



# Volunteering ‘below the radar’? Informal volunteering in deprived urban Scotland: research summary<sup>i</sup>

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## 1. Background

### Key points

- Current research in Scotland focuses on ‘formal volunteering’ (through a third party) rather than ‘informal’ (helping out a friend or neighbour).
- Recent policy documents rely – often implicitly – on voluntary participation in order to achieve their goals.
- Research shows rates of formal and informal volunteering differ between different populations and locations.
- This research helps us understand more about voluntary participation in its broadest sense, to help inform future research, policy and practice.

In Scotland, most policy and research relating to volunteering has focussed on ‘*formal volunteering*’. Formal volunteering is defined as the giving of time and energy through a third party, which can bring measurable benefits to the volunteer, individual beneficiaries, groups and organisations, communities, the environment and society at large. It is a choice undertaken of one's own free will, and is not motivated primarily for financial gain or for a wage or salary.<sup>1</sup>

The Scottish Household Survey measures levels of formal volunteering in Scotland, asking respondents whether they have given time, in an unpaid capacity to an organisation or club. Policy-makers and those developing volunteering make decisions based on this research. It appears that rates of formal volunteering in Scotland are – overall – declining (28% in 2013) with this decline being driven by a reducing rate of ‘occasional’ rather than ‘regular’ volunteers.<sup>2</sup>

Another aspect of volunteering has been termed ‘informal volunteering’. This has been defined as ‘helping a friend or a neighbour in a self-managed way, e.g. helping them with some gardening or watching their home...’.<sup>3</sup> Examples include: giving them a lift to the doctors, looking after their children or taking bins out for an elderly neighbour.

Recent policy agendas in Scotland such as *public service reform*, *localism*, *community empowerment* and *asset transfer* rely on individuals giving time, voluntarily to carry out activities and participate in

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decision-making. Therefore, understanding how people participate in ‘voluntary activity’ in its broadest sense is important in understanding whether it is possible and/or appropriate to expect such activity to grow to meet the demands of these policy agendas. We need to know more about what participation (formal and informal) looks like in Scotland, and how it varies across the country.

One reason for this is that formal volunteering varies between different populations and different locations.<sup>4</sup> This might influence the capacities of different populations to become further involved in voluntary participation, both more and less formal. For example, it has been suggested informal volunteering might be more characteristic of the volunteering that takes place in deprived urban areas and there should therefore be a stronger focus on supporting less formal voluntary action.<sup>5</sup>

In England and Wales, rates of informal volunteering are consistently higher than rates of formal volunteering. Table one summarises recent data on levels of formal and informal volunteering:<sup>6</sup>

	2007/ 2008	2008/ 2009	2009/ 2010	2010/ 2011	2012/ 2013	2013/ 2014	2014/ 2015
Regular formal volunteering <sup>7</sup>	27%	26%	25%	25%	29%	27%	27%
<i>Less frequent formal volunteering</i>	43%	41%	40%	39%	44%	41%	42%
Regular informal volunteering	35%	35%	29%	29%	36%	35%	34%
<i>Less regular informal volunteering</i>	64%	62%	54%	55%	62%	64%	64%

Table one: Levels of formal and informal volunteering in England and Wales.<sup>8</sup>

In Scotland informal volunteering is not measured, and therefore the activity that this includes is not recognised: it is ‘below the radar’ compared to formal volunteering. Without widening our understanding of participation, those who volunteer informally rather than formally are at risk of being considered in terms of a deficit (e.g. ‘disengaged’). In recognising the full range of participation and increasing our understanding of informal volunteering, decision-makers may more easily understand:

- The ways that cultures of participation may vary between different communities;
- How best to support participation;
- The appropriateness or likely success of policy agendas reliant on individuals participating.

Therefore the research aimed to improve our understanding of informal volunteering in Scotland, and is centered on the perspectives of members of communities in deprived urban areas of Scotland.

