Volunteer Internships: Opportunity or Exploitation

Speakers:

- Ruth Leonard, Head of Volunteering Development at Macmillan Cancer Support.
- Ogo Ojukwu, Internships and Placements Manager at Macmillan Cancer Support.
- Kristen Stephenson, Volunteering Development Manager at NCVO.
- Justin Davis Smith, Executive Director of Volunteering and Development at NCVO.

1) Inaugural election of officers

Co-chairs:

- Baroness Pitkeathley (Labour Party)
- Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbots (Conservative Party)
- Nick Hurd MP (Conservative Party)
- Susan Elan Jones MP (Labour Party)

Vice chairs:

- Martin Docherty MP (Scottish National Party)
- Dr Paul Monaghan MP (Scottish National Party)

2) Charities (Protection and Social Investment) Bill

- Brief discussion of the Bill advanced by Baroness Hayter of Kentish Town.
- Charities encouraged to give their input and views on the Bill.

3) Volunteer Internships: Opportunity or exploitation

Justin Davis Smith, NCVO

- We have seen a growth in the number of internships. There has been a welter of criticism related to unpaid internships, and all sectors have come under fire for this. There have been calls for unpaid internships to be banned.
- It should be emphasised that there is no such thing in law as an internship. An intern in law is either an employee, worker or volunteer.
- NCVO’s position is that where an internship is a job it should be paid at least at the minimum wage. Where unpaid internships become a pre requisite for a paid work role then there are clear inequality of access issues.
- However there is also another story. There is growing evidence of the value of volunteering to the individual as well as to the organisation that they volunteer at and of course the wider community. It creates skills for employability, builds confidence and grows social capital.
- Into this mix of views and practices, Macmillan and other charities have found volunteer internships to be a very useful and positive addition to their volunteering programmes, alongside more episodic and micro forms of volunteering.
• Interns tend to like the term. It gives them kudos and the expectation of support from an organisation.
• Volunteer internships have significant value but for them to be justified they must be legitimate volunteering opportunities and not unpaid jobs.
• Charities must think about training and accessibility issues.
• NCVO has produced guidance in partnership with a number of charities on running a good volunteer internship programme.

Kristen Stephenson

• NCVO worked with a range of organisations, including Macmillan, to review the current situation and produce our guidance.
• We believe that the sector should produce the highest standards in how it treats and supports volunteers, ensuring that volunteer interns have a high-quality and useful experience, are treated fairly and within the law.
• Expectations about the role should be clear for both parties
• Key principles from the guidance are:
  1. Be clear what the role is and its purpose before recruiting
Voluntary organisations must be clear about the status of the role- whether it is most appropriate for the intern position to be a volunteer, worker or employee role.
  2. Ensure that a volunteer internship is a genuine volunteering opportunity
So it should fit with the widely accepted definition of volunteering which is:
  ‘an activity freely undertaken that involves spending time unpaid doing something to benefit the environment or individuals or groups other than or in addition to close relatives’.

Roles within organisations change and develop over time, and so it is important to review the status of roles and the nature of the relationship with the organisation on a regular basis. This can help to identify any potential issues early and ensure that there is always clarity about expectations.

3. Make sure volunteering opportunities are genuinely inclusive and accessible
Organisations should ensure volunteer internships are as accessible as possible, including to those who need to support themselves financially, claim benefits, study or care for others. For instance, organisations should:
  • Always pay out-of-pocket expenses.
  • Offer part-time roles and ensure all volunteer internship roles are built with the capacity to be flexible around individuals' needs or other commitments.
  • Set fair entry requirements.
  • Be flexible on location and length of volunteer internship.
  • Advertise the role. Ensure equal access by advertising each opportunity, not just providing opportunities for existing volunteers or via other volunteers or staff.
4. Support volunteer interns in accordance with good practice standards in volunteer management.

5. Ensure that volunteer intern positions do not undermine fair recruitment procedures

Organisations should avoid implying that undertaking a volunteer internship in an organisation will lead to a paid opportunity within the same organisation, as this can be misleading and may be seen to be prioritising those with the means to volunteer.

6. Provide regular opportunities for evaluation and regular feedback

This ensures that the experience of both volunteers and the organisation continually improves.

