



**Institute for
Community Studies**

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Volunteering Journeys

Growing the youth volunteering generation

Institute for Community Studies, 2022

Authorship

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1. Introducing the Volunteering Journey

The Volunteering Journey final report examines how young people perceive and experience the UK's current volunteering 'offer', and how it could be reshaped to strengthen and sustain their life-long participation. The project is rooted in a shared belief that young people's emergent civic power, through volunteering, can inspire long-term engagement in social action, innovation, and entrepreneurship across all life stages. It aims to enhance how place-specific support structures might be better connected to broaden volunteering opportunities for all during youth transitions to adulthood.

It is published at an important political and social juncture in our country's history. Research indicates the Covid-19 pandemic has proven generationally transformative, impacting significantly on the educational, health (particularly mental health), socio-economic, and life prospects of children and young people (Beatfrees, 2020; Leavey et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2021). And yet, the pandemic has emphasised the distinctive resilience of 'Generation Covid', particularly their ability to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances and their willingness to participate at home, their places of education, in their communities, and online (DCMS 2020; Percy-Smith, 2022). Young climate activists also highlighted the importance of volunteering at events across COP26 in Glasgow in November 2021.

Volunteering is a driver for change and provides significant opportunities for young people to powerfully reshape the present and future, while inspiring a sense of belonging, pride in place, social responsibility, and reciprocity (House of Lords, 2018). It can provide a powerful counterweight to the increasing social fragmentation and isolation experienced by many young people during the pandemic (Millar et al., 2020; Mental Health Foundation, 2021), thus strengthening 'the ties that bind' communities and the country together.

The Volunteering Journey supports the UK Government's delivery of a National Youth Guarantee. This was identified in the recent 'Levelling Up' white paper (DCMS, 2022) and aims to offer every young person opportunities to volunteer and help 'rebuild social capital and self-reliance' across the country by 2025. It also supports the growth of youth volunteering at

national, regional, and local levels, such as the delivery of the Scottish Government's Young Person's Guarantee.

In this report, we define the concept of the Volunteering Journey, considering how evidence and data has identified gaps in how young peoples' transitions through 'youth-hood', and their relationship with existing systems, are understood and supported - or not.

The report then presents the results of a co-produced, participatory research process undertaken with over 650 young people between the ages of 11 and 30, from different regions of the UK. In this work, the young people were guided by a Youth Advisory Board, and informed by iterative workshops with stakeholders working to support youth volunteering across multiple sectors.

Finally, we offer conclusions and recommendations for how the system of support for young people can be better shaped in order to empower, extend and sustain young peoples' access to, and participation in, volunteering.



1.1 Defining the 'Volunteering Journey'

We understand the 'Volunteering Journey' as encapsulating the spectrum of activities, experiences and engagement available to young people at different stages of their transitions to adulthood. Volunteering is one part of a wider process of socialisation - both as *being and becoming* active citizens - which we call the 'Civic Journey'. This wider concept focuses on supporting, inspiring and empowering young people by encouraging understanding of and participation in formal and informal volunteering, civic institutions and systems, democratic engagement, and community activism through a continuous ecosystem of support for children and young people.

The Volunteering Journey can be understood as linear, in that children and young people experience ongoing development from childhood to adolescence and then early adulthood (Sawyer et al., 2018). For the vast majority, their transitions are also framed by universal pathways in education (primary, secondary, and further education) and by the collective acquisition of rights and responsibilities as they reach certain ages. The Volunteering Journey is also non-linear, as young people biologically and socially mature at different rates, depending on a range of variables including gender; sexuality; socio-economic, class, ethnic and/or racial background; and parental or caring responsibilities. Their experiences of education and employment can differ significantly, particularly when they reach the age of 18. Independent living, marriage, parental and other caring responsibilities can also impact on the potential and preparedness to volunteer.

The value of adopting a 'journey' approach in understanding how young people engage with volunteering, and how the volunteering system could better serve young people, is twofold. Firstly, it places a strong value on appreciating young people's experiences in shaping their engagement in volunteering - particularly the diversity of entry, exit, and transition points. Secondly, it provides the opportunity to take a 'whole system' look at how the system can be changed or adapted to better serve young people's volunteering requirements and aspirations.

The Volunteering Journey provides a timely response to policy challenges to 'level up' opportunities for young people, recognised in different ways by governments across the UK by offering a minimum 'guarantee', or offering to support them during their transition to adulthood. It also engages with the 'citizenship challenge' identified by the House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement (2018) to create volunteer opportunities for all young people to inspire a sense of belonging, pride in place, social responsibility, and reciprocity.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has further emphasised the urgent need to better coordinate civic engagement opportunities for young people (House of Lords, 2022). Volunteering has been identified as providing a powerful counterweight to increasing social fragmentation and isolation experienced by many young people during the pandemic (Mental Health Foundation, 2021), thus strengthening 'the ties that bind' communities and the country together.

The concept of the Volunteering Journey seeks to cast a fresh solution-orientated light on perennial and emergent challenges. The benefits of the 'journey' concept are that it seeks to address fragmentation in relation to both social change and policymaking in order to facilitate joined-up thinking and connectivity between different age groups, opportunities and forms of volunteering. It seeks to reveal gaps, or show where provision is particularly threadbare, and encourages working with young people to co-design a more attractive, youth-centred 'volunteering offer'.

It also helps in identifying key transition points - particularly the impact of changes in young people's educational and social environments - on volunteering, and how the volunteering system for young people might be reimagined by better understanding the 'entry', 'exit', and 're-entry' points of participation. As such, it seeks to increase efficiency, catalyse innovation, and avoid duplication in support for young people and the provision of opportunities for them to volunteer.

1.2 Why look at the Volunteering Journey for young people now?

The mobilisation of volunteers was a crucial part of the pandemic response, with young people playing an essential role due to their lower health risk. Shifts in the scale and nature of volunteering were observed, particularly increases in informal volunteering associated with community support and mutual aid across all age cohorts (DCMS, 2020; DCMS 2021). A shift towards younger volunteers was observed, but attributed to older volunteers needing to shield, and the growing resonance of digital volunteering (Saxton, 2020; Norrlander et al. 2021).

Research indicates this upsurge in young people volunteering is not entirely new, but rather an existing trend that becomes more marked, visible, and acknowledged (Paine, 2000; Roche, 2000). Such trends provide important clues about how, when and where young people want to volunteer. This poses the question: what can we learn from the pandemic to improve the quantity, quality and diversity of youth volunteering in future?

The Covid-19 pandemic revealed the existence and implications of deeply embedded structural inequalities within society and further exacerbated their 'scarring effects' (Mulgan et al, 2022). Factors relating to housing, occupational risk and access to healthcare made certain communities far more vulnerable than others in both economic and health terms. Young people either in education, not yet in employment, or living in precarious tenant-based housing or space and resource-poor environments, suffered disproportionately both during the pandemic and in terms of its effects on their future lives (British Academy, 2021). The impact of the pandemic has been realised in the safety and mental health of young people (Children's Society, 2021; Young Minds, 2021). This noted, they continued to demonstrate outstanding forms of agency in supporting others, resilience, and optimism in their generation's drive to change the future for the better (Prince's Trust, 2021).

Social and spatial inequalities within the UK also impacted on volunteering opportunities for young people - including gaining access to volunteering as a gateway to other social, economic and cultural opportunities. This – in part – highlights how reductions in local government funding over

the past decade had a significant impact on the provision of youth services. Research suggests that funding by local authorities has declined by 60% or more, with some regions and localities experiencing average reductions of over 70%, and some having funding pulled completely (YMCA, 2022). The National Youth Agency (2021) reports that for every £16 of reductions to local services, £1 has fallen on youth work.

This noted, funding cuts have disproportionately impacted on services for young people in the most deprived areas of the country (Atkins and Hoddinott, 2022), meaning annual spending ranges from just £250 to only £25 per head of population across local authorities in England (based on 11- to 19-year-olds) (National Youth Agency, 2021). Locality is also influential, with the average net expenditure on youth services reported to be £62 per head on average in urban areas, compared to just £47 per head in rural areas. A 'postcode lottery' now exists; the place young people grow up in powerfully determines if and how they are supported to volunteer. The existence of funding 'hotspots' and 'coldspots' brings into relief the challenges of both 'levelling up' the country and providing a universal national minimum offer of support for young people as they grow up to learn about and experience volunteering.

The pandemic has further exacerbated existing local and regional differences in resourcing infrastructure for youth volunteering (UK Youth, 2021), reducing further access to traditional formal routes to volunteering for young people, especially during the periods of lockdown (McGarvey et al., 2021). Furthermore, schools and colleges were often overloaded with responsibilities, meaning education-based pathways to volunteering were limited or absent. As we (hopefully) move on from the pandemic, evidence suggests the volunteering journey offers a distinctive lens to develop understanding of the distribution of funding and interventions on a more granular level. This could, for example, look at what is available and effective for different age groups and locations to better synchronise and interconnect opportunities throughout young peoples' transitions to adulthood.

Such inequalities impact on different systems and policies, and how they operate at local level, requiring us to look at more integrated models of volunteering support that can address those experiencing multiple and complex needs. We propose that, by adopting a youth-centred approach to volunteering, we can better understand the barriers and incentives from young peoples' perspective. The ambition of our work is to identify the diversity of volunteer entry points to understand how Volunteering Journeys can be better supported and organised, so there is greater equality of opportunity across UK towns, villages, and cities.

There is growing evidence that, as the UK emerges from a decade of austerity, with the implications of job-market changes due to Brexit, and now following more than two years of the pandemic, that the trend towards the 'blurring' of roles between informal volunteers, formal volunteers, and paid staff has become more prevalent (see Rochester, 2021; Casseldine and Pickard, 2015). Reductions in public funding and community resources have led some sources to argue that the emergence of a 'mixed economy of welfare' has encouraged a fragmentation of the traditional roles of 'volunteer', 'community leader', 'public service worker' and even 'entrepreneur' (Baines and Wilson, 2011). Changes in how the role of the 'volunteer' in society is viewed raises questions about the 'value' or 'meaning' of volunteering to society in the post-pandemic landscape. It also highlights the need to reconsider incentives and reward models for youth volunteering at different stages of their transitions to adulthood, and at what point 'volunteering' becomes hybridised with 'work'.

Adopting a 'Volunteering Journey' approach raises the potential to identify and connect strategic intervention points where funding might have the greatest impact, including making the most of funding mechanisms such as match funding. Mapping programmes and interventions along the trajectory of young people's transitions to adulthood can help government and other funding stakeholders better identify the strategic resourcing and impactful distribution of resources. This would help address concerns about the need to amplify the quality and impact of youth work by better coordination and intentional spending across government (APPG on Youth Affairs (2021).

We believe the pandemic recovery offers significant opportunities to establish a 'Volunteer Journey' model that is as ambitious and agile as it is integrated and inclusive. It would offer equal opportunities to learn about and gain experience of volunteering to support youth transitions to adulthood, and nurture lifelong active citizenship. The increased participation in informal volunteering during the pandemic offers new evidence about what works in incentivising and rewarding young people to be active citizens, and how to keep this momentum building. The emergence of new, powerful networks of volunteering organisations, such as Shaping the Future with Volunteering and Vision for Volunteering, combined with existing initiatives like #iwill, Project Scotland, or #PowerofYouth in Wales, offer significant opportunities to learn and develop partnership-based approaches to designing and delivering youth programmes.

Beyond the value added to communities, there is also an opportunity to develop knowledge about how and when volunteering might play a role in the wellbeing of young people. As noted in the 'Kruger Report' (2020), volunteering has the potential to build resilience, pride, and opportunities in communities across the UK as part of broader efforts to 'level up' the country. Most importantly, volunteering can empower young people to learn about and affirm their agency and their potential to be essential participants and shapers in the future of their communities.



1.3. Understanding the Volunteering Journey

Over the past decade, understanding of youth volunteering and the wider social action landscape has been illuminated by extensive research, commissioned and published by a range of governmental, civil society, and academic actors. This important work has enhanced knowledge about the motivations, opportunities, and barriers to youth volunteering, and ‘what works’ in terms of supporting young people to build social capital while enhancing their educational and employability prospects, resilience, and wellbeing.

Two significant themes are evident from existing research, which can be understood both in terms of policymaking and provision of opportunities for young people to volunteer:

1. Young people are increasingly interested in volunteering, but how they conceive it can differ somewhat from traditional definitions. This has implications for how they are supported in their participation and recognition of their contribution. A significant number of those who say they are interested in volunteering, often experience barriers, which limits their involvement, and around one-quarter of young people consistently say they do not wish to volunteer.
2. The potential to grow the volunteer base and support young people to participate as they grow up is strongly influenced by place – namely, where young people are born, grow up, go to university, or live during their early adulthood. Within each place, we understand there are diverse circumstances related to social inequalities, and health and wellbeing that mediate exactly how where young people live affects whether or not they can access volunteering opportunities.

The Rapid Evidence Review that opens this report seeks to draw on but not replicate this work. Our final report aims to make a distinctive contribution to knowledge by engaging challenges identified in previous research, which persistently limit the appeal and scale of youth volunteering. We have adopted innovative evidence-led *and* policy-orientated approaches, founded in a belief that youth volunteering can create positive social

change in communities that benefits all of society, while helping address some of the UK’s biggest social problems.

We have adopted an innovative mixed-methods, seven-stage research design, underpinned by Participatory Action Research (PAR), to ensure our research was inquiry-based, collaborative, youth-centred, innovative, comprehensive, and transformative in that it sought to make original contributions to knowledge, and inform future policymaking and practices. Youth-centred approaches have sought to better understand how young people conceive volunteering, their motivations and expectations, and how personal circumstances might impede their participation at different points in their transitions from childhood to early adulthood.

The findings from our research have highlighted three interconnected cross-cutting themes, which we explore across different age cohorts from childhood to early adulthood:

- Establishing a common language for youth volunteering that reflects its hybrid, changing and adaptive nature.
- Supporting volunteer literacy for all young people so they can understand, navigate, and participate in the increasingly complex volunteering ecosystem.
- Enhancing youth-centred pathways in the Volunteering Journey to grow the youth volunteer base, recognising the background and circumstances of each young person is critical in influencing attitudes to and frequency of volunteering.

In addition, findings reveal two key dimensions that present an opportunity and a possible barrier to realising a stronger volunteering journey. These are:

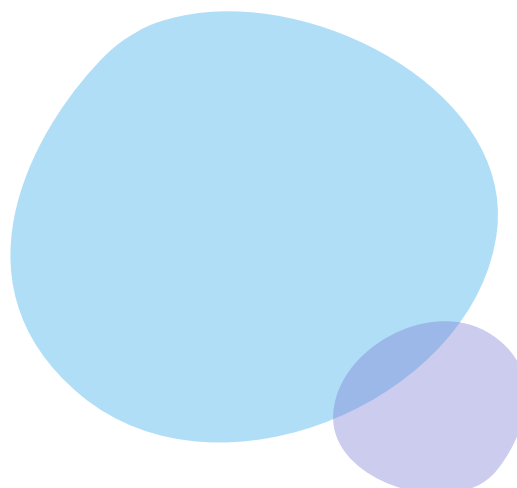
- The potential of local communities and of 'community service' as an entry point, as a site of sustained volunteering, and as a support system for youth volunteering.
- The barrier presented by the experience of mental health challenges for this generation, particularly in early adulthood (those aged 18 to 24).

