

# ***I Give, You Give, We Get***

**VSB's Response to the**

**Volunteering Strategy for  
Northern Ireland**

**October 2009**

## Response to Volunteering Strategy Consultation Paper VSB September 2009

### Executive Summary

VSB operates Volunteer Centre Services in Ards, Belfast, Castlereagh, North Down and Fermanagh District Council areas.

This response has been formulated after consultation with volunteers, organisations, specific workshops with older people's groups and young people, website comments, political representatives' comments, and the views of staff and Management Committee of VSB.

- 1. Consideration should be given to establishing and resourcing an Inter-Departmental Panel or a Commission on Volunteering and Civic Engagement to oversee and develop the Strategy across all sectors and report annually during the lifetime of the Strategy.***
- 2. Volunteering should, by definition, remain a voluntary act and should not have any element of compulsion. The Volunteering Strategy needs to clearly commit to this element of the definition.***
- 3. The Strategy needs to articulate a vision for volunteering in a context which recognises that building a healthy participative and good society requires skills and contributions from government, business and civil society.***
- 4. The Councils should develop a local volunteering strategy, as part of Community planning, to compliment the Northern Ireland strategy.***
- 5. The Strategy should encourage all councils to have recognition events during the life of the Strategy. In particular councils should be encouraged to utilise Volunteers Week (1<sup>st</sup> week in June) to celebrate and recognise the importance of volunteering.***
- 6. We suggest that the strategy encourage and support organisations that involve volunteers to gain Investing In Volunteers Award. Further, we would ask that Statutory funders consider making Investing in Volunteers a minimum requirement when providing a contract or grant to organisations where volunteers play a significant part in the delivery of services.***

- 7. The Strategy could endorse research on the social and economic impacts of volunteering.**
- 8. VSB would ask that the Strategy endorse and resource a proactive approach to engaging with the media on promoting the benefits of volunteering.**
- 9. The Strategy should recognise the educational value of volunteering and it should encourage the development of volunteering and service learning programmes within the formal and informal education sectors**
- 10. The Strategy could support and resource a pilot programme to develop “family” volunteering.**
- 11. Investment in a longitudinal study on the quality and impact of volunteering in Northern Ireland is worthy of consideration as a facet of the strategy implementation.**
- 12. An easily accessible, high quality and single Volunteering website /database for Northern Ireland are an essential component of the Strategy.**
- 13. We suggest that the strategy take forward an Ask Campaign which could have various themes (older people, young people, employees, sport, arts) over its life to recruit volunteers.**
- 14. We welcome the recommendation of a Turn up, Take Part volunteering opportunity and this idea might be piloted by local councils through Social Action Days.**
- 15. VSB would ask that the Strategy support the recommendation made in the Manifesto for Change (2008) to include appropriate criteria in the Investors of People standard.**
- 16. VSB suggests that the volunteering infrastructure is strengthen and mandated to engage with the public and private sectors to develop Employer Supported Volunteering.**
- 17. The Minister responsible could promote the value of the Volunteering Strategy across these islands and identify innovative work that would catch people’s imagination and make a real contribution to positive ways of tackling needs.**
- 18. VSB supports the proposal to review mechanisms to encourage people with disabilities to volunteer. The new infrastructure should be mandated to undertake this task.**
- 19. Innovative measures are needed to promote volunteering – we suggest taking the message to the people at events, shopping centres, leisure centres, community**

*centres in a mobile volunteer resource which could go out and about across Northern Ireland providing the public with information on the benefits of volunteering, why they might get involved, how they can get involved and what opportunities are available.*

- 20. An intergenerational volunteering programme might be a model/concept worthy of investigation or piloting.*
- 21. A Volunteering Innovative Community Event Awards could be established.*
- 22. VSB suggests that the Strategy endorse the small grants awards and investigates ways to enhance and develop a Challenge Grant programme.*
- 23. VSB feel it is important to support those willing to serve in a voluntary capacity as Trustees / Board members and would not want to see an over bureaucratisation that caused barriers to many interested and committed people volunteering.*
- 24. All Government departments should commit to supporting the Strategy and contribute to a major bi-annual Northern Ireland recognition event.*
- 25. An 'ASK' publicity campaign to recruit volunteers could be funded by DSD or jointly by all departments over the lifetime of the Strategy.*
- 26. VSB welcomes and supports the proposal to encourage involvement from local councils, public bodies, health trusts in delivering the Strategy. Synergy between various public bodies can only maximise the involvement of volunteers and contribute to a good society.*
- 27. A fit for purpose infrastructure that offers a co-ordinated, cost effective approach to meet the future projections of increased demand for volunteers and one that is coherent in providing a regional perspective with local delivery should be a cornerstone of the Strategy.*
- 28. VSB believes there needs to be a synergy across all government departments in how volunteering is funded and recognition given to the proposed volunteering infrastructure.*
- 29. Ownership of the Strategy must be wider than the DSD in order to deliver on the government's vision.*

