



# THE BENEFITS OF INCLUSIVE VOLUNTEERING

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## BACKGROUND

This paper was produced by Volunteer Scotland, with input from the Third Sector Research Forum, to try and better understand the benefits of inclusive volunteering. The aim was to:

1. bring together evidence and knowledge about the benefits of volunteering for people who are more likely to experience exclusion from volunteering and other areas of society;
2. identify evidence gaps and explore what evidence is needed to inform policy and practice;
3. explore considerations for volunteering research, policy and practice to inform how the Third Sector supports and promotes inclusive volunteering.

## WHAT IS INCLUSIVE VOLUNTEERING?

The *Volunteering as a Tool for Inclusion* (2013-2015) project has defined inclusive volunteering as: “the participation of a person who has a disability or any other difficulty that is limiting their opportunities to get involved within mainstream volunteering” ([Inclusive Volunteering](#), 2015). Inclusive volunteering means everyone, regardless of age, culture, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, social status or disability, is able to volunteer.

For the purposes of this report, the term “inclusive volunteering” refers to people who are at risk of experiencing exclusion, for example those who are:

- experiencing a mental health problem;
- disadvantaged by age and transitions, e.g. young and older people;
- fleeing abuse and violence (mainly women and refugees);
- disadvantaged or excluded due to their culture or circumstances, e.g. ethnic minority groups or travelling people;
- disabled or have additional needs;

- presents challenging behaviours to services;
- experiences multiple disadvantage through poverty, poor housing, poor environment;
- is 'marginal, high risk and hard to reach' and may be involved in substance misuse, offending and at risk of exclusion.

This report considers how people who are at risk of experiencing exclusion can benefit from **becoming a volunteer** and from being **supported by volunteers**.

## **CALL FOR EVIDENCE**

A call for evidence was put out between 23 June and 15 August 2014 to a selection of charities and organisations across Scotland. The call for evidence asked people to provide the Third Sector Research Forum with any existing evaluation or research reports that they were aware of that made reference to the “inclusive volunteering” criteria as described above.

Around 50 documents were received in total. Of these, 42 were relevant to the topic of inclusive volunteering. The majority (59%) provided evidence within a particular setting (project or service) and geographical place. Most documents related to Scotland, although some did cover other parts of the UK and occasionally outside the UK.

The content and conclusions within this report are limited by the range, volume and quality of the materials that were submitted as part of the call for evidence. For example, this report does not include any findings from any peer reviewed journal articles. For some topic areas, such as offenders/ex-offenders and ethnicity, only one or two relevant reports were received.

Nevertheless, common themes have emerged across this body of work, providing a good basis for future considerations for research, policy and practice in the area of inclusive volunteering.

## **SUMMARY FINDINGS**

Overall, the evidence suggests that volunteering connects individuals to each other and to their communities. The benefits of this connection can result in improved wellbeing and increased confidence and skills development. By acting as brokers who facilitate connections between services and those in need of support, volunteers can play a crucial role in helping to reduce the need for acute interventions.

The evidence also suggests that a unique relationship exists between volunteers and those they support, a relationship based on trust and reciprocity. This relationship develops because unlike

paid staff, volunteers are there because they want to be, and they often have a shared experience with those they support.

The key findings are discussed below with illustrative examples from the literature.

## **BENEFITS FOR VOLUNTEERS WHO MAY BE AT RISK OF EXPERIENCING EXCLUSION**

People who may be socially excluded tend to volunteer for the same reasons as many other people: to make friends, to learn and develop skills, to make a difference and to give something back. The benefits identified in the literature are:

### **1) volunteering helps to develop new skills and enhance existing skills**

The evidence shows volunteering can provide people with opportunities they wouldn't otherwise be able to access and can help to both develop and enhance skills.

In a *Volunteering and Disability* study carried out by Volunteer Scotland (Reilly, 2005), disabled people mentioned how volunteering can be a way to gain skills that can be useful when seeking employment or other opportunities: *“leadership skills, development skills, listening skills and various supporting methods. These will be useful for job hunting or taking in any other volunteering situation”*.