At present, the multitude of volunteering programmes, initiatives, and schemes available to young people are often impactful, but they lack sufficient thematic or structural integration. This means the 'Volunteering Journey' for many can prove fragmented and disjointed. Mapping programmes and interventions along the trajectory of young people's volunteering journeys could help national and local government and other funding stakeholders better identify the strategic resourcing and impactful distribution of resources through transitions to adulthood.

Adopting a volunteering journey approach also raises the potential to identify and connect strategic intervention points where funding might have the greatest impact, including making the most of funding mechanisms such as match funding. This would help address concerns about the need to amplify the quality and impact of youth work by better coordination and intentional spending across government (APPG on Youth Affairs (2021)). Encouraging a systemic approach to the mapping of existing and potential interventions could ensure that every young person is offered a minimum level of support and opportunities to volunteer – regardless of where they live or their background – and feel supported and empowered to become the active citizens of today *and* tomorrow.



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The Volunteering Journey project research methodologies

The Volunteering Journey project team adopted an innovative mixed-methods, seven-stage design underpinned by Participatory Action Research (PAR) to ensure our research was inquiry-based, collaborative, youth-centred, innovative, comprehensive, and transformative in that it sought to make original contributions knowledge and inform future policymaking and practices.

Young people were embedded as co-researchers, influencing and shaping all stages of the research design, data-collection and analysis throughout the project. The involvement of researchers from diverse backgrounds encouraged an iterative, emergent series of research activities. The integration of mixed methods at multiple points in the research process through data collection and analysis facilitated the iterative development of the study.

The seven research stages were:

1. Rapid evidence review

An integrative approach was adopted to assess, critique, and synthesise existing peer-reviewed academic literature as well as government, civil society, and practitioner reports and evaluation outputs on youth volunteering to enable new perspectives to emerge. A rapid review of existing evidence was undertaken to identify gaps and opportunities in the volunteering ecosystem, and to examine the potential efficacy of interventions. The evidence review sought to frame and refine research questions in subsequent stages of the project, while also identifying gaps or weak areas in the literature. Forward and backward 'snowball' sampling techniques were adopted, utilising a range of online search engines, with over 150 research articles and reports reviewed to provide context and develop the thematic foundations of the project (though only research cited has been included in the bibliography).

2. Stakeholder workshops

Two facilitated online workshops were held, engaging with over 20 key stakeholders from the volunteering ecosystem. The first workshop, held on 8 December 2021, focused on defining the lines of enquiry for the evidence review and subsequent research phases. Participants were invited to share their learning and insights about what volunteering is, who volunteers, where, why, and how they find out about volunteering opportunities. A provocation paper was shared with participants ahead of the session, posing questions about volunteering patterns during the pandemic and what they indicate about how young people may want to volunteer generally. On 8 March 2022, a second stakeholder workshop was held online, focusing on the findings emerging from the project research and challenges for the sector in supporting 'Volunteering Journeys' for all young people, and to identify where volunteering provision could be adapted or changed.

3. Youth volunteering and social action survey

Working with our Youth Advisory Board and YouGov, we surveyed 2,514 young people aged 16 to 30 across the UK, including a boosted sample of 505 from regions targeted by the UK government for 'levelling up'. Our Youth Advisory Board took part in facilitated co-production workshops with researchers from the Institute for Community Studies to develop a series of questions as part of the quantitative survey.

4. Data re-analysis and regressions

We undertook extensive re-analysis of four large-scale social surveys to better understand the factors associated with various aspects of youth volunteering, social action, and civic engagement:

- In the Taking Part Survey - an England-wide survey designed to estimate the number of people taking part in leisure, cultural and sporting activities – data was collected from a nationally representative cross-sectional sample of adults (aged over 16), youths (aged 11 to 15) and children (aged 5 to 10). The datasets available divide respondents into five-year age bands, and two samples were available for analysis: 16- to 19-year-olds and 20- to 24-year-olds (children under 16 are not asked about their voluntary activity).
- The Community Life Survey is an England-wide survey that provides Official Statistics on issues that are key to encouraging social action and empowering communities, including volunteering, charitable giving, community engagement, wellbeing and loneliness. Like the Taking Part Survey, the safeguarded datasets available on the UK Data Archive group respondents into five-year age bands, and so two samples were available: 16- to 19-year-olds and 20- to 24-year-olds. However, unlike the Taking Part Survey, the Community Life Survey divides volunteering into ‘formal volunteering’ and ‘informal help’.
- The Understanding Society Survey is a UK-wide longitudinal household panel study. Questions about voluntary or community work are asked every other year and the size of the survey means that data are available for individual age points. However, the Understanding Society Survey does not divide volunteering into ‘formal volunteering’ and ‘informal help’.
- The National Youth Social Action Survey is a UK-wide survey focussed on young people aged 10 to 20, exploring the types of voluntary activity they become involved in, their routes into volunteering, the benefits to young volunteers and those their activities impacted upon.

The core method in each case was to combine multiple annual survey waves to create large enough datasets to draw robust inferences about

young people aged 10 to 24. While the four surveys examine the type and/or frequency of volunteering, the definitions, variables and parameters of volunteering vary. This noted, the findings from the re-analysis of four large-scale data sets provide the macro trends and results about the way place mediates youth volunteering opportunity, aspiration, and participation. In particular, a re-analysis was conducted to unearth new insights about where and when young people are volunteering. This was identified as an evidence gap, especially at the level of ONS regions or Government Office Regions. The Taking Part Survey, Community Life Survey, Understanding Society Survey, and National Youth Social Action Survey are safeguarded datasets available on the UK Data Archive.

5. Peer interviews



Some 30 peer researchers were trained by the Volunteering Journey project team, who then undertook two co-design sessions to create the interview script, focusing on what felt most important

to them about volunteering, and building on their diverse experiences to shape questions tailored for other young people. Our peer researchers undertook 81 semi-structured interviews with young people from diverse backgrounds and places across the UK, delving into the role of volunteering in the lives of 16– to 30-year-olds, and their changing relationships with volunteering throughout their lives. Two co-analysis sessions were conducted with the peer researchers, which employed qualitative thematic analysis to co-create a coding framework, enabling young people to take an active part in sense-making and analysis of the data, while maintaining quality assurance by the Volunteering Journey research team. This was then used to code the data to identify key themes, as well as key challenges and opportunities, and shape the final outputs.

6. Digital qualitative research

To better understand the Volunteering Journey, we adopted innovative peer research approaches to better understand the lived experience of a diverse range of young people. We generated insightful, rich stories from young people, utilising a digital autobiographical arts-based mapping methodology called River of Life (Participedia, 2020; Denov & Shevell, 2021). This is an exercise where participants use digitally visual and interactive prompts to articulate how, when, through what mediums, and how far volunteering has impacted

on their social, education and employment pathways – and what positive and negative associations and relationships volunteering experiences have in their life (Freeman, 2007). River of Life is an arts-based visual mapping tool that encourages participants to take the lead in telling their story as they express a narrative through drawing. Alongside their drawings, participants were asked to note captions, explaining key details and emotions at each point. Some 46 young people aged 16 to 30 from across the UK were recruited in February 2022 to complete this phase of the project.

From the age of about 6 or 7 I occasionally joined family on local environmental/wildlife conservation days to clean and maintain the local woodland. These were run by a community group called Friends of Re-disher. I remember feeling excited about these days because of the way we got to meet new people and have some fun along the way, but this was before I could probably understand or articulate what 'community' was

General Election 2010 was the first time I felt politically engaged (aged 13) as did my peers, possibly due to the rise of social media at this time – I vividly remember watching all the TV debates and discussing key issues with my friends, enjoying the feeling of being informed and engaged with something bigger, but frustrated it was a long time before I would be able to vote

Was given funding by my local Rotary Club to attend the Na-tional Youth Theatre and to say thank you, I then volun-teered to sing at their Christmas functions. Felt a great sense of belonging to a local community through this experience of giving back and having mutual support, whilst still doing something I enjoyed.

I experienced long-term illness during childhood/early adolescence and was mostly home schooled as a result. This sometimes made me feel a bit sheltered from the wider community. Although I found other ways to engage I felt particularly cut off from opportunities such as NCS and Duke of Edinburgh Awards, which simply weren't an op-tion for someone outside of the system and una-ble to participate in lots of the activities.

Attended a local performing arts school – Ros-sendale Dance & Drama Centre - from the ages of 11-21 and participated in lots of fund-raising days over the years (Children in Need, Comic Relief, a Zumba marathon for the chari-ty Sands, annual Tap-athon etc)

As a child I got involved with annual global fundraising appeals via children's TV shows such as Blue Peter and this really opened my eyes to the importance of giving and helping others

As a result of my illness I fundraised actively every year for Asthma UK and joined their Youth Forum when I was about 12. I also set up a local petition for free prescription charges in England and gath-ered nearly 50 signatures from friends and family. It felt like I was taking action on something I cared about. However, it was frustrating to feel like my petition didn't really achieve anything and wasn't listened to.

Whilst still attending as a student, I volunteered from the age of 16-21 as a Teaching Assistant, helping to run the school's junior classes in drama and musical theatre. It felt great to be doing something I enjoyed, building useful experience for the future and giving something back to a group that had supported me and given me such a great experience. Many years later this also helped me to secure a job as a performing arts teacher.

Voted for the first time! (2015–aged 18)

An example of a completed digital River of Life exercise with accompanying narrative text explaining choice of symbols and the meaning attributed to them by the young person.

7. Participatory workshops

Throughout February 2022, a series of participatory workshops were carried out in eight rural and urban locations across the country to investigate the attitudes of young people aged 11 to 15 towards volunteering. The workshops engaged a total of 330 individuals aged 11 to 15 and 30 individuals aged 16 to 18 with complex needs. The core activity of the workshop was

a participatory activity, combining visual and storytelling elements. Young people were asked to design the “ideal volunteering experience” and create an advert for it. They had the option of creating an advert in visual format (eg a poster or flyer), audio format (eg a radio advert or skit) or combined visual and audio (eg acting or videos), while narrating the reasons behind their choices, and the definitions, incentives and sense of impact they felt this would achieve.



Rapid evidence review: shaping the Volunteering Journey

We undertook a rapid review of existing evidence to develop our understanding of the current 'Volunteering Journey' available to and experienced by young people. As noted in the introduction to this report, this evidence review helped identify three core themes, which have shaped our research methodologies and project conclusions:

Theme 1 - Establishing a common language for youth volunteering

Youth volunteering is widely understood as any activity that involves young people freely giving time to help a cause, group, or community. This is often planned rather than spontaneous, usually unpaid, and altruistic in that those who benefit tend to not be related to the volunteer. Formal volunteering occurs within structured, organisational environments, whereas informal (or semi-formal) volunteering involves activities supporting friends, neighbours, and communities independently from a third-party organisation (Buckingham, 2012). The relationship between formal and informal volunteering is complex and fluid in terms of how different activities are categorised and how they intersect.

Definitions of what is – or what is not - volunteering are also somewhat ambiguous, disputed, and liable to change over time (Paine et al., 2010, 10). Changes in government can have a significant impact in terms of the framing and development of youth volunteering. For example, during Labour's last period in office, youth volunteering was initially connected with 'civil renewal' through the encouragement of active citizenship (Jochum et al., 2005), but increasingly focused on concerns about strengthening communities and British identity (Milner, 2008). Since 2010, Conservative-led governments have sought to encourage youth social action, which is understood to differ from volunteering in that it is youth-led, challenging, socially impactful, progressive, and activist in nature (Ockenden et al., 2013, 6), driven by the notion of self- and community efficacy (Spencer and Lucas, 2018, 10).

How youth social action differs from volunteering has proven to be according to the form and cost of participation, and to its outcomes and benefits to young people and society (Centre for Youth Impact, 2019a). Advocates note that youth social action involves activities that are not typically associated with volunteering (Birdwell et al., 2013, 3). Critics argue young people appear to be compelled to engage in 'directed' volunteering as part of their education as they grow up to 'get on in life' in ways that compromise altruistic motivations and diminish their enjoyment of the volunteer experience (Holdsworth and Brewis, 2014, 205). Other criticisms have centred on promotion of 'public service volunteering' whereby young people are encouraged to volunteer in response to reductions in government spending (Buddery, 2015, 10).

The focus of youth social action on campaigning and activism indicates a merging of 'volunteerism and political participation' (Marzana et al., 2012, 497), highlighting its potential politicisation (Amnå, 2012, 613) and divisiveness for young people in intentions and outcomes (Centre for Youth Impact, 2021a). The ambiguous and porous boundaries between social and political participation have led some to distinguish between youth social action, blending campaigning, volunteering and service to others, and youth social change, whereby young people seek to challenge power and disrupt contemporary socio-economic conditions that cause injustice and inequality (Simpson et al., 2020, 14).

Evidence indicates that some actors within the youth sector – and young people themselves – are uncertain as to what youth social action is and how it differs from volunteering in England (Centre for Youth Impact, 2021b). Divergence of language, policy, provision, and evaluation of volunteering in different parts of the UK have also been observed (Davies, 2017; McGarvey et al., 2021). The APPG on Youth Affairs (2021) recently noted that this has had implications in terms of shaping and realising shared outcomes for youth volunteering that reach across all levels of government across the UK.

This situation has also impacted on the potential to develop evidenced-based approaches to policymaking and practice, particularly in terms of building longitudinal data. Our re-analyses of the four large-scale social surveys indicate there is some annual aggregation of longitudinal data of youth volunteering as part of a wider survey of community participation. They are diverse in their research design (particularly how they define volunteering), methodologies, and evaluation of data, and often overlook those under the age of 16. Furthermore, the data collected in large-scale social surveys for volunteering do not map consistently on findings from evaluations of individual youth volunteering programmes. There remains a paucity of evidence about 'what works' beyond short term measures, encouraging circular arguments about levels of funding and evidence of long term impact (APPG on Youth Affairs, 2021).

This situation raises significant questions about the validity of many conclusions about the benefits of youth volunteering and social action (Fox, 2019, 5). Current approaches to capturing and evaluating participation are often focused on self-reporting, meaning young people focus on formal volunteering and underestimate informal volunteer action. The extent to which youth volunteering is 'meaningful' is often framed by frequency of activity and/or its reported effects on the attitudes and potential future behaviours of young volunteers. These measurements are helpful but often overlook how volunteering might positively contribute to or change society or the organisations they volunteer with. This can encourage young people to view volunteering in individualistic and instrumental terms (Dean, 2014), limiting the potential for them, the communities they live in, and institutions they volunteer with to fully recognise the value of their contributions.

However, there is agreement in government, the youth work sector, and academia of the need to invest in longitudinal cohort-based studies of youth volunteering to enhance policymaking and improve outcomes for young people (see, for example, UK Gov, 2022; McGarvey et al., 2021, Williams, 2018; Arthur et al, 2017, 34). It is important that such work seeks to capture the impact and value of both formal and informal voluntary action and involves young people as part of the research process as active, empowered partners and not subjects peer-led research to capture their daily experiences across all public and private spheres, including the digital world (Amnå, 2012, 623).

