

Building Sustainable Volunteering Communities

A Toolkit

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About this Toolkit:

This toolkit has been developed as a resource for volunteering organisations, to accompany a series of 'Research Insight' events with volunteer managers across Hampshire. It is based on the findings from a series of research studies that the authors have undertaken on volunteer motivations and experiences at the University of Winchester, in collaboration with Community First: Winchester, Hampshire County Council, and Nottingham Trent University, with the aim of trying to address some of the challenges facing volunteering organisations in recruiting and retaining volunteers. This toolkit is for people who are interested in what motivates people to volunteer, and to continue to volunteer, and how to build the sustainability of their volunteering communities.

The Toolkit provides a summary of the main research studies, presents key findings from across the research, and provides recommendations for how these might be implemented in practice.

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Summary of the Research

This toolkit is based on three research studies that were conducted between 2017 and 2020. The aim of these studies was to understand, in various ways, the motivations and experiences of volunteers (and in some cases non-volunteers), as well as some of the outcomes of volunteering, e.g. improved wellbeing. We also wanted to try to understand how these motivations, experiences and outcomes that influence volunteering could be used to help to increase in the number of people volunteering, to improve the retention of volunteers, and to try to boost the benefits of volunteering for volunteers.

The three studies took different approaches to address these questions:

Study 1: was an interview study with 40 volunteers (aged 18-74; 68% F: 32% M) from the South of England. The interviews asked questions about volunteering motivations and experiences.

Study 2: was a mixed methods study, involving both interviews with 53 volunteers (aged between 18 and 74; 63%F: 37%M) in the South/South West of England and an online survey with 529 participants (volunteer and non-volunteers; aged 18-95; 60%F: 38%M) from households across the West Midlands. The interviews explored people's experiences of volunteering, and the survey asked questions around community identification, social support and personal well-being.

Study 3: was an online survey study, which was a collaboration with the University of Winchester, Hampshire County Council and Community First. The survey got 403 responses from both volunteers

and non-volunteers between October and December of 2019 (aged 18-74; 68%F: 30%M) and covered a range of questions related to volunteering, help giving and receiving help.

Find Out More: About the Research

This research has been published in peer reviewed academic journals, many of which are open access. If you wish to read the method and findings in full, please use the following references or contact the authors:

Gray, D. & Stevenson, C. (2019) How can we help? Exploring the role of shared social identity in the experiences and benefits of volunteering. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 193(1), 1-19.

Bowe, M., Gray, D., Stevenson, C., Cleveland, M., McNamara, N., Wakefield, J., Kellezi, B. & Wilson, I. (forthcoming). A social cure in the community: A mixed-methods exploration of the role of social identity in the experiences and well-being of community volunteers. *European Journal of Social Psychology*.

Cleveland, M., Gray, D., & Manning, R. (forthcoming). Exploring volunteer experiences of the structures and dynamics within volunteer organisations.

Key Finding 1 - Communities, Groups and Social Connections

A key finding across the three research studies, was the importance of communities, groups and social connections for understanding volunteering motivations and experiences.



Volunteer group belonging is important for whether or not people stayed in a particular volunteering organisation or opportunity.

Most people gave a social motivation for volunteering – to fulfil a group/social based need.

Good sense of community - feeling connected to and feeling like you are personally contributing towards the community – is key to understanding volunteering motivations and experiences. Higher sense of community is associated with higher levels (time spent) volunteering and is what distinguishes volunteers from non-volunteers. Sense of community increases volunteer commitment, and volunteering was described as a key community resource, which helped to create shared community identities, encourage and develop social support networks and to contribute positively to the well-being of volunteers and community members.

Feeling that they belonged to a volunteering group was key to this, in the sense that they want to be part of a collective group, in which other volunteers were supportive and welcoming and volunteers felt they belonged. Where they did not get a feeling of belonging, they often moved to a different volunteering role or stopped volunteering altogether. Indeed, the key aspect of the volunteer experience most strongly associated with satisfaction was feelings of belonging.

Reciprocity is an important group norm for volunteers, i.e., where community members had previously received help and support from the

community, volunteering was seen as an important way of reciprocating that help to other community members. Or, where people saw that they might need help in the future, then volunteering was a way of 'banking' that mutual support. So, volunteering is seen as both a way of giving support to others, when you can, and as a way of ensuring that support is returned, when it is needed.

