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Volunteering to lead: a study of leadership in small, volunteer-led groups

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Nick Ockenden and Mark Hutin

March 2008

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Executive summary

Introduction

Researchers in the voluntary and community sector have traditionally tended to ignore grassroots, volunteer-led organisations and focus instead on larger organisations that are more immediately obvious. Relatively speaking, then, we know a lot about volunteering in larger, paid-staff organisations but comparatively little about volunteering within volunteer-led groups and even less about issues of leadership within these groups. Volunteer-led groups are defined as those in which the leader of the group is a volunteer.

It is in such a context that this study aims to explore issues of leadership within small, volunteer-led groups and the challenges associated with their growth and development. It has been funded by the Volunteering Hub and carried out by the Institute for Volunteering Research.

This research was informed by a case study approach. Six volunteer-led groups from two geographical areas in England were selected. They were all led by volunteers and were drawn from the environmental and conservation, heritage and cultural, and sports sectors. A series of interviews and focus groups were completed with each group, with leaders, committee members and less senior volunteers. Interviews with four umbrella infrastructure bodies were also completed. The research visits took place between November 2007 and January 2008. The report adopts a thematic analysis of the emerging issues.

The characteristics of volunteer-led groups

All of the groups had a structure in place, being led by a figurehead. However, this leader did not always occupy the position of chair. All groups had some form of committee and a wider membership of volunteers. However, the comprehensiveness of the structures could vary between groups, with one group having an executive committee backed up by a series of sub-committees.

All groups demonstrated very high levels of involvement, commitment and passion from their volunteers. However, the highest levels were generally exhibited by the leader of the group. Despite this, the study found little evidence to suggest that the leaders were overburdened, identifying little or no resentment of their personal workload or time commitment. In many instances, life inside and outside of the group became blurred and the social and family life of volunteers was closely connected to the work of the group. However, non-committee volunteers often gave time as one of the main reasons that they had not wanted to get involved as a leader or a member of the committee, having consciously chosen a more distant and removed role. Furthermore, there was evidence that some leaders could experience frustration because they were aware that they made a greater commitment to the group than other volunteers.

All groups held a strong belief in the value of volunteering as an activity, associating it with passion, commitment and drive. At the same time, they frequently demonstrated a distrust of employing paid staff, often the result of past negative experiences and challenges. The origins of the groups were rooted in the community, having emerged out of a local need for services or activities. Subsequently, the growth of these groups, while often ambitious, was generally slow and incremental.

Functioning of the groups

Groups commonly gave thought to recruiting new volunteers to maintain the mix of skills and to ensure their sustainability. While a variety of methods were used, the most common approach was to rely on word of mouth and personal contact.

The groups tended to function through a combination of informal, yet structured approaches, especially with regard to the management of volunteers. Moreover, groups often felt strongly that imposing more formal systems of volunteer management would not be appropriate or effective. Similar levels of informality were observed in the process of electing leaders and committee members. While protocols were followed, it often appeared to be a matter of electing the person who was deemed to be most suitable and most willing at the time, in which the leader *'stepped into'* the role unceremoniously.

All groups to varying degrees, even the newest ones, had given some thought to succession and the importance of ensuring new members and leaders come on board. Again, an informal approach was favoured in which the leader and committee members tended to keep watch on other volunteers and give responsibility to those they felt wanted it.

Systems of leadership

The groups demonstrated a 'group approach' in which all volunteers, to varying degrees, contributed to activities, projects and outputs. Much of this seemed to come about through delegation of responsibilities by the leader to other volunteers within the group. While groups experienced challenges in ensuring successful delegation, several groups were undertaking this effectively. This seemed to have a number of important benefits including giving ownership of the work to less senior volunteers, being able to act in the absence of the leader, and freeing up the time of the leader to work on more strategic issues.

This research found that collective systems of decision making were evident in all of the groups to varying degrees. However, respondents often described practical barriers to involving all of the volunteers all of the time, with everyday decision making residing with the committee. Collective decision making in its true sense was therefore generally limited to only part of the groups. Volunteers drew a clear distinction between the role of the committee and that of the other volunteers. They were often grateful that certain individuals were willing and able to take on the additional responsibilities and workload.

The defining element of the leaders' positions appeared to be an external-facing role, distinguishing them from other members of the group. The leaders all demonstrated certain characteristics that helped them be effective in their role.

This included skills such as communication, diplomacy and lobbying. However, experience was also felt to be important, both in terms of having been involved in leading other groups in the past and also having built up a sound knowledge base of the subject matter. The personalities of the leaders also played a central part, often being more outgoing and sometimes even feeling that they had '*been destined*' for such a role. However, leaders also demonstrated humility in their role. This study also found that despite the skills and attributes of the leaders, most groups felt that they could survive their loss. This was often felt to be closely related to the strength of the group approach.

Engaging with external bodies

Leaders within groups appeared to receive the majority of their support from their peers. Groups often tended to exist largely independently from other organisations, and where external relationships were evident they were most commonly formed with specialist infrastructure bodies or their local authorities; they did not tend to access support from generalist volunteering infrastructure bodies to the same degree. Groups generally felt that in order to access support, they needed to be proactive in identifying it. While some groups had significant support from other groups in their area, few appeared to be networking extensively with other volunteer-led groups and some had even experienced hostility from others when they were established.

Most of the groups had some form of relationship with their local authorities and their experiences varied considerably. The relationship appeared to exert a major influence over their day-to-day and longer term existence. In some cases, the local authority performed an enabling role, providing support and resources, while in one case it was seen to restrict the group's development. There were also examples where groups were ambivalent towards the council. In general, it was felt that the relationship could change over time.

Initial conclusions

The conclusion returns to the original aims of the research project and discusses some of the major themes that emerged from the study in relation to each aim and the associated challenges for the stakeholders involved.

Understanding the defining characteristics of leadership in small volunteer-led groups

All groups functioned through a mix of informal yet structured systems of management. They had structures in place and adhered to protocol when necessary, yet did so in a way that suited their group and the volunteers. This may frequently be observed from an external perspective as somewhat chaotic, perhaps as a result of the bureaucratic lens through which much commentary may take place. While such systems may appear 'messy' from the outside, in each of the groups, they functioned effectively.

A key challenge facing volunteer-led groups may be the threat of becoming exclusive, unrepresentative and unaccountable due to the reliance on word of mouth and personal contact for recruitment. While this was not observed within the

case study groups, it perhaps has implications for the longer term inclusiveness of the groups, all of which felt that they had been set up to represent and serve the community. Such approaches could risk excluding those outside the immediate social and professional networks of the existing volunteers.

Barriers and challenges for volunteers as group leaders

Collective systems of group work and decision making were evident in all of the groups to varying degrees. However, there were limits to the collective involvement of volunteers, with the majority of decision making responsibilities in particular falling to the committee (and in some cases one or two members of the committee) rather than to all volunteers. It could also be possible that this could be exacerbated by the strength of the leader's personality and the effective influence of one individual's vision. It may be the case that, albeit unintentionally, volunteers can be excluded from the decision making process and groups need to be alert to the associated dangers.

Time was rarely identified as a barrier to leaders and overburdening did not appear to be a major problem. This could be because there is often a blurred line between the activities volunteers undertake in their social life and within the group. Furthermore, the volunteers often saw participation as enjoyable. It is not easy to compartmentalise forms of voluntary activity, however, and volunteering in leisure activities may be far more fluid than those which occur in a more formal setting. The leaders also seemed to gain satisfaction from their role, and many demonstrated successful delegation of activities and tasks, which could be seen to minimise the negative impacts of workload. However, time commitments may stop other volunteers from taking on leadership roles.

Impacts of ongoing growth and development of small volunteer-led groups

The frequent incremental growth of groups could arise because the objectives of their growth often remain rooted in the community. In addition, the groups had often been led by the same individual during such periods which could mean that the vision and ethos of the group remained consistent. The cause and effect of growth and development can sometimes become blurred. Certain indicators and results of growth, such as acquiring new buildings and assets, employing paid staff, or introducing new structures to address power struggles, can themselves act as catalysts for further growth.

Implications for stakeholders

In the light of the findings of the research, implications for three sets of stakeholder groups are considered: the volunteer-led groups and their volunteers; the volunteering infrastructure; and policy makers and government:

Volunteer-led groups and volunteers

- > develop recruitment processes to extend beyond a current reliance on word of mouth approaches that can act to limit the inclusiveness of groups
- > help avoid the overburdening and burnout of leaders through the successful delegation of responsibility and workload to other volunteers
- > recognise that some members of the group will not want to make, or are not able to make, the same level of commitment as the leader or committee members. All

members of the group should, however, be kept informed of developments and involved in decision making when possible

- > help minimise potential conflicts and problems when employing paid staff by providing specific and well-defined duties for all employees

Volunteering infrastructure

- > recognise volunteer-led groups as a form of volunteering that is as equally valuable to, and possibly more prevalent than, that which occurs in larger volunteer-involving organisations with paid staff
- > work towards removing obstacles to this form of volunteering, which can include help dealing with bureaucracy and red tape such as planning legislation
- > recognise that groups may not always welcome interference through further generic capacity-building initiatives or the imposition of models of management and volunteer-support
- > become more proactive when offering support to groups including promoting resources more widely.