New approaches to measurement and evaluation must capture the shifting and adaptive nature of youth volunteering, rather than attempting to categorise or distinguish what is and isn't volunteering. Although overall levels of youth volunteering have remained largely stable over the past 20 years, trends in formal and informal youth volunteering have fluctuated over the same period (see, for example, Rochester, 2006; Lim and Laurence, 2015). Interestingly, recent research indicates that levels of formal volunteering fell during the Covid-19 pandemic, while informal volunteering rose to a record high (DCMS, 2021). A shift towards younger volunteers was also observed during the pandemic due to the need for them to take on roles that older, clinically vulnerable people were previously performing (Norrlander et al., 2021). Interestingly, forms of youth volunteering changed during different phases of the pandemic. During periods of lockdown, young people adopted largely informal modes, followed by a return to more formal volunteering during periods where they were allowed more freedom.



This indicates that young people engage in adaptive forms of volunteering, which are fluid, in response to changing circumstances as they grow up (Natale, 2021). While formal volunteering remains at the base of youth activity, particularly in building the skills and structures needed by young people to volunteer, pathways into volunteering reflect different levels of formality (McGarvey et al., 2019, 83). 'People-powered' volunteering is often supported but not led by volunteering organisations, indicating a shift to a more 'bottom up' approach whereby informal volunteering leads to more formal activities. It also reflects that the binary of volunteer-beneficiary proved more fluid during the pandemic for many, with roles shifting as people became infected with Covid-19.

Young people are also increasingly fluid in how they volunteer (McGarvey et al., 2019, 31). Many young people are prepared to commit to a sustained relationship with an organisation, which provides support and opportunities for them to volunteer, at certain points as they grow up. However, there has been a growth in episodic volunteering, which allows young people to get involved on a more ad-hoc basis, offering more flexibility in where, who with, and how they volunteer. Volunteering is thus adaptive to the life circumstances of young people, particularly during periods where they have examinations, employment commitments, or when their interest and engagement with a particular issue resonates strongly.

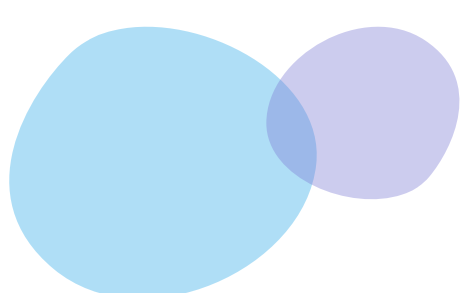
The Covid-19 pandemic also highlighted a growing hybridity in youth volunteering. Digital volunteering enhanced accessibility and inclusion, enabling the participation of young people who may be geographically isolated or have limited mobility (McGarvey et al., 2019, 84). It has also allowed some young people to volunteer in multiple ways within an organisation or group and/or with more than one at the same time. Evidence suggests digital volunteering has increased the agency

of some young people, particularly those less reliant on formal structures and who can self-organise through digital channels. It has also led to innovations in volunteering both in terms of its structure and form. Online volunteering is especially relevant to young people, who often present high levels of digital literacy, and it can reduce racial and ethnic discrimination that may be faced in an embodied setting (Seddighi and Salmani, 2018).

Nonetheless, there is a risk of leaving behind young people who have lower digital literacy skills or reduced access to the internet, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Concerns have also been raised regarding the potential limitations in the benefits of face-to-face volunteering when it is transferred online, such as creating new social ties and gaining satisfaction from seeing the impact of their actions. Indeed, online volunteering has been identified as being less engaging or satisfying than embodied volunteering opportunities for some (Ackermann and Manatschal, 2018).



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Theme 2 - Supporting volunteer literacy for all young people

The socialisation of young volunteers, to empower them to volunteer, is a critical element shaping their Volunteering Journeys. Volunteer literacy has, however, often proven peripheral in policy and analysis of youth citizenship, particularly when compared to the role of political literacy to support democratic participation. Evidence suggests this oversight has significant implications.

Many young people report they lack appropriate opportunities to acquire the requisite knowledge, skills, and experiences to successfully navigate an increasingly complex volunteering landscape, and to source and take up opportunities to volunteer.

Volunteer literacy should ensure all young people, through classroom-based and experiential learning, understand the terminology and can acquire the requisite skills to undertake volunteer action. It should set expectations about volunteering activities and enable young people to verbalise how, when, and where they would like to volunteer. Volunteer literacy should also ensure that young people learn how to locate and undertake volunteer action in their schools, communities, and online - and be able to transition from initial participation to a life-long volunteering journey. Lack of information about volunteering can be a 'social barrier' for young people but navigating the complex ecosystem of opportunities can overwhelm even those keen to volunteer (Davies, 2017, p. 43). Finally, volunteer literacy should raise awareness of the connections between volunteering and other aspects of active citizenship, particularly democratic engagement and participation, while also realising the value of volunteer action to enhance educational, employability, and health and wellbeing pathways.

Research indicates that policymakers, teachers, youth work practitioners, volunteering organisations and young people all consider schools and colleges the most important location in which to learn about and undertake volunteering (Centre for Youth Impact, 2019b; #iwill, 2019; Brodie et al, 2011, 29). School-based citizenship education, community service programmes or national schemes (such as The Duke of Edinburgh's Award) are identified as common points of entry to participation (Alma Economics, 2021, 10). Attending a school that promotes volunteering or has 'civic-mindedness'

as part of its identity is proven to enhance pupils' chances of volunteering (Ballard et al., 2015; Dean, 2016). Importantly, schools provide a significant compensatory effect in terms of encouraging volunteering for young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds where family-based social capital and activism is often lower (Hogg and De Vries, 2018).

The impact of participating in education-based volunteer action is proven to significantly help develop understanding of the context, purpose, and outcomes of volunteering, and to developing a sense of empowerment, belonging, and community (Torres-Harding et al., 2018). Schools are also an important factor in facilitating relationships between young people and volunteering organisations that extend beyond the formal period of education (British Youth Council, 2009). Young people's experiences at school can have a lasting impact on attitudes and behaviours with regards to volunteering into early adulthood and beyond (Davies, 2017, 45; Fox, 2019), while also enhancing personal, skills and task-based competencies to support their educational progression and transitions to employment (Ellis Paine et al., 2013; NCVO, 2013; Kirkman et al., 2015; Williams, 2017, Hoskins et al., 2020).

This noted, inequalities in opportunities to learn about and take part in volunteering exist across all levels of education (Tejani and Breeze, 2021). Citizenship education in primary schools is not statutory, and less than a quarter (23%) offer volunteering opportunities to their pupils (Department for Education, 2019, 13). Volunteering at this age typically focuses on fundraising activities, meaning it is framed as transactional but rarely educates or critically engages children in the reasons behind their voluntary action or the political or social causes or issues of charities involved (Body et al., 2017).

Support for young people to develop their volunteer literacy during their secondary education is more substantial, and many report their first experiences during this period of their transitions to adulthood (Owens, 2015). Volunteer literacy is provided as a subject component, during 'in-house' volunteering, and by extending the curriculum through working with external partners (Ofsted, 2011). Classroom-based teaching is often delivered through *Citizenship*, a statutory subject in the National Curriculum since 2002, where young people are encouraged to volunteer by acquiring the 'knowledge, skills and understanding to prepare them to play a full and active part in society' (Department for Education, 2013, 1). *Citizenship* continues to suffer from a lack of timetable space, resources, status within the curriculum, a lack of trained teachers, and political support for the subject (Weinberg et al., 2021). Moreover, 'academy' schools and colleges in England are not compelled to teach *Citizenship* or offer its GCSE, and volunteering – if taught at all – is now delivered via a range of subjects including Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE), Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural (SMSC) development, or Relationships and Sex Education (RSE).

The lack of equal opportunities to develop volunteer literacy has seen a 'participation gap' emerge, particularly where young people's relationships with schools are challenged by poor academic performance and external social circumstances (Davies, 2017, 45). Disparities have also been identified in extra-curricular volunteering provision whereby some secondary schools, particularly those in deprived areas, lack appropriate resources, capacity, institutional support, and connections with external providers (Alma Economics 2021; #iWill, 2021). Young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to participate in school-based volunteering when encouraging participation is left to external organisations and formal groups (Hogg and Vries, 2018). Place-based disparities in opportunities to volunteer also exist, with schools and colleges in rural communities facing challenges in encouraging meaningful participation that builds a sense of connection and belonging to community (National Youth Agency, 2021, 8).

Overall, how schools and colleges support and deliver volunteer literacy is often not embedded in everyday school life due to a lack of connected, integrated provision between classroom-based volunteer literacy, 'in house' volunteering, and



opportunities provided by external providers. According to the latest pre-Covid data on secondary schools, only three-quarters (74%) provide volunteering opportunities for their students (Department for Education, 2019, 13), with the most disadvantaged schools offering fewest opportunities (Sutton Trust, 2017). Furthermore, there is a significant decline in opportunities to participate during Key Stage 4 as schools and young people focus on examinations and educational progression (Hogg and Vries, 2018).

Youth-focused and other civil society organisations, regional youth work units, and local authorities, as well as programmes such as National Citizen Service and The Duke of Edinburgh's Award, also offer valuable volunteer literacy programmes delivered outside formal education settings. These typically focus on experiential learning but can also involve the delivery of structured resources and instruction to support young volunteers. National and local youth representation organisations also offer peer-to-peer initiatives where young people share and develop knowledge of volunteering. The connectivity between such interventions is limited though, as is the availability and reach of non-school based volunteer and youth social action programmes (#iwill, 2019; APPG on Youth Affairs, 2021). A 'postcode lottery' therefore exists whereby the potential for young people to develop their volunteer literacy is strongly influenced by where they go to school and the places they live.

Volunteering opportunities are typically provided on an ad-hoc and inconsistent basis in further education institutions too. is not a statutory subject for further education, meaning the numbers taking the subject are small and often not extended to vocational courses. While research suggests that many young people (57%) report they volunteer, this is principally to develop skills and enhance employability (Owens, 2015). Inequalities in quality and provision of volunteer opportunities are related to a lack of resources, trained staff, and curriculum capacity. Participation in volunteering programmes undertaken during secondary education are often not maintained and developed for young people who move to a new college. Similarly, non-school volunteering programmes such National Citizen Service have limited follow-on pathways into further (and higher) education (Mills and Waite, 2017).

Those who had been through higher education also report mixed experiences in terms of volunteering. For some, going to university provides significant opportunities to volunteer because of access to course-based activities in some subjects (including work placements) and via their Students' Unions. Activities such as volunteering have been evidenced to improve student performance and outcomes, particularly for those with a predisposition for lower achievement (Kerrigan and Manktelow, 2021) and employability (Barton et al., 2017). Evidence suggests though that institutional support for and delivery of volunteering is 'patchy' across the sector, with a lack of trained lecturers and support services to develop volunteer literacy and help identify opportunities to participate. This means that many students who were not volunteering in secondary or further education, and some who were active but whose studies and socialising take precedence over formal participatory activities, do not volunteer during their degrees (Brodie et al., 2011, 29). Going to university can thus either develop or disrupt young people's Volunteering Journey (Arthur et al, 2017).

Young people who study at university are more likely to volunteer than those in full-time employment (McGarvey et al., 2019). For those who do not go to university, participation is typically promoted in the workplace through Employee Supported Volunteering (ESV) or corporate volunteering programmes across the public, third, and private sectors (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2013; Improvement Service, 2018). Employees can also volunteer through membership of trade unions

and other representative organisations, helping them function, campaign, recruit members, and raise funds. Volunteering is seen to add value to both employees and the organisations they work in, enhancing productivity, skills, self-esteem, and wellbeing at work (Percy and Rogers, 2021; Latter and Rippon, 2021). There is, however, limited evidence that it develops volunteer literacy in a coherent, structured and critical manner (Percy and Rogers, 2021, 3).

There have been calls to enhance support for businesses and young people in work to volunteer (see, for example, Morgan Inquiry, 2008; ACEVO, 2012; McGarvey et al., 2019). But there are challenges for young people, particularly those working long and/or irregular hours, on precarious or fixed-term contracts, or who commute long distances (Donahue et al., 2020; Mantovan et al., 2021). For many young people who have left home and have other responsibilities, volunteering is particularly difficult as they often lack the financial resilience to take unpaid leave for ESV programmes. Volunteering for young employees is not typically accredited in terms of rewards or promotion, or acknowledged in human resources or personal development programmes. As such, volunteering is typically framed as helping the young gain employment, rather than progress once a job has been secured.

Job satisfaction, security, and rates of pay thus play an important role in motivating employees to volunteer, with happy and more financially secure workers more likely to participate (Lup and Booth, 2018). While successive governments have supported the formalisation of ESV by encouraging businesses to allocate paid time for employees to volunteer, thus far, no legislation has been passed (McGarvey et al., 2019, 7). Work-based support for transitions to further volunteering is also limited, if provided at all. The 'double burden' of work and homelife (including caring responsibilities) is also seen to impact the willingness of some young volunteers, particularly young women, to volunteer (DCMS, 2020; Downward et al., 2020). This may well explain a decline in formal volunteering for those aged 25 to 34 when compared to the younger 16- 24-year-old cohort, and an increase in informal volunteering.

Theme 3 - Enhancing youth-centred pathways in the Volunteering Journey

Recent research suggests that just over half of young people in England volunteer, with just over a third regularly participating (Bratsa et al., 2020). Rates of engagement in youth voluntary activity vary by race, ethnicity, gender, age, region, education, and family, income levels. Young volunteers are more likely to be girls than boys, to be white, and from affluent social backgrounds; and furthermore to be young people who have access to significant resources such as connections to organisations, networks, education or employment opportunities. Those who chose to volunteer are more likely to have higher levels of existing social capital – in this instance, strong networks and diverse relationships through which to gain opportunities, skills and influence - and were likely to generate more social capital because of their volunteering and thus maintain or increase disparities (Fox, 2019, 3). Young people with high levels of social capital, evidenced through parental activism and religious or community affiliation, are particularly likely to volunteer (Bennett and Parameshwaran, 2013). The profile of young volunteers can change depending on the type of programme evaluated. For example, National Citizen Service typically attracts an over-representation of young people from minority ethnic backgrounds (Kantar, 2020). The type of volunteering can also have an impact, with sport-based volunteering more appealing to young men whereas arts volunteering appeals more young women (D’Souza et al., 2011).

The principal enablers of volunteering in sourcing and supporting participation are young people’s families, friends and peer networks, and their places of education and/or employment (see, for

example, Russell, 2005; Brown et al., 2014; UK Youth, 2019, McGarvey et al., 2021). Proposals to further grow the youth volunteer base have often focused on enhancing the process of volunteering, including using youth-friendly language, improving the messaging about volunteering, making it easier to sign-up, and ensuring opportunities are close to where young people live. Some argue there is a need to increase the capacity of young people to volunteer, creating time for volunteering by ensuring it fits in with school, work, and family life (Commission on the Future of Volunteering, 2008). The experience of volunteering is also seen as important, in terms of its value and benefits to young people, while ensuring it is seen as fun and enhances their social networks and capital (Birdwell et al., 2015).

While families can positively influence, motivate, and enable young people to volunteer, their socio-economic status, structures, and functioning in terms of happiness or distress can impact on pathways to volunteering (Stuart et al., 2020). Impactful peer networks can also reproduce inequalities based on place, social capital, deprivation, and resources (Donahue, 2020). Pathways to volunteering at all stages of young people’s transitions to adulthood are strongly shaped by the density or absence of opportunities and support from youth organisations and educational institutions, access to relevant information, and young peoples’ spatial mobility (Davies, 2018).



