



# VOLUNTEER WELLBEING: what works and who benefits?

Rejuvenation of Circular Road community garden, London Borough of Haringey, London UK © John Birdsall / Alamy Stock Photo



## THE BIG PICTURE

Most people in Great Britain – around seven in ten – formally volunteer through a group, club or organisation at some point in their lives.

Currently, one in five people volunteer at least once a month and most get involved locally in their own neighbourhoods. Many more give their time in more informal ways in communities, for example, shopping or caring for neighbours.<sup>1</sup>

### Volunteers offer invaluable support. But how can volunteering help support the wellbeing of volunteers themselves?

There is a growing body of research on the links between volunteering and wellbeing, and our review brought the most relevant studies together in one place. We focused on the experience of adult formal volunteers, and looked at the key factors involved in improving wellbeing through volunteering.

WE SIFTED OVER **17,000**  
REPORTS & PAPERS  
**158 HAVE BEEN INCLUDED\***

\*SOURCED FROM UK AND ABROAD, 2008 ONWARDS



Volunteers at the More in Common initiative, Batley © Jo Cox Foundation

1 McGarvey, A., Jochum, V., Davies, J., Dobbs, J., and Hornung, L. (2019) Time Well Spent: a national survey on the volunteer experience <https://www.ncvo.org.uk/policy-and-research/volunteering-policy/research>, NCVO; NCVO (2020) UK Civil Society Almanac, <https://data.ncvo.org.uk/volunteering/>

## HOW THIS EVIDENCE CAN HELP YOU

This information will help groups, clubs, and organisations to design and develop their volunteering programmes with wellbeing in mind. That's why we have focussed solely on adults who formally volunteer. We know there are other less formal ways people give their time and skills to benefit others.

This briefing summarises the findings from a rapid evidence assessment (REA) exploring what we currently know about the impacts of volunteering on the wellbeing of volunteers aged 16 and over.

We looked at the positive and negative effects of volunteering on volunteers':

- happiness
- life satisfaction
- quality of life
- feelings of depression and anxiety

The Theory of Change developed from the evidence will help you understand how and why volunteering can lead to changes in wellbeing for volunteers (figure 1).



### EVIDENCE INTO ACTION: applying the findings

We've suggested some questions you can ask yourself to help you use the research to improve the wellbeing of your volunteers. You can find these throughout this summary in these boxes.

We've collected resources and guides to help you develop volunteering that supports wellbeing on our website.

This builds on research on the key features of a volunteer experience from NCVO's national study [Time Well Spent](#).

## WHAT IMPACT DOES VOLUNTEERING HAVE ON VOLUNTEERS?

### Volunteering is associated with enhanced wellbeing, but context matters.

There is high quality evidence that volunteering is positively linked to enhanced wellbeing, including improved life satisfaction, increased happiness and decreases in symptoms of depression.<sup>2</sup>

We can't, however, categorically state that volunteering causes improved wellbeing. Just because volunteering can lead to positive changes in wellbeing it doesn't mean it always does.<sup>3</sup> Some studies also argue that happier and healthier people are more likely to get involved in volunteering in the first place, with this making the difference rather than volunteering itself.<sup>4</sup>

The effect that volunteering has on a volunteer's wellbeing is shaped by a number of factors, including the volunteer's own circumstances and motivations, and what they experience as a volunteer.

**What's clear is that volunteering fits into the wellbeing cycle of communities.** Either because volunteering leads to wellbeing for volunteers, or because when people feel well they are more likely to get involved. Increasing wellbeing – through volunteering or other means – is good for individuals and the communities they are part of.

## WELLBEING AT THE HEART OF THE VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

For those **designing, delivering and managing volunteer programmes and activities**, the evidence highlights the importance of the volunteer experience to increased wellbeing.

We can't take for granted that volunteering will necessarily lead to enhanced wellbeing. The way volunteers are involved and engaged can enhance or hinder the positive wellbeing effects of volunteering.