Policy makers and government

- > ensure that policy at all levels recognises volunteer-led groups as a valuable and legitimate form of volunteering
- > recognise that the informal, non-corporate model of volunteering that often occurs within volunteer-led groups is valid and moreover works effectively
- > ensure that the volunteering infrastructure is properly resourced, enabling them to diversify the support they provide to groups. In particular, sufficiently fund specialist infrastructure bodies as well as the generalist infrastructure, as the former appears to be particularly popular with volunteer-led groups.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Volunteer-led groups

Considerable numbers of people are currently engaged in volunteering. Interim findings from the government's 2007 Citizenship Survey (covering England and Wales) found that 44 per cent of those surveyed had taken part in formal volunteering (though a group, club or organisation) at least once between April and September 2007 (DCLG, 2008). There is almost no limit to the diversity of this form of volunteering. It can range from involvement in large, volunteer-involving organisations to participation in very small groups that are run entirely by volunteers.

There is a lack of clarity around definitions of volunteer-led groups (Zimmeck, 2001; MacGillivray et al, 2001), which have often been described as ambiguous in character (Rochester, 1999b). They have, however, frequently been described as being grassroots or community based (Zimmeck, 2001; Holland, 2004; Billis, 1993; Berkes, 2004). In this context, they may often have been established to fulfil a local need (Jochum, Pratten, and Wilding, 2007), such as the achievement of a specific objective (Thake, 2006). It is also possible, however, that such groups could have been set up for personal and instrumental reasons, with member associations often aiming to secure member benefits (Rochester, 1999b; Billis, 1993).

There is no accurate figure of the number of volunteer-led groups in existence, although broad estimates suggest that there are a great many. There could be as many as 600,000 to 900,000 'micro social enterprises' in the UK (MacGillivray et al, 2001), which meet the characteristics of volunteer-led groups, and in the US, research suggested that the number of grassroots organisations outnumber tax-registered paid-staff non-profit organisations, which are broadly equivalent to organisations with UK charitable status, by a factor of ten to one (Smith, 1997).

1.1.2 The research requirement

Researchers have tended to ignore grassroots organisations and focus instead on larger organisations that are more immediately obvious (Smith, 1997). Relatively speaking, then, we know a lot about volunteering in larger, paid-staff organisations, but comparatively little about volunteering within volunteer-led groups, and even less about issues of leadership within these groups. Many of these groups are effectively invisible to government and policy makers (MacGillivray, 2001), often not being members of support networks or being isolated from the volunteering infrastructure (Thake, 2006; VDS, 2006; Dalgliesh, 2006). What we have, therefore, is an 'incomplete, distorted, and misleading' picture of the non-profit sector which requires a paradigm shift in research (Smith, 1997, p.114). It is in such a context that this study explores issues of leadership within volunteer-led groups and seeks to redress this information deficit.

The research has been funded by the Volunteering Hub.

1.2 Aims and objectives

The research aims to explore issues of leadership within small, volunteer-led groups and the challenges associated with their growth and development. Within this, the specific objectives of the research are to:

1. Understand the defining aspects of leadership in small volunteer-led groups. This will seek to identify the unique characteristics of leadership in small volunteer-led groups, including the reasons why groups are volunteer-led and the current role and place of volunteers within the group, including their relationship to paid staff (where relevant).
2. Explore barriers and challenges for volunteers as group leaders. Looking at individual volunteers; this will explore their motivations, the place of volunteer management and examples of good practice.
3. Explore the impacts of the ongoing growth and development of small volunteer-led groups. This will explore the impact of changes in the size, authority, formalisation and the overall mission of the organisation.

1.3 Terms and definitions

For the purposes of this study we have used the definition of volunteering set out in the Volunteering Compact Code of Good Practice (Home Office, 2005):

'[Volunteering is] an activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or someone (individuals or groups) other than, or in addition to, close relatives.'

This definition includes both formal volunteering (taking place through a group, club or organisation) and informal volunteering (taking place independently of such groups). This study, however, concentrates on formal volunteering.

A volunteer-led group is defined as a community group in which the 'leader' of the group is a volunteer who holds one of the *'formal elected or appointed offices'* (Pearce, 1980, p.86), which is commonly, but not always, the chair. They are the functional equivalent of a chief executive officer in a paid organisation. This does not include trustees in paid-staff organisations.

Throughout the report, the person in the leadership position will be referred to as the 'leader' and their position in the group, for example the chair, will be given if necessary. Members of the executive or management committee will be described as the 'committee' or as 'committee members'. The term 'volunteer' will be used to describe any member of the group who takes part in volunteering; specifically, however, it will commonly refer to those volunteers in non-committee positions. The 'membership' describes those remaining individuals who are signed up to the group and who use its services or attend events, but do not necessarily take part in volunteering.

1.4 Methodology

The research was informed by a case study approach of volunteer-led groups that was complemented by a series of interviews with umbrella infrastructure bodies. The fieldwork was carried out between November 2007 and January 2008.

1.4.1 Literature review

A literature review of relevant research into volunteer-led groups was carried out.

It was based on an extensive review of existing literature which included databases such as the Social Sciences Citation Index, BIDS, ARNOVA (the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action) and the Foundation Center's Catalog of Nonprofit Literature. It also included libraries such as the integrated catalogue of the British Library, the library of Volunteering England and the Johns Hopkins Library online catalogue. The Voluntary Sector Studies Network (VSSN) was also used to identify appropriate literature.

1.4.2 Case studies

Six organisations were selected as case studies to explore the aims of the research in depth. Organisations were drawn from two geographical areas: one large urban area in the north of England and one small urban fringe area in the south of England. Such an approach was used to make as consistent as possible the geographical factors that could influence the groups. At the same time, having two contrasting areas enabled various types of groups to be introduced. The case studies were chosen from three sectors: environmental and conservation; heritage and culture; and sports. The categories were chosen because each had a high level of activity of volunteer-led groups.

In order to qualify, the case studies had to be led and run by volunteers, in line with the definition provided in section 1.3. While the person in the leadership role had to be a volunteer, groups could employ a paid member of staff in a support or project role. Groups did not have to be formally constituted but, in order to exclude larger groups, the maximum number of active volunteers was set at 50.

Case studies were identified with the help of volunteering infrastructure bodies and umbrella organisations. This included national, regional and local organisations, as well as those that were generalist in the type of support they provided and those that catered to a specific sector or subset of the sector. Requests for case studies were disseminated through the networks of these organisations and staff from the organisations also advised on suitable groups who met the criteria. Groups were also identified by searching the internet.

The six final case studies that informed the study illustrated a wide diversity of characteristics and undertook a range of activities. The age of groups varied from less than a year old to over 50; the number of volunteers ranged from two to over 40; and total annual income was less than £200 at a minimum to a maximum of approximately £26,000. All groups were constituted and one was registered as a charity. They were all led by one individual backed up by some form of management committee, and supported by a wider membership of volunteers. Two groups had paid workers: both were individuals working on a part-time basis in a specific position with no leadership responsibilities. One further group had had a paid employee in the past, again in a project-specific, non-leadership role.

The characteristics of the case studies have been described in the following anonymous descriptions:

- > Group A: a large, long-established multi-sports club providing coaching and fitness activities. There was one paid employee. It occupied a building and was in the process of securing a new one, having recently been given the land by its local authority
- > Group B: a well-established, large, mainstream sports club providing coaching activities, community events and hosting a number of teams. It occupied a building on a short-term lease and was seeking permanent tenancy

- > Group C: a very small, newly-formed environmental organisation with a lobbying role working with a single neighbourhood green space
- > Group D: a well-established, medium-sized organisation with the aim of improving the local environment and regenerating the area. It had had one paid employee on a time-limited contract in the past
- > Group E: a well-established, medium-sized cultural support group working locally with one ethnic group. There was one paid employee
- > Group F: a newly formed medium-sized heritage/history group organising practical activities, lectures and events.

For each case study, one in-depth face-to-face interview was carried out with the leader of the group and a further one with a member of the committee; this amounted to 13 interviews, two each for five of the groups and three in the case of one. The interviews lasted between one and two hours. In general, focus groups were also carried out with a group of less senior volunteers; 14 volunteers took part in focus groups for four of the groups, comprising a mixture of committee members and non-committee volunteers. These lasted between one and a half and two hours. Because the case study groups were often small in size and their volunteers frequently had many competing demands on their time, it was necessary to be flexible in the application of the methodology; in two cases, focus groups were not possible and were substituted by further individual interviews. In addition, an employee of a local authority was interviewed because of their close relationship with the case study group.

1.4.3 Umbrella organisations

In order to gain a wider understanding of the issues and challenges facing volunteer-led groups, telephone interviews with staff from four umbrella organisations were carried out, two in each region. Two of these organisations provided support to a wide range of groups while two offered more specialist support focused around a specific field of activity.

1.5 Report outline

The report discusses the findings thematically. Chapter two begins by exploring the characteristics of volunteer-led groups, before chapter three examines how the groups function. Chapter four then discusses the systems of leadership within the groups and chapter five explores the relationship of the groups to external bodies. The report is then concluded in chapter six where the themes are drawn together and assessed in light of the study's original aims, before implications for various stakeholders are considered in chapter seven.

1.6 Presentation of data

The data from the interviews and focus groups are presented anonymously. The position of the volunteers in the groups will not be given unless there is a need to distinguish them. The six groups who took part in the study are referred to as 'groups' or 'case studies'. Unattributed quotations are presented throughout the report in single inverted commas and italics.

