



Plenary discussion

The concluding discussion of the conference focussed largely on how the voluntary and community sector defines itself and its values. Its engagement with the public sector could increase the confusion between the two. However, although they may have some common interests and shared values, and partnership is both unavoidable and desirable, they are bringing different strengths to the table.

The VCS has the capacity to make small resources go a long way, to think creatively and to draw upon their special relationship with the communities in which they work. They need to be clear about their own strengths and values in order to avoid subsuming those to the government agenda. Combining together can increase their strength and morale, and introduce efficiencies, but they need to educate government into recognising the value of small organisations and their different contributions.

We are in a process of change. Major changes in the LSC will impact upon the voluntary and community sector and add to the necessary changes the sector is going through. Good communication is of the essence.

This edition of the Working Together newsletter is devoted to a report of our recent Conference – ‘Changing Times’ – which looked at the changes facing the voluntary sector and the role of learning and training in responding to these new demands. The two main speakers, from the Learning & Skills Council (LSC) and National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), together with the workshop leaders, encouraged participants to consider and discuss the implications of these changes. They suggested that, given the right preparation, the voluntary and community sector (VCS) might be able to use them as an opportunity rather than a threat.

Learning and training Julia Baron, Chief Executive, Community Council of Shropshire

‘Working Together’ – the LSC national strategy for work with the sector – highlights the three key roles of the VCS: as a major employer, as a provider of education and training, and as channel for communication with, and source of expertise about, disadvantaged groups.

This experience and expertise enables the sector to make maximum use of limited and year-on-year funding. In its role as an infrastructure body, the Community Council of Shropshire provides the free Voluntary Sector Learning Network, produces the ‘Working Together’ newsletter, and has developed the VSLIP website – the main portal for those VCS organisations involved in learning and training. Other information available includes a Digest of Training Courses, a Directory of Trainers, and a list of

Shropshire Community Venues suitable for use for this area of work.

One of the biggest projects, Getting Qualified, offers free access to NVQ Level 3 for the voluntary sector in a joint partnership between six VCS organisations and two FE colleges. NVQs are particularly applicable to the sector because they give the status of nationally recognised standards, via work-based assessment, to the skills and competence that volunteers are already demonstrating in the work they do.

There has been a high take-up rate, with only 20 places left of the original 150 target learners, and 3 places left from the funding for 12 assessors. A wide range of subjects have been taken up, from Children’s Care, Learning & Development to Advice & Guidance.

All this necessitates a demanding process of sourcing funds, tendering for work and negotiating contracts. Working together with the LSC is therefore essential and offers great potential in enabling the provision of locally relevant training.

Contact:
jean.garner@shropshire-rcc.org.uk

Changing Times Cheryl Turner, Senior Policy Manager, LSC

One of Cheryl’s major concerns is to ensure that there is a voluntary and community sector dimension to the work of the LSC and she joined the LSC after 20 years in the VCS in order to promote this strategy. She is

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responsible for the **'Working Together'** strategy which encourages and facilitates co-operation between the LSC and the VCS. This co-operation is important for three reasons

- the VCS has substantial expertise in supporting disadvantaged groups
- the VCS can play a significant role as a provider of learning and skills
- the VCS is itself a major employer.

Cheryl discussed the implications of the **'Agenda for Change'** for both the LSC and the VCS. Both will need to adapt their strategies and processes in order to maximise the benefits of co-operation. For example, for the LSC to enable the VCS to access direct mainstream funding, the latter may need to adapt the way they operate.

The LSC's agenda to transform the post-16 learning and skills sector should engage the VCS not just in its role as employer (the VCS employs more people than the car industry or agriculture) but because hard-to-reach learners are often most effectively reached by the VCS.

In addition, although the easy-to-reach but underskilled are going into FE courses and colleges, the requirement in the **Learning & Skills Act 2000** for 'proper and reasonable' provision reflects the lack of effective provision in some FE colleges. The Agenda for Change Prospectus (August 2005) was built on discussion with FE colleges and did not involve the VCS but the sector is now being included in the discussions as to how each theme of the agenda might be implemented.

The emphasis on **Quality** of provision has implications for those FE providers who are offering poor quality provision (and may therefore lose contracts) and VCS organisations who may be eligible to apply

for them but could need help in setting up the quality systems to demonstrate and monitor the good work they are already doing. Accordingly the LSC is working with NIACE to consider how this might be provided.