2 Lawton, R., Gramatki, L. and Watt, W. (2019) Happy Days: Does volunteering make us happier or do happier people volunteer?, [Jump, https://jump-projects.com/](https://jump-projects.com/); Binder, M. (2015) Volunteering and Life Satisfaction: a closer look at the hypothesis that volunteering more strongly benefits the unhappy, *Applied Economics Letters*, 22 (11), pp 874 – 885

3 Son, J., and Wilson, J. (2012) Volunteer Work and Hedonic, Eudemonic, and Social Well-Being, *Sociological Forum*, 27 (3), pp 658–681

4 Hansen, T., Aartsen, M., Slagsvold, B., and Deindl, C. (2018) Dynamics of volunteering and life satisfaction in midlife and old age: Findings from 12 European Countries, *Social Sciences*, 7 (5), pp doi:10.3390/socsci7050078

## HOW ARE DIFFERENT PEOPLE AFFECTED?

### Some groups gain more from volunteering than others

The evidence points to stronger wellbeing benefits of volunteering for some groups compared to others, including:

- people in later years of life
- people from lower socio-economic groups
- the unemployed
- people living with chronic physical health conditions
- people with lower levels of wellbeing.

The studies we looked at found that volunteering can play a protective role for individuals' wellbeing. For example, people with lower wellbeing report a bigger increase in their life satisfaction when they regularly volunteer. For people with higher wellbeing, the effects are not as strong.<sup>5</sup> But these benefits can be short lived if volunteers do not continue with their volunteering.<sup>6</sup>

### WELLBEING AND OLDER VOLUNTEERS

A large number of studies look at the effects of volunteering on those in later years of life.

The evidence points to stronger effects of volunteering on the wellbeing of older volunteers compared to younger adult volunteers.

Changes in wellbeing include improved life satisfaction and decline in symptoms of depression for volunteers.

Evidence suggests that volunteering may play a 'compensatory' or buffering role for those who have experienced life transitions such as retirement or bereavement. Studies have also found that volunteering can bring a new sense of purpose, identity and sense of belonging.<sup>7</sup>



### Evidence gaps on impacts for different groups

Our review found that there is a lack of evidence on the wellbeing impacts of volunteering specifically on:

- different ethnic groups
- young people
- disabled people
- people experiencing serious mental health issues.

We need research which focuses on these populations so we can better understand their experiences and how volunteering could benefit their wellbeing.

### Those with the most to gain face barriers to getting involved

**Some groups are missing out on the benefits of volunteering** due to barriers they face and inequalities in access to opportunities.<sup>8</sup> For example, research shows that gains in life satisfaction are greater for those on low incomes compared to higher income groups. Yet they are also less likely to get involved. Ill health and disability are cited as particular barriers for low income groups.<sup>9</sup>

5 **Binder, M. (2015)** Volunteering and life satisfaction: a closer look at the hypothesis that volunteering more strongly benefits the unhappy, *Applied Economics Letters*, 22 (11), pp 874 – 885

6 **Magnani, E. and Zhu, R. (2018)** Does kindness lead to happiness? Voluntary activities and subjective well-being, *Journal of Behavioural and Experimental Economics*, 77, pp20 – 28

7 **Jones, R. and Reynolds, F. (2019)** The contribution of charity shop volunteering to a positive experience of ageing, *Journal of Occupational Science*, 26 (4), pp 524–536

8 **Southby, K. and South, J. (2016)** Volunteering, inequalities & public health: barriers to volunteering – Summary report. Project Report. *Volunteering Matters*

9 **Lawton, R. and Watt, W. (2019)** A Bit Rich: Why is volunteering biased towards higher socio-economic groups? Jump, <https://jump-projects.com/>





## EVIDENCE INTO ACTION: making volunteering more inclusive

- » What are the potential barriers for people who might really benefit from volunteering with you, and what could you do to remove them?
- » Is it easy for your service users to get involved as volunteers? What extra support do they need?
- » When recruiting volunteers, how can you use targeted messaging that emphasises the wellbeing benefits of volunteering?
- » Is the culture and environment inclusive and welcoming to volunteers? What could you do to make your organisation more inclusive? What could you do to address potential discrimination and bias?
- » Do volunteers have opportunities to move between roles, reduce their commitments or step back from volunteering when their personal circumstances change?



Volunteers at the launch of an exhibition at Humber Street Gallery © Thomas Arran

## WHAT ARE THE PATHWAYS THAT LEAD TO CHANGES IN WELLBEING?

There are a number of different steps or pathways that link volunteering to wellbeing. Evidence points to:

- **self-efficacy - a person's belief in their abilities**
- **social connectedness**
- **sense of purpose**

as some of the steps along the pathway from volunteering to wellbeing.