## 2. Questions and methods for the study

In each of the three deprived urban communities, the specific research questions were:

1. *How do people themselves understand ‘informal volunteering’, and what might this mean for those seeking to encourage people to volunteer?*
2. *What does informal volunteering involve, and is it linked in any way to more formal volunteering?*
3. *How does people’s involvement change over time, and what is the influence of the events in people’s own lives on shaping decisions to become involved in or withdraw from voluntary activity?*



#### 4. *How does where you live, and where you participate, influence what you do?*

##### 2.1 Where was the research carried out?

Individuals in three deprived urban Scottish areas were interviewed.<sup>9</sup> Focus groups and key informant interviews were also undertaken. To make sure the responses remained anonymous, each area and research interviewee was given a fictitious name.

'Ashburgh' was generally less deprived than the other two areas, however this hid significant pockets of deprivation. Participants noted that there were more and less affluent 'halves' of the area. It was approximately thirty minutes bus journey from the centre of a major Scottish city. The local voluntary and community sector (VCS) was, compared to the other case study areas, smaller.

'Hinton' was on average more deprived than Ashburgh. This peripheral housing estate had seen recent rapid population decline. Whilst there was a well-developed VCS according to interviewees funding was in decline.

'Linmount' was statistically the most deprived of the three case study areas. It was within close proximity to the centre of this major Scottish city, was well established and had a well-developed VCS.

##### 2.2 How was the research carried out?

Participants in each community took part in one-to-one 'life course' interviews. In the interviews, people told their story of how they had been involved with their communities in different ways throughout their lives. Taking this approach allowed interviewees to focus on the activity that was important to them, and to describe it using their own words. As well individual interviews, the research involved focus groups with residents, and interviews with volunteer involvers and community leaders in each area.

To try and make sure people were involved who identified themselves as being involved at different 'points' on a 'spectrum' of participation, figure one was produced and interviewees at different points on the spectrum were sought. This was also used with participants as a prompt to identify what kinds of participation they were currently or had been involved in, and how they were (or were not) related.

In the spectrum 'informal volunteering' was broken down into informal volunteering undertaken 1:1 and as a group (the green spheres on the left). Examples of formal volunteering are placed in the red sphere on the right. Some activities, such as 'community action/social participation', could potentially be seen as 'formal' (through a third party) or 'informal' (self-managed) and are between the two (central blue sphere)<sup>10</sup>.

The use of the 'spectrum' also fed into the analysis of the interviews and focus groups, helping to identify:

- how informal participation related to other kinds of participation they might be involved in;
- how people might move left and/or right across the spectrum (or be at multiple points at once) as their life developed, and
- motivations for and barriers to different types of participation.