The LSC needs to acknowledge that the provision of **Skills for Employers** is also relevant to the VCS, both in their capacity as employers themselves and in their potential as providers, working to a set of quality standards and awarded a Quality Mark to demonstrate their capacity to offer viable and specialist support to businesses.

The key issue is **Funding** and the major change is towards simplification of previously complex allocation processes in order to treat all providers equally, in an open and competitive tendering process. Thus although there is a statutory requirement to allocate a proportion of funding to the FE colleges other areas of LSC work are gradually being opened up to open and competitive tendering.

This new funding strategy will come into effect in 2007-8 and will not imply a sudden change from FE to VCS provision but there will be a more detached look at what the FE colleges are providing. This is going to present a 'crisis and opportunity' to the VCS and the sector needs to be prepared for it. Small organisations may find it difficult to engage in the process but the suggestion is that they might work in partnership with FE or with each other.

The simplification process is also being applied to the collection of **Data**. Data collection about the work of the VCS can be onerous and may not be used to its full extent. Currently learners are not tracked

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relevant personnel, and a checklist. There is a need to keep bureaucracy to a minimum.

In-house training might benefit from outside speakers, and taster sessions could be offered to motivate uptake. On-going training, for additional skills, needs good support and supervision and the benefits can be maximised by follow-up and by efficient recording. Accredited training, often provided at FE colleges, may need to be 'sold' to the volunteers. Though it can offer them long-term benefits beyond their volunteering it may be difficult to motivate them to take on extra tasks and they may find them difficult to access.

On the job training may seem more relevant to them. It may involve one-to-one training and a degree of self-monitoring so again it will require support, supervision and monitoring. Access to training beyond the volunteer role is a question of personal development and requires skills within the organisation to identify what will be relevant and useful to the individual.

Louise used the example of Home-Start North Shropshire & Oswestry to demonstrate a comprehensive training programme. They offer a Preparation Course for new volunteers, now accredited at OCN Level 1, which includes Induction to volunteering and Induction to Home-Start; and In-house training for groups of volunteers, including outside speakers. In all 30 hours of training are provided, taking the volunteers through Legal issues e.g. Child Protection, personal safety, confidentiality; the Role of the volunteer; Support and supervision; Attitudes and Values; and Home Visiting. Longer term volunteers can access NVQ Level 2 Advice and Guidance. Workshop participants were then asked to

look at the barriers to volunteer training and possible solutions.

These may be to do with attitudes. Fear of training can be worsened by negative feedback from other volunteers; commitment to the full process may be lacking; or there may be over-confidence and a feeling that training is not needed. * Much of this can be overcome by involving the volunteers in developing the programme; offering peer support; offering taster sessions to tempt volunteers into the process; and recognising achievements as they are made.

There may be practical problems for volunteers – of time, other responsibilities and access to venues. *These might be eased by linking volunteers (for transport and for mutual support); seeking out accessible venues; and by making the training itself attractive and enjoyable so that it becomes a first choice for the volunteer.

There are also practical problems for the organisation, in sourcing funding and the right trainers. * These may be skills that the organisation personnel need their own training for.

Finally there is the need to make training appropriate to the volunteer so that they want to, and can, engage with it. * This requires a sensitive awareness on the part of the organisation personnel. Are they knowledgeable and sensitive on literacy and numeracy issues? Are they providing the information and skills relevant to the volunteer? Is the information that is presented jargon-free and is it delivered appropriately?

Contact: louise@nsvb.fsnet.co.uk

Future working together

Sue concluded with a series of questions for discussion and this enabled VCS representatives to voice their concerns. How will local needs be represented at regional level? If contracting happens at regional level there is some concern that this will give undue weight to the big urban providers and that provision will concentrate in urban centres. Might this also limit innovation and creativity if small organisations are working in competition with the standard players? Working in partnerships or consortia could however ease the pressure on small organisations and encourage constructive exchange.

It is not the case that tenders will only be offered to bodies which already have provider approval, but accepted bodies will then have to go through the process. Bodies will have to be offering something that other organisations aren't, so should not go through all the hoops until they know that they have a viable product to offer. And if the VCS is advised to form into consortia to better engage with this process there is an obligation on government to also operate in a joined-up way, so that a VCS organisation that is working in partnership with, for example, the health service, does not lose its investment in that process if a service is unexpectedly cut back.

