

# Literature Review: Volunteering as an Intervention to Increase Life Chances

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## 1. Executive Summary

Royal Voluntary Service (RVS) commissioned this literature review to look at the role of volunteering as an intervention to increase life chances. The 2020 review spans literature over the last ten years and reviewed articles and reports from Europe and North America. The main aim of this report is to inform future RVS research. The report is focused specifically on the areas of employability, skills, confidence, social mobility and community engagement and on improvements linked to formal volunteering for people from lower socio-economic groups including young people, refugees and mid-career un- or under-employed.

Over the last several decades we have seen many volunteer programmes in the UK and abroad which aimed to increase the opportunities to volunteering or have aimed to use volunteering as a route to employment. This report reviews some of those programmes and the lessons learned. Among the key lessons learned from these programmes is the need for flexibility and that potential volunteers receive the support needed from skilled staff members who run an inclusive programme that challenges internal unconscious bias. Recruitment messages must be targeted to people based on their particular motivations and needs and efforts must be led by people with lived experience.

The review includes a brief summary of volunteering in the UK, focused on who volunteers and their experience. The research highlights that volunteering levels overall have remained relatively unchanged and there continue to be inequalities in who volunteers. We know from current data that the key differences between volunteers and non-volunteers relate to socio-economic status

and education levels and the research consistently indicates that inequalities of resources and power mean that some people are more likely to be excluded from activities.

There is a link in the literature between areas of high deprivation, very little infrastructure and low levels of community resources and this often results in less support from voluntary sector organisations, fewer staff who support volunteers, fewer opportunities for volunteering and less likelihood of being asked to volunteer.

The benefits to volunteering are clear in the literature. They include health and well-being improvements, increased confidence, self-efficacy and self-esteem, a range of soft skill improvements (including communications, resilience, emotional intelligence, networking and leadership), gaining experience in workplace settings (which can be included on a CV), building references, accessing training in a variety of areas, increasing aspirations (e.g. interest in further education/qualifications) and developing new networks which can act as a bridge to opportunities and expand horizons. Less clear are hard skill improvements related to volunteering - this might be a feature of limited evidence and methodological issues in the literature.

People from lower socio-economic areas have particular motivations and barriers related to volunteering and these do not necessarily fit with the 'traditional view' of volunteering. The evidence in this review shows that people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to be motivated to volunteer as a way of increasing their life chances, particularly related to getting into higher education, building their CV, expanding their networks, gaining employment, improving their employment and increasing their income or income potential. We also know that volunteering is more than just motivation and it needs a trigger, an opportunity and resources. Increasing life chances through volunteering requires that we ensure people have both the resources and the opportunity to volunteer.

The groups that would benefit most from volunteering are also facing serious barriers which include practical barriers (for example being out of pocket for volunteering, having caring responsibilities or lack of data or technical resources), felt barriers (such as lack of confidence, not feeling that they are the 'right' kind of volunteer and a low sense of self-efficacy) and learnt barriers (such as not being asked, lack of information about volunteering and the image of volunteering as a middle-class activity). Local volunteering opportunities are important to this target group, as is not being out of pocket to volunteer and ensuring that volunteer-involving organisations are inclusive and challenge their own bias towards engaging potential volunteers from areas of high deprivation.

In order to make sure that volunteering helps the people who would most benefit from improvements in life chances, it is important that the right staffing is in place to support potential volunteers, that there are opportunities local to where people live, that people are asked directly and given targeted information about the benefits and that partnerships are explored with schools and others to maximize engagement.

There is mixed evidence as to the direct link between volunteering and employment, but there is a large body of evidence showing how volunteering indirectly supports people into employment via increasing confidence, self-esteem and numerous soft skills as well as raising aspirations and developing networks. The research outside of the UK is much more positive, with studies from Europe and the US showing positive employment outcomes, wage impacts and educational attainment, however the evidence from the UK is mixed and there is a lack of evidence showing direct employment impacts, but the indirect benefits of volunteering are clear in all areas.

The review discusses four thematic areas:

1. Young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds have the most to gain from volunteering but are least likely to engage. Volunteering can serve as a direct or indirect route to employment, higher education and aspiration for this group.
2. There is a relationship between volunteering infrastructure, geographic location and deprivation. Disadvantaged neighbourhoods often have insufficient infrastructure and resources to create and maintain voluntary associations, which results in fewer opportunities for volunteering.
3. Volunteering can act as a pathway to British culture and citizenship. Refugees and new migrant communities have a unique experience in relation to volunteering and it plays an important role in increasing life chances for this group via local experience, the creation of networks and links to job markets.
4. Volunteering can be an important mid-life route out of un- or under-employment and especially for recently unemployed people, volunteering can be an important means of keeping active between jobs, preventing a gap in CVs and testing new skills or career paths.

It is important to remember that volunteering can only do so much. The structural inequalities in place for people experiencing deprivation require wider policy solutions and volunteering mainly focuses on the supply side of the labour market without looking at demand side solutions. However, if RVS can support potential volunteers from the groups that would most benefit from increased life chances to develop and sustain the resources needed to volunteer then a volunteering intervention has the highest chances of impact. This may require an equal emphasis on resources and opportunities to volunteer to enable these improvements.

## 2. Introduction

This report summarises the literature review that took place in December 2020 for Royal Voluntary Service (RVS) to look at volunteering as an intervention to increase life chances. The review spans literature over the last ten years (from 2010 onwards) and includes academic journals, evaluations and research from the voluntary and public sectors in North America, Europe and the UK. Over 100 pieces of literature were reviewed and analysed thematically below.

The main aim of this report is to inform future RVS research and in particular the upcoming think piece on volunteering and life chances. By improving life chances, we focus specifically on employability, skills (hard and soft), confidence, social mobility and community engagement. The focus of this review, therefore, has been on improvements related to formal volunteering for employment and income prospects for people from lower socio-economic groups including young people, refugees and mid-career un- or under-employed. Much of this literature is focused on young people (25 and under), but we have included older people where possible.

### 2.1. Context

In the UK, the gap between rich and poor has been widening for at least the last decade<sup>1</sup>, made starker by austerity and Covid-19. According to the ONS, in 2018, the top 10% held 45% of the wealth in households in the UK. The [Government Spending Review 2020](#) has noted that unemployment is expected to peak at 7.5% in the second quarter of 2021 so it is more important than ever to find ways of increasing life chances for the people who need it most. Within the Spending Review, the Government have announced a new package of spending that will include programmes to support unemployed people (such as [Kickstart](#) and [Restart](#)) and to increase skills as well as a UK Shared Prosperity Fund and a Levelling Up Fund. Additionally, recent [research](#)

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<sup>1</sup> See ONS data at:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/bulletins/totalwealthingreatbritain/april2016tomarch2018>

shows that demand for services is increasing for charities (over the last several months) while their income is predicted to decrease.

The literature shows that in the UK over the last 30 years, there have been numerous policy objectives and programmes related to volunteering and employment. These have been either programmes that specifically seek to increase employment outcomes through volunteering (particularly prevalent during economic downturns) or those that seek to increase volunteering opportunities (where employment outcomes may be one of many aims)<sup>2</sup>. Research also shows a trend in public services working more collaboratively with people by 'doing with' rather than 'doing to or for'.<sup>3</sup>

Covid-19 has not necessarily created new forms of volunteering, however it has accelerated trends for online and 'micro' volunteering that have been in place for some time<sup>4</sup>. The pandemic has likely changed volunteering in ways that are yet to be understood.

The [Kruger Report](#) this year spelled out the 'levelling up' agenda and highlighted the deep digital divide in communities across the UK where people from lower socio-economic areas are at a disadvantage and how this might impact social action, including volunteering. It notes that:

- Unemployment is predicted to rise next year; with 500,000 young people in long term unemployment
- There is an austerity impact – youth clubs and parks suffered deepest cuts
- There is a lack of data from government and charities to understand and analyse the environment and volunteering
- It is essential that Job Centre Plus Work Coaches work closely with civil society

That report outlines a plan to address some of these issues as well as to expand service opportunities for young people and to create a new deal with faith communities. It also states that volunteers cannot be a substitute for paid professionals in the public services.

## 2.2. Definitions

This review refers to several concepts that deserve defining, as they are relevant to the topic and are detailed below.