FIND OUT MORE: WHY ARE SOCIAL GROUPS IMPORTANT FOR US?

These findings about the importance of social groups for our motivations, behaviours and experiences is related to a theoretical framework in psychology called the social identity approach. This framework says that our group memberships and our sense of belonging to particular groups (i.e. our social identities) are psychologically very important to us. Such group memberships make us feel that we have sense of community with our group members, and are therefore essential to our self-esteem and how we understand ourselves and others in the world (Sani et al., 2015). These group memberships are so fundamental to our sense of self, that they can direct how we think, what we believe and how we act. They also have the potential to improve our health and well-being, because they provide people with important resources, such as a sense of social connectedness, personal control, and the belief other people will help and support us during times of crisis.

Over the last decade, there is much research to back up these ideas. The groups that we identify with can impact our health and wellbeing through

the provision of psychological resources such as social support, and the promotion of positive health behaviours (Haslam et al., 2018). These 'active ingredients' have been found to be important for people living with complex needs, including those with long-term mental health problems (Cruwys, Haslam, Dingle, Jetten, Hornsey, Chong, & Pei, 2014), older adults (Gleibs, Haslam, Haslam, & Jones, 2011), residents of socially deprived communities (McNamara, Stevenson, & Muldoon, 2013), and those recovering from addiction (Buckingham, Frings, & Albery, 2013). In each case, one or more of the 'active' ingredients described above have had a significant impact on positive health outcomes. In summary, there is a strong evidence base that can explain how and why group belonging and social integration is beneficial for health and well-being.

How to Use this Evidence:

How you use these findings will depend on the particular issues that are facing your organisation and the level at which you are working.

At the community level, encouraging social connections is the best way to encourage help giving and has the capacity to increase volunteer numbers. Make the social group element of volunteering prominent – it is a key motivation for non-volunteers. Community-based interventions should focus on activities that aim to increase community connection, belonging and strong support networks. Many of our volunteers came to volunteering through **word of mouth connections** because of their community ties, and so this is another way to boost volunteering numbers.

Those involved in **promoting volunteering** will benefit from knowing how best to appeal to people when asking them to engage with an opportunity. Social group-based motivations have been shown to be key here, along with a strong social norm towards reciprocity, so appealing to those community and group-based motivations could be an important way to match motivations with volunteering opportunities.

Volunteering organisations could should help facilitate and encourage a shared volunteering identity within their organisations. Two practical implications that are suggested as a key priority are:

- ⇒ Implementing a peer-support system within the organisation to help promote solidarity between the volunteers. Give confident, engaged volunteers the opportunities to lead on this.
- ⇒ Peer support programmes can be a great way to involve non-volunteers, by reducing barriers to social inclusion (e.g. anxiety). A friendly, welcoming, structured approach with reassurance that they belong and can overcome challenges in their role, is key here.
- ⇒ Providing more opportunities for volunteers to take part in collective volunteering and to encourage active group participation, which should strengthen their commitment to their volunteering role.

FIND OUT MORE: PEER SUPPORT NETWORKS

Across the research the importance of peer-support came up time and again. For most of our

volunteers, peer support was seen as more important than organisational support in determining and defining their volunteering experiences. For many, this peer support included several different activities, which ranged from a simple meet and greet, to more organised forms of peer support, e.g.:

1. When taking up a new volunteering role, having an experienced volunteer meet them on their first day to say hello and to explain things.
2. Having a 'buddy system' where a nominated person could answer questions, help them when things became stressful etc.
3. Having a 'virtual group' (e.g. a WhatsApp group) where people could chat and share information and experiences.
4. Having organised group sessions to meet up with others and in some cases (depending on the volunteering role) to debrief.

No matter what the approach, key to the success is the creation of a warm, friendly and welcoming environment which is accessible to all, and which generates an important sense of belonging. Peer support is most effective when integrated into the standard practices of the organisation. It might be good to explore with your volunteers what kind of peer support would work for them.