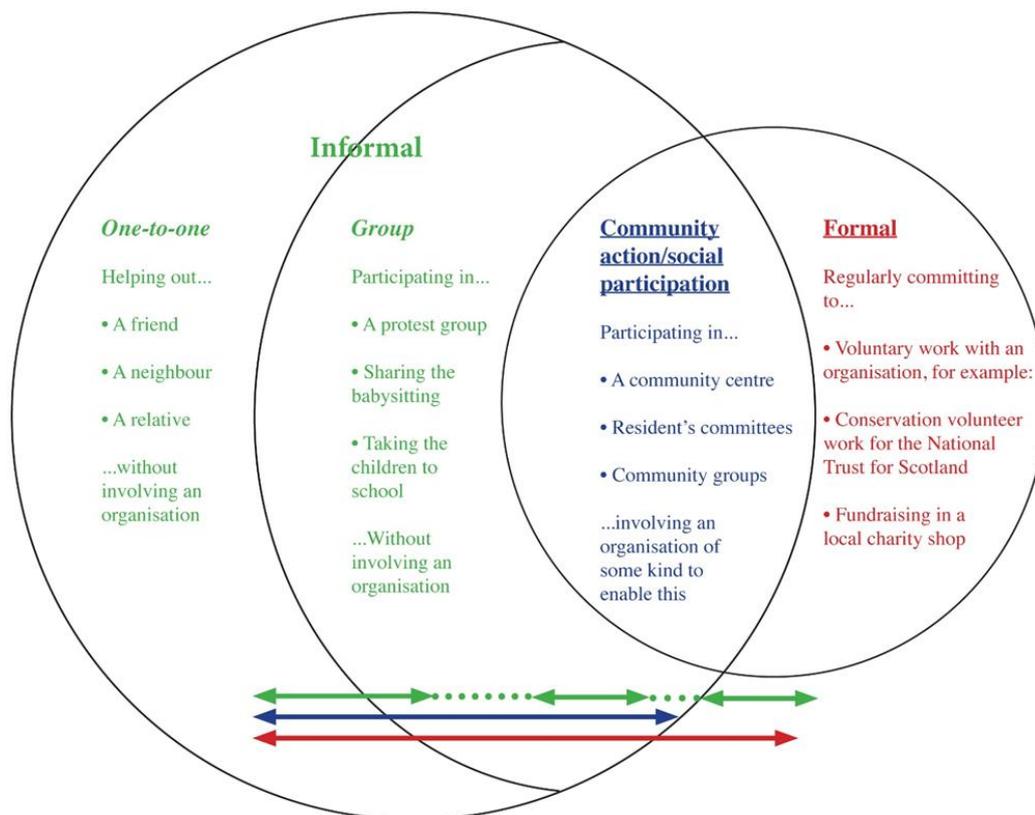


Figure one: A 'spectrum' of participation.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1 Perceptions of volunteering

For policy and practice, if we want to understand how to engage people more effectively, and recognise what is already being done, we need to know how people themselves talk about it and understand it. We need to understand what *they* think volunteering is, how they refer to it, why they might or might not get involved, and how barriers to involvement might be reduced. Researchers also need to understand how to ask about and identify the wide range of activity which people might be involved with. Therefore this section focuses on research question one: **How do people themselves understand 'informal volunteering', and what might this mean for those seeking to encourage people to volunteer?**

#### Key findings:

- Most people see 'informal volunteering' as helping, just something you do. Nobody described 'informal volunteering' as volunteering.
- Influences on how participants viewed volunteering included views on what volunteering 'should be', the types of people perceived to be 'volunteers' and the perception of how far they felt they were 'making a difference'
- It appears experience and perception of participation are key in decisions to participate and continue to participate.



Participants talked about volunteering in three different ways:

1. Some activity was understood as 'volunteering', but other activities were understood as 'helping', something you 'just do'.
2. All activity – formal and informal – was described as 'volunteering'
3. All activity – formal and informal – was understood as something other than 'volunteering',

Whilst there were examples of (2) and (3) in the interviews, it was approach (1) which was by far the most common. This approach to thinking and talking about volunteering can be described as 'relational'. That is, certain activities were identified as being more like 'volunteering' whilst others were more clearly 'helping' in nature. For many respondents informal volunteering was never described as 'volunteering', generally it was understood as *'helping'*; *'something you just do'*.

The research found there were factors which shaped *how participants viewed voluntary participation, which in turn influenced whether or not they got involved*. For example some discussed the ways in which both community action and more formal volunteering might only be something undertaken by particular groups of people (for example the more wealthy, or more confident). Some were also put off volunteering for charities or organisations with paid staff as this went against their ideas of what voluntary activity 'should' be:

*"No, I'm not interested in them, because er, to me the people at the top are getting well paid, and that's not my idea of charity! [laughter]. I mean if it's a charity it should be volunteers running the whole show, no paid people. I mean the likes of... when I heard about that charity shop in [relatively nearby affluent community], and the manager's on a high wage... waste of time".*

Participants in the research also talked about *how they experienced voluntary participation*. Participants talked about the need to feel that they were having an impact, gaining a sense of achievement and/or making a difference as a result of their participation. Sometimes participants who had experienced both informal and formal volunteering, said having an impact was easier to do through 'informal' rather than 'formal' volunteering activity. In the extract below, the participant talks about her volunteering in a shop, and compares it to her experience of being involved in the local community centre:

*"Well they er, they've got just so many rules and regulations in [the community centre]... I mean we have our own rules you know health and safety and all that, but... we are sort of individual, and we can sort of choose what we choose to do, you know and we can help a lot more people behind the scenes, but [the community centre are] a different thing altogether, they're educational as well... We're more for everyday stuff I think..."*

**For research and policy**, if people don't consider 'informal volunteering' as 'volunteering' at all, but instead see it as 'helping', there may be a great range of activity which is missed when we measure levels of participation. Similarly, certain types of activity defined as formal 'volunteering' by surveys might not be seen as 'volunteering' by those involved with it.