Throughout the report, we use the National Council of Voluntary Organisations ([NCVO](#)) definition of **volunteering** as any activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or someone (individuals or groups) other than, or in addition to, close relatives. This can include formal activity undertaken through public, private and voluntary organisations as well as informal community participation and social action. Central to this definition is the fact that volunteering must be a choice freely made by each individual. **Informal volunteering** refers to unpaid help to benefit individuals that are not related such as through mutual aid and via neighbours. **Formal volunteering** refers to giving time and helping others through groups, clubs or organisations (such as RVS). It is worth noting that there is significantly more research related to formal volunteering than there is on informal volunteering (although this body of research is growing) and it is recognized throughout the literature that people from lower socio-economic groups are more likely to undertake informal volunteering. People also do not

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<sup>2</sup> Kamerade, D. & Paine, A.E. (2014) 'Volunteering and employability: implications for policy and practice', Voluntary Sector Review, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 259-273.

<sup>3</sup> Eds Cooke, G. and Muir, R. (2012) The Relational State, IPPR.

<sup>4</sup> McCabe, A., Wilson, M. and Ellis Paine, A. (2020) Rapid Research COVID 19 Stepping up and helping out: grassroots volunteering in response to COVID-19, Briefing 6, Local Trust.

necessarily label themselves as *volunteers*, particularly in more deprived areas and they are more likely to view themselves as helping neighbours or their community<sup>5</sup>.

**Social class** is traditionally defined by occupation, wealth and education but newer research suggests there are three dimensions to class - economic, social and cultural. This has resulted in seven new groupings, of which we focus on the three most deprived: traditional working-class, the emergent service workers and the poorest in society<sup>6</sup>.

The term **life chances** is complex and can mean different things in different contexts, including structural factors, policy interventions and individual choices. In this report we focus on increased employability, skills (hard and soft), resilience and **social capital**. Social capital includes trust, reciprocity, making new friends and increased social networks that tend to be local and help people to feel more rooted in their community. Social capital is linked to reducing isolation and increasing one's life chances.

**Social mobility** has been described as opportunities for movement between different social groups, and the advantages and disadvantages that go with this in terms of income, security of employment and opportunities for advancement. Like other forms of capital, families can pass onto their children their social capital in the form of networks of contacts. Such social capital may work to the advantage of children from middle class backgrounds by giving them access to extensive and diverse social networks of individuals who can offer support in-kind such as information, advice and additional contacts. Working class networks tend to revolve around close kin and friends, all of whom are closely connected to each other. By contrast, the middle classes have extensive weak ties with, for example, ex-colleagues, acquaintances and friends of friends (strong bridging capital). Such weak ties have been shown to be more important than strong ties for success in finding employment and other labour market outcomes<sup>7</sup>.

The themes within this literature review are related to formal volunteering, as this is the realm of RVS, and how best to reduce barriers for the people who might benefit most from volunteering outcomes related to improving life chances.

### 3. Who volunteers and what do we know about the experience?

There is a large body of evidence related to who volunteers. In 2019, NCVO published [Time Well Spent](#) (TWS), which focused on the experience of volunteering, as well as motivations and barriers to formal volunteering. It was based on a survey of over 10,000 members of the British public. Building on the original research, they later published a [series of focused reports](#) on employer-supported volunteering, public sector volunteering and volunteering and diversity. This research gives us the most up to date snapshot of volunteering in the UK and some of these results are summarised below.

#### **Participation levels overall have remained relatively unchanged in the UK**

[NCVO Almanac data](#) shows that over a third (36%) of people volunteered formally at least once in 2018/19. This gives an estimate of 19.4 million people who formally volunteered during that year. Over one in five (22%) people formally volunteered regularly (at least once a month) in that year (11.9 million people).

#### **There continues to be inequalities in who volunteers through groups, clubs and organisations**

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<sup>5</sup> McCabe, A., Wilson, M. and Ellis Paine, A. (2020) Rapid Research COVID 19 Stepping up and helping out: grassroots volunteering in response to COVID-19, Briefing 6, Local Trust.

<sup>6</sup> See BBC article at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-22007058>.

<sup>7</sup> 6, P. (1997) *Escaping Poverty – From Safety Nets to Networks of Opportunity*, Demos.

TWS research confirms findings from the literature that volunteers are more likely to be older, from higher socio-economic groups, female and educated and that those who have never volunteered are more likely to be younger, from lower socio-economic groups, male, unemployed or not working, living in an urban area and educated to a lower level.

People who are unemployed or not working were most likely to say they had never volunteered (both 42%) and showed the lowest recent participation rates overall (both 28%) and for frequent volunteering (both 18%). People working full time were less likely to have volunteered in the last year (35%) than those working part time for 8–29 hours a week (41%) or fewer than eight hours a week (53%). They were also less likely to volunteer than retired people (44%) or full-time students (42%).

Other literature backs up these findings and shows that volunteering requires and builds social, human, cultural and economic capital, so that those with less resources are less able to volunteer and gain the associated benefits. This literature suggests a need to increase forms of capital rather than simply target recruitment at particular groups.<sup>8</sup>

### **The most significant differences between volunteers and non-volunteers relate to socio-economic status and education levels**

The TWS research identified the most notable difference between those who volunteer and those who do not relates to socio-economic status. People from higher socio-economic groups were more likely than those from lower grades to be recent volunteers (44% vs 30%) and frequent volunteers (30% vs 19%). Those from lower socio-economic groups were most likely to say they had never volunteered (40% vs 25%). Additionally, those with higher educational qualifications were more likely to have volunteered recently than those with lower educational qualifications. For example, 48% of those educated to degree level or above had volunteered recently, compared with 20% of those with no qualifications. The 'civic core' that comprises the most engaged is made up of people who are more likely to be from managerial and professional occupations and who have higher educational qualifications, in other words, the middle classes.

### **Research on volunteering consistently indicates that inequalities of resources and power means that some people are more likely to be excluded from certain activities**

The literature shows consistent evidence that unemployed volunteers are less likely to volunteer than employed people<sup>9</sup>. More recent research<sup>10</sup> has shown that volunteering can reinforce inequalities by creating unequal relationships between people who are helping and those who are helped.

#### **3.1. Impact from Covid-19**

According to the most recent research from [Time Well Spent](#), Covid-19 has had an impact on volunteering in a variety of ways. Some organisations were able to move their volunteering online or remotely, others were forced to stop involving volunteers completely. Yet, at the same time people across the country signed up to a range of local and national initiatives to help out, including people who had not volunteered before; in April 2020 more than 750,000 people registered to be part in the [NHS Volunteer Responder scheme](#) (in partnership with RVS and GoodSAM) within days of its launch.

Covid-19 may have led to an increase in the total number of volunteers and brought a new cohort of people to volunteering (including people on furlough), but according to [Local Trust](#) research it

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<sup>8</sup> Southby, K. and South, J. (2016) 'Volunteers, inequalities and barriers to volunteering: A rapid evidence review', Centre for Health Promotion Research, Leeds Beckett University.

<sup>9</sup> Rochester, C., Paine, A.E. and Howlett, S. (2010) *Volunteering and Society in the 21st Century*, Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>10</sup> McCabe, A., Wilson, M. and Ellis Paine, A. (2020) *Rapid Research Covid 19 Stepping up and helping out: grassroots volunteering in response to COVID-19*, Briefing 6, Local Trust.

remains to be seen whether these new volunteers will continue being involved after the pandemic. The rise of flexible volunteer options that are easy to engage with may help sustain their involvement. However, priorities of volunteers may shift, particularly in view of the difficult economic times ahead. In the future, more people may not be able to afford to volunteer or may need to prioritise getting paid work.

Lastly, we know that newer forms of volunteering have been accelerated by the pandemic. For instance, micro-volunteering is becoming more prevalent, particularly with younger people and 80% of micro volunteering is online.

#### 4. How Volunteering Works

It is helpful to understand how the literature frames volunteering. The [Pathways Through Participation](#) research showed that in order for participation (including volunteering) to start, a person needs to have a motivation, a trigger, resources and an opportunity. For participation to continue, one needs a good quality experience plus resources. Participation stops when there is a poor-quality experience combined with a lack of resources and life event. The resources referred to in the literature are those that are **learned** (e.g. skills, knowledge and experience), **felt** (e.g. confidence and sense of efficacy) and **practical** (e.g. time, money and health).

