



## **Improving access to volunteer-led services through sharing practice, opportunities and training - Hard 2 Reach London Forum**

Organisations who use volunteers to deliver services to people facing social exclusion are coming together to share their experiences, skills and resources. The Hard 2 Reach London Forum aims to plug some of the gaps and improve access to services through collaboration. Set up in 2007 as a loose alliance of organisations with common aims and interests, the Forum has already delivered tangible benefits in terms of enhancing volunteer recruitment and training processes and delivering help to vulnerable clients. And this is only the beginning.

### **Who's involved?**

---

The Forum was initiated and is convened by UBS (Universal Beneficent Society). It brings together approximately thirty local and national organisations who operate in London, including charities, NHS Trusts, councils and volunteer centres. <sup>1</sup>

### **How did it start?**

---

The Forum took shape when Tina Dinch joined UBS as National Volunteer Manager in the summer of 2007. Part of her remit was to review and redesign the services delivered by volunteers. Tina decided that the best way to do this was to find out what was already happening in the field - and to collaborate with others. "I'd come from the NHS, where I was part of a group of managers from London Trusts who came together regularly to share experiences and ideas. There seemed to be much less sharing in the third sector."

Tina was particularly concerned about the "mire of difficulties" facing vulnerable end users who either do not know about services or do not feel able to take advantage of them. Local variations in service provision, poor or inaccurate information, and a lack of help in accessing services are major barriers. Tina wanted to explore the possibilities of improving services by sharing information and good practice, and by sharing volunteers between organisations.

Having identified around 100 organisations working locally and nationally with socially excluded groups, Tina e-mailed the CEOs, proposing the creation of a collaborative Forum. Her vision was of a network that would share operational resources - in particular, volunteer opportunities and training - but she knew that it would fail unless there was support from the top. The proposal was welcomed by many and the first Hard2R London Forum meeting took place in June 2007.

### **How does the collaboration operate?**

---

The Forum is open to all interested parties - there are no conditions or requirements of membership. Meetings are held every three to four months, with a focus on sharing expertise and experience. Although they are convened by UBS, their content is dictated by the group. Time is set aside to identify areas of common interest for future meetings. Members choose whether or not to attend based on agendas circulated in advance.

Forum meetings to date have included a training session on writing volunteer role descriptions, delivered by one of the members, and discussions of best practice in setting up new services, risk assessment and data protection.

A contact list of member organisations was produced and circulated early on, to encourage networking outside formal meetings. Indeed, it is the informal networking - the “chatting over coffee” - which Tina feels has produced some of the most valuable results.

Where specific projects are developed (see below), a Memorandum of Understanding is drawn up between the relevant parties.

### **What are the benefits?**

---

The Forum is allowing those working in the sector to develop a better understanding of what is available, helping them improve guidance to clients and target their own resources appropriately. It is building capacity - strengthening organisations’ ability to tackle practical issues such as the recruitment, training and use of volunteers.

The relationships developed through the Forum have inspired other joint activities. When setting up their new telephone befriending service, for example, UBS worked with another charity, Friends of the Elderly, who had a similar scheme in place. The two organisations shared information and experience which helped them work more effectively.

A collaboration between UBS and Help the Aged is expanding the number of vulnerable individuals who have emergency phones and know how to operate them.

Help the Aged provide the phones and train the UBS volunteers, who support clients during and after the installation.

A third bilateral partnership involves UBS and Wireless for the Bedridden, who provide televisions and radios to elderly and housebound clients but who do not have access to volunteers. The collaboration has provided TVs and digital radios, and the help in using them, to several dozen elderly people who would otherwise have been excluded.

### **... and the challenges?**

---

Currently, the Forum is not funded. Tina has taken the lead so far as she could see the direct benefits to her own work, as well as to others', but she acknowledges this is not sustainable in the long term. Submitting joint funding applications now seems to be the way forward - and the Forum has already laid some of the groundwork for this.

Tina also points out that the theory and practice of partnership working can be very different. "Many organisations talk about collaboration in their strategic plans", she notes, "but this often seems to dry up at operational level due to things like differing governance structures... There can be a tendency for organisations to work separately, jealously guarding their own pot. You sometimes have to be very creative to find a way through the tension... Organisations should realise there can be real cost benefits to sharing."

### **Top tips for collaboration**

---

- Question why you want to collaborate - if you can show a potential partner the benefits in terms of improved outcomes, they are more likely to want to work with you.
- Don't be afraid of making requests. "If you ask someone to help you, I find they usually do", Tina comments. "Be clear about what it is you're asking them to do, and how often or for how long."
- Exploit your collective expertise and experience. As Tina suggests, "People aren't always good at speaking up for themselves and yet they often have a huge amount of knowledge and expertise. Find ways of drawing them out."

### **Looking to the future...**

---

Tina can see huge scope for the network in terms of sharing resources and lobbying on important issues, in particular, access to services. A Forum conference in October will

take the Hard 2 Reach idea forward by showcasing organisations' work and promoting joint operational working. The Canary Wharf venue and catering are being provided for free by a financial institution.

While this kind of ad hoc financial support is very helpful, a longer term strategy for financing the Forum must be found. As well as looking at ways of supporting specific projects, such as the work with Help the Aged, Tina and her colleagues are exploring possible sources of funding for core Forum activities. She has no doubt that the work must go on: "There's never been a worse time in the sector, financially speaking. It's really important that resources are shared. Just do it!"

**Date:** April 2009

**Interviewee:** Tina Dinch (National Volunteer Manager at UBS, The Universal Beneficent Society)

This case study was collected by bassac as part of the Collaboration Benefits programme, <http://www.bassac.org.uk/our-programmes/collaboration/collaboration-benefits>

Thanks to Tina and the Hard to Reach Forum for sharing their experience.

---

<sup>1</sup> Reported member organisations (April 2009) were: Friends of The Elderly, Contact The Elderly, Mentoring and Befriending Foundation, Wireless for the bedridden, Pepper pot day centres, Epilepsy network, Stroke Organisation, Age Concern, Help The Aged, Independent Age, Volunteer Centre Ealing, London Older Peoples Forum, Volunteer Centre Lewisham, University College London Hospitals NHS Trust ( Voluntary Services), Action Trust for The Blind, Open Age, Florence Nightingale in Sickness Trust, Red Cross, RNID, RNIB, Westminster PCT, Volunteer Centre Wandsworth, Volunteer Centre Southwark, Volunteer Centre Tower Hamlets, Greater London Volunteering, Newham Volunteer Centre, Chinese Mental Health Association, WRVS London territory, Westminster PCT - commissioning, AFTAID, Get Walking, Community Network, NOVA, Multiple Sclerosis Society, Skill, Sante Project, Terrence Higgins Trust, St Giles Trust, London Catalyst, National Energy Action, John Ellerman Foundation, Blgrave Trust, Rayne Foundation, Harry Payne Com Trust, CHK Charities Ltd, Haberdashers Co, Goldsmith Co, Garfield Weston, Albert Hunt Trust