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### Full Report

VSB has been a driving force, for over 40 years, in the development of volunteering in Northern Ireland and has consistently looked for the development of public policy to give recognition and support to volunteering. We, therefore, welcome the Department for Social Development's consultation and the fully endorse the proposed actions and objectives for the Volunteering Strategy for Northern Ireland.

Volunteering is quite often the beginning of a powerful process for social change, particularly to tackle issues of disadvantage, exclusion, social justice and poverty. People who give their time because they want to, not because they have to, make things happen. In this context the process of voluntary civic engagement is a fundamental facet for a good society. VSB believes that it is essential for government to support but not own the process. The process is as important as the voluntary activity undertaken and as such requires resourcing from government to enable and foster an environment in which volunteering can flourish.

The Council on Social Action (2008) publication 'Willing Citizens and the Making of a Good Society' has defined good society as something that has to be made and continually sustained and not something that just happens. The concept of the 'willing citizen' where people show concern for one another not because they have to but because they want to; people who drive the making of a good society; people who carry out an infinite number of actions that can make other people's lives better. In this context the challenge of building a better future for the people of Northern Ireland falls to each and every member of this society not only to develop the courage to imagine a different future, but the will power to do the hard, practical work that makes it happen. Harnessing the creativity and commitment freely given by volunteers is central to the way we live and how we improve the quality of life for all.

The Report of the Commission on the Future of Volunteering and Manifesto for Change (2008) outlines their vision as "a society in which we will be united by our common concern for the wellbeing of others; a society in which we enrich our own lives by enriching others through the giving of time. This may be through offering services to individuals, or it may be through working for a better society in other ways." In not volunteering people are missing out on something that is life enhancing. Our experience and research indicates that people's lives are often transformed by their volunteering adventure. We believe government has a role to play in supporting volunteering to become part of the DNA of our society.

VSB believe that a Volunteering Strategy, actively supported by government, will make a significant contribution towards a 'better future' for Northern Ireland. DSD should provide effective leadership for this strategy to all government departments through example and should be supported by all other departments.

***Consideration should be given to establishing and resourcing an Inter-Departmental Panel or a Commission on Volunteering and Civic Engagement to oversee and develop the strategy across all sectors and report annually during the lifetime of the strategy.***

Such a commitment by all government departments would provide a positive message on the value it places on volunteering and the nature of the society it wishes to foster.

## **Definition of Volunteering**

***VSB agrees with the definition of volunteering.***

Time given freely by people for the common good, to counter inequalities, to protect the environment, to develop artistic, cultural and sporting life, to provide services for others, to combat poverty, to promote social justice and to offer challenge and an alternative voice is a powerful force for the good of our society.

Time given freely is something that cannot be taken for granted; rather as a unique resource it must be cherished. Therefore, in addition to defining volunteering we ask that you place the definition in a strong value to society context.

The Commission on Volunteering quotes Justin Davis Smith (2001) definition of volunteering being categorised into four different types of activity according to their final outcome: **mutual aid or self-help**; **philanthropy or service to others**; **participation**; and **advocacy or campaigning**. VSB supports these differing activities associated with volunteering and views these as a spectrum of opportunities for active citizenship to be encouraged and supported.

***Volunteering should, by definition, remain a voluntary act and should not have any element of compulsion. The Volunteering Strategy needs to clearly commit to this element of the definition.***

## **Government's Vision for Volunteering**

VSB recognises that volunteering is one of the manifestations of a healthy, flourishing and good society; the values and value base for volunteering should be made clear as this determines what we do, why we do it and how we do it.

The vision for volunteering should be as much about a cultural change of how we see volunteering, not as an add-on, but as an integral part of how we live in and contribute to society.