This may be a useful framework for RVS when thinking about supporting people to volunteer from lower socio-economic groups. Below we talk about motivations for this group in particular and the learning from other volunteer programmes that have aimed to increase life chances through volunteering. There are many examples in the literature of efforts to increase opportunities but fewer that focus on supporting people to have the resources needed to volunteer.

#### 5. Learning from others

This section details relevant programmes from North America and Europe (including the UK) where volunteering aims to impact on life chances either directly or indirectly and any lessons learned for RVS.

##### 5.1. National Citizen Service

The [NCS](#) is six-week programme open to all 16- and 17-year olds in England which includes a 'social action project' and brings together young people from different backgrounds to build work and life skills. Since its launch in 2011, it has received more than £1.5 billion of funding from the government and supported over 400,000 volunteers, making it the largest investment in volunteering in UK history<sup>11</sup>. NCS has an ambition to improve outcomes for young people related to social mobility, engagement and cohesion. Over 100,000 young people took part in the programme in 2018.

There have been robust evaluations<sup>12</sup> of NCS that have evidenced how participants develop valuable skills for the future and become more confident about future employment prospects. Relevant evaluation results for each outcome area are summarised below.

##### **Social mobility**

The NCS programme's aim is to support 'a society in which young people from all social backgrounds have the capabilities and connections to take advantage of evolving opportunities and fulfil their potential'. As well as social mixing, participants engage with adult role models and are exposed to activities about businesses and employability. Together with regular guided

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<sup>11</sup> Dokal, B. et al (2020) National Citizen Service 2018 Evaluation Main Report, Kantar and London Economics, Department for Digital, Culture Media & Sport.

<sup>12</sup> Dokal, B. et al (2020) National Citizen Service 2018 Evaluation Main Report, Kantar and London Economics, Department for Digital, Culture Media & Sport.

reflection, the intention is for participants to develop self-expression and goal-setting skills, to learn self-efficacy, and for the programme to help raise aspirations.

The evaluation showed a positive impact across almost all measures examined for summer and several autumn sessions.

- **Making the most of opportunities** - The largest social mobility impacts relate to self-confidence. The summer NCS programme had a significant positive impact on all self-confidence measures, and the autumn NCS programme on nearly all, including confidence in being the leader of a team.
- The areas of **problem solving, decision-making, emotional regulation** and **resilience** were also positively impacted by both programmes.
- **Broader social networks** - The summer NCS programme had a positive impact on most measures (four out of six) of team-working and social networking. The autumn NCS programme had an impact on only one of six team-working and social networking measures.
- **Awareness of and aspirations to future opportunities** - The summer NCS programme had a positive impact on two of three measures of participants' future outlook: how positive they feel about getting a job in future and their confidence in having the skills and experience to get a job in the future. However, the autumn NCS programme had no significant impacts on participants' positivity towards the future.
- The evaluation also found that the majority of participants agreed that NCS helps develop skills for the future (87% both summer and autumn).

### **Social engagement**

NCS had a positive impact across many of the social engagement measures for both summer and autumn. The majority of participants felt the programme had a positive impact on their personal development, with 87% of both summer and autumn participants agreeing that NCS helped develop their skills for the future. Participants also said the programme improved their self-understanding and pride: 89% of both cohorts agreed they are proud of what they achieved and over four in five agreed they have a better understanding of their abilities (82% for summer and 80% for autumn).

### **Attitudes to the future**

There is evidence that NCS raises young people's stated aspirations and capacity to reach goals. Participants agreed that the NCS programme improved their emotional resilience and, ultimately, helped them to be better equipped for the future. Almost four in five (78%) summer and autumn participants agreed that they 'feel better prepared for challenges that life might bring me' while over seven in ten said they feel better prepared for further education or training (74% for summer and 72% for autumn). A similar proportion said they are more able to see the steps needed to achieve their goals (70% for summer and 71% for autumn).

Research from NCS suggests that social action can improve motivation in school and lead to higher educational attainment.

## **5.2. Americorps**

[AmeriCorps](#) members and AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers serve directly with nonprofit organisations in the US with an aim to tackle the nation's most pressing challenges. They enroll over 270,000 individuals annually to serve organisations making a difference in communities across America.

There is robust research<sup>13</sup> on the relationship between employability and full-time 'service year' models of volunteering such as Americorps, which has been running for more than 20 years. Full-time 'service year' programmes have not received the same level of investment in the UK as in the US but some programme evaluations from the UK suggest similar positive outcomes related to employability. Full time volunteering, however, may have different outcomes from the type of volunteering on offer at RVS.

That said, a ten-year study of Americorps found that volunteers had a 27% higher likelihood of finding a job than those who had not participated in the programme<sup>14</sup>. Americorps evaluations show the impact of the programme on participants' career choices after leaving; participants are more likely to choose careers in government, charities and public service (60%). Evaluation results show that employment impacts are more pronounced for those from disadvantaged backgrounds (46% of alumni from disadvantaged circumstances were employed in public service careers versus 26% of comparison groups). Research also shows that volunteering can lead to higher wages and increased job satisfaction.

A 2020 [study](#) by [ICF](#) found that AmeriCorps and Senior Corps offer a significant return on investment, with every \$1 spent returning \$17 to the community, participants and government.

### 5.3. City Year

[City Year](#) is a youth and education charity in London coordinating full time volunteering within English schools. Young people that join City Year spend a year volunteering full time in schools as tutors, mentors and role models. City Year aims to achieve a 'double-impact'; on the lives of the children but also the lives of the volunteers. All volunteers benefit from the [Leadership After City Year](#) development programme which includes more than 300 hours of professional training and support across the year and the opportunity to carry out work shadowing days with corporate sponsors.

The programme helps members to build six [Civic Leadership Competencies](#) during their year of service. Developed by City Year in the US, in partnership with Deloitte Consulting, the competencies represent best practice from the corporate world and are designed to help volunteers be successful serving in schools and to prepare for a successful career.

The second-year evaluation of City Year London<sup>15</sup> explored the impact of the programme on its volunteer 'corps members' and the schools and pupils they work with. During 2011/12 the 81 corps members aged 18 to 25 volunteered full-time across schools and on community projects in London. The evaluation showed corps members develop transferable skills including leadership skills, public speaking and working with others. A key area of success for the programme was the development of confidence and personal growth amongst corps members and the experience helped shape participant thinking about career paths. Participants reported that 85% had a job lined up and/or planned to continue education after City Year.

The limitations of this research show that volunteers were somewhat diverse but did not include large numbers of volunteers from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

### 5.4. National Young Volunteers Service - v

The 2004 Russell Commission's key recommendation was the creation of a dedicated, young person-led, independent implementation body to deliver this framework, which became v - The National Young Volunteers' Service. v was launched in 2006 and aimed to deliver a step change

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<sup>13</sup> Accessed at: [Service Nation 2020 - Demos](#)

<sup>14</sup> Spera, C.; Ghertner, R., Nerino, A., DiTommaso, A. (2013) Volunteering as a Pathway to Employment: Does Volunteering Increase Odds of Finding a Job for the Out of Work? Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Research and Evaluation: Washington, DC.

<sup>15</sup> Stuart, J. and Aapola, A. (2012) Evaluation of City Year London Year 2 Report, Institute for Volunteering Research.

in the quantity, quality and diversity of youth volunteering in England. In response to one of these recommendations, v commissioned a formative [evaluation](#) of its activities, which brought together nine methodological strands of activity over two and a half years to evaluate the v programme. The organisation had to close in 2018 due to funding cuts. Since its start, v worked with more than 500 charities and public, private and community organisations to create over a million youth volunteering opportunities.

The research found the following impacts on volunteers:

- increased human capital, including qualifications and life skills
- increased social capital, with bridging capital playing a key role in linking young people to new opportunities, support networks and aspirations
- increased confidence, self-esteem and an opportunity for meaningful occupation
- increasing awareness of and engagement with the local community

Motivations noted in the research included gaining qualifications or skills, which were grouped as employment or educational advancement, qualifications and awards, and life skills. Respondents noted that v funded activities had a positive impact on the volunteers' chance of getting a job in the future (90%) and a positive impact on higher education (88%).

