

ROYAL
VOLUNTARY
SERVICE

Kickstarting a new volunteer revolution



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Foreword from Catherine Johnstone CBE

Britain is a generous nation and its strong history of volunteering demonstrates the country's collective spirit. The potential that volunteering has to make a positive mark on our society and help us meet the challenges of today is vast, but equally, giving one's time cannot be framed merely as a means to an end. In order to encourage more people to get involved, we must recognise what intrinsically drives us to contribute in the first place.



Catherine Johnstone CBE

By taking an in-depth look at those who have recently volunteered for the first time, we can begin to better understand the complex tapestry of motivations and emotions that underpin this decision. Similarly, it is an opportunity to examine the barriers that can prevent people from taking that step forward and giving their time. We live increasingly active lives, and even small obstacles can have a significant impact on otherwise willing and able potential volunteers.

My vision is for everyone in Britain to see volunteering as a part of who they are. In order for this to happen, everyone must have the opportunity to give his or her time via more flexible, creative routes including micro volunteering and family volunteering. Everyone should be aware of the role that their skills and experience can play in improving somebody else's life or contributing to society. And we should play a bigger role in celebrating the successes and achievements of volunteers. There is a great joy in volunteering, and organisations such as Royal Voluntary Service have a responsibility to convey these benefits and inspire people. Our challenge is to reach more people than ever and inspire a more diverse group of people across Britain than ever before to step forward. Together, we can change lives, change communities and change society.

Executive Summary

This report sets out to understand more about why people decide to volunteer for the first time, or after a significant break – their motivations, routes in, ambitions, benefits and challenges, the support they receive (or don't) and what more could be done to encourage others like them to get involved. It is focused on formal volunteering, broadly defined as giving unpaid help to any group, club or organisation.

*The analysis is drawn from a specially commissioned public opinion survey of over **4,000 UK adults** and a separate booster survey of **500 first time volunteers**, in-depth interviews with five first time or newly returned volunteers, and a review of recent relevant literature.*

The findings reinforce what other studies have shown, that the UK is a generous nation, with almost six in ten (56%) adults over the age of 18 having volunteered at some stage in their lives.¹ However, in contrast to other recent studies, it suggests that a significant proportion of the population (44%) have never been involved, meaning that there is a pool of over 22 million potential new recruits.² Volunteering was found to be closely associated with economic status, with 34 percent of people from the highest socio-economic groups never having volunteered, compared with 56 per cent of individuals from the lowest groups. The report suggests that the main reasons why people don't volunteer are the pressure of work, never having thought about it, and having other demands on their free time. First timers and other volunteers exhibited similar motivations to get involved, with a rich mix of altruism and self-interest. However, new volunteers were more positive about the potential benefits of engagement,

reporting that their experience left them, feeling happy, useful and fulfilled, less stressed, and more connected to their local community. There is some evidence that volunteers are responding to rising need, with a third of first timers saying their decision to volunteer was influenced by cuts to local services. The two biggest areas of future need for volunteers were identified as supporting the NHS and older people. Drawing on these findings, the report makes a series of recommendations to organisations for reaching out to first time volunteers, including making it easier for people to get involved, developing more flexible and micro opportunities, reinforcing the benefits of volunteering, including social connectivity, and doing more to attract the 'young old' through such innovations as family volunteering. It also calls for a new partnership between the public services and the volunteer movement to build a stronger bond between state and community.

Introduction

The stability of volunteering in the UK is something to be celebrated.³ But it also points to the challenge of engaging those individuals for whom volunteering holds little appeal or is seen as out of reach. Although all types of people get involved to some extent, surveys repeatedly suggest a bias in participation towards those from higher socio-economic groups. Academics have pointed to the existence of a relatively small ‘civic core’ that carries out the majority of volunteering, ‘drawn predominantly from the most prosperous, middle-aged and highly educated sections of the population’.⁴

It is not straightforward to identify the proportion of people who have never volunteered. Most surveys provide a snapshot of one particular point in time, which means they fail to account for the fact that most people move in and out of volunteering at different stages of their lives.

