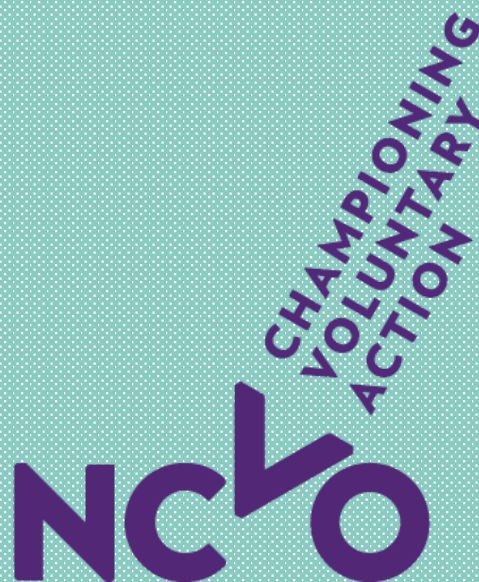




INTERIM LEARNING REPORT

NCVO Consultancy

December 2022



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1. Foreword: The wider volunteering context in the UK

The ambitions for the Active Kindness programme – to help Leisure Trusts develop their volunteering operations - comes at a pivotal time for volunteering in the UK. The NCVO Almanac 2022 notes that levels of formal volunteering (typically accounting for the bulk of volunteering undertaken through Trusts) fell sharply during the Covid-19 pandemic.¹ Although this event affected many types of volunteering, right across the Voluntary and Community Sector, Sport England’s Active Lives Survey confirms that sport and physical activity was hit particularly hard: 3.1m fewer adults volunteered between November 2020-21 compared to the previous 12-month period.²

The England-wide Vision for Volunteering exercise, undertaken in late 2021 and early 2022, picked up on many of the trends volunteer-involving professionals are grappling with as they seek to tackle these recruitment and retention challenges.³ And perhaps sensing similar issues, Sport England explicitly recognised the fundamental importance of volunteers to achieving their vision and mission in their new strategy, Uniting the Movement (2022-32).⁴ Realising the Power of People and Leadership is one of their five ‘catalysts for change’ through which the strategy focuses on supporting the development of volunteering in several areas, including:

Working with others to take an honest look at the support and experience for volunteers within our sector, focusing on what’s needed to make giving your time easy, meaningful and supported, now and for the future, and in doing so, reducing drop-out rates.⁵

Against such a backdrop the Active Kindness programme could not come at a more opportune time for Leisure Trusts. It offers the opportunity to step back and consider the role volunteering can play in Trusts’ visions and missions - and develop their capacities and capabilities to achieve this. This interim evaluation offers an early indication of potential programme and individual Trust outcomes, as well as valuable learning and reflection as we move from the pilot to the core phase of the programme.

¹ [NCVO Almanac 2022 - Volunteering](#)

² [Sport England Active Lives Survey 2021-22](#) (slide 26)

³ [Vision for Volunteering](#) (2022)

⁴ [Sport England Strategy - Uniting the Movement](#) (2022)

⁵ [Sport England Strategy - Uniting the Movement](#) (Full) (slide 37)

2. Introduction

This report summarises learning from the Active Kindness programme pilot. Active Kindness is funded by Sport England and delivered by Community Leisure UK (CLUK) in partnership with NCVO. NCVO is also responsible for the evaluation of Active Kindness.⁶

Active Kindness (AK) is a programme designed to build the Leisure and Culture Trusts' capacity for volunteer management and re-energise the volunteering experience in the sector. The programme wants Trusts and their volunteers to make a bigger difference together in their communities and wishes to contribute to achieving the long-term intended impact of *more active and connected communities*. The theory of change for AK including key activities and outcomes can be found in Appendix B.