Results also included evidence of how volunteering supported transferable employment skills, within a structured working environment. For some, it was the first time they were in a work environment or had taken on responsibility, and as a result allowed them to 'behave professionally'. They also developed communication and interpersonal skills as well as public speaking, problem solving and negotiation, creativity, team working, leadership and time management.

Additional impacts identified related to aspirations, with 94% of respondents saying that their volunteering opportunities had increased young people's aspirations. Volunteering helped young people to think about future career direction and develop career paths. They also met 'trusted adults' that supported them to engage with opportunities available.

The evaluation noted lessons learned related to 'routes to involvement':

- Young person-led: guided and supported by skilled adult facilitators, volunteering should have young people's needs and interests at its heart.
- A personal approach: approaches to promoting youth volunteering should include energetic and persistent outreach and personal invitations to young people to get involved.
- Matching message to motivation: opportunities themselves, and the way they are promoted, need to recognize and respond to the fact that young people volunteer for different reasons.
- Dipping a toe in the water: young people should have an opportunity to try things out before committing themselves, for example through introductory training or by accessing taster sessions that they can take part in with friends. When it comes to initial involvement, care should be taken not to set the bar too high.
- A rapid response: young volunteers need opportunities to get involved when their interest has been sparked.
- The benefits of brand: opportunities should be explored for linking with recognized brands that are popular with young people. This will help ensure that the service stands apart, adds appeal and kudos to volunteering, encourage marketing and promotion of the programme.
- Taking account of practicalities: approaches should be sensitive to, and seek to overcome barriers such as reimbursement of expenses and practical steps (e.g. phone credit).
- Building flexibility into the conditions attached to any programme is also important in accommodating young people's changing circumstances.

The evaluation also noted key points of learning from v:

- Responding to young people's needs and interests. Care should be taken to match volunteers to roles.
- Supporting young people's personal and social development. The support provided for young people while they are volunteering is critical. This includes ensuring young people have the resources they need to make the most of their experience; including help with practical problems; and helping young people to reflect on their experience.
- Creating varied volunteering pathways: volunteering works best where it offers a range of opportunities and pathways, responding to young people's needs and interests rather than focusing on a single type of volunteering. Often, this will require new partnerships.
- To help create these pathways it is important that staff have the skills, knowledge and confidence they need to create and maintain strong community networks, along with time to make this happen.

The report also highlighted the importance of being asked to volunteer and developing a youth-led approach.

### 5.5. Volunteering for Stronger Communities and Volunteer Centres

The Volunteering for Stronger Communities (VSC) project was a £1.9m programme funded by the Big Lottery Fund, which ran from October 2012 to December 2013. The project aimed to:

- increase levels of volunteering within disadvantaged groups and communities;
- improve employability through volunteering and other forms of employment support to help those outside the labour market move closer to, or into, paid work;
- enhance the skills, knowledge and resources of both Volunteer Centres and the volunteer-involving organisations they support and
- strengthen the ability of Volunteer Centres and volunteer-involving organisations to influence local, regional and national policies and practice through shared learning.

This was an NCVO project delivered by 15 Volunteer Centres across England in areas selected according to the economic deprivation of the area. The Volunteer Centres were funded through the programme to create and broker volunteering opportunities for the participants in partnership with local organisations, the Job Centre Plus and other agencies, and to provide additional support to the participants in their volunteering and in the development of skills in CV writing and job applications<sup>16</sup>.

Evaluation<sup>17</sup> of the project showed that of participants in the project, 78% were defined as disadvantaged (unemployed and those outside the labour market who are not in receipt of out-of-work benefits) and 53% had no qualifications. The project succeeded in helping 22% of participants into paid work, of which 58% had been out of work for over 12 months. Of those who had not found a job, 69% were actively seeking employment and 80% felt, as a result of participating in the programme, they were more confident about finding paid employment. The success of the VSC project has been illustrated in a short [video](#).

Employment outcomes for VSC compare favourably when benchmarked against the national [Work Programme](#). Data also highlights 'soft' outcomes related to employability, health and well-being which were sustained over time. Research found a clear 'programme effect' with participants indicating that VSC support made a difference to positive outcomes experienced. These findings

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<sup>16</sup> Ramsay, N. (2012) Understanding how volunteering creates stronger communities – A literature review, Institute for Volunteering Research.

<sup>17</sup> See: [vsc-policy-final.pdf \(ncvo.org.uk\)](#)

suggest the core model of intensive and bespoke support to increase access to volunteering among disadvantaged people is effective.

Outcomes for participants included improvements in confidence as well as practical skills needed to secure paid employment and boosts in self-esteem. The single most important factor identified in the research was quality and availability of staff to support volunteers. The research indicates that VSC projects are effective in supporting individuals some distance from the labour market back to work.

Additional research related to infrastructure has shown that Volunteer Centres are often in a position to support and recruit people who are under-represented as volunteers, who are new to volunteering or who are from disadvantaged or vulnerable groups. It has been quite common for Volunteer Centres in the UK to run supported volunteering schemes and to recruit people who may not have the resources (such as access to the internet or technology) to volunteer. Research in London found that young people are disproportionately likely to use their services<sup>18</sup>.

### 5.6. #iwill (Step up to Serve)

*Step Up To Serve* was established in 2013, with the aim of its [#iwill](#) campaign to get over 60% of young people from all backgrounds to take part in high quality social action by 2020. In 2016, the #iWill campaign launched with the government and the Big Lottery Community Fund pledging £20m each.

Evaluations of the programme's effectiveness have been mixed. Research on the programme was conducted by the [Behavioural Insights Team](#) which found strong positive correlations between social action and character attributes like empathy, problem solving, cooperation, grit and resilience, and sense of community.

The [National Youth Social Action Survey](#), conducted by Ipsos MORI, has run annually since 2014 to inform the #iwill campaign and it is based on thousands of interviews with 10-20 year olds in their homes, providing a nationally representative sample of young people across the UK.

Involvement in the programme steadily decreased between 2015 and 2019 from 59% to 53%. There was also a large participation gap in terms of who volunteered, with those from the most affluent backgrounds comprising 41% compared to 29% from low-income backgrounds.

Involvement in social action was commonly embedded in existing institutions such as schools with the most common motivating factors of participating being able to volunteer with friends or being able to volunteer at school or uni.

The most common benefit noted by participants was 'increased self-confidence/self-esteem' (mentioned by 44%), closely followed by the statement 'improved communication skills' (42%). Other ways young people benefited included 'improved how you work as part of a team' (38%), 'helped to motivate others' and 'improved social skills (both mentioned by 31%).

Recent [media](#) reports highlighted the lack of engagement with "harder to reach" groups, such as young men from low socio-economic backgrounds and not having as big an impact as hoped. This article highlighted "that a commitment to social action needs to start in school, involving young people across the board". The campaign did form partnerships with more than 1,000 organisations since 2013 including the NHS, O2/Telefonica, the Canal and River Trust and the Mayor of London.

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<sup>18</sup> Paine, A.E. and Donahue, K. (2008) *London Volunteering Health Check: All fit for 2012?* Institute for Volunteering Research, London.

## 5.7. Big Local

Big Local is a national Lottery funded programme supporting 150 of the most deprived areas in England to create resident-led and place-based solutions to make areas better places to live and work. Local resident volunteers lead the work locally and there has been a plethora of research in recent years by [Local Trust](#), the national organisation that manages Big Local. Recent research since Covid-19 has identified key factors for the successful mobilisation, coordination and retention of volunteers in Big Local areas<sup>19</sup>:

- Clear boundaries: Not asking people to take risks with their own health or engage in activities they feel are beyond their comfort zone.
- Permissions: To say no, to opt out at times and have the option of returning without being judged.
- Social rewards: Ensuring that volunteers can feel the benefits of volunteering and that the social connections they develop as a result of being active bring their own sense of rewards.
- Nurturing of relationships with volunteers: In some cases, those with responsibility for coordinating volunteers relied on those they knew most well – those they knew could do the job. There is a balance to be had in relying on those you already know and building relationships with new volunteers.
- Feeling valued: Volunteers need to know that their contribution has been worthwhile and is recognised.

## 6. Theme 1: The most to gain and least likely to engage - young people from lower socio-economic groups

The literature has shown that the people who have the most to gain from volunteering are also least likely to engage in formal volunteering<sup>20</sup>. Young people from the lowest socio-economic groups (poor and working-class communities) have the most to gain from volunteering but also face the biggest barriers and have fewer resources. The sub-sections below draw out the learning from the literature as to the barriers faced by this group, their motivations, the potential benefits and the needs of this group.

