

# Volunteers in service delivery

By GAVIN HODGE

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen.

Let me begin with an apology since you were expecting the organ grinder and instead you have the monkey. But I will do my best to inform you as Wil Gibson would wish.

The services carried out by many thousands of rural volunteers in this region have become an increasingly important element in service delivery, but one that at times seems barely recognised by Government. If Government chooses to recognise only those volunteers who give their time regularly, in certain very specific fields, and for the same number of hours each week it overlooks a vast number of rural volunteers who give their time as and when required and whose help is highly valued by the recipients. The work done by volunteers can make the difference between a life worth living and no life at all.

Rural volunteers work in many different fields including transport, community led planning, housing needs surveys, Citizens Advice Bureaux, environmental improvement, and in a great variety of ways that fall into the category of care and wellbeing. Many charities depend heavily on volunteers to achieve their goals and Suffolk ACRE is no exception with more than 550 volunteers in the Good Neighbour Scheme.

Turning first to transport, from the Suffolk perspective it would be fair to say that rural public transport in Suffolk is patchy and that community transport initiatives are playing an important part in addressing the problem. Time and again transport seems to be the issue in trying to help the rurally isolated reach services or vice versa. It is a tough nut to crack and few things are more disappointing than the sight of an empty bus on a country route. It probably means that there is no convenient bus going back the other way.

There are no fewer than 28 community transport initiatives up and running in Suffolk and the majority of these use volunteer drivers who need to be co-ordinated. Suffolk ACRE co-ordinates three community transport initiatives which use a mixture of volunteer and paid drivers. I take my hat off to the volunteer drivers of Ipswich Dial-a-Ride which celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. These volunteers turn out winter and summer, in all weathers, and are very special people – part driver, part social worker, part technical expert on wheelchairs and other safety devices. They and their counterparts elsewhere in the county help some of the most vulnerable members of our communities and without this help many of their clients would be shut away from society and social interaction. Ipswich Dial-a-Ride volunteers have given a total of 4200 hours of service over the past two years.

A very different type of volunteering is carried out by people who become involved in developing Parish Plans, or Community Led Planning which is the current favoured terminology. Steering group members take on a tremendous commitment when they agree to be the change they want to make and commit their time to developing a parish plan, or perhaps a market town healthcheck. This is quite a complicated process and agencies like Suffolk ACRE fulfil a vital role in guiding, training and co-ordinating steering group members so that they are able to carry out the necessary community consultations and identify issues that need to be taken forward as action points. These volunteers need and deserve to have their work recognised by their local planning authority and while this is getting better slowly in Suffolk it is moving faster elsewhere in beacon status councils such as West Berkshire, North Devon and Oxfordshire which, incidentally, has 300 parishes making it the most comparable to Suffolk of these three.

Suffolk ACRE enabled 22 communities to complete Parish Plans during 2007 and 2008, with many more parishes beginning the process. On average volunteer man and woman hours to create a Parish Plan add up to some 450 per parish, so for those 22 parishes some 9,900 hours of voluntary commitment were made. It is not surprising that some of these volunteers feel burned out by the time the Parish Plan is published and may well regard the publication as an end to the process rather than a beginning. In reality, if the action points are to be taken forwards then new

volunteering blood may well need to be found to develop an action plan and champion each of the action points.

The traditional role of Suffolk ACRE has been to help rural people to help themselves and many of the people who involve themselves in self-help organisations don't necessarily see themselves as volunteers. Wil Gibson believes that this great body of people, numbering thousands, do not fit the Government's definition of volunteering and therefore are not acknowledged or strategically supported. Accordingly rural issues do not get a fair crack of the whip.

My personal expertise has been in developing the Suffolk ACRE Good Neighbour Scheme which I have co-ordinated since it was launched in Summer 2003. We now have some 21 independent, sustainable schemes around the county under the Suffolk ACRE umbrella and a network of more than 550 volunteers. The principal goal of the scheme is to enable people to live in their own homes as long as possible, reducing pressure on hospital and care beds. The scheme also undoubtedly helps build more cohesive communities.

Each scheme revolves around its own mobile phone, held in turn by a rota of volunteers. We raise our volunteers in a way that identifies in what way or ways a volunteer is willing to help so it is easy to match a volunteer to a request for help. All the schemes offer very similar types of help which includes giving lifts, collecting pensions or prescriptions, shopping, minor domestic repairs including checking smoke alarms – a vital service. Befriending older people and lonely people and also newcomers to a community which helps to integrate them and use their skills and talents. Help with form filling and advocacy, and help with pets, perhaps when a community member is going into hospital for a short while.

The Good Neighbour Scheme has recently had some good publicity on The One Show on BBC television. A film crew came to film the Shotley & Erwarton scheme and notably to interview Dot Page, who was the subject of a case study that appeared in the Government's Empowerment White Paper in the summer. I have since fielded enquiries from all over the country and sold the Good Neighbour Scheme toolkit to seven out-of-county organisations. Pembrokeshire County Council has developed its Good Neighbour

Scheme on the Suffolk ACRE model and I visited Pembroke last February to give a talk at a GNS Conference organised for County Council professionals.

The One Show gave a very positive view of the Good Neighbour Scheme and it is perhaps ironical that Suffolk ACRE has really struggled to get funding to keep up the expansion of the project. The project has bucked the trend of short termism by surviving for five years thus far due to a mixture of determination and obduracy.

It is interesting to note that the majority of volunteers in the Good neighbour Scheme are the newly retired, or empty nesters. Retirees have chosen the community where they want to spend the rest of their days, they want to make it as nice a place as possible and they want to put their bit back into society. Crucially from my point of view they are available during the working day when most of the help is needed, and many of them are drivers. Lifts are by far the most popular service offered within the GNS.

The fact that the majority of volunteers are older people is by no means limited to the Good Neighbour Scheme. Age Concern Suffolk has volunteers who are older than virtually all the clients they help. Yet we are losing that wonderful generation of volunteers for whom service before self were not just idle words. They were brought up before or during the Second World War and have volunteered as a matter of course all their lives. Now, many of them have reached the point when they need help themselves, but, of all people, they find it most difficult to ask for that help. It is perhaps the biggest barrier that the Good Neighbour Scheme and other schemes offering a variety of help to older people have to overcome.

Suffolk has one of the fastest ageing populations in the country, second only to Devon I believe. Part of the reason for this is that Suffolk is a popular choice of county for retirement, and it fairs pretty well in terms of life expectancy. Nonetheless there are regions separated by only a few miles where life expectancy drops by up to 9 years. There are hidden pockets of deprivation across the county as highlighted in the Rural Deprivation study to be found on the Suffolk ACRE website. This ageing population needs to be cared for and I would like to end by mentioning some of the most praiseworthy volunteers in Suffolk, the 98,000 family carers.

We live in an age when people of retirement age are often looking after a mother, a father or both parents who may well live into their late 80s or their 90s. My mother is 88, fiercely independent, lives alone in a village bungalow and still drives confidently. She is out and about practically every day. When the time comes for her to give up the steering wheel her life will change dramatically.

Suffolk Family Carers have some 4000 carers on their books and estimate that half of these live in rural areas of the county. It is perfectly natural that people want to look after their own, and so it should perhaps be. But where you have a frail elderly person looking after an even more frail, possibly disabled person because care would be an economic impossibility it gives pause for thought. Family carers are unsung volunteers. They are saving the Government an enormous sum of money and are only now starting to get the support they need.

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