

Supporting Others through Volunteer Action (SOVA)

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Background information

Inspection judgements

Inspectors use a four-point scale to summarise their judgements about achievement and standards, the quality of provision, and leadership and management, which includes a grade for equality of opportunity.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Further information can be found on how inspection judgements are made on www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Scope of the inspection

In deciding the scope of the inspection, inspectors take account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) or other funding body. Where appropriate, inspectors also consider the previous inspection report (www.ofsted.gov.uk), reports from the inspectorates' quality monitoring or annual assessment visits, and data on learners and their achievements over the period since the previous inspection.

In addition to reporting on overall effectiveness of the organisation, its capacity to improve further, achievement and standards, quality of provision and leadership and management, this inspection focused on specialist provision in:

- Community learning

The inspection concentrated on volunteer training in the South Yorkshire region as most of the learners with whom the volunteers work are with partners or subcontracted provision that is already subject to inspection.

Description of the provider

1. Supporting Others through Volunteer Action (SOVA), acting as a national voluntary organisation, is a company limited by guarantee, founded in 1975. It operates across England and Wales and aims to strengthen communities by involving local volunteers in promoting social inclusion and reducing crime and re-offending. SOVA trains its own volunteers who then provide support and mentoring services to individuals through projects, working with a range of statutory and voluntary agencies.
2. Volunteer training includes core volunteering skills plus specific training in mentoring young people, employment support, peer mentoring or substance misuse. National Open College Network (NOCN) provides learners with accreditation at levels 2 and 3. SOVA's projects work with offenders, ex-offenders, refugees and asylum seekers, and socially excluded or disadvantaged groups that may be at risk of offending. SOVA has contracts with the Probation Service, Social Services, Youth Offending Services, Jobcentre Plus, the Learning and Skills Council, the European Social Fund, Prison Service Plus, the Prison Service, colleges of further education, charitable trusts and foundations. Projects have single or multiple funding streams.
3. Operational management is through the projects. Each project has a manager who reports to a regional director. Each regional management committee is responsible to the executive group which in turn reports to the board of trustees. SOVA manages over 60 projects annually. It employs about 300 staff and has approximately 1650 active volunteers working with more than 1100 beneficiaries. During the inspection, 87 volunteers were in training in England, including 47 in the Sheffield and Barnsley area.

Summary of grades awarded

Effectiveness of provision	Good: Grade 2
Capacity to improve	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Achievement and standards	Good: Grade 2
Quality of provision	Good: Grade 2
Leadership and management	Good: Grade 2
Equality of opportunity	Contributory grade: Outstanding: Grade 1

Sector subject area

Community learning	Good: Grade 2
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Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Good: Grade 2

4. The overall effectiveness of the provision is good. Provision in community learning is good, as are achievement and standards. The completion rate for volunteer training is high. Learners acquire and apply good volunteering skills, however, the proportion of learners who gain external accreditation is low.
5. The quality of provision is good. Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Learning is well planned and highly participative, however, the assessment process is insufficiently thorough. The extent to which SOVA meets the needs and interests of learners is good. The very good range of provision meets the needs of the individual and the community well. Support is good. Information, advice and guidance are good as is the support for volunteers to enable independent working.
6. Leadership and management is good. The management of projects is very good through particularly good engagement with an extensive range of partners and staff benefit from a strong culture of collaboration, inclusion and support. Arrangements for equality of opportunity are outstanding, however, business planning processes are insufficiently developed and quality improvement arrangements are insufficiently established.

Capacity to improve

Satisfactory: Grade 3

7. SOVA has demonstrated that it has satisfactory capacity to improve. The effectiveness of steps taken to make improvements since the previous inspection have been satisfactory. SOVA has maintained, and in some cases improved further, the key strengths identified in the previous inspection. The management of staff and volunteers remains good. SOVA has maintained its strong partnerships to improve social inclusion and encourage community cohesion. It has developed further its inclusive management approach and has started to improve business planning processes, although these are not yet fully implemented. SOVA has improved the use of its quality improvement framework but progress on some aspects has been slow and some quality improvement arrangements are insufficiently established.
8. The self-assessment process is good. All projects produce a self-assessment report which provides good evidence for the overall self-assessment report. The views of staff, volunteers and beneficiaries contribute well to the final report, which is evaluative, self-critical and broadly accurate. It correctly identifies the strengths and key areas for improvement. The action plan is comprehensive and contains clear improvement targets with regular progress reviews.