To remedy this deficiency, Daiga Kamerade tracked people’s participation over time, using longitudinal data from the British Household Survey from 1991 to 2007. The findings, she suggests, demonstrate that the number of non-volunteers is low, perhaps only one in ten (13%) of adults, and that ‘the vast majority of British adults have volunteered at least once and most of them do it repeatedly’.⁵

Her conclusion is that there is unlikely to be a sizeable untapped pool of volunteers waiting to be engaged and that policy makers should instead look at how best to ‘retain’ and

‘re-engage’ existing volunteers. John Mohan from the Third Sector Research Centre at the University of Birmingham agrees. Drawing on data from Mass Observation, he points to the ‘exhaustion’ of many non-volunteers, burdened by paid work and caring responsibilities, and asks whether it is reasonable to expect people to do any more. Shifting the dial of participation, he suggests, might simply result in further embedding the civic core and privileging more prosperous communities at the expense of communities where need is greatest.⁶

Our contention in this report is that we shouldn’t give up so easily. Engaging non-volunteers, or one-off volunteers won’t be easy, but it is surely worth the effort. Breaking open the civic core, and spreading the benefits of volunteering more widely, are causes worth championing. If it is true that participation can help combat loneliness and contribute to improved physical and mental wellbeing, then we have a duty to ensure these benefits are available to all. Moreover, our study suggests that one in ten might be a significant under-estimate, suggesting the challenge might be more urgent still.

The research

Faced with this challenge, which has confronted policy makers and practitioners over many years, Royal Voluntary Service commissioned a study to shed further light on the issue. This research was analysed and compiled into the contents of this report by Dr. Justin Davis-Smith, Nick Ockenden and Dr. Helen Timbrell, with support from Cass Business School.

Opinium Research, was enlisted to carry out a representative national survey of the UK adult population. Four thousand people over the age of 18 were asked a series of questions about volunteering – whether or not they took part, the routes in, benefits, drawbacks and barriers to engagement. The questions were modelled on those used in other major national surveys, particularly the Community Life Survey, with the aim of providing some measure of comparability, although the authors are aware that even minor differences in methodology and question wording make exact comparisons impossible.

In addition a booster sample of 500 first time volunteers was constructed, drawn from people who had commenced volunteering at some time in the preceding five years. This group were asked similar questions to the main sample, although with an emphasis on what prompted them to volunteer for the first time, what benefits they have seen and whether or not they intend to continue. Both surveys were carried out in September 2018. To complement the survey data, five qualitative interviews were carried out in September and October 2018, with first time volunteers.⁷

*The **results** are compelling and **provide a platform for the development** of a strategy, not just within Royal Voluntary Service , but the wider volunteer movement, for **recruiting** a cadre of **first timers** to kick-start a new **revolution in volunteering**.*

The results

In line with other studies, our figures suggest that the majority of the UK population (56%) has volunteered at some stage in their lives, although a significant number (44%) have never been involved. This latter figure is higher than other studies, and it is possible that when answering, respondents had forgotten about volunteering they had carried out in the past. But whatever the exact figure, our study suggests a significant proportion of the population have either never volunteered, or volunteered so long ago or at such a low level, that they have forgotten about it. Just over two per cent of the adult population volunteered for the first time in 2018 according to the survey, representing over 1.1 million new volunteers. If our figure of 44 per cent non-involvement is correct, then there is a pool of over 22 million potential new recruits. And even based on Kamerade's estimate of 13 per cent, this still leaves almost seven million adults in the UK yet to volunteer.

Participation between men and women was found to be relatively equal, at 55 per cent men and 57 per cent women, and among different age groups, with 58 per cent of people aged between 18-34 and aged 55 and over having been active, compared to 52 per cent among those aged 35-54. Far larger differences were found in relation to nations and regions, with the highest rates of participation found in London (66%), Scotland (62%), and the South East (59%), and the lowest rates in the North East (45%), Wales (46%), Yorkshire and Humberside (49%) and Northern Ireland (55%). Significant differences were also found according to employment status,

with full time students (72%), those working less than eight hours a week (71%) and the retired (60%) far more likely to have volunteered than those working full time (55%) and those who are unemployed (34%). Given the focus of this report, one of the most significant findings was the confirmation of what previous studies have told us about the clear link between participation and social class. Whilst only about three in ten (34%) of people from the highest socio-economic groups reported never having volunteered, the figure was double (56%) for those from the lowest groups. The civic core it appears is alive and kicking.

