



Eurosoma Cultural Centre- Community Resilience: Working with volunteers, particularly young people

Eurosoma Cultural Centre is a representative body of Horn of African refugees and immigrants, people elected from diverse refugee communities in inner-city and outer-city Birmingham. As such, we support all arts and cultural programmes by marketing events to and seeking feedback from local communities. In addition, we constantly engage and consult with young people to represent their concerns and aspirations at our management meetings, and inform our network in Birmingham.

Eurosoma have no staff at the moment, 5 Management Committee members and 15 volunteers. We have been running for three years. Eurosoma operates in and around Birmingham, our target groups of community are immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees from Horn of Africa.

Summary of activities

We support the refugee and asylum seekers in and around Birmingham, particularly by the provision of advice on various issues such as welfare, housing, and immigration matters, education, health care, employment and training and youth development. We also provide an after school club, play scheme, and sport activities including football and basketball. Our aim is to enable refugees and asylum seekers to access services provided by the government and other agencies. We aim to give them accurate and up to date information about the issues that are affecting them. Many refugees are in confusion as to what to do next when they arrive in Birmingham. Our aim is to direct them to the right place where they can get support, we also give them the appropriate advice that they need.

We approach these services to build up the community's confidence to achieve higher things. In most cases we support our service users directly by making direct telephone calls, drafting letters, dealing with the services providers, presenting appeals and reviews. In some cases we also use signposting to other organizations or agencies such as Job Centre Plus, CAB, different Law Centre organisation, IAS, and local neighbourhood offices.

Briefly describe the experience you wish to focus on in this paper

We focus on how we recruit up-skilled and enthusiastic volunteers, which we believe have made our organisation strong and resilient. In particular we have worked to increase the involvement of young refugees those are NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training), thus eager to build up self development, confidence and experience in the host society. Also to create activities that allow our volunteers to learn key skills and improve their lifestyle.

Describe what your RCO did, and what came out of this.

We believe that motivating the young people is the best form of recruiting young volunteers. We would like to share with you some successful young volunteering pathways.

The case involved a group of five youngsters 19 – 23 years old from Somali ethnic background. They are all boys and they had been NEET so long, they used to be addicted to Chad chewing in Stratford Road in Birmingham, where there are a lot of Somali young boys still sitting there and chewing Chad. (Chad is a traditional green herbal from Horn of Africa which is a kind of drug).

In the summer of 2008, Eurosoma started an Arts project for young people from the Horn of African Community in Birmingham which was successful. During this project, one of the project events was held in Muath Centre in Sparkbrook (off Stratford Road). The majority of the participants in that event were from Sparbrook area and Stratford Road, namely from the young chad chewing addicted groups.

These above mentioned five young boys were amongst those who participated in that event, from that event they continued to participate and enjoy the events. Since then, they applied to volunteer with Eurosoma, and we welcomed them to join with us. With the guidance of Eurosoma Management Committee they were offered to volunteer with us with flexible time.

Fortunately, all these five young boys are now back into work and still they are not only volunteering with us but they are the best enthusiastic young volunteers we have ever had. And most importantly they stopped all kinds of drugs they used to use.

What problems and barriers did your RCO face in doing this, and how did you overcome or try to overcome these?

New communities suffer difficulty as a result of a deficit in terms of language, skills and qualifications.

Because of lack of communications, it was difficult to involve parents in the first place who look after their households and children in this process, as many of them do not understand the benefits of volunteering and spending their free time in volunteering, we approached the following methods:

- After an extensive research on how to overcome this issue, the Eurosoma management committee agreed to organise a “civic awareness sessions” on week ends in every two weeks, we started to invite the parents, our services users, some other RCO’s, and individuals from different schools and Mosques to discuss about the parents responsibilities towards the youngsters’ future, how can bring them up to mainstream, and other issues, like behaviour and parenting responsibilities, health, employment. Through these awareness sessions, we have found that the most of the parents from new communities were reluctant to engage volunteering activities because of lack of integration and understanding the system in UK.
- The management committee decided to start a campaign to emphasise volunteering benefits among clients and other community members
- We agreed to help clients to prepare a “Time Sheet” to find out their available time to dedicate volunteering activities; to help them to draft CV’s, job search etc. We have found that it is a beneficial to have more service users involved. They have brought a lot of new ideas for projects, such as the Eurosoma Cultural Centre’s building up the youngsters talent awareness, which intends to tackle the isolation of Horn of African Community as whole and the young people in particular, the Arts and

cultural project which addresses the multicultural information, integration and mutual understanding between the new arrivals and host society.

Support from other organisations

We feel without support from Refugee Council, namely from David Hirst, our local Basis Project Organisational Development Officer in Birmingham, we could not have achieved what we did for the three years we have been running our organisation. We believe that Mr Hirst was and still is very helpful being available and resourceful whenever we needed his assistance. He always helps us to develop our strategic plan, which would be very useful in looking at the long term plans of the organisation. He supports us in improving our capacity building as well as networking with other RCO's, fund raising training, safeguarding training.

We downloaded the Basis Project Governance Toolkit from the internet and used this to help develop Management Committee roles and responsibilities etc.

What are your tips for other RCOs considering doing something similar?

- Be up skilled to run a voluntary organisation
- Be ready and equipped to listen to and understand all members of the community!
- Back up your general and standard services with tailored and personalised services for groups/individuals with special needs.
- Recruit motivated volunteers, be fair with them, let them to develop their skills and capacity creating for your volunteers networking, training and further qualification opportunities
- Cultivate good relations with other RCO, native community organisations, Local Authorities and other stake holders
- Be frugal with your financial resources; don't rely always on funding / grants to cover your running costs.

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