The programme's main activities include:

- Programme of training and development sessions for Leisure Trusts
- Volunteer management audit and action plans
- Strategic development of volunteer programmes
- One-to-one support for developing volunteer programmes
- A grant of £12,000 for each Trust
- Training and mentoring for data collection, monitoring and evaluation development

Four Leisure Trusts have participated in the pilot stage of the programme, which started in 2019, and was paused during the critical stage of the pandemic (early 2020 – early 2022). The original delivery partners were CLUK, NCVO and Absolutely Cultured. Absolutely Cultured ended their involvement due to the pandemic. The programme restarted officially in April 2022 with the following Trusts:

- Your Trust Rochdale⁷
- Pelican Centre, Tyldesley
- Active Luton
- Hyndburn Leisure, Accrington

The purpose of this interim learning report is to provide an initial review of the planning and implementation stage, and early outcomes of the programme. This report focuses on the period following the restart of the programme to the end of 2022. A final evaluation will take place towards the end of the programme in 2023, and focus on outcomes.

Details of the methodology for the interim evaluation can be found in Appendix C.

⁶ Sport England, Community Leisure UK and NCVO are referred to as “partners” throughout this report.

⁷ Your Trust Rochdale disengaged from the pilot in October 2022 following staff sickness which affected their ability to take part. They did not take part in this evaluation or supply any data.

2.1 Key Performance Indicators⁸

| KPI | Progress at interim |
|---|---|
| 1. Production of a Volunteer Programme Toolkit for community leisure | A number of key assets have been developed, although they are yet to be brought together formally into a Toolkit. Including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AK brand pack • Trello board for programme engagement • NCVO support offer |
| 2. Production of a toolkit of resources for volunteer managers | The bulk of this will be developed during 2023. Progress so far includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing a basic structure for testing with new sites in early 2023 • Developing an anticipated inventory of resources to produce, source or co-produce with new sites |
| 3. Established network for volunteers | No progress yet, to be reviewed during 2023. |
| 4. Established network for volunteer managers | There is a monthly programme of engagement for the participating Trusts. New sites have been inducted and their engagement is sought to shape the network's content and support offer, using the Investing in Volunteers essentials process and 121 support from NCVO. |
| 5. 15 Trusts will be engaged in the programme delivery | 5 engaged for the pilot (one dropped out for financial reasons during the pandemic, another unable to take part in this evaluation). 10 new Trusts engaged for the full roll out of the programme. |
| 6. 375 volunteers recruited | 169 volunteers recruited so far by four Trusts in the pilot. |
| 7. 20% of volunteers engaged will be from lower socio-economic groups | 52% of volunteers were from lower socio-economic groups ⁹ |
| 8. 60% of volunteers engaged in this programme will be female | 70% of volunteers in the pilot programme identified as female |

740 hours of volunteering completed

⁸ Source for KPIs 1-5: AK programme managers. Source for KPIs 6-8: Data supplied by three remaining pilot Trusts.

⁹ Defined as residing in postcodes in the top quintile of deprivation as measured by the English Indices of Deprivation 2019. This means 52% of AK volunteers that we have postcode data for live in the top 20% most deprived areas in England.

3. Progress towards outcomes

To understand Trusts' progress towards outcomes identified in the programme theory of change, the evaluation team conducted interviews with participating Trusts' staff, volunteers and partners, and analysed administrative volunteer programme and experience data supplied by three pilot Trusts. Evidence has been assessed against outcomes 1-10 in the programme theory of change. Outcomes 11-14 are excluded from this assessment at this stage as they relate to longer term changes we would not expect to see yet.

Strong evidence that the programme has made progress towards:

- Trusts have a better understanding of the potential of volunteering
- Trusts are more able to include volunteers
- Volunteering is more effective
- Volunteering is more embedded across the Trusts
- Volunteers enhance their skills and capabilities
- Broader and more engaged volunteering base

Some evidence that the programme has made progress towards:

- Trusts are better able to connect the volunteers to inactive communities
- Trusts are better able to recruit a diverse range of volunteers from their community
- The community can influence Trust services

Limited evidence that the programme has made progress towards:

- Stronger volunteering movement in the leisure sector

We would not expect to see evidence of this change at this point in the programme.

