opportunity to directly influence and enhance public sector services and gain skills to improve their employability.

3.6. The programme was set up partly to address the needs of NEET young people but involves young people from a range of backgrounds. The opportunity to mix with young people in different situations and from different backgrounds was a key objective for the programme.

3.7. The high quality, structured placements in areas such as nursery education, play, youth work, care leavers, health and sexual education and learner support last 44 weeks, lead to a minimum of a level 2 qualification and offer personal development grants of up to £1,500 for young volunteers on completion of the programme to assist with progression into education, training, employment or further volunteering. Each local authority and FE college is working with 15 young people per year for 2 years to add value to existing services by providing activities and support which would not otherwise exist.

3.8. Residential weekends, delivered by Duke of Edinburgh's Award, prepare young volunteers for their placements, enable them to undertake a skills audit and encourage young people to

develop social networking groups so they can keep in touch with each other during their placements and foster a group identity.

6.1. In drafting this response we have spoken to some of the **v talent** year placement supervisors based at local authorities and captured the opinions of some of the young volunteers on the programme. **v talent** year is being formally evaluated as part of **v**'s full organisational evaluation. Interim findings for the programme will be available in Spring 2010. The full evaluation is due in Spring 2011. .

3.9. Below are some of the key learnings emerging from the project and its work with NEET young people.

Pre programme and progression

3.10. Each project had a target of engaging 40% NEET participants in the first year. On average the projects have engaged 60% NEET young people. Some had recently finished Entry to Employment programmes, some had been long term NEET and others had dropped out of post-16 education because their course did not meet their needs. There are also a handful of graduates.

3.11. The programme is proving to have a transformative impact on the young people taking part as the quotes below illustrate.

“ **v talent** has definitely changed my life. Before this, I was going from one thing to another without any real direction. Now I feel focused and determined to make the most of this experience and get a great job at the end of it. Not only am I now on the right path career-wise, I have made lots of new friends. As a result, my confidence has continued to grow and on the whole I feel so much more positive about my life. I know that if I also think I give up less easily now. Before I might have given up when something hard came my way, but now I persevere, and feel so much better when I achieve things.” *v talent year volunteer*

“My life before **v talent** was very different to what it is now. I had been out of rehab 10 months and I knew I wanted to work with kids but I didn't know how to go about doing it. I was getting bored and depressed being at home all the time and was starting to feel my life was pointless. I was even considering going back to drugs. Since being on **v talent**, I have built in confidence, more assertive, made new friends, got a lot more understanding about my future, and what I want to do. I have learnt so much for the training we have been given. I love this course and it's the only thing I have ever stuck with.” *v talent year volunteer*

“You saved my son's life.” Parent of **v talent** year volunteer

3.12. The first cohort finishes the programme in February 2010. A key element of the programme is early consideration of progression after the programme ends. Each volunteer can apply for a grant of up to £1,500 to assist with their progression. Some volunteers have already secured further placements or jobs within children and young people's services, continued education to NVQ level 3, are applying for university, or have decided they would like to volunteer abroad.

Support from staff

3.13. The support from placement supervisors and staff managing volunteers while on placement has been crucial to the outcomes for the people on **v talent** year. Placement supervisors can see volunteers anything from 2-3 times per week to once a fortnight depending on their needs, especially as the programme is such a big commitment. A number of the volunteers are young parents who need support juggling childcare arrangements and their volunteering hours, some

need help developing their confidence, developing a positive attitude or dealing with personal circumstances such as becoming homeless. The investment in staff time has been essential.

Financial support

3.14. Each volunteer receives up to £100 in volunteering expenses and subsistence. Volunteers are not eligible for Job Seekers Allowance (JSA), and despite undertaking a level 2 qualification as part of the programme, DCSF's view is that the volunteers are not eligible for Education Maintenance Allowance.

3.15. Spending a year volunteering with out of pocket expenses and a modest living allowance is a tremendous commitment for the young people taking part. If the volunteer lives independently they may be worse off financially than staying on benefits and doing nothing. This situation seems particularly unfortunate.

3.16. For older NEETs claiming JSA, the lack of financial support is a significant barrier to taking advantage of the experience that full-time volunteering could provide. v's research, 'Young people Speak Out: attitudes to, and perceptions of, full-time volunteering'¹ found that that the modest financial support offered to cover living expenses would not compensate for the loss of JSA and other benefits such as housing benefit and council tax exemption.

3.17. **v would like to see the scheme fit within post-16 options and options for young people on benefits, with the same financial support available**, alongside reimbursement of out of pocket volunteering expenses. The scheme has the added benefit of work-based experience, staff support, a qualification and progression beyond the scheme built in. This approach would make better economic sense than incentivising young people to do nothing or stay in learning provision that does not meet their needs. The case is further illustrated by the early indications of progression routes for the young volunteers.

Progression and destinations post programme

3.18. The first cohort does not complete the programme until February 2010 but the placement supervisors begun working with the volunteers on their progression from day one, starting with their personal development plans. More recently, more intensive support has been given to progression with some early indications of success.

3.19. Some volunteers have already secured or are applying for jobs within children's or youth services – children's centres, young offenders services, play services, youth work, sports coaching, admin or Connexions. Some are moving onto apprenticeships, different placements, starting a level 3 qualification, moving onto further or higher education, training, applying to university or to do international volunteering. The vast majority of the young people would not have progressed in this way without the v talent year programme. The experience has increased aspirations, broadened the volunteers' minds to new opportunities and better prepared them to make decisions about their future.