Overall, there is mixed evidence in the literature to show that volunteering is a direct route to employment and there is clearly no guaranteed path between the two. These factors are complex, and the causal links are not fully understood. There is also a potential mismatch between what people *believe* may be happening (and related self-reporting) and the actual recruitment decisions being made by employers.

Volunteering may help to make people more employable – by building skills, confidence or increasing networks – but it doesn't often address the structural disadvantages that many people face in the labour market, or impact on the demand side<sup>21</sup>.

### 6.1. Evidence related to volunteering and increased employment outcomes

There is mixed evidence related to volunteering as a direct intervention for employment.

The Volunteering for Stronger Communities (described above) project evaluation provided evidence that volunteering is a statistically significant influence on improvements in:

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<sup>19</sup> McCabe, A., Wilson, M. and Ellis Paine, A. (2020) Rapid Research COVID 19 Stepping up and helping out: grassroots volunteering in response to COVID-19, Briefing 6, Local Trust.

<sup>20</sup> Southby, K., South, J. & Bagnall, AM. (2019) A Rapid Review of Barriers to Volunteering for Potentially Disadvantaged Groups and Implications for Health Inequalities. *Voluntas* 30, 907–920.

<sup>21</sup> Ellis Paine, A., McKay, S. and Moro, D. (2013) Does volunteering improve employability? Evidence from the British Household Panel Survey, Third Sector Research Centre Working Paper 100.

- skills and experience to find a job
- overall health and well-being
- feeling useful
- feeling good about one's self and
- getting on well with other people and getting out of the house to speak to people

The project highlighted the importance of social networks as a source of job opportunities, increased confidence and motivation and improved job search skills.

A Belgian study found some evidence for volunteering having a causal effect on individual employment opportunities. Volunteers from that study were more than 7% more likely to get a positive reaction to their job application. This was higher for women, but the number of engagements was insignificant<sup>22</sup>.

A similar study in the US (more recently) found that people who do volunteer work get 45% percent more requests for interviews, but this varied by job sector (better results were found in retail and real estate)<sup>23</sup>.

A Dutch study found that people who are volunteering when they enter the job market for the first time get higher status jobs (although volunteer status had a negative impact on first job income). A similar Austrian study, however, found positive wage effects from volunteering<sup>24</sup>.

The robust evaluation of the American National Citizen Service programme (see above) in 2013 (which had a sample size of more than 70,000) found that after controlling for demographic variables, volunteering was associated with a 27% higher likelihood of employment. That research showed that the association between volunteering and employment had the strongest effect on individuals without qualifications (51% increase) and individuals who live in rural areas (55% increase). That study found that the relationship between volunteering and employment was stable across gender and ethnic categories, age, time, and unemployment rate. The overall association remained consistent across each year of the study period and different unemployment rates, indicating that regardless of the economy, volunteering may add an advantage to the out of work seeking employment<sup>25</sup>. This is an example of where volunteering may help to 'level the playing field' for people who are at a disadvantage.

The [Points of Light Foundation](#) research in the US found that service sectors provide volunteers with the opportunity to explore different career paths, gain job-related skills, develop leadership skills, and network with community leaders, while engaged in activities that strengthen communities<sup>26</sup>.

Unlike the research from Europe and US, evidence from the UK provides a more mixed picture. A study of 16-25-year olds found no effect of volunteering on young people's transition into employment, no matter how much volunteering they did<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Baert, S. & Vujić, S. (2017) Does it pay to care? Volunteering and employment opportunities, *Journal of Population Economics*, 31(3): 819–836.

<sup>23</sup> Alfonso-Costillo, A., Morales-Sánchez, R. and López-Pintado, D. (2020) Does volunteering increase employment opportunities? An experimental approach, Working Paper Series, Universidad Pablo de Olavide.

<sup>24</sup> Wilson, J. (2012) Volunteerism Research: A Review Essay, *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 41(2): 176–212.

<sup>25</sup> Spera, C., Ghertner, R., Nerino, A., DiTommaso, A. (2015) Out of work? Volunteers Have Higher Odds of Getting Back to Work, *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* Vol. 44(5) 886–907.

<sup>26</sup> Wu, H. (2011) Social Impact of Volunteerism, Points of Light Foundation.

<sup>27</sup> Ellis Paine, A., McKay, S. and Moro, D. (2013) Does volunteering improve employability? Insights from the British Household Panel Survey and beyond, *Voluntary Sector Review* 4, 3, 333–53.

Quantitative and qualitative data from the Citizenship Education Longitudinal Survey, which looked at the relationship between youth volunteering and employment, found that volunteering is not unequivocally beneficial for employment, particularly if it does not offer career-related experience or when it is compulsory rather than self-initiated. This data also showed there can sometimes be a negative effect on employment. Social class mediates access to volunteering opportunities that are most likely to convert into employment. Researchers concluded there is little evidence to support policy assumptions that, in the short term, volunteering has a positive relationship to paid employment<sup>28</sup>.

This mixed picture on the impact of volunteering on employment might be down to several things – from methodological differences in measurement across studies to differences in volunteer programmes (e.g. volunteer role, training, support). The literature is however more consistent in findings related to increased self-esteem, enhanced skills and capacities, aspiration related to career paths, and enabling people to be physically and mentally healthier.

## 6.2. Barriers

Throughout the literature, there is evidence of the barriers faced by volunteers, particularly young people but also in relation to people from lower socio-economic groups. One study looked at barriers to volunteering and defined ‘barriers’ to mean any factor or combination of factors that constrains engagement in volunteering whether at structural, institutional, or personal levels<sup>29</sup>. We have grouped these barriers by those that are **practical** (including things like time, money and health), **felt** (including things like low confidence) and **learnt** (including things like knowledge and experience).

### 6.2.1. Practical barriers

Barriers to volunteering experienced by young people involved with v included concerns regarding the **cost of volunteering** and not being able to ‘afford it’ because they were out of pocket. This has been echoed in other evaluations and is a particular issue for low-income volunteers. More affluent volunteers may be able to absorb the invisible costs of volunteering (such as transportation, meals, childcare costs, or care costs) but others will find this stops them from participating. In some cases, we have seen that even if the organisation reimburses volunteers for out-of-pocket costs, the volunteering ‘culture’ creates a barrier of expectation that volunteers will not seek reimbursement.

Research from Jump showed that personal circumstances are more likely to be identified as a barrier by people from lower socio-economic groups and this includes **health**, illness or disability (46% higher); **caring** responsibilities (40% higher) and feeling that they are **too young** (‘I am not the right age’ - 53% higher)<sup>30</sup>. While health has been noted as a barrier for people there is also evidence that shows there are numerous health and wellbeing benefits of volunteering which are considerably higher for these groups.

Lack of time is often cited as a barrier for volunteers generally and the literature shows that this is true for young people as well, but mainly those from more affluent backgrounds and this is not as important a barrier for people from lower socio-economic groups<sup>31</sup>. It has been recognized that time can be both a perceived and an actual barrier, evident in the finding that employed people

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<sup>28</sup> Hoskins, B., Leonard, P. and Wilde, R. (2020) How Effective Is Youth Volunteering as an Employment Strategy? A Mixed Methods Study of England. *Sociology* 54(4) 763–781.

<sup>29</sup> Southby, K., South, J. & Bagnall, AM. (2019) A Rapid Review of Barriers to Volunteering for Potentially Disadvantaged Groups and Implications for Health Inequalities. *Voluntas* 30, 907–920.

<sup>30</sup> Lawton, R. and Watt, W. (2019) A Bit Rich ‘Why is volunteering biased towards higher socio-economic groups?’ New research into the mix of motivations and barriers, Jump Projects, London.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

tend to volunteer more than unemployed people. Lack of time can be related to other factors as well, such as a lack of **information**<sup>32</sup>.

### 6.2.2. Felt barriers

The literature has noted that middle-class parents and their children tend to see volunteering as an investment for later life, while the working-classes are more likely not to see volunteering as important for their futures<sup>33</sup>. These entrenched ideas can also be barriers and can be linked to a **lack of confidence** to participate in volunteering. The literature has numerous examples of confidence being a particular barrier for disaffected young people, who expressed concern that they have nothing to contribute or felt that they did not fit the **image** of a volunteer<sup>34</sup>.