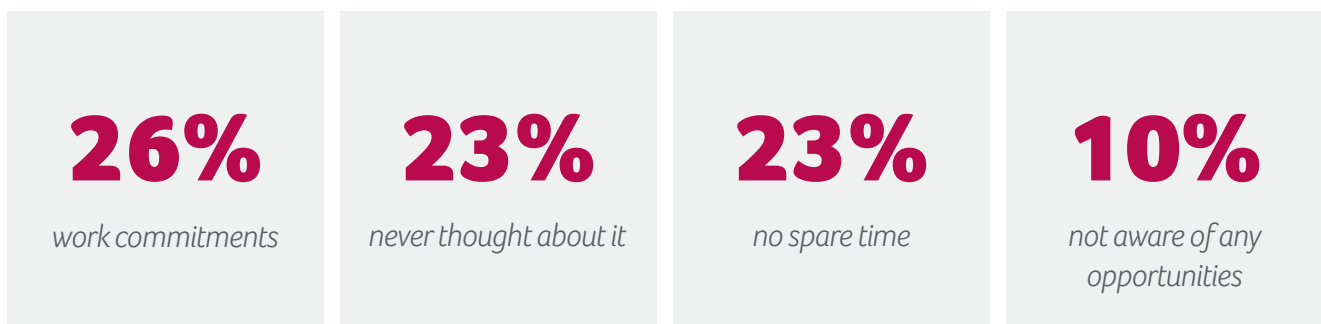
The key benefits of volunteering

The key benefits of volunteering cited by those who had been involved were that it made them feel useful (60%), more fulfilled (56%), more socially aware (53%), more connected to the local community (52%), had given them access to new friends (52%) and made them more positive (51%) and happier (49%).



The reasons given for not volunteering

The main reasons given for not volunteering by those who said they had never been involved, were work commitments (26%), never having thought about it (23%) and having other things to do with their spare time (23%). One in ten (11%) said their reason for not getting involved was that they didn't know of any groups that needed help, with a similar proportion (10%) citing the fact that they weren't aware of opportunities to help.



First timers

Of the 500 first time volunteers interviewed in the survey, 53 per cent had started during the past three years and eight per cent in 2018. Almost eight out of ten (78%) of all new volunteers were still engaged. Of those that were still active, over half (53%) said they intended to retain their existing level of commitment over the next 12 months, with 32 per cent looking to increase their level of activity. Less than two in ten (14%) said they were planning to scale back and only 2 per cent said they intended to stop.

Motivations – balancing altruism and self-interest

Motivations of first time volunteers match closely the motivations of other volunteers, and are made up of a rich mix of altruism and self-interest. Presented with a list of possible reasons, key motivations to emerge among survey respondents were: wanting to improve things and help people (51%), getting involved and feeling part of the community (42%), having some spare time (39%), and wanting to meet people and make friends (36%). A third of first timers (33%) said they volunteered because the cause was important to them, with a further three in ten (30%) citing the fact that they were attracted by the enjoyment and fun of the activity.

The key motivations of first time volunteers



Similarly, among the first timers interviewed as part of the research, enjoyment and personal satisfaction also featured large:

“I enjoy it because it’s a passion and interest of mine and my son is involved. It’s a group of boys that are all under eleven, so they’re relatively easy to manage still, and it’s sport. So, it’s good. And also, it works for us as a family because it’s a Saturday morning and it allows me, it’s nice way to start the weekend in the fresh air and to make sure that I spend some time with my son and, you know, quite frankly, I don’t get to spend a huge amount of time with my kids.” -
(Male sports volunteer, working full time)

But a strong sense of wanting to make a difference also shone through:

“Just to give something back, really, I think because like, obviously I feel like a very fortunate person, but I think a lot of people are struggling or are lonely, especially in hospitals because staff are so busy that people don’t always get to chat to anyone, so I just wanted to give something back, if I could help at all.” -
(Female student, hospital volunteer, aged 19)

“On a professional level I suppose it was that I believe every child deserves the best start in life and deserves the opportunities to flourish and achieve, and on a personal level, hearing the difficulties that these children were having accessing education and support in education, it was kind of a no-brainer really. It was those two fit together perfectly. It was really important that I felt I could give something, and I could help those children.” - (Female children’s health charity volunteer, working full time)

The social value of volunteering was also highlighted:

“Just getting to know different people. It kind of amazes me how many stories people have and what lives they’ve had. And yeah, I just get enjoyment out of just talking to them and finding out about their lives and things. I think it makes a big difference, like it’s increased my confidence and I think it’s just nice to meet people. It’s really lovely.” - (Female student, hospital volunteer, aged 19)

For some interviewees there was a sense that volunteering was simply a part of who they were, a reflection of their values and personality:

“I think there’s a good majority of it that comes from people’s intrinsic motivations. You know, they’re doing it because that’s the kind of person they are, or they have those values and they see there is a little bit of time that they can give.” - (Female children’s health charity volunteer, working full time)

“It’s just personal preferences and whether or not they want to. You know, it’s a bit like saying why do some people do sport or not. You know, it just comes down to how you’re wired as an individual.” - (Male sports volunteer, working full time)



Volunteering in the context of public service cuts

In some instances, volunteers were driven to step forward as a result of a perceived increased need in their community. Across all volunteers, nearly one in 10 (9%) were influenced by cuts to community projects.

