

POWER TO CHANGE: VOLUNTEERING IN COMMUNITY BUSINESS

VOLUNTEERING IN COMMUNITY BUSINESS: A VITAL INGREDIENT

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Over the last year, as a team of researchers from Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Birmingham, we've been conducting research on the multiple meanings behind volunteering in community businesses. As we publish our [final report](#) we wanted to share a short summary of what we found and the implications of these findings for policy makers and practitioners interested in the role, meaning and possibilities of volunteering in community businesses.

Firstly, our case studies highlighted the value and potential of volunteering in community businesses. Volunteers carried out a range of different roles and whilst volunteering was less central in some organisations than others, volunteers were often vital in ensuring the sustainability and viability of the community business. Even in organisations that could potentially run without volunteers, they were frequently seen as key to the purpose or ethos of the organisation, adding to their uniqueness and difference.

We also found that volunteers have different levels of stake and influence within community businesses, ranging from being regarded as (unpaid) employees, to members or service users, or co-owners and managers of the organisation, or a combination of these roles. Some 'super volunteers' took on high levels of responsibility and committed a great deal of time over many years to the organisation, whilst regular volunteers provided a bedrock of frequent commitment for organisations over time, with episodic volunteers involved for specific activities and special events for a relatively short period.

Volunteers had different motivations for becoming involved in the community businesses we spoke to. Some were passionate about the organisation's activities or values, some wanted to give something back to their community, some volunteered to gain experience or develop skills, and some wanted to connect with others. Community businesses also had different drivers for getting volunteers involved. Volunteers provided capacity to help organisations get things done, supporting the financial viability and sustainability of the organisation. Volunteers were also often key to realising the community-focused aims of community business, i.e. as part of their ethos or to build legitimacy through connecting with service users and community members. Volunteers were seen to bring creativity and vibrancy to the organisations they gave time to. This multiplicity of motivations, roles and duties, and centrality, meant that

many community businesses had to be flexible in how volunteers were managed and involved.

However, community businesses did encounter challenges in involving volunteers. In some cases, the regulation of particular services or the time commitment and level of responsibility of running the business under commercial pressure was challenging and could limit the involvement of volunteers or put people off taking up governance or leadership positions. While some conflict between business and volunteering could have been expected, we also found that the 'business' side of community business could sometimes be a facilitating factor for volunteers looking to use or develop their business skills to do good in their community.

There was a consensus that the benefits of volunteering far outweighed the costs, but support and effective coordination of volunteers is very important to help realise their potential and protect them. For example, some community businesses were very reliant on a small number of volunteers, who commit a lot of time to the organisation and take on a lot of responsibility, such as those in trustee roles. While these volunteers were often very passionate about the organisation and committed to their roles, in some cases this led to issues of burnout and problems with succession planning. Community businesses should ensure that they take care of volunteers and look for balance in terms of responsibilities as well as seeking diversity and representation from the community they serve, particularly amongst younger people. Overall, however, the volunteers that we spoke to were overwhelmingly content with their roles and how they were managed and supported within community businesses and described experiencing enjoyment, conviviality, belonging and wellbeing benefits as a result.

Thank you to all our participants across our eight case studies who took the time to share their experiences with us. You can read the research report [here](#).