

Volunteer Voices

The premise of the Community Organisers programme is voluntary action. The government designed the programme as one which would encourage and support 4,500 volunteers (indications are that this target has been exceeded). Volunteers are the heart of the programme as it stands, and the future.

A formal training programme for volunteers was introduced in the final year of this programme's funding. The Volunteer Training Programme (VTP) has run in fifteen areas across the country and provides an opportunity for volunteers to better understand the programme's community organising methodology, to put it into practice and to gain a qualification.

The highlights

- Community Organisers have motivated and supported thousands of people to become active on their communities.
- Volunteers are articulate about how this activity has positively impacted their confidence and self-esteem.
- There are some fantastic examples of community action around the issues that residents feel passionate about – people have been supported to take action themselves.
- Many Community Organisers have gone beyond what was expected of them to reach out and support individuals to develop their listening and organising skills.
- Fifteen organisations have signed up to be Volunteer Training Partners, *allowing a much deeper reach* and creating networks of engaged people.
- By June 2015 136 VTP volunteers have achieved credits for work across the first three units of the Foundations of Community Organising course. The vast majority of these have been at level 3, including many for whom English is their second language.
- The VTP has provided volunteers with new skills, knowledge and experience – many are taking on leadership roles within their community and several have found paid employment as a direct result.
- The VTP has enabled senior COs to refresh their understand of the community organising process, and has a provided an opportunity for their own professional development.

- The VTP has changed the way that some CO employer organisations carry out their work.
- The VTP has been proven as a core and essential element of the community organising process.

Themes arising

Volunteering as a concept however is problematic. Many feel it gives out the wrong message – both in terms of motivation (it is seen to smack of an altruistic gift relationship, offering help to others, which is at odds with the community organising principle of appealing to self-interest, supporting activism and not ‘doing for others’) and in terms of status (vis-a-vis the paid community organisers). And yet, the term ‘volunteer’ has gained even greater currency because of the VTP. There is no one term that everyone signs up to and alternatives bring their own problems e.g. activist or local leader. For ease, the term volunteer is used throughout this report but this isn’t intended to endorse it as a term over any other. As several Community Organisers (COs) and volunteers have said ‘we need a new terminology’.

There are a number of other themes, issues and questions which have informed and arise from this piece of work:

- Are volunteers the lifeblood and the future of the Programme, and if so, how can they best be supported?
- How can COs best be trained to work with volunteers – from recruitment to motivating to creating leadership?
- Volunteers may have complicated lives and some require a lot of personal support, How is this understood and accommodated within the roles of a CO?
- What’s distinctive about being a volunteer community organiser as opposed to any other kind of volunteer?
- What works in terms of timing and length of the VTP and can the possibilities of people of dropping in and out be accommodated in an accredited training programme?
- Are there ways in which participation in discrete elements of the training can be acknowledged e.g. a certificate for the first two days?
- What kind of training is required by COs who are delivering the VTP? And are there specific topics / themes that need to be included in the training e.g. team building and managing group conflict?

- Does the VTP attract a different kind of person from those the CO is working with on an everyday basis at the local level? And does this matter?
- How can the challenges faced by volunteers who use English as a second language be minimised to help them get through the accreditation process?
- Does the VTP give an opportunity for broader networking of COs and volunteers e.g. on a sub-regional/regional/national basis?

Content and methodology

The following paper begins with an exploration of volunteering across the community organisers programme (Section 1) and then goes on to focus on learning from the VTP (Section 2). The content is based on:

- Workshop discussions with volunteers at Action Camp 2014 and CoCo15
- Telephone interviews with COs from cohorts 11-14
- Face to face meetings and interviews with volunteers, COs and employers in three places: through Sharrow Community Forum in Sheffield, Starting Point in Stockport (both running a VTP) and High Trees Development Trust in South London (no VTP).
- Telephone interviews with the VTP training co-ordinators
- Face to face interview with Community Resolve
- An electronic survey with seven COs running VTPs and some follow up telephone interviews
- On-line VTP supervision session 23.6.15
- Secondary research from other Imagine work
- Review of on line discussions held by Locality with COs and volunteers, June 2014

Section 1 Volunteering within the Community Organisers programme

People volunteer for a whole variety of reasons. These range from 'Had nothing else to do!', to 'It came along at the right time', to wanting to make life better for others, to wanting to make a difference.



The benefits of volunteering

The community organisers and volunteers interviewed identified a wide range of activities. Some talk about making tea and setting up projects, some talk about networking and signposting, and many mention door knocking, sharing a vision, giving a voice and creating energy.

There is an old community work maxim about the experience being personal and the action being collective. This is borne out through the Community Organisers programme.

Personal benefits are identified as feel-good factors - building confidence, getting out of the house, gaining in knowledge, finding positives, the satisfaction of making this happen, knowing I am making a difference, interacting, and being at Action Camp!

Building confidence and trust – out of work for 3 ½ years following redundancy in the public sector. Enjoy it. Volunteer

One CO cited S, a woman who had no voice before and kept a low profile. Recently she did a walkabout with the MP and local agencies – and gave them what for! *'She has become very articulate. Personal empowerment like that has a ripple effect on others'*.