7. Recognise the contribution of volunteer interns

Organisations should ensure they recognise volunteer interns’ efforts in the same way that they do all volunteers who contribute across their organisation, through appropriate channels such as awards and thank-you events.

Ruth Leonard, Macmillan Cancer Support

- Macmillan offer volunteer internships and these form one element of a wider volunteering team.
- This is an excellent way of both reaching and inspiring an audience.
- It is really important for Macmillan to ensure that it is meeting the varying needs of people with cancer. This audience gives us that way of doing this. Volunteer interns bring different views and perspectives on this.
- Macmillan offer flexibility so that everyone can participate in their volunteer internship scheme. So they have volunteer interns across the country and some people are also able to work from home if that suits them better. For example, the role of a social network intern can be taken on remotely.
- The volunteer opportunities are project based and are designed so that person participating can learn new skills. The experience prepares them for future roles. These roles are not necessarily with Macmillan although 20% of volunteer interns do end up taking on paid employment with Macmillan. Volunteer interns are also given extra career coaching with tips on interview techniques.
- Case study: one volunteer intern took on a project that involved interviewing people affected by cancer. This former intern is now working on Macmillan’s End of Life programme.

Ogo Ojukwu, Macmillan Cancer Support

- The example of the volunteer intern who interviewed people affected by cancer shows how volunteer internships can be made flexible and successful. The intern in question had just finished university and had a retail job. Her role at Macmillan was designed to fit around those commitments. So she came to the office two days a
week and then went to meet people out of the office to gather the information for case studies.

- Macmillan provided her with support from a mentor as well training, both online and internally.
- The benefit of the internship scheme works two ways. Interns see the experience as instrumental in helping them get later roles. Often Macmillan interns also move onto other charities and NHS graduate schemes. They have received training and support which was flexible unlike education. It is also really beneficial for Macmillan to have an individual speaking to cancer sufferers in person. It is highly valuable to have patients’ voices forming the basis of an awareness campaign.

**Question and Answer Session**

**Defining internships and volunteering**

Susan Elan Jones MP raised the question of whether there should be such a thing in law as an internship and when internships should be paid. Justin Davis Smith said that if the internship is clearly a job it should be paid. However there is also a real value in a proper volunteer role. Ruth Leonard added that the volunteering aspect is very important. Baroness Howard stressed her view that it is difficult to define the difference between an internship and volunteering.

Regarding terminology, Justin Davis Smith said that the evidence suggested young people liked the term internship. It has different connotations to that of general volunteering. There is an expectation of skills development so it is slightly different.

**Accessibility**

Baroness Howard raised the question of accessibility regarding internships. Ogo Ojukwu said that at Macmillan they had piloted a scheme for 16 year olds to tackle accessibility issues. The scheme was aimed at young people who were the first in their family likely to attend university. Macmillan tries to make volunteer internships as flexible as possible for people so that they can afford to be interns and pay out of pocket expenses.

Baroness Howard agreed that work experience schemes like the one described are a good start but that we do have to consider some of the accessibility issues around the most prestigious internship roles, like those in Parliament. If some of these roles should be paid then it is an issue of definition. Martin Docherty supported Baroness Howard’s point and said that social accessibility is an issue even as regards volunteering placements. He suggested that the living wage should be paid to all interns and that charities should be strongly encouraged to do this. Justin Davis Smith stressed that if the role in question is in fact a job then it should be paid. However if the role is a volunteering one then the situation is different. It is important not to allow legitimate criticisms to wash away really good volunteering opportunities. The issue should not be regarded as a clear cut one.

The panel discussed the availability of volunteer internships to those in the welfare system, the disabled and older people. The panel agreed that there was little research into the way the welfare system encourages volunteering and Kristen Stephenson said that a major challenge is that there is limited research on volunteer internships in the voluntary sector. Ogo Ojukwu explained that at Macmillan there are no age restrictions on who can be a
volunteer intern. Often there are people who are changing career or are parents going back to work. There are also opportunities for skilled professionals. Ruth Leonard stressed that roles at Macmillan are open to everyone and they are as accessible as they can be. Justin Davis Smith said that NCVO is pushing for a new access to volunteering fund. There is a well-established access to work fund and NCVO is hoping to see something similar regarding volunteering.