



Policy Briefing

Young People and Volunteering

June 2023



About Us

Volunteer Scotland

Volunteer Scotland is Scotland's national centre for volunteering. We believe that volunteering should be an enjoyable, rewarding and fulfilling experience for the volunteer; that volunteers have the right to be safe and protected in delivering their volunteering roles; and that to derive health and well-being benefits from volunteering requires regular and meaningful contributions of time.

Should any queries arise from this briefing, please contact our Policy Officer by emailing **sarah.latto@volunteerscotland.org.uk**

YouthLink Scotland

YouthLink Scotland is the national agency for youth work. We are a membership organisation representing the voluntary and statutory sectors. We champion the role and value of youth work and represent the interests and aspirations of our sector. We are an organisation with a sharp focus on the needs of young people. We are an organisation that promotes learning, innovation and progressive thinking and are committed to the highest standards of protection and safety for young people.

For more information on YouthLink Scotland or to find out more about the role of youth work and volunteering, please contact YouthLink Scotland's Policy and Research Manager Kevin Kane on **kkane@youthlink.scot** or YouthLink Scotland's Senior Development Officer for Youth Social Action and Volunteering, Emma Kyles on **ekyles@youthlink.scot**

Introduction

Recent research from Volunteer Scotland exploring the participation of young people in volunteering raised some interesting findings, both positive and negative. We would first like to acknowledge and celebrate the many thousands of young people who contributed a total of 9.7 million formal volunteering hours in 2022. Youth participation in volunteering continues to be higher than rates for adults, and in some instances appears to be more inclusive, which is great news. However, there are worrying signs that fewer young people are volunteering and those that do are not experiencing the same benefits as they were prior to the pandemic. Given the predicted decline in adult volunteer participation, and the potential benefits of volunteering for the personal development of young people, it is vital that youth work and youth volunteering participation are prioritised.

This joint briefing explores these findings in detail and identifies some of the policy implications of this research for youth work and youth volunteering more broadly. It also details some tangible recommendations to address some of the more concerning findings from this research.

Research Summary

In May 2023, Volunteer Scotland published the findings from a survey of young people investigating their engagement with volunteering. This is the 4th survey of its kind. It is based on data from the Ipsos omnibus survey of secondary school pupils across Scotland. Below is a summary of these research findings, supplemented with other relevant research or qualitative evidence where appropriate.

- 1. Decline in youth volunteering participation** - both formal and informal¹ youth volunteering participation rates have declined since 2019. Formal participation is down 12% from 49% to 37%, and informal participation is down 7% from 25% to 18%.
- 2. Demographic variations** – the formal volunteering participation rate for young people aged 17-18 was 68%, significantly higher than the rate for 11-12 year olds (22%). There is gender parity in volunteering participation rates in young people, largely because female participation outside of school has declined by 16 percentage points (45% to 29%). Young people living in the 20% most deprived areas of Scotland were far less likely to volunteer formally (28% participation

¹ Formal volunteering refers to unpaid work undertaken through an organisation to help other people or a cause. Informal volunteering refers to unpaid help given as an individual directly to people who are not relatives. This briefing will primarily respond to findings related to formal volunteering, but the informal volunteering rate was deemed worthy of inclusion to demonstrate that formal volunteering rates experienced a sharper decline.

rate) than their peers in the least deprived areas(38% participation rate). Finally, young people with long-term health conditions had higher levels of formal participation (48% participation rate) than young people without long-term health conditions (39% participation rate) – a reverse of the rates for adult participation.

3. **Formal volunteering activities** – Activities supporting children, sports, hobbies and recreation, and local communities dominate young people’s volunteering. It is interesting that 32% of young females volunteer in physical activity, sports and exercise, 10 percentage points higher than males at 22%. Again, this is a reverse of adult participation rates.
4. **Decline in formal youth volunteering activities** – there were declining participation rates in four out of the top six formal youth volunteering activities. The largest decline was in activity related to physical activity, sport and exercise – a 12% decrease.
5. **Routes into volunteering** – parents/carers are the most influential group for encouraging youth volunteering, cited by 42% of young people. Teachers and other adult influencers such as youth workers also have a key role in encouraging volunteering, with 24% and 23% of young people citing them as key influencers respectively. Friendship is also important, with 20% of young people reporting that their friends influenced their participation in volunteering. Similarly, 51% of young formal volunteers said that being able to volunteer with their friends would encourage them to do more volunteering. Interestingly, only 12% of young people were encouraged to volunteer through a volunteering scheme or initiative (e.g. [Duke of Edinburgh’s Award](#) or [Saltire Award](#)).
6. **Benefits of volunteering** – there remains clear benefits of volunteering for young people. The number of young people reporting increased confidence as a result of volunteering decreased by 17 percentage points, from 52% to 35%. Similarly, the number reporting that their volunteering helped them to feel happier reduced by 19 percentage points from 36% to 18%. There were similar although slightly less pronounced decreases in young people reporting employability benefits from volunteering. For example, the number reporting that they had learned new skills decreased by 8 percentage points from 54% to 46%.