Community benefits include the creation of an estate action group, taking direct action and more community unity; more people thinking about what they can do and greater community voice; and the organisation of a community festival.

They are planning a pop-up library on the estate – it's a small project, but it will bring the community together.

There are some fantastic examples of actions. One VCO has initiated a very successful 'Alleyway Project', ... and set up a community group: Active Kids, Active Neighbourhoods'. Another VCO has developed a strong relationship and collaboration with a group of residents where he lives and they now they accompany him when he goes out to listen – they have started to use the Listening Matters approach, so the network is growing by the day.

A resident organised a free music project for people to attend, to build community where he lived. Later on this resulted in community fun day - BBQ, film screening etc.

The volunteers realised through listening that they weren't isolated. They began to think in a different way and become aware of their ability to challenge those in power.

Many of these benefits however, could be attributed to a wide range of volunteering opportunities, not just those in the Community Organisers programme. After all, there must be something value in volunteering, for an estimated 29% of the population to volunteer formally at least once a month (Community Life Survey, England, 2012-13). So, is this just another volunteering programme, or is there something different about community organising?

Unpaid community organising

A key distinction is that this programme also includes the training of 500 paid Community Organisers, who then have responsibility to engage others in the **listening** process. The volunteering (outside the more formal Volunteer Training Programme) is often quite informal and not necessarily described or perceived in volunteering terms. People give their

They might call themselves neighbours, activists, leaders, campaigners, organisers, helpers, friends, citizens, agitators, doers, supporters. Naomi Diamond, Community Organisers programme manager, Locality.

time freely because they believe they can collectively create some change. It is much more about mutual aid to improve one's own community than it is about the more traditional volunteering concept of an altruistic desire to help someone else.

For many, involvement begins with a knock on the door and is followed by a desire to take some control over where they live, and over the issues affecting their lives. The appeal to **self-interest**, a basic foundation of community organising, is a strong motivation for volunteer community organisers – people are encouraged to help themselves and supported to work with others who share similar concerns and ideals. One CO talks about how *'door knocking finds people invested in the neighbourhood and thus wanting to create change for themselves and their families'*. Volunteering within the Community Organisers programme is therefore *'informal and non-prescribed - meeting in pubs, cafes with neighbours and creating their own projects based on their wants and needs..... allowing residents to see that they CAN do something and then gradually aspiring to bigger political/structural/social change'*.

Its different in that we are working with people to raise their voices and not doing things for them – we support them to do it themselves.
Volunteer

High Trees, London

In one area where the COs have been working, ten key leaders have emerged, plus a broader group of fifty people who were part of a local network from about 100 listenings. *'You need at least one solid leader to sustain action, with the ability to network with non-leaders that they can mobilise through relationships they have built when needed'*.

E. has taken on a leadership role She made connections and got to know lots more people in the community. She felt she couldn't have done any of this without the support of the COs – they helped her work out what she could question and what she could do, and they gave her to confidence to act on this. She said it was very empowering and reassuring.

The CO project has been an important catalyst for the group – showing them how to communicate with other residents; how to do door-knocking and listening; how to plan and organise events; how to do printing, flyers, posters etc; how to be a member of a committee and take decisions collectively. E. found it hard to challenge things when she started – she always worried in case she was wrong. But now she is better informed and finds it less difficult.

The nature of volunteer community organising varies from place to place and even within a place, depending upon who's involved and the issues they identify. A CO in Bristol gives the example of one volunteer listening to tenants, compiling their issues and building a group to meet the housing provider. In the same area, another volunteer is listening to residents on how they are feeling and identifying what they can do following a brutal local murder. Equally, in Portland, a group of residents have created a digital hub and community centre which offers local people the support they need to move into employment and develop more positive and productive lifestyles, whilst at the same time COs and volunteers have successfully campaigned to have a decision to raise local taxes overturned. Portland is one of the areas that has been funded through the Community

.... been involved with Staring Point - CO is more local, more personalised. Seen Laura and Nicola using RSLM sheets, liked the conversational tone, you find things out about people, not just statistics.
Volunteer

Organisers Social Action Fund (COSAF), which aimed to support volunteer led projects to become more sustainable. Other COSAF projects also illustrate a range of leadership roles being taken on by volunteers. For example, in Burslem, Stoke on Trent, two volunteers are now being paid to co-ordinate a number of other volunteers and have opened and are staffing a local arts library; in Margate volunteers have established a Community Interest Company to run a community based lettings agency.

So, clearly the programme has opened up many opportunities for people which have a positive impact on both those volunteering and on their wider community. But what can we learn about recruiting, keeping, supporting and training volunteer community organisers, and where do the challenges lie?

Recruiting volunteers

Some community organisers find engaging volunteers easy whilst others find it a real struggle. Those that have been successful say they have used the 'RSLM door knocking' approach but also a combination of different approaches and communication/listening styles. Monthly community update emails calling out for volunteers (perhaps targeted at those that have already been met through door knocking), events and project meetings, follow up 1-2-1 work, networking, public stalls, coffee mornings, posters are all mentioned:

Others I have asked to help with specific roles, for example translating into community languages. Others have become involved through one on one support - for example helping with a personal benefits or housing issue, and since then contributed to some collective project.