Tender processes can be quite time-compressed and this can exclude the VCS from the process if they need to get a partnership together. The LSC needs to think about advance notice of intention to tender and to be clear about exactly what they want from approved contractors, including what data is

required. This should then help the VCS provider to put in enough of a bid to cover their full costs to run the service.

Contact: sue.marston@lsc.gov.uk

Training for Volunteers

Louise Stokes, Chief Officer, North Shropshire Voluntary Action

Working in partnerships or consortia could ease the pressure on small organisations and encourage constructive exchange.

This was a very comprehensive presentation of all the different forms of volunteer training, ranging from induction to access to training beyond the volunteer role. It began from the premise that volunteer time is a valuable resource that needs to be maximised and recognised by appropriate training at each stage.

Induction is the process of preparing volunteers for a clear relationship with your organisation, giving them an understanding of the organisation and their role in it.

Training is the process of preparing volunteers to perform the work of your organisation and should include the information and skills but also the attitudes and approaches they need to successfully perform the work.

Coaching is the process of developing and upgrading skills and follows a three step process - a demonstration of the skill to be learned or improved; observation of the volunteer trying out the skill; and feedback and analysis.

The workshop participants spent time considering what training they gave their volunteers and identifying what worked and what didn't. Induction might include information packs, meetings with

over the whole course of their learning, which might take them from an introductory course at the village hall to a full college qualification. Nor are all VCS organisations necessarily targeting LSC qualifications. The establishment of Common Data Definitions and the Unique Learner Number should enable effective recording and analysis of what is being provided and what trainees are achieving.

All of this has implications for the way the LSC operates and the resulting re-organisation includes the priority to create smoother liaison with the VCS, specifically with the provision of a named contact in every LSC team. In order to prepare the VCS to contract with the LSC the sector will be encouraged to form Consortia. (Different arrangements will be needed for national VCS organisations which will have individual national contracts rather than working through consortia, but will still be able to work regionally in liaison with the regional LSCs and can co-operate with local consortia.) With more precisely defined quality standards and funding processes the LSC will be unable to contract with lots of small organisations and will be looking towards bodies that show a clear awareness of, and the capacity to deliver to, LSC targets.

So life may be tougher for VCS organisations but may also be more rewarding. FE colleges will be encouraged to retain no more than 15% of the LSC funding when they franchise out to other providers if they are not doing a significant proportion of the work (previously it could have been as high as 60%). In addition the White paper on FE published this week suggests that the VCS along with other

providers will now be able to apply for capital costs of their provision (previously this was only possible for FE providers) though this has still to be refined by the DfES. There may also be things that the VCS can do better than the FE colleges. Better co-operation between the LSC, the colleges and the VCS will ensure that work is not duplicated, that it is done in the most effective way, and that the rewards are equitable.

The priority for the LSC is therefore to emphasise the importance of the VCS as providers and employers, to inform the sector of opportunities as they develop, to encourage and enable the formation of consortia, and to support the sector in its partnerships with FE colleges. The onus on the VCS is to prepare itself for the new agenda by ensuring that is working to LSC priorities and targets. 'Mission drift' can be a waste of energies. To become an approved provider an organisation, or consortia, will need the capacity to provide the quality standards, data and management information systems that will give it an equal place in the field.

Subsequent questions expressed concern at the lack of capacity in the VCS to establish yet another set of quality standards, to do the tendering and to set up consortia (and even the desirability of setting up another layer of the VCS structure). However Cheryl confirmed that most of the quality assessment will be via self-assessment, that training will be available for this and for consortia building and that the LSC website contains information in toolkits about the characteristics and establishment of consortia.

Contact: cheryl.turner@lsc.gov.uk

Public service reform and rural policy in the VCS

**Claire Steel, Rural Policy Officer,
National Council for Voluntary
Organisations**

The reform of public services, and how they are delivered, is at the heart of the political agenda. The government wants public services that are accountable to their users, devolved to, and reflecting, local areas but satisfying national minimum standards.

There are opportunities here for the voluntary sector, and NCVO and other national bodies have been working to involve the sector in the agenda for public service reform while at the same time maintaining the independence of the sector.