Volunteering can help people, for example, feel more socially connected to others and this in turn drives positive changes in wellbeing. Research suggests that social connectedness is the 'strongest first step in the path from volunteering to increased wellbeing' <sup>10</sup>. Volunteering can also act as a buffer against stress or loss for some people, such as those who are unemployed.



## EVIDENCE INTO ACTION: increasing connectedness in volunteering

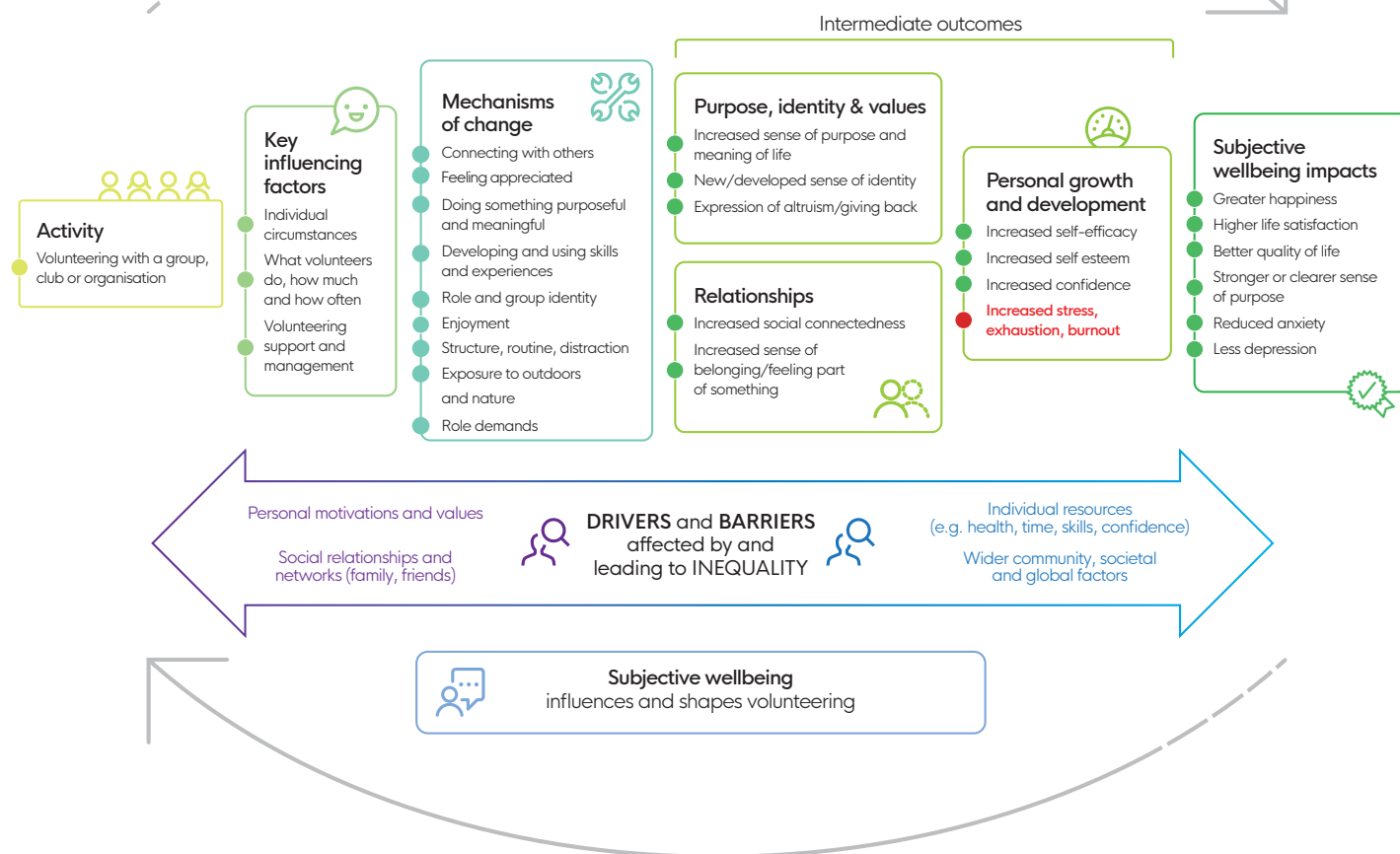
- » Do your volunteers have opportunities to connect with other people through their volunteering if they want to, including other volunteers, staff and beneficiaries?
- » Do they feel a sense of community or belonging through their volunteering and what could you do to encourage this?
- » If volunteers are engaging remotely or virtually how can you promote a sense of connection with the organisation and other volunteers?

