



# Ageing Well

## Advice for Youth Organisations Interested in Intergenerational Work

From August 2012 to July 2014, UNA Exchange (Wales, UK) and Grenzenlos (Austria) collaborated on the 'Spot on Senior Volunteering Exchanges' project, funded through the Grundtvig Senior Volunteering Project strand of the European Lifelong Learning Programme.

This document contains some key points of advice that we learnt during the project and will be particularly useful for organisations already using a similar model of international youth volunteering.

### Introduction to Spot on Senior Volunteering Exchanges

#### Who we are

UNA Exchange (Wales) and Grenzenlos (Austria) both work in the field of international volunteering with a focus on working with young adults (18-25) and those facing social exclusion. We have been exchanging volunteers and collaborating on projects for a number of years but wanted to explore ways of opening our opportunities to 'older' volunteers. In Grundtvig terms, 'older' means fifty and above.

#### Why shift to 'older' volunteers?

We'd often had interest from this age group in the past, but found that potential volunteers often thought that international volunteering 'wasn't for them'. They felt it was something 'you do when you're young' and that they had missed their opportunity. We were fed up of hearing those words, 'If only I'd done it when I was younger!', so we applied for a Grundtvig Senior Volunteering grant.

We wanted to create opportunities to support older people to volunteer with UNA Exchange and Grenzenlos. We also wanted to understand what we already did that would work for a different age group – and to explore what we might have to do differently to offer quality experiences to a new age range.

And, importantly, we felt that we were missing something important by not making our opportunities available to a wider range of people. The work of UNA Exchange and Grenzenlos is all about bringing people from different backgrounds – countries, social groups, political and religious beliefs, income levels – together to volunteer and, through volunteering, to live and learn together and about each other. Surely bringing together people of different ages was an important area of diversity that we were missing?

### **What happened during the project?**

The opportunity to take part in a three-week Grundtvig placement was shared amongst our networks to recruit volunteers. Importantly, participants were expected to be involved in the planning and development of the project as well as the placement itself. They were also expected to participate fully in evaluation and follow-up – and they did, hosting other volunteers in their homes, leading end of placement evaluations and, in some cases, choosing to join the management committees of their sending organisation.

During the project ‘Spot On Senior Volunteering’, we exchanged eight volunteers between projects in Cardiff and Vienna. The placements varied but they all included full participation in a ‘workcamp’. Workcamps are the ‘bread and butter’ of our organisations’ activities and see a group of volunteers from a variety of countries volunteering and living together for two to three weeks. The group completes voluntary work that would not otherwise be done, and in the Grundtvig SVP all placements shared the common theme of environmental work with a focus on community and city gardens.

The Grundtvig volunteers’ programmes also included a range of additional activities to add variety to the project. This included working on community events, often with an international theme; visiting local volunteering projects (including the Jewish cemetery in Vienna); spending time with UNA Exchange and Grenzenlos staff to understand the ‘bigger picture’ of how we work; and, of course, taking part in a range of cultural exchange activities with other volunteers.

## **What did we learn?**

Feedback, review and responsive redesign were important elements of the project. We knew that some aspects of the approach we used with young people would work well for this different age group. But we also knew that we would have to work differently at times. The following points sum up the key learning and form our advice to organisations who are used to working with young adults but wish to engage a wider range of ages in their work.

### **1. Information, Information, Information**

We found that older volunteers wanted much more information pre-departure than our younger volunteers usually requested. Their questions were more specific and it seemed more important to them to have a clearer sense of day-to-day activities and details about accommodation.

If possible, arrange for former volunteers to meet others pre-departure; arrange for volunteers to Skype/ telephone their hosting organisation.

### **2. A lifetime of skills...**

UNA Exchange and Grenzenlos focus on unskilled – and therefore wholly accessible – volunteering placements. Volunteers in their fifties and sixties – and seventies and eighties... – will have a lifetime of skills. Some may want to use them, some may not. Establish clear goals and expectations before a project; if volunteers have specific skills, identify possibilities within placements to use them. And if there aren't too many possibilities, inform volunteers to keep expectations realistic. Think, too, about opportunities for older volunteers to learn about the mechanisms of your organisation and projects.

### **3. Why are we here?**

Take time to explore wider motivations, too, and how an international volunteering placement can meet them. This may include things like supporting someone to book overland travel to get to the project and fulfilling a lifetime dream of crossing Europe by train!

### **4. Insuring**

On a more practical note, look carefully at any insurance policies that you have or offer and ensure that they are suitable for older volunteers and any medical conditions that they may be carrying.

### **5. It might still be a big step**

Older volunteers are not immune to anxiety and culture shock and they may be carrying worries and problems from home, just as young people do. This is where good practice easily transfers: orientation and induction, regular check-in, making sure people know what the plans are. Remember, too, that older volunteers may be less used to living/ being in close contact with strangers and to compromising on daily tasks than younger volunteers who are usually more accustomed to communal living.

### **6. Wherever I lay my hat...**

Typically, on our projects, volunteers sleep in communal accommodation that is not

purpose-built. Without exception, our older volunteers were grateful for our efforts to find comfortable and more private accommodation – even if it was at a distance from other group members.

### **7. Keep mixing it up**

'Intergenerational' doesn't mean eight volunteers under twenty-five and two over sixty! Aim for a wide range of ages and/ or equal proportions of different ages. If this is hard, think about how you can engage other 'older' volunteers in the project e.g. local supporters who might be willing to host the older volunteers for an evening or a weekend.

### **8. Getting something back**

Older volunteers offer a wealth of experience to organisations. Think in advance about follow-up and longer term opportunities that you can offer and ways in which both the volunteers and your organisation could gain from working together. This could include specialist advice, contribution to organisational management or support to mentor other volunteers.

### **9. Remember it's worth it**

One of our volunteers summed this up perfectly, so we'll leave you with her words:

*'I had the time of my life! But that is the purely selfish bit. I genuinely think that 28 people have learned so much about different cultures, attitudes, disabilities. These young people are the future and their experience will go with them through their lives. Including older people is a new idea, hence the funding. I believe it was a resounding success.'*

*Thank you to all those amazing volunteers in Austria who gave up their time to be our inspirational leaders - you made this work!*

*Thank you, UNA Exchange in Cardiff. Thank you, Grenzenlos in Vienna. Thank you, our funders, Grundtvig.'*

### **For more information:**

UNA Exchange

[www.unaexchange.org](http://www.unaexchange.org)

Grenzenlos

[www.grenzenlos.or.at](http://www.grenzenlos.or.at)

Grundtvig

[www.grundtvig.org.uk](http://www.grundtvig.org.uk)

Other European mobility programmes

[http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/index_en.htm)