What does this tell us?

Impact of COVID-19 and Cost of Living Crisis

It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent cost of living crisis have had a significant impact on youth volunteering participation rates, and on the experiences of young volunteers. Volunteering tasks that emerged during the

pandemic were likely less suited to young people, due to the fast-evolving nature of the voluntary response and the lack of resource to provide additional support. COVID-19 also [restricted the spaces](#) in which formal youth volunteering takes place. Most community spaces closed their doors, significantly impacting youth volunteering participation rates. A lot of activity, including face to face youth work, ceased for a considerable time.

The closure of schools and community facilities during COVID-19 also removed the positive influence of teachers and youth workers in supporting young people's participation in volunteering and making wider community links with youth groups. In [Volunteer Scotland research](#) exploring the impact of COVID-19 on volunteering, it was found that many infrastructure organisations were 'particularly concerned about young people' and rejuvenating youth volunteering was identified as a priority. Further, during the initial co-production of the upcoming National Youth Work Strategy (2023-2028) and contextualisation efforts due to the pandemic, it was agreed by youth work leaders that volunteering infrastructure needed to be improved to support young people into volunteering and to meet the critical priority aim of workforce development to support the implementation of the strategy in every local authority in Scotland.

The cost of living crisis has placed additional strain on youth volunteering. Many organisations providing opportunities for young people to volunteer, or support young people to access volunteering opportunities, have faced a perfect storm of rising demand, increasing costs and stagnating or declining income. The most recent findings from [The Scottish Third Sector Tracker](#) revealed that rising costs/inflation is the number one challenge experienced by third sector organisations, with 46% reporting this as one of their top three challenges. Similarly, 36% expressed uncertainty about the future of their organisation as a key challenge. In this difficult environment, promoting youth volunteering and providing meaningful, supporting volunteering opportunities may be more challenging to prioritise.

The adverse mental health and wellbeing impacts of COVID-19 and the cost of living crisis on young people may also have undermined their engagement in volunteering. This could also provide an explanation for the decline in young people experiencing the benefits of volunteering, with young people generally less able to reflect on the positive outcomes of their volunteering.

The initial [lockdown lowdown key findings report](#) found that 96% of young people worried about the impact of coronavirus on their future, and that 77% worried about their mental health and wellbeing. This reduced slightly in [subsequent reports](#) to 38%. However, it remains a key area of concern. A [survey by Young Scot](#) published in December 2022 found that 70% of young people were concerned about their parents, carers or guardians in relation to the cost of living crisis, and 50% did

not feel good about their mental health and wellbeing when thinking about the crisis. One respondent said:

“I suffer with anxiety...I’m more worried about my family being able to cope and keep a roof over their heads. It is affecting university as I’m wanting to put in as many hours as possible working to help as much as I can”

The connection between limited volunteering opportunities in a safe place with a trusted adult has been postulated as a compounding factor in young people reporting anxiety and poor mental health.

Equal Access to Volunteering

The research demonstrates clearly the vital role of adults as ‘role models’ or ‘influencers’ in encouraging young people to volunteer. Parents are the most influential, raising a question about young people who don’t have a strong parental influence, including many young people who are care-experienced, and those whose parents/carers don’t understand the benefits of volunteering. This places more significant importance on ensuring that young people are exposed to other adult influences who understand the benefits of volunteering and can support young people to access relevant volunteering opportunities, in both school and non-school settings. This is particularly important for ensuring that every young person is able to participate in volunteering, particularly those from more deprived areas where volunteering participation rates are significantly lower.

Youth work is vital as it provides quality, meaningful volunteering opportunities, enabling young people to develop transferable skills and progress. Volunteering opportunities and safe space experiences created by youth work encourage and support young people into/through volunteering (especially those impacted by poverty), the progression pathways, the sustained relationship with a youth worker, and a keen focus on developing and understanding the skills developed. Further, volunteering through youth work contributes to closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

Positive volunteering participation rates for young people with long term health conditions reflect the role of volunteering in self-management of health conditions, and in building core skills like confidence, connectedness and physical stamina, while contributing to the local community. For these reasons, it could be that young people in this demographic group are afforded additional support and opportunities to volunteer, perhaps because they are more likely to be excluded from mainstream education.