3.1 Learning questions

The programme theory of change also details four learning questions:

| Learning question | |
|--|--|
| L1. What works in engaging priority communities and relative effectiveness of outputs and approaches | To be assessed at the final evaluation when longer term learning is available. |
| L2. Learning about if/how a broader volunteering base leads to a more active and connected community | To be assessed at the final evaluation when longer term learning is available. |

| | |
|--|----------------|
| L3. Learning about the benefits and effectiveness of the partnership | See section 5. |
| L4. Learning about creating a positive experience for volunteers | See section 4. |

4. Learning from volunteering development

This section summarises key learning from the volunteering development to date.

4.1 Embedding volunteering within Trusts

At the heart of AK was to increase Trusts' ambitions and motivation to embed volunteering to different areas of Trusts' work. Appendix A contains a case study of how this took place at one pilot Trust.

Managers agreed that participation in AK has increased the profile of volunteering within Trusts and helped to make the approach more structured and strategic. They talked about a "paradigm change" in their volunteer programmes and volunteer management. This was the case across the volunteer journey, from designing roles, policies and procedures, advertising and recruiting, onboarding, training and evaluating the volunteer experience. There was also a better understanding of how valuable volunteers can be across the organisation. The pilot Trusts were all considering how to maximise what they had gained from the initial investment to take forward the volunteering agenda. Specific examples of embedding and developing volunteering at Trusts included:

- Investing in volunteer management software
- Including volunteering in the Trust's new strategic plan
- Awareness raising with other staff and managers about the potential of volunteering
- Featuring volunteering in annual reports
- Setting targets around volunteering

Trusts created an average of six new roles each through the programme. In terms of future aspirations, they planned to maintain the new roles that had been created and explore other potential new roles for volunteers within their Trusts, in new areas of activity. At one Trust volunteering has been included in the new five year strategic plan and the volunteering agenda was integrated into their approach to people and culture as a whole.

"We wouldn't be where we are now if it weren't for the involvement of Active Kindness. It has really moved the volunteering agenda on."

Trusts where the AK manager was holding a more senior role were able to have a greater influence on the level of Trust engagement in volunteering development. However in other cases

where the AK manager's role was closer to delivery they had the benefit of being more embedded within and familiar with the local community. Staffing issues hindered engagement in the programme by one Trust.

4.2 Recruiting volunteers from diverse groups and new communities

Work on this at the Trusts was focussed on creating volunteer roles aimed at recruiting people from outside of the traditional leisure sector volunteers. Traditionally they would comprise of students from local colleges and Universities studying sports and leisure related courses, or qualified roles such as volunteer lifeguards. New roles included:

- Local heritage walk leader
- Gym buddy
- First aid assistant
- Soft play assistant
- Half term club assistant
- Food programme volunteer
- Library volunteer

To increase their reach within the local area, Trusts linked up with 'gate keeper' organisations such as GP surgeries, local refugee organisations, other local charities and community groups, schools in priority areas and social housing organisations. Other ideas around recruiting volunteers from diverse groups or new communities included:

- More use of social media
- Leaflets and posters with QR codes on that take them to volunteering information
- Online application form

4.3 Motivations to volunteer and benefits from volunteering

The Trusts collected data from new volunteers to understand their motivations to start volunteering and how satisfied they were by the experience.

The most common reasons for wanting to volunteer were to help people and make a difference, and to have fun. This chimes with findings from the most recent NCVO's Time Well Spent Report, which found that a sense of duty and desire to make a difference was one of the key motivations for volunteers during the pandemic.¹⁰ Scores for feeling valued and satisfaction levels from volunteer experience surveys were high, and almost all respondents said they would volunteer again in the future. The most recent national survey of volunteers found similar levels of satisfaction.¹¹ Between one third to one half of volunteers across the Trusts had never volunteered before. The most common skills volunteers said they gained were communication skills and confidence.

¹⁰ Time Well Spent: IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE, 2022, Rei Kanemura, Oliver Chan, Alex Farrow

¹¹ Time Well Spent: A National Survey on the Volunteer Experience, 2019, Amy McGarvey, Véronique Jochum, John Davies, Joy Dobbs, Lisa Hornung

In interviews with volunteers it was found that people decided to volunteer following or during a significant life change such as a job change, relationship change or a traumatic event. It is useful and important to understand some of these stories, and learn that each volunteer will have their own unique journey (whether or not they want to share them) so an individualised approach is key. Volunteers were not generally aware of Active Kindness branding. They were focussed on their specific role. The partnership should be mindful that volunteers don't necessarily think in terms of programmes. They are motivated by their own life's story and current situation.