***The Strategy needs to articulate a vision for volunteering in a context which recognises that building a healthy participative and good society requires skills and contributions from government, business and civil society.***

VSB recognise the *power* of volunteering - it is carried out by choice and is driven by values. Whilst there are a wide range of personal values held by individuals it is our experience that the vast majority of people have a common concern for the well-being of others and that they are committed to working for a better society.

In looking towards the future VSB feel that the 'new' Councils have an important role to play in recognising the achievements and the impact that volunteers give to their community (be that a geographical or interest based community).

***The Councils should develop a local volunteering strategy, as part of Community planning, to compliment the Northern Ireland strategy.***

Councils are closer to communities and have opportunities to interact with members of the public relatively frequently and they are best placed to, and many do through civic events, give recognition to volunteering.

***Councils should be encouraged through the strategy to utilise Volunteers Week (1<sup>st</sup> week in June) to celebrate and recognise the importance of volunteering.***

The impact and message given if all Councils committed to this week would be significant both in terms of recognising the value and capturing the benefits.

The strategy should recognise that specialist Northern Ireland campaigns, programmes, awards such as the Millennium Awards for young people or Retired Senior Volunteers have a role to play in developing the value and benefits of volunteering.

Good practice in volunteer recruitment and retention plays a vital part in volunteers having a positive experience. It is important for volunteer involving organisations to understand how people are encouraged and supported to become volunteers; people generally have immense good will and enthusiasm and this needs to be harnessed and not taken for granted.

Recently VSB gained the IIV (Investing in Volunteers) Award and staff found this to be a very beneficial process as well as having a rigour that encouraged us to really examine our practice with volunteers. It also enabled staff to have consistency across all the various projects and to share best practice within the organisation. The IIV Award should be part of a good practice that statutory organisations and funders could employ for improving standards across the sector.

***We suggest that the strategy encourage and support organisations that involve volunteers to gain this Award. Further, we would ask that Statutory funders consider making Investing in Volunteers a minimum requirement when providing a contract or grant to organisations where volunteers play a significant part in the delivery of services.***

## **Promoting Voluntary Action**

The Minister has a role to champion volunteering across all government departments. A co-ordinated and cross government approach needs to be taken, under the leadership of the Minister and civil servants, to recognise volunteering and the social and economic impact that this has for society.

***The strategy could endorse research on the social and economic impacts of volunteering and/ or establish a Commission on Volunteering and Civic Engagement.***

VSB welcomes the involvement of the media and believes that they have much to contribute. There is a key role for the media to influence opinion, for example, public campaigns, positive feedback on effects of volunteering input. VSB has found the media to be responsive to their work and to getting a positive message about volunteering out to a wider audience. The BBC community website has recently introduced a *Volunteer Voices* section on this site and this wider acknowledgement is welcome. Newspapers could make a significant contribution to keeping volunteering and volunteers in the public eye not only through regular profiling of volunteers and volunteer activities but also in practical ways, such as, along with the weekly *Job Finder* there could also be a weekly ***Volunteer Finder***.

***VSB would ask that the Strategy endorse and resource a pro-active approach when engaging with the media to promote the benefits of volunteering.***

## **Involving More Young People**

VSB very much welcomes initiatives that encourage young people to become involved in volunteering and know from their own research that young people volunteer to gain experience, develop skills, self satisfaction and for career development (*Why Not Ask Me? VSB, 2007*). There is evidence to support the fact that young people are much more likely to volunteer and continue to volunteer if they have a positive volunteering experience when they are young. It was very clear that young people were keen to give something back to their community and that 91% would volunteer if they were asked to.

The Council on Social Action (CoSA, 2008) report recommended that volunteering needs to start young. VSB know from experience with young people that volunteering can be a route to the successful transition into adulthood as it can offer an opportunity for confidence building and experimentation often an essential ingredient in this important transition.

VSB know from listening to volunteers' experiences over many years that some volunteering opportunities can be life changing and would not want to under-estimate the power of the volunteering experience. An example of this is overseas experiences where elements of risk, that are often attractive to young people, make a lasting impact. Whilst being mindful of risk management VSB would like to encourage an international element to volunteering experience as this has many mutual benefits for Northern Ireland society.

VSB would encourage models of Service Learning developing as part of the school and university curriculum through, for example the Department of Education and the Education Skills Authority. Specialist programmes could be introduced or developed to target specific groups of young people; Millennium Volunteers for young people could be enhanced and, for example *Recognition Events* could be supported by education and youth organisations.