Key strengths

- High completion rate for volunteer training
- Good acquisition and application of volunteering skills for the benefit of the community
- Well planned and highly participative learning
- Very good range of provision to meet the needs of the individual and the community
- Good support for volunteers to enable independent working
- Good information, advice and guidance
- Very good management of projects
- Particularly good engagement with an extensive range of partners
- Strong culture of collaboration, inclusion and support for staff
- Outstanding response to equality and diversity

Key areas for improvement

- Low proportion of learners gaining external accreditation
- Insufficiently thorough assessment process
- Insufficiently developed business planning processes
- Insufficiently established quality improvement arrangements

Main findings

Achievement and standards

Good: Grade 2

9. Achievement and standards are good and completion rates for the volunteer training are high, as recognised in the self-assessment report. The proportion of learners who complete the volunteer training programme has been consistently high over the three years to 2006/07, with similar rates in terms of age, gender, disability and ethnicity. In 2005/06, over 90% of learners completed the training. In 2006/07, of the 998 learners who started training, 803 became active volunteers. Retention rates have remained high over the three year period to 2006/07 at 90% or higher.
10. Learners' acquisition and application of volunteering skills are good and benefit the community. The standard of work in learners' portfolios is very high and show good development of learners' confidence, self-analytical and interpersonal skills, through thoughtful and accurate responses to both case studies and training materials. Many learners recognise how their learning has changed their prejudices and negative attitudes towards the groups with which they now work. They apply their skills well in a range of support contexts and provide high levels of individual mentoring and support to many vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. The progression of learners to employment is good. About one quarter of SOVA's current permanent workforce came from its volunteers and over the previous two years about 150 volunteers have gained new employment in the care and criminal justice sector.
11. The proportion of learners who gain the NOCN accreditation is low, as recognised in the self-assessment report. In 2005/06, fewer than 10% of learners who completed their training gained accreditation. On some projects, trainers encourage learners to gain accreditation but on others, they do not. In 2006/07, the proportion of learners gaining accreditation increased to 24%.

Quality of provision

Good: Grade 2

12. The quality of the provision is good. Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Learning is well planned and highly participative. As recognised in the self-assessment report, learning programmes are well designed to develop learners' skills and to carefully prepare them for volunteering. SOVA has developed its own good quality courses and training materials to provide the background knowledge that volunteers need. Trainers create a comfortable and supportive environment and skilfully encourage all learners to share their views and experiences. Trainers use case studies and exercises well to extend learners' knowledge and to provide assessment evidence.

13. Learners develop a good range of tools and techniques to use when mentoring. The training raises significantly learners' awareness of equality and diversity matters. Trainers reinforce constantly the importance of non-judgemental behaviour and language and stereotyping and prejudices are challenged strongly. Learners understand well the mentoring boundaries and requirements for personal safety. Trainers demonstrate a wealth of experience which they share with learners. The ratio of trainers to learners is good, with two staff in most training sessions.
14. The assessment process is not sufficiently thorough. The quality of feedback assessors give to learners on their written work varies considerably. Some assessors provide learners with detailed, useful feedback, but others provide none. Assessors do not regularly sign and date their assessments and assessments do not always show if the learner has achieved the assessment criteria. The skills that learners possess at the beginning of their training and the skills that they develop during the course are insufficiently recognised and recorded. The wider skills that learners develop are not fully captured or accredited. Some staff have developed their own individual learning plans but they are not standardised or shared throughout the organisation and their quality varies considerably.
15. As recognised in the self-assessment report, SOVA offers a very good range of provision to meet individual and community needs. Active community development takes place through the recruitment of learners from local communities. SOVA organises learning sessions and projects at times to meet learners' requirements and successfully engages many learners with multiple barriers to learning who train and work as volunteers. Volunteers display a high level of awareness of the barriers that affect participation in learning. Some volunteers were once beneficiaries of the mentoring service. Partners work closely with SOVA to provide volunteers with highly relevant training and information which benefit the community. Visits to custody units familiarise learners well with the environments they will work in. Guest speakers accurately make learners aware of the realities and frustrations of volunteering.
16. Support for volunteers is good and enables independent working. Good opportunities exist for regular peer support from other volunteers through further training and support groups. SOVA provides financial assistance to help volunteers pay for dependant care costs. It provides a good range of additional in-house training including child protection, drugs awareness and homelessness and encourages beneficiaries to attend these events. SOVA refers learners in need of extra literacy or numeracy support to other providers in its network, however, the identification of learners in need of support varies considerably between projects. Volunteers benefit from useful, regular supervision sessions once they start mentoring, however, SOVA does not monitor or moderate the quality of these supervision sessions.