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Youth transitions to adulthood are shaped and influenced by experiences that can inform their individual and collective pathways to volunteering. The challenge is to develop understanding of how these pathways are understood and experienced, and in what ways they can be thematically and chronologically mapped, inter-connected and realised to inform current and future policymaking and practice. Policymakers and other stakeholders have, over the past two decades, displayed an awareness of the challenges of developing systemic approaches to scheduling and providing opportunities to volunteer during transitions to adulthood (see, for example, Russell Commission, 2005; Youth Citizenship Commission, 2009; Cleverdon and Jordan, 2012; Arthur et al., 2017; House of Lords, 2018; Sport England, 2021). As noted, aspirations to enhance support and opportunities for volunteering have yet to evolve into clearly defined and integrated pathways that reflect the diversity of circumstances, experiences, and interests of young people.

How opportunities integrate can have a profound effect on the structure, coherence, and impacts of pathways supporting volunteering. These impacts are often understood in cognitive terms, with children and young people acquiring the appropriate knowledge, skills, and behaviours for lifelong active citizenship incrementally. This noted, opportunities to volunteer are strongly influenced by the extent of provision by a range of providers in different parts of the country, educational institutions, national and local government, volunteering charities and organisations, community groups, online, and within peer and family networks (McGarvey et al., 2019). Volunteering programmes also tend to target people within specified age brackets, commonly 11 to 18, 14 to 21, 16 to 24, and 18 to 30. This establishes age limitations, which restrict engagement across age cohorts and educational stages.

This means that although children and young people may undertake volunteering at certain points as they grow up, this is rarely sustained. The impact of the various transition points which they experience as they grow up (including educational, social, familial, legal etc) can affect and impair their pathways to volunteering significantly. For example, levels of volunteering decline after key transitions from secondary school to further education, and after age 18 (#iwill/IPSOS Mori, 2018). How the entry, exit and transition points to both formal and informal volunteering are – or are not - signposted and navigated can strongly influence participation and non-participation, particularly for those less certain about volunteering (Williams, 2017, 16).

At present, most volunteering policymaking, funding, and provision focuses on the secondary stage of formal education, and the transition period after GCSE exams. Research indicates, however, that those who first get involved in volunteering and other forms of youth social action aged under 10 have been found to be more than two times more likely to have formed a 'volunteer habit' than if they started in during secondary or further education (Arthur et al. 2017, 5). This has led calls to expand opportunities to volunteer for younger ages through primary schools and youth groups (particularly within school curriculum), and integrate programmes with secondary schools (Brown et al., 2014).

Williams (2017, 18) notes that there is also a need to consider how support might be improved for young people before, during, and after they have first volunteered and as they continue to participate. Understanding how volunteering fits into the flow of the academic year, focusing on periods where young people feel they have capacity to engage and participate, is important. As with older volunteers, levels of volunteering undertaken vary over time as young people grow up (Spencer and Lucas, 2018, 31), due to changes in the periods of time available to volunteer (Ellis Paine et al., 2010). This can have an impact on the type of volunteering and its intensity at different periods of the year and ages. To help this approach, young people should be provided opportunities to learn how to reflect on their journeys, and be able to record, evaluate and feedback on their progress (UK Youth, 2019, 11).

Young people's volunteering journeys fragment significantly in the post-GCSE period of formal education, and when the statutory period of education comes to an end. While there are important opportunities to participate in programmes such as National Citizen Service or The Duke of Edinburgh's Award, alumni networks, and opportunities to keep volunteering, are often limited (Mills and Waite, 2017). Opportunities to volunteer can thus be impactful in the short term but have a 'sheep dip' effect that limits their legacy over time. Moreover, the absence of consistent support for young people to volunteer as they continue their further and higher education means that those who have high levels of social capital and are experienced volunteers are considerably more likely to continue to volunteer. Of more concern, there is an absence of pathways to support volunteering among those young people who do not go to university (Percy and Martin, 2021).

The role of young people in shaping pathways to volunteering have also been recognised as a critical driver of volunteer engagement and participation. 'Youth-led' approaches have become increasingly common in schools and across youth work sectors, providing young people with an active role in the design, delivery, and evaluation of formal volunteer programmes (Brown et al., 2014). Youth-led programmes can have considerable positive personal benefits and are also important in mobilising and connecting young people to address personal or social issues that shape their lives, effect positive change, and enhance the possibility of future volunteering (Kahn et al., 2009; Ockenden and Stuart, 2014). Youth-led approaches can, however, prove challenging for some young people, especially those who are less confident and/or lack understanding and prior experience of volunteering. For those who feel they lack the capacity or resources to volunteer, the demands and pressures of leadership can be seen to be too much responsibility. Indeed, some might be put off by youth-led volunteering, meaning predominantly those who are already active and possess high-levels of volunteer literacy and social capital adopt leadership roles. Youth-led approaches must therefore be underpinned with appropriate practical and emotional support (Birdwell et al., 2013, p. 5).

The motivations of young people who volunteer, and the triggers that facilitate participation, are complex, varied, and inextricably linked to their individual and collective circumstances as they grow up. Youth volunteering is also driven by, and influential in, enhancing young people's identities and values, while also shaping a sense of belonging, community, pride, and 'pro-social' attitudes for future volunteering (Crocetti et al., 2012). For example, a growing number of young volunteers report being motivated to participate in response to reductions in public services, particularly in their communities, the perceived need to support the NHS, and rises in visible homelessness (Davis-Smith et al., 2019, 15).

The influence of family in motivating young people to volunteer is often seen as critical (Bennett and Parameshwaran, 2013), as are a range of actors outside of the family home, including teachers, sports coaches, and volunteers in uniformed and non-uniformed youth organisations (Bradford et al., 2016). This is particularly important for young people who do not receive support from parents or family members, as volunteering provides opportunities for positive contact with teachers, youth workers and other adult mentors (Davies, 2018).



When asked, most young people report that they view volunteering in positive terms, and express altruistic views about participation in their communities. This does not necessarily translate into regular volunteering though. Furthermore, about one-quarter of young people consistently say they are not interested in volunteering (Bratsa et al., 2020), with many unable to see any reasons why they should (Commission on the Future of Volunteering, 2008). Youth volunteering still appears to be largely the preserve of a 'civic core' of young people, who are likely to live in more affluent parts of the country and have similar characteristics, and this 'core' are often formally recognised as responsible for a large percentage of voluntary action, charitable giving, and civic participation in the country (Mohan and Bulloch, 2012; Dean, 2016, 95).

Young people frequently note they lack sufficient time, access to information, awareness, and confidence to volunteer (see, for example, Rochester et al., 2010; Ockenden and Stuart, 2014; Davies, 2017, Alma Economics, 2021). Negative peer pressure is also important, particularly stereotypes that volunteers are 'do-gooders' and volunteering is 'boring'. The term 'volunteering' has itself been identified as problematic, as it is seen as 'exclusive' and difficult to relate to in everyday life; the preserve of older, middle-class people (Gaskin, 2004, 10).

Young people from the poorest backgrounds are the least likely to access structured volunteering opportunities (Holliday, 2018, p. 2), and are five times less likely to volunteer or participate in youth social action (APPG on Youth Affairs, 2021). Those from poorer backgrounds often lack role models at home or in their communities, and view volunteering as an activity where the costs outweigh the benefits, and one that competes with other demands on time such as the need for paid work (Davies, 2017, 44). This noted, young people from poorer backgrounds often participate

outside the formal definitions of volunteering (Tonge et al., 2012, 590). Existing data indicates that informal volunteering plays a larger role in the lives of traditionally excluded or socially discriminated-against groups, such as women, disabled people, people from black and ethnic minority backgrounds, and those who are income poor (Donahue et al., 2020).

Data around the mental health of young volunteers indicates there are potential health and wellbeing benefits associated with volunteering, both in terms of their individual and social development (Lawton et al., 2020). This noted, younger volunteers tend to express more self-oriented reasons for volunteering (McGarvey et al, 2019). Young people with better mental wellbeing are more likely to choose to volunteer (Fox, 2019; Mantovan et al., 2021). Health and wellbeing are thus critical motivating factor for volunteering, creating increased participation for some while limiting opportunities for those young people who struggle with anxiety and depression (NCVO, 2018; Downward et al., 2020).



Summary

This rapid evidence review argues that the 'Volunteering Journey' provides a new way of thinking about youth participation in volunteering, with an emphasis on young people's agency in shaping their own volunteering pathways. There is however a need to acknowledge that the changing face of volunteering had significant implications for volunteers of all ages, meaning shifts in policy and practice have been acutely experienced by young people during their transitions to adulthood. Embracing an adaptive understanding of volunteering that incorporates fluidity and hybridity is essential to ensure it does not quickly become outdated. It is critical that the understanding and experiences of as many young people as possible are considered to develop policies and support frameworks that will help them to make the most of their volunteering experiences, and maximise benefit to society. Furthermore, children and young people must be provided with consistent and substantial opportunities to develop their volunteer literacy to ensure they are equipped to understand, chart, and navigate their individual volunteering journeys.

The adoption of an integrated approach to youth volunteering highlights the importance of initial experiences as catalysers of further participation and providing easy transitions from one opportunity to the next. It also helps identify current 'gaps or traps' where young people may disengage due to the lack of supported transitions.

Adopting a 'Volunteering Journey' approach from childhood to early adulthood offers an opportunity to increase the impact of each volunteering experience and their longitudinal development by better-linking programmes and initiatives with each other, and explicitly thinking about the flows or transitions between them. This requires better planning to encourage integration of the volunteering journey across the full course of transitions to adulthood.

Participation is first and foremost personal and must be viewed from the perspective of the individuals taking part. Stakeholders across the volunteering ecosystem and policymakers must embrace 'youth-centred' approaches, where there is an active acknowledgement of current circumstances, locations, and commitments of each young volunteer, and an appreciation of issues of identity, values, and social responsibility. Such thinking is not new, and 'youth-centred' approaches have been proven to increase involvement in volunteering activities, higher civic efficacy, and build stronger aspirations amongst young people to volunteer (Crocetti et al., 2012).



The Volunteering Journey: the importance of place

Our rapid evidence review highlighted that a sense of place and community matters to young people, underpinning their motivations to volunteer, and strengthening a sense of belonging, inclusion, and cohesion (Ramsey, 2012; Brown et al., 2014). Young people feeling part of their community is seen to enhance wellbeing, including mental health (Miller et al., 2017). Conversely, not feeling part of a community can act as a barrier to volunteering and can contribute to isolation and disengagement (Boulianne and Brailey, 2014). Young people in disadvantaged or geographically isolated communities are more likely to note that they have few or no opportunities to volunteer (Bratsa et al., 2020, 14). Equally, those living in rural areas report they are more likely to volunteer than those living in urban areas (Fox, 2019, 63; National Youth Agency, 2021). While young people strongly relate a sense of place to the education institutions and communities they grow up in, they increasingly also refer to online spaces (#iwill, 2019). This suggests that place and community are complex terms which can be descriptive, normative, and instrumental for young people, but are not static, and can be overlapping, multiple, and contested (Ramsey, 2012).

Our re-analysis of the existing large-scale surveys revealed significant place-based disparities in the uptake of volunteering amongst young people in England – and some inconsistencies in the data due to differing methodologies and research agendas. Regional disparities were evident in the Taking Part survey, with young people living in the south more likely than their counterparts in the north to do voluntary work.[1] The National Youth Social Action survey returned similar findings, with young people in Yorkshire and the Humber, and in the north-east and north-west of England, less likely to be volunteering.

While this generally reflects the so-called ‘north-south divide’, and preconceptions about the south having increased access to opportunities and infrastructure, other regional disparities were also evident. The Taking Part survey shows, for example, 63% of 16– to 19-year-olds living in south-west England undertook voluntary work in the last 12 months, compared to 28% in the north-east. While the National Youth Social Action survey

indicated a much smaller disparity between the north-east and south-west, there was a relatively low number of young people volunteering in the east of England and Greater London, and a relatively high number in the East Midlands.

When comparing urban and rural trends, both the Taking Part and National Youth Social Action surveys indicated young people living in rural places are more likely than their urban counterparts to volunteer across all age groups and frequencies of activity.[2] The Community Life survey paints a similar picture, where 51% of 16– to 19-year-olds in inner cities volunteered formally and informally in the last 12 months, compared to 65% of those not in inner cities.

All surveys identify various place-specific factors that might influence how and why people undertake volunteering. Taking Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) as the measure, which identifies neighbourhoods with relative forms of deprivation across indicators including, amongst others, access to services, economic means and health – both the Taking Part and Community Life surveys show higher levels of volunteering in the least deprived places. The Taking Part survey shows 20% of 16– to 19-year-olds living in IMD1 areas have done voluntary work in the last 12 months, compared to 50% in IMD9 areas and 69% in IMD10 areas. The Community Life survey shows 12% of 20– to 24-year-olds in the 20% most deprived places volunteered formally monthly, compared to 24% of those in the 20% least deprived places. [3] Similarly, the National Youth Social Action survey suggests that young people’s volunteering decreases steadily with each social grade, where 71% of respondents in the most advantaged social grade (A) volunteer, compared to just 45% of young people in the most deprived social grade (E).[4]

While applying these different place framings demonstrates relatively consistent trends across the four surveys, an analysis at the hyperlocal level conducted using a multilevel regression model built by the Institute for Community Studies (see Box 1) highlights some inconsistencies both within the Taking Part survey and across the other datasets. Looking at the predicted levels of volunteering at the hyperlocal level, the model confirms the proposition that the north-south divide matters. Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham (62%, 61.6% and 60.9% respectively),

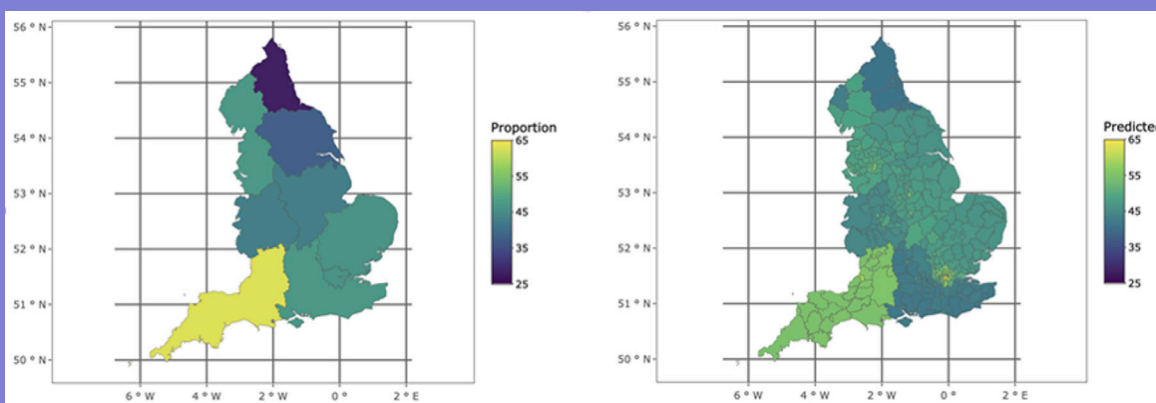
followed by the city of Bristol (59.3%) show the highest levels of predicted volunteering to be in the south and the lowest ten places in rates of predicted volunteering to all be located in the north-east, with the lowest levels presenting in County Durham (41%). However, this contradicts findings from the Taking Part survey that suggest young people volunteer more in rural places, and Community Life Survey findings that people volunteer less in inner city places.