**For practice**, those seeking to involve people with volunteering need to be aware of the different factors which influence how people will see and experience those opportunities, which in turn impacts on whether and to what extent they are likely to get involved. The ways in which opportunities are developed and described to potential volunteers need to take into account that people do not necessarily want to engage in a formal way, or may be put off by an environment which appears 'formal' to them. For sustainable engagement, it may also be important to ensure that it is clear to volunteers how their participation will make a difference, and to ensure that they can achieve this easily.



### 3.2 Links between informal and formal volunteering?

#### Key points:

- Some literature argues that 'informal volunteering' is the first 'rung' on the journey to becoming a 'formal volunteer' – this work suggests journeys are more complex than this.
- This research suggests people can be 'informal' and 'formal' volunteers at the same time, so people can't necessarily be labeled as active in only 'formal' or 'informal' ways
- Rather than talking about people being 'engaged' or 'disengaged', or progressing from informal to formal, it is helpful to understand that the composition of 'on the radar' and 'below the radar' activity might vary throughout a person's life. Those leaving formal volunteering may return in the future.
- 'Informal volunteering' appears ongoing, and prioritised over formal volunteering. Helping family generally 'comes first', over helping friends and formal volunteering.
- Formal volunteering is likely to be held in tension with a range of informal volunteering/helping commitments.
- Therefore: it is not always easy or desirable to 'formalise' informal volunteering/helping.

Some policy documents as well as volunteering management literature, argue that informal volunteering is the first 'rung' on a ladder towards becoming a 'formal volunteer', and that people will become formal volunteers if they can be engaged informally as they build – amongst other things - skills, confidence and knowledge. This has not been tested, and whether it is true or not has a big impact on how we involve people in volunteering. Therefore this section focuses on research question two: **What does informal volunteering involve, and is it linked in any way to more formal volunteering?**

This research challenges the view that people progress from informal to formal volunteering. Rather, journeys between these different types of participation appeared much messier, multiple and influenced by a range of life-course and geographical factors. There is no one 'formula' which explains why people undertake one or the other form of participation. *Participants reported undertaking formal and less formal activity at the same time*, for example helping friends and neighbours at the same time as volunteering formally with a charity shop. This suggests people can't necessarily be labelled as either 'formal volunteers' or 'informal volunteers'.

On the basis of this research, informal volunteering – or "helping" - doesn't often lead to more formal acts of participation with a community group or charity shop, for example. Equally, it doesn't appear to be common for those who formally volunteer to also help each other out outside of the group they volunteer for. However, most people engage in some kinds of informal 'helping' as a matter of course. Thus, *helping seems to be ongoing in people's everyday lives, and something which can be prioritised over more formal volunteering.*

Helping friends and neighbours (and particularly family – not always understood as informal volunteering by researchers or policy-makers/practitioners) generally 'comes first', prioritised over formal volunteering. Research participants said they withdrew from formal volunteering if time was limited, or there were pressures to help others. An example might be when a friend needs to be cared for through a period of illness. However, there is also evidence that people will re-engage with more formal activity when they are able. *Withdrawal is not permanent* and so someone who appears not to volunteer formally at any given moment in time might not be 'disengaged' but be doing a range of informal helping which may be 'below the radar' when measured by more formal definitions.

**Those seeking to involve people with voluntary activity** should be aware that it is not easy, or desirable, to develop volunteer involving programmes which seek to channel informal voluntary activity



and motivations into more formal volunteer involving programmes. Rather, it might be most helpful to recognise that more formal activity is likely to be held in tension with a range of other commitments to help friends, families and neighbours, and that efforts should be made to be flexible in involving people in more formal activity in terms of time commitments and the frequency of that commitment. An individual choosing to stop participating in (formal) voluntary activity may return to it in the future, become involved with a more flexible form of activity, one which is related more strongly to changing motivations to volunteer, or be most heavily involved with helping outwith an organisation or group. Whilst research participants may or may not be involved with ‘formal volunteering’ at particular points, they were rarely disengaged completely from the entire spectrum of participation.