One study of young people in Glasgow found that volunteering was seen as 'non-normative' and was the kind of activity that would give rise to '**informal penalties**', which were particularly significant for young men<sup>35</sup>.

The literature argues that dominant representations of volunteering restrict the public's perception of how diverse and complex that it actually is and has formed three related issues:

- There is a limited understanding of the range and scope of activities;
- There is uncertainty about the nature of rewards and benefits;
- There are stereotypical notions concerning the kinds of people who volunteer.

These barriers together create an over-arching **low status** barrier of volunteering<sup>36</sup>.

### 6.2.3. Learnt barriers

Researchers have consistently found a **lack of information** to be an acute barrier for young people and adults experiencing social exclusion. Access to information often relates to the networks and environments to which an individual is connected. This has been noted in the literature as a danger of not being asked to volunteer, which is what young people from more deprived areas have reported as a key reason why they have not volunteered. One study found that younger respondents were more likely than older ones to report that they **lacked the right skills or experiences** to volunteer<sup>37</sup>.

Evidence in the literature indicates that 'teachers and schools are among the most significant actors facilitating youth volunteering'<sup>38</sup> and that many volunteers and non-volunteers felt that their schools did not offer adequate information about opportunities to volunteer<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> Rochester, C., Ellis Paine, A., Howlett, S. (2012) *Volunteering and society in the 21st century*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>33</sup> Dean, J. (2016) Class diversity and youth volunteering in the United Kingdom: Applying Bourdieu's habitus and cultural capital. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 45, 95S-113S.

<sup>34</sup> Southby, K., South, J. and Bagnall, M. (2019) A Rapid Review of Barriers to Volunteering for Potentially Disadvantaged Groups and Implications for Health Inequalities, *Voluntas* 30:907–920.

<sup>35</sup> Davies, J. (2018) "We'd get slagged and bullied": understanding barriers to volunteering among young people in deprived urban areas, *Voluntary Sector Review*, vol 9, no 3, 255–72.

<sup>36</sup> Rochester, C., Ellis Paine, A., Howlett, S. (2012) *Volunteering and society in the 21st century*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>37</sup> Southby, K., South, J. and Bagnall, M. (2019) A Rapid Review of Barriers to Volunteering for Potentially Disadvantaged Groups and Implications for Health Inequalities, *Voluntas* 30:907–920.

<sup>38</sup> Pye, J. and Michelmore, O. (2016) *National Youth Social Action Survey 2016*, Ipsos Mori Social Research Institute.

<sup>39</sup> Davies, J. (2018) "We'd get slagged and bullied": understanding barriers to volunteering among young people in deprived urban areas, *Voluntary Sector Review*, vol 9, no 3, 255–72.

Volunteer opportunities are sometimes not promoted to young people in the most effective way to appeal or in a way that links to youth culture. Some young people reported in the literature as feeling that their participation was not recognised by society<sup>40</sup>.

The research from #iwill (see above) identified barriers which included 'it **never occurred to me** to take part' (mentioned by 32%), '**my friends aren't doing this** type of thing' (mentioned by 28%) and having 'few/no opportunities in my area' (19% in 2019).

### 6.3. Motivations

The literature shows that people from lower socio-economic areas have different motivations and barriers to volunteering and that these do not necessarily fit with the traditional view of volunteering. Research by Jump found that these groups had more of a need to volunteer to **get on in their career** and **improve social networks** whereas people from more affluent backgrounds cited personal philosophy or the importance of the cause as a motivator. This research found that people volunteer more for **personal development** motivations, both professional and social<sup>41</sup>.

The evaluation from #iwill (see above) noted the motivations for volunteering included being able to volunteer with friends (mentioned by 29%) and volunteering through school or educational institutions (mentioned by 19%) as well as the importance of volunteering near home (14%) and being asked (11%).

The literature shows that the key motivations for people to volunteer from more deprived backgrounds includes getting into higher education, building their CV, accessing new networks, getting employment, improving employment and increasing income.

### 6.4. Benefits from volunteering

The literature shows that in North America it is widely believed that volunteering can increase one's chances of obtaining a higher education qualification and, consequently, a better job. In the UK, research results indicate at least some degree of benefit from volunteering in the following areas:

- Confidence and self-esteem
- Soft skills such as communications and 'people skills'
- Experience which can be included on a CV
- Having a reference from volunteer activity
- Developing and accessing new networks which may act as bridges to opportunities and employment
- Training that may be transferable
- Expanding horizons and aspirations (especially for young people)

Evidence from youth social action research in the UK found that benefits come from young people having a chance to be valued, having opportunities to engage in challenging and meaningful activities and being recognised for making a positive contribution (being seen as part of the solution rather than the problem)<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> Kirkman, E. et al (2013) Evaluating Youth Social Action, Does participating in social action boost the skills that young people need to succeed in adult life? Behavioural Insights Team.

<sup>41</sup> Lawton, R. and Watt, W. (2019) A Bit Rich 'Why is volunteering biased towards higher socio-economic groups?' New research into the mix of motivations and barriers, Jump Projects, London.

<sup>42</sup> Kirkman, E. et al (2013) Evaluating Youth Social Action, Does participating in social action boost the skills that young people need to succeed in adult life? Behavioural Insights Team.

### 6.4.1. Soft skills

There is evidence<sup>43</sup> to suggest that volunteering can improve employability through building confidence, developing 'soft' skills such as teamwork and communication, advancing 'hard' skills such as language, IT and management, and demonstrating job readiness to potential employers. It is also often noted in the literature that volunteering is not a 'magic bullet' or a direct route into employment but rather creates a kind of fertile ground. Many believe that in order for volunteering to have a real impact, there needs to be a bridge created between volunteering and the labour market. One study has suggested a soft skills matrix that is based around skills generated by volunteering<sup>44</sup>:

- Personal development
- Learning to learn
- Spirit of innovation
- Sense of initiative
- Interpersonal sensitivity
- Networking
- Negotiation
- Teamwork
- Communication

Alternatively, a framework developed by the [Young Foundation](#) based on youth social action was developed, this is summarized below.

- Optimism
  - Communication
  - Creativity
- Determination
  - Confidence and Agency
  - Planning and Problem solving
  - Resilience and Grit
- Emotional intelligence
  - Leadership
  - Relationships
  - Managing feelings, self-control

### 6.4.2. Hard skills

There is mixed evidence in the literature relating to volunteering benefits and the development of specific 'hard' skills that employers are recruiting against. According to the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (2015)<sup>45</sup>, as many as 22% of all job vacancies are hard to fill, but they are mainly vacancies for which employers cannot find candidates with job-specific, technical or practical skills. The skills that volunteering is reported to enhance may be less of a priority for

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<sup>43</sup> Rochester, C. et al (2009) A gateway to work: the role of Volunteer Centres in supporting the link between volunteering and employability, Institute for Volunteering Research, London.

<sup>44</sup> Zozimo, J. et al (2016) Bridging volunteering and the labour market: a proposal of a soft skills matrix, *Voluntary Sector Review* 7 (1): 89-115.

<sup>45</sup> Vivian, D. et al (2018) The UK Commission's Employer Skills Survey 2015: UK Results, UK Commission for Employment and Skills.

employers and this has been a challenge for volunteering programmes designed to increase employability.

Evidence from human resource development literature suggests that ‘insufficient targeting to address labour market demands for specific skills and experience is likely to reduce the effectiveness of volunteering and employability programmes’. This gap between supply and demand is not surprising, as volunteer programmes are often not linked specifically to ‘what employers are actually looking for to meet their needs (the demand side)’<sup>46</sup>.

## 6.5. Needs/ lessons learned

The literature is rife with valuable lessons learned from volunteering programmes and evaluations and there is robust information about the needs of volunteers from lower socio-economic groups. Key to these lessons perhaps is the need for activities to be led and driven by the people who are participating, for example young people.

We know that the ‘ask’ is important, especially for low-income people. Disparities in recruitment, as one aspect of volunteer management, suggest that access and opportunities for volunteering benefit more affluent groups<sup>47</sup>.

