

A National Scout Organisation

Over the years I have heard from time-to-time genuine people raise the question of value for money for fees paid to National Office, it always sounded to me a bit like the question “What have the Romans ever given us?” from Monty Python’s Life of Brian.

In recent times though I have come to understand that there are many committed Scouters throughout the country that are starting to question the value of a national organisation and to consider the possibility of a more independent existence.

Origins

Scouting started with an experimental camp in 1907 run by Baden-Powell in the UK. It grew spontaneously after Baden-Powell published the book “Scouting for Boys” in 1908. A national organisation emerged and, in 1912, The Boy Scout Association was incorporated by Royal Charter.

In the following years Scouting went on to welcome girls and women as members and leaders and it spread around the world. More than 500 million young people and adults have taken part in Scouting since its inception over a century ago. Today, Scouting is the world's leading educational youth movement with over 57 million Scouts in over 200 countries and territories worldwide.

Through its unique combination of education, adventure and fun, Scouting continues to be an inspiration for young people to become active citizens who are engaged in creating a better and more sustainable world.

Challenging Times

In recent years many challenges have arisen to the continuing success, even existence of Scouting.

The most striking for me are:

- Modern society in many countries now offers a vast array of pursuits for young people, and emerging technologies have provided a huge variety of attractions and distractions for them.
- Historic abuse of young people has been revealed within trusted institutions that were at the heart of our society and our communities, and Scouting did not escape this scourge.
- The pandemic created by Covid-19 caused severe restrictions on the movement of people and on outside-the-home gatherings, this brought almost a complete stop to the Scout programme experience for many and a hugely curtailed experience for most.

Despite these grave challenges, Scouting appears to be holding its own in many places and may soon be on a solid growth path again.

Scouting in Ireland

Scouting Ireland had been aware of the need to change how it was organised and managed (the Governance framework), and in the face of emerging clarity about historic abuse, brought forward the timeframe for change by adopting a new constitution in October 2018. To signal a clean break with the past they also appointed a completely fresh Board of Directors, who set out to oversee the transition to a new company structure for supporting Scouting.

The path has not been smooth and was made even more challenging with the arrival of the Pandemic. Decisions and changes intended to further underpin the idea of a clean break sadly led to the emergence of a restrictive, unproductive, and often unwelcoming environment for volunteers who would work at national level. Now, a much-reduced complement of paid staff and a significantly reduced pool of active volunteers at national level has led to a much-diminished level of service to Scout Groups, and it is likely that County and Provincial teams are also feeling the impact.

Of the many knowledgeable, experienced, and committed volunteers who have withdrawn from service at national level some have left Scouting, and some have withdrawn to their Scout Groups to focus their work there.

The Strength of Community-based Scouting

Scouting started at a local level with young people forming patrols and getting on with the adventure of Scouting. Our greatest strength is the role we play in enabling young people to have positive experiences every week of the year at their meetings, activities, and events.

It is likely that the withdrawal of many from volunteer service at national level, will for a time be of great benefit to their Scout Groups as they devote their volunteering energies exclusively there, but there is a longer-term hazard arising from their absence at National level.

Role of a National Scout Organisation

A National Scout Organisation is valuable to its members in many ways, I suggest their role may be summarised as follows:

1. To provide an attractive, relevant, and accessible Youth Programme, regularly reviewed and refreshed and with adequate resources to support its provision to all Scouts
2. To provide support and resources to aid the recruitment, induction, training, management, and support of sufficient Adult Volunteers to provide quality Scouting opportunities throughout the country
3. To provide advice, support, and guidance to Scout Group management teams in matters concerning good governance
4. To provide services and facilities (such as insurance, campsites & centres, supply of uniform & programme support materials, legal & financial advice, safeguarding services, etc.) to enable Scout Groups to function well and to be effective
5. To manage the image of Scouting in Ireland and to represent Scouting to external stakeholders; for example through advocacy of Scouting and youth work in general, liaison with Government bodies, participation in national bodies such as the National Youth Council, etc.
6. To manage relationships with other Scouting Stakeholders, such as The Scout Association (who also have Scout Groups in NI), European and World Scouting, other Scout Organisations who may visit here or whom our Scouts may wish to visit, etc.