2 ‘There are times when you can make a difference to people’s lives’: The characteristics of volunteer-led groups

This section explores some of the key themes that can help us understand the characteristics and nature of volunteer-led groups and their volunteers. It firstly discusses the clear structure evident within the groups before exploring the high level of commitment demonstrated by the volunteers and especially their leaders. It then discusses how time is not perceived to be a significant barrier by leaders and examines the extent to which life inside and outside of the group can become blurred. The strong belief in the value of volunteering and the presumption against employing paid staff is then explored. This section closes by discussing how these groups can be firmly rooted in the community from which they emerge before finally discussing how their growth is often incremental.

2.1 A clear structure

All of the groups were constituted and had adopted a clear structure. All were led ultimately by a single figurehead. This was often, but not always, the person who had taken a lead role in establishing the group. However, it was also common for the leader to have taken over from one of their predecessors as they stood down. In three groups, the position occupied by the leader was the chair. However, in the remaining three case study groups, the leader occupied another position. Here they held the positions of vice-chair, secretary, and project worker. In these examples, the ‘non-chair leaders’ of the groups nonetheless worked very closely with the chair, to the point where the relationship was described as *‘the bus driver and the conductor’* in one group. In this group, many of the responsibilities of leadership were shared between the two individuals. However, it was nonetheless the *‘bus driver’*, or the project worker, who was consistently seen as the figurehead and leader of the group by the volunteers.

All of the groups had some form of executive or management committee, which backed up the leader and held strategic management responsibilities. While there was variation in the size of the committee between groups, they commonly consisted of the positions of chair, vice-chair, secretary and treasurer. Most groups had a single committee. However, in the case of one group, there was a single executive committee which was then supplemented by a series of sub-committees. While it is possible that this could have been affected by the age and size of the group, it seems possible that the field of activity within which the group operated necessitated such a structure. This sports club ran a series of different activities and the sub-committee structure had evolved to take on direct management of these different components. The sub-committees included the bar committee (the running and management of the bar resource), the playing

committee (the day-to-day issues of players), the development committee (progressing the building of a permanent building) and the disciplinary committee (behavioural issues within the group). It may also be possible that the introduction of formal processes may have other motivations that are not necessarily related to their field of activity. Several groups formalised their structures in order to protect the group from problematic relationships between volunteers and paid workers, power struggles (i.e. when someone may assert their personal agenda against the will and ethos of the group), and the need to free up the leader's time to pursue larger, often more strategic aims.

The committee, or committees, were then backed up by a wider body of volunteers who generally did not assume official or elected positions but who contributed to the work of the group to varying degrees. They often paid fees or subscriptions to participate in the group and took part in the life of the group through meetings, events and activities, and ongoing informal contact. Finally, there was a wider membership of people who would be signed up to the group. They could use the services provided by the group or take part in events, but were not necessarily actively involved in volunteering.

2.2 High levels of commitment

In all of the groups, volunteers at all levels demonstrated very high levels of commitment to their cause, especially in terms of the hours that they contributed. Furthermore, retention of individuals generally appeared to be very good, with individuals within the longer established groups often having been involved for many years, frequently at the same level of involvement and in the same position. This commitment seemed to be able to help volunteers continue their work during more difficult times, as one leader said:

'Out of passion, because it is a passion, we have to continue.'

While the vast majority of volunteers appeared to be highly committed to their group, the highest levels of commitment were often seen amongst the leaders. In each case, it was evident that the leader, and also the members of the committee to a lesser degree, contributed more time and effort than other volunteers within the group (the distinction between the committee and the non-committee volunteers will be explored in detail in section 4.2.2). This could sometimes involve a commitment other than time. In one case, it involved significant personal financial risk from the leader, who took out a second mortgage to secure a lease on an area of land to establish sports pitches and then later to invest in a prefabricated building to provide facilities for a clubhouse. In many cases, some degree of personal sacrifice and commitment was seen to be synonymous with involvement in such groups.

The leaders' higher levels of commitment could also be partly attributed to their frequent close involvement in setting up the groups. The motivations of the leaders could often be personal and could drive the groups forwards. One group was set up by the current chair due to his personal love of the field and his desire to get more people involved. Other volunteers in the group saw it as 'his baby', but nonetheless felt that they were fully involved and that they had ownership as a valid part of his project. In the same way, volunteers of another group discussed how it was the realisation of a personal vision for the leader, going on to say that *'we are living out [the leader's] dream for this group'*. Again, however, the volunteers did not appear to demonstrate any resentment of the personal origins of the group.

While the leaders did not appear to resent the additional commitment they invested in the group, some were aware that they made a greater commitment to the group than other volunteers. This did contribute towards frustration in some instances. The leader of one group, for example, discussed how he felt that some of the volunteers had slipped into a 'comfort zone', stating how he would like them to do more. Similarly, the leader of another group was very aware that her contribution was significantly higher than the other non-committee volunteers, and she commented:

'Sometimes my drive to get things done doesn't match other people's priorities.'

2.3 Time not a major barrier for leaders and committee members

The umbrella bodies spoken to as part of this research all highlighted time as a major challenge that faced the leaders of volunteer-led groups. Indeed, non-committee volunteers often gave time as the main reason that they had not wanted to get involved as leader or a member of the committee, consciously choosing a more distant, removed role.

While the leaders understood that they devoted a great deal of time to their activities, they did not discuss this negatively. They more frequently described access to funding, maintaining membership levels, and ensuring levels of enthusiasm and momentum were kept up as some of the main challenges they faced. It is possible, however, that the leaders had taken on their role precisely because they had sufficient amounts of time available, and time would therefore not necessarily have become an issue for them while it was an issue for others.

Subsequently, the overburdening of leaders as a phenomenon was not commonly observed within the case studies. There was, however, an indication that leaders often needed to undertake a wide variety of activities themselves; tasks in the groups observed ranged from lobbying local councillors for funding to cleaning the toilets. The response of the leaders could range from an acceptance as a necessary part of the job in which one leader said *'you must be willing to do other roles...to make sure it gets done'*, to apparent frustration in which another commented that *'you're just a jack of all trades and you shouldn't have to do that'*.

2.4 Blurring between social life and the group

In all of the groups there appeared to be a lack of delineation between the volunteers' personal lives and that of the group, possibly helping to explain the high levels of commitment. In some cases, volunteers drew no distinction, seeing the group as a key part of their social activities because of the enjoyment and satisfaction they gained from taking part. In other cases, this social link could take the form of familial connections; the secretary of one group was the daughter of the treasurer, while in another group, the chair and secretary were husband and wife. While many volunteers said that this could mean that life in the group was fun and sociable, others described the challenges such blurring could create. The leader of one group, for example, found it difficult to separate himself from the work of the group when he visited the group's facilities socially, and would

frequently be approached by volunteers with issues and concerns. Similarly, he noted the difficulty of keeping certain issues confidential from close friends within the group. Volunteers, therefore, often described the necessity of striking a balance and attempting to maintain a degree of distinction between life inside and outside of the group.

It may be possible that the field of activity of the case study organisations could mean that this blurring was particularly evident. Sports, environment and conservation, and heritage and culture activities can all be closely related to hobbies and interests. Therefore, the line between the ‘work’ of the group and the ‘fun’ of social life can become even less distinct, with individuals potentially viewing the group merely as an extension of a personal interest or hobby. This was possibly most pronounced within the sports clubs, where the amount of time contributed by the leaders and the committee members in particular appeared to be greater than the other groups. The line between the groups’ activities and social life seemed to be especially blurred, and as one leader said, *‘this is life, being here’*. This could also, however, be related to the fact that these were also the two longest established and largest groups with commitment possibly developing over a period of time and as the group grew in size.

2.5 Strong belief in the value of volunteering

All respondents spoke positively and passionately about the value of their groups being led and run by volunteers. Positive attributes such as an altruistic belief in the common good, passion, commitment, devotion and loyalty were frequently discussed. The fact that they were carrying out their activities in a voluntary role was often seen to be a vital part of their identity. Comments from volunteers included:

‘If you believe in something strongly enough, then you should be able to do it without necessarily being paid for it.’

‘Volunteers want to do it, that’s the difference, isn’t it?’

Several groups also stated how volunteering helped to make their activities fun, undertaking the work because they wanted to rather than because they were obliged to.

2.6 Presumption against paid staff

Two groups currently employed paid members of staff in distinct roles, and one further group had in the past employed a member of staff for a time limited contract. Amongst all groups, however, there was a degree of distrust of paid staff. Sometimes, particularly in those groups who had direct experience of employment, this could be related to practical challenges and negative experiences. Some groups had found it difficult to manage paid staff. The leader of one group described it as *‘a totally different ball game’*, referring to the legal implications and liabilities that they could be exposed to, while the secretary of another group summed her opinion as *‘it’s a quagmire with employment’*. In another group, the experience of employing a paid member of staff had contributed to internal conflict and power struggles. This emerged out of what was described as the staff member’s *‘personal agenda’*; the leader said that the individual had:

'Wanted to do things his way and the committee and him had strained relationships.'

The leader of the group went on to say that a key strength of volunteers is that there are no such personal agendas. These examples show how relationships between volunteers and paid staff could often be fragile and emotive.