One acknowledged that she should use social media more:

One woman is really keen to volunteer because of what she's seen on facebook and twitter, and likes what she reads.

Sometimes, it is just about being in the right place at the right time:

She knocked on this woman's door in March - at the point She wanted to change her life at just the right time.(The CO) was prepared to listen to the woman - ...she was quite aggressive at first - she asked what the CO was doing if she didn't have any money. However, being listened to, not surveyed, is what grabbed her.

Several COs talk about the significance of building relationships and the challenges that brings in relation to time. One CO, still in her training year, has found volunteer recruitment quite easy - she went door knocking and had an impromptu house meeting where 10 people turned up. She puts her success down to being a direct person and just says 'why don't you do it yourself?', 'if you are straight with people like this they just say OK'. She now has 30 volunteers and that's a lot of relationships to build and very time consuming. One CO suggests that it takes two or three conversations before you can build a relationship and engage them further and another is keen to stress that this relationship must be two-way:

You need to identify what people are passionate about, but they also need to know what YOU are passionate about too - otherwise why would they want to work with you?

The challenges – what gets in the way?

Time and 'life':

A lot of volunteers don't have much time and trying to match their availability and link that with the CO working hours and other volunteer spare time can be difficult:

Most of the volunteers I worked with are employed (part-time/full-time, agency work, short-term contracts, etc.) and most of them have families, children, etc. A number of volunteers are attending some other professional or academic courses so the pressures of work (trying to make end meet), everyday challenges and managing their time has been a barrier to deeper and longer engagement (despite their will and motivation).

In addition, many volunteers have numerous other commitments in their lives and peoples' life circumstances can change quite suddenly, meaning they can't be involved in same way as they were before. And of course, some of the volunteers find paid work – perhaps as a result of their increased confidence from volunteering - and no longer have much free time.

Personal circumstances:

One CO said how much she struggles with the amount of support she can give to people, and what is ethical in terms of her use of time and existing skills. Many people live complicated lives and require sensitivity, and this can be exacerbated when COs find that they are working with volunteers who have mental health problems (and many do):

This isn't always apparent at first and can be difficult to work out how to engage or even, where appropriate, disengage.

In this particular case, the CO found support from her host organisation invaluable in dealing with this.

Conflict in groups:

This is another area where COs need to be sensitive to people's needs and behaviours, to hold onto individuals **and** help groups function. Individuals in a group may have very different visions and ideas, as well as their own private fallings out. One such example given by a CO was between friends in a group, especially with young people. Dealing with this effectively has been a challenge for the CO concerned as well as managing the group dynamics when some people feel that they do more than others and others feel they can't fully contribute. Another CO talked about wanting the volunteers to understand that to shift power, it was important not to fight with each other, and to recognise that this takes time.

Responsibility and risk:

There are a number of examples of where people are enthusiastic but are then stopped in their tracks through risk management policies. One volunteer was keen to offer more time working with young people. However, he felt inhibited because of security constraints, eg he had offered his garden to local youngsters to grow vegetables, but then he hit safety and child protection issues, and in the end nothing happened.

Leadership:

Some COs struggle with volunteers looking to them for leadership and find it difficult to transfer leadership responsibility to volunteers.

The weather!

Volunteers are entitled to pick and choose when they give their time. It can be difficult to get people to come out on cold winter nights and one CO found their involvement to be seasonal. Another talked of all the preparation that went into arranging some listenings outside a local school and then the weather was so awful it had to be called off.

The terminology:

There are a lot of COs who object to the use of the term 'volunteers', they feel uncomfortable using it and don't believe it is the way to keep people involved. One CO would like the programme to be clearer about its concept of volunteers, another is blunt: not labelling it 'volunteering'. One CO says it has stopped her from providing Locality with volunteer alerts; *'they aren't volunteers, they are their own group'*. Another CO says he prefers the term 'leaders' but others find this term problematic. And some volunteers don't mind the term as they are giving their time voluntarily. One CO who is running the VTP says the participants in this Programme are more likely to use it because the whole training programme uses volunteer language, and some of the participants are looking for formal volunteering opportunities, rather than looking to listen and take action in their own community. Even so, on the doorstep, many of the volunteers doing listenings as a part of the VTP say they are COs – not volunteers.

A lot of the volunteers that I have worked with would not class themselves as 'volunteers'

This is a bigger issue than just terminology. There is a questioning of how volunteers are seen within the CO programme. As one CO puts it, *'are they seen as people who are there to support community organising or are they there to volunteer for their community, and is there a distinction?'* One CO wondered whether the volunteers involved in community organising are different from community activists, and whether the CO process encourages them to have a sustained voice rather than working on a one-off issue.

What helps?

Messages for paid community organisers:

"it's not just about 'doing stuff with me'. you provide support, reflection, help them resolve conflicts. You help them develop the glue that holds the group together and builds relationships and trust. After that you can develop the skills of listening....."

Much of the advice that COs want to pass on to their peers concerns the management and consistent support and motivation of volunteers. COs are warned not to overload people who are giving their time freely and to be patient - *'people have lives to live!'* - but also persistent.

Ask the potential volunteer what they would like to 'achieve' in their community and discuss how volunteering will enable them to do this and enable others to do the same.