While attitudes towards the role of volunteers at a time of austerity and cuts to public services were mixed, some of the first timers interviewed were clear that the need for volunteers had risen because of reductions in statutory provision:

“I think that whatever charity it is, there are children, adults, animals, that need support, there are not enough services out there now with the cuts in local authorities.” - (Female children’s health charity volunteer, working full time)

For this volunteer, the reality of the situation meant, that whatever their views on government policy, it was imperative that the community got more involved:

“I can speak from a childcare background: we’ve had hundreds of cuts in boroughs in local services that aren’t enabling children to access the things that they need. However, they could if there was a voluntary service. We are at a crisis point, and as the services are cut it needs replacing by something.” - (Female children’s health charity volunteer, working full time)

For others, however, there was a concern that the cuts could undermine people’s willingness and ability to help out:

“In many cases lots of these clubs and societies just wouldn’t exist because the funds don’t exist in order to pay people for their time and volunteering.” - (Male sports volunteer, working full time)



Barriers to volunteering:

busy lives and making time

Asked why they hadn't volunteered before, first timers involved in the survey cited a mix of reasons, which echo those given by non-volunteers in previous studies.⁸ Chief among them was work commitments (cited by 40% of respondents), wanting to do other things with any spare time (23%), children and home responsibilities (20%) and never having thought about it (20%). One in ten first timers (10%) said the reason for not volunteering was that they couldn't find the right opportunities.

A similar range of barriers emerged from the interviews. Pressures of time, whether caused by work or caring commitments, or simply due to a prioritisation of other leisure activities, were cited as reasons for not getting involved:

"I think it's really hard. I think time, with everything. People's lives are so much more complex and busier now than I think they've ever been due to work demands, whether it be money demands, life demands, caring for the elderly, caring for siblings, caring for parents, parents caring for... it's really a very difficult climate to be able to enter. I've got two young children, I've got a family, a house and all those things, and not having enough time is my frustration. Not having the time I'd really like to plough into it." - (Female children's health charity volunteer, working full time)

A feeling of not having enough time to volunteer is reinforced in some people's mind by a concern that if they sign up to an organisation they will be required to put in more time than they can spare. For one interviewee, although this concern didn't prevent them from putting themselves forward, it remained a worry, and they could see how it might put others off:

"I think my initial concern, if anything, was they might have wanted me to commit to a number of days and a number of hours and I didn't really want to make a commitment in that sort of way." - (Male conservation volunteer, age 66, retired)

A lack of information or knowledge about available opportunities was also seen as a barrier.

For some first timers, there was a slight sense of nervousness and trepidation, about whether they would fit in and be welcomed:

"I was excited to get started but also nervous because obviously I hadn't done anything like that before." - (Female student, hospital volunteer, aged 19)

"Some people are naturally quite shy and retiring and wouldn't want to perhaps put themselves into a position of having to start conversations about a subject that they just genuinely, either weren't used to or weren't interested in." - (Male sports volunteer, working full time)

Of the small number of first timers still volunteering who planned to scale back or reduce involvement, the key reasons cited for doing so were caring responsibilities for children or older people (47%), work commitments (43%), wanting to do other things with their spare time (30%), and pressures of study (28%).

The rewards on offer: from life experience to using skills

In terms of the benefits accruing to first time volunteers, the most important were the enjoyment of the activity (cited as important by 91% of the survey respondents), the satisfaction from seeing the results (87%), the sense of personal achievement (86%), broadening one's experience of life (82%), a chance to do something they are good at (82%), meeting people and making friends (81%) and playing a part in the community (83%). Seven out of ten (68%) said an important benefit was they felt less stressed, with 67 per cent citing as important the fact that volunteering improved their physical health.

The health benefits of volunteering for first timers were probed in more detail with a series of questions asking respondents to reflect on the impact of their engagement in relation to various 'quality of life' indicators. The findings reinforce the evidence from previous studies of the positive health impact volunteering can bring. Over three quarters (77%) of first time volunteers said they felt more useful, with 70 per cent saying they felt more fulfilled. Two thirds

(68%) said they felt more positive as a result of their engagement, with 65 per cent saying they felt happier, and 62 per cent more confident. Almost four in ten (37%) said their volunteering had made them less lonely. A similar proportion of first timers (37%) said they smiled more often as a result of their volunteering, with 35 per cent saying that volunteering had given them a more positive outlook on life and improved their mental wellbeing.