The emphasis on the local context, with Local Area Agreements responding to local needs, could facilitate greater user involvement and develop services that are relevant to their context and therefore more sustainable. The onus is on the VCS to make themselves aware of the agenda and decide how they can best work with government to secure the best terms for the sector and, where rural organisations are concerned, to 'rurally proof' the process.

Government has given a lot of thought to its relationship with the VCS and the sector's role in public service reform over the past few years but this has not necessarily been reflected in changes on the ground. The Treasury cross-cutting review (2002) was one of the most important documents to have come out of government, since the VCS can quote its recommendations on improving funding and contracting practices.

In order to check how far these recommendations have actually been implemented a National Audit Office study asked NCVO to research the experience of service delivery organisations. Although 37% of VCS income comes from government, the VCS receives only 2% of public expenditure on public services, so there is huge potential for expansion. In addition, although there is not a major difference between urban and rural contractors, a greater number of contracts go to large national organisations. A greater understanding of how small rural organisations work would not only result in more appropriate contracts but would accord with the emphasis on locally based provision. These are the experts on their local communities.

Perhaps even more important than their knowledge, experience & expertise, what the VCS can bring to the field of public service delivery is a different perspective. Their experience of the community also brings a relationship with the community. Working from a different motivation (often expressed as their 'mission') they are more likely to be working in ways that emphasise user involvement and choice and encourage mutual trust between service provider and client.

The actual process of public service delivery can therefore become part of the mission, and the VCS needs to ensure that the way contracts are written reflects this. Contracts will also, of course, reflect government commitments to equity, universality and accountability, and these constraints will limit the flexibility of the organisation. They may also place it at risk of over-expansion, unsustainable development and the problem of having 'all its eggs in one basket'.

Framework for Achievement which offers accreditation for smaller modules which can be added to.

All the learning offered must be of high quality, delivered by people with the appropriate qualifications. These may initially be tutors with experiential rather than paper qualifications but they themselves can be offered the opportunity to go on to get a recognised qualification. And underpinning the quality of tuition should be a high standard of infrastructure and support including buildings fit for purpose and co-ordinated provision.

Funding Priorities

The government's top priority are 16-18 year olds, followed by the first full Level 2 (the employability level), the Skills for Life programme which is concerned with literacy and numeracy skills and on which 80% must be working towards an accredited qualification, and the Level 3 in skill shortage areas.

At the other end of the spectrum is the Personal Community Development Learning programme where the learning is for learning's sake, perhaps as a leisure activity, and there is no programme of progression and no need to sit qualifications. It is the section between these two, offering independent living skills or provision for offenders, that is being squeezed.

Engaging with the VCS

In Shropshire the LSC is working with the Community Council and Telford & Wrekin CVS and has reached more than 450 voluntary and community organisations, identifying nearly 2,250 learners from the sector, while other work is being done through the FE

colleges. Working in co-operation has also made it more possible to access funding – from the European Social Fund, Local Intervention and Development Funds, and Information, Advice & Guidance contracts. Consolidating and maintaining a local infrastructure is vital to the continuing stability of the VCS. If it is lost it is very difficult to re-build.

The Agenda for Change

Colleges and other providers will be valued by employers if they provide the skills they need. The Quality Mark will make demands on the VCS but offer them rewards, and could be achieved largely by self-improvement and self-assessment. Simplifying funding routes and data collection (via the Unique Learner Number) will reduce the administrative burden and improve efficiency. Promoting best practice, monitoring quality of provision, and marketing it well, will all increase the reputation of the sector.

Because of all these changes the LSC needs to go through its own training process and a significant restructuring. Recognising that sudden change is destabilising, it is working to a long-term vision, and liaising with the VCS to enable the sector to prepare for the new demands and possibilities.

The new LSC structure and the changes this will bring

The local LSC team will be reduced from 50 to 13 and will work in partnership with the Hereford & Worcester LSC. Contracting will happen at regional level, to avoid duplication. VCS providers should take time to consider what they are offering and what they are signing up to in order to ensure that they can deliver it.

There will always be constraints on time and money. Individuals re-training can lose their salary. There is also a cost in tendering and managing contracts.

* Building full cost recovery into contracts can allow contracts to reflect the extra demands on the organisation and also reflect its wider mission.

