

## **Feedback to Volunteer Now to inform their response to DSD regarding an Action Plan for the Volunteering Strategy**

As a leading member of the **World Health Organization (WHO)** European Healthy Cities Network, Belfast through Belfast Healthy Cities addresses international issues relating to health and health equity within the local context. **Health Equity in All Policies (HEiAP)** is an overarching goal for cities designated to the network; it champions the importance and potential of good planning for health in all local policies as a tool for providing better health outcomes for all. It champions a cross sector all approach to address inequalities, which are recognised as a key determinant of health and well being.

Belfast Healthy Cities broadly welcomes the Volunteering Strategy as recognition of the importance of volunteering by government and a commitment to support activities that potentially will increase the participation of citizens in society. Volunteering can provide mutual benefit for those taking part, whether they give their time or receive services from volunteers. Participation in volunteering widens people's social networks and increases their sense of connectedness to their communities.

There are many successful volunteer initiatives which tackle issues such as social isolation and fear of crime that can be detrimental to health and wellbeing such as community befriending and home safety schemes. Other volunteering programmes, such as the Green Gym promotes healthy active lifestyles and afterschool clubs, supported by volunteers contribute to the positive development of children.

However, the strategy does not explicitly mention health and wellbeing and Belfast Healthy Cities believes this is a significant omission. The strategy's action plan represents an important opportunity to redress the absence and Belfast Healthy Cities would like to suggest ways in which this could happen.

## **The Need for Understanding of How Volunteering Improves Health and Wellbeing**

There is a need to understand, if, and how volunteering improves health and wellbeing and to explore volunteering as part of the toolkit to improve health and promote wellbeing.

While evidencing the extent to which being a volunteer, in itself, produces better health outcomes is challenging, some research concludes there is a positive impact on personal wellbeing (Thorts and Hewitt 2001). In Northern Ireland, 44% of volunteers with Belfast City Council Community Centres and Afterschool Clubs who participated in a volunteering audit (Belfast City Council/Volunteer Now 2011) reported improved overall wellbeing as a result of volunteering.

Work being carried out by Volunteer Now which focuses on impacts on health and wellbeing amongst older people is important and timely, but Belfast Healthy Cities would suggest that there is a need a wider approach to create an evidence base across a wider range of age and socio-economic groups. In particular, there potential for work around how volunteering impacts on mental health amongst younger people.

The strategy does acknowledge the potential of volunteering to complement the delivery of existing policy, the main example in the document being as a method of gaining skills for employment. People on low incomes and in lower socio are more likely to suffer ill health and die younger and one way to address this is by increasing income levels. While it this is a positive inclusion, it is only one example of how volunteering can be used to challenge inequality while complementing existing policy and enriching the development of future policies. Belfast Healthy Cities would welcome the opportunity to be part of a discussion about how volunteering can be used more widely as a positive tool for improving health and wellbeing.

On a more general point, Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the strategy's focus on supporting better organisation and promoting good management standards within volunteering. This will minimise stress and conflict and ultimately maximise the positive impacts on health and wellbeing producing a better experience for all participants, voluntary organisers and paid staff.

### **Comments on Action Plan- Particular areas of interest to Healthy Cities**

#### 1.3 Measuring Impact

Existing tools such as the Volunteer Impact Assessment Toolkit provide a mechanism for auditing self perceived changes in wellbeing for volunteers and those receiving services. The outcomes of these audits could be collated to provide a Northern Ireland wide overview. However, there is also a need to evidence in greater detail, the ways in which volunteering impacts upon health and wellbeing over a period of time. One area of particular interest to Belfast Healthy Cities would be the contribution of volunteering to the resilience of individuals and communities as an asset for improving health and wellbeing.

#### 1.4b Barriers for people living on benefits

People who depend on benefits are amongst those most vulnerable to health inequalities. There is still evidence that some people do not become volunteers as they believe it will affect their income. While it must be acknowledged that awareness raising campaigns have taken place, misconceptions about volunteering whilst on benefits seem to be an ongoing issue. If the strategy is to deliver on improving access to volunteering for this group there is a need for awareness raising amongst Social Security Agency staff and other agencies who provide benefits advice to ensure those wishing to volunteer are given the right information about what is allowable under current legislation.