Predicting volunteering

We originally sought to use micro-data (ie individual responses) from the Taking Part survey and the Community Life survey, to create a more accurate picture of youth volunteering at Local Authority District level or below. These would have been multilevel regression models with post-stratification. In the absence of such micro-data, we instead built a simpler model - a standard logistic regression - using a bespoke dataset, constructed for this purpose from the Taking Part survey. Looking across factors including happiness, anxiousness and deprivation, this simpler model sought to predict the distribution of voluntary work at local authority level, correctly classifying 66% of respondents' volunteering behaviour.[5]

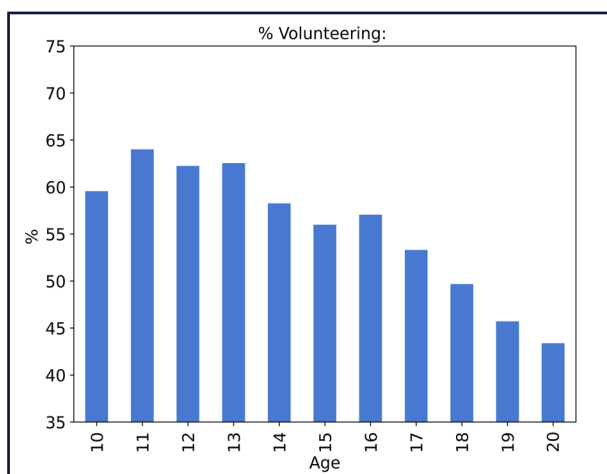
The two maps below show the distribution of voluntary work at Government Office Region level (left-hand side, as recorded in the Taking Part Survey) and the distribution of voluntary work at local authority district level (right-hand side, as estimated by the model).

In predicting the distribution of voluntary work at the Local Authority District level, the model partly replicates the strong regional effect in the survey dataset but moderates the extremes in the south-west and north-east. It also identifies potential clusters of activity in other places, such as Manchester, Nottingham and inner London that are otherwise swamped by larger regional effects.



Place-based provision and routes into volunteering

Our re-analysis of past National Youth Social Action surveys explored the type and route into volunteering that young people take, particularly the role of institutions, services and infrastructure in different places (in this case, regions) in influencing how and why young people volunteer. In support of the rapid evidence review findings, educational institutions consistent across all regions play a key route into volunteering, with 70-85% of 10- to 17-year-olds reporting this is how they access volunteering. For 16- to 20-year-olds, the role of college and university is supplemented by employment-based routes into volunteering. Interestingly, the importance of local community as a route into volunteering grows consistently in the older age groups, coming into prominence between 16 and 20 years.



Volunteering by age

However, strong regional differences apply to the role of places of worship and (uniformed) clubs, sports and hobbies as routes into volunteering. In the Midlands, Yorkshire, the Humber and in Scotland, uniformed groups - such as the Scouts - support 9-11% of voluntary activity compared to just 3% in Greater London. On the other hand, places of worship are an important route into volunteering for 13% of young people in London, compared to 1-7% for the rest of the country. This might point towards regional disparities in availability of these institutions to support pathways into volunteering. Clubs and sports activities account for over 20% of routes into volunteering for young people in both Scotland and Northern Ireland. Interestingly, less than 6% of entry routes to volunteering in every region of the UK were attributed to programmes such as The Duke of Edinburgh's Award or The Prince's Trust.

The Understanding Society survey (which focuses on 11- to 15-year-olds) highlights a possible relationship between how young people spend their time and to pathways to volunteering, while also raising questions about how the disparity in provision or access to leisure or social infrastructure might impede or supporting a strong volunteering system. For example, 65% of 11- to 15-year-olds who go to a youth club also volunteer, rising to 72% of those who attend most days. Those who go less frequently - or who do not have the opportunities to attend - volunteer less frequently too. Some 63% of those who spend less than an hour using a computer at home for playing games on a normal school day do voluntary and community work, compared to 32% of those who do so for four and six hours a day.

The Institute for Community Studies/YouGov nationally representative survey further developed our understanding of differing attitudes to youth volunteering and social action activity amongst 16- to 30-year-olds. It explored the forms of participation young people would be most likely to do to change society, routes into and frequency of volunteering, as well as other unpaid and voluntary activities that young people might have undertaken in the last 12 months. It also explores aspirations and attitudes of young people towards social action, volunteering and making change - detailed in following sections of the report.

An analysis of the data through a place-based lens highlighted regional differences in how young people might like to volunteer. When asked to rank preference of how to participate, 19 to 21% of young people in north-east, east and south-east England and Scotland chose 'volunteering through an organisation' as one of their top three choices, compared to just 10% in north-west England and 13% in Wales. In north-east England, Yorkshire and Northern Ireland, 19 to 22% of young people indicated a keenness in 'raising awareness online or via social media', compared to 11 to 13% in east and south-east England and Wales.

Notably, the Institute for Community Studies survey data, including a focus on regions identified as levelling up priority areas, supported findings from the re-analyses of large-scale survey datasets that those falling into social class ABC1 ('middle class') were more likely to have volunteered than those in C2DE ('working class'). Interestingly, when asked about communities they belong to, 23% of young people living in priority areas, compared to 17% of young people living in other parts of the UK, were likely to feel like they belonged in a city.

Summary

Mirroring the findings of the rapid evidence review, there are various challenges associated with inconsistent terminology and data collection framing, which is well-noted in existing literature. Nonetheless, taking the re-analysis of these four large-scale survey datasets together provides a large, multi-year dataset from which to draw robust inferences about young people and how they volunteer across England and the UK. The findings from the re-analysis support some of the existing evidence base, for example in highlighting the role of educational institutions. It also reinforces gaps in the evidence base, such as the role of online communities and social media in young people's volunteer journey. The ICS/YouGov survey begins to explore such gaps, explored in this section and in later sections understanding young people's motivations and pathways.

Place also emerged as a *motivating factor* for volunteering -especially among older age groups within the youth bracket. Those who said they had become involved in volunteering due to *wanting to change an issue in my local neighbourhood* was selected by 17% by the younger generation (aged 16 to 24 years) versus 23% of the older generation (25 to 30 years). Interestingly there was a reverse decline by age in those who preferred to take action through being inspired by social movement: 30% of 16- to 24-year-olds stated social movements inspired their social action versus 21% of 25- to 30-year-olds; showing a shift away from campaign or politicised motivations for volunteering among older young people (Amna, 2012; Centre for Youth Impact, 2021) towards local and community-orientated motivations for volunteering. However, class (if considered as a proxy for income/deprivation in this case) does intercede slightly in how far young people feel they can create change locally; those from middle and upper classes were more likely to agree they could create change on the issues that mattered to them locally than those from lower and working classes (39% ABC1 versus 32% C2DE).

Finally, the role of local organisations as routes to create change was found to have greater prominence for young people than national organisations or development schemes; 44% of young people agreed that they felt they could make change through local organisations; compared to 31% who felt they could create change through a national organisation (and 44% disagreed with national organisations as routes to create change).

This highlights the potential for local organisations as gateways, entry points and important anchors for youth volunteering in the post-pandemic landscape.

The re-analysis of the existing datasets highlights various regional differences in routes into volunteering and types of volunteering undertaken. However, the ICS/YouGov survey shows no significant differences in trends and attitudes towards volunteering between 'levelling up' priority areas and the general survey population. Following the evidence, the findings may thus suggest that, rather than what has been called a poverty of aspiration around volunteering existing for young people in 'levelling up' areas, it may in fact be poor logistical conditions (infrastructure, transport), challenges of variable provision, and/or wider social conditions of poverty or precarity that affect engagement with volunteering for young people in poorer and deprived parts of the UK. These - and other barriers - are also found to have a strong impact on 'Volunteering Journeys' for poorer young people in the next section, discussing the findings from peer and digital research with young people.

The model predicting volunteering by using a multilevel regression model suggests that micro-data would help identify potential clusters of activity within places, that are otherwise swamped by larger regional effects. Data to this effect would also help us better infer relationships between place-based trends and place-based provision, to help understand what supports or impedes a flourishing volunteering system. However, the Institute for Community Studies/YouGov survey found a strong correlation between the *sense of community* in building participation in volunteering. This is unexpected when we look at the disparate relationships and considerations about community in relation to volunteering in the existing evidence review.

Findings: understanding the Volunteering Journey

This section presents findings from the primary research stages of the co-produced participatory action research, which engaged more than 600 young people between the ages of 11 and 30. Co-production - whereby a Youth Advisory Board of individuals aged 16 to 30 co-designed the terminology, methodology and research instruments - resulted in a unique qualitative research approach being taken with each age group.

Participatory workshops, drawing on creative methods, were co-designed to engage with young people aged 11 to 15. These sought to empower young people to articulate their experiences and visions for volunteering through an accessible, experiential learning approach that also raised their awareness. This drew on insights from the evidence base about the uneven provision of volunteering for younger age groups - requiring sensitivity to varying levels of knowledge of the issue, and raising awareness of what volunteering *is*, alongside addressing a gap in the evidence of qualitative research to increase understanding of attitudes to and experiences of volunteering among young people.

Peer research, and the River of Life digital research methodology, were used with young people aged 16 to 30 because they maximise participation, engaging many that would not usually take part in research studies, through being sensitive to different time constraints and normative participation routes (for example asynchronous online engagement, and peer-to-peer engagement via phone, Whatsapp call, or in person). The methods also enable deep participation through storytelling approaches, which are sensitive to gaining research insights on lived experience, conceptualisations, barriers, motivations and pathways - all crucial to understanding the Volunteering Journey for young people once they leave formal educational settings.

Our research has five main findings, three of which align with and stretch findings from the evidence review; and two that emerged from the research with young people:

- The need for establishing a common language for youth volunteering that reflects its hybrid and adaptive nature, coupled with more consistent but flexible entry points to volunteering that facilitate formal and informal first experiences of volunteering in a more concerted and visible way.
- The need to support volunteer literacy for all young people, and for the system of volunteering provision to speak to young peoples' social values and desire to see meaningful change.
- The need to develop a youth-centred approach to volunteering and to organise a youth-centred volunteering system that sustains young peoples' participation as volunteers. This should recognise that the background and circumstances of each young person is critical in influencing attitudes to and frequency of volunteering; and creating more even provision that overcomes barriers but is not solely delivered through educational pathways.
- The need to build and capitalise on social scaffolding in youth pathways, specifically the role of family and community in growing participation and maximising social and wellbeing returns from volunteering. There is a significant opportunity to grow the youth volunteering base by delivering opportunities in local places and connecting them to local issues; and by framing that to young peoples' interest in serving their community.
- The need to introduce wider structures of support, including mental health services and mentoring, into the volunteering offer - particularly for those aged over 16.

Each of these will be discussed, drawing on data from the different stages of the qualitative methods as they relate to findings with different age groups.

Finding 1

We need a common language for youth volunteering that reflects its hybrid, changing and adaptive nature - and more consistent but flexible entry points and support structures.

Most adults report their first experiences of volunteering during secondary education (Owens, 2015). The rapid evidence review found these early experiences can have a lifelong impact on volunteering attitudes and behaviours, although more longitudinal evidence is required on how this operates. In this section, we first examine the need for a common language and entry points for the youngest age group involved in the research (11- to 15-year-olds); and then for post-16 age groups.

This research identified two key entry points to the volunteering journey, which act as connectors between 11- to 15-year-olds and early volunteering experiences. The first is schools, which represent the most common entry point for this age group. Most young people in that age group who had participated in volunteering had done it through their schools, and those who had never done so pointed to their school or tutors as a route to finding their first volunteering opportunity. Furthermore, the schools that were engaged in the research expressed an interest in promoting volunteering in their students, acknowledging the potential to play a role in building volunteering behaviours.

These findings are backed by the existing evidence base, which indicates the majority of young people identify their school or college as the primary factor in facilitating volunteering for the first time (Brodie et al, 2011, 29). School-based citizenship education, community service programmes, or national schemes (such as The Duke of Edinburgh's Award) are identified as common points of entry to participation (Alma Economics, 2021, 10). Young people themselves see the potential of schools as a key touchpoint, expressing a desire for schools to integrate volunteering within their education and learning (#iWill, 2014, 35). Schools are also an important factor in facilitating relationships between young people and volunteering organisations, which extend beyond the formal period of education (British Youth Council, 2012).

However, for those aged over 16, the dominance of school-based and formal routes to volunteering was not as strong as the evidence suggested. As indicated in the rapid evidence review, volunteering pathways across all stages are limited by resource constraints, density of youth organisations, restrictions on spatial mobilities, difficulties in accessing information, and a lack of support from schools, which emerged as a major pathway for many young people. Around a quarter (19) of the peer research participants and over a third (17) of the River of Life digital research participants referenced formal structures, entry points, and models of volunteering. When we consider that just six of the 125 combined participants who took part said they had never volunteered, this suggests the majority of young people are volunteering through informal structures and fluid models of volunteering that fall outside those offered through education and institutional routes and opportunities.

As demonstrated during the pandemic, informal volunteering remains important - both as a response to community needs, and to ensure young people are able to participate in volunteering when formal structures fall through. During the pandemic, for instance, access to formal routes to volunteering for young people was significantly reduced, especially during lockdowns, and for regions with low resourcing for youth infrastructure, increasing existing spatial inequalities (UK Youth, 2021). Volunteering literacy must, therefore, not just consider formal volunteering, but also build knowledge of informal volunteering and how to organise or access it.

As discussed in the methodology, the Youth Advisory Board determined the most effective way to present 'volunteering' to young people that would resonate with them was through the terminology 'social action', which peer researchers explained to participants encompassed both formal, informal, fluid and regular models of volunteering. When using this broader definition, our research found the majority of young people had engaged in a volunteering activity at some point in their life.

Despite this, engagement with formal structures and models of volunteering remained a prominent part of how young people *first* experienced volunteering, particularly for those from the most deprived backgrounds (here defined through the governments' levelling up categorisation of 'priority 1' areas). Post-16 education, in particular, was the most common a formal pathway into volunteering spoken about by young people during both the peer-to-peer interviews and the River of Life maps. As mentioned in the rapid evidence review, among the 16- to 21-year-old age groups, volunteering is increasingly being framed as part of the 'student experience' at university, which is mirrored in how those participants who had experienced university categorised and had experienced it. This is also reflected in the fact that *all* peer research participants who had *never* volunteered had had more limited further and higher education opportunities, if any.

This is not to say volunteering through school does not have the potential to be a significant pathway into continued volunteering engagement. For the younger age groups (11 to 15, and 16 to 18 years) our research demonstrates that a more regular service model could be a significant opportunity to grow the volunteer base who continue to volunteer into later life, and to 'even out' the opportunities for young people. Several participants who had experienced education systems outside the UK described the impact a more regular volunteering experience had on their volunteering capital in later life: "at high school, around 16, I was required to complete 50 hours of community service. [...] It started out as a requirement, but it never felt like one - I continued well after my 50 hours were up. Still, this was only just the beginning" (male/female, 25).

