

Privileged to pursue her passion

A conversation with Katie Bruce



Katie Bruce

Dr Katie Bruce left her policy job and took a pay cut to pursue her passion for social justice, first as JustSpeak Director and now as the new Chief Executive of Volunteering New Zealand. She spoke with Public Sector's ROSE NORTHCOTT about her career, her respect for young people, and how volunteers are making a multi-billion-dollar contribution to this country but remain undervalued.

What inspired your passion for social justice?

I grew up in the UK with my dad, running a charity that worked alongside people with disabilities, and I've always had a really strong sense of social justice. I started volunteering at school, setting up the student council and starting initiatives to get young people's voices heard. I campaigned for 16-year-olds to get the vote and set up awards to empower young people. All around me I saw that young people's voices weren't getting heard, and as a young person, I wanted to change that.

My white privilege and education have opened up opportunities for me. I am also Roma, the most marginalised population across Europe. I have only really reflected on that much more recently, and that's been a real learning curve for me in understanding my identity, my privilege, and my responsibility to use that privilege.

Tell us about your university days and early career?

I studied criminology at university and then got a scholarship to do a master's and PhD in sociology. University gave me a chance to study injustice. It gave me the language and social theory and helped me contextualise what I was seeing and feeling.

On graduating, I got a job at Southampton University researching volunteering. It was a two-year contract, and as I was finishing, I was pregnant. I certainly didn't see myself getting another academic job as it was so competitive. I had no idea what I'd do. The more I studied, the further away I seemed to get from myself and where I wanted to be.

Then my husband was made redundant, so we came to New Zealand on holiday while we figured out what to do with our lives, and we didn't go back.

You found work in the public sector. Why did that ultimately fuel your desire to work outside government?

After applying for about 30 jobs, I got a job working as a youth analyst at the Ministry of Social Development. I landed myself with an awesome team and an amazing manager. I learnt that many people within the public sector cared about social justice just as much as people outside it, and that was a really important lesson for me.

I also found out that I'm very impatient, and I wasn't sure whether I was making things better or worse for people. The things I was working on as a policy analyst seemed so far removed from people's lives. I also found the bureaucracy frustrating.

I then went to SuPERU as a senior analyst, working at the interface of research and policy to encourage the use of evidence in decision making. After two years, I knew I wanted to leave the public sector and try something different.

I realised that getting out of academia and exposing myself to other roles had been a good idea, but I just seemed to find myself even further away from that feisty teenager who was going to change the world and be true to her values.

What appealed about the JustSpeak Director's role?

JustSpeak is a movement of young people who are advocating for positive and transformative change in criminal justice, supporting them to speak out on criminal justice in an evidence-based way.

I saw the ad and said to my husband this is my absolute dream job. It combines campaigning, working with young people and criminal justice, and using research skills. No way did I think I would get the job. I'd never even led another person let alone an organisation, and my career was very much in research and policy rather than campaigning. But I got it.

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How challenging was your first leadership role?

It was new in every way and was the steepest learning curve I could ever imagine. I'd been used to having concentrated time working on discrete projects. Suddenly I was responsible for other people and a whole organisation, dealing with everything from TV appearances to ensuring we had enough money for the next month's pay, arranging funding bids, and organising events. It was an environment where I could make decisions for myself and effectively the whole sector, which was amazingly liberating and terrifying all at the same time.

What did you get out of that role?

I'm really proud that we've got 17-year-olds out of the adult justice system. That will affect thousands of 17-year-olds, but it's just a tiny part of what needs to change.

And the personal development opportunities and friends I made was huge.

Young people get a bad rap for not being engaged, and that has been so far from my experience at JustSpeak and other organisations. I met so many passionate and really skilled young people changing their communities and making a real difference.

What prompted you to go for the Volunteering New Zealand role?

Given my role at JustSpeak, there were not many roles I would even glance at a second time, but this one – it grabbed me for a couple of reasons. It was a new challenge. I really care passionately about criminal justice, but the more I worked in it, the more I could see how inter-linked the issues are, for example, criminal justice, health, and housing. I thought here's a chance to work on capacity building as an organisation, advocating for volunteering across a lot of different areas. Also, an organisation like JustSpeak is young and fresh, and it can only stay like that if you keep having new ideas and new people engaged.



Katie (right) giving evidence to the Social Services Select Committee

What does Volunteering New Zealand do?

We are the voice of volunteering. A national body with members including regional volunteer centres around the country that support people to get involved in volunteering, as well as national NGOs and public sector organisations like Plunket, Youthline, and Auckland DHB. We advocate for volunteering and build capacity in the sector. We develop a lot of resources, run national volunteer week and student volunteer week and we advocate for volunteering to be valued and resourced.

We are funded through a mix of government grants, membership fees, and consultancy – we are increasingly offering organisations opportunities to develop capacity best practice in managing volunteers.

Who volunteers?

New Zealand has one of the highest rates of volunteering in the world, nearly half of us volunteer in some capacity. If it suddenly stopped, much of what we took for granted would just grind to a halt.

Some people think of a volunteer as a certain kind of person – actually it's all kinds of people. I'm keen to shake up the image of volunteering!

What does volunteering contribute to New Zealand?

There is visible volunteering that people see, whether planting trees or supporting people in hospital and reading at school. But there is also a huge amount of volunteering that we just don't see, such as the JustSpeak campaign work.

It's estimated that volunteering contributes \$3.5 billion annually to

the economy, the same as the construction industry, so it's huge. We've just made a submission on the government's wellbeing indicator project, arguing that volunteering contributes to the wellbeing of individual volunteers and that it should be recognised and supported.

What are some of your priorities?

To develop more in-house resources and advocate for volunteering to be measured and valued. Better measurements and understanding the impact of volunteering in communities is the first step in valuing it more.

It is a challenging sector because volunteering is undervalued and under-resourced. Volunteering isn't free; it has a cost for organisations to support people properly to engage in volunteering.

There is definitely an increase in employee volunteering. I'm interested in how we make this a strategic and transformative experience and make sure that it is actively contributing to communities.

I'm also interested in making sure that we are future-proofing our sector, so we are looking for how younger generations want to be engaged in volunteering, rather than trying to fit them into our current model.

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The public sector is already very engaged in volunteering, for example, in hospitals and prisons. We are keen to engage and see how we can embed volunteering opportunities into public organisations.

What are the benefits and challenges of a career in social justice?

I certainly took a pay cut when I left the public sector. I'm lucky enough to be earning an above-average wage and be able to make those kinds of choices. It's a huge privilege to get paid for work that you love and are passionate about – that's the ultimate goal.

I do see a lot of burn-out in NGOs, especially among people working on campaigns. You can feel you are working on something for so long and there is no progress or you are actually moving backwards. I was campaigning in criminal justice at the same time the prison population was rapidly increasing. So having positive experiences and a good support network outside of work is critical.

I would never have believed I'd be in this job when I was filling out all those job applications and couldn't even get an interview. Obviously having a PhD helped me get in the front door, but sometimes if people are given the opportunity, even when they haven't done this type of work, they can flourish with the right support. I'd love to see more young people in leadership roles.