Be realistic in terms of how much change can happen locally in the short time frame - community organising work is always 'a work in progress', it's a long-term 'project' and it really has no end, or use-by date.

COs also talk about humility and respecting the experience/wisdom of activists - not expecting to be the 'expert', and treating volunteers as equals and associates as opposed to volunteers/students/trainees.

A dedicated space to meet is also seen as important; one CO commenting on the significance of *'people knowing where to find me'*.

Messages for volunteers:

The message from Keith Hanley, a volunteer community organiser in Manchester, is clear:

Do what's powerful for you

www.cocollaborative.org.uk; My volunteer story: Keith Hanley)

If people are to give their time freely then it also needs to be enjoyable. Many talk about the need for the experience to be 'fun':

*Have fun and remember that it isn't compulsory
If it isn't fun, don't do it.*

Messages for the Programme/legacy body:

Sticking at something through the 'downs' as well as the 'ups' can be tough for volunteers. Paid and unpaid community organisers would like more recognition of the value and role of volunteers in the programme:

*Do everything you can to show volunteers that they are immensely valued /
recognition that volunteers are doing a good job – support us.
Promote volunteers' views of working as community organisers.
Involve volunteers in developing the vision for the future of community organising
Listen to what volunteers have to say
Doesn't matter what status is – volunteers should be able to access what COs (paid)
can*

The other key message is around training, for new and more experienced volunteers. This includes access to the formal Volunteer Training programme, but also more training for COs – so that they are better able to train volunteers as part and parcel of their Community Organiser role:

*Don't lose the VTP, CoCo (COLtd) should facilitate this to continue – accreditation is
important
Consider establishing 'volunteer buddies'*

Access to regional and national gatherings is also important. One volunteer, keen that several people from his area should be able to participate in CoCo15, fundraised specifically for their travel expenses to get there. In Deal in Kent, the volunteers have their own Action Camp which they model on the national Action Camp - it's not flash as it often happens within the COs home but is a great source of information as well as pride.

Training

COs have expressed feeling 'slightly at sea' in relation to training volunteers. One CO was very exercised about the fact that she needed more help, she felt she was 'busking it'. Another CO commented on the lack of a structure to support volunteers. She is a trainee herself and doesn't feel well placed to give out

We were told that listening, projects, volunteers were the MOST important things for us to achieve, but we've had NO training on how to handle volunteers – COs need a better grounding in how to build a team and then support and train them'. CO

training. She identified the need to build relationships with volunteers and would have liked more coverage of this on the CO training programme. This comment is in line with many others who believe that the training of volunteers should be a core part of the Programme:

.... the skills I have gained and developed throughout my own journey as a community organiser (leadership, communication, negotiation, planning, group work, etc.) have played a crucial part in my ability to recruit, retain, support the development, etc. of our volunteers. To be honest, I put all my efforts, intellectual and physical abilities into this job and I am keen to ensure that our volunteers gain relevant knowledge, skills experience and succeed as community organisers - the same as I am.

The following section outlines how the Programme has responded to the need for a coherent approach to volunteer training and draws out learning from those involved.

Section 2 The Volunteer Training Programme

It's been good for the organisation to get paid to do this. It made such logical sense to do formal training rather than leaving it to individual COs with no materials. It provides common threads which can be tailored to particular situations. COs can add their insights. There was a lot of negotiation about content which was really refreshing. There was no 'you have to do it this way. CO, Bristol.

As the programme has progressed, programme management staff have been very aware of the need to put in place more structured training for volunteers. In the summer of 2014, a volunteer training programme was developed and piloted by Sneinton Alchemy. This has since been rolled out to a further fourteen areas (thirty one applications were received). It has been delivered by the COs with support from the Programme's training team.

The COs who have been involved were motivated by seeing the need for a more formal approach to training, and to equip the volunteers with more knowledge, experience and a qualification opportunity, as well as by the potential that the VTP affords in terms of extending the reach and long term sustainability of community organising. One CO saw this as a good opportunity to pass on her knowledge and skills, and the benefit of her own community organising experience plus she hoped to benefit herself from further learning - from the volunteers/trainees and developing communication and facilitation skills.

With the VTP we have been able to have a much deeper reach in the local community and start building a network of engaged people, and I have been continuously developing and learning. CO

The attraction of offering something back to volunteers has been important to the COs who have taken part, and the COs have found that the formal training and accreditation is a great learning and personal development opportunity for people who often don't get the chance.

*...formal training allowed us to spread out a little across a bigger area and engage with some passionate people that we had not encountered previously.
CO*

Both the Stockport and Sheffield employers and COs were motivated to take part by the specific volunteering offer.

Sheffield VTP

The VTP gave us traction, time to reflect and re-evaluate our volunteering offer.

At the start, Sharrow Community Forum (SCF) held ambitions that the VTP would provide the mechanism and momentum necessary to create a community organising movement in the Sharrow area, which could be replicated across Sheffield and beyond.

SCF applied to be a part of the programme as a way of embedding community organising principles into its development strategy. The programme came along at a time when SCF was embarking upon the Our Place programme and looking to create new ways of working at neighbourhood level.