There are many further resources available for creating a peer support network. For example:

<https://knowhow.ncvo.org.uk/case-studies/establishing-a-successful-volunteer-peer-support-scheme>

Key Finding 2 - Volunteering Across the Lifespan

Our studies showed that volunteering was often a complex activity for participants, in that people often volunteered at different places, doing different things, at different stages in their lives. In line with previous research (e.g. McGarvey et al., 2019), our participants reported moving in and out of volunteering across their lives, and few of our participants had consistently volunteered over their lifetime.

Transitions were key to understanding these volunteering journeys. Across the interviews, volunteering often intersected with particular moments of transition, e.g. becoming a parent, relocating, retiring, children going to school, which can provide important resources for volunteering (e.g. time), but where volunteering can also fulfil an important transitional role (e.g. 'giving you something meaningful to do'; 'being of use'). People often used volunteering to help them cope with a transitional moment, by ensuring that they could bridge between one version of themselves and another.

FIND OUT MORE: TAKING A LIFESPAN APPROACH

In our research, we found that people's relationships with volunteers were something that developed over time, enabling people to create new in-group identities (and resolve old identities) that are central to their experience of volunteering. As an example, from one of our interviews:

I: So, when did you first become interested in volunteering then?

Shona: Um well I suppose because I was a nurse I've always wanted to help people, as well as myself if you like... and once my children went to school, I then at that stage decided that I could...umm...participate in volunteering really. That was linked with the school and that sort of thing. And then when they got slightly older, I volunteered with a lunch club in the village and I graduated to the cook [laughs]... and then my... my...umm my mother in law became ill so I looked after her for a few years and then...I needed something else to do...

In this extract, Shona who is 74 years old, talks about how she got into volunteering in the first place, how she 'dips' in and out of volunteering across the various stages and demands of her life, and how these are linked to key transitional moments, e.g. her children going to school, her mother in law becoming ill etc. Many of our participants described their volunteering journeys in this way, as part of a life-long process of commitment at different times and stages to different kinds of volunteering roles. As with Shona later in her interview, this was seen as really positive to most of our volunteers, that they could come back to it and it would help them to get through tricky transitional moments in their lives.

Volunteering in your youth was a strong predictor for continued volunteering as an adult. However, the younger people in our samples were often the

least positive about their experiences of volunteering. This was for a variety of different reasons. In some cases, our younger volunteers reported that they did not feel that they **belonged in the volunteering groups** and roles that they took up; related to Key Finding 1, this did not meet their social/community group needs. Our younger participants were often struggling the most with transitions, e.g. to a new place for university, work or school, and wanted volunteering to help them feel less isolated.

Some of our younger participant talked about how they felt that their voices were not heard or treated with the same respect as the older volunteers who had been there for a lot longer. Longevity in volunteering provides one with a sense of status and leadership in the group, but makes it hard for younger volunteers to feel that they can **contribute meaningfully**.

This group were also the most likely to say that their reason for volunteering was to **gain skills for work**. This is not surprising given that many of them took up volunteering through their school or university because it was promoted to them in this way. However, work motivations are the least likely to lead to volunteer commitment and have lower satisfaction with volunteering (Stukas et al., 2014). These work motivations also did not match with their expectations of volunteering, even though it was the reason that they had started to volunteer in the first place.

How to Use this Evidence:

Based on this evidence, we have the following recommendations:

- ⇒ Transitions stages are key as people make decisions about volunteering. Transition gatekeepers e.g. retirement counsellors, bereavement specialists, professional societies e.g. law or accountancy are ideal connections to those going through transitions and could function as signposts to opportunities
- ⇒ Those who have previously been involved in volunteering, but are not currently, can be easier to recruit if some of the barriers for this group are addressed, e.g. time. This could and should be a focus and priority for organisations.
- ⇒ Youth volunteering needs particular attention, given that this is a key time for starting off a life-long volunteering journey. Work motivations can be enough to attract young people to volunteering, but more needs to be done to make them stay in volunteering. Young people have the same belonging and social connection needs as other volunteers and more needs to be done to address these needs in volunteering roles.

Key Finding 3 – Good Organisations Support

Volunteering occupies a unique position, where volunteers are not classed as employees, but they are often operating within structures that do, in many ways, resemble an organisation.