"[I wanted] to do something for myself. I didn't just want to be a stay at home mum. It's beneficial for me because it keeps me physically fit for what I want to do as a career. I've got a social circle for myself."

The skills or benefits volunteers were gaining from their experiences varied depending on what they were involved in. Volunteers wanted Trusts to be friendly, understanding and organised.

"It's seeing somebody like that, and how much enthusiasm that they're getting from it...You can be a taker all your life, you can take from society, or you can start to give back a little bit" – Volunteer discussing supporting others in their role

4.4 How the community influences services

Opportunities for volunteers and communities to influence services happened in different ways depending on the individual Trust, its size and staff. Some ideas had been initiated already and some were still in the pipeline. These included:

- Key stakeholder groups (e.g. disabled people's groups, older people's groups) designed to work with the Trust around services and improvements relevant to that group.
- User groups hosted by a volunteer – these were intended to be less intimidating than speaking to staff members
- Consultation events run as drop-ins where people can have a brew and a chat
- Feedback forms on the website
- Anonymous surveys
- Relationship building in the community. This is less tangible than the above examples but it was evident in visits to the Trusts. Where AK managers were visible and well embedded in the community, there was evidence of community members feeling comfortable enough to approach, chat with or visit the office within a Trust to express their views. Although less formal than other opportunities, this is testament to the strong relationships that staff had built and maintained within their communities.

"We're a community led organization, it's generally that people would, they'll come in and tell us what they want and think ... some of them are quite vocal at the desk. ...They generally know that if the office door is open, it's not dark, they can just come in and say"

5. Learning from programme development

The evaluation explored the efficacy of the partnership including the extent of involvement by participating Trusts, and how successful partnership working has been.

5.1 Programme design and set-up

Overall, partners were generally positive about the current situation of the programme, and the success of the pilot stage.

“It certainly feels like at the moment the programme is in a good place going into its final year of delivery”

Trusts wanted more clarity on time commitment needed to take part in the programme to help mitigate some of the capacity issues in future cohorts. It was felt that there was a lack of clarity about the time commitment involved at the beginning of the programme. This, alongside general pressures on Leisure Trusts as a result of the pandemic and the cost of living crisis lead to some capacity issues and affected some Trust’s ability to take part in all aspects of the programme.

Trusts wanted more guidance and concrete suggestions of ways to engage diverse or new communities specifically. Despite this being one of the key aims of the programme it was not a major theme in evaluation discussions which often focussed more on the practicalities of volunteer management. There is potential to give this topic more prominence for the next cohort.

Trusts also mentioned that the most useful parts of the regular meetings with the other Trusts and the AK programme staff were very practically focussed i.e. workshop style, where they also get tools and guidance to take away with them (as opposed to general updates and chatting).

The grant provided to each Trust was intended as seed funding to support sustainably embedding volunteering. However perhaps unsurprisingly the one major improvement that all the Trusts spoke about was more funding. This would have enabled them to fund one role that was solely focussed on the volunteering offer, and a single point of contact for the community.

5.2 Peer networks

One of the key elements of the programme design was to establish a network for volunteer managers within the Trusts participating in the AK programme. The partnership approach was highly valued by all managers, the peer network providing a programme sounding board and a safe space to share ideas. One of the highlights of the programme was the visit to one of the Trusts to take part in a workshop.

“You’ve got a network of people who are on the same journey. That has saved us time and brought in additional resources without us having to pay for them”

Stakeholders felt it was important that these networks continue to be maintained.

5.3 Delivery challenges

The Covid-19 pandemic was the key challenge to the delivery of the programme. This resulted in the programme being put on hold for almost two years, and one of the original partners dropping out. It was also felt that working remotely had a detrimental effect, as it hindered the development of relationships somewhat and presented additional challenges to working practices and preferences. There were some differing opinions on how the process of re-starting the programme went and whether this should have happened faster or slower.