SCF already had health champion volunteers and wanted to use this training model as a template for other volunteers. They have approached the VTP differently but the purpose of supporting volunteers is the same, providing the volunteers with a range of activities in which they could get involved and offering a qualification.

If you are not careful, you are just asking people to do something for nothing. If can offer qualifications and experience on tangible projects where can build people's confidence then we should do this. Without the VTP, wouldn't have had an offer for people. There is no money in community development work so the VTP is good. We are creating people who are self determining. (Employer)

Some of the volunteers are working in specific areas or around particular projects in pairs and find this helpful. They also talk about the 'liberation' of not feeling responsible for everyone else: *Putting things back on people works.*

Stockport VTP

Starting Point is a resident led organisation that specialises in digital and financial inclusion activities e.g. computer clubs and money advice – and now community organising. The COs wanted to make sure that volunteers got as much out of their experience as possible – *when there is no monthly pay packet.... This isn't a one way thing – volunteers helping others in their community but about themselves and their own development.*

They had been looking for something like the VTP right from the start. Starting Point's digital champions were being offered accredited training and they felt the VCO's were a bit like the 'also rans.' And the VTP has given them the opportunity to see how other volunteers can benefit from understanding community organising e.g. the digital champions.

Twenty five people enrolled on the VTP and all attended both days of the initial training weekend. Five have dropped out – community organising wasn't for them. Ten people have so far completed the accreditation process, all at level 3.

The feedback from the volunteers has been brilliant and everyone is still there at 5pm. The training has allowed the COs to show the volunteers that there is more to community organising than listening, it's also about moving to action. The session on power was a particular highlight. Before there were lots of projects, not so many campaigns, but the power session has helped. They like the interactive style of the sessions and *'everyone together helping each other'*.

The VTP has been an opportunity for people to get together – a little club.

The VTP starts with two consecutive training days run by COs and Locality. This is followed by scheduled support sessions, door-knocking and listenings, and the opportunity to complete units 1-3 of the CERTA Foundations in Community Organising course (around 50% of original participants have taken this up).

The first two days of the training were the best thing I have ever done. CO

In some VTPs the 'group' aspect has worked well – people valuing the opportunity to reflect on their progress with their 'team', feeling like they are part of something bigger.

Bristol VTP

We started the course by doing some practical listening work. This resulted in three volunteers actively initiating house meetings and starting to develop project ideas with other residents – a petition about a dangerous road, laundry issues in a towerblock, problems with speeding traffic, developing a shared community meal. When we started the accreditation the focus shifted almost entirely to coursework. Regular weekly discussion sessions on each task in each unit, combined with follow up sessions to help them complete work up to level 3 standard. This meant an unexpected shift in the focus of the course away from practical on the job to more theoretical learning - but always backed up by collective discussion based on actual real world life experiences.

In other places, the group sessions haven't worked as anticipated and the COs have adapted their plans to provide either two lots of group sessions e.g. one in the daytime and one in the evening, and /or a lot more one-to-one support. Finding suitable times to bring all the volunteers together in the same place has been difficult - due to their other commitments, issues in their personal lives, and the geography of rural areas. And there can also be conflicts within the group.

VTP success stories

There are some inspiring examples of what people can achieve given the opportunity and some surprising outcomes.

Many COs talk about how the training programme has been significant in providing volunteers with new skills, knowledge and experience, and particularly with regard to self-reflection and critical consciousness. And several volunteers have talked about how they have learnt to listen to people, and how they stop themselves from trying to solve everyone's problems.

The programme has equipped the volunteers with skills to be more effective, critically aware practitioners. In terms of technical community organising skills, the volunteers developed their listening, communication and leadership skills, and have initiated and run successful projects, taken part in public talks and debates, and have engaged successfully with the local institutions, systems and structures.

In one area, a VCO has been approached by a local residents' association that is breaking down and asked for support to listen to other residents and revive the work on its estate. And in more than one area, VCOs have become the chair of a local neighbourhood association.

*All of the volunteers are using their new-acquired skills, knowledge and confidence and are on their way of making a genuine, long-lasting change in the local area. The VTP has played a crucial part in all this!
CO*

Another CO commented that people wanted to be a volunteer to change themselves as well as their communities, and the community organising training has acted as a catalyst. For example, R. has been asked to be the chair of a local community group in an area where he is a local tenant. As a result of the VTP he has the confidence in his own abilities to take this on.

It's been an interesting experience – I'm taking confidence with me to go out in my community and talk to people – I now have an avenue to try and make a difference. Volunteer

One CO has been surprised by the mix of people who chose to come on the course:

Throughout my work as a CO I have really struggled to engage with non-English speaking residents and 90% of the people I work with are British, despite the high

proportion of Eastern European people in the area (amongst others). This course attracted a whole variety of people and 50% of the VCOs speak English as a second language.

One of our volunteers with limited English was shy and reserved when he started. He is now really out going and his English and confidence have improved massively.

CO

The COs, their organisations and the communities involved have benefitted too – the COs are honing their facilitation skills, they have enjoyed teaching an approach they were learning about not that long ago, and as one CO says, it has been a refresher:

...been useful for me having to explain the key things over and over again, and in different ways

The VTP is deepening people's understandings about where they live and how they live, showing 'what can happen when you bring together a multi-ethnic group in a divided area, and discuss power and how it affects their lives'. And it is extending the reach of community organising through dedicated groups of volunteers:

we are animating, encouraging, building a network of engaged individuals and inspiring local action.