There is a danger that the voluntary sector will be regarded as (and exploited as) a public sector workforce on the cheap.

* Could the sector turn this to their advantage by using their power to shape contracts? They have a huge free workforce i.e. volunteers; they are independent bodies; and they have a wider mission – not just offering public services but empowering people who use those services.

There are increasing constraints of legislation (e.g. Food hygiene) and standards of qualification necessary (e.g. for Early Years work). Volunteers can be deterred from putting themselves forward for training.

* It is important to work to those constraints that are necessary, but not create unnecessary demands; making training appropriate but not intimidating; and tailoring it to the needs of the individual (including attention to cost, location and timing). It is partly a question of how training is marketed. The sector needs volunteers to come forward. Volunteers may welcome the chance to get skills.

Volunteers may feel they are working in isolation and that the considerable effort they need to put into training is not valued.

* Evaluation and feedback is vital, not just to tailor future training but to feedback to volunteers the value of their participation. Success stories can be

shared and volunteers can both influence and re-inforce each other. Residential courses, group work, and shared meals all make this more possible, and more fun, serving to motivate those involved and increase the likelihood of word-of-mouth encouragement to other potential trainees.

Contact: simonc@rawm.co.uk

Working together locally – LSC and the voluntary and community sector

Sue Marston, Head of Regeneration, LSC

In her workshop Sue Marston looked at how the Working Together strategy impacts on the local VCS; how the LSC chooses its priorities currently; and how the Agenda for Change will affect the way the LSC purchases skills from and works with the local VCS.

Local Priorities

The LSC sets national, regional and local priorities but these last are also gathered from the ground up. Stimulating a demand for and increasing uptake of learning is a matter not only of offering a wide choice but of communicating the opportunities to the right target groups, in particular those marginalised groups that have most to gain but are least likely to get involved in training.

Engaging with employers offers them the support they need and ensures that the relevant skills are offered, so there is an increasing focus on joint investment with employers. Level 2 is fully funded. For Level 3 employers put in 50% of funding. Offering a range of learner pathways enables people to qualify through different routes. For example the

It is precisely because the VCS has different values to bring to public services that it should ensure that involvement in public service delivery does not dilute or threaten its independence. If voluntary organisations are clear about their own value and mission they will be better able to protect, and project, it in their dealings with government.

They will however need help to negotiate the tricky business of procurement and NCVO have been working to develop procurement guidance for the sector, set up a network of VCS procurement officers, and establish a Collaborative Working Unit to work with smaller organisations. This unit can help organisations come together to offer public service delivery (www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/cwu), combining administrative functions such as HR and IT and creating mutual support.

NCVO has also produced two sets of terms of engagement on public service delivery, one for the sector and one for government, and both are available on their website. Some sections of government have only a confused, and even apprehensive, view of the voluntary sector, and the sector has the demanding task of improving its transparency and accountability to reassure its statutory partners.

The crisis in the countryside precipitated by Foot and Mouth prompted the Haskins Review and the Rural Social and Community Programme but the latter was for a limited period and much of the funding for rural regeneration is now

channelled through the Rural Development Agencies who have an economic and business emphasis that inevitable focuses on the cities in their region.

The new England Rural Development Programme will end the Rural Enterprise Scheme in its current form and the money will be spread wider, and therefore thinner. Local government will increase in importance and therefore the emphasis on local provision will increase. In the Comprehensive Spending Review everything is on the table.

These developments might increase the potential for VCS involvement but greater care will be needed to avoid exploitation. Taking public service delivery is a choice for the VCS. VCS engagement with government in public service provision needs to be prepared for, approached realistically and structured to preserve the VCS agenda.

Contact: claire.steel@ncvo-vol.org.uk

How voluntary and community organisations can connect with Skills for Life

Marie Kerwin and Colleen Wickstead, National Institute for Adult Continuing Education

The Skills for Life project is designed to provide flexible support, over relatively small time-spans, as requested by smaller VCS organisations to meet their needs for LLN skills. Appropriate help addressing their own particular

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needs is not always available to such organisations and the aim was to build their capacity so that further workforce development was sustainable, particularly through the development of partnerships and networks.