During the co-analysis phase, the wider group of 35 peer researchers reflected on this distinction between community service and more 'patchy' volunteering provision, and concluded that an approach that incorporates volunteering directly into the curriculum – while allowing young people the time, space, and flexibility to seek out their personal interests - may be a more appropriate model in boosting young people's desire to continue engagement beyond in-school opportunities.

This was also reflected peer research interviews with 21- to 30-year-olds, considering what would have better-supported their volunteering journey at secondary school and sustained this involvement through tertiary education.

"It would be good to have basically an agreement with university for there to be some time just left out where someone could possibly engage in voluntary work if they wanted to. My college encouraged that - in particular where, on one of our courses, we had to do at least 30 hours of voluntary work. That encouragement allowed a lot of people to go off and basically learn about the world in the ways that they haven't learned about before and obviously, same goes for me. It would be good if that was a thing as well."
(Female, 21)

Addressing deprivation

Our research shows that the pathways into volunteering offered by schools can be disconnected and uneven. They are also affected by geographic location, and the social inequalities experienced by students. Building on evidence that suggests a correlation between low socioeconomic status and limited scaffolding available to support volunteering pathways, our data shows the particular importance of hybrid models that work throughout education but provide additional support to young people through partnership with informal organisations. This can play a key role in generating and supporting pathways for those from disadvantaged backgrounds to volunteer.

"I currently am part of a charity that provides mentorship to 16- to 25-year-olds in my local community, and mentorship to people who would otherwise not have some type of networks that their peers and their counterparts would have, that definitely help them attain education and in their career. I want to even that playing field."
(Female, 22)

Participants in the over-18 age groups frequently mentioned the potential emotional drain from volunteering and the need for balance and flexibility. The peer research and River of Life exercises both demonstrated that having ownership over the extent and nature of their volunteering commitment, and the frequency and intensity of their involvement, were important factors for young people. This can be seen as young people from the age of 18 upwards expressing a preference for fluid volunteering, where rather than a 'service-driven' model, which requires consistent or regular hours, they seek a high-impact but very flexible role and terms of engagement. This may be difficult to deliver consistently within resource-limited environments and speaks more to what could be called a 'social action plus' model, where volunteering delivers deep societal benefit, often on a 'justice-based' issue, that can be personal to the lived experience or values of the young volunteer.



Finding 2

All young people need greater 'volunteer literacy' to understand, navigate, and participate in the increasingly complex volunteering ecosystem - and more opportunities that 'speak young peoples' language' around social value, and connect closer to local places.

Volunteering literacy is taken to mean the sense of awareness young people have – or do not have - of volunteering. At secondary school, and in the crucial transition points in finishing formal education (between 16 and 18 years) and in commencing work, the research found that, as well as a need to build volunteering literacy amongst young people, there was also a strong need for volunteering provision to be cognisant to, and reflective of, the language and causes young people are passionate about. Furthermore, our findings reflected an opportunity for volunteering provision to engage young people through bringing them closer to local needs, interests and opportunities.

Age, social and spatial disparities in literacy

To understand youth perceptions of volunteering, a series of participatory action workshops with a total of 300 individuals aged between 11 and 15, and 30 ESOL students between 16 and 19, were carried out in six locations across the country. The workshops highlighted a general lack of volunteer literacy, with participants across all contexts demonstrating little familiarity with the types of opportunities that might be available to them. This was most clear in the lack of certainty when participants talked about volunteering they might potentially be interested in. Although participants were passionate about specific causes, and seemingly eager to do something about them, they had vague or ill-informed ideas about how they might get involved.

*"We'll be talking about the rainforest and the help they definitely need. We need your help. Here's an example of what you can do to help the animals in danger: we could do CPR for animals and we could help plant trees and stuff. The rainforest is dying and we need to help save it."
(Male/Female, 11)*

During the workshops, participants were asked to provide their own definition of volunteering, rather than providing a predetermined definition. The most common element that featured was the idea of 'helping'. This is linked to the intent of volunteering, creating a wide range of possibilities for the activities involved. In some cases, identical activities were identified as volunteering or non-volunteering based purely on the intent to help. Another element that featured for most 11 to 19-year-olds' definitions was volition; the idea that volunteering is something done willingly or by choice.

*"Help poor people, homeless, orphans, children. Why? Because they are human."
(Male/Female, 16)*

The desire to 'help' was underpinned by sympathy towards those who are perceived as 'worse off' or in need. Sympathy is an emotion that responds to 'an apparent threat or obstacle to an individual's good or wellbeing', and involves concern for the sake of the other (Darwall, 1997). It differs from empathy in that it does not necessarily consider or mirror the feelings or emotions of the person in need, but is driven by concern, pity or compassion. The specific object of sympathy changed from context to context, with younger children featuring often in all settings. Urban settings (London and Leeds) tended to identify people as needy - mainly those living in poverty, younger children, older adults or those without homes - while rural or coastal settings (Jedburgh, Brighton) had a more diffused definition, which included animals in need and the environment.

In the more affluent settings where workshops were held with 11- to 15-year-olds, notably Jedburgh and Hove, a high proportion of participants' 'ideal' volunteering experiences related to existing organisations, either locally or nationally and internationally. For instance, participants in Jedburgh, a rural setting, had high awareness of local organisations, including the charity Stable Life (equine therapy) and Arthurshiels (animal rescue). Participants in Hove demonstrated knowledge of local organisations including Ride the Tide, Sea Rescue, local sports centres, and national organisations, such as Dog Trust, Team Trees, and Cancer Research.

Participants in Gladesmore Community School in London) also had frequent mentions of existing organisations. This group was similar to the group engaged in Hove, in that participants were younger (10 and 11 years old), and located in the south-east of England. In these locations, local organisations and formal opportunities are more likely to have appropriate funding and infrastructure to support volunteering opportunities. Although funding of youth infrastructure has declined significantly in the entire country in the last decade, the south-east has been amongst the areas least affected and might be seen as a winner in the 'postcode lottery' (McGarvey et al., 2021). These findings indicate a higher volunteering literacy in more affluent contexts, which corroborates the findings of the evidence review, highlighting spatial as well as social inequalities, with the poorer and more peripheral locations we visited having lower volunteering literacy and less sense of opportunity for 11- to 15-year-olds.

Causes that resonate

To understand how and where 11- to 15-year-olds would like to volunteer, participants were asked to think of and represent their 'ideal' volunteering experience in an advert. This participatory approach conveys the message that their voices "[matter] so much that they would be worthy of broadcasting" (Kleine, et al., 2016). The adverts provide insights into the types of volunteering that people this age group are interested in, as well as the causes that they care about.

These varied significantly across contexts. Environments that were more connected to nature (eg semi-rural Jedburgh and coastal town Hove) had a greater frequency of 'ideal' volunteering experiences related to animals, such as animal shelters and saving animals at risk of extinction. These same settings had more mentions of environmental causes, such as beach-cleaning, tree-planting and litter-picking. This shows increased access to or contact with nature may increase young people's interest in environmental causes, including helping animals

In contexts that were more urban (eg London and Leeds), volunteering experiences tended to relate to social causes, such as helping families in need or people experiencing homelessness. The social causes of interest in these contexts related to observed needs (eg running a soup kitchen) as well as causes of personal significance (eg helping refugees, and campaigning for LGBTQ+ rights). This reflects the increased exposure of young people in urban settings to societal issues, as well as the connection between lived experience and the causes that individuals are passionate about.

The differences between the volunteering preferences of young people across settings demonstrates a propensity to be passionate about causes that are more visible through lived experience in being part of a local community, or through social and visual media (many referenced social media or television in why they selected their causes). This highlighted that young people's identities today are more fluid due to internet connectivity and social media, navigating between being both global and local citizens. Stakeholders from the volunteering system, who were engaged in feedback workshops, also observed this dual identity in their beneficiaries, and felt it was exacerbated by increased digital volunteering during the pandemic.

To grow the volunteering base, it is important to ensure young people have the opportunity to engage in both local and global causes, regardless of their location. The co-analysis with the Advisory Board who considered the workshop data found the challenge to be twofold: on one hand, it is crucial to ensure a diversity of societal themes and volunteering opportunities are present in places where they may not be as visible, such as places that are less dense or relatively affluent, in order to grow aspiration. On the other hand, it is important to support young people who may be constantly exposed to societal issues (for instance, those in urban contexts), to ensure they are able to engage positively and do not experience burnout or apathy through overexposure or overburden. Even in communities with acute need, the Advisory Board stressed young people should have the opportunity to choose which causes to engage with. Choice supports sustained engagement and increases equality across contexts. This also ties back to building 'volunteer literacy', supporting young people to engage with a range of causes that transcend their lived experience.

Developing volunteer literacy during secondary education can be transformative, enabling young people to seek out and participate in volunteering experiences that are meaningful to them. However, our workshops confirmed there are currently deep inequalities in opportunities to learn about and take part in volunteering across all levels of education. Workshops drew attention to the limited capacity of some schools to provide volunteering opportunities and accompanying literacy. Reliance on schools as the place where the 'Volunteering Journey' of young people begins may exacerbate inequalities, giving a head start to students at better-resourced and more civically-oriented schools.

Volunteering literacy post-16 years

"The way that we are taught what volunteering is, isn't actually what it actually is about. It feels like [with] the word volunteer your brain instantly jumps to unpaid work basically, which seems quite negative for people. It seems like people don't have space for that. I guess people volunteer constantly." (Male/Female, 25)

The post-16 age groups engaged in this study were quick to challenge the way volunteering had been defined and conceptualised during their formal education and through formal routes. Comparing

responses across the different ages engaged in the peer research process, we found that 16- to 18-year-olds more dominantly referenced formal routes to volunteering via charitable organisations, through part-time work, or through local community organisations. Post-18 participation in volunteering appeared to become more hybrid and then, for those aged over 25, it was extremely hard to identify common anchor points that keep young people involved.

Despite school being the most common entry point for young people into engagement in volunteering, it was said to rarely boost volunteering literacy in the 16 to 18 age groups. Just one young person across the River of Life digital and peer research methodology explained that school volunteering exposed them to future opportunities, or nurtured knowledge of a route into the volunteering system; *"school was a huge part of my journey, as they encouraged us to volunteer and help people in the community"* (Male/Female, 20). Instead, for many, school volunteering illustrated just one instance of volunteering activity occurring in isolation from other forms of engagement, which they felt rarely highlighted alternative pathways for making change or organisations at which they could seek similar opportunities.

The concept of what constituted volunteering became increasingly contested by young people aged over 16. The workplace as a route into volunteering was particularly undervalued. In fact, participants frequently questioned whether volunteering in their part-time or full-time work constituted 'true' volunteering - and often discounted it entirely as a meaningful volunteering experience.

"I don't know if it's volunteer work more than just unpaid work, but with Spoons we did like beer festivals on days off [...] It was just a beer festival that happened every year... Wasn't paid, so it was, I suppose, volunteering, but [I] didn't do it to make a difference or help. I just did it because my mates are doing it and it was fun." (Male, 21)

Our findings raise a disconnect between how volunteering opportunities are presented for all age groups and young people's understanding of the importance of volunteering, and their own motivations to volunteer. The highly altruistic motivations of those aged 11 to 15 were succeeded by a desire to 'make a difference' being the most common motivator amongst 16- to 25-year-olds. Through the peer research methodology, 39 participants cited this as a key motivator for their engagement in volunteering, and our research indicated that self-interested was rarely the sole or primary reason young people engaged in volunteering activities. This is a departure from the existing evidence base, which has frequently highlighted the dominant driver as being 'instrumental' use of volunteering to gain skills, or to access higher education and employability. Our research showed this was only true for those in the 16 to 21 age groups, seeking to access university or employment; and then only for the minority, and typically in tandem with wanting to make a wider societal impact.

Our project sought to understand the impact of significant education, social, political, and life transition points on the 'Volunteering Journey' of young people after secondary school, drawing on a range of peer research and digital methodologies with 16- to 30-year-olds. Through participatory action research and peer research methods, we sought to empower young people as co-producers of knowledge and evaluation of fieldwork data to explore the diverse pathways to volunteering experienced by young people after leaving formal education.

This research shows that conditions of place and deprivation, as well as the uneven landscape of school provision, mean certain young people, particularly the poorest, lack consistent opportunities in their early secondary years (aged 11 to 15). If the volunteering base is to be grown, the volunteering system needs to go further to 'even out' the gaps and to recognise other sites of socialisation, such as the importance of family and peer models, that could support young people to engage in volunteering. These findings strongly emphasise the need to take a youth-centred approach that recognises different age transitions and shapes volunteering provision and support to more closely respond to the challenges young people experience.



Finding 3

We need youth-centred approach to volunteering to sustain young peoples' participation

As noted in our rapid evidence review, initiatives to grow youth volunteering have often focused on enhancing educational and employability prospects, suggesting the primary motivation of young people to participate is largely instrumental.

This research has identified a range of other motivations for young people, which change throughout their transition to adulthood. The journey of young volunteers was shown through our research to be non-linear. Although differential early engagement impacted perceptions and routes into volunteering for almost all the young people we spoke to, their perception of volunteering now was different to the one they held during their initial phase of engagement.

Transitioning life stages were key in these shifting patterns, and in the prioritisation young people gave to volunteering. This highlights the importance of adopting youth-centred approaches to understand how young people conceive volunteering and what motivates them to participate in it.

This section describes some of the drivers to start to sustain volunteering that were identified in different age groups.

Drivers and motivators: 11- to 15-year-olds

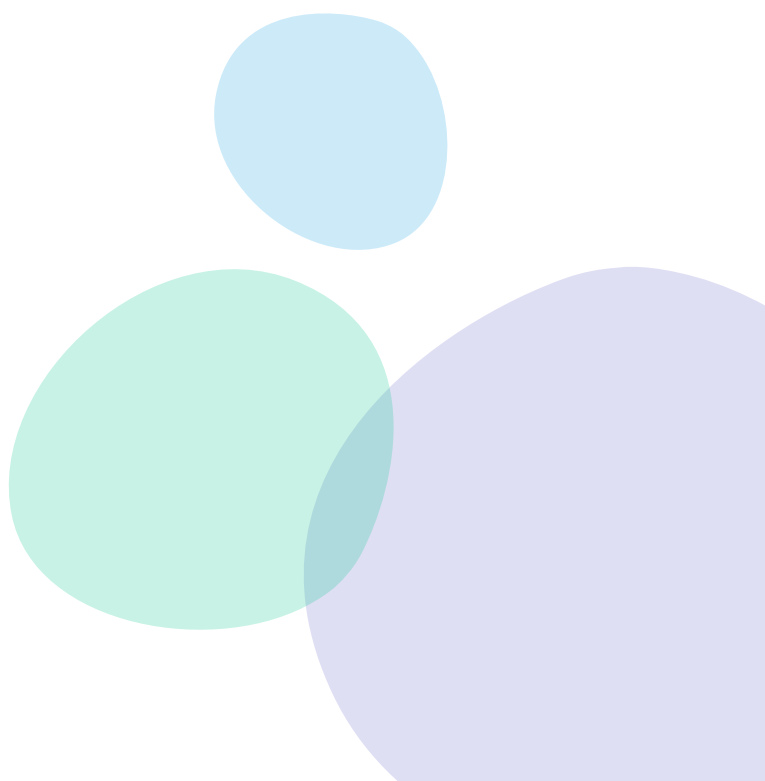
In workshops with 11- to 15-year-olds, we identified clear motivators for volunteering that differ from the existing evidence base. Participants created adverts to represent their 'ideal volunteering experience' in whatever medium they selected. The results were telling of the specific causes and activities that interested them, which were often linked to place. A large proportion of all adverts created by participants (nearly three quarters), appealed to sympathy, stating the needs of beneficiaries dramatically and emotionally.