### 3.3 Life events as triggers for participation

#### Key points:

- We know little about how the events taking place in people’s lives influence their participation.
- Children: having children appears an overwhelmingly strong influence on decisions to become involved in formal and informal activity.
- Health: the influence of health on participation appears more complex, leading to journeys into and out of different forms of participation over time, linked to recovery and reciprocity.
- Wider influences include faith and the influence of upbringing.
- Therefore influences are more complex than purely pragmatic motivations (e.g. developing skills or seeking employment). For sustainable participation these influences should be considered.

Whilst we know that people are more likely to be involved with formal volunteering at certain ages, and less likely at others, we know little about how the events that take place in someone’s life – like having a child, or going through a period of ill health – might impact on how and why they get involved. If we can understand this more clearly, volunteer involvers can better engage with potential volunteers at certain times and accept that at other times people might be less likely to participate in formal volunteering, or may wish to do so in particularly flexible ways. Volunteer involvers might also be able to provide more suitable forms of participation, depending on an individual’s experiences. Therefore this section focuses on research question three: **How does people’s involvement change over time, and what is the influence of the events in people’s own lives on shaping decisions to become involved in or withdraw from voluntary activity?**

Key life-course influences include:

- *Children:* It appears that having children is an overwhelmingly strong influence on the amount of activity (both informal helping and more formal participation) undertaken. This activity can be undertaken for one’s own children (for example involvement with a Scout group) or in cooperation with others (for example taking turns at taking children to school). It also appears that the children of others (for example of next-door neighbours) can also be a catalyst for more neighbourly interaction, and potentially more ‘helping’ between neighbours as a result. This activity is often *accidental* and *contingent* rather than *planned* and *strategic*.
- *Health:* Whilst the influence of children on the amount and diversity of participation was talked about consistently by research participants, the influence of health appears more complicated. Ill health may lead to withdrawal from formal volunteering and the use of more informal networks for support. However, over time they may re-engage with formal volunteering as a means to recuperation (for example to engage with others after periods of withdrawal, or to begin to undertake more physically oriented activity), to say thank you to an organisation that had helped the individual (for example a cancer charity providing support during treatment), or as means to help others facing similar



challenges (for example those coping with depression supporting others). In this way over time health could be considered as a motivating factor to participate as well as a barrier. This emphasises the way that paying attention to *stories* of participation over time can show us how people engage with and withdraw from different forms of participation throughout their life.

- *General life-course influences:* Consistent with much other research, faith-based activity appeared to encourage wider voluntary activity throughout the lives of the participants of this study, whilst the influences of parents as role models and instillers of values were also often cited as motivations:

*“...I was brought up in a church environment, strong church attending family. So from that perspective I’ve always, erm, I’ve had quite a strong community presence or attendance outwith of family or you know extended family and friends, etcetera. And also it’s kind of brought on the idea of kind of service basically”*

Therefore this research found that there are often more fundamental – and often unplanned - motivations and barriers to participation found in the lives of individuals rather than more ‘strategic’ motivations such as looking to achieve particular skills for future employment.

**These findings have implications for where, when and how we ask individuals to participate.**

They suggest it is important to think carefully about asking people to participate who are experiencing different life events e.g. new parents or young families, those who’ve recently experienced ill health or a caring role. Organisations and groups could consider how to support volunteers at particular life events, recognising that this may mean participating with a different organisation or group, or engaging exclusively with informal activity for a time. Such an approach would recognise that rather than being ‘involved’ or ‘not involved’ participation instead can be predominantly ‘on’ or ‘below’ the radar at different times. It would also recognise that whilst an individual may withdraw from formal volunteering for a while, this may not be permanent withdrawal.

**3.4 The role of place in participation**

**Key points:**

- The motivations and social ‘rules’ (or etiquette) for informal activity (e.g. ‘helping’) remained relatively consistent across case study areas.
- The motivations and opportunities relating to the ‘community action’ sphere of activity were more varied; there was a stronger link to community context.
- Apparently ‘formal’ spaces (e.g. a community centre) can also host less formal and more flexible participation.
- A single activity (e.g. fundraising) can be undertaken in a range of ways, more or less formal.