Negativity towards paid staff could also be related to the ethos of volunteering. There was a feeling that it would not be possible to get the same level of commitment from a paid staff member as it would from a volunteer. One group with a paid employee in an administrative position felt that the support was of limited value because the worker was not perceived to be as motivated as the volunteers by a commitment to the group's aims. In another club, the chair was so adamant that employing a paid member of staff would negatively affect the group's ethos that he had made it clear that he would leave the group should this happen.

The two groups currently employing paid members of staff both felt, however, that paying a salary to an individual did not conflict with their identify as a volunteer-led group. Both groups interpreted the role of the paid staff member as being distinct from the activities undertaken by the volunteers and as being task specific. In this way it was not seen to affect the group's remit and could not threaten the leadership of the group or the way in which it was run. One group employed someone to coach sports during the day as part of a link-up programme with a local school, while the volunteers attended during the evening. The other group employed a paid office worker who undertook administrative duties on behalf of the group; referred to as *'just a clerk'*. In this way, the leader interpreted the employment as a change in the way in which the group delivered its work, but not as a change in its remit.

Several other groups discussed how they had given thought to employing a paid member of staff in the future. This could often be related to a planned expansion in the size of the group. One group, for example, who had plans to develop a new building felt that this would necessitate having a paid caretaker. Currently, maintenance tasks were seen to be demanding on the volunteers and not what they wanted to spend their time doing: *'keeping here going is just taking so many volunteer hours'*. The majority of the volunteers felt that this would not affect the group's remit and identity and said that it was more to do with the activities and the management of the group becoming more planned. Another group, who also discussed the possible need to employ someone to look after a new building, described the value of the employee as being able to carry out activities that volunteers were unable to do, such as grass-cutting during the day when volunteers were at work.

There was some feeling that *'volunteers can only do so much'* and that having a paid employee would increase the capacity of the group and remove some pressure from the leader. One group gave the example of a 79 year old volunteer who often spent three hours cleaning the group's building before he carried out his coaching, while another group likened having a motivated, paid employee to *'the difference between riding a bike and taking the train'*. This was seen in the context of removing some of the administrative duties from the leader, as in the case of another group:

'We could do with someone in the office for [the leader]. The pressure is on [the leader], so if we could get someone to man the office to take phone calls.'

In each case in which volunteers felt able to justify having, or having had in the past, a paid member of staff, they identified the employee as being in a non-

leadership role and as being focused on specific tasks and activities. In such a way, it appears possible, but nonetheless challenging, for groups to successfully employ a paid member of staff without negatively affecting the remit or volunteering ethos of the group.

2.7 Activity rooted in the community

All of the groups had emerged out of existing needs within the local community with a central aim to provide some level of service to the local people. In each case, they were acutely aware that they served the local population, and even in the case of one group that had a wider geographical remit, it maintained a strong community focus. There was often a strong altruistic desire to leave a legacy for the '*common good*'. When describing the activities and facilities that one of the longer running groups had established, the leader said that '*we want it to stay forever*'. While many groups could experience high levels of support for their work from the local community, it also seemed possible that some members of the community did not necessarily value the objectives of the group to the same extent. For example, as a result of expanding activities within the same group, a larger number of cars were parked in roads surrounding the group's building which led to some opposition from local residents.

2.8 Incremental growth

The groups ranged considerably in age and were subsequently at different stages of development. To varying degrees, however, they all had plans for growth. The two newest groups, both under a year old, were primarily concerned with increasing their membership and establishing themselves more firmly. Two other groups were concerned with continuing their work, becoming more sustainable and accessing funding to improve their stability. The two sports clubs, both of which were well-established, had more ambitious plans and these seemed to be progressing in a steady manner. They were both working towards the development of new buildings for the home of their groups; one had secured land but was waiting for planning permission while the other was seeking a long-term tenancy agreement on a temporary building. They both also had past experience of occupation and management of properties for their groups. In no cases did the growth appear to be aggressive in nature but rather seemed to concern sustainable growth.

The desire to provide a better service to the community appeared to connect the motivations for growth of all groups. In the opinion of the leaders, this could range from better representing the views of the community in a lobbying role by increasing membership to being able to provide more activities in a new building.

Similarly, all groups appeared to recognise that there were limits to the size they could reach. Despite ambitious plans for increasing the membership within the smallest group, the leader was aiming for '*about 15 people*'. Even in the examples in which a new building was planned, the volunteers and leaders did not want the group to get much larger than it already was. Securing property appeared to be more concerned with ensuring the long-term sustainability and stability of the group. In cases where obtaining funding was mentioned, the groups seemed to relate this to simply '*keeping going*' rather than direct expansion, noting that they

could lack the income for basic necessities. One group, for example, said that further funding would allow it to run the boiler in its building during the winter and eradicate problems of damp.

Several groups had already undergone considerable growth and expansion in the past. In all cases, the volunteers and the leaders described how the remit and ethos of the group had remained the same throughout the development. The two sports clubs underwent the greatest amount of change in terms of the number of volunteers and the range of activities they offered. A degree of stability and consistency of approach may be related to the fact that they have both had the same leader throughout such changes, helping to maintain the original vision of the group. Indeed, umbrella organisations spoken to as part of this research felt that having the same leader could result in core values being conserved during periods of change.

3 ‘Don’t knock it if it works’: Functioning of the groups

This section explores how volunteer-led groups function. It begins by examining how the recruitment of volunteers commonly takes place through word of mouth and then discusses the lack of formal management practices that are evident. It explores how election to leadership positions may often be a matter of being in the right place at the right time, before it finally examines the value that is frequently placed on planning for succession within groups.

3.1 Recruitment through word of mouth and personal contact

All groups were open to anyone who wished to join them and they all, to varying degrees, expressed an interest in attracting new members. It was common for new volunteers to join after some form of personal contact with one of the existing volunteers. This could often involve someone taking part in an activity run by the group, becoming interested and even passionate about the work of the group and slowly increasing their involvement to the point at which they become an active volunteer and signed up member. This had happened with both of the sports clubs. In the case of one, parents who initially came to watch their children take part in sporting events organised by the group had subsequently joined as volunteers.

Volunteers also appeared to join the groups as a result of the involvement of family members and friends. In one group, the secretary, who was the daughter of the treasurer, recalled her frequent childhood visits to the group and described her reasons for joining:

‘Like the rest of the family, we don’t have much choice!’

This again indicates the blurring of social life and life within the group (see section 2.4). Such personal contact could also take a more direct approach when a group needed to recruit. The leader of one group, for example, noted that the committee required specific skills in order to function, and described how she would ‘*hand pick*’ and select individuals she knew in the wider community who she felt would be appropriate and capable, and who possessed the right personal qualities, skills and contacts.

Other recruitment processes were evident including promotional events and literature being distributed to the wider community. The apparent dominance of word of mouth approaches do, however, signal a concern for the inclusiveness of the groups and the involvement of individuals who may be outside the immediate social and professional networks of the existing volunteers.

3.2 Lack of formal volunteer management processes

Volunteers were not 'managed' in a formal sense in any of the groups. Within several groups, members of the committee had experience and knowledge of more formal systems of volunteer management in larger organisations as part of their paid jobs. With their understanding of how such systems and policies operated, they were adamant that they could not be imposed upon or even translated effectively to the groups they volunteered with. This was seen especially in relation to those groups that had functioned effectively for a long time without such systems in place. As one volunteer said of their informality, *'don't knock it if it works'*.

In some cases where groups were very small, particularly in the group that was made up of a husband and wife, it was not possible to have a system of management beyond informal conversations. In such a case, decisions were made in *'household meetings like between any other couple'*. This did not, however, seem to affect the importance that groups often placed on the following of protocol. This was often observed during such meetings which were formally minuted and actioned. The leader of the group said that there was a risk if such protocols were not followed, suggesting that it was important to have written evidence of any important decisions:

'If not, then it will come back later on - you're just wide open otherwise.'

However, even with adherence to such protocol, it is possible that if such a system was to continue as the group grew, then new volunteers may risk being excluded, not necessarily consciously, from an inner and more exclusive core. It could therefore risk compromising the accountability of the group should such a scenario occur.

Some groups were also so new that they had not yet had a chance to think about volunteer management and were instead concentrating on building momentum and the numbers of volunteers. There was a recognition that as they grew they may need to consider introducing more formal structures.

The extent of formality of the management of volunteers did vary to a degree between groups, however. It appears possible that there could be a relationship between the area in which they worked and the involvement of their volunteers. Some activities that are undertaken may necessitate more formal management processes which can often be related to health and safety considerations. One group that runs practical archaeological digs, for example, requires volunteers participating in excavation trenches to be managed and closely supervised. Similarly, the sports clubs, both of which involve contact sports, require professional standards of coaching by the volunteers who need to enforce rules and regulations to ensure the safety of the individuals involved.

It seems that the greatest benefit of the informality of these processes could simply be that it suited the type of groups, their audience and the context within which they had developed. Several groups also described how such informality could also be a major factor in helping to make participation in the groups fun, enjoyable and sociable. However, evidence from one group suggests that there may be certain situations in which informality is not appropriate and greater formality may be necessary. The group had formalised its structures and procedures in response to a past conflict between a paid employee and volunteers, having felt that the original, highly informal structure was not sufficiently strong to address the problem.

