OLDER VOLUNTEERS

BELFAST

Older people volunteering to provide local public services.

What are the objectives of the project?

The project aimed to draw on the potential of senior citizens as a source of knowledge, competence and experience and to use these skills to develop the same skills in others, benefitting the local community.

This allowed all participants to learn other about cultures and to build their confidence and self belief.

It also recognised, promoted and celebrated the contribution older volunteers make to civic life.

Timeline

The project started in November 2009 with a preparatory visit between the two cities. The project kicked off in 2010 and ran until July 2012.

Background

The project enabled local communities to draw on the potential of senior citizens as a source of knowledge, competence and experience. A toolkit was produced by the project managers. It contains recruitment tools, induction procedures and evaluation processes. If you're developing a senior exchange project and interested in using the toolkit for your own programme, you can email Adele Faulkner on faulkneradele@belfastcity.gov.uk for further information.

Who is responsible for the project's implementation?

Both Belfast city council and the municipality of Madrid under their school of volunteering were responsible.

How does the project work?

The European element was developed between Madrid and Belfast as a European initiative. It involved a grant from Europe to support senior volunteering projects between local organisations located in two countries.

Six volunteers from Belfast travelled, in pairs, to Madrid for six weeks placements. In turn,

six volunteers from Madrid came to Belfast, in pairs for six weeks. They volunteered in local organisations and businesses. The activities focused on learning and wellbeing but varied depending on the individual skills of the volunteer. They used the experiences and the skills in their home communities.

Sponsored by the Atlantic Philanthropies and supported by Volunteer Now's Unlocking Potential Project, Belfast City Council also runs an Older Volunteer of the Year award scheme. This scheme is planned to run for three years from 2011-2013.

What are the results of the project?

The results show that the structures for volunteering in each are very different. In Madrid, it's more civic or community based, with volunteers getting involved in events organised by the city. Volunteering is more structured and the city supports its volunteers. In Belfast it's a much more ad hoc and community focused. Many volunteers don't even classify what they are doing as volunteering. Both cities report that volunteers are very happy and positive about their experiences in the other city. Both have learned a lot from the others culture. One of the clearest examples of learning is charity shops. There are not a lot of charity shops in Madrid, and the volunteers returned there with ideas and information on how to set up and run charity shops in the city. In return, the Belfast volunteers learned a lot about how Madrid copes with immigrants and homeless.

Was the project evaluated and were there any follow-up activities?

The volunteers and placement organisations continuously monitored the progress of the project to ensure the effectiveness of the exchanges. At the end of the exchange an evaluation form was completed by the volunteer and by the host organisation.

At the end of the project - July 2012 - all 12 volunteers were brought together for a final seminar to discuss experiences, launch the toolkit and create an action plan for future work.

What lessons did you learn?

The main outcome was an increased awareness of the value of older volunteers.

The project allowed volunteers to contribute to the development and implementation of non-profit activities and to the community as an active citizen. The receiving organisation benefited from the skills and knowledge of the volunteer as well as the volunteer learning new methods of working/volunteering.

How is the project funded and what resources (financial and human) are dedicated to its delivery?

The project is funded by the European Commissions DG for Education and Culture (Grundtvig). The project manager is provided by Belfast city council.

Who is the contact person for the project?

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If you have an example of a good practice that you would like to include in the database, please send an email to caroline.greene@eurocities.eu.