17. Information, advice and guidance are good. Potential volunteers receive particularly useful information to help them decide if they want to volunteer. During the very detailed interview before they join the course, they receive clear and accurate information about volunteering and have to answer very challenging questions to help them self-assess their suitability. Learners then progress to closely observed training and a thorough interview after the training to clarify the volunteering role and discuss any concerns or further training needs.

Leadership and management

Good: Grade 2

Equality of opportunity

Contributory grade: Outstanding: Grade 1

18. Leadership and management is good and the management of projects is very good. SOVA is very responsive to both changing external demands and the needs of its learners. It has been very successful in designing new projects and in gaining funding to continue its volunteer training. SOVA has been very successful in achieving targets, with typically two-fifths of projects exceeding their targets.
19. SOVA maintains a strong culture of collaboration, inclusion and support for its staff. It actively seeks the views of staff on key organisational developments through advisory groups. Staff demonstrate much commitment to the overall mission of the organisation. Communications are good and maintained through a range of regular meetings, the intranet and staff conferences. Staff benefit from a well managed staff appraisal system, and enjoy very good professional development opportunities and support through a comprehensive programme of internal events and external training programmes.
20. SOVA engages particularly well with an extensive range of partners from the statutory and voluntary sectors to widen participation and promote social and community cohesion. It works closely and collaboratively with its partners and draws extensively on their specialist expertise to enhance its work with volunteers and to support learners who are excluded or at risk. SOVA participates very actively in regional and national networks as well as a number of advisory boards.
21. SOVA's response to equality and diversity is outstanding. A very strong and well established ethos of equality of opportunity encompasses all of SOVA's work. Its clear mission and strategic direction embraces the needs of those who are excluded or at risk. SOVA has a comprehensive and long-established approach to equality and diversity which is reflected in thoughtful and well written policies and procedures, and in additional processes which go beyond legal requirements. Some projects challenge prejudice through anti-racist campaigns and the recruitment of volunteers matches closely the diversity of each region. Equality is carefully integrated with all aspects of volunteer training. SOVA strongly and continuously promotes an approach of mutual respect among its staff and its wide range of learners. Learners clearly adopt and exemplify this approach in their language and behaviour towards each other.
22. Business planning and review processes are insufficiently developed. SOVA's business and operational planning does not link consistently to its strategic objectives, and planning cycles are unclear to staff. It does not set sufficiently well defined targets to measure its success effectively. Although it routinely collects data, SOVA recognises in its self-assessment report that it has not always recorded or evaluated data sufficiently to be able to recognise its achievements, or inform future business plans effectively. It has now established a detailed business operations database, together with key performance indicators for each

project, and has set in place a more thorough process of strategic and business planning. It is too soon to evaluate the impact of these developments.

23. Quality improvement arrangements are insufficiently established, as recognised in the self-assessment report. Although individual managers monitor projects closely and work effectively to maintain their quality, SOVA does not sufficiently monitor the quality of some aspects of its provision, such as the initial assessment of its learners or the recording of their individual achievements. It does not monitor fully the implementation of its policies on literacy and numeracy or share good practice sufficiently among staff in relation to moderation or supervision activities. SOVA has recently implemented actions to strengthen its quality improvement arrangements but it is too soon to judge their impact.

What learners like:

- The exciting and interesting learning
- 'Feeling as if you are doing some good and doing an important job'
- 'It brings up a lot of issues and you learn a lot about yourself'
- 'It looks good on my curriculum vitae'
- 'Makes you more aware of everything: for example, why people use drugs'
- 'The learning challenges me'
- 'Meeting new people'
- 'It pushes me in different directions'

What learners think could improve:

- No specific improvements identified