3.3 The right place at the right time

In the case of all groups, all positions of the committee, including the leader, were elected by a democratic vote by volunteers present at the group's Annual General Meeting. All volunteers, including the wider membership, were invited to attend these meetings. When leaders described their personal experience of being voted into the role, it commonly seemed to be a matter of the right person coming forwards to take on the responsibility in response to a development within the group. This ranged from founder members passing away through to individuals standing down due to personal reasons. In one group which was less than a year old in its current form, the current chair was elected when the previous chair decided to stand down from the group. The leader described a process that was informal yet structured and adhered to protocol, being voted in by a suggestion that he should take on the role in which the previous leader said:

'I'm stepping down as chair and I think [the current chair] should take over.'

This process was then followed by a quick show of hands in which *'they stepped down and we stepped in'*. In other cases, the leader was the individual who had a dominant role in originally establishing the group. However, the process of 'electing' them appeared to be equally informal and without ceremony.

Similarly, the volunteers of the groups often saw the process as being primarily concerned with the leader *'stepping into'* the role rather than having been formally voted in, viewing the leader as the most appropriate and suitable candidate. The leader was also frequently seen to be the individual willing to take on the responsibility and the workload. Election to positions within the groups may therefore be seen as a system of allocation, in which the roles were *'dished out'* in an almost nominal, yet structured, way to the most suitable and interested individual at the time.

3.4 Value placed on succession

Groups, and especially the leaders and committee members, frequently discussed the importance of thinking about the next generation of leaders to take the groups forwards. This was observed even in those groups that were very new and did not exhibit any noticeable problems. However, few groups had actually progressed these thoughts into material steps and where systems were in evidence, informal processes were favoured in which the committee casually observed the involvement and commitment of other volunteers, especially younger individuals. Often the leader and the committee would test the response of individuals to certain situations or give them additional responsibility to judge their reaction. The entire process was carried out informally and there was no plan or policy in place. In one group, for example, it was simply based on the understanding that suitable people will *'float to the surface'* and be easily identifiable.

All of the groups currently had in place, or at least recognised the importance of, structures and procedures to elect new positions onto the committee should the need arise. In some cases, however, especially with the newer groups, these had not yet been tested and were not fully developed, to the extent that they were unclear about how long the term of office was for positions on the committee.

4 ‘We’re the spokes on a wheel’: Systems of leadership

This section describes the themes running through the systems of leadership within volunteer-led groups. It opens by exploring the group approach to the completion of activities and tasks before discussing the collective decision making structure evident in the groups. It then examines the importance of certain characteristics of the leader before highlighting a perception that the groups could survive the loss of the leader.

4.1 A group approach

4.1.1 Systems of collective effort

While all of the groups were led by a single figurehead, it was common to observe a system of collective effort in which large numbers of volunteers, to varying degrees, contributed to activities, projects and outputs. Leaders often had a great deal of faith that the volunteers would contribute when needed. In one group, the current collective system, in which responsibilities were spread throughout all volunteers, had emerged as a direct response to the way the group had been led by a past leader:

‘[He] did everything and to our shame we let him.’

The current leader felt that this change had helped to make the group more sustainable and manageable in the long term. However, all groups recognised that they had a core group of more active volunteers. In one case, for example, the non-committee volunteers (including volunteers and the wider membership) were described as largely inactive to the point that a large proportion did not pay their membership fees.

4.1.2 Delegation of activities and tasks

One of the most effective ways in which to ensure this collective contribution develops appeared to be by sharing responsibility and delegating tasks down from the leadership. Several of the leaders of the groups recognised this as being fundamental to ensuring the sustainability and success of the groups. In turn, the umbrella bodies described this as one of the biggest challenges facing groups and their leaders, especially the ability to relinquish control. In this sense, delegation within the groups perhaps has much in common with good people management in any organisation, paid or volunteer-led. One leader described the importance of not getting caught up in micro-management of issues and volunteers:

‘My personal role is to have an overview of what’s happening, to agree things, as a manager managing the outcome.’

All of the groups were aware of the need to do this, but many described the difficulties of doing so. One group felt that it could often be a challenge to choose

appropriate volunteers for tasks and duties. The leader stressed the importance of choosing someone who is able to fulfil a role confidently with minimum supervision and maximum motivation.

Several of the groups did, however, demonstrate effective delegation of tasks. Where this took place the benefits to the groups frequently seemed to be significant. Groups described how giving volunteers responsibility for an area of work could help to keep them interested and motivated, one group saying how this had previously been successful with someone running its community newspaper. As part of this, delegation seems to help develop competent and able volunteers. The committee of one group felt that they would be able to act in the absence of the chair if necessary, while the leader of another group felt that if someone was absent, another volunteer would be able to drop into their role and successfully undertake that activity: *'if someone drops dead tomorrow, it carries on'*.

It appears that successful delegation can also free up the leader and the committee to concentrate on other, perhaps more strategic, areas of work. In one group, for example, delegation of the running of the group's everyday activities to the various sub-committees enabled the executive committee to concentrate on the task of planning and executing new initiatives and improvements within the group, no longer having to undertake *'fire fighting'*. The leader directly attributed this move to the improvement in governance within the group.

4.1.3 Desire for further volunteers

While the groups demonstrated collective effort in activities and many good examples of delegation of responsibilities and tasks, they all said that more volunteers would be useful. This appeared to be closely related to the longer-term sustainability of the group in many cases and even succession. Several groups described the importance of encouraging more young people to get involved especially as part of the committee. However, leaders and other volunteers felt that increasing the number of volunteers could also have practical benefits. Such a development was perceived as being able to ease the workload of the leader and also take away some of the more menial roles they may undertake, potentially making the role of leader more enjoyable.

4.2 Collective decision making

4.2.1 Democratic involvement of volunteers

Leadership of the groups was carried out in a democratic, rather than authoritarian, approach. Such an approach was highly popular amongst the volunteers. Indeed, the volunteers of one group said that a more dictatorial system of leadership would, in their opinion, result in fewer volunteers being involved. One volunteer said that she would object to being told which activities to undertake at events, for example.

Leaders of the groups would often describe a process in which everyone contributes to decision making at some level, frequently speaking of the high levels of enthusiasm for such involvement amongst the volunteers: *'so many people are prepared to be the leader'*. There frequently appeared to be a strong desire from the leader and the committee members to involve all volunteers in decision making processes. The leader of one new group was especially keen to get to know the volunteers and learn about their interests and abilities, and was highly enthusiastic about their potential contribution to decision making processes. Indeed, the committee of this group stressed that they wanted the volunteers of the group to

inform its direction and interpreted their involvement in decision making as fundamental to the group's future development. Furthermore, there were examples of the wider volunteer membership feeding into decision making processes to varying levels, one volunteer of another group describing their input as a situation in which *'we come along and give our two pennies worth'*. This suggests that such community groups, and also the wider voluntary and community sector, can act as an important space for debate and dialogue.

4.2.2 Distinctiveness of the role of the committee

While volunteer engagement at all levels was actively encouraged, in reality the collective decision making approach did not appear to extend to all volunteers. This was with the exception of large, often strategic decisions, which could require ratification by the wider volunteer membership in several groups. However, involvement in everyday decisions effectively appeared to only extend to the committee. It was here that the collective decision making approach was well illustrated. Comments from members of committees included:

'It's a cabinet, but we all work together to achieve things.'

'We are like spokes on a wheel.'

In all of the groups, volunteers drew a clear distinction between the committee and the remaining volunteers, seeing most of the decisions and workload falling to the committee, or sub-committees where these were in place. Leaders and members of the committees described advantages such as being able to get together *'at a moment's notice'* due to their availability and the need to make decisions quickly in some cases. The volunteers of the groups also appeared to appreciate the role and place of the committees, understanding their decision making powers and responsibilities. This was not taken with resentment but rather a grateful recognition that there were individuals who were willing to commit the additional workload and responsibility. As one volunteer said of the committee members:

'It's good of them to give up their time; you can't ever knock that enthusiasm.'

Despite ultimate control and decision making residing with the committees, none of the groups seemed to use them in a presidential way and there was no evidence that those leading groups had abused their power or responsibility. In the case of one new group, for example, a member of the committee described how the committee had no desire to see the body develop as an autonomous unit that led the volunteers. However, the presence of a smaller, more active core group of volunteers with primary decision making power does raise questions around opportunities for wider volunteer involvement in the strategic development and functioning of the groups. It may be the case that, albeit unintentionally, volunteers can be excluded from the decision making process. The earlier analogy of the *'spokes on a wheel'* perhaps then serves to position the role of the committee above that of the other volunteers. While this may be a reality in most of the groups and was not actually observed to be problematic, it may also serve to further foster such inequalities. A more accurate and inclusive analogy may therefore be that of *'hubs, spokes and rims'*, of the leader at the centre, being supported by the committee members, who are all backed up by the wider volunteer membership. This also still recognises the differing levels of involvement and commitment.

4.3 The importance of the leader's characteristics

4.3.1 External-facing role of the leader

The one thing that seems to consistently identify the role played by leaders within the groups is the extent to which they take on responsibility for external links with the outside world. Leaders of all of the groups, to some degree, had a role that involved lobbying, raising the profile of the group, applying for funding, negotiating with stakeholders, attending meetings, or acting as a spokesperson. The external nature of this role had sometimes developed as the group had changed. As the group became more concerned with activities such as new buildings, the role of the leader could evolve to become more outward-facing, one saying that his role involves *'more talking than training now'*.