The following **Theory of Change** (figure 1) shows how and why volunteering might lead to changes in the subjective wellbeing of volunteers. A key focus of the theory of change is what volunteers experience and feel through their volunteering. Drivers and barriers, such as personal motivations and family relationships, are also identified and these influence participation.

10 Brown, K. M., Hoyer, R., Nicholson, M. (2012) Self-Esteem, Self-Efficacy, and Social Connectedness as Mediators of the Relationship Between Volunteering and Well-Being, Journal of Social Service Research, 38 (4), pp 468 - 483

Figure 1

# Theory of Change for volunteer wellbeing



## HOW IS THE WAY PEOPLE VOLUNTEER LINKED TO CHANGES IN WELLBEING?

### More frequent volunteering, and staying involved, is linked to higher volunteer wellbeing – but context matters

Overall, the evidence tells us that more frequent and regular volunteering – such as weekly – is better for volunteers than being involved just a few times a year.<sup>11</sup>

However, if the volunteering becomes too intense for the volunteer the benefits start to wane. There is no agreed threshold of how much volunteering is too much – this is likely to depend on the person, their personal circumstances, the volunteering activities, and the management and support they receive.

The evidence doesn't show whether particular volunteering roles and fields bring more wellbeing benefits compared to others. **Doing something purposeful and meaningful is identified as important, whatever the role.**

When it comes to whether there is a higher physical or emotional toll on volunteers, the type of role makes a difference. The research points to the potential negative effects of involvement in some high intensity, high demand or high-risk roles on stress, anxiety and burnout<sup>12</sup>. However, we need more research exploring the possible negative impacts of volunteering activities on wellbeing.

11 Lawton, R. N., Gramatki, L., Watt, W., and Fujiwara, D. (2020) Happy Days: Does volunteering make us happier or is it that happier people volunteer, *Journal of Happiness Studies: An Interdisciplinary Forum on Subjective Well-Being*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-020-00242-8>

12 McNamee, L. G. and Peterson, B.L. (2015) High-Stakes Volunteer Commitment: A Qualitative Analysis, *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 45 (2), pp 275-294



## EVIDENCE INTO ACTION: creating more balanced volunteering

- » Are you considering how much volunteers are juggling volunteering alongside other roles and responsibilities in their lives?
- » Do you give opportunities for volunteers to reflect on their volunteering commitment and step back if they want to, including volunteers who are leading other volunteers?
- » How do you monitor the responsibilities and workloads of volunteers to make sure they are not taking on too much? What are the warning signs of volunteers being overburdened?

## HOW DOES THE VOLUNTEERING EXPERIENCE AFFECT THE WELLBEING OF VOLUNTEERS?

### A volunteer experience that maximises wellbeing

We can't take for granted that volunteering will necessarily lead to enhanced wellbeing. The way volunteers are involved and engaged can enhance or hinder the positive wellbeing effects of volunteering.

The review identified some of the key ingredients in the volunteer experience that make a difference to volunteer wellbeing. They highlight organisational practices that can maximise the wellbeing benefits, as well as the barriers that might limit them (see figure 1).

The key aspects of a volunteer's experience include **connecting with others** through volunteering, **feeling appreciated** by others for their efforts, and **feeling like they are doing something purposeful and meaningful**.

**Sharing and using skills, personal experience and knowledge** is another ingredient linked to increased wellbeing. It is one way that volunteers report their roles as having meaning or purpose – allowing them to 'give something back'. **Developing new skills and knowledge** is also important, for older as well as younger volunteers.



## EVIDENCE INTO ACTION: making volunteering meaningful

- » Are your volunteers supported to get involved in roles that are purposeful and meaningful to them?
- » How do you find out what is important to individual volunteers: how and why do they want to volunteer and what do they want from the experience?
- » Do you co-produce roles and activities with volunteers?
- » Do volunteers have opportunities to share their knowledge or develop new skills?
- » Do volunteers have opportunities to see the impacts of their work and the difference it makes?
- » Do you provide opportunities for volunteers to take up more diverse responsibilities if they want to or to step back if their circumstances change?
- » How can you include volunteers in conversations about future plans and changes?