Personnel changes at CLUK and NCVO were identified as the second most significant challenge after the pandemic. It was believed that this sometimes contributed to a lack of clarity around expectations and aims since the beginning of the programme, and a lack of continuity after the programme was restarted and the other partner Absolutely Cultured dropped out.

5.4 Evaluation and data

This year, an individualised and flexible approach was taken to collecting data from Trusts for reporting purposes. However this may have contributed to incomplete data for some of the pilot sites. In the future, a standardised monitoring template will be used by all the Trusts to improve reporting.

Trusts don't necessarily see their volunteering activities as separated into 'Active Kindness' activity and 'non Active Kindness activity'. For Trusts it is more about developing their work as a whole, rather than doing something specifically 'Active Kindness'. This makes reporting KPIs challenging as there is not always a clear distinction between Active Kindness and non-Active Kindness volunteers. For the purposes of this evaluation, numbers of volunteers reported are those who are new since the beginning of the programme restart (April 2022).

The evaluation team requests Trusts to supply postcode information of volunteers to help to assess the extent to which the programme is reaching new volunteers from targeted communities. Some Trusts were not able to supply full postcode information for all volunteers despite consistent requests and reminders. This has restricted the ability to report on the proportion of volunteers from lower socio-economic areas. A more standardised approach to collecting this data during 2023 would help, rather than the individualised approach taken this year. Data collection was also hindered within larger Trusts where volunteer data is maintained by multiple people in different teams – most of whom have little involvement in Active Kindness.

Partners discussed potential modifications to the evaluation approach for the next cohort. There were some differing opinions regarding the type and frequency of insights needed – whether this is more regular quantitative data or less formal data collection and more regular informal insights.

The capacity of Trusts to supply data or take part in evaluative activities needs to also be considered.

5.5 Planning for future sustainability

All partners are looking ahead to the end of the programme, thinking about how to share the final learning and embed this across the sector to ensure the long-term sustainability of Active Kindness. It was felt that attendance at face-to-face events to share learning and increase visibility was preferable. However the capacity of partners to do so needs to be considered. Suggestions included:

- Attendance and presentation at the annual leisure industry exhibition at the ExCel centre
- Attendance and presentation at CLUK regional meetings
- Utilising NCVO's leadership in the volunteering sector, such as through the Vision for Volunteering Conferences
- Linking with the private leisure centre e.g. Serco

For the final evaluation next year, some different formats for sharing insights will need to be considered. For the leisure sector more widely a report may not be the most effective format.

6. Recommendations

Recommendations for Active Kindness programme delivery partners:

- Research methods and approaches to engaging diverse or new communities, and give this topic more prominence in the programme for the 2023 cohort.
- Create guidance for new Trusts on the timescales and time commitment
- Ensure the design of the sessions with Trusts always includes some practical take away element
- Include the Trust's perspectives on the resource needs in any advice for similar programmes.
- Continue using the Governance board to provide oversight for the programme.
- Continue close communication between partners to support the handover between Programme Managers at CLUK.
- Use some time in a future partners meeting to discuss and make a plan for maintaining their peer network beyond the end of the programme
- Ensure that there is an opportunity for the 2023 cohort Trusts to meet face-to-face.

Recommendations for Trusts:

- Celebrate and promote the success of the volunteering development aspect of AK.
- Pilot sites should continue to engage with the monthly learning sessions and the network for peer support.
- Promote charity status more to influence reputation locally with potential volunteers.
- Have a set of standardised volunteer roles and be also open to creating something bespoke for a potential volunteer with a specific skillset or interest.
- Create links with other organisations in order to reach diverse and new communities.

- Ensure that Trust social media and website contains up-to-date information about volunteering.
- Utilise the standardised data monitoring template supplied by NCVO in the future.

Actions for the programme delivery partners and governance group related to programme legacy:

- Use a future governance meeting to discuss plans for the legacy of the programme
- Research a schedule of potential events following the end of the programme
- Discuss capacity for actions following the end of the programme
- Consider the budget and time available for more accessible outputs for the final evaluation, e.g. videos, animations or podcasts
- Discuss evaluation approach for 2023 in January.
- NCVO to update the evaluation framework for the programme and create a standardised data monitoring template for the 2023 cohort to utilise to supply data.
- NCVO to communicate with policy colleagues internally regarding Vision for Volunteering conferences.