4.3.2 Emphasis on soft skills

The ability of leaders to develop a successful relationship with external stakeholders was often closely related to their skills. Those described by the leaders themselves often included good communication and an ability to talk and network. Similarly, being diplomatic, having an ability to negotiate, canvas and persuade, being thick skinned when necessary, being determined, and having an ability to remain calm in a crisis were also discussed. The importance of diplomacy was particularly evident in the group that was involved in lobbying its local authority. The relationship sometimes appeared to be challenging and reportedly had on occasion led to a breakdown in effective communication. This seemed to demonstrate that in cases where diplomacy was not, or could not, be employed, the consequences could often be negative, in this case resulting in stalemate. The leader felt, however, that this was part of preserving the group's original vision and objectives.

Non-committee volunteers often recognised that the leader had specific skills that meant they were effective in their role. In many cases they felt that it was appropriate to leave the running of the group to someone who had the necessary skills, frequently cited as the reason why they had chosen to take more of a backseat role.

It has already been noted that the leader of the group was not always in the position of the chair (see section 2.1). In some cases, this anomaly may be as a result of differing skill sets between the leader and the chair. Respondents from one group described how the leader had better communication skills than the chair who concerned themselves with administrative details:

'[The leader] is good at talking to people but not with words and the bidding process.'

In another group, the leader felt that he had dropped into the role of the leader because of his decision making skills, while the chair's role predominantly involved chairing internal meetings. This could also be the case with other roles: in the same group, the leader was described as being a good communicator but less effective with regards to paperwork, a responsibility that the secretary subsequently took on. The ongoing development of groups also appears to be important. Where the external-facing role may develop slowly as the group expands, the newly evolved skill set may not necessarily fit those of the existing chair and instead be taken on by another more suitable volunteer within the group.

The umbrella bodies spoken to as part of this research described how leaders of such groups could often lack the necessary skills, including an inability to

effectively chair meetings and minute decisions, poor communication skills and failing to disseminate information down to the rest of the group. This was not, however, observed within these case studies.

4.3.3 Importance of previous experience

The leaders often had significant experience of leadership positions in other groups and roles. For example, the leader of the smallest group had been the chair of a sports club previously and had also been closely involved in a housing group; the leader of another group sat on numerous different committees and had a strong and active trade union background; and another leader was also a local councillor. In some cases they had also been closely involved in the sector in a different, but still public-facing, capacity. The leader of one group said how his previous experience of the subject had meant that he had become recognised as the face of archaeology locally before the development of the group.

Previous experience also often appeared to be closely related to the subject knowledge that the leaders had built up in their past roles. The leaders themselves tended to see their primary attributes as more focused around this than the previously discussed skills. They talked about their knowledge of the activity and their passion. The leader of one group, for example, said how he was seen by the rest of the group as *'a man of experience'* while the leader of another said that *'the group have faith in me because they've seen what I can do'*. The non-committee volunteers of this group, and others, tended to agree, immediately discussing the knowledge and experience of the leader as their foremost attribute, saying how no-one else in the group had similar levels of knowledge.

4.3.4 Importance of personalities

The leader of one group described how it may often be the dominant personality who emerges as the leader, which appears to be part of the recognition of a process in which some people *'will push a bit harder than others'* and emerge as a figurehead. In one group, the leader described how she had effectively led the group while she was in the position of vice-chair before she was elected to her current position:

'I was vice-chair for two years. I was leading from the backseat!'

This was attributed to the presence of a largely inactive chair with a lack of leadership skills. This could be interpreted as somewhat of a personal calling in some instances. In the same group, the chair said:

'I felt convinced I could lead this group. I'm interested in communities. In being a community champion.'

Despite reservations about their role amongst some of the leaders, they appeared to enjoy their position. Observations of the case study groups suggest that the leadership role may actually form part of their personal and social identity and status, both within the group and in the wider community.

While strong personalities were exhibited by most of the leaders of the groups, humility was also frequently observed. In many cases, the leader often appeared reluctant to assume the title 'leader'. In several groups, the leaders described how the group wasn't led by an individual and used 'we' instead of 'I' when discussing leadership issues. The leaders of some of the groups did not seem to relish their role in telling people what to do, describing how they liked to avoid being seen as the 'boss'. The leaders would often interpret themselves as being equal to all other volunteers within the group, something that, in their opinion, was aided by the fact

that they were all in voluntary positions. The chair of one group, referring in particular to the other members of the committee, described the group as *'just a group of lads with the same mindset'*. Leadership within the groups appeared to be focused on the common good and did not concern itself with egos or individuals. As the leader of one club said, *'you take a lead but you don't want to be called leader'*. This could partly be because all of the groups were member organisations. Indeed, there seemed to be a strong recognition amongst leaders that their strength as organisations relied on all of the volunteers, with the leader of one group acknowledging that he was *'only as good as the troops'*.

4.4 Evidence of sustainability

All groups felt that should the current leader discontinue their involvement, it would be a major challenge to replace their skills, knowledge, enthusiasm and social and organisational connections; something that could leave a hole in the group. While it was felt that other members of the committee would take on the role, volunteers frequently felt that there was not often a candidate who matched the attributes of the existing leader. For example, in one group it was noted how the vice-chair, who would be the natural successor, was not as dynamic or eloquent as the leader. Furthermore, in the case of the smallest group, due to lack of any alternative, it was felt that the group would come to an end in such a circumstance. However, consensus amongst the other groups was that despite the challenge of the loss, it would be possible for the group to continue.

This perceived sustainability could often be attributed to the strength of the committee but also to factors such as the successful delegation of responsibility (see section 4.1.2). It seemed evident, however, that opinion could vary between members of the committee, who would often feel that the group would continue, and the non-committee volunteers, who could feel that the group would come to an end. It is possible that this could be related to the fact that the wider volunteers of some of the groups did not have a detailed understanding of the functioning of the committee and may not have fully appreciated the collective system of leadership, instead over-emphasising the group's dependence on the leader.

Similarly, all of the leaders, even those who had started the groups, said that they would willingly hand over leadership to a successor should they be voted out. Indeed, many acknowledged the need to avoid stagnation of the group and its leadership. Most of the leaders said that they would be happy to contribute to the aims of the group at any level, as long as they saw what they were working towards achieved:

'If they decided they didn't want me as chair, I'd carry on as a member of the group. It's not a power thing.'

This perhaps points towards an altruistic belief in the common good of the group and its aims. However, it also indicates a potential blurring between this and the personal agendas, however altruistic they may be, of the leaders; many of the plans for the common good of the groups and communities emerged out of a single person's vision and the desire to start the group. In no cases was it possible to explore what it would be like in reality if the leader was voted out of their position, for example, whether they would be able to stand back and contribute in another position or conversely find it too difficult given their previous position.

5 ‘Until you knock on that door you don’t know who will answer’: Engaging with external bodies

This final thematic section explores the groups’ relationships to external bodies and organisations. It discusses how many groups can be independent in their outlook and the nature of engagement when it takes place. It also explores the importance of, and variation in, a group’s relationship to its local authority.

5.1 Independent and often self-reliant groups

Much of the support that leaders and other volunteers received came from their peers within the group rather than from external sources. As has previously been discussed, this study observed a culture of ‘chipping in’ and providing help to other volunteers when necessary. The leaders, in particular, often said that they felt well supported in their role and had not had obstacles placed in front of them:

‘I’ve had so much support, I can’t think of anybody who hasn’t bent over backwards.’

It appeared that this peer support could be most valued when it was of emotional need, with several leaders describing challenging times during family bereavements and the value they placed on the support they received from other members of the group at these times. This also appeared to work in the reverse. In the case of one group which was threatened with closure due to losing its building, family members and friends of the volunteers within the group came together to help in the campaign to successfully save the group. Similarly, when the smallest of the groups ran a promotional stall at a local event, it relied on the help of friends and family. These examples once again illustrate the blurred line between life within the group and the external social and family life. Similarly, the non-committee volunteers would often describe a high level of support from the committee themselves.

Some of the groups had gained considerable support from other community groups and organisations in their area, accessing funding and sharing good practice, advice and guidance. It seemed more common, however, for groups to demonstrate limited networking with other community groups in their locality. The leaders and other members of the committee of some of the newer groups had experienced initial, albeit limited, hostility from other groups when they were set up. One leader attributed this to the dictatorial style of leadership he had observed within the other groups and the strength of individual personalities. This research did not seek to confirm or deny the validity of such opinions. It may, however, be difficult to fully comprehend the style of leadership of groups from an external viewpoint. It also raises the question of how other groups would observe the leadership style of the case study groups involved in this research, and whether

the leaders' strong, outgoing personalities could be interpreted as dictatorial to any degree.

The umbrella bodies spoken to as part of the research had also observed a lack of networking, attributing it to the young age of many groups, a suspicion from other groups, and an often narrow focus to their work. However, where groups did network, the benefits could often be considerable, especially when they were in a crisis and facing numerous challenges. Speaking of one event that was organised by an external body, the leader of one group said that *'it was a sense of relief because we weren't alone'*.

