

Historic Environment Forum - Heritage Counts 2011

BritainThinks were commissioned by the Historic Environment Forum (HEF) to conduct research into encouraging greater participation in the local historic environment.

1. Background

BritainThinks proprietary polling shows that there is a vast potential pool from which volunteers for the historic environment can be drawn. Our polling shows that 24% of the population say they have 'taken part in a campaign on a particular issue' in the past year, and 35% say that they have 'volunteered at a local charity', and 6% (2.88 million people) say they regularly volunteer locally, rising to 14% of those aged 65 and over.

The continued population movement towards urban areas and rapid population growth will lead to even greater demand for jobs and housing, leading to pressure for more intense development. The Government's localism agenda and Big Society initiatives create space for local groups to help shape and influence development, but in order to do so effectively, groups will need to access a wider and more sustainable pool of support.

2. Objectives

The theme for Heritage Counts 2011 is the "Historic Environment and the Big Society". The purpose of this project is to develop a 'health check or toolkit' that will help local groups understand how to attract more volunteers and how to keep their volunteers more engaged in the long term, beyond one-off campaigns and events.

This health check will enable groups to better deliver on two of the key strands of "Big Society" - social action (what people can do to help each other and their community) and community empowerment (what people can do to help themselves). This brief summary report sets out the key findings and maps the challenges ahead for the sector.

3. Methodology

- Review of existing literature covering the current policy context for volunteering in the local historic environment and research data covering the experience of volunteering.
- Four focus groups in two fieldwork sites; Leeds and Leicestershire
 - Two groups with 'one-off volunteers', two with 'warm non-volunteers.'
- Lay research phase: Participants given a toolkit and diary to record experiences of interacting with local groups.
- Two deliberative workshops one in Leeds, one in Leicestershire, combining participants with representatives from local groups.
 - These longer half-day deliberative sessions enable a deeper, more meaningful interaction between the local groups and local people, with space to hear each others point of view and establish empathy before working together collaboratively on creative solutions.
- Collaborative workshop session with HEF Partners.

4. Key findings from the research

In this report we use the phrase local groups to describe: "bodies which meet locally and act as advocates and watchdogs for local heritage and amenity on an ongoing basis and which do not exist for a single campaign or issue". They include civic societies and Building Preservation Trusts. Many of the findings can just as easily relate to the experiences of other heritage groups and would prove as useful for them.

Local groups say that they are keen to involve more people in what they do, and there is a large pool of people out there who are enthusiastic about getting involved in protecting and enhancing their local historic environment, especially in campaigns pertaining to sites they have a local or emotional connection with.

Yet even those who are the 'low hanging fruit'; those who have participated in one off activities such as signing a petition or going to a meeting don't tend to get involved with local groups on a more sustained basis.

The reasons for this are rooted in the experiences and attitudes of these audiences and the culture of many local groups.

The local people perceive a huge gap between themselves and the people who run local groups. Even the one-off volunteers see getting involved in a group as a huge step onto 'another level' of involvement - they set the bar high for that kind of activity in terms of knowledge, time, cost and drive, whereas in fact the one-off volunteers have a relatively high level of knowledge and/or solid experience of activities.

They perceive that the people running local groups are very different to them and almost seem to speak a different language. This is despite many of them self-evidently having skills and knowledge equivalent to many of those involved in groups. The workshops suggest that this gap is real, not just perceived; the local people proved to be justified in their views.

The representatives of local groups at our workshops were self-selecting and drawn from the leadership of their groups, but in addition to their expertise they were also older, overwhelmingly male and appeared to be drawn from higher socio economic groups.

Asked to design their ideal meeting activity, participants described something sociable and open. The ideal 'meeting' activity would be sociable and not bureaucratic; in a pub or bar, but it still has to be business-like, not a drinking session, and there has to be a strong leader who can move things along. In the opinion of our local people this leader has to try to be neutral and not lead discussion, but to sum up at the end and clarify actions.

Membership is not a barrier per se but does raise concerns for local people. Our local people were comfortable with the idea of being a 'member' in theory and were members of a variety of organisations. The main benefits of membership are being kept 'in the know' and getting more information. The downsides are cost both in terms of fees and being hassled for donations, but also mission creep - getting gradually sucked in and feeling guilty for not meeting expectations of other members. This sucks out the enjoyment and makes the experience feel like work.

The local groups are often resistant to changing their approach and often wedded to an unduly bureaucratic meeting culture. Many are jaded by experiences of people coming along and volunteering but not following through, creating more work for the 'core group'.

Local groups also sometimes come across technical problems such as requirements for CRB checks for volunteers or lack of skills in new media, which they are unable to surmount.

5. What are the key challenges for the sector?

The Government Citizenship survey shows that the top barriers to volunteering are predominantly associated with a shortage of time due to work and family commitments and competition with other things people already do in their spare time.

It is within this context that local groups must refine their approach to potential members and volunteers. Local groups need to take stock of their goals and the tools they have available to achieve them, and realise the benefits of widening participation in their activities, but also understand that due to the pressures on their target audience's time they must travel some distance from where they are now to attract and retain new supporters.

There is also a challenge with groups' use of social media. Recent figures published by Civic Voice, the national charity for the civic movement, show that in England civic volunteers are behind the curve on social networking - only 27% value Facebook and other social networks for keeping in touch compared to 42% of the population as a whole.

6. How can local groups attract and retain more volunteers?

Many local groups will need to change the way they work: It isn't about communicating more widely what they do; it's about changing elements of what they do to position themselves more where local people want them to be.

Local people want a suite of different ways to get involved flexibly, in their own time.

- The last thing they want is to feel guilty for not completing a task
- But local groups can find it difficult to work around more flexible commitment and think it's difficult for things to happen without regular meetings

Local people want activities with wide appeal...but it seems that some local groups simply want to attract more people to the things they already do

- Local groups see doing new things as a 'means to an end' for their existing priorities
- But for local people things like fundraising and events are a great way to get involved flexibly and celebrate the historic environment

Local people think that ideally local groups should be part of a much wider local community

- But the local groups see themselves as specialists, a discrete community

7. Summary

Local groups have huge potential to grow their influence and skills base by giving local people a voice on issues they care about, including protecting and enhancing those elements of the local historic environment that are most valued by their community.

However in order to do this, some local groups will need to be prepared for fundamental change in the way they work and activities they do.

They must communicate the passion that motivates them to do what they do; and accordingly run events that celebrate the local historic environment and its benefit to the wider community. This means spending more time organising activities that encourage appreciation of aspects of the historic environment; the buildings, parks and sites of interest, not just abstract discussion in written reports and public meetings.

Campaigns must use language carefully so as not to alienate supporters by using 'planning-speak' as a matter of course; and local groups should show local people a more collegiate co-operative and welcoming face by working with other local groups and plugging into national events whenever possible.

Ultimately they must secure their legacy by meeting their demographic challenge; recruiting the next generation of local champions.

There is no one size fits all solution, but the first step is for groups to start a period of reflection, identifying the benefits of broadening their base and the actions and changes to the way they do things that will achieve it. But they will need help, and national organisations can play a vital role in facilitating information sharing and best practise.

Local people will engage if they feel they can make a difference and participate on their own terms, but this project has demonstrated that there is still a substantial gap to be bridged before that model of involvement can be replicated as a matter of course across the country.

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