The training has taught us how to deal with difficult situations. We were talking to people everyday anyway but now know how to face conflict and learnt about power – where people think power lies in the community.

Volunteer

In some areas, the volunteers are now moving into a paid role as a direct result of their participation in the VTP. In Nottingham, the CO has secured the funds to employ three of the VTP learners; in another area, two are being taken on part time by the CO's employing body and in another some of the volunteers are being paid for a piece of community research work.

The impact on CO employing organisations is also starting to be seen. In Sheffield, Sharrow Community Forum's Development Manager believes that the VTP and the volunteers have been instrumental in supporting the Forum's existing projects but the volunteers have also changed the way that the Forum is carrying out its work; they bring greater reach into the community, and the community is now at the heart of what they do. He suggests that community organising gives a clarity about their approach and has been significant in other programmes they run e.g. the Our Place programme. A CO in another area comments:

Our organisation is currently re-designing its volunteering policy. Being a core part of a Community Development team that is central to the volunteering infrastructure at the organisation, we have been able to have significant influence and the way we work with our volunteers has helped challenge the accepted norm that volunteering is very rigid and formal.

The VTP accreditation process

The VTP includes an opportunity to gain accreditation for the first three units of the Foundations in Community Organising. This includes written submissions and an oral assessment via skype. The assessor body for the VTP is Community Resolve.

Once the idea of a VTP was agreed upon, it had to be established in a hurry if it was to have enough time to create some impact before the end of the funded CO programme. Community Resolve found itself having to paddle upstream – and quickly – to meet the needs of the VTP learners. This allowed no time for piloting, adjusting the assessment criteria or even training their own assessors; this has all happened as the VTP has been rolled out. Nevertheless, it seems to have worked and the COs are emphatic in their praise for Community Resolve and the support, patience and positivity they have brought to the programme. In return, Community Resolve describes the COs involved as ‘*like lions*’, putting in huge amounts of time and commitment to support volunteers through the process.

There is no doubt that for many VTP participants, the promise of a qualification is what draws them to the programme. In addition, it provides some validation for the work they are voluntarily engaged in:

People in my own community don't recognise volunteering – think its just a hobby but I can't just take it or leave it.

Participants have found the training useful but some have found the accreditation arduous; indeed when asked about their training experience, several participants talked only about the accreditation. The academic work and what some see as the ‘abstract’ thinking required for the reflection components has been challenging; one volunteer said he needed ‘*to do a double take on the questions*’, and another said she wasn’t sure what was being asked for. Several COs commented that the volunteers needed more time to work through the accreditation as the existing course structure meant less time for listenings.

This is especially true for those for whom English is a second **language** and who have been trying to understand and write assignments as part of the accreditation process. Where VTP participants have supported each other, it seems to have made a difference, as have one to one sessions with a CO.

Certainly, the support that is required for some individuals to attain the required standard of accreditation is high. One CO suggests that ‘*With that in mind it is essential for the trainers to be on top of the accreditation material, to properly understand it and make it interesting and real*’.

At the beginning the aim was that each volunteer would go out doorknocking once a week, then accreditation suggested 10 hours on top of this. So the original idea was very aspirational. It was clear that people wanted to focus on the accreditation and do it well and that would take up most of their time. It was really complex stuff – the values and principles of CO in 500 words, ... only after Community Resolve did the guidance was it clear how it was going to be assessed. CO

People like doing it but not writing about it. People on the VTP are natural listeners, but find it difficult to write it down. CO

*It needs an overhaul to make it more accessible. There are people with degrees who found it difficult to understand the assessment criteria
Community Resolve*

Life gets in the way. Sometimes people can't turn up, they have good reasons. People drop out, this gets in the way of the accreditation. CO

*Our own informal get-togethers made a lot of difference Three of us supported each other with the course work – organised this ourselves.. ..Important to verbalise it. Practised the oral assessments together.
Volunteer.*

There are also some practical things that COs can put in place to support the VTP participants e.g. several COs have offered a quiet working environment as volunteers may have difficulty finding the time and space in a busy household to work on assignments.

Several of the COs have said that given their time again, they would value some kind of assessment framework to help identify the most appropriate level of accreditation for each volunteer. Levels 2 and 3 are available and many have gone for the higher level, only to struggle later on. On the other hand one volunteer has noted that she likes the fact everyone is learning together at the same level.

Technology has also been a bugbear for some. The VTP relies on electronic communication as part of the accreditation process and yet the volunteers don't always have IT literacy never mind computers. Volunteers have therefore had to find access to computers where they can but this has caused more work for the COs:

those using computers in the library and printing out their assignments - had to retype all of these to then save them online.

Another volunteer who uses an iPad has struggled with the formatting of the modules.

Support for the COs

Larna and Zoi, from Locality's CO training team, were contracted to support and co-ordinate the VTP – from development and delivery. They began by looking at what had happened in Sneinton, worked with the COs prior to training delivery, e.g. around recruitment, and supported the COs over the initial two days (as did Ruth and Naomi from the programme management team). They followed up the COs as the VTPs progressed and have also run on line supervision sessions for the COs. These sessions seemed to have worked really well for some of the COs, and less well for others (participation fell off, perhaps because some COs couldn't make the date and time, were just too busy or didn't find them useful).