This is a strong indicator that the motivation to volunteer for these participants was the desire to help, driven by both sympathy and heroism. This diverges notably from the way youth volunteering

is often understood and framed as instrumental. It points to the importance of a youth-centred approach to understanding and framing volunteering, which would enable the volunteering system to better engage with young people.

Although there is uniformity in the drivers of volunteering across different contexts, variation was observed in terms of both the volunteering activities selected and the related causes. This points to an influence of place and context. Factors such as affluence, available infrastructure, and relative visibility of causes in a place all had an effect on the preferences of participants. It is essential to build a deeper, youth-centred understanding of how young people want to volunteer, and how this might be shaped by factors of place.

It is important to note that engagement with causes both local and global was not political, but rather motivated by a desire to create positive social change. The line between volunteering and political participation has become increasingly blurred with the proliferation of campaigning and activism, conceptualised as 'youth social action' (Marzana et al., 2012, 497). Yet, this age group expressed a desire to become involved in the causes they care about in ways that are apolitical. Their interest was driven by altruism and the desire to benefit their community, aligning more closely with definitions of 'meaningful social action' (Spencer and Lucas, 2018, 10). This challenges the notion that youth engagement with global causes and societal themes is inherently political, shedding light on the alternative, apolitical ways that young people can become involved in causes they care about.



Sustaining volunteering: 16- to 30-year-olds

Research with participants aged over 16 highlighted motivations for sustained volunteering, which may change as young people transition to adulthood. The desire to make a difference was the primary motivating factor for young people's sustained engagement with volunteering. Although this was particularly distinctive for the youngest age cohort (aged 11 to 15) and among 21- to 24-year-olds, it was reflected with every age group.

Participants in the peer research and digital research described the importance of seeing the impact of their volunteering on others. This may be even more important than being embedded in the local community, if the impact is not apparent. A participant in the peer research explained that despite volunteering in a shop in her community, the immediate impact of supporting call centres felt more satisfying for her:

"I think for me personally I like it when I can see a direct impact of what I'm doing, so for example like working in the charity shop was like, it didn't feel - maybe I'm just being selfish here - for me it's like I need to feel like I'm getting something out of it so I can feel better about myself because I've helped someone... like with the charity shop it's like at the end of the day it is a charity shop but you're working in a shop and you don't really feel that [charity aspect], like, it was Samaritans [and] I really love that charity, but I think I would have felt better working in the Samaritans call centre rather than Samaritans charity shop because then at least I'm like actually, like people are calling me for help rather than me just like essentially actually just working in a shop" (Female, 22).

This suggests the ways in which young people gain from and experience volunteering is not solely instrumental, and has a greater resonance and impact than just the 'tick box' exercise that stakeholders (and the evidence review) suggest. This previously dominated the discussion around 'meaningfulness' in volunteering. Our peer research findings particularly suggest other senses of 'meaning' that young people gain from engaging in volunteering, in terms of mutual wellbeing and impact on the community.

Interviewee: *I used to volunteer in a Welsh children's youth club. So I used to look after children, children from the age of I believe it was 11 to 13. It was quite fun. Actually.*

Interviewer: *So would you say that was a positive experience for you?*

Interviewee: *Oh, definitely. Yeah, it was something that I really enjoyed doing. Well, just to see the effect of doing little workshops with these young people. Just the effect that that had on their happiness and their well-being and stuff like that. (Male/Female, 25)*

On the other hand, older cohorts expressed scepticism that their volunteering could have a real impact on the issues they care about. The digital River of Life methodology illustrated a shift in motivations, with older people sharing the perception that volunteering had limited impact in making a difference. Yet, some participants were motivated by the opportunity to build skills and confidence that could then be used to create social change.

"I think having done volunteering experiences and gaining those leadership skills does definitely set you up for the future. It gives you the confidence as well, not necessarily to be a leader, but to stand up when you know something isn't right, per se." (Male/Female, 16)

Our re-analysis of the Community Life Survey shows a decline in volunteering for older age groups, alongside increased engagement in activism. This could illustrate a shift for young people in where best to put their energy to make a difference, including to their wider community. Our research found young people passionate about creating change on many local to global societal issues. However, a consistent number felt volunteering has limited impact on changing all or many of these issues. This may also connect to why some evidence indicates young people increasingly volunteer for self-motivated reasons as they get older. Our evidence shows this may not, in fact, be due to a reduced desire to make a difference - but a shift in perception of the impact volunteering has. If young people believe stronger altruistic benefits can be achieved through other forms of engagement, then those who continue to volunteer appear to have more personal reasons or relationships that drive this.

This perception raises interesting questions around how to encourage young people to remain engaged in volunteering as their journey progresses; which messaging and benefits to emphasise; what further conversation may be needed about whether volunteering has an empowered role in society; and how far a youth-centred model could help reposition volunteering as empowering.

In older age cohorts, university engagement generally aligned with wider interests, motivations and beliefs, using language and tone that indicated a stronger sense of passion, and drive. Through the River of Life digital methodology, one 23-year-old from London described herself at university through the butterfly symbol, explaining: *"this represents me being at university. I began to really find my interests and flourish into someone better. I started volunteering for the Nottingham Refugee Forum, I was a part of the local Christian community in providing aid and it was the first time I felt like I was making a difference in society."* (Female, 23). Another said: *"I think you know when you're in uni, I think that's like the prime-time people volunteer, that's what I feel"* (Male/Female, 24). In total, university was spoken about as a critical point in engagement with volunteering across 13 of the peer research interviews and 11 of the digital River of Life maps.

Although evidence indicates young people's volunteering journeys fragment significantly in the post-GCSE period of formal education, when statutory education ends, our evidence indicates those that continue with volunteering tend to move into far richer and deeper engagement. University attendance is a critical reference point in this journey. Yet, given 50% of young people choose not to attend university, reliance on universities as an entry point for volunteering exacerbates inequalities.



Finding 4

Social scaffolding - specifically the role of family and community – is important in growing participation in volunteering, and in maximising social and wellbeing returns.

As explained in the previous section, a youth-centred approach to volunteering has the potential to grow youth participation in volunteering while creating experiences that are meaningful to young people and maximise their wellbeing. This research highlights the potential role of family and community in ‘scaffolding’ the volunteering journey, providing entry points and support for young people that sustain their participation in volunteering. ‘Scaffolding’ encompasses the holistic systems and institutions, peer and intergenerational relationships, and community and family assets and resources that a young person has access to (Flinders, 2022). Some people start their volunteering journey with little scaffolding at all, while others benefit from an extensive and well-constructed system. How scaffolding can expand and change becomes the important question in building a more equitable volunteering journey.

Family and peers

Family and peers have the potential to model volunteering behaviours and connect children and young people with early volunteering experiences. Both family and friends are an important entry point to volunteering, and the latter increases in importance with the passing of time. Our re-analysis of past National Youth Social Action Surveys indicate that, at 10 years old, family is the main route to volunteering for about 10% of young people, while friends are important for about 5%. By the time young people turn 19, the proportions become inverted, with friends representing a more common route into volunteering.

In workshops with the youngest age groups (aged 11 to 15), participants demonstrated a strong influence of family and peers in their volunteering preferences. For instance, participants who observed or participated in volunteering at home were likely to express a preference for the same cause or activity. This reaffirms the findings of the Community Life Survey, which has shown that parental volunteering is a predictor of volunteering amongst young people, and is an important route into volunteering, especially amongst the upper-middle class.

“I am volunteering for Sea Rescue because my mum does it, and it’s really fun. And we get to learn so much about the sea.” (Male/Female, 11)

Participants aged 11 to 15 also shared a general preference toward group activities, including group beach-cleans, sports activities and social roles. This importance of peer relationships is consistent with the characteristic milestones of puberty, which include the development of personal identity in parallel to the growing importance of peer relationships, sometimes in subcultural groups. Young people did not necessarily identify group volunteering models as the solution themselves, but they did identify that peer models were important in overcoming confidence, motivation and mental health barriers, particularly in the teenage years.

“I don’t think there’s necessarily any barriers physically, really, in getting us out and into the community to volunteer. I think perhaps there is just a mentality of the teenager to want to not really do anything social sometimes. I wouldn’t say there’s any physical barriers. I would just say it’s a case of having the motivation between me and my peers to actually get up, go out, and take an active role.” (Male/Female, 16)

Our research found that young peoples' pathways to volunteer and motivations for it significantly deviate and become disparate in the 16- to 18 and, particularly, the 21 to 24 age groups. There is also a drop off post 25, where a small number of young people continue to volunteer and become more deeply engaged, while others struggle to continue to volunteer due to logistical constraints in the 'double burden' of juggling work and family responsibilities with volunteering. However, family and 'group models' of volunteering remained popular within older age groups engaged in this study. Participants in the 16 to 18 and 18 to 21 age groups in particular were frequently interested in volunteering related to sports, such as volunteering to coach or teach younger children. This may be due to lived experience of similar opportunities, as many described having been involved in sports themselves and recalled the positive role of older volunteers. This highlights the importance of young role models in volunteering, though care must be taken to avoid the tokenisation of youth volunteers.

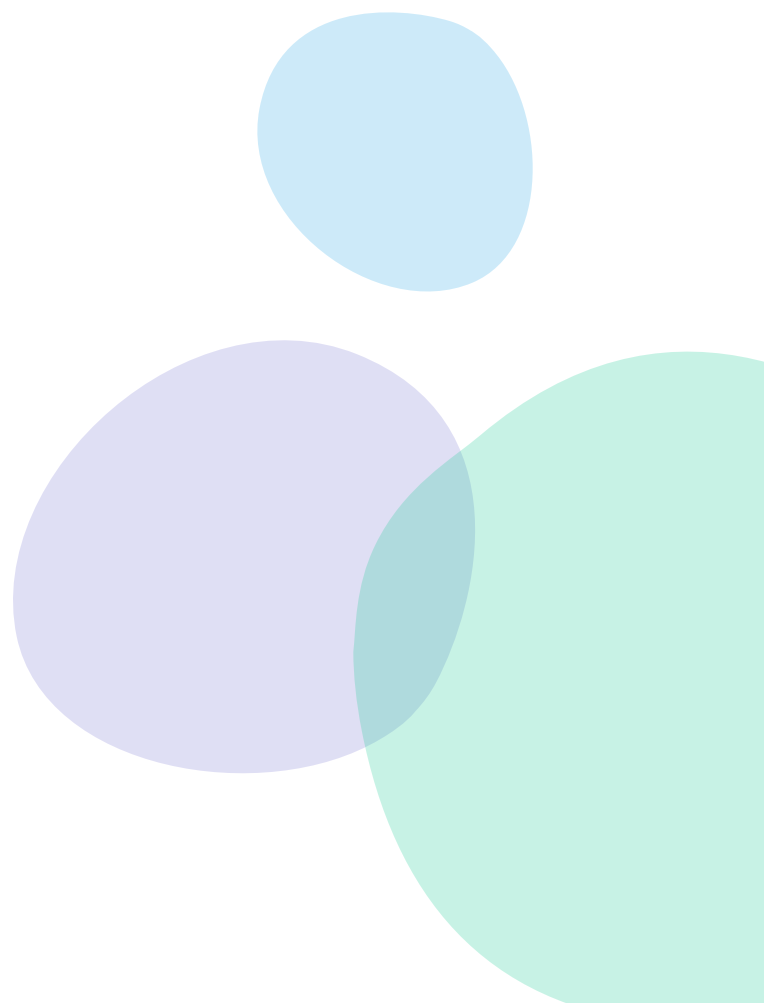
'Spark moments' and social scaffolding

For the post-16 age groups, more than half the young people referenced a 'spark moment' that shifted their view of volunteering and level of engagement. This took many forms, did not always have consistent terminology - and took place at different stages of life; but commonly included a moment where the person was exposed to information about a topic that they felt they could either relate to, or were angered by and wanted to change. For one or two this came through school; for several it came through university exposure; but for the majority it stemmed from informal and familial experiences that exposed them to novel perspectives and topics.

The analysis of the River of Life digital methodology revealed several 'spark moments' from social scaffolding. Many highlighted the influence of interests of their family members, eg: "during the general election my sister lived at home, so I was able to get involved and volunteer, campaigning in the election" (Male/Female, 17), or conversations within their home environment. This particular quoted example also illustrates a blurring of political participation and volunteering, which is of interest given the wider context of the Civic Journey study that considers youth participation in all pillars of civic engagement, from democratic engagement to youth activism.

Reference was made by several participants to the influence of political movements as a spark. In the River of Life, reference to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement was made by seven young people, noted as a trigger for their initial or renewed engagement with civic activities. This supports the data found in the nationally representative survey, which showed 30% of 16- to 24-year-olds were inspired to volunteer by social movements such as BLM or Extinction Rebellion.

For others, the 'spark moment' came from an informal conversation with a teacher or an exposure to an issue through a club or extra-curricular activity. Tracing back to her experiences at school, one 23-year-old used the fire symbol in the digital method to explain: "I had an English literature teacher who introduced me to Maya Angelou's work, it ignited my passion for poetry, women's rights, and intersectional feminism. It was from this point I recognised my intense passion for women's rights". In this example, the possibility for social scaffolding to be supplemented by education becomes clear, demonstrating the lasting impact young people's experience at school can have on attitudes and behaviours with regards to volunteering (Davies, 2017). His example further highlights the lack of uniformity across education, exposing a lottery within volunteering literacy dependent on individual school policy and teacher actions.



Much less frequently referenced was the role of social media in creating 'spark moments' or influencing participation in volunteering. Where it was referenced, it was typically around awareness-raising - with young people later deciding to participate because of a 'real life' encounter or opportunity to volunteer closer to home or in further education. No young people involved in either the peer research or digital methodologies described finding and accessing a volunteering opportunity exclusively through online channels.

"It's very much social media engagement and just seeing things, seeing events that are designed to raise awareness and then following through with that. Like I found out about Hope Rescue just from advertisements in my local town, and then I just thought, 'If I've got the time, I would like to engage and help with these people,' and that's what I did. It's the same with the environmental group. The environmental group advertised themselves in my college, and then I decided to take that opportunity." (Male/Female, 22)

Across all 125 responses from the two methods, just one person mentioned citizenship education. Using the 'explosion' symbol he explained "my citizenship GCSE project prompted me to think about what I cared about and allowed me to get involved. I raised a donation fund of toiletries for the homeless and temporarily housed young people at the YMCA". The negligible reference to citizenship education as a 'spark moment' for young peoples' volunteering engagement suggests it is vital to reconsider the efficacy of current citizenship education models in inspiring active participation in volunteering and equalising education opportunity.

The awareness of 'spark moments' within local communities and the wider social system that young people experience raises the question of what better-connected provision outside formal education and between different organisations and social connections, including families, could look like, and what it could deliver in terms of levelling out opportunities for young people to engage in volunteering. This challenge is more prominent in young people experiencing poverty or challenges within the social and educational system. As one young person explained: "I lived in care for a bit OK, so I've had the experience with like youth offending team you know what I mean. So I sort of know the help that the system can give. But like, when it's not in place, it's sort of hard to get these opportunities" (Male/Female, 20).