There are 7 million adults in England with low levels of literacy and numeracy. By raising awareness in the VCS of the Skills for Life agenda, organisations can be directed to appropriate, local help. The funding offers opportunities to both staff and volunteers. 3-hour practical sessions raise awareness of what it meant for the individual to have inadequate literacy and numeracy skills and also how this can impact on the wider community. An 18-hour course aims to provide the means to tackle those skill shortages, including additional skills to build relationships with clients in order to support them, recognise avoidance strategies and other blocks to training, and the capacity to signpost them to other services to further improve their life chances.

In 2006 the DfES agreed funding for three regions, of which Shropshire was one, to be divided between 3-5 organisations. There was a fairly tight timetable, but a simplified application process helped organisations to bid for support and the five successful applicants were Home-Start North Shropshire & Oswestry, Homeless in Oswestry Action Partnership, North Shropshire Furniture Scheme, The Pre-School Learning Alliance and The Walled Garden.

Each organisation had a one-to-one interview with the Regional Development Officer, an action plan was agreed, and support, information and resource materials were offered as appropriate, with meetings held only when necessary.

Three of the successful Shropshire organisations described their experience of the project and what they had used the funding for.

The Homeless in Oswestry Action Partnership advice officers offer help with housing problems such as failing tenancies, plus a furniture recycling scheme, and were interested in developing the literacy and numeracy skills of both volunteers and clients. They decided Internet facilities were a priority and used the NIACE funding for a mobile phone and laptop so that the technology could be taken into people's houses. Courses were offered to people who wanted to do them. Confidence building was important but having the courses house-based provided a good start. Thus a small amount of money has gone a long way.

One positive aspect of this for the organisation was the actual process of focusing on what needed to be done and how to do it. Entering the world of training, which has its own language and complexities, was a challenge, but managing this was itself re-inforcing for the organisation.

The Pre-School Learning Alliance works with 15,000 pre-schools and 500,000 young children across England. Their aim is to help children to succeed, create the childcare which families need, and build learning communities. They are already a recognised provider of high quality training and were keen to work with NIACE to provide awareness of the Skills for Life strategy to staff and volunteers. This could then be carried out to Toddler Groups and provide opportunities for parents to access their own learning while supporting their children's learning.

Activity included the delivery of awareness raising training sessions to staff and volunteers, the development of an induction pack, six workshop sessions for parents and children and the provision of resource boxes for development workers. Attention was also paid to evaluation, making the project sustainable and adapted to local needs. Individuals were identified to progress to Level 2 Certificate in Learner Support.

The greatest challenge was motivating volunteers to give extra time to the process and more time, and therefore further funding, is needed to carry it forward. The benefits to the organisation are already evident in terms of the raised awareness of abilities and needs of staff, volunteers and parents, and a new approach to developing publicity and other material.

Home-Start North Shropshire & Oswestry used their funding to train staff and volunteers to pick up skill shortages and signpost people to training. The 3-hour awareness session is an eye-opener, giving a personal understanding of the daily difficulties faced by the low-skilled. Volunteers receive training to help clients with their skill shortages but volunteers have their own training needs which the awareness raising enables them to recognise and acknowledge.

This then increases their sensitivity to the needs of clients, giving openings for admission of need. It has also led to the development of materials that are reader-friendly, and an emphasis on talking things through as an addition to written material.

The funding has allowed time for the organisation to address training needs while not impinging on their core work. The challenge is to incorporate these

approaches in all future work and ensure sustainable funding to do so.

Contact: marie.kerwin@niace.org.uk

Workforce Development Simon Cottingham, Rural Action West Midlands

Simon approached the issue of workforce development for the voluntary sector in Shropshire by splitting the workshop participants into two groups. Their task was to look at the problems or barriers, for both organisations and individuals, regarding Demand and Supply respectively.

Once the two groups had drawn up their lists they were asked to problem-reverse, i.e. to consider how the problem or barrier could be turned to an advantage. People found this quite hard to do because we could not think of many positive aspects to our problems. We were then asked to use any of the problem-reverse ideas to come up with positive solutions.

Those working within the voluntary sector, whether as volunteers, paid staff or committee members, can face heavy demands on their time; feel a lack of confidence (for e.g. working on a management committee); or feel the need for training.

* The solution to this might be to make training more accessible, appropriate to the worker and the organisation, and less 'heavy', and to acknowledge that there is also a value in the experience and understanding they already possess. Committee members might then be less intimidated by the prospect and even regard it as an enjoyable bonus.