Maintaining and developing skills through volunteering was also highlighted as an important benefit for asylum seekers and refugees in a study carried out in Denmark and Scotland in 2013: *“When I volunteered [making raised beds in a community garden] it gave me the opportunity to use skills that I have, but which I don't have the chance to use here in Scotland, as right now I don't have right to work...I wanted to do more of it, but there was no more work to do! I really enjoyed doing this work”* – 22 year old male asylum seeker, Scotland (Romme Larsen, 2013).

The volunteer placements offered through the Sue Ryder Prison Volunteer Programme provide offenders with the opportunity to gain work experience and to improve their skills and confidence, all of which can significantly help them to secure sustainable employment upon release and to prepare them for life after prison: *“for the prisoners the main advantage is that it gets them into a routine that makes the transition into society when they are discharged easier”* (Finnegan and Stewart, 2012).

### **2) “giving something back” through volunteering enhances individual wellbeing**

Volunteering provides an opportunity for people to “give something back” which can enhance

individual wellbeing (such as improving feelings of self-worth and confidence). For example, a high proportion of volunteers with the *East Fife Mental Health Adolescent Project - LINK Young Persons Project* have experienced mental health issues and find that volunteering is a way of 'repaying' and reciprocating the help they have received: *"I had a volunteer and then when that was finished, I thought I wanted to do for somebody what had been done for me and so I took the training and now here I am"* ([LINK](#)).

A piece of small scale research by Volunteer Centre Edinburgh for *A Stitch in Time* (Howard, 2014), illustrates the mental health benefits of volunteering for older people, brought about by "doing something for others". For example, Margaret, one of the older people taking part in the study, said: *"I still have depression but it is not as bad. I feel other people's pain and that makes you feel better and helps to put things into perspective. Doing something for others gives me satisfaction. If you can get people laughing it's so much better than pills"*.

The positive impact of reciprocity is further highlighted by the Sue Ryder Prison Volunteer Programme. An evaluation of the scheme found that some prisoners had been inspired to consider volunteering in the future and to look for work in the Third Sector upon release: *"it felt like you were giving something back instead of just taking. I didn't feel like I was contributing before"*. Prisoners revealed that by volunteering, they felt that they were making reparation to society for their crimes: *"I can't directly say sorry to the people I've hurt but now I'm putting something back into the community"* (Finnegan and Stewart, 2012).

## **BENEFITS FOR SERVICE USERS WHO ARE AT RISK OF EXPERIENCING EXCLUSION**

The evidence suggests that volunteers develop consistent and trusting relationships with those that they support who may be at risk of experiencing exclusion. As a result of this, services offered by volunteers have unique benefits. The benefits identified in the literature are:

### **1) volunteers help people connect to mainstream society**

The ability of volunteers to connect people at risk of experiencing exclusion to the outside world was a common theme across the literature. Volunteers can provide an opportunity for those members of society who may be isolated or marginalised to have fun and to broaden their horizons. People look forward to the social interaction that volunteers provide, and particularly for older people, volunteers can sometimes be the only outside contact that they receive.

Interest Link Borders matches volunteers with children and adults with learning disabilities who are of a similar age and have similar interests. They meet regularly to take part in activities, such as cycling, swimming or going to the cinema and having a cup of coffee. This befriending helps

people with learning disabilities to overcome social exclusion, develop friendships, pursue their interests, participate in community activities, gain skills and develop independence: *“being in a group gave me the chance to smile and laugh more than I usually do. I have so much more self-confidence than I have ever had in my life and I am so grateful”* ([Interest Link Borders](#)).

Through helping to build confidence and skills, volunteers enable people to connect and become involved in mainstream society.

## **2) volunteers help build resilience and prevent acute intervention**

Volunteers can deliver a unique and special service to people who are at risk of experiencing exclusion that paid staff are often unable to offer. Volunteers can be matched to people on the basis of shared interests and experience. The fact that volunteers want to spend time with people and are not being paid to be there and are not family members, can make people feel valued, interesting and increase their feeling of self-worth: *“the volunteers have the time to sit and have a conversation”* (Howard, 2014).