We have seen from the evidence that the structures which concentrate voluntary activity among a ‘civic core’ of young volunteers are often enabled by youth workers and volunteer support workers who ‘ask’ volunteers based on bias about who they think might be most reliable. We have seen that biased perceptions of working-class volunteers can act as barriers to their engagement<sup>48</sup> and that workers are often proven wrong in their assumptions about the commitments of young people from more disadvantaged groups.

There are lessons to be learned in relation to messaging and recruitment of volunteers which include more emphasis on ‘getting on’ and less about ‘giving back’, as the latter message creates ‘a presumption that the person has had a fortunate, fulfilling life and therefore feels the desire to repay society by volunteering’<sup>49</sup>.

Research related to public service volunteering has shown that tailored recruitment routes, clearer roles and expectations, the provision of an ongoing support network, feedback and recognition of effort are all important aspects of a successful volunteer programme for people from disadvantaged groups. There is also a need for a dedicated team to build resilience, provide administrative support and monitoring as well as good channels of communications across all stakeholders<sup>50</sup>.

There is also a clear connection between life chances and the role of educational institutions in relation to volunteering. The evidence shows the need to embed volunteering within schools and an opportunity for organisations to partner with schools and the corporate sector to raise aspirations along with life chances.

Further to this, recent research shows that when pathways to volunteering are through schools, there are no statistically significant differences in engagement between young people from

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<sup>46</sup> Kamerade, D. & Paine, A.E. (2014) ‘Volunteering and employability: implications for policy and practice’, *Voluntary Sector Review*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 259-273.

<sup>47</sup> Benenson, J. and Stagg, A. (2016) An Asset-Based Approach to Volunteering: Exploring Benefits for Low-Income Volunteers. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 45(1): 131–149.

<sup>48</sup> Dean, J. (2016) Class diversity and youth volunteering in the United Kingdom: Applying Bourdieu’s habitus and cultural capital. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 45(1) 95-113.

<sup>49</sup> Lawton, R. and Watt, W. (2019) A Bit Rich ‘Why is volunteering biased towards higher socio-economic groups?’ New research into the mix of motivations and barriers, Jump Projects, London.

<sup>50</sup> Ellis Paine, A. and Hill, M. (2017) ‘The Engagement of volunteers in third sector organisations delivering public services’, *The third sector delivering public services*, eds. J. Rees and D. Mullins.

different social backgrounds but when organisations are the main pathway, significant class differences emerge<sup>51</sup>.

An asset-based approach moves beyond what volunteers lack and instead draws on the resources within volunteers and their communities. Understanding the ways volunteering could serve as a mechanism for individuals to build and leverage assets is an important aspect of the topic<sup>52</sup>.

Some suggest that the voluntary sector is ideally placed to deliver 'low-cost and effective interventions' and to 'increase access to disadvantaged populations', however, more research is needed in this specific area.

While volunteering may boost an individual's skills, confidence and self-esteem and may help to build their CV, contacts and aspiration, it is unlikely to impact the demand side of the labour market. Volunteering can be powerful but it alone cannot tackle the structural inequalities which underlie the labour market<sup>53</sup>.

## **7. Theme 2: Where you live matters – the relationship between volunteering infrastructure and deprivation**

People living in the most deprived areas of the country also have the least volunteering infrastructure and fewest community resources available, which means they have access to fewer volunteering opportunities and get asked to volunteer less. This is partly because we know that people living in these areas particularly are more likely to participate in local activities and programmes.

The literature shows consistently that the community context in which volunteering takes place 'mediates access and opportunity for participation'. The NCS evaluation from the US showed that communities with more organisations have been found to have higher volunteering rates, whereas disadvantaged neighbourhoods often have insufficient infrastructure and resources to create and maintain voluntary associations, which results in fewer opportunities for formal participation. Living in areas with high poverty may also impact volunteering because of additional stressors on individuals and families<sup>54</sup>.

Research from the UK has shown that the health of local civic infrastructure and neighbourhood effects can also create obstacles to participation. Researchers have argued that the voluntary sector in deprived areas has been disproportionately damaged following the implementation of austerity policies<sup>55</sup>. Still others have argued that the reduction in rates of volunteering in disadvantaged communities following the 2008 financial crash was an outcome of community-level factors, such as a lack of civic organisational infrastructure, rather than personal experiences of hardship. Their work highlights how, in periods of austerity, the spaces in which voluntary action can take place are reduced, as is the support that youth workers are able to offer young people<sup>56</sup>.

Research from Local Trust shows that where 'top-down, command-and-control approaches to grassroots action have been problematic, hyper-local, community-led infrastructure has played a

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<sup>51</sup> Hogg, E. and de Vries, R. (2020) Different Class? Exploring the relationship between socio-economic advantage and volunteering for young people aged 10-18, unpublished article.

<sup>52</sup> Benenson, J. and Stagg, A. (2016) An Asset-Based Approach to Volunteering: Exploring Benefits for Low-Income Volunteers. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 45(1): 131–149.

<sup>53</sup> Ellis Paine, A., McKay, S. and Moro, D. (2013) Does volunteering improve employability? Insights from the British Household Panel Survey and beyond, *Voluntary Sector Review* 4, 3, 333–53.

<sup>54</sup> Benenson, J. and Stagg, A. (2016) An Asset-Based Approach to Volunteering: Exploring Benefits for Low-Income Volunteers. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 45(1): 131–149.

<sup>55</sup> Monforte, P. (2020) From compassion to critical resilience: Volunteering in the context of austerity. *The Sociological Review* 68(1) 110–126.

<sup>56</sup> Davies, J. (2018) "We'd get slagged and bullied": understanding barriers to volunteering among young people in deprived urban areas, *Voluntary Sector Review*, vol 9, no 3, 255–72.

vital role in mobilising, engaging, connecting and coordinating volunteering’ and this is particularly true in the current pandemic. Effective and continuous voluntary action does not just happen – it requires an ‘investment in community-led infrastructure to build and sustain local voluntary action’<sup>57</sup>.

Other researchers have raised concerns about the ability of volunteering to change the ‘social characteristics of deprived areas independently of their material circumstances’. Communities have ‘strengths in areas related to maintaining social order rather than creating economic growth’ and so policies to tackle area deprivation need to concentrate on linking deprived areas to economic opportunities in more affluent surrounding areas rather than on local strategies based on self-help<sup>58</sup>.

### **8. Theme 3: Volunteering as a pathway to British culture and citizenship**

Refugees and new migrant communities have a unique experience in relation to volunteering but it nonetheless plays an important role in increasing life chances for this group. Research has shown that volunteering for this group has been a pathway to citizenship, local experience, the creation of networks and links to job markets.

Research from London found that volunteering became a route to assimilation, particularly for refugees, asylum-seekers and new migrants who came into volunteering as a way of becoming more familiar with British culture, of learning or improving English and as a way to make contacts and gain work experience. This experience also provided an education as to the local community, the social welfare system and cultural norms and values in the community<sup>59</sup>.

In Canada, research showed that new immigrants and young people at the margins of the economy increasingly volunteer to gain work related experience. This research found that the ‘precariously employed’ volunteered the most hours because they wanted to gain access to networks or work experience, with hopes that it would lead to employment.

The concept of ‘hope labour’ was also found in the literature, which contends that ‘exposure and experience will possibly lead to employment in the future’, where the self is imagined as a ‘bundle of skills that indexes one’s employability’. However, the un- and under-employed, particularly immigrants, face difficulties accessing volunteer opportunities that develop appropriate skills and networks and struggle to present volunteering as valuable ‘work experience’. For young unemployed post-secondary graduates and underemployed professional immigrants, volunteering was described as a ‘poor man’s’ internship. Because of the lack of unpaid work experience available in their fields, professional immigrants often volunteer, along with young people, to merely gain basic transferable and soft skills, often performing the ‘grunt work’ of organisations. These difficulties show how hope labour is structured by and reproduces social inequalities<sup>60</sup>.

Research shows that there is a danger in formalizing the link between volunteering and citizenship, as it is possible that volunteering may become another obstacle for refugees to overcome in the long process of resettlement and this may have implications for ‘humanitarian

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<sup>57</sup> McCabe, A., Wilson, M. and Ellis Paine, A. (2020) Rapid Research COVID 19 Stepping up and helping out: grassroots volunteering in response to COVID-19, Briefing 6, Local Trust.

<sup>58</sup> Derounian, J. (2013) Briefing Paper 116: A review of rural community organising in England. Third Sector Research Centre, Birmingham.