The COs have valued the support from Larna and Zoe, especially because they come from a background of training within the CO programme.

Meeting expectations

There was a lot of enthusiasm and energy at the start of the VTO, and despite this being a new venture, expectations were high. Some of these expectations haven't been met, though they may have been unrealistic to start with.

Many of these expectations relate to **numbers** – the number of people applying to take part, the number of people sticking with it and the number completing the accreditation process:

- Many of the COs thought they would have a lot more interest in the course than they did, and others have been disappointed at the numbers who have left part way through.

There was an aim to recruit between twenty and thirty volunteers to each VTP. In some places this has been relatively easy e.g. in Bristol and London, but in others it has proved more difficult e.g. Devizes. There may be many reasons for this difference – urban inner city areas may fare better than more rural areas, the local community history may have an impact, the advertising may have been clearer in some areas than in others. In some areas there has been more community organiser time available to provide ongoing support to the volunteers, with practical skills and activities as well as with the accreditation process and the written work that this involves. These variations may account for the numbers of people who have dropped out of the programme in some areas. One CO suggests that

people might drop out when faced with *'the reality of CO work being hard work and the commitment of six months being quite long'*. It may also be that volunteers need some formal recognition early on, irrespective of whether they are planning to go for the full award or not e.g. in Sharrow, participants receive a certificate of participation at every stage of their learning journey.

In all areas, there have been people who have dropped out of the VTP, in some cases 50-60%, and this has been distressing for some of the COs – they have been self-critical, wondering what they have done wrong. One CO talked about trying to balance the expectations around training and accreditation placed on COs from Locality with the reality of the volunteers and their lives. They have found the online supervision sessions useful in this respect, realising they are not alone and that there are plenty of reasons for volunteers not continuing.

...25 come to an initial weekend. A quarter of them enjoyed it but decided it wasn't for them, about 12 did the 6 months and 10 did two thirds of the accreditation. Eight have finished the entire three units, which is a massive achievement, given that for all but one, English is their second language. Now they have 7 level 3 credits, which is pretty amazing. CO

These include the complicated lives that some people lead, the realisation on the part of the volunteers that this is more than say, helping out in the community café. Perhaps in future, there could be an explicit understanding that some volunteers will leave, and that this is a normal part of running a training programme for volunteers.

- Some COs expected that people would achieve more listenings in the first few months than they did:

This part has gone off to a slow start, getting people out door knocking has not been so easy. I envisaged the group to mix and go out together but this has not happened as much. I expected the group to bond quite well over their shared passion for community work and thus start working together more, but this has not happened as much as I would have hoped.

Other expectations relate to **programme resources**:

- All the VTP COs were given facilitation training through the Art of Hosting course. Several COs however have expressed disappointment that they weren't offered a training for trainers (e.g. a PTLLS teaching qualification) course to help them develop their training skills. Locality had suggested that this would be available but in the end it was decided that the resources for this would be better used if put into running more VTPs instead.
- Many were surprised that there wasn't more infrastructure in place to support them – resources, guides, more directive support. On the other hand, one CO says she has very much enjoyed putting together training packs and resources to support the learners, and another says that in hindsight, it was good to have to put this together as it helped her to understand the programme better.
- The COs didn't anticipate the amount of time they have had to put into the VTP and many of those involved in the VTP describe the programme as chronically under-funded (some however didn't spend all the money they received). All the VTPs have illustrated how much time is needed on the part of COs to support volunteers in developing their community organising skills and in working through the accreditation process. This is especially the case where the VTP participants can't all come in for group sessions at the same time, or where one to one support is more appropriate. The COs have gone way beyond what has been paid for; meeting the volunteers almost everyday; being available at

all time of day and night; and *'doing the paperwork at midnight'*. Several COs are continuing way after the VTP funding has ended:

If I had stopped (when the money ran out) none would have got through.

This has been particularly difficult for lone COs, and especially those who work part time.

Suggested improvements for a future VTP

A clearer overall framework for the VTP

Now that the VTP has run in a number of areas, there could be a library of materials, experiences and ideas about how to structure the programme. This could be shared with COs new to training volunteers to help mould their plans.

It has also been suggested that it would be good to spread out the timing of the different VTPs so learning can be built from each course.

More face to face opportunities

Some have suggested a face to face session with all the VTP trainers, an opportunity to watch a peer deliver a training session, and perhaps a regional or national meet-up of all the VTP participants.

Greater flexibility

This relates to how the training is delivered – both in terms of timing and structure, but also facilitation style. Different COs have different perspectives about what should run when, and how:

Been running training sessions as well as the accreditation sessions, and in future would drop some of the training sessions that are not related to accreditation because it is too much, they are not timely and unnecessary.

Some COs think there shouldn't be any listening targets for volunteers, others wonder about the structure of the course. Some feel that volunteers should just do door knocking and listening first, before they start the accreditation, whilst there is also a view that its important to deal with the theory first, before the practice. If everyone went their different ways however, it is likely that the essence of the VTP would be lost – some kind of overarching framework does need to be in place.