Volunteering organisations are expected to provide a **range of support and help** to volunteers: practical and emotional. Fundamentally, while volunteers provided help and support to service users, organisations were expected to provide help and support to volunteers to enable them to fulfil this role effectively (and easily). Good support is often defined in terms of 'being in touch', where volunteers can ask questions, and get help and support with their relationships with service users. Where this did not happen, volunteers often felt unable to cope with the demands of the role (e.g. too little time), or saw this as unfair (as 'pushing too much onto the volunteers').

Volunteering organisations are key to managing the **identity-related complexities of volunteering**.

Organisations tended to be characterised positively if they recognised the value of their volunteers and also facilitated building shared identity and a sense of belonging. Where this did not happen, volunteers tended to move onto other volunteering opportunities; often without feedback.

Leadership is complex in volunteering. Volunteer groups often benefited from having an identified group leader, with significant volunteer experience accepted as the basis taking up a leadership role. However, group relations amongst volunteers is most often described as being one of equality, rather than hierarchy, which can make leadership

tricky. Often, this leaves volunteers seeking an overarching organisation-led responsibility for leadership and the effective running of a group. Where organisations did not do this, volunteers saw this as risky because it could upset the shared expectation with other volunteers of the role and of mutual give-and-take.

Over time, the expectations within volunteer roles increases, particularly for those with experience and particular skill sets, or for those who have previously offered more than was initially expected of them within the role. Balancing volunteering and non-volunteering roles and activities is a primary concern of those volunteering: **creating a volunteer/life balance**. Conflicts between these roles can impact how much volunteers are able to commit, or act as a barrier in continuing to volunteer at all. Organisations are seen as key to helping volunteers manage these practicalities.

FIND OUT MORE: PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACTS

These findings around the relationship between volunteers and their volunteer organisation(s) can be understood through a concept known as psychological contracts. Psychological contracts explain how those within an organisation have expectations of the obligations and exchanges that they share with that organisation (Rousseau, 1995). These expectations are referred to as promises and can help to shape and provide some structure to the future of the relationship (Rousseau, 1990). Where volunteers have an expectation, for example, that they will receive support from the organisation to help them carry

out their volunteering role(s), but this support is not received, it can feel to the volunteer that the organisation is not keeping to the promises they have made in the relationship. If volunteers feel as though their organisation have broken promises to them, this can have a negative impact on the commitment that they will then be willing to invest in that organisation. Much research has been carried out on the impact that broken promises can have on the organisation, the individual, and the users of the services being offered. It can result in reduced trust in the organisation (Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski & Bravo, 2007), and can affect how much effort people are willing to put into the organisation (Zagenczyk, Cruz, Cheung, Scott, Kiewitz & Galloway, 2015). Service-users could also feel the impact of broken promises, as this lack of effort trickles down to them (Bordia, Restubog, Bordia & Tang, 2010). It can leave people emotionally exhausted (Costa & Neves, 2017), having difficulty sleeping (Garcia, Bordia, Restubog & Caines, 2017), as well as feeling increasingly tense and anxious (Rosen & Levy, 2013). In summary, there is evidence to suggest that the relationship between an organisation and an employee is of importance to both the running of the organisation and to the health and wellbeing of those carrying out tasks for the organisation.

How to Use this Evidence:

We have the following inter-related recommendations for organisations based on this evidence:

