Run4Wales: Event volunteering on a world championship scale

CONTEXT

Run4Wales delivers high profile elite and mass participation sporting events in Wales, such as the Cardiff Half Marathon and Velothon Wales.

The IAAF/Cardiff University Half Marathon World Championships was held in March 2016. It was one of the most prestigious endurance events in the UK in recent years, giving participants the opportunity to compete alongside some of the world’s best athletes as well as earning themselves a world championship medal.

The organisers also hosted Wales’ first major sport, health and well-being exhibition: the Cardiff Sports Expo. The three-day expo took place over the Easter Bank Holiday weekend from Thursday 24 to Saturday 26 March 2016 at the Motorpoint Arena in Cardiff city centre.

The Half Marathon attracted 1157 ‘Extra Milers’, one of the largest volunteer workforces ever involved at a sporting event in Wales. The volunteers supported the race day itself, as well as the run-up at the Cardiff Sports Expo. They carried out a wide variety of roles including marshalling around the course, water station management, handing out medals and liaising with the media. The organisers acknowledged that the event could not have happened without them:

‘I think the volunteers are the sole reason why events are successful or not. You want the participants to enjoy it but even more so you would like the spectators who have bothered to come and cheer you on to be greeted with smiling faces and knowledgeable volunteers.’

Darren, Cardiff World Half Marathon runner

\[1 \text{ You can watch a short film about the Extra Milers here.}\]
Volunteering Spirit Wales (VSW) and Run4Wales worked together, to achieve the objective of improved volunteer engagement, both the quality of the experience and how likely volunteers were to get involved with future events.

In order to achieve this, the pilot project focussed on:

- How volunteers were briefed prior to the event and on the day
- Provision of volunteer facilities on the day
- Follow up after the event, including a celebration of volunteers contribution, and highlighting further volunteering opportunities

VSW aims to increase access to volunteering and to ensure that the quality of the experience, support and follow-up that volunteers receive at events is of a high standard. The project will pass this learning on to event organisers in order to help improve volunteer management at future events.

VSW is funded by Spirit of 2012 and has been delivered in partnership, led by Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) from 2015 to June 2017. The other five pilot events were carried out in partnership with Partneriaeth Awyru Agored (The Outdoor Partnership), Disability Sports Wales, Voluntary Arts Wales, National Museum Wales (St Fagans) and Yr Urdd.

Volunteers making their voices heard

OVERVIEW: WHAT DID WE LEARN?

- **Role allocation** - at an event of this scale, some roles inevitably prove to be more popular than others with volunteers. Allocation of roles therefore needs to be transparent and fair, balancing the needs of the event with the expectations of volunteers.

- It can be beneficial if responsibility for **event management** and **volunteer management** are held by the same person. Advantages include making sure volunteers have enough to do, that the volunteering is well organised on the day, and that the Volunteer Coordinator (VC) is perceived to be ‘hands-on’. This helps to develop an ongoing relationship with volunteers, making follow-up easier. If organisational structure or the scale of the event does not allow for these roles to be performed by the same member of staff, then close joint-working can help achieve some of the same benefits.

- The provision of a **Volunteer Hub** was useful in ensuring a positive experience for volunteers. The Volunteer Hub was a designated place for use just by the volunteers throughout the event, where they knew they could always find members of the wider team for advice and support. Providing a hub involves commitment of resources, including human resources and refreshments, but the benefits at this event were worth the investment in terms of the improvement in volunteer experience that resulted.
Provision of branded kit for volunteers was possible at this event due to corporate sponsorship. The kit added to a feeling of being part of a team, and kept people dry on what turned out to be a rainy day!

Working with Event Management Students to support volunteering at an event of this size proved beneficial. Four students helped run the volunteer hub and to gather feedback from other volunteers.

Having a good online Volunteer Management System is key to successful recruitment at an event of this size, especially in ensuring fair allocation of roles and in monitoring and improving retention between events.

Good communication with volunteers is important at events of any size. At large events, it can be difficult for the Volunteer Coordinator to get to know each volunteer personally. Frequent, good quality communication via email in the lead-up to and after the event, is therefore important.

**WHAT WE DID AND HOW IT WORKED**

**Recruitment and diversity**

Recruitment of the volunteer ‘Extra Milers’ began almost a year prior to the World Championship, with increased focus in the final four to five months before the event. Much of the recruitment was done via the Run4Wales website, and attracted volunteers from across the UK and beyond. Recruitment was also done through relationships with partner organisations. Cardiff University was a ‘title partner’, sponsoring the event and provided a large number of volunteers. Many of these were overseas students.

Competitors in the Half Marathon pay to enter the event, but spectators can watch for free. This is of relevance because other VSW pilots have noted that it can be easier to sign volunteers up for events that charge for entry.

Learning from previous Run4Wales events such as the Cardiff Half Marathon in 2015 had shown that some volunteer roles were more popular than others. For example ‘finish line’ roles were much more popular than ‘baggage station’ roles. In order to mitigate this, volunteers were invited to give their top three preferences of role when signing up online. There was then scope for flexibility in the process of role allocation by the Volunteer Coordinator, to balance the needs of the event with the preferences of the volunteers. Once a role had been accepted by a volunteer, they were not allowed to change roles on the day.