7. Appendix A: STAR CASE STUDY - Active Luton

Situation

Prior to their involvement in the Active Kindness programme, Active Luton had a very reactive volunteering programme with no dedicated staff resource. Like many Trusts, the pandemic hit staff and delivery levels hard - but through their involvement in the vaccine rollout it also gave them a valuable opportunity to engage volunteers in new ways, setting them up well for their involvement as a pilot site in 2022.

Task

Active Luton set out to create a more proactive volunteering programme, supporting the Trust's wider objectives. Their objective was to change the organisation's mindset and culture around volunteering, to make the programme more proactive, accessible and inclusive and to improve their ability to capture data and measure impact.

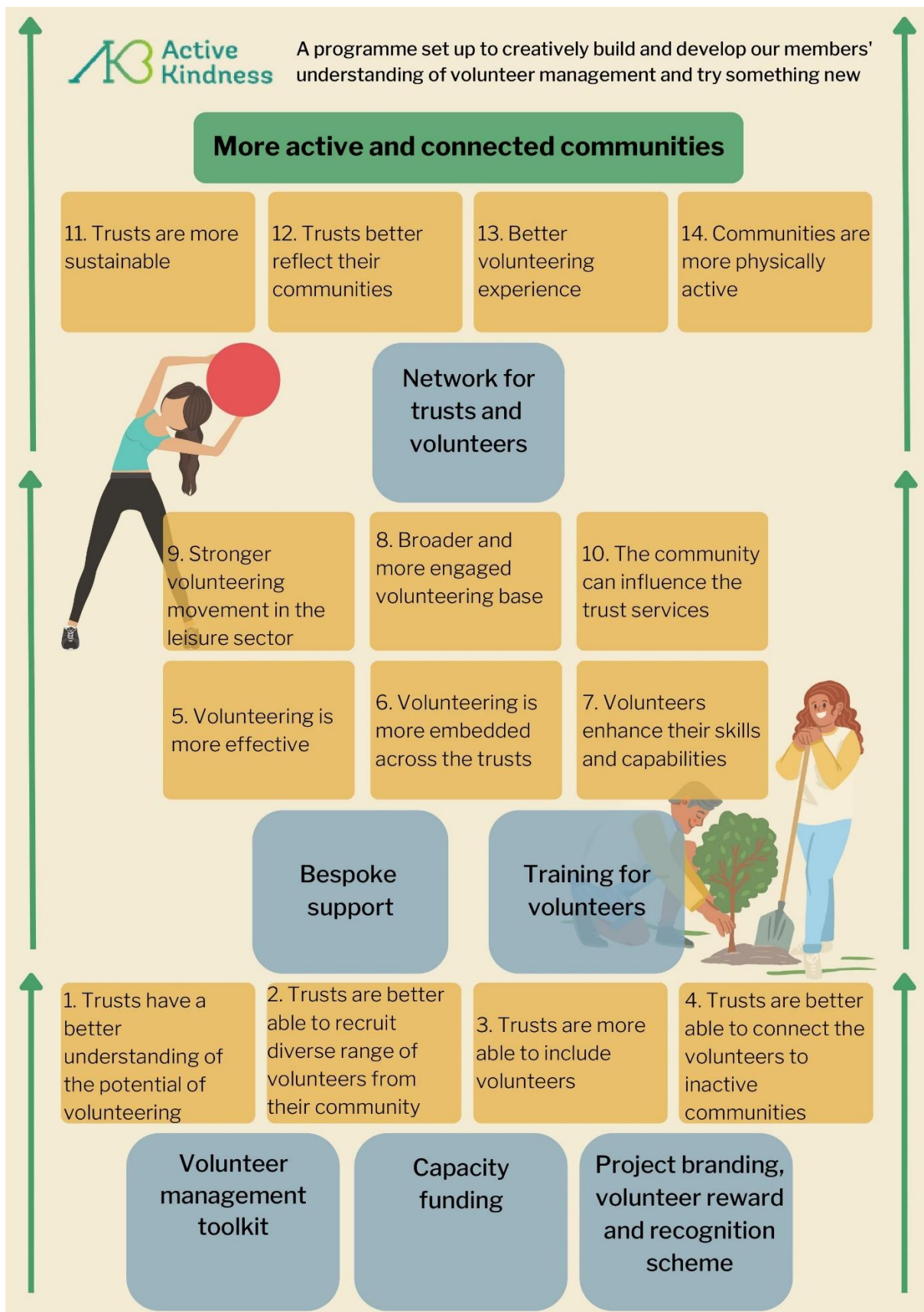
Activity

At a strategic level they used Active Kindness as a springboard to establish a strategic oversight group, which they used to refresh their policies and procedures and identify priority areas for recruitment supporting their libraries, healthy eating and school holiday activity programmes. This in turn led to the establishment of an internal delivery group, agreement on key volunteering metrics and an organisational commitment to a new CRM to support their efforts.

Result

Through their involvement in Active Kindness, they now have a strong, credible volunteering offer to take out into the community and handle requests to volunteer more proactively. Their data has improved and they are making good progress on increasing the diversity of their volunteers – 40% now come from culturally diverse backgrounds. Though implementation of the CRM has taken time, they are proud of their wider culture change on volunteering, particularly with the support of their senior team. They now see volunteering as a key asset in their future funding bids and are developing an exciting new volunteering partnership with the local University.

8. Appendix B: Theory of Change



What else needs to happen?

1. Culture-based programme can translate to leisure
2. Trusts are able to retain and put into practice their knowledge
3. Individuals from target communities want to volunteer
4. The programme is seen as an attractive proposition by trusts and they want to invest in the programme. Trusts are not joining to receive funding as main motivator
5. Trusts see that volunteers could be a significant part of their organisation
6. Trusts want to reflect their community
7. Volunteers have the capabilities, motivation and opportunities to engage local communities