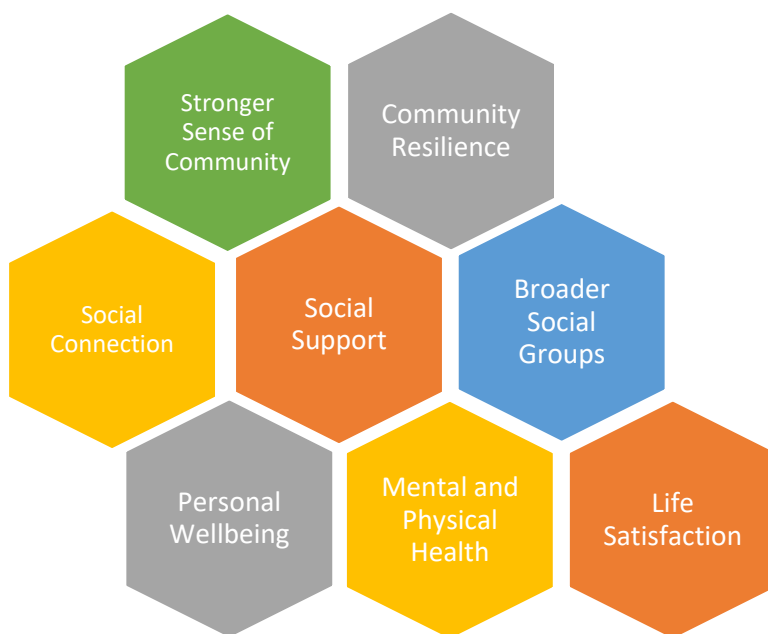
- ⇒ We believe that understanding the underlying promises volunteers believe volunteer organisations have made to them, or should be making to them, is fundamental in addressing the challenges around recruitment and retention of volunteers.
- ⇒ Organisations should identify and meet the identity and belonging related needs of volunteers; this has the potential to transform the relationship with the organisation and with volunteering.
- ⇒ Organisations have to identify and attend to the complexities of leadership in their volunteering groups. Where possible, a volunteer should occupy a group leadership role to manage the activities of the group and offer informal support to the volunteers, but this might not always be possible.
- ⇒ Volunteers should be trained on how to deal with group dynamics as this often forms a large part of the conflict in their role.

Key Finding 4: Volunteer Benefits

Across the three studies, many spoke of the ways in which volunteering was beneficial for them: providing a strong sense of community, building strong social networks and social support, bringing them into contact with people they might not have otherwise met, and providing a real sense of reward, makes people happier, more satisfied with life and less anxious. The impact of volunteering was described by some participants in transformative terms: as having positively changed their whole sense of self.

a bond with, and feeling supported by, their volunteering group helped volunteers to feel as though they could face any difficulties experienced within their volunteering roles and contributed to the volunteers' sense that they could deal with volunteering-related challenges.

The benefits of volunteering are most profound when moving from being a **non-volunteer to becoming a volunteer** (1-2 hours a week is enough to start seeing improvement). Benefits continue to increase with time spent volunteering and then tail off (above 2-5 hours a week).



When compared to non-volunteers, volunteers identified significantly more strongly with their community, felt more socially supported and reported more positive personal well-being. Volunteering increased community connection, which in turn played an important role in how supported volunteers felt within their community and their experiences of positive well-being. Having

However, while the benefits of volunteering tail off with increased time spent volunteering, the benefits from social connections can continue to increase as the **variety of volunteering actions increases**. Current volunteers could increase their sense of community and therefore increase help giving and receiving behaviour by adding extra variety to their

volunteering - this may also help with volunteer retention.

programmes should include a measure of social connection in the evaluations of their programmes.

How to Use this Evidence:

- ⇒ Volunteering has a number of important benefits for people. Highlighting these benefits more clearly to people could attract more people to volunteering, as a form of 'social prescription'.
- ⇒ Maximum benefit would come from getting non-volunteers involved in the most accessible and comfortable way for them. Breaking down volunteering barriers is hard, but the benefits are most concentrated there: an aim of 1-2 hours a week is reasonable to get the highest benefit for the greatest number of people.
- ⇒ Challenging/encouraging existing committed volunteers to diversify could positively impact on their wellbeing, and this could increase the social and personal benefits of volunteering.
- ⇒ It is important to measure and monitor volunteer outcomes and that there is a common framework for doing this across different programmes/initiatives. Measures of how successful volunteer programmes are at creating connection and a sustainable social network among volunteers and recipients is an important way to track the progress and sustainability of volunteering initiatives. Funded

FIND OUT MORE: MONITORING VOLUNTEER OUTCOMES

Measuring your volunteer outcomes is important for a number of reasons. A robust demonstration of what is working in your service allows you to tell the world (including funders) about your success in a compelling way. A good evaluation should also allow you to take a close look at how things could be improved in the future. Finally, if you systematically evaluate your activity in an ongoing way, you can look at how changes you implement affect your outcome measures.

Evaluation doesn't have to be complex, nor does it have to interfere with the delivery of services. You can work with an evaluation partner to evaluate your service. However, you can also conduct limited evaluation yourself with lower levels of resource. It is important to make good use of data you may already have – for instance many organisations already collect data about their volunteers (e.g. about retention, recruitment, volunteer engagement etc.) and these can all give important information about how your organisation is meeting the needs and demands of its volunteers.

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