Ensuring there is information on volunteering opportunities in order to make an informed choice is important. Careers information within the education system may need to increase the profile of volunteering as a means to gain skills and experience particularly in vocational careers. However, there is a much wider element to volunteering that relates back to the concept of the *willing citizen* and the common concern for the well-being of others and as the Manifesto for Change identifies "a society in which we enrich our own lives by enriching the lives of others through the giving of time." If volunteering is only presented as a means of gaining skills and experience it excludes a fundamental basis of well-being for society.

The Commission on the Future of Volunteering, Manifesto for Change (2008) recommends that "a culture of youth action should be embedded right the way through our education system" and VSB would support the development of this. Further we agree that volunteering provides a way for children and young people to connect to and value their local communities, and make a positive contribution to them. There is evidence that volunteering contributes to better community relations and is an excellent means for young people to become involved in understanding and addressing some of the tough problems facing this society. The Morgan Inquiry (2008) recognised that volunteering was an excellent way for young adults to develop transferable skills.

***The Strategy should recognise the educational value of volunteering and it should encourage the development of volunteering and service learning programmes within the formal and informal education sectors.***

As we know from research, when volunteering opportunities are encouraged at a young age they are more likely to become part of future life experiences; by offering and encouraging family volunteering opportunities we are investing in the future. A family volunteering activity may be viewed as an intergenerational event; this has many benefits by inspiring each other and an opportunity to increase contact with and understanding of each other. We often think that family volunteering is parents with young children but this could easily include older adults and their parents or extended family or grandparents and grandchildren. The pattern

of family life is changing and there are higher numbers of single parent families and volunteering opportunities may well be an appropriate way for community engagement that may not otherwise happen.

***The Strategy could support and resource a pilot programme to develop “family” volunteering.***

## **Measuring Volunteer Impact**

With over 40 years of experience VSB knows that there is no such thing as a typical volunteer. They come in all shapes, guises, backgrounds, experiences, ages. They are most often “people who simply believe things could be better than they are and set about making them so” (CoSA).

It is evident that much of Northern Ireland society was kept together throughout the ‘troubles’ by people giving their time freely to ensure that children had summer activities to attend; young people were offered high quality youth provision during the heaviest days of rioting and unrest; mother and toddler groups had places to meet and support each other; sport and arts organisations continued to flourish.

There is an educational, social and economic outcome from volunteering and research shows that 52% of voluntary organisations could not deliver their services without volunteers. A vibrant, growing and flourishing society depends much on members of society engaging in its activities and exercising free choice. The impact of this can present a number of challenges as some may be long-term; however it is not only about the numbers of people involved (quantitative) but the nature of society (qualitative outcomes). There is evidence to show that the more engaged a citizen is the more likely it is that they play a crucial role in stimulating community activity (Communities in Control, 2008).

***Investment in a longitudinal study on the quality and impact of volunteering in Northern Ireland is worthy of consideration as a facet of the Strategy implementation.***

## **Volunteering Database and Associated Website**

Access to information and promotion of volunteering is critical to sustaining and developing volunteering. An engaging, easily accessible database and website are essential to recruiting, encouraging and supporting volunteers and volunteering. A fully functional single Northern Ireland website and database will enable individuals to be ‘asked’ by organisations who require volunteers. It is not the only way, but would be a significant resource to individuals, organisations and those who volunteer, particularly if combined with information, opportunities for training, questions and answers, stories and latest volunteer campaigns, and was supported by local councils and statutory agencies to market their volunteering opportunities. Whilst VSB would support a website such as [www.do-it.org.uk](http://www.do-it.org.uk) we would also suggest that Northern Ireland learn from other places such as Seattle where daily, weekly and family/group volunteering activities are advertised.

An effective and high quality website and database will be of benefit for Councils and government departments to highlight opportunities they have for people to participate in volunteering events. This would also be of benefit for giving feed back as to the impact of volunteers at local and regional levels.

***An easily accessible, high quality and single volunteering website/database for Northern Ireland is an essential component of the Strategy.***

## **Develop and Implement a Volunteer Recruitment Programme**

VSB supports the development and implementation of Northern Ireland Strategy for a volunteer recruitment programme. This would be carried out in a number of ways including a recruitment strategy of themed campaigns, special events, taster opportunities, local recruitment drives.