8. Broader volunteering base leads to increased community involvement

What can we learn?

- L1.** What works in engaging priority communities and relative effectiveness of outputs and approaches
- L2.** Learning about if/how a broader volunteering base leads to a more active and connected community
- L3.** Learning about benefits and effectiveness of the partnership
- L4.** Learning about creating a positive experience for volunteers



9. Appendix C: Methodology

During 2022 NCVO supported Trusts to develop their monitoring and evaluation skills and processes. The four pilot Trusts received:

- A monitoring and evaluation training workshop
- Three one-to-ones with NCVO's evaluation consultant focussed on reviewing their current evaluation practice, identifying their individual goals and checking they had the processes in place to collect and report data needed for AK.
- Volunteer registration and experience survey templates.

In November 2022 NCVO received data from the three pilot Trusts that took part in the interim evaluation, and visited each of these Trusts to carry out face-to-face, primary data collection.

9.1 Evaluation methods

- Interviews with staff and volunteers at three Trusts, carried out by NCVO
- Interviews with three representatives of partner organisations carried out by NCVO
- One observation of an activity at a Leisure Trust was planned but only partially went ahead due to the weather.
- Administrative and volunteer experience data that the Trusts record themselves was shared with NCVO for analysis.

| Group | Number of interviews |
|--|----------------------|
| Pilot Leisure Trust staff | 5 |
| Volunteers | 3 |
| Representatives of partner organisations | 3 |

9.2 Limitations

- Volunteer postcode and gender data was not supplied for all volunteers by all the Trusts, which has limited the ability to report against the KPIs. This data was requested multiple times from the Trusts. The main barrier seems to be the quality of data recorded by others dealing with volunteers within the larger Trusts. Another barrier is collecting this data from one-off volunteers such as an event volunteer, where it may not be feasible or appropriate to collect personal data such as gender.
- Volunteer experience data is collected in different ways by Trusts. This was agreed to allow for an individualised approach and manage the burden of data collection on the Trusts.
- One Trust was unable to take part in the evaluation as they disengaged following a change in staff member responsible for the programme.

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