The health benefits of volunteering for first timers

77%

felt more useful

68%

felt more positive

37%

felt less lonely

37%

smiled more

The first timers interviewed backed up the suggestion that volunteering can be good for your wellbeing:

“What I find most beneficial or of benefit to me is actually doing something positive. That to me is, if I can make a difference to somebody’s life in a positive manner, then that is an absolute joy for me.” - (Male, young person’s befriender, retired)

“So I decided the time was right to retire and so I took the bullet and handed my notice in. My wife was concerned I wouldn’t have anything to do, I’d be bored, I’d be under her skin, which, if you know me you’d understand. I’m quite active, I don’t sit around for long and I decided I’d look for some volunteering.”
- (Male conservation volunteer, age 66, retired)

Future need: volunteering in a changing society

As for future engagement, first timers were asked where they felt volunteers were most needed. The two biggest areas of future need were identified as supporting the NHS (cited by 45% of respondents) and supporting older people (44%). Health, disability and social welfare was cited as an area of key future need by 33 per cent of first timers, with 31 per cent citing children’s education, 29 per cent the local community and 27 per cent the environment and animal welfare.

The first timers who were interviewed did not doubt that more volunteers would be needed in the future:

“I think the more people that volunteer obviously the better impact it has because, it’s obviously going to make patients feel happier and take a bit of strain off the NHS staff and, I think, yeah it can only have a positive impact, but enough people have to do it to be able to feel that impact.” - (Female student, hospital volunteer, aged 19)

“I think the more people that can support and add their two pence worth into it, even if it was just their two pence worth, the more that could be done. I mean from the role I play, if we had more volunteers we could do so much more, because at the moment it just falls down to six of us.” - (Female children’s health charity volunteer, working full time)



Sense of community

One of the themes explored in the interviews was whether as a society we are losing our community spirit. Some respondents felt we are:

“I think it’s getting worse, the sense of community. People don’t do enough to meet up with their neighbours... I sit and look out of the window now and I think, none of these people would come over to me if I was an older person in need of some sort of help. There are a few that would, obviously, but generally I think people tend to keep themselves to themselves these days... They’ve got their own lives. They’ve got their own jobs... when we first moved in we would always try to make ourselves available to some of the older people who were by themselves. That doesn’t seem to happen these days. People just sort of get on with their own lives and don’t seem to talk to many neighbours.” - (Male conservation volunteer, age 66, retired)

“I think it’s getting worse. I think we’re very segregated as a society and I think a lot of it is to do with social media and those kinds of things because people are more in contact over social media and we’re not actually engaging with each other. We’re engaging with each other but on a different kind of platform. It’s quite hard.” - (Female children’s health charity volunteer, working full time)

But others had a more optimistic take, with one person pointing out how their local community had rallied round during a recent bout of bad weather.

“We had the Beast from the East this year. We had a lot of snow up here, we had two foot of snow on the ground outside and it was the first time in maybe thirty years that I’ve seen communities working together to get cars out of snow, and if somebody found a shop that was selling milk they’d get more than enough for themselves so they could make sure old people were getting milk in the crescent.”
- (Male, young person’s befriender, retired)

One respondent pointed to what they saw as a conflict between increased generosity and community spirit and reduced free time to get involved, which they argued was storing up problems for the future:

“I would imagine if you drew a line over twenty or thirty years, we are more generous in respect of there are just more clubs and societies that run now than there ever used to be, therefore I would imagine there are more volunteers. If that’s what equals generosity. If you mean it from the internal, psychological perspective of, you know, how hard wired is volunteering into the average brain, it might actually be the opposite because we now have more demands on our time, on our lives, because we’re trying to be in three places at once and everything is multi-media and multi-channelled and it might actually be more difficult. And perhaps that’s where the issue is because you’ve got two curves running in opposite directions: one where the requirement is for more volunteers but actually working in the opposite direction is the fact that everyone’s lives are so much more complicated and they haven’t got the time to volunteer.” - (Male sports volunteer, working full time)

There was a clear sense from the people spoken to that, irrespective of what they felt was happening to community spirit at the moment, volunteering was a good way of building closer ties:

“I think it encourages people to reach out and help others who live around them and build up connections with people, and I think, in a way, if we’re to build a strong community then volunteering is one of the most important things you could do it with.”
- (Female student, hospital volunteer, aged 19)

Differences with first timers

Our research suggests that in some respects first time volunteers are just like all other volunteers. They volunteer for a wide mix of reasons, both altruistic and self-interested, they get significant personal satisfaction and enjoyment, feel more connected to their local community, and cite improvements in physical and mental wellbeing as a result of their involvement.