If a young person is not within a supportive family environment, it is important that provision is available from institutions they connect with at other points in their development. Herein lies the importance of 'scaffolding' - the systems and institutions, relationships, assets and resources that young people have access to - that supports them throughout their transition to adulthood (Flinders, 2022).



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Community

Connection to community emerged as a significant motivator in volunteering activity, showing as the second highest motivator, and appearing in 21 of the peer research interviews. Across both peer research and the Institute for Community Studies / YouGov survey, a pattern emerged between those who feel they belong to a community, and those who are more likely to undertake volunteering. For example, in the survey, 63% who had been involved in volunteering felt they belonged to a place-based community, compared to 44% of those who have never been involved.

Similarly, those who felt a sense of belonging to identity-based communities were three times more likely to engage than those who did not.

Our River of Life digital research also saw a pattern emerge where young people were exposed to and began engaging with a new community, which then sparked volunteering engagement. For example, for seven young people, becoming part of the LGBTQ+ community inspired volunteering activity to support their peers and make a difference to the challenges facing their community.

Hence, the distinction between the two motivators is not always clear-cut. Community was often where young people felt able to make a difference, and part of the impact or benefit narrative from the volunteering experience:

“When it comes to volunteering, I think ‘What can I do to help somebody?’, and ‘Who is in a different situation to myself?’ and I suppose you would get an element of community out of it. You meet lots of different people and also develop your self-identity, develop your understanding of other peers and [all this] makes you feel like you [belong] within that specific community” (Male/Female, 22).

Seeing the impact of their volunteering reflected in the community was also a key driver for a large proportion of the older participants aged over 21.

“[Volunteering] just helped me connect and realise that my ideas can be put into form and actually into community rather than, I don't know. It was the first time that I'd actually made something that actually had an outcome and was actually positive. There was tangible experiences for people. It wasn't just my abstract ideas. It was like, I've got an idea. I'm actually going to make it. People were involved and there was actually collaboration and outcome. Yes. It was measurable.” (Male/Female, 25)

Captured through the River of Life digital methodology, one young person wrote long explanations about her experience of community volunteering through Temple, her swimming club and local nature society, before briefly noting: *“I should also mention the countless bake sales and charity events I ran as part of school council at secondary school, as well as the charity events we are currently planning as the student leadership team at my sixth form.” (Female, 17).*

Although community was a strong motivator for some, others said volunteering was practical and although it made them “feel good” it was rarely linked to personal identity or wider social desires.

Finding 5

Volunteering impacts on young people's mental health, and there is a 'triple burden' on volunteers

The effects of global and national events on young people's confidence and emotional security - particularly in the older, post 18 years age groups - were striking. In total, 17 of the young people we spoke to across both methods referred to mental health as a factor affecting their engagement in volunteering. This was referenced across all life stages, with the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbating impact for many.

"It feels like there's an impending sense of doom on the world. If it's not the pandemic, it's certainly the Russian-Ukraine conflict or something. It feels like every other day there's something that just throws my inner self into turmoil. Like, I remember in 2020, I think it was 2020 when there was the Black Lives Matter movement after I think it was George Floyd was killed. Yes, seeing the Twitter coverage of that and the news was heavy on me. It felt like there was no point to my actions, and I sometimes feel like that every now and then, with the pandemic and the conflict...it feels like the world is really going to end soon, or it feels like maybe I shouldn't be doing what I'm doing, and be focused on other stuff. I guess that's a barrier sometimes to volunteering for me because I'm always going to be wondering if I should be doing something else." (Male/Female, 25)

In the River of Life research produced by young people, mental health was attributed as a factor reducing or preventing their engagement. Employing the 'rain' symbol to illustrate their experience, one young person added the caption "one of the biggest barriers to engagement in my case is definitely mental health". Another explained that during their "second year [of university] I suffered badly with depression and anxiety. This caused me to withdraw from [...] activities and I distanced myself from friends and my community." (Male/Female, 19)

These findings indicate that, in comparison to the 'double burden' frequently noted as a barrier for older volunteers (Community Life Survey, 2019), a 'triple burden' exists for the younger age groups, balancing volunteering with their work, family life, and mental health.

Amongst those who said they regularly volunteered (more than once every few weeks) burnout was mentioned by 22% across the peer research and River of Life methodologies. This was particularly the case when the volunteering activity was closely linked to issues of personal identity and the desire to make a difference. Represented by a watercan symbol, one young person marked a point in their River where they were "working to heal from feeling burned out by so many experiences of trying to change things". Another person used a negative face symbol to say, "burnout had a detrimental impact on my physical and mental health, happiness, relationship". This followed directly after starting a local community organisation, where they volunteered to support newly-arrived refugees.

Even amongst those who did not regularly volunteer, the idea of burnout caused by awareness of social issues and feelings of helplessness acted as a barrier. Citing an "overexposure to different issues through online platforms", one young person went as far as to say "***you can feel compassion fatigue before you even decide which cause you want to volunteer with***" (Male/Female, 24).

Coupled with burnout is guilt that can occur with volunteering - particularly where people feel overwhelmed due to other factors in their life, and when, despite wanting to volunteer, they are unable to. For example, one participant said: "***I think if you sign up for something and then aren't able to you feel quite bad and guilty about that***" (Male/Female, 20) - or not feeling as though you had done enough.

Conclusion

Our research finds young people far from disengaged from either awareness, or in taking action in their communities. However, the framing of volunteering is a concept young people see as too limited - or even problematic - in driving and sustaining the engagement they seek to have in their communities. Concurring with suggestions in the existing evidence review, young people identify with adaptive and hybrid forms of volunteering, with those in the 16 to 18 age group particularly drawn to fluid and adaptive approaches and not to formal pathways.

Among those aged 18 to 21, and particularly young people at university, how volunteering as it is defined and conceptualised in the evidence base is arguably closer to how young people told us they experience and recognise its value. For the post-25 years age group, young people were more reflective on formal versus non-formal routes, and favour formal pathways, mainly due to constraints of time and logistics, meaning contained activities were more feasible alongside work, family, and other social pressures.

However, strong differences exist in how young people conceive of the parameters of what '*meaningful*' volunteering experiences are. Models of weekly and recurrent volunteering were not seen as providing as much value - either to the volunteer or to society - as 'social action', 'public service driven' or 'youth-led' models, focused on addressing critical societal themes. The need to see direct impact - both personal, and for the communities the volunteers were working with; and the need for a developmental and positive wellbeing benefit to the volunteer, were clear drivers of whether the volunteering was a positive or negative experience. Furthermore, the quality of the *experience* of volunteering was the main driver for whether young people continued with their volunteering journey - or not.

This extends to what sustains young peoples' involvement in volunteering. When young people compared different forms of volunteering, activities that show transformative impact on the community they prioritised were viewed more positively. This can be conceptualised as a 'triple benefit', founded on the strong driver community has for young people. This is a new contribution to what we understand about volunteering from the existing evidence base, and more limited survey and quantitative methodologies explored.

Our research finds a clear connection between the sense and strength of belonging to a community, in providing *entry points*, *motivations for*, and a *powerful sense of impact from and for* young people from volunteering. This moves beyond the dominant evidence base, which has been said to be 'end goal'-driven, encouraging young people to view volunteering in individualistic and instrumental terms (Dean, 2014), towards an understanding that this generation of young people are driven not solely by how volunteering may support their employment or educational goals, but by collective and external-facing benefit to local communities - particularly for those considered most vulnerable. This finding is interesting as it may suggest as a value shift; even young people who were highly aware (often anxiously accepting) of the *need* for volunteering to support their routes into paid employment saw the potential community benefit and engagement as being of greater value, as well as - often - enjoyment gained from the experience.

Limited evidence in the last decade found that feeling part of a community can act as a barrier to volunteering, particularly for disadvantaged youth (Boulianne & Brailey, 2014), and this research appears to confirm the reverse: strong belonging, driving strong voluntary action, appears important for this generation of youth, even within deprived regions of the UK.

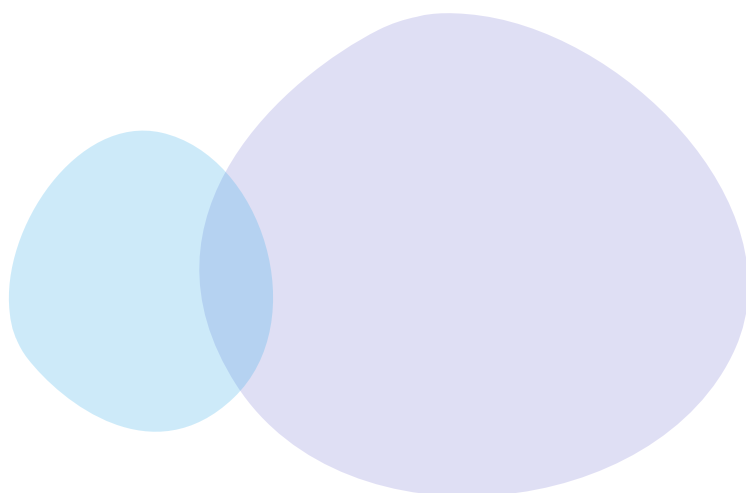
The impact of youth volunteering thus extends well beyond the traditional framing of a 'double benefit' (Hayes, 2017) to the volunteers, with discernible positive impacts for government, public services, civil society, and the economy; to demonstrate what can be seen as a 'triple benefit' to volunteers, public services and government - and to communities. The community part of this 'triple benefit' includes service to local causes, entry routes, and connection to local organisations, and a strength of local social relations between a young person and the community(ies) to which they feel a sense of belonging.

However, the opportunity to capitalise on this triple benefit is put at risk due to the triple burden faced by this generation in terms of precarious work, family responsibilities, and experience of the mental health crisis. This goes beyond the 'double burden' (DCMS, 2019 – CLS) of work and family responsibilities, which has been shown to cause a drop-off in young volunteers, particularly those aged 25 to 30

The three elements of the triple burden were found to intercede most in the sustaining and positive impact of young peoples' volunteering journeys; with mental health being the most recurrently intervening factor for 16- to 18-year-olds and 21- to 24-year-olds, affecting whether they continued to volunteer.

"I think people obviously are - and I guess rightfully so in some ways - focusing on their own mental health and their own stuff at the minute so maybe volunteering to help other people is a bit on the back burner" (Male/Female, 25)

The emergence of a triple burden and triple benefit model, as barriers and drivers for volunteering respectively, and the recognition of the different ways young people understand the reciprocal benefit of their role as volunteers and the community, reinforces the need for youth-centred models in volunteering provision. A youth-centred approach has the potential to overcome tokenism and instrumentalism, focusing instead on young people's motivations and the barriers they face to volunteering.



Recommendations

Building volunteering journeys

There is a need, expressed in both the peer research interviews and by stakeholders, to transform the quality of logistical support for volunteers *and* the provision of volunteering opportunities by local organisations, particularly in deprived places. This includes the need for better infrastructure for volunteers to attend and travel; and the need to consider funding or structural models that can enable larger civic organisations to support the *local* smaller organisations with building their volunteer base. This may include funding, administrative support and specialist help to cut through the increased bureaucracy of safeguarding, GDPR and Covid-19 provision. It was also said to include support small organisations to access and build models of volunteer support and wellbeing.

There is a need to align volunteering models more closely with how young people are motivated and the terms under which they want - and need - to engage. The trend towards 'adaptive volunteering' was found to be popular with young people - but fluid and informal models were not exclusively sought. In fact, both the under-15s data and that gathered with 16- to 30-year-olds showed interest in volunteering through formal organisations, and for young people to take 'high impact' roles in organisations and centres supporting vulnerable people in society. There is also a need to consider ways to effectively match 'demand' with 'need' - not just 'supply' in terms of the types of provision and the volunteering offer.

A youth-centred approach to volunteering

To overcome the triple burden of volunteering, this research highlights the potential of a youth-centred approach to support young people on their volunteering journeys. The evidence review identifies a trend towards volunteer-centred approaches to provision. This has similar components to the wider volunteer-centred approach, but responds to the barriers young people feel they needed to overcome to start - and continue - engaging in volunteering. This comprises a number of elements:

- Flexibility of structuring volunteering opportunities that can work around and respond to the pressures and varying time, logistical and developmental burdens young people face at different points in their journey to adulthood.
- Group models that provide greater peer benefit, socialisation, support and 'fun' - and drive positive, ongoing engagement with volunteering.
- 'Scaffolding' or support that accompanies the volunteering offer, to help overcome challenges to participation:
- Mental health support to help young people overcome the triple burden;
- Transportation and infrastructure, particularly in rural or deprived areas;
- Mentoring - where negative experiences can be counteracted and positive experiences shared as inspiration;
- Addressing development needs - as opposed to a volunteer's education and employment needs

Alongside this youth-centred approach, different models may increase the volunteering base and support stronger participation. In summary:

- A community-anchored youth-centred model delivered through local organisations. This is characterised by team volunteering models and group dynamics; where volunteering is consistent (not one-off) but supported by a strong connection to social purpose and local community benefit. This was viewed as attractive for all age groups engaged, but for the youngest (under 15) and oldest (25 to 30) youth volunteers, this may also be characterised by a family volunteering model in place of the 'team' or 'group' model.
- A 'social action +' model that appeals to young people, particularly in the 18 to 24 years bracket. This is characterised by youth-led design, focused on social and often complex causes, of which the individual may or may not have lived experience; peer to peer support; and a high sense of impact. This is typically individual-led and often focused on flexible engagement, recognising that youth social action has included a 'blend or hybrid of campaigning, volunteering and service to others' (Simpson et al, 2020, 14). While embracing those elements, this model is motivated by peer vulnerability, heroism through altruism, or issues closer to the individuals' experience or in local proximity - rather than a politicised campaign model.
- The potential for a new, service-driven model that has greater regularity and long-term commitment for those aged 16 to 18, focused not on playing a small role in a system or service (such as volunteering in a charity shop or library), but on slow-burn change and future-facing themes that appeal to young people. This responds to the 'need' of the volunteering sector to drive greater engagement by young people with weekly or daily models to fill roles that older volunteers vacated during Covid or due to burnout (Roche 2021, Norrlander et al 2021).

These could be delivered through educational settings, youth settings or service organisations, dependent on resourcing and curriculum. This research confirms the findings of other studies suggesting motivating themes would include:

- environment and climate change
- solving vulnerabilities, such as food, fuel and childhood poverty
- supporting people experiencing homelessness, substance abuse, or discriminated against groups
- peer support (young people helping other young people)
- place development or preservation.

Connected to the above, there is a need to build volunteering literacy, given the low and limited levels found, particularly, in younger age groups and young people in local areas of deprivation, within this study.

However, this is not simply a 'one way' transaction where young peoples' awareness must be raised: there was a strong recognition by both young people and stakeholders that the system of provision needs to consider and adopt terminology that appeals to, and resonates with, young people, in how volunteering is presented and how the commitment required by - and the benefit gained from - volunteering is communicated.

Given the connection between local organisations and community-driven models of volunteering, there would be value in locally-shaped, locally-sensitive and locally-accessible signposting to raise awareness and access to volunteering opportunities.

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