### Supporting volunteers is key

Volunteer **management and support** as well as **peer support** are key factors in creating a volunteer experience that fosters wellbeing.

Evidence suggests that support which

- helps volunteers accomplish their tasks
- is emotionally oriented – such as encouragement and appreciation

are both key to volunteer engagement and in turn are associated with volunteer wellbeing <sup>13</sup>.

Peer support is highlighted as important in helping volunteers manage the challenges and demands of their volunteer role.<sup>14</sup>

13 **Alfes, K., Shantz, A. and Bailey, C. (2016)** Enhancing Volunteer Engagement to Achieve Desirable Outcomes: What Can Non-profit Employers Do? *Voluntas*, 27 (2), pp 595-617

14 **Gray, D. and Stevenson, C. (2019)** How can 'we' help? Exploring the role of shared social identity in the experiences and benefits of volunteering, *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, DOI: 10.1002/casp.2448

## LOOKING FOR MORE SUPPORT?



A volunteer at an Apple Day event, East London © Laura Martinez

We've gathered together further resources to help you in your efforts to promote wellbeing through volunteering. Look at our volunteering page for more information.

Our online guide on [How to Measure your Impact on Wellbeing](#) can help you design an evaluation of your volunteering programme, including a bank of recommended measures.



If you have any questions about this research, or would like to share your knowledge and tips for improving volunteer wellbeing, get in touch with Ingrid [ingrid@whatworkswellbeing.org](mailto:ingrid@whatworkswellbeing.org)

## POLICY MAKERS, FUNDERS AND COMMISSIONERS

This review underlines the importance of evidence-informed decision-making and funding, so that volunteering programmes are inclusive, well-managed, and help promote the wellbeing of volunteers.

### **Policy makers, funders and commissioners can:**

- bring wellbeing to the heart of funded programmes and projects
- recognise the importance of a good volunteer experience and support organisations to do this well
- get it right for volunteers in high-demand roles by supporting organisations with the needed skills and resources
- address inequalities in volunteering, and supporting organisations to reduce the barriers for those people who would particularly benefit from involvement
- recognise the role of volunteering as one of several important ways people get involved.

[Please see the website](#) for further discussion of the implications for policy makers, funders and commissioners.





# WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR RESEARCH AND EVALUATION?

This Rapid Evidence Assessment identified some important evidence gaps and research opportunities which could help us better understand the links between volunteering and wellbeing.

## Future research should:

- be question-driven and empirical in design
- reflect the complexity of volunteering and subjective wellbeing
- fill the evidence gaps on different groups and populations
- focus on how (not just if) formal volunteering affects subjective wellbeing
- look at the organisational approaches and practices that can maximise the wellbeing benefits of volunteering
- be balanced, examining the negative as well as the positive impacts of volunteering
- look beyond formal volunteering to other forms of participation

Please see the [website](#) for further details on evidence gaps and recommendations.

## ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

Findings from this review are based on a comprehensive, balanced and rapid synthesis of 158 relevant studies that examine the relationship between volunteering and the subjective wellbeing of volunteers.

The review prioritised and considered in more depth studies that were rated as higher quality. Lower quality studies were used in the synthesis when there was an insufficient number of higher rated studies to respond to the research question. Quality ratings (high, moderate, low, very low) were given to each study based on key criteria including methodological robustness, data confidence and the extent to which the study helped to provide new knowledge, understanding or theory to the research field.

As a rapid review, methods for appraisal and synthesis were applied with less breadth and depth compared to a systematic review methodology and therefore unlike a systematic review, confidence ratings could not be attached to individual findings.

The REA was commissioned by the What Works Centre for Wellbeing and Spirit of 2012, and led by the Institute for Volunteering Research at the University of East Anglia (Joanna Stuart, Dr Sara Connolly and Dr Jurgen Grotz) in partnership with the University of Salford (Dr Daiga Kamerāde), the Third Sector Research Centre at the University of Birmingham (Dr Angela Ellis Paine) and Sheffield University (Dr Geoff Nichols). The study was shaped and informed by expertise from an advisory group of stakeholders from the voluntary sector. This briefing was written by Joanna Stuart and Ingrid Abreu Scherer.

The full technical report is available from the [What Works Centre for Wellbeing](#).

## VOLUNTEER WELLBEING

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