To understand the opportunities and challenges that policy strategies such as ‘localism’, and public service reform might present, it is important to understand the influence of place on the varying capacities of individuals to participate. Therefore this section focuses on research question four: **How does where you live, and where you participate, influence what you do?**

- *Differences between the case study areas:* Reasons for less formal activity, and the social ‘rules’ which were attached to it, appeared similar between the case study areas. Helping was seen as ‘just what you do’, with the norms influencing what is done, for whom, and how this is thanked/reciprocated appearing similar across the case study areas. However, motivations for and opportunities for involvement with community action (for example tenants’ and residents’ groups, Neighbourhood Watch groups) appeared to vary more significantly between communities.



- *Spaces*: This research found that that spaces used for more 'formal' volunteering activity can also support less formal types of activity. For example, a community centre involved with this research hosted formal volunteers responsible for managing others, but also involved those who participated in a far more flexible and spontaneous manner, such as delivering messages to others in the community.
- *Different formalities, similar outcomes*: It is also useful to think of new ways to understand the range of 'more' and 'less' formal participation that individuals might undertake, and how far this might or might not be 'on the radar', as illustrated in figures one and two. Fundraising for example was found to be undertaken 'informally' amongst neighbours for a sick child or for the wider community, without necessarily requiring a third party (i.e. organisation or group) to facilitate it. This was in addition to or instead of more formal fundraising activity:

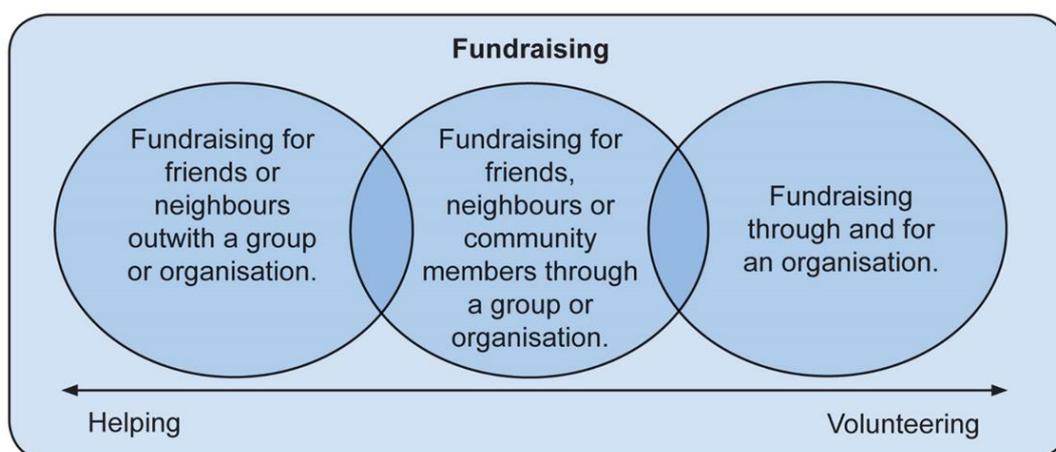


Figure two: The multiple formalities of fundraising<sup>12</sup>

**Volunteer involvers might want to consider** how to make sure that there are a range of activities with which people might get involved: from helping making cups of tea whenever they have a spare few minutes, or coming to a one-off environmental action event, to having a high degree of responsibility and a regular time commitment. It also appears important to recognise that a great deal of activity might be undertaken – voluntarily – outwith organisations which might achieve outcomes similar to those which might be achieved when undertaken through organisations.

#### 4. What are the key messages?

- Organisations offering more formal roles for volunteers might want to think about how they can offer a range of opportunities that could also include those who don't think of themselves as 'volunteers', which might also help engage 'occasional' volunteers.

Organisations offering more traditional, formal roles for volunteers might want to think about how they can offer a range of opportunities – some of which could be less formal in terms of time commitment, frequency of participation or degree of organisation - for people who are already helping out in their community but who don't think of themselves as 'volunteers', or don't want to volunteer for a formal organisation or club. More formal volunteering roles may be less attractive to particular sectors of society; this is in part due to their perceptions or experiences. Such an approach may also help in engaging those who could be potential 'occasional' volunteers (which may help address the decline outlined in the introduction to this summary. Therefore when seeking to involve those in less affluent areas in voluntary activity it may be helpful to build on local norms of informal helping.