But despite the similarities, there are a number of important differences, which provide pointers to how organisations might seek to attract more people into volunteering. Many of the differences are connected to what we might describe as the initial warm glow of participation. On nearly all the measures of personal enjoyment and satisfaction, first timers score significantly higher than long-standing volunteers. For example, while 68 per cent of first timers reported feeling more positive as a result of their volunteering and 65 per cent happier, the figures dropped to 51 per cent and 49 per cent respectively for all volunteers. Similarly, although 60 per cent of all volunteers said that their volunteering made them feel useful and 56 per cent fulfilled, the respective figures for first timers were 77 per cent and 70 per cent. Volunteering appears to have a small role to play in relieving stress, with two in ten (21%) volunteers overall saying their involvement made them feel less stressed and three in ten (29%) more calm mentally. But these effects appear to be significantly magnified for first timers, with 34 per cent saying their stress levels were reduced and half (50%) feeling mentally calm.

All volunteers want to feel useful and that they are fulfilling a valuable role in the community, but first timers are more likely than longer-standing volunteers to cite feeling useful and fulfilled as a benefit. First timers also appear to be more likely to say that they feel connected to their local community as a result of their volunteering, cited by 68 per cent compared with 52 per cent of all volunteers. There is some evidence from this research that volunteers are responding to rising need, particularly those who have got involved for the first time. A third (29%) of first timers said their decision to volunteer was influenced by cuts to community projects and local authority services, with a similar proportion (27%) citing concern for the older people or cuts to care funding as a motivation. One in five first timers (19%) said that they had started volunteering at least in part in response to a visible rise in homelessness and poverty in their area, while 15 per cent said that they had volunteered as a result of their awareness of the increased pressures faced by the NHS. Across each of these examples of need, first timers were more likely to say that they had been motivated to volunteer as a result than long-standing volunteers.



Kickstarting a new volunteer revolution

What lessons can we draw from this research that might help in engaging first timers or one-off volunteers?

Making it easier for people to get involved

First, for new volunteers to get engaged, they need to know about the opportunities that exist and the routes in. This study reinforces what many other studies have told us, that a significant number of people are simply unaware of how they can help.

The inexorable rise of social media provides unprecedented means for organisations to counter this information deficit and sell both the opportunities and benefits of voluntary action to a new audience. This is already happening for younger people, with one study suggesting that four out of ten younger people ‘who had participated in social action in the past year had used the internet to assist with their social action in some way’.⁹ Organisations should seek to connect with people where they are, which for many increasingly will be online, but which will also for most continue to take in such physical spaces as the workplace, gym, sports club, hospital and doctor’s surgery.

In parts of the country, Clinical Commissioning Groups have begun to reach out to the community in support of the concept of social prescribing, which recognises that physical and mental wellbeing requires active participation as well as clinical treatment.¹⁰ Overcoming the information deficit, and finding new ways to spread the message of the value of volunteering, is the first requirement to kickstarting a new volunteer revolution.

Flexing the ask

It is not just about information, though. The successful organisations of the future will also take into account the desire being expressed for increasing flexibility. Again, first timers are much like all other volunteers, in their desire to get involved in more episodic and fluid ways. But perhaps even more so, given their reluctance to volunteer, first timers will demand a greater degree of flexibility.

One of the most exciting developments in recent years has been the growth of digital and micro volunteering, which enables people to engage at a time and place that suits them – on the bus, after school, at home, during the lunch break.¹¹ Making it easier for people to take the plunge, by experimenting with time-limited, bite size chunks of volunteering, without having to sign up to a lengthy period of involvement, should help to attract new recruits. Of course this will not replace the need or desire for face-to-face engagement, but it could provide the key to unlocking participation among those for whom time is a scarcity or who have been excluded from more traditional face-to-face engagement as a result of ill-health, disability or mobility issues. It may also help keep people engaged if they find that for a period of time they have to scale down their involvement. With ever-increasing demands on people's time the successful organisations of the future will be those that respond creatively to the demand for more flexible ways to engage.

Micro volunteering is not limited to the Internet. Some charities, such as Oxfam with its 'What can you do with five minutes?' or the Canal and River Trust with its 'Tow Path Challenge', have developed offline, micro volunteering schemes, to respond to the desire for more flexible, time-limited opportunities.

The British Red Cross has recently launched a campaign to recruit 10,000 local volunteers to help out in their communities when a crisis hits, like a flood or terror attack, promising a sign-up process that takes just ten minutes. The volunteers will be called upon only when needed, with the Red Cross acknowledging that 'people have busy lives and can't always commit to volunteering all year round'.¹²



Accentuating the positive

Making volunteering more accessible and flexible is unlikely to be sufficient on its own, however. Organisations need to take heed of what the new volunteers have been telling us about why they started and what they get out of their involvement, and tailor their message and offer accordingly.