<sup>59</sup> Donahue, K. (2010) Unlocking the potential: Volunteers in Islington. A report for Cripplegate Foundation, Institute for Volunteering Research.

<sup>60</sup> Allan, K. (2019) Volunteering as hope labour: the potential value of unpaid work experience for the un- and under-employed. *Culture, Theory and Critique* 60(1): 66-83.

constructions of volunteering', which may be lost if volunteering is perceived by refugee volunteers as mandatory<sup>61</sup>.

## 9. Theme 4: Volunteering mid-life as a route out of un- or under-employment

There is limited literature to show that mid-career professionals who have become un or under – employed may find volunteering beneficial, and more research is needed in this area related to how this could improve their life chances.

The VSC evaluation (see above) has illustrated the barriers to volunteering for the long-term unemployed and has looked at how these can be overcome. For example, people who face barriers such as low self-esteem, isolation and health problems are often prevented by the same barriers from participating in volunteering and other activities. Volunteer Centres can potentially be key partners in reaching these groups and volunteering can play a role in tackling the underlying barriers to participation in the labour market.

A study from the Netherlands looked at self-respect in relation to the experiences of unemployed, low-skilled people recruited as Workfare volunteers. As many have argued, the long-term unemployed struggle to maintain self-esteem. This study found that Workfare projects that introduced participants to volunteering 'helped to regain self-respect through four types of emotional labour: feeling respected through their newfound status, enjoying a craft, being able to perform in less stressful working environments, and taking pride in the meaning bestowed' by volunteering. But the emotional labour necessary to experience the positives also increased the risk of experiencing negative emotions<sup>62</sup>.

Health and well-being are often a barrier to participation in both volunteering and employment. The VSC project evaluation found 'notable improvements in outcomes around confidence and self-esteem' and reported improvements against other health and well-being measures. Participants reported that 'positive changes in perceived health and well-being were sustained for at least 12 months following their initial engagement with a VSC project.'

[The King's Fund](#) research<sup>63</sup> found evidence that volunteering can have a positive impact on the volunteer in terms of improved self-esteem, wellbeing and social engagement. The benefits for older volunteers have been particularly well researched; older volunteers appear to experience less depression, better cognitive functioning and improved mental wellbeing relative to those who do not volunteer, although in some studies it is not clear whether health benefits flow from volunteering or if healthier people choose to volunteer.

The VSC project showed that volunteering can support successful transition into employment. One in five (22%) participants said that they had found paid work since taking part in the project and succeeded in supporting long-term unemployed people into work, with evaluators finding the project 'clearly effective in supporting individuals some distance from the labour market'. Of those who found paid work following participation in the project, 58% had been out of work for over 12 months.

The project evaluation also showed that volunteering can develop some of the skills needed to get back into work. Improvements were noted of between 40% and 60% in 'skills and experience, completing job applications and confidence in attending interviews.' Evidence suggests that these 'positive outcomes were sustained over time.' There were also challenges noted in this project

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<sup>61</sup> Yap, S., Byrne, A. and Davidson, S. (2010) From Refugee to Good Citizen: A Discourse Analysis of Volunteering. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 24(1): 157-170.

<sup>62</sup> Kampen, T., Elshout, J. and Tonkens, E. (2013) The fragility of self-respect: Emotional labour of workfare volunteering. *Social Policy and Society* 12(3): 427-438.

<sup>63</sup> Naylor, C. et al (2013) Volunteering in health and care: Securing a sustainable future. Kings Fund, London.

related to working with Job Centre Plus staff and their lack of knowledge about volunteering and difficulty in communications between JCP staff and Volunteer Centres.

The VCS evaluation showed that for recently unemployed people, volunteering can be an important means of keeping active between jobs, preventing a gap in CVs and testing new skills or career paths.

Research from the US related to unemployment looked at the relationship between time, employment, and volunteering and asked if unemployed people are more likely to volunteer due to newfound time or to obtain a benefit. This study found that the duration of unemployment emerges as a key factor, where volunteering decreases over time. Findings suggest organisations should recruit volunteers from untapped and under-represented groups. This study noted that while unemployed volunteers devote more time, they are also less likely to receive an invitation to volunteer and so potentially committed volunteers may not engage simply because no one asks them<sup>64</sup>.

Other research from the UK found that volunteering had a positive effect on the chances of moving into work for people aged 45-60 years old when undertaken on a monthly or slightly less frequent basis<sup>65</sup>.

## 10. Gaps in the literature

This review of literature, while uncovering themes related to volunteering as an intervention to improve life chances, has also uncovered key gaps in the literature related to the topic. There is clearly a gap in relation to research on volunteering for mid-career job changers or unemployed people who are over 30. So many of the volunteer programmes related to employment target young people (and rightly so) but there is both an opportunity and a gap of information for those who are older and who are under-employed or seeking work who are not at retirement stage. This area may be one of growing relevance with the impending economic fallout of Covid-19 and the expected unemployment increases which are likely to be across age groups.

There is some literature that captures the experiences of people from lower socio-economic groups but there is very little dedicated research as to the experience of this group in relation to volunteering and life chances. This would be a valuable addition to the overall body of research.

We still know relatively little about the resources needed to volunteer among people from poorer backgrounds and the effectiveness of efforts to increase those resources (rather than a focus on increasing opportunities). This would be a valuable area for further study.

Much of the research that has noted impacts on employment is linked to full-time volunteering for young people and more research is needed related to the impact of other types of volunteering which are not full-time, as there may be a difference in outcomes.

There also appears to be a gap in the literature in relation to the views of employers in the UK in relation to volunteering experience and any advantages that may be perceived by employers. Additionally, current research related to hard and soft skill needs of UK employers would be useful, particularly in light of the unemployment projections post-Covid.

Another gap in the literature relates to what constitutes successful partnership working or collaboration between voluntary sector, public sector, Higher Education and the private sector in terms of volunteering increasing life chances. Case studies of what works or any evidence that highlights success factors would be useful. For example, are there any successful partnerships

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<sup>64</sup> Piatak, J. (2016) Time Is on My Side: A Framework to Examine When Unemployed Individuals Volunteer. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 45(6): 1169–1190.

<sup>65</sup> Ellis Paine, A., McKay, S. and Moro, D. (2013) Does volunteering improve employability? Insights from the British Household Panel Survey and beyond, *Voluntary Sector Review* 4(3): 333–53.

between educational institutions, volunteer-involving organisations and corporate sponsors related to volunteering and employment?

## 11. Conclusions

There is strong evidence within this review to show that people from deprived areas and low-income backgrounds face greater barriers to volunteering and yet have much to gain from the benefits. Many of the volunteer programmes explored above have focused on increasing opportunities to volunteer and far fewer have effectively focused on increasing the resources needed and supporting people to volunteer based on their motivations and needs.

The implications of this review for RVS are many. Partnerships may be a key element to successfully running a volunteer programme that increases life chances. These could be with Higher Education and schools, faith-based organisations, employers, Volunteer Centres, youth clubs or agencies such as Job Centre Plus.

Schools may prove to be particularly important partners for such an effort, as they act as critical triggers for volunteering among younger age groups especially. It is also important to remember that differences in participation are often caused by the ways in which young people are recruited to volunteer, such as being asked. If we are only asking 'the usual suspects' or people from middle-class backgrounds, then we will be possibly entrenching inequality further<sup>66</sup>.

Researchers suggest that in terms of the benefits between the individual to the society, the link is emotional intelligence. Effective volunteering brings people into contact with difference and builds empathy and understanding which is the bedrock of a cohesive society and an effective workforce<sup>67</sup>.

The literature also reminds us that volunteering is not free and the importance of investing resources into supporting volunteers properly, which is particularly important for under-served populations.

There is evidence to show that volunteering can bring broader benefits to communities, including by enhancing social cohesion, reducing antisocial behaviour among young people, and providing placement opportunities that may then lead to employment. However, volunteering can only do so much and it cannot overcome structural inequalities which require policy solutions and systemic change.

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<sup>66</sup> Hogg, E. and de Vries, R. (2020) Different Class? Exploring the relationship between socio-economic advantage and volunteering for young people aged 10-18, unpublished article.

<sup>67</sup> Birdwell, J., Birnie, R. and Mehan, R. (2013) The state of the service nation: youth social action in the UK, Demos, London.