#### 2.1 Underrepresented groups.

Key groups who are underrepresented in volunteering; including older people, younger people and people with disabilities also tend to be vulnerable to health inequalities and as a result experience poor health and a reduced sense of wellbeing. Volunteering has had some significant successes in involving

difficult to reach groups but activities need to be well resourced and sustainable to ensure that successful approaches are mainstreamed and learning is widely disseminated.

### 3.2 Family Volunteering.

A key theme of the World Health Organisation (WHO) European Healthy Cities Network is working to ensure the best possible health outcomes for children and young people, including the ways in which they are active within their community. Evidence suggests that those who engage in volunteering when younger are less likely to suffer ill health in later years (Grimm et al 2007). The development of family volunteering opportunities are an innovative idea which have the potential to bring generations together as well as introducing children to a 'volunteering habit' at an early age.

#### 3.2b Turn Up, Take part Volunteering Opportunities

The development of informal or semi formal opportunities has the potential to increase participation in volunteering. Where these opportunities are environmental they would have the positive impact of encouraging participants to engage with green spaces and the built environment as well as increasing awareness of other issues such as planning and the location of essential services.

#### 3.4a Increasing Volunteering Across the Public Sector

The inclusion of more volunteers in the public sector offers an opportunity for a greater range of volunteering opportunities and the potential for better services and better experiences for service users. However, it is essential that volunteering in the public sector is organised to a high standard, that roles are clearly defined and distinct from paid roles. There is also the issue of the integration of volunteers within the wider workforce; for many organisations involving volunteers alongside paid employees is a significant cultural shift and consideration should be given to providing training and ongoing support to minimise difficulties.

## 5.2 Monitoring Group

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the establishment of a high level monitoring group for the strategy as it is important that those making decisions and/or allocating resources are at the heart of developments. It is right that this is made up of representatives all from sectors but it also should include volunteers

and those receiving services. While this latter group may well have the capacity to fully participate at an executive level, appropriate support should be put in place for volunteers or service user representatives who feel they need it.

#### 5.2b Ongoing Evaluation with Final Report and Recommendations

Belfast Healthy Cities believes that in order for the strategy to be effective, ongoing evaluation and appropriate updating of activities is essential. It is important that learning is applied proactively in order to strengthen activities. While creative and aspiration thinking is necessary, without concrete recommendations there is the danger that an opportunity to integrate volunteering into all sectors will be lost. As with monitoring it is important that volunteers and those receiving services supported by volunteers are actively involved in the evaluation process.

#### 5.2c Update of It's All about Time Volunteering Research

A good evidence base is essential to the development of volunteering as a tool for improving health and wellbeing. It's All About Time is a valuable resource which provides Northern Ireland specific data in relation to volunteering. It could be strengthened by the addition of questions about health and wellbeing. At the very least a question about self perceived health improvements could be included in questionnaires and further in-depth exploration of health and wellbeing benefits carried out with focus groups.

#### 5.2e Cross Departmental Responsibility

Volunteering is a cross cutting activity and as such no one department should be expected to take full responsibility for resourcing activities. However it is important that the Department of Social Development (DSD) as the lead department for volunteer development show leadership and ensure the strategy is taken forward at a governmental level.

## 5.2F Public bodies

Councils and other public bodies have a role in developing, supporting and resourcing volunteering. It is important that existing standards such as Investing in Volunteers (IIV) are used across the board to ensure volunteers have a good volunteering experience. Although some bodies, such as Belfast City Council have already engaged in development activities others are at an earlier stage in integrating volunteer involvement. There are a range of tools that have been successfully used by voluntary, community and some public sector bodies which should be considered as a tool kit for high quality volunteer involvement including

- Investing in Volunteers (IIV) - the recognised quality standard for involving volunteers.
- Certificate in the Effective Management of Volunteers.

It is important that public bodies show leadership in volunteering but also that they are also supported to develop their capacity.

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the opportunity to provide comment for the action plan of the volunteering strategy. We are happy to discuss issues in further detail or to provide further evidence where it is available.