**Training and support**

Three briefing evenings were held a couple of weeks before the event. Places at these briefings were allocated by role, with two roles being covered per session. Approximately half of prospective volunteers took up the opportunity to attend these briefings. Feedback from attendees, and reflections from the Volunteer Coordinator after the briefings suggested that the main benefit of these sessions was to increase the sense of engagement and enthusiasm that volunteers felt.

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2 Five volunteer management themes are explored in the VSW project: 1. Recruitment, 2. Management and Communication, 3. Training and Support, 4. Recognition and 5. Follow up and Referral. This pilot focussed particularly on themes 3 and 5.
about the event. The briefing sessions were held in Cardiff Arms Park, and the majority of people who attended were those living locally.

All volunteers were issued with an ‘information lanyard’ on the day of the race, with key information and answers to frequently asked questions, as well as a map of the course. The lanyards proved popular, and were a good way of conveying key information to large numbers of volunteers, not all of whom had attended the briefing sessions.

During the event, volunteers were provided with facilities to relax in the ‘volunteer hub’ in Cardiff City Hall. Tea, coffee and other refreshments were provided free of charge. The hub was well used.

The volunteer hub required ‘staffing’ by a small team of volunteers, who signed the Extra Milers in and out, issued lanyards and gave out refreshments. It was difficult to recruit people to do this, as most volunteers want to be ‘in the thick of it’ out on the marathon course. A couple of people who have been volunteering for Run4Wales for a number of years helped out in the hub, in addition to four Event Management students from Cardiff Met University:

‘I’ve had some experience of events in terms of festivals, mainly volunteering for the ticket but with this event it gave me the opportunity to see the other side of things, the organisation of the event. I volunteered within the Volunteer Hub on race day ...making sure that (volunteers) were all OK and keeping them engaged”

Alex, volunteer and Business Management student from Cardiff University

‘Alex was a great asset to the team... She was brilliant at communicating with and supporting other volunteers as well as keeping the social media channels up-to-date with what was happening on the volunteering side of things ...’

Naomi Warner, Volunteer Coordinator

**Recognition**

Due to the high profile nature of the event, the race attracted sponsorship from Adidas. This meant that branded kit was available for volunteers. The kit was issued on the day, and helped contribute to a sense of belonging and team amongst the Extra Milers.

The distribution of the kit did cause some logistical issues. The fact that there were more items than there were volunteers due to not all volunteers turning up on the day led to some instances of people hoarding spare kit. This was not widespread but did become a distraction for some, from carrying out their volunteering role.

A celebration event for all volunteers was held the week after the race, in Cardiff Students Union. The event included speakers, and an informal ‘awards’ ceremony where 20 volunteers were recognised for their contribution. These volunteers were selected on the basis of anecdotal feedback from supervisors and other volunteers about the way they had carried out their volunteering role. The event was attended by approximately 20% of the volunteers in total.

Run4Wales also produced a short film as a ‘thank you’ to the Extra Milers, with input from Cardiff Met students, including footage from the race and interviews with volunteers.
Follow-up
All volunteers were thanked by email, as well as being contacted about the post-event survey and invited them to the celebration event.

Once volunteers have signed up for a Run4Wales event they are automatically contacted about subsequent volunteering opportunities with Run4Wales, unless they request not to be included.

Survey Results

All volunteers were given the opportunity to complete a pre and post-event online questionnaire. This consisted in part of questions originally supplied by the funder, plus some questions specific to the VSW project. The survey was adapted to an ‘easy read’ format during workshops with an earlier VSW pilot project delivered by Disability Sports Wales.

A total of 104 people completed the pre-event survey, and 216 people completed the post-event survey. This represents roughly a return rate of 10% over all. This was the highest response rate out of the six VSW pilots. The generally low response rate across the pilot projects as a whole, appears to reflect the difficulty in getting people to complete feedback questionnaires for one-off volunteering experiences. This raises questions about the format and content of such surveys and how they are used.

Volunteer motivation

The most common motivations stated for volunteering in the pre-event survey were for enjoyment/satisfaction, and ‘for the cause’. This was mirrored in the post-event feedback, suggesting that the event had lived up to volunteers’ expectations.

Most volunteers agreed in the post-event survey that volunteering had helped them develop a range of skills. Three skills stood out with more people choosing ‘strongly agree’. These were ‘working in a team’, ‘trying new things’ and ‘getting things done on time’.

‘Developing new skills’ had not been one of the top motivations quoted in the pre-event survey, which may indicate that volunteers’ expectations were exceeded in this respect.

Feedback about the volunteer experience

Respondents gave positive feedback in the surveys about all elements of the volunteer journey, from sign-up to ongoing communication. They gave a score between eight and nine out of ten on average for each.

66% of volunteers rated the communication they received in the run up to the event as ‘excellent’, and a further 29% rated it as ‘good’.