Crucially, first timers appear to be more likely than long-term volunteers to play up the personal benefits of volunteering, in health terms, socially, in connecting to their local community, and perhaps, most strikingly, in terms of enjoyment and fun.

That volunteering is good for both the community and volunteer is pretty clear. A new study from the Centre for Ageing Better argues that ‘as well as helping others, making a contribution to our communities is good for us. It has been shown to improve our social connections, enhance our sense of purpose and self-esteem – and as a result, to increase our life satisfaction, happiness and wellbeing.’¹³ Although many of the claimed-for benefits of volunteering appear to be well founded, we need to exercise a note of caution. Not all studies agree. Claims and counter-claims abound, and some of the more hyperbolic assertions have been found wanting. The evidence is perhaps strongest in relation to health, physical and mental, although the direction of causality is still an issue.¹⁴ Volunteering might improve health, but healthier people might also be more likely to volunteer.

A recent study of volunteering on wildlife projects suggests that volunteering offers a major boost to mental wellbeing, with two-thirds of participants noticing an improvement in wellbeing within six weeks.¹⁵ A systematic review of evidence in 2013, which included research tracking the same people over time, ‘showed volunteering had favourable effects on depression, life satisfaction and wellbeing’.¹⁶ A more recent study from the Scouts found 70% of volunteers reported improved life satisfaction and four in ten (42%) reduced feelings of loneliness (42%).¹⁷ It is suggested that the impact might be particularly pronounced for older people. One study found that ‘voluntary work in later life is associated with lower self-reported cognitive complaints and a lower risk for dementia’.¹⁸

Other studies, however, suggest that volunteering can have negative as well as positive impacts, with Fujiwara, Lawton and Watt suggesting that ‘when too much time is spent on voluntary work, people can start to feel worse’, perhaps pointing to the well-observed danger of burnout.¹⁹

It is no surprise that the initial gloss derived from volunteering begins to wear off after time, but organisations should use this insight to emphasise the personal benefits to be gained from volunteering. Highlighting these benefits even more than currently might help to attract more people for the first time, or those who had volunteered at some point in the past but have since given up. Selling the personal benefits of volunteering is not a new concept and most organisations already incorporate this message in their recruitment strategies. But this survey suggests that pushing this message even further might bring significant dividends. There is a further implication from the research, of course. If the initial warm glow derived from volunteering begins to wear off after a period of time, however

inevitable this might be, then the question arises as to how organisations can seek to reinvigorate the volunteering experience to minimise this effect and ensure that volunteers continue to see the benefits of involvement. Organisations have long been concerned about trying to limit turnover rates and encourage volunteers to remain. Re-igniting the flame of volunteering by finding new ways to engage and inspire, might be part of the solution.

This is not to undervalue altruism. First timers, like all other volunteers, also want to know that what they are doing is meeting a need. Emphasising the difference volunteers can make in their community is likely to motivate many to get involved. Volunteering is about reciprocity and exchange. First timers want to be useful, but they also recognise the personal gain that can come from engagement. The most successful volunteering organisations in the future will be those that understand this basic truth and embed this reciprocity and exchange into their practice.

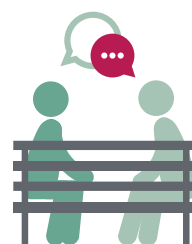


Rediscovering the social

Loneliness is one of the scourges of our age. The Community Life survey for 2017-18 found that six per cent of adults felt lonely often or always, equating to nine million people, with only 23 per cent saying they never felt lonely.²⁰ Perhaps surprisingly, younger people aged 16-24 were the most likely to report being lonely.²¹

Loneliness can bring profound problems to both individuals and society, being linked to poor physical and mental health, with all the resulting pressure on health and social services. A new study from the Institute for Voluntary Action Research and the Local Trust suggests that isolation is one of five main barriers preventing communities from being powerful.²² The British Red Cross and the Co-op have examined the contribution played by Community Connectors – volunteers and staff – to reconnect people with their communities.²³ But evidence also suggests that the act of volunteering has a key role to play as a route out of loneliness for those affected.²⁴

The Campaign to End Loneliness has highlighted ‘the central importance of volunteering, as both an enabler of effective loneliness interventions and a way of directly preventing and alleviating loneliness’.²⁵ Given the correlation between loneliness and economic disadvantage, there is an added imperative to try and open up volunteering to those outside the civic core. Organisations should accentuate the social side of volunteering, the opportunity to meet new friends, to get out of the house and to try new experiences.