While several groups, especially the sports groups, were members of regional and national bodies, they often did not access the support that was provided to them. In cases where they did make use of the support, groups tended to speak most favourably of the assistance that they received from specialist, rather than generalist, infrastructure bodies. There was a common feeling that they were able to provide tailored support, understanding the context within which the groups were operating; much of the support required of organisations appeared to be knowledge-based. Umbrella bodies described the type of support that they provided to the groups as being led by their needs. The leaders themselves were often the specific focus of the support, with some organisations appearing to provide what amounted essentially to a mentoring role or training around specific skill sets. Groups found it hard to identify the type of further support they would value but did identify frequent gaps in the provision of advice and guidance on making funding applications.

When accessing and identifying external support, all groups described the need to be proactive. There was a general consensus that offers of support from infrastructure bodies would not come unprompted. In some cases, groups said that they had come across umbrella organisations or networks by chance. In turn, the umbrella bodies themselves understood the necessity of developing personal, often one-to-one contact with groups and their leaders, but felt that the support they were able to provide was often limited by their staff capacity to be able to undertake such outreach. For staff from these organisations, the most frequently mentioned factor that would improve their ability to support groups was having a member of staff who could undertake personal visits to the groups.

5.2 Local authorities as enablers and barriers

Most of the groups had some form of relationship with their local authorities and their experience varied considerably. The implications of this relationship often appeared to be significant. At one end of the scale, the local authority could 'enable' the work of the group, for example, gifting it land as the site for a new building and being highly supportive of its work. When the group was threatened with closure due to the loss of its then home, the campaign to save the group became, in the words of the leader, *'a vote winner'*, resulting in a local councillor successfully identifying a plot of suitable land for the group. As the leader said, *'I've never seen red tape cut quicker!'*

However, at the other end of the scale it was possible for groups to have challenging relationships with their local authorities, with the council acting, in the eyes of one group, as a barrier and obstacle to what it was trying to achieve:

'It's almost like we're speaking two different languages.'

The lobbying remit of the group, however, meant that a difficult relationship could always be a risk. Similarly, another group described the challenge of dealing with local authority 'red tape'. It had found planning regulations around its new building to be restrictive and cumbersome and described how even small improvements, such as planting a small garden around the group's building, could be limited by legislation, in this case requiring planning permission as the site was within greenbelt land. As well as being seemingly frustrating for groups, such barriers appeared to be having a negative effect on the long-term stability of the group, leading to the group being offered short-term leases on its building.

There were also examples in which groups did not necessarily have a positive or negative relationship, but simply felt that the local authorities could do more to recognise their work and achievements. In some cases, this level of support could vary within the local authority itself. One group experienced a high level of enthusiasm from local authority officers but limited support from councillors; in the case of another group, where lobbying was a key part of its work, it received considerably more support from the councillors than from the local authority staff. The leader of the latter group acknowledged how his work as group leader had recently become far more political, working with and against politicians and local authority staff to help achieve the aims of the group. This can be seen as an example of linking social capital, in which connections with people in positions of power are made.

Evidence does suggest, however, that it may be possible for relationships to change over time. One group noted that while it had little support from the local authority in the early stages of the group, as it grew in size, offered more activities, and became better known within the local community, the council appeared to recognise and support it to a greater degree.

6 Initial conclusions

The case study approach means that generalising about all volunteer-led groups from the findings of this study is not appropriate or possible. However, many common themes emerged which ran through the majority or all of the six groups. Given that the groups represent a wide range of activities, size, age and remit, it is therefore possible that these themes could be found amongst other volunteer-led groups. This research offers a series of interesting insights into how volunteer-led groups function and most importantly, how they are led.

These conclusions will return to the original aims of the research project and discuss some of the key themes that emerged from the study in relation to each aim.

6.1 Understanding the defining characteristics of volunteer-led groups

All of the groups had a structure in place, being led by a figurehead. All had some form of committee and a wider membership of volunteers. However, the comprehensiveness of the structures varied between groups, with one group having an executive committee backed up by a series of sub-committees. In this example, it appeared that such a structure had been developed as a result of the range of activities that the group offered. However, taking ownership of new buildings, dealing with problematic paid employees, or resolving power struggles also seemed to lead to groups formalising their structures to ensure that problems did not arise.

Groups commonly gave thought to recruiting new volunteers to maintain the mix of skills and to ensure the sustainability of the group. In some cases, methods such as promotional events or literature were employed to reach the wider community. However, it appeared more common to use word of mouth or personal contact. This perhaps has implications for the longer-term inclusiveness of the groups, all of which felt that they had been set up to represent and serve the community. Such approaches could risk excluding those outside of the immediate social and professional networks of the existing volunteers.

All groups demonstrated very high levels of involvement, commitment and passion from their volunteers. The groups had often emerged in response to a community need and provided an important and valuable service for those in the local area. They exhibited many characteristics of grassroots community involvement, something that literature has testified to amongst other volunteer-led groups (Zimmeck, 2001; Holland, 2004).

The groups tended to function through a combination of informal, yet structured approaches. This appears to back up Zimmeck's (2001) opinion that such groups can be *'messy and unwieldy'*. Such observations, however, may commonly be made through a lens that has its base in the bureaucratic, paid-staff organisational

world. This is more likely to associate informality, along with its lack of systems, procedures and legislative restrictions, with a form of chaos. Within the case study groups, such chaos was commonly associated with a system of management that had evolved as the group developed from a grassroots origin and faced and responded to new challenges. While such systems may appear messy from the outside, in each case they functioned effectively and had done so for many years in some cases.

Moreover, groups often felt strongly that imposing more formal systems of volunteer management on them would be inappropriate and ineffective. Groups were also commonly opposed to the notion of employing a paid member of staff. This appeared to be linked to how highly valued volunteering as an activity was within the group, respondents frequently describing the passion and enthusiasm of volunteers, qualities they often felt may not be demonstrated by a paid employee. However, the apparent distrust of paid staff also appeared to be related to practical barriers. Several groups had negative experiences of employing paid staff in the past, such positions seemingly having the potential to disrupt relationships within the group and the ethos of the organisation. However, it did appear possible in a number of cases to employ paid staff effectively, especially when they were confined to specific activities.

The fluid nature of the groups is reflected by the fact that in three of the groups, the leader was not in the position of chair. Roles appeared to be given out almost nominally to the individual who was seen to be most applicable and most interested at the time, and often in response to a predecessor leaving their post. Their roles did, however, often develop with time, and groups adhered to protocol in all cases, again illustrating this blend of informality and professionalism.

The defining aspect of the role of the leader of the group ran consistently through all groups. While roles were often fluid with individuals contributing to a variety of different tasks *'to get the job done'*, all leaders had a core element to their role that involved external relations, such as lobbying, awareness raising and forming partnerships. The skills of the leaders themselves would often be closely related to this task.

6.2 Barriers and challenges for volunteers as group leaders

While high levels of commitment were demonstrated throughout the groups, there was often a disproportionately high level of involvement from a smaller core of individuals, with an active committee and a less active wider membership of volunteers. This has been commonly observed in wider literature (Rochester, 1999b; Cantano et al, 2000; Thake, 2006; Ockenden and Moore, 2003). Within the committee itself, the commitment, drive and passion was generally much more pronounced in the leader of the group. Often they were the person who set up the group. This is backed up by wider research which has found that volunteer leaders can be more psychologically involved in the group than other volunteers (Cantano et al, 2000) as well as demonstrating higher levels of altruism (Locke, Sampson and Shepherd, 2001). This heightened commitment displayed by the leaders was commonly recognised and appreciated by other volunteers within the groups observed as part of this research. Again, this is something that has been observed in other studies, in which volunteers can praise the *'selflessness and commitment to the organisation'* of the leaders (Pearce, 1980, p.91).

While the leaders put in more time and energy into the group than other volunteers, the study found little evidence to suggest that they were overburdened, identifying little or no resentment of their current workload or time commitment. This perhaps goes against observations in wider literature that cites burnout as a possible danger for leaders of small groups (Rochester, 1999a). This could be the result of a number of factors.

Firstly, it is possible that the work of the groups was closely related to activities that could be interpreted as hobbies. Involvement in such groups could be closely linked to enjoyment and may not, therefore, be seen as 'work' per se, but rather a pleasure activity. The current leader was often the individual who had started the group, something that was closely linked to a personal vision and interest. Their passionate enthusiasm for the subject in turn garnered the support of other individuals. In such a context, it may actually be misplaced to analyse time as a potential barrier. Apart from meetings, the time contributed to the work of the groups by the leaders rarely appeared to take place in regimented slots. It may therefore be misleading to compartmentalise their actions, involvement in this form of volunteering being far more fluid, with the leaders, and indeed the volunteers, dipping in and out when necessary and when available.

Secondly, the leaders gained satisfaction from their role. This could include thriving on the stress associated with the position and this could be seen as a positive benefit. Indeed, Locke, Sampson and Shepherd (2001) observed this exact phenomenon amongst community leaders in East London who were found to be *'complaining about the stress but also gaining satisfaction from being involved and needed'*. It is also possible that leaders could see their role as an important part of their own status and identity, both socially and within the group. Some of the individuals observed interpreted their role in the community as one of leading others, displaying natural leadership qualities which they needed to express. In some cases, therefore, the act of leadership may provide a key part of what makes their lives meaningful. In such a context, it may not be possible to say that volunteers will avoid leadership roles on grounds of 'costs' alone (Pearce, 1980) without also taking into account the less distinct benefits of the role that may include status, enjoyment and an ability to thrive on stress.