65% of post-survey respondents had attended one of the briefing sessions prior to the event. Given that 50% of volunteers overall attended one of the briefings, this means that there was a higher response rate to the post-event survey from those who had attended the briefing. This supports the anecdotal feedback that the briefing helped increase engagement.

Retention

The percentage of people feeling that they were likely to volunteer again at a future event also went up from 72% to 77%. This is a further indication that volunteers had a positive experience.

33% of volunteers stated that they were going on to do more volunteering elsewhere following the event.

In order to calculate if there had been an increase in volunteer retention, the rate of retention has been calculated between three races. The Cardiff Half Marathon in October 2015, the World Championship Half Marathon in March 2016 (the subject of this case study) and the Cardiff Half Marathon in October 2016.

A total of 683 people volunteered at the October 2015 event, and 88 of these went on to volunteer in March 2016. This represents a retention rate of 13%. In total, more people volunteered in March 2016 (1157 people). 152 of these people went on to volunteer at the next event in October 2016. This represents an identical retention rate of 13%.

One of the main aims of the pilot was to increase retention, so the fact that the retention rate (i.e. the likelihood for any one volunteer to come back) is in some sense disappointing. However, given that the Half Marathon in October 2016 was much lower profile than the World Championship event, and did not include the same incentives, such as competing alongside world champion
athletes and receiving free Adidas kit, the fact that recruitment has stayed consistent reflects well on the engagement strategy.

Also, although the proportion remained the same, the total number of repeat volunteers went up to 152, from 88 previously, and over the three races, a total of 32 volunteers attended all three. This represents a growing relationship with a set of loyal ‘regulars’:

“There are some volunteers that have been back a few times now and you get to know them by name. There are a core group that I’ve really got to know and that are really supportive. They are friendly familiar faces on the day!”

Naomi Warner, Volunteer Coordinator

It is also worth noting that these figures only refer to volunteers who registered as individuals, and does not include those who volunteered as part of a group through a partner organisation.

**KEY TRANSFERABLE LEARNING**

- Recruitment of volunteers for large events is complex, and made much easier by the use of a versatile volunteer management database. Ideally, this would be a bilingual resource enabling volunteers to interact with the organisation through the medium of Welsh as well as English. At the time of writing there is not yet a bilingual system available.

- Working with partner organisations, through a single point of contact, can help to recruit large numbers of volunteers for example as was done through Cardiff Universities at this event.

- The recruitment of event management students to support the volunteering worked very well here, provide the capacity to make the volunteer hub feasible.

- Having a variety of ways to brief volunteers about their role works well, especially when some are travelling from a distance. At this event, a combination of information received via email, the offer of a pre-event briefing, and then briefings and ‘information lanyards’ on the day, meant that people had the information and confidence they needed to perform their role.

- There are advantages and disadvantages to issuing volunteer kit on the day of the event. The ease of giving it out in person rather than sending through the post, must be balanced against the distraction that spare kit available on the day may cause. One option would be to give out kit at the briefing sessions held in the run up to the event. It is possible that this might have boosted attendance at the briefings.

Run4Wales were concerned that if volunteers had the kit in advance, they may have had less incentive to turn up on the day, but there is an argument that the opposite may have been the case because being issued with the kit may have increased engagement levels (the kit would have a higher value to them if they volunteered than if they didn’t).

- Despite the bad weather on the day of the Half Marathon World Championship, feedback from volunteers was very positive. This shows how important it is to consider and plan for the welfare of volunteers and the quality of their experience. Having a warm, dry volunteer hub to go to, with free tea and coffee provided, no doubt made a lot of difference to the experience of volunteering on a rainy day, as did the provision of good quality waterproof kit!

- Providing face-to-face thanks and recognition is more difficult with large numbers of volunteers. One idea for future events that emerged from this pilot is to issue name badges to volunteers to help with this. The badges could also include a colour-coded sticker to indicate returning volunteers. This would help the Volunteer Coordinator to identify those who have been before, as well as enable volunteers to seek guidance from other volunteers who are more experienced.
Reflections from this pilot included the challenges of making sure that event volunteering is truly integrated into the overall planning and management of an event. Despite the fact that the volunteer and event management were carried out by the same person at Run4Wales, it was felt that there was still scope to integrate planning for volunteering more effectively into the roles of other team members. For example by encouraging the fundraising team to seek sponsorship for volunteer kit and refreshments.

Run4Wales have been reviewing the way they recognise volunteering, in light of the fact that a large celebration event will not always be within budget as a means to say thank you. They also want to make sure that their methods of recognition stay fresh rather than becoming repetitive. Although only 20% of volunteers attended the celebration evening, it felt like a big success on the night, with positive feedback from those who attended. All volunteers had the benefit of knowing that an effort was being made and their contribution was appreciated, even if they couldn’t attend. The likely format for subsequent Run4Wales events will be a social evening for volunteers. This will be on a smaller scale, but will still incorporate formal thanks in the way of speeches from key members of the event team.