Current research with young volunteers demonstrates that more young people would volunteer – *if they were asked (Why Not Ask Me, VSB, 2007).*

***We suggest that the Strategy take forward an Ask Campaign which could have various themes (older people, young people, employees, sport, arts) over its life to recruit volunteers.***

There are a number of demographic changes that any recruitment of volunteers needs to consider including increased 'older' population, 'baby boomers' coming to retirement age, increased unemployment and the likelihood of an increase among young graduates, increased number of volunteers from ethnic minority groups, more people from socially excluded groups (*Helping Out report, 2007*), active citizenship on the education/school agenda.

There is evidence from a number of sources (Youth Volunteering Charity V and CoSA) to demonstrate that ways of attracting volunteers need to be creative in the way volunteering opportunities are described and organisations should make these opportunities 'stand out' in a very competitive and ever changing market place using technology effectively.

***We welcome the recommendation of a Turn Up, Take Part volunteering opportunity and this idea might be piloted by local councils possibly through Social Action Days.***

## **Employer Supported Volunteering**

VSB has extensive experience of Employer Supported Volunteering over the past ten years. This has been a key area of involving a number of businesses and a number of government departments. The Manifesto for Change (2008) proposes two ways of looking at ESV employer supported volunteering where employees of an organisation are encouraged to

volunteer; and another side to this is where the employers involve volunteers in their work (which many charities do). There is obviously a lot more scope for engaging with the public sector and the private sector has probably furthest to go in relation to this. Incentives should be offered to major employers to release staff for particular volunteering opportunities; David Blunkett (Fabian Society, 2008) makes the recommendation that employer supported volunteering should release staff for specific volunteering opportunities which link time from work with time out of work – so that the essence of volunteering is maintained. It would be useful to initiate training for public sector staff such as civil servants and local government officers in order to enhance their understanding of the role of volunteering. Motivating employers is a key to the success of promoting and encouraging ESV.

***VSB would ask that the Strategy support the recommendation made in the Manifesto for Change (2008) to include appropriate criteria in the Investors of People standard.***

The development called *Chain Reaction* is based on the premise that “social leadership practised by willing citizens in local communities, in government and in business is the key to tackling successfully the global challenges we face”. VSB supports new thinking that goes beyond ESV and involves the bringing together of ‘unexpected’ groups of people to use their collective actions to build a better society.

VSB’s *Social Action Day events* give employers opportunities to see the benefits of volunteering and all have been received very positively by employers. Again volunteer organisations may need to be creative in how ESV can be successful – they may have to take volunteering opportunities to employers such as repairing equipment, pro bono opportunities customised events; there are a number of ways to creatively ‘ask’. This is a key role for the volunteer infrastructure to open channels for those looking for volunteering opportunities.

***VSB suggests that the volunteering infrastructure is strengthened and mandated to engage with the public and private sectors to develop employer supported volunteering.***

## **The Unintended Consequences of Legislation and Government Policy**

There is a role for infrastructure organisations and government departments to explore any negative impacts of legislation and government policy. There should be absolute clarity between the benefit system and volunteering, particularly in relation to asylum seekers and those for whom English is not their first language.

Long waiting times while CRB checks are made for those volunteering with children and vulnerable adults have certainly deterred many volunteers. Volunteers often want to start their volunteering as soon as possible and waiting for any length of time for clearance will dampen enthusiasm and opportunities for working with children and vulnerable adults may be lost.

VSB's experience is that it is difficult in today's culture of litigation and risk adverse actions. The protection of children and vulnerable adults is paramount and a system that works efficiently and quickly is necessary. The newly established Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA) will hopefully be able to meet these requirements.

However, we are also aware of regulations around benefits and health and safety that need addressed. Risk management is important but this needs to be proportionate to the volunteering opportunity. This should be reviewed on a bi-annual basis.

## **Volunteering in Border Areas and Volunteering on an Island Wide Basis**

VSB welcomes this proposal. It is particularly important for border areas and cross border volunteering projects. Infrastructure and government organisations with the same standards are important. VSB has positive experiences with a number of counterpart organisations in Dublin and know that volunteers gained immensely from cross border visits and exchanges. Looking at ways of creatively managing the transference of skills, knowledge and synergy between infrastructure organisations will be of mutual benefit.