- A more flexible approach than the 'ladder' model of volunteer engagement would be helpful. Involvement changes over the life-course, and an approach to involving participants which recognises that the activities engaged with, and how far they are 'on' or 'below' the radar, changes over time is needed.

The 'spectrum' challenges previous assumptions that there is a 'ladder' of participation. This research has shown that a more flexible approach to engaging and supporting volunteers is required, recognising that participation may be engaged with, withdrawn from and change in its nature over time. In particular, involvement changes over the life-course, and an approach to involving participants which recognises that the activities engaged with, and how far they are 'on' or 'below' the radar, changes over time would be helpful.

- Understanding the personal motivations of individuals and the way they might view different types of activity is fundamental to the sustained involvement of volunteers

This study has shown that understanding the personal motivations of individuals and the way they might view different types of activity is fundamental to the sustained involvement of volunteers.

- Current statistics do not accurately reflect actual levels of participation. This makes it harder for decision-makers at national and local levels to take into account existing cultures of participation when developing and implementing policies aimed at encouraging participation, or reliant on participation to succeed. .

Those developing volunteering-based initiatives and policy implementation which either relies on high levels of involvement (such as public service reform and community empowerment agendas) or assumes low levels of involvement (with levels of formal volunteering found to be low in more deprived areas, for example) should be aware that current statistics are not necessarily an accurate reflection of actual levels of participation. To ensure that modes of involvement are appropriate, realistic and sustainable, policies at the local level must take into account the existing culture of participation in a particular community or neighbourhood, as the example of less affluent areas in this study has illustrated.



<sup>1</sup> Scottish Executive (2004) *Volunteering Strategy*. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive p7. <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/Doc/25954/0025523.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.volunteerscotland.net/policy-and-research/research/volunteer-participation/>

<sup>3</sup> Volunteer Development Scotland (2004) *Research on volunteering in Scotland: Research findings report Scotland 4*. Stirling: Volunteer Development Scotland. p1

<sup>4</sup> See for example:

Hurley, N., Wilson, L., Christie, I. (2008) *Scottish Household Survey Analytical Report: Volunteering*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government: <http://www.gov.scot/resource/doc/209828/0055479.pdf>;

Woolvin, M. (2012) *Mapping the third sector in rural Scotland: an initial review of the literature*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government. <http://www.gov.scot/resource/0038/00386850.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Williams, C. (2003) Developing voluntary activity: Some policy issues arising from the 2001 Home Office citizenship survey *Social Policy and Society* 2 (4): 285 – 294

<sup>6</sup> Owing to methodological differences it is not possible to directly compare informal and formal volunteering rates in Scotland, therefore by way of example, data for England and Wales are provided here.

<sup>7</sup> For both formal and informal volunteering, 'regular' is considered to be at least once a month, 'less frequent' is considered to be at least once in the previous 12 months.

<sup>8</sup> Cabinet Office (2015) *Community Life Survey 2014 – 2015: Statistical Bulletin*. London: Cabinet Office. Pp7-8. [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/447010/Community\\_Life\\_Survey\\_2014-15\\_Bulletin.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/447010/Community_Life_Survey_2014-15_Bulletin.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Deprivation was measured according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). The deprivation of a case study area was measured according to the proportion of its datazones in the 15% most deprived in Scotland.

<sup>10</sup> Data collection took place between 2008 and 2010.

<sup>11</sup> See also:

Smith, F.M., Timbrell, H., Woolvin, M., Muirhead, S., Fyfe, N. (2010) Enlivened Geographies of Volunteering: Situated, Embodied and Emotional Practices of Voluntary Action. *Scottish Geographical Journal* 126 (4): 258 – 274;

Woolvin, M., Hardill, I. (2013) Localism, voluntarism and devolution: experiences, opportunities and challenges in a changing policy context. *Local Economy* 28 (3): 273 – 288; (3) Talcott, F. (2011) *Broadening civic space through voluntary action: Lessons learned from 2011*. Bonn: Civicus and UNV p10. <http://www.unv.org/fileadmin/img/unv/2011%20volunteerism%20publication.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> See also: Woolvin, M., Hardill, I. (2013) Localism, voluntarism and devolution: experiences, opportunities and challenges in a changing policy context. *Local Economy* 28 (3): 273 – 288