It seems obvious to me that this support is invaluable, indeed vital, to Scout Groups although it can sometimes be overlooked. However, value is often questioned when expected benefits are not present and/or actual benefits are not evident.

Volunteer Relationship Management

In its publication "Volunteers in Scouting Toolkit 2", WOSM proposes an approach to Volunteer Relationship Management and declares that the following components significantly affect the retention or loss of Volunteers in Scouting:

Quality of Service

Adult Volunteers respond to the quality of the service provided to them and to the young people in the organisation. They also respond to the quality of the image portrayed by the organisation in the community. Good quality brings about a growth in demand and poor causes a drop in demand. If the quality is right, then Adult Volunteers will join and stay. If the quality is not right, then they will be slow to join and quick to leave.

Value

Adult Volunteers respond to the value that they receive from an organisation and the value they perceive that the organisation provides to young people who are its' members. Things do not have to be free of charge or even particularly cheap, so long as they are seen as worth the money. Likewise Adult Volunteers need to feel they are actually gaining real knowledge from their training.

Satisfaction

If an Adult Volunteer is satisfied with their work in the organisation, with the support that they get and with the organisation itself then they are likely to stay involved.

Trust

In order to stay motivated and thus contribute effectively to the organisation, each Adult Volunteer must feel that they can trust:

- The people who give them leadership and/or direction
- The priorities set by the organisation
- The projects and initiatives undertaken by the organisation
- The organisation's capability to carry out its mission

This trust is built through a consistency of words and action at all levels in the organisation. The Adult Volunteer must continuously feel that the ideas, principles, plans and actions of the organisation are all part of a consistent picture that they believe in. If they see evidence that this is not so then they will begin to doubt and, if they are not reassured, they will soon lose trust. Once trust has gone, interest in staying involved will quickly disappear.

Loyalty

If an Adult Volunteer believes in the organisation, trusts that it can deliver on its mission, and is satisfied with the way they are treated, then they will develop a loyalty to that organisation. This loyalty takes time to establish but, once established, it is usually difficult to undermine.

The Question of Value and VRM

It seems evident that all of the components of the Volunteer Relationship Management approach influence the prevailing environment within a National Scout Organisation. If value is being seriously questioned then it is likely that there are also real (or genuinely perceived) issues with Quality, Satisfaction and Trust. If that is the case, Loyalty by those who have been involved for a long time may act as a counterbalance for a while, but eventually it too may become eroded.

I believe that we can all do something about this.

Every Programme Section Team, Scout Group, County Team and Provincial Team could consider the health of each component of the VRM in their team(s), some of the questions they could consider might include:

- Is the service provided by them of sufficient quality to attract and retain volunteers?
- Do they actively support all of their volunteers through mutual agreement and review?
- Is the monetary cost of volunteering managed so that it is not a burden on the volunteers?
- Do they regularly show their appreciation for the work done by the volunteers?
- Do they check to see if their volunteers are satisfied (or unduly burdened) by their contribution?
- Do they include all volunteers in decision-making so that they know they are listened to and feel that they make a difference?
- Do they take for granted the strong contribution made by those who have been around for years, or do they talk to them regularly about how their knowledge, skills and experience can best be used without causing them to get burned out?

A few small changes might make a huge difference.

I mentioned earlier the need to change the approach at national level that has created an over-reliance on a diminishing number of paid staff to lead all work at national level and that has resulted in the withdrawal of numerous experienced and knowledgeable volunteers. It seems to me that good Volunteer Relationship Management is not at play for national-level volunteering and has not been for some time. I am not optimistic that the pressing need to address this is understood by those who could change it, and I don't believe that they will opt to change it anytime soon.

Perhaps there is something useful which they would do though. Article 42 of the Constitution allows that the Board may co-opt up to three people at their discretion. I understand that there is only one such co-option in place at present. Perhaps the Board would consider co-opting a suitable person to provide them with input in the area of Volunteer Relationship Management and, while they are at it, perhaps they could also co-opt another to provide them with input in the vital area of Youth Empowerment and Youth Involvement?

I believe that putting this important topic much higher up the agenda would greatly benefit our organisation at all levels and may help to reverse the current flow... Or is it already too late?