
Formative Evaluation of v

The National Young Volunteers' Service

Final Report – Implications Summary

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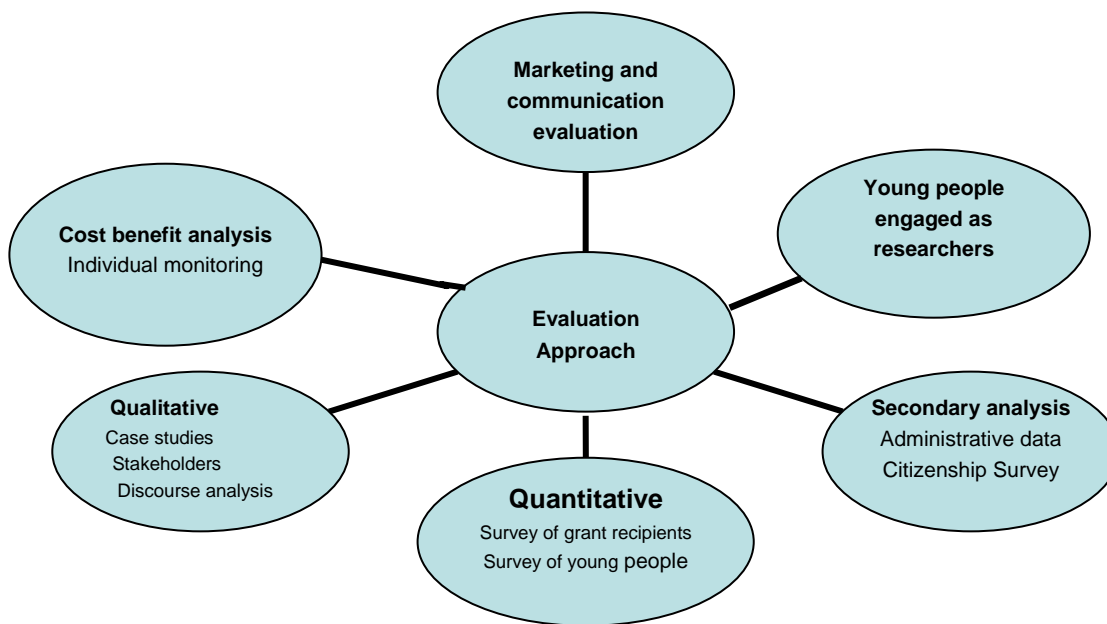
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Introduction

v is a national charity, launched in 2006, with the aim of inspiring a new generation of young volunteers aged 16-25. v was set up following a report from the government-initiated Russell Commission, and was tasked with implementing 12 of the Russell Commission's 16 recommendations. v was responsible for leading a national investment programme designed to create a step change in the **quality, quantity and diversity** of youth volunteering. Much of this was achieved via a network of volunteer-involving organisations, funded by v to deliver their projects along discrete schemes, with particular aims and targets. v continues to support: marketing and communications around youth volunteering; developing innovation modes of youth-led action; utilising web and social media to engage young people; creating partnerships with the public and private sectors; and research and public affairs activities to support youth volunteering.

Alongside the grant funded network, v commissioned an independent formative evaluation of its activities. The evaluation consisted of eight strands, under six methodological headings, as outlined in the diagram below. This document presents a summary of the key social and organisational implications that have emerged from the formative evaluation of the v programme.

Evaluation methods



This was a multi-method evaluation which has approached the assessment of the impact of **v** from a range of perspectives using diverse sources of primary data. It involved a multidisciplinary team from a range of research and academic backgrounds, and a systematic attempt to engage young people actively in the process of evaluation. During the course of the evaluation new methods were developed to collect data directly from young volunteers, online – a process for individual monitoring that greatly improved the quality of data on young volunteers held. The evaluation team are aware of no other evaluation of a single initiative of this kind that is as broad in its scope.

Quantity

Monitoring data from the **v** programme indicated that 1.05 million youth volunteering opportunities have been created via **v** and that by autumn 2010 over 700,000 opportunities had been taken up by young volunteers. Sixty per cent of these young volunteers had volunteered in the previous 12 months. The most recent figures from **v** (June 2011) indicate that the number of opportunities created and filled has been 1,094,175.

However a challenge the evaluation team found of monitoring participation in volunteering is that gathering information on the characteristics of volunteers can be time-consuming, and therefore risks generating some resistance among organisations that deliver projects.

Given the relative costs of some **v** schemes (no more than £100 or so per volunteer in some cases) it is easy to see that gathering monitoring data could absorb a significant resource. Extending the coverage of the individual monitoring data collected directly from volunteers, online, as part of the evaluation would be a relatively low-cost way of obtaining further information on the characteristics of individuals. There is still something of a digital divide however which might mean

that responses are skewed towards those with access to the appropriate technology and confidence in using it.

An alternative to obtaining detailed data from each individual project would be to sample a small number of representative schemes more intensively – with the data perhaps being collected by young people themselves with guidance from project staff. If a representative sample of schemes were covered, there could be confidence in estimating totals of the numbers of volunteers with particular characteristics.

If volunteering initiatives are to be promoted and if their intention is to target the recruitment of particular social groups, then appropriate data need to be obtained by those managing any funded projects. The experience of **v** may be valuable in this regard. For example, **v** has actively engaged with difficult questions (e.g. in seeking information about the background characteristics of their volunteers in sensitive areas such as sexual identity or whether or not volunteers have experienced varying kinds of social exclusion).

More generally, if policy agendas such as the Big Society are to be truly inclusive and something in which all groups in the population take part, a baseline against which progress can be monitored towards this objective is required. At present the only reliable baseline which asks questions in sufficient detail about volunteering is the Citizenship Survey which is no longer being commissioned. Another new source is required that goes beyond that of existing monitoring data.