3.20. The progression routes show that for some young people the job specific skills developed through v talent year are vital to their intended destinations. The importance of developing job specific skills through full-time volunteering for some young people is supported by v's 'Young People Speak Out' research. Amongst those who said training would be important in encouraging

¹ Young people speak out: attitudes to, and perceptions of, full-time volunteering June 2009, page 26
http://vinspired.com/system/datas/9/original/Young_People_Speak_Out.pdf

them to consider volunteering on a full-time basis, job-specific skills were most popular (55%), followed by team-working skills (46%) and leadership skills (45%)².

Additional benefits

3.21. One placement supervisor noted that some of the volunteers looked visibly healthier since starting the programme. One particularly had become far less pallid and decreased his smoking because he wanted to step up to his new professional role.

3.22. The social mix was also noted as a key benefit to the programme. The residentials were particularly helpful in mixing young people from different backgrounds, different ethnic groups and helped to improve some volunteers' confidence, giving them experience of working together on tasks.

4. The effectiveness of the Government's NEET strategy

4.1. The Government's NEET strategy makes a valiant attempt to bring together provision for 16-18 year old NEET young people. We believe the lack of reference to the role that volunteering can have in preparing young people for education and employment is an unfortunate oversight.

4.2. Instead of being seen as a stepping stone into sustainable employment or a gateway into education or training, volunteering has often been regarded as a 'soft option'. Volunteers can often gain valuable qualifications and skills, as well as developing the self-confidence and practical experience that is required to move into paid employment.

v talent year volunteers on how the programme differs from education, training and work

- More opportunities to interact with a wide range of people
- Learn more from others you work with and meet through the programme
- Getting hands on experience, in education you learn through listening, whereas through v talent year you learn through doing
- 9-5 can be awful, volunteering is a great building block

4.3. v talent year and v's other full-time programmes have successfully engaged and retained high numbers of NEET young people, helping them to develop their confidence, skills and employability. **Structured full-time volunteering should be regarded as legitimate alternative, or be integrated into the New Deal and Flexible New Deal for 18-24 year olds and into post 16 options with the financial support to remove barriers to engagement.**

² Young people speak out: attitudes to, and perceptions of, full-time volunteering June 2009, page 40
http://vinspired.com/system/datas/9/original/Young_People_Speak_Out.pdf

Eighteen months ago, Caroline* was unemployed, had been involved in alcohol and drug-related crime, and had been to prison for two brief spells. Caroline was, as she puts it now 'generally struggling with life and needing a goal.' After hearing about the local Youth Volunteering Network (YVN), Caroline went along to see how she could get involved.

After obtaining five GCSEs, Caroline started her A levels but found she could not cope. A diploma in child care and development followed, but this proved equally stressful. Now, she says, 'I've got a purpose, a reason to get up in the morning.' Through YVN Caroline has been involved in an ethnic minority festival and in conservation projects. YVN has rewarded Caroline's dedication to volunteering with an apprenticeship, providing her with an opportunity to work alongside experienced staff, while studying for a level two NVQ on a part-time basis. At last, Caroline has some positive options.

'I was in a bad place and didn't have much purpose to my life. Getting involved with YVN has completely turned that around, and I feel very privileged that YVN has given me this opportunity for an apprenticeship. I thought that my criminal record would hold me back, but it hasn't here'. Caroline would like other young people to be aware that if they are struggling with alcohol or breaking the law 'there is help out there, people do care, and there are networks that will help you and give you a chance to change your life'.

*name changed

4.4. The NEET strategy also fails to highlight the important role the local authority can play in bringing together public, private and voluntary sector partners to draw on the strengths of each to create the best provision and options to move young people into education, training or employment. This approach would also build a better picture of provision available in the local area, not just in education, employment and training but in activities such as volunteering that can be particularly beneficial for NEET young people as illustrated above.

5. The likely impact of raising the participation age on strategies for addressing the needs of young people not in education, employment or training

5.1. Local authorities will need to ensure that the options available in local areas meet the varied needs of young people. v is pleased that full-time volunteering remains an option for young people when the participation age is raised and believes that there is considerable scope to expand the provision of full-time volunteering opportunities in both the voluntary and public sector. For example one v talent year project recently received 157 applications for just 15 places and some of the local authorities see the potential to open up the programme in other services.

5.2. As mentioned previously, early indications are that v talent year is particularly helpful for young people that need the support that the programme provides in order to realise what they can achieve whether this be moving into apprenticeships, jobs, training or education.

5.3. v talent year is just one example of where innovation created by the voluntary sector has led to new opportunities for NEET young people in the public and statutory sectors. In the years leading to the raised participation age, far more of this should be incentivised and encouraged by government in order to create provision that best meets the needs of young people.

7. The opportunities and future prospects in education, training and employment for 16-18 year olds

7.1. The early indications ahead of a full evaluation show that there is significant scope to extend the provision of v talent year. Where it works, it works particularly well. After learning from

the first year pilot, many of the projects will be making changes particularly to the way that the volunteers are recruited. For example, they are now better able to identify those young people that will benefit most from the programme.

7.2. To make the programme work better, 16-18 years olds living independently would have to be assured that they would not be any worse off from starting the programme than being on benefits and doing very little. 16-18 year olds living with parents or guardians would need to be assured that being on the programme would not impact on their family's benefits. **We recommend that parent(s) of participants should be able to continue to claim child benefit without question while their child is on the programme.**

7.3. v strongly believes in the power of volunteering to improve outcomes for young people. We are currently scoping a longitudinal study to develop a better evidence base on the personal, economic and social impact of volunteering. In addition the independent evaluation of all of v's programmes should provide some evidence to support a greater role for volunteering in tackling the NEET problem. The first of two annual reports is due in Spring 2010.

Thank you to the v talent year placement supervisors and volunteers, and other v-funded projects that have contributed to this response.

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