The trust between volunteers and those that they support means that volunteers are often able to act as a broker between organisations and the service user. For example [Home-Start](#) volunteers work with families to build their resilience and improve both parent and child outcomes. Volunteers provide emotional and practical support, and help to facilitate the use of local services by families. By improving coping mechanisms and reducing social isolation, volunteers help to prevent vulnerable families failing into crisis where the need for acute intervention is required.

This trust also extends benefits to the families and caregivers of people who have additional support needs. For example, the families of people with learning disabilities can greatly value the opportunity provided by befriending schemes to have time to themselves to rest and enjoy outside interests, knowing that the people they care for are safe and enjoying themselves with trusted volunteers: *“I can now relax by myself or go out and see friends”* ([Interest Link Borders](#)).

The role that volunteers can also play in helping people to recover from health problems is demonstrated through the *LINK East Fife Mental Health Befriending Project*. LINK recruits and trains volunteer befrienders who are matched with people who are isolated as a result of mental health problems – people who have removed themselves not only from enjoyable and fulfilling activities but from relationships with other people and from involvement in study, volunteering and work. The project provides companionship, increased social opportunities, support to try new things and a structure in people’s lives which results in improved resilience, self-esteem, confidence and mental wellbeing. *“Life would have been less, less of everything. Some of my first experiences were with my befriender, such as going bowling or a barbeque. Sounds simple but*

*the skills of socialising in those situations are invaluable. Chances are, I also wouldn't be volunteering today if it wasn't for LINK, it inspires me to be more" ([LINK](#)).*

## **EVIDENCE GAPS**

The findings from this review suggest that inclusive volunteering has unique benefits. It generates reciprocal and trusting relationships which spark an ongoing cycle of benefits for volunteers and those they support.

There are a number of evidence gaps which, if filled, would help grow inclusive volunteering either by generating knowledge for practice, or to identify how inclusive volunteering can help achieve policy outcomes:

- 1) to what extent does inclusive volunteering impact on social cohesion/reducing inequalities and/or help to prevent acute intervention?
- 2) what can be done to make volunteering easier for people who may be socially excluded? How can we reduce barriers and support enablers for inclusive volunteering?
- 3) to what extent is inclusive volunteering encouraged and supported by organisations, projects and funders?

## **CONSIDERATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE AND FUNDERS**

Volunteering brings added value to services. Volunteers work with and complement (rather than replace) paid staff. Volunteers have a unique relationship with those they support which helps improve the quality of the service, and potentially make it more successful.

Linking practitioners and projects together, sharing information and approaches, and building evaluation into activities is an important way of generating the practice knowledge we need to help organisations and projects embrace a more inclusive approach to volunteer involvement.

Funders should consider how they encourage projects and organisations to adopt a more inclusive approach to volunteering and how the impact of this is evaluated.

From this relatively small but important evidence base, it is clear that there are important links between the benefits of volunteering and a variety of policy agendas. Policy-makers should consider for example, the benefits of volunteering for societal wellbeing, prevention, service delivery (particularly in health and social care), and asset-based approaches to service delivery and development.

## **NEXT STEPS**

A review will now be carried out to identify the barriers and enablers to making volunteering more inclusive. This work will be informed by feedback gathered from practitioners and volunteers on the findings highlighted in this paper.

## **REFERENCES**

Finnegan, L. and Stewart, M. (2012) *An evaluation of the Sue Ryder Prison Volunteer Programme*, Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion

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Romme Larsen, B. (2013) *Amir’s volunteering: A study on volunteering as pathway to social inclusion for young asylum seekers and refugees – opportunities and barrier in a European context*. The Danish Red Cross: Copenhagen

## **CONTRIBUTIONS**

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Lead Scotland

LINK – East Fife Mental Health Befriending Project

LinkLiving

Pass It On

Scottish Refugee Council

Volunteer Centre Edinburgh

Volunteering Matters

Volunteer Now  
Volunteer Scotland  
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Youth Highland