***The Minister responsible could promote the value of the volunteering strategy across these islands and identify innovative work that would catch people's imagination and make a real contribution to positive ways of tackling needs.***

## **Encouraging Better Volunteer Practices**

VSB endorses developing support for best practice, we know from experience that initial contact, welcome, induction, clarity of role, training and ongoing support plays a hugely significant part in how a volunteer views the volunteering experience. Some volunteers, for example, may have special support needs, health or mobility concerns, and volunteer involving organisations need support to ensure that volunteering is accessible to all.

There is no one size fits all when it comes to supporting the development of volunteering opportunities. It may be useful to think of a volunteer journey, we may start this as teenagers or younger as part of a family volunteering event. Over the course of peoples lives their circumstances, time, interests, skills and knowledge change and volunteering opportunities need to reflect this. Having fun and learning something new may be a high priority in volunteering when we are young, however, this may change as we get older and particular interests or causes may take priority. Time available is increasingly an issue and volunteering opportunities will need to be flexible, varied and attractive in an ever competing society.

The volunteering infrastructure should play an important role in assisting volunteer involving organisations, challenging where necessary, in the recruitment and retention of volunteers. The volunteer should have a positive experience in their volunteering role, treated with respect and valued.

***The Strategy should encourage volunteer involving organisations to undertake the Investing In Volunteering Award as this would provide a baseline for good practice.***

## **Encouraging Volunteering Among Older People and Other Under Represented Groups**

VSB has extensive experience of involving older people in volunteering for example our Retired and Senior Volunteer Programme funded by DSD for 10 years provides a substantive body of evidence to show the benefits of older people taking up volunteering, particularly health benefits and engagement in society. This, in turn, reduces their demands on the Health Service as they are physically active and have a support network that will help in times of stress, loss and isolation.

***Specialist programmes/campaigns should be developed to target specific sections or groups within society.***

A similar campaign to the Millennium Volunteers' Programme for young people could be developed for older people – Retired and Senior Volunteers and Civic Volunteers are two USA programmes. The latter developed the Purpose Prize to recognise and invest in the potential of social innovators over the age of 60. It is important to replicate and modify good practice from elsewhere. Increasingly evidence is being produced that sustainable communities, particularly related to crime and the fear of it, require links to be made between the generations.

***An intergenerational volunteering programme might be a concept worthy of investigation or piloting.***

## **Tackle the Barriers to Volunteering**

Recent research studies carried out by VSB (Why not Ask Me?) and the VDA (*It's All About Time*) have identified a number of barriers to volunteering. These include: people have not heard about volunteering opportunities and do not know how to get involved; many feel too old or unskilled or felt impaired by a disability.

***VSB supports the proposal to review mechanisms to encourage people with disabilities to volunteer. The new infrastructure should be mandated to undertake this task.***

People from disadvantaged areas often face numerous obstacles such as lack of money and unemployment, low self worth, low educational attainment and mobility difficulties. Volunteer expenses are often crucial to enable people from poor economic backgrounds to participate in meaningful volunteering opportunities. There is often a negative perception of the 'image' of volunteering. A new volunteering strategy needs to address these barriers.

Work, of course, has been ongoing to address some of these issues. VSB's work in schools, asking young people to get involved. VSB's research with young people found that it is clear that messages about volunteering need to be much more prominent in the media and that there is much merit in volunteers being encouraged to talk about their experiences to others. A recent publication by VSB's Young Citizens in *Action* magazine profiled volunteers from the minority ethnic community and these personal volunteer stories were found to be very effective role modelling - with positive outcomes. The recent Unlocking Potential poster campaign for the over 60s volunteering provides positive images of volunteering and volunteers.

A sustained approach to marketing and promotion which brings information and the Volunteer "Ask" to the general public and has targeted campaigns for particular audiences is needed to overcome perceived barriers.

***Innovative measures are needed to promote volunteering – we suggest taking the message to the people at events, shopping centres, leisure centres, community centres in a mobile volunteer resource which would go out and about across Northern Ireland providing the public with information on the benefits of volunteering, why they might get involved, how they can get involved and what opportunities are available.***

## **Small grants programme**

VSB is aware that even a small grant is significant especially to volunteer led organisations. This is particularly useful for programme costs and government should not underestimate the value of small grants. The current Small Grants Programme is a good model but has limited financial resources and is restricted to organisations with income of less than £100,000. More investment is required and the income threshold should be increased to £500,000. The Small Grants Scheme could be more focused during the life of the Strategy to support particular aspects of volunteering that organisations need to develop, such as, local promotional campaigns to recruit volunteers. This could be linked to the 'ASK' Campaign, recognition events and Volunteers Week, training programmes, family volunteering days/events, youth volunteering and increasing diversity within the volunteer pool.