In fact, the training has been adapted to suit local circumstances. In one area, the format is described as much more discursive and 'wordy', and in Bristol, the session around power included joining a protest. But not all COs have the confidence to adapt the training programme or see the possibilities of flexibility – it needs to be much more explicit.

Greater preparation

It has been suggested that COs need to do a lot more of the personnel / HR work upfront so as not to confuse the volunteers so much when they first start. This includes gaining an understanding of individual's learning and participation needs.

The VTP needs to make sure that different levels of training are open to people of different abilities. Some are not confident with social media for example.

Recruitment

It is important to be clear at the start about what the VTP is, and involves, so that people know what they are getting into/signing up for, A longer lead in time would enable more groundwork in target areas so as to publicise what the VTP may offer more effectively . Three months recruitment time is seen to be about right.

One CO says that those that have stuck with it '*were already involved and knew a bit about community organising, they are active in other things, into this kind of work, see this as an opportunity and are really good COs*'. Are the volunteers most likely to stick with it those that are passionate about their neighbourhood, and if so, does this have implications for how people are recruited to the VTP?

Review the length of the VTP

There are two different suggestions here – many feel that 6 months is nowhere near long enough whilst others feel a less formal workshop or modular programme might work better, where participants sign up to membership of an on-going network of trainees and take up training sessions as and when they are able to or interested in doing so.

Whatever follows on the future, there is a need to be clearer about how much time it takes e.g. it will take this amount of time and this amount of effort.

Reward participation

Certificates of participation e.g. for the initial two days, acknowledge the learning process and help learners feel they are doing something worthwhile, even if they don't want to go for the accreditation

User friendly language

Community Resolve, the COs and volunteers have all commented on the vagueness of some of the accreditation questions and the lack of clarity about what is being asked for. In addition, some of the learners left the programme because of language barriers which could be overcome in part by straightforward plain English.

Training the trainers

Most COs value the Art of Hosting training in facilitation skills that they have received but not all. There are some who don't want to follow it as a rigid model, and see some of the exercise as '*patronising and hippyish*'. Some have expressed the view that they would have liked a foundation teacher training type course such as the PTLLS qualification, and are disappointed that this wasn't available through the programme, but again, not all. Resources for CO professional development beyond the initial 51 weeks have been scarce and whilst no one type of training for trainers will suit everyone, the experiences of the first VTP COs could inform the most appropriate 'pick and mix' training and support mechanisms in any future roll out.

One CO says that she is teaching people an accredited course but isn't qualified as a trainer; '*There must be training techniques I don't know about*'. She uses the Assessor Guide but is doing this on her own and would value a pairing with another VTP CO – she does ring people but feels a burden and would like this legitimised. Training around team building and dealing with conflict has also been suggested (note that this is also a request from a number of COs, not just those working with the VTP):

Feel I am just responding but not always sure what to do.

Co-training

The VTP involves a continual support as well training for organisers. Co-training (as in two trainers working alongside each other) is seen as good practice in most training circles, COs who are working in a pair (or as a threesome in Devizes) find it much easier than those working alone. Some of the lone COs have also been working part-time. One recommendation from a CO is the need for two trainers and one administrator for every VTP.

In future, if COs are in the position of delivering alone, then perhaps more support could be built in – either from the training co-ordinators and / or from the assessor body.

The legacy of the VTP

It remains to be seen how far those people trained through the VTP will continue to community organise. In some areas, some volunteers are moving into paid roles and in others they are taking on leadership roles:

Already three of our volunteers have become de facto 'local leaders'

[the VTP] has animated residents and I expect them to continue their development as effective community organisers and encourage, support and facilitate community projects and grassroots action.

Although those who have been through the VTP 'are better equipped from their learning and training to work confidently', some COs are undecided about how much the volunteers would take on without a CO being in the area to support and work alongside them (some of the COs' contracts are ending and they are leaving) and one CO wonders whether the volunteers will all go their separate ways after the VTP. However, they may go on to do community work with a different type of awareness, and they may do it with organising methods.

Some COs have used personal development plans with the people they worked with at the end of their 51 weeks and it has been suggested that this could be a model for the VTP. The challenge now is to ensure that the volunteers remain true to the community organising process, to listening and facilitating dialogue with others that can inspire action and do not get diverted by others' agendas or those looking for a ready pool of volunteers to help deliver projects.

The VTP has shown what is possible when dedicated resources are made available for a systematic training process for volunteers. The COs involved believe that this is what community organising is all about and if they had their time again, they would work with volunteers differently from the start. It might be 'a massive process' but the question remaining is how can informal and formal training processes be embedded within the core role of the community organiser?

Community organising has been a great success story in Southampton! And the best is yet to come! CO

The VTP has made a real difference – given her a lot more drive. Fourteen people doing it completely voluntarily – this is the future. They get it. Its nice to work with people and not going out doorknocking on my own. The other CO volunteers are project focused but the VTP volunteers are doing listenings. CO

*There are some keen and inspiring volunteers – would be good to know this isn't just going to end.
Locality trainer*

All the 4,500 should have had the training to move from a VCO to a (paid) CO.