Thirdly, it is possible that the leaders of the groups studied were successful in the delegation of responsibility and workload to other volunteers, although this was not seen to the same extent in each group. This has also been observed by Pearce (1980) who stated that effective delegation of tasks to other volunteers is a suitable solution to the problem of volunteers avoiding leadership roles. All of the groups, to some degree, demonstrated a form of collective decision making process in which the committee, or sometimes even the wider volunteer membership, were involved in the leadership of the group. This mutually supportive atmosphere, which has its roots in democracy and in which the workload is shared, could help to explain why the leaders of the case studies rarely felt overburdened.

A challenge facing volunteer-led groups, and especially their leaders, is how to ensure that they are led and managed in an inclusive way. This research found that collective systems of group work and decision making were evident in all of the groups to varying degrees. Indeed, wider literature describes how it is common for volunteer-led groups to be based on a system of leadership that is 'collectivist-democratic' which is egalitarian, non-hierarchical and interpersonal (Zimmeck, 2001); similarly, groups may involve 'transformational', rather than 'transactional' approaches, in which support is garnered from followers through personal qualities rather than reward or punishment (Cantano et al, 2000).

However, this study did also indicate that there were limits to the collective involvement of volunteers in the groups observed, with the majority of decision making responsibilities in particular falling to the committee, rather than all volunteers. While this did not appear to have caused any problems within the groups, and the other volunteers were generally happy for a core to take on the additional responsibility, it does highlight the potential for them to become exclusive oligarchies if managed or led inappropriately. It may be the case that, albeit unintentionally, volunteers can be excluded from the decision making process. Furthermore, it may be possible that the strength of the leader's personality and the effective reliance on a single person could limit the inclusiveness of collective decision making processes. Their drive and vision could in some cases be linked to the existence and progression of the groups. The extent of their outward-facing role (see section 4.3.1) could further strengthen the position of leaders, having the opportunity to consciously or subconsciously forge the development of the group through their external social connections that were not necessarily open to the rest of the group's volunteers.

Indeed, wider literature has pointed to the risks of relying on a small core of decision makers, in which volunteer-led groups can become elitist, exclusive, non-transparent and even corrupt (Zimmeck, 2001; Jochum, Pratten and Wilding, 2007). The analogy of the '*spokes on a wheel*' in section 4.2.2 perhaps then serves to position the role of the committee above that of the other volunteers. While this may be a reality in most of the groups and was not actually observed to be problematic, such a perspective may also serve to further foster such inequalities. This study therefore proposes a more accurate and inclusive analogy of 'hubs, spokes and rims', of the leader at the centre, being supported by the committee members, who are all backed up by the wider volunteer membership. This also still recognises the differing levels of involvement and commitment.

While leaders experienced a range of challenges around the relationships and responsibilities of their role, they did not often identify other barriers that they faced in their position. They instead more commonly spoke about the positive support that they had received, especially from their peers. Groups often existed largely independently from other organisations, with most external relationships being formed with specialist infrastructure bodies or their local authorities, the latter of which could often exert a major influence over their day-to-day and longer-term existence.

6.3 Impacts of ongoing growth and development of volunteer-led groups

The groups were in different stages of their development, ranging from those that were less than a year old to one that was over 50 years old. Even in the more established groups, however, their evolution and growth tended to be slow and measured. This is corroborated by wider literature which describes how groups may not always subscribe to the predominant model of growth: '*some are on their way to becoming more formal organisations; others have almost finished what they set out to do; still more are happy to carry on as they are*' (MacGillivray et al, 2001, p.65). Reflecting their grassroots nature, where growth did take place it was always in response to community needs and was often part of a desire to provide a better service to the local population. No groups appeared interested in growth for growth's sake and there was no suggestion that it was power-related. There was

also no evidence to suggest that this form of growth changed the remit or ethos of the group, possibly because of the stability of leadership within the oldest groups. The maintenance of the ethos throughout change could also be because the expansion of the groups did not appear to be concerned with greed or domination, but rather better, more effective, provision of services. Expansion in these instances could therefore be seen to be a fundamental part of their original remit.

The cause and effect of growth and development can sometimes become blurred. Certain indicators and results of growth, such as acquiring new buildings and assets, employing paid staff, or introducing new structures to address power struggles, can themselves act as catalysts for further growth. Some groups, for example, may reach a size at which they require paid staff; and whilst the employment of staff can be a significant challenge for a group, it can also considerably increase its capacity for further growth.

7 Implications for stakeholders

The themes, issues and challenges have a number of implications for the volunteer-led groups themselves and for those working with and supporting them. These will be discussed in relation to three stakeholder groups: the volunteer-led groups and their volunteers; the volunteering infrastructure; and policy makers and government.

7.1 For volunteer-led groups and volunteers

This study has shown that volunteer-led groups can make an important contribution to improving people's quality of life and living conditions. To do this, they function in ways that are very different to those within larger volunteer-involving organisations with paid staff. The groups observed were nonetheless highly effective at what they did and successfully fulfilled a community need that was not met elsewhere. In order to become yet more effective, and to help ensure their longer term sustainability, volunteer-led groups and their volunteers could consider:

- > how to ensure that recruitment processes reach the widest possible audience. Extending the reliance on word of mouth approaches that may not reach far beyond the personal and professional networks of current volunteers can help to ensure that volunteer-led groups become inclusive and representative of the wider community
- > how to help avoid the overburdening and burnout of leaders through the successful delegation of responsibility and workload to other volunteers. This study identified numerous benefits to such an approach including reducing the burden on leaders and motivating other volunteers. This can effectively be achieved by giving individuals specific projects. However, it is necessary to ensure that tasks are delegated to suitable individuals who demonstrate sufficient and appropriate attributes, self motivation and enthusiasm to successfully undertake the tasks
- > how to keep all members of the group informed and how to communicate important information openly to them. There may, however, be limits to the type and comprehensiveness of the information to be communicated, especially from a practical point of view
- > how to recognise that some members of the group will not want to make the same level of commitment as the leader or committee members. This should not, however, be taken as a sign that they are any less enthused by the group's aim, but rather a desire not to take on additional workloads. However, systems need to ensure that if they want to get involved they are able to
- > how to develop and bear in mind succession planning; for example, leaders and members of the committee can observe which volunteers could form the next generation of leaders

- > how to help minimise potential conflicts and problems when employing paid staff by providing specific and well-defined duties for any employees. Thought could also be given to employing a suitable personality who understands and if possible believes in the remit of the group. This may help them form a good working relationship with the volunteers and especially the leader of the group. However, there is a risk that closeness of vision could also lead to power struggles between the paid employee and leader.

7.2 For the volunteering infrastructure

The volunteering infrastructure can, and in many cases does, play a crucial role in providing support to volunteer-led groups. While it is recognised that in many cases the infrastructure is over-stretched and under-resourced, it could usefully consider the following in order to improve access to the support it offers:

- > how to recognise volunteer-led groups as a form of volunteering that is as equally valuable to, and possibly more prevalent than, that which occurs in larger volunteer-involving organisations with paid staff
- > how to explore ways to remove obstacles to this form of volunteering, which can include help dealing with bureaucracy and red tape such as planning legislation. Groups may also be concerned about their longer term financial security. Advice, guidance and support on funding opportunities was the area of additional support that was most commonly mentioned by groups
- > how to recognise that while training can be highly beneficial and appropriate, groups may not always welcome interference through further generic capacity-building initiatives or the imposition of models of management and volunteer support. Popular and effective forms of support can include tailored-made support that responds to the unique requirements of these groups and their leaders. These include one-to-one support and opportunities to take part in networking with a primary aim to share good practice and experiences. It is, however, acknowledged that this will be limited by the finances and resources available to volunteering infrastructure organisations and programmes matching up pairs of volunteers could offer a more economical means of support
- > how to be as proactive as possible when offering support to groups. This research found that groups often had to be proactive when identifying support from the volunteering infrastructure and could spend considerable amounts of time identifying it. The support available from organisations should be promoted more widely rather than waiting for groups to approach the organisation as this may not occur. Similarly, infrastructure bodies need to be clear about the type of support that can be provided to groups. Again, this is dependent on the capacity and resources available.

7.3 For policy makers and government

Evidence suggests that volunteering in volunteer-led groups may not be widely recognised by those within the policy environment. This form of volunteering needs to be central to their thoughts and not on the periphery. In order for this to happen, policy makers and government could consider the following:

- > how to ensure that policy at all levels recognises volunteer-led groups as a valuable and legitimate form of volunteering
- > how to recognise that the informal, non-corporate model of volunteering that was observed within the volunteer-led groups is valid, and moreover, works effectively. Evidence suggests that a more formal model cannot and should not be imposed on, or even translated to, this form of volunteering and capacity-building initiatives that seek to do this should be avoided
- > how to ensure that the volunteering infrastructure is properly resourced, enabling them to diversify the support they provide to groups, such as the funding of posts for outreach workers. Umbrella bodies spoken to frequently discussed how they would be able to provide more comprehensive support to groups with additional staff
- > how to sufficiently fund specialist infrastructure bodies to support volunteering as well as the generalist volunteering infrastructure. The former appears to be particularly popular with volunteer-led groups who value the insight they can have into their sphere of work
- > how to create funding pots for revenue funding for groups, enabling them to fund ongoing activities such as building costs.

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Volunteering England supports volunteering and everyone who works with volunteers by:

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- > developing and supporting a strong and effective nationwide volunteering infrastructure
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