***A Volunteering Innovative Community Event Awards could be established to capture and develop some of these ideas.***

In Britain there is a *Grassroots* grant programme and it may be useful to consider a similar initiative for Northern Ireland. Consideration of an imaginative Award that encourages new/innovative thinking, for example Catalyst Awards, Making a Difference Volunteer Awards for individuals etc might provide added value to current initiatives. A Challenge Grant programme (£5,000-£10,000) for larger organisations to improve their volunteering practice such as better volunteer recruitment, collaborative volunteer work, innovative training in

recruitment/retention of volunteers might be considered by DSD or other government departments.

*VSB suggests that the strategy endorse the small grants awards and investigates ways to enhance and develop a Challenge Grant programme.*

## **Utilise Employer Supported Volunteering to Develop and Strengthen Management Committees**

VSB feel that this may have a role to play but it needs to be 'interest' led. In our experience people volunteer because of the passion they feel for a particular cause or interest. Often people who volunteer for an organisation do so, so that other skills might be developed for example a bank manager does not always want to be treasurer, a doctor may use his skills as a football medic but his involvement may be because of football.

Obviously the introduction of the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland will see a number of changes in the governance of charities and this will require Boards and Trustees to be more aware of their legal responsibilities. This we hope will not require all such governing bodies to only have those with an interest in managing a business.

*VSB feel it is important to support those willing to serve in a voluntary capacity as Trustees and Board Members and would not want to see an over bureaucratisation that caused barriers to many interested and committed people volunteering.*

## **Volunteer Management in the Faith Based Sector**

VSB recognise the need to improve good practice in all sectors; volunteer opportunities need to be inclusive while respecting the ethos of faith based organisations. Some work may need to be carried out on inclusivity with some faith based organisations given that Northern Ireland society is a multi-faith and multi-ethnic society. Difference needs to be respected and VSB believe that "volunteering in different communities can build confidence and pride and this can be a powerful message to those outside a particular community about the strengths and values that are common to us all, but may be expressed in diverse ways" (Manifesto for Change, 2008).

## **Volunteering within Central and Local Government and Across the Public Sector**

The Review of public Administration (RPA) outlines an expanded brief for councils and as part of this there is an opportunity for a more proactive approach for civic engagement. Local Government has a key role to play in the delivery of the Strategy. Some Councils, recognise the contribution of volunteers by hosting awards and events to pay tribute to local individuals and groups.

***The Strategy should encourage all Councils to have recognition events during the life of the Strategy.***

***Councils, through their community planning, should be encouraged by the Strategy to develop local Volunteering Strategies that compliment the Northern Ireland Strategy.***

Councils should be encouraged to promote and publicise their internal volunteering opportunities widely by engaging with a new Northern Ireland website/database. This would greatly aid the implementation of the Strategy. Councils' websites should also incorporate volunteering opportunities provided by the Council and signpost people to become engaged as active citizens.

As stated earlier the new Volunteering Strategy for Northern Ireland offers an opportunity for the public sector to lead by example; large organisations such as health, sports, arts, education and criminal justice could all demonstrate, by example how to make the best use of volunteers and enable volunteering to have the greatest impact. Appropriate training for public service staff would support them to understand how best to appreciate the added value that volunteers and volunteering opportunities bring.

***All Government departments should commit to supporting the Strategy and contribute to a major bi-annual Northern Ireland recognition event.***

Departments and Public Bodies need to look at ways in which volunteering can be encouraged within their activities for example DCAL could examine how to support volunteering within the Arts, Museums and Sports.

***An 'ASK' publicity campaign to recruit volunteers could be funded by DSD or jointly by all departments over the lifetime of the Strategy.***

Statutory Agencies such as Health and Social Care Trusts, the new education bodies benefit significantly from the investment of volunteers. The Health Service has significant numbers of volunteers delivering services. Education bodies often rely on volunteers as a key part of delivering their youth services. Sports bodies are dependent on volunteers. All could be encouraged to commission research to audit the level of volunteering, assess the economic contribution and added value volunteering makes to their respective agencies. Their corporate plans and annual reports could highlight services provided by volunteers.

