

Role and Impact of Volunteers in UK Children's Hospices

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Introduction

In the UK there are 50 children's hospices supported by approximately 17,000 volunteers, with an economic contribution of approximately £23 million (Carling and Howlett, 2013).

Volunteers are involved in many different ways including providing practical and social support for children, young people and their families, supporting the organisation in a diverse range of ways including administration, catering, housekeeping, gardening and fundraising governance roles as trustees. Burbeck et. al (2013), Carling and Howlett (2013) and Scott, (2013) suggest that there are many opportunities to develop volunteering further and Together for Short Lives (2013) call upon hospices to champion this development, recognising their key role as part of the children's hospice workforce.

This poster reports on children's hospice data from a larger research study exploring the unique influence and impact of the work of volunteers on UK hospices.

Purpose of research

This research aimed to gain a strategic perspective of volunteering. Using a new theoretical model of volunteering impact developed following a review of literature, the purpose of the research was to:

- Explore the influence of volunteers on four key organisational sustainability factors: governance, service delivery, hospice economy, and community engagement;
- Gain insight into how volunteering is understood by senior staff, volunteers and trustees;
- Consider the relationship between volunteering and hospice sustainability.

Conclusion

It is clear from this study that volunteering brings a unique dimension to the children's hospices taking and that it has a significant impact, on the services provided and the ability to deliver these. In some cases volunteering is crucial to the continuing existence of the organisation. It is important, therefore, that hospices recognise of their dependence on volunteering and the strategic significance of this. Planning processes must consider future volunteering needs with the same emphasis as staffing and funding. Many external and organisational factors influence volunteering and children's hospices must also review and assess the sustainability of the voluntary service, remaining responsive to and embracing the changing landscape of volunteering and volunteer expectations.

References:

- Burbeck, R., Low, J., Sampson, E.L., Scott, R., Bravery, R., & Candy, B. (2013) Volunteer activity in specialist paediatric palliative care: a national survey. *BMJ Supportive and Palliative Care* (1-7).
- Carling, R., Howlett, S. (2013) Shining a spotlight on children's hospice volunteers. Bristol: Together for Short Lives.
- Scott, R. (2013). Strategic Asset or Optional Extra: The impact of volunteers on hospice sustainability. Doctoral Thesis, University of Dundee. UK
- Together for Short Lives (2013) *The Future of Hospice Care. Implications for the children's hospice and palliative care sector*. Bristol: Together for Short Lives.

Method

Because of the wide geographic spread of the study, self-administered online questionnaires were used. Trustees, senior staff and volunteers from independent adult and children's hospice organisations listed in the Hospice UK Directory 2012 were invited to take part. Separate questionnaires were developed for the different participant groups with core questions common to all.

Data were analysed by hospice type, hospice size, participant group and country, enabling a range of information to be extracted and compared.

Of the 44 children's hospices in the UK at the time of the study, a minority comprising 18% (n=8) took part. These findings may therefore only be representative of this group of participants.

Findings

Findings indicated that volunteers:

- Are vital to the sustainability of children's hospices and to their ability to provide the level and range of services offered.
- Are seen as an integral part of the staff team, contrary to previous research.
- Are important, not only to the care of children and young people, but also to supporting families.
- Improve the quality of services offered to children and families.
- Are inextricably linked with the financial success of organisations in terms of income generation and cost-effectiveness.
- Play a key role in community engagement and public education.
- Help in breaking down taboos around children's hospice care making such care more accessible.
- Wish their skills to be used in more meaningful ways.

Findings also indicated that:

- Hospices were committed to developing volunteering roles in every area of work – particularly in providing support to children, young people and their families.
- A small number of hospices stated that they would close if they did not have the involvement of volunteers.
- Volunteering is influenced by a range of factors including: societal changes, national policy, changing demographics, economic climate, volunteering expectations, organisational attitudes and local demography.