Volunteer Edinburgh provide a ‘Bespoke Youth Volunteering’ service which works specifically with young people who have complex health needs. They have found

that creating and supporting tailored volunteer opportunities requires significant time and resource, but that this leads to positive outcomes for the young people involved. Volunteer involving organisations also require guidance and support to build capacity and confidence to develop and sustain opportunities that are attractive and accessible to young people, particularly those with support needs or long term health conditions. Given the drop in participation when young people with long term health conditions reach adulthood, sustaining volunteering through quality supported opportunities should be a priority in the National Transition to Adulthood plans for disabled people.

The same is true for the success story around participation of young females in volunteering related to sport. This could reflect the increased likelihood of girls to volunteer more generally, but perhaps also reflects the success of efforts to break down stigma around female participation in sport. Efforts to support more women and girls into sport should focus on the transition into adulthood and the role of female volunteers in sport as important role models to encourage further participation.

Benefits of Volunteering

The decline in young people reporting benefits of volunteering is a particular concern. As previously stated, this is likely linked to the wider effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis on the wellbeing of young people more generally but could also reflect a decrease in the quality of volunteering opportunities for young people, or a decline in opportunities for young people to reflect on their volunteering experiences.

Many organisations that support youth volunteering are experiencing a challenging operating environment at present which could be impacting on the level of support provided to young volunteers. Whilst the Young People in Scotland research did not explicitly ask about the quality of volunteering experiences, early figures from [NCVO's most recent Time Well Spent survey](#) suggest that overall volunteer satisfaction in the UK has dropped.

The decline in young people reporting benefits of volunteering could also indicate that less young volunteers have the support to reflect on their volunteer experience. Within a youth work setting, the [youth work outcomes and skills framework](#) helps youth workers to support young people to reflect on their progress and skills development. YouthLink Scotland is exploring how this framework can better support young people to understand the benefits of volunteering.

Policy Recommendations

The policy landscape and infrastructure to support youth volunteering and youth work is already in a fairly strong place. The [Youth Volunteering Innovation Project \(Youth VIP\) report](#), co-designed with a panel of young people and published in 2019, provides clear recommendations for promoting youth volunteering participation. The Scottish Government accepted all of these recommendations through its response published in January 2020, and most recently gave a further recent commitment to funding as a promising start to achieving the YouthVIP recommendations by embedding YouthVIP within existing structures.

The [Volunteering Action Plan](#) was launched in June 2022, and includes a range of actions which focus on increasing diversity and developing opportunities to volunteer according to life-stage. This 10 year plan is still in its infancy, but significant progress has already been made.

The upcoming [National Youth Work Strategy \(2023-2028\)](#) underwent significant co-production alongside thousands of young people and youth workers. This culminated in priorities, including investment in volunteering to improve the educational and life chances of Scotland's young people, particularly those whose opportunities are exacerbated by poverty.

With this in mind, we have made the following recommendations to complement and enhance existing policy commitments:

1. Following both the National Discussion on Education and the Hayward review of qualifications and assessment, we would recommend that volunteering becomes a core part of the curriculum, with dedicated resource to ensure that **all** young people have the opportunity to participate in volunteering and reflect on their personal development benefits.
2. Invest in high quality, supported volunteering opportunities for young people, with a particular focus on youth work, to ensure all young people are able to participate.
3. Explore the role of schools and other education establishments (formal and non-formal) and Skills Development Scotland in promoting volunteering when preparing young people for future pathways and the transition into adulthood and the world of work.
4. Undertake a review of the Saltire Award, reflecting on its success in promoting youth volunteer participation and providing opportunities for young people to reflect on the personal benefits of volunteering.

5. Recognise the role of youth work in raising attainment and achievement, including through improving engagement in learning, skills, health and well-being and through recognition of achievement, including youth awards, many of which provide opportunities for young people to volunteer.
6. Provide resource to support dedicated research into why volunteering is more accessible for young people with long-term health conditions, which could then inform specific actions in the National Transition to Adulthood Plan.

Next steps

1. Review the Youth VIP recommendations and the Volunteering Action Plan to understand current commitments to promote youth volunteering in Scotland
2. Reach out to Volunteer Scotland and YouthLink Scotland to discuss how your influence can be best utilised in advocating for policy solutions to promote youth volunteering participation and youth work.