Quality

Reach was a quality assurance accreditation system rolled out across the funded programme by **v**. Two funding schemes (**v**involved teams and projects) were expected to gain the **Reach Achieved** standard. Of the grant recipients from these schemes surveyed, 74 per cent thought **Reach** had a positive impact and 15 per cent that it had no impact on their project. In addition 86 per cent of organisations surveyed (across all schemes) thought that their **v** funding improved the way they handled youth volunteering. Sixty-nine per cent of **v** funded projects had put in place new ways to support young volunteers as part of their **v** funding.

The evaluation found that implementing these new systems of quality, including policies and procedures, could create increased workload and tensions among the network, however they ultimately led to positive impacts (for volunteers, organisations and the community) and therefore there should be a culture of supporting such procedures and openness to new ideas without imposing structures on organisations. There is a need for an on-going resource that enables organisations involving volunteers to meet and maintain quality standards.

Using their existing skills and knowledge **v** could be well-placed to provide support for volunteer involving organisations in terms of good practice for youth led activities and quality standards (following **Reach**). **v** could capitalise on their expertise in this areas and offer training, support and advice to youth-focused volunteer involving organisations in the future.

Diversity

The characteristics of **v** volunteers reflect that of the general population of young people, with evidence that a higher proportion of young people who are Black, Asian or minority ethnic, and to a lesser extent, from socially deprived areas, had been involved in the volunteering opportunities. This indicates that the programme design of **v** - which built in from the outset an expectation that the funded network would actively seek to include a range of young people with different characteristics - may have achieved this aim.

The evaluation found that building links to existing social networks, trusted adults and activities young people are engaged in, is particularly important for igniting interest in young people who may be less active in their initial route into volunteering.

Young people involved in the **v** programme appreciated the diversity of opportunities on offer which helped enable them to identify an opportunity of interest to them. There should continue to be a diverse range of volunteering opportunities for young people (both type of opportunity and length of commitment) supported by the government. **v** was also attributed by stakeholders with changing the image of youth volunteering, and making it more professionalised. This ensured that young peoples' personal development often benefited. These may be key areas **v** could advise the sector on in the future.

Concerns about lacking time and income to volunteer remain barriers however. The government needs to consider how to ensure young people have adequate resources with which to volunteer in the face of education and employment commitments or a reduction of income if they volunteer. This point is not without debate – providing financial incentives arguably tests the boundaries of what is and what is not volunteering. However to achieve successful social mixing, strategies for engaging hard-to-reach groups remain key as they enable young people already engaged in pro-social activities to mix with those newer to them.

Recognition and support for young people who volunteer is important to maintain their engagement. However this should be flexible to incorporate the myriad reasons for volunteering young people have and the sector needs to consider how best to maintain diversity in terms of opportunities on offer to volunteer, and quality standards in terms of how young people are supported and recognised for their volunteering.

The future - for v, and for the sector

v's funding programme ceased in March 2011, and due to recent cuts in public sector funding, **v** has been unable to sustain its investments in a network of volunteer-involving organisations. However, **v** has an ongoing role to support young people to achieve their potential through participation in volunteering, social action and enterprise. **v** intends to continue to develop its role in youth social action, delivering a range of programmes and activities including: marketing and communications around youth volunteering; developing and fostering innovation modes of youth-led action; utilising web and social media effectively to engage and inspire young people; creating

partnerships with the public and private sectors; and, research and public affairs activities to support youth volunteering.

v's commitment to undertaking a large scale, formative evaluation of its work, and to share this learning in a open, transparent and collaborative way, is an important step towards ensuring that the voluntary and public sectors in particular, can learn about how to effectively engage young volunteers in their work. Indeed this is the first formative evaluation of its kind in the sector. The full report of the evaluation provides a comprehensive outline of the multi-faceted learning and evaluation that has come from both the v programme and v evaluation. With volunteering an integral component of the Big Society ethos, and young people facing a difficult economic and employment context, these lessons are important ones. This evaluation shows that, with appropriate program design and resources, it is possible to offer a menu of opportunities that draws a more diverse range of participants into volunteering.

Learning from the formative evaluation process

Research and evaluation exercises can be expensive and in a tight financial climate they may be difficult to justify. One lesson from this evaluation is that with careful attention to the gathering of monitoring data, plus the use of information generated automatically (e.g. through hits on websites), much information can be gathered in an economical way. Cross-referencing against other sources of data (such as national survey information) is also possible. The evaluation team have gained much experience of using administrative data on the activities of projects funded through v. With appropriately-designed procedures for gathering data on the characteristics of volunteers, and of the work that they do, we believe that it is possible for voluntary organisations to demonstrate their impact - at least in terms of targeting particular groups of the population, and in terms of demonstrating the value of their activities. Ensuring there are open channels to communicate and develop learning points in a meaningful way throughout formative evaluation processes are also important to factor into formative evaluation processes from the outset.

The learning from the evaluation process also provided key messages in terms of the challenges and benefits of monitoring and evaluating youth volunteering in the future. In particular it is important that ways to accurately measure the number and characteristics of young people involved, the social impacts of youth volunteering, and the longer term impacts of volunteering on young people would be useful, as these remained challenging to measure throughout the evaluation. A process put in place that improved the quality of data for these outcomes included the online individual monitoring that came directly from young volunteers, set up as part of the evaluation.

Full details of the evaluation methodology and findings can be found at:

<http://vinspired.com/about-us/research>

www.natcen.ac.uk

The evaluation was completed in June 2011