Attracting the young old

The UK population, like many western democracies, is rapidly ageing. The Commission on the Voluntary Sector and Ageing states that ‘by 2033 nearly a quarter of the UK population will be aged 65 and over’, while the Young Foundation suggests that ‘by 2050 Britain will spend more than a fifth of its entire national output on services for the elderly’.²⁶

The effect on volunteering is likely to be considerable, both positive and negative. Demand for services to care for older people will increase, and volunteers will be expected and required to do more. But such demographic shifts might also lead to increased supply. Volunteering rates by the newly retired (the young old) are consistently high, and as the baby-boomer population retires, this could result in a large body of people with sufficient time and good health to volunteer. As Saxton, Harrison, and Guild note: ‘the greater proportion of older people we will witness over the coming decades will continue to offer charities a positive pool of volunteers’.²⁷ But we cannot rely on this. Volunteering, as we have seen from this research, will be up against a range of other calls on people’s time – paid employment, caring for parents and spouses, looking after grandchildren, leisure and travel – and might not always come off best.²⁸ And there is a clear bias among older people engaged in formal volunteering towards those who are more economically secure and in better health.²⁹ Finding ways to wrap volunteering around older

people’s increasingly hectic lives will surely be key to retaining existing commitment and encouraging new volunteers to come forward. New technology and micro volunteering will again have a part to play, but so too will schemes such as those pioneered by the National Trust and Royal Voluntary Service, which enable families to volunteer together and which, rather than focusing on service, play up the social side of volunteering. The task may not always be straightforward. The National Trust notes the importance of careful project design, suggesting that many of the necessary tasks in the everyday running of a Trust property do not lend themselves to being delivered by families with small children.³⁰ The new volunteer revolution, however, will be built at least in part on our ability to present volunteering as an alternative leisure pursuit to the gym and the hobby club. New forms of social action such as Casserole Club and the Good Gym, in addition to the phenomenally successful Park Run, are leading the way in re-framing voluntary action as a form of ‘serious leisure’.³¹

A new partnership in public services

The new volunteer revolution will also require a fundamental re-think of the way our public services are delivered. We need to break free from the reductionist views that suggest volunteers can replace paid professionals, or that with proper public investment they will not be needed. Neither perspective stands up to close scrutiny, or is fit for the challenges of the future.

Recent research by the Kings Fund for Royal Voluntary Service and Helpforce identified that volunteers were welcomed by NHS staff who recognised the positive impact they had on patient experience and outcomes. We need a new drive to open up our public services to greater community involvement, not as a means of saving money, but as a way of bringing in additional resource and new ideas, and building a stronger bond between state and community and provider and beneficiary.

The health service offers a particularly good place to start these conversations. Volunteers are already heavily involved, with three million individuals active in health and social care and almost 80,000 volunteering specifically within the NHS.³²

George Mombiot, writing in *The Guardian*, has suggested there are 'two national health systems in this country: the official one, performing daily miracles, and the voluntary network that supports it'.³³ For the past 80 years Royal Voluntary Service has been at the forefront of efforts to build a more productive partnership between the health service and the community, and in 2018 lent its support to a new initiative, Helpforce, which aims to double the number of volunteers in the NHS by 2021.³⁴ An opinion poll commissioned by Royal Voluntary Service in 2018 found two thirds (67%) of adults felt volunteers have a vital role to play in supporting the NHS, with one fifth (22%) saying they would consider volunteering to support its work.

The roles most favoured were providing companionship to patients on wards (47%), helping out in shops or cafes (46%) or at mealtimes (35%), supporting patients to and from appointments (30%) and involvement in social activities (24%).³⁵ Online and micro volunteering is also finding its way into the health service, with initiatives such as GoodSAM (smartphone activated medics), providing a rapid response service from trained first aiders to people suffering cardiac arrest before the arrival of professional medics, and thousands of digital-savvy volunteers engaged in various ground breaking citizen science and medical research projects.

This is not about the state withdrawing and volunteers being asked to pick up the pieces. Volunteering is not and never has been a panacea for all ills. But rather than seeing it as a zero sum game, where volunteers and paid staff are battling it out for survival, we need to see volunteers, voluntary organisations and other community assets, alongside paid professionals and the public sector, as partners in co-producing solutions to the wicked problems of our age.

Finding the right balance for the future between a properly financed public sector and a people-powered community resource, will be an essential ingredient in meeting the needs of the most vulnerable in society. And attracting more first timers will be an important part of the solution. But perhaps even more fundamentally, we need to stop equating volunteering solely with the delivery of public services and focus on the wider benefits to society which it brings - the building of social capital, the combating of loneliness, and the enhanced sense of well being and life satisfaction for those who take part.



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“Our volunteers provide practical support and vital companionship to help people get the best out of life.”

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