

Volunteering and Local Government

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In my 27 years experience in local government, both here and in the UK I have been both a volunteer and a co-ordinator of volunteers. There seems to be two main types of "volunteering" in local government:

- 1 The ethic of service is often an important component of working in local government. This often results in staff volunteering time outside paid hours, both to work on important issues and to contribute to projects organized by their employers. In the case of [Environment Canterbury](#), many staff will put in long additional hours on projects to which they are committed and which they see as benefiting the environment and the people of the Region.
- 1 The other type of volunteering is, I believe, going to become an important element of local government in the years to come. This is the direct involvement of communities in issues of importance to them and which the Council (in this case Environment Canterbury) wishes to pursue. The Resource Management Act puts huge pressure on Councils to protect the environment. I consider that this cannot be done adequately without communities "owning" the issues.

Traditionally, the "Council" is the body of bureaucrats that you write to to complain (drains, rubbish, dirty rivers). I see the future as lying in involving communities in partnerships in developing solutions. Some people may see that as doing the Council's job for them, but it is more than that; it is tackling issues of direct importance to people and getting real local solutions.

Some examples

[ECAN](#) worked with the Okains Bay community to develop a revitalisation plan. The Regional Council put in staff time and sponsored a very able landscape student to work with the community and develop design ideas that were capable of implementation by volunteers from the community.

Working with Banks Peninsula District Council and Crown Public Health, ECAN sponsored and trained two groups of volunteers to monitor the water quality in Akaroa and Lyttelton Harbours. These two groups have done most of the organizing themselves and have been able to monitor at far higher frequencies (once a week) than any agency could do. As a consequence, they have highlighted issues that have been previously hidden and have obtained positive remedial action.

The list of volunteered work of this nature is growing. It looks very rosy, but there are important issues for both sides.

- 1 If a Council sponsors an issues related group they have to come to terms with the fact that they may have nurtured a viper in their bosom! An involved community can be troublesome, biting the hand that feeds it, but if a partnership of this nature is to work, the sponsoring agency needs to accept this.
- 1 The community needs to adjust to the concept of direct involvement as opposed to the habit of complaint. At a time when individualism seems to rule, community involvement can do much to rebuild a sense of shared responsibility.

In the future, I think there is great scope for growth in these ideas, from employers recognizing the volunteered time of staff as an important component of job experience and establishing community

links, to communities pressing for direct involvement and realising the grey-suited bureaucrat image of local government is, I hope, increasingly outmoded.

Canterbury Volunteer Centre papers

- | [The Value of Volunteering](#) for SROW Symposium by Ruth Gardner, September 2000
 - | [Gifting - and the Consequences of its Absence](#) by Katherine Peet, May 1999
- | [Goodwork - A New Way of Addressing the Employment Issue](#) by Katherine Peet, 1996
 - | [Volunteering and Local Government](#) by David Gregory, 2001
 - | [Valuing Human Capital](#) by Katherine Peet, March 2001
 - | [Sustainable Work](#) by Katherine Peet, April 2000

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