***VSB welcomes and supports the proposal to encourage involvement from local councils, public bodies, health trusts in delivering the Strategy. Synergy between various public bodies can only maximise the involvement of volunteers and contribute to a good society.***

## **Infrastructure to Support Volunteer Involvement and the Delivery of the Strategy**

Northern Ireland is a relatively small place with a population, although more dispersed than other places, of approximately 1.7 million. At a time of economic recession the impacts of which will be felt over the lifetime of this proposed strategy the development of an integrated regional and local infrastructure is timely. The environment in which we now exist requires consolidation and new coherent ways of delivering services to the public not fragmentation and duplication.

***A fit for purpose infrastructure that offers a co-ordinated, cost effective approach to meeting the future projections of increased demand for volunteers and one that is coherent in providing a regional perspective with local delivery should be a cornerstone of the Strategy.***

VSB welcomes the on-going work with VBI and VDA which will hopefully come to a satisfactory conclusion. The volunteering infrastructure providing regional co-ordination with a local delivery service can both offer support to and be enhanced by the new emerging Councils. This new infrastructure will create a dynamic that can be responsive to future trends which indicate that we need to be able to respond quickly to recruit volunteers and support organisations requiring volunteers. In this context an integrated approach makes it easy to access good quality and consistent volunteering information throughout Northern Ireland.

Along with reviewing funding within DSD it would be appropriate to review funding across all government departments including Health, NIO, Education, Arts and Culture as volunteers provide service delivery across a number of government departments.

***VSB believes there needs to be a synergy across all government departments in how volunteering is funded and recognition given to the proposed volunteering infrastructure.***

To be effective and to obtain the targets anticipated in the Strategy a regional infrastructure with local delivery mechanism will be required. Northern Ireland is a relatively small place with a population, although more dispersed than other places, of approximately 1.7 million. At a time of economic recession the impacts of which will be felt over the lifetime of the strategy it is timely to consolidate rather than fragment. An integrated volunteering infrastructure therefore will provide, co-ordination of recruitment and promotional campaigns, consistency of standards, efficient use of resources, bring added value to the new RPA Structures, offer the same service to individuals and organisations throughout Northern Ireland. It will provide a responsive local service that will increase volunteering locally and regionally – thus meeting the needs of organisations and local communities.

## Implementation

VSB welcomes the establishing of a widely represented Implementation Group, with membership at senior level and to include central and local government, voluntary and community, statutory and private sectors, volunteers and individuals from outside Northern Ireland to take the volunteering strategy forward.

***Consideration should be given to establishing and resourcing an Inter-Departmental Panel or a Commission on Volunteering and Civic Engagement to oversee and develop the Strategy across all sectors and report annually during the lifetime of the Strategy.***

The monitoring/implementation group should have its own secretariat and a budget to enable discrete pieces of research or piloting to take place. An additional financial investment from government will be needed to take the Strategy forward – funding to underpin the implementation of the Strategy, such as The ‘ASK’ Campaign, Infrastructure Development, Specialist Programmes/Campaigns, North/South Development, Investing in Volunteers Standard and Volunteers’ Week.

VSB welcomes the idea of an evaluation of the Volunteering Strategy and suggests that formative research methods are used so that the learning and experience from the evaluation is shared and changes made to the strategy, if appropriate, during its lifetime. The proposed survey of public and volunteering involving organisations at the end of the Strategy would provide very useful information.

VSB endorses the involvement of both volunteers and volunteer involving organisations being involved in the delivery of the Strategy. This could be carried out in a number of different ways such as through the new website, blogs, focus groups, citizens’ juries, World Café Conversations. Ways to motivate and involve large numbers to participate in the process are welcomed and these mechanisms should increase ownership as well as providing an effective sounding board for the monitoring/implementation group.

Close working between government departments is crucial in order to get a ‘sense’ of the Strategy’s success across government otherwise there is the danger of duplication or anomalies being established.

***Ownership of the Strategy must be wider than the DSD in order to deliver on the government’s vision.***

## **Conclusion**

VSB welcome and support the proposed Volunteering Strategy and look forward to early confirmation and implementation of the Strategy. A society looking to a new future from a past of conflict need hope and positive messages on which to build. There is no better example of hope and optimism than the efforts and time given freely by volunteers for the good of all. I give, you give, we get. We wish the Department every success with the passage of this unique Strategy.