

September 2020 **BRIEFING 5**

Rapid Research COVID-19

Volunteering through crisis and beyond: Starting, stopping and shifting

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SYNOPSIS: The contribution of volunteers in the response to COVID-19 has rightly received considerable attention. Media reports have suggested levels of participation are soaring, but behind the headlines lie a series of questions about what volunteering is taking place, who is getting involved and how it is organised. This briefing draws on literature about volunteering during both crises and 'normal' times to begin to address these questions. It suggests that what is happening now should encourage us to think in new ways about volunteering, while also acknowledging some of the enduring strengths and challenges associated with it.

Key points

- Volunteering has been crucial to local and national responses to COVID-19.
- Alongside the thousands who have been deployed through formal mobilisation schemes at national and local level, many more have taken direct action within their own communities.
- While many people have started volunteering during COVID-19, others have shifted their activities, and still more have had to stop.
- Patterns of volunteering are uneven. Broadly speaking, those with more resources are more likely to volunteer, raising questions of equality and access.
- In 'normal' times, there is a tendency to focus on individual motivations for, and engagement in, volunteering. Crises such as COVID-19 remind us of the significance of social relations and connections to volunteering.
- Looking forward, it will be important that we find ways to ensure that the renewed interest in these forms of collective volunteering leads to it being nurtured rather than stifled.

This briefing is the fifth in a new series seeking to understand how communities across England respond to COVID-19 and how they recover.

Future briefings will be published throughout 2020 and 2021 to share early findings and learn from others exploring similar questions.

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Introduction

To help fight the 'war on coronavirus', rallying cries were made to recruit an 'army of volunteers'. The response was phenomenal. Five people per second reportedly signed up for the NHS Responders scheme in the hours after it was launched on 24 March; the target of 250,000 volunteers was soon exceeded by far (Murphy, 2020). Many more had already stepped forward to volunteer within their local communities, helping their neighbours, forming mutual aid networks, and supporting charities and public services providing vital support. By the end of May the media was reporting that levels of volunteering were soaring, with 10 million people in the UK – 1 in 5 adults – having volunteered during lockdown, with an economic value of over £350 million per week (Jones, 2020; Aldrick, 2020).

This demonstration of solidarity, mutuality, community and care has been one of the few rays of sunshine in an otherwise very stormy year. And this is not unique to the current crisis; the United Nations Volunteers (2018, p. 4) argue:

"...volunteers are at the forefront of every major shock and stress, responding to problems big and small within communities".

If we are to learn from what is going on now, and also from the experience of past crises, it is important to ask questions about what lies behind the headlines. This briefing begins to do just that. It draws on thinking about volunteering during the current pandemic, on evidence during other crises, and on what we know about volunteering in 'normal' times. It suggests that what is happening now should encourage us to think in new ways about volunteering, whilst acknowledging some of the enduring strengths and challenges associated with it. We aim to provide an overview, and as such our reporting will inevitably be high-level and brief. We will return to explore some aspects in greater depth in future briefings.

What is the scale and scope of volunteering?

The media reports of 10 million people, or 19 per cent of the population, volunteering during COVID-19, and the conclusion that levels of volunteering are soaring, were based on a survey undertaken by Legal and General and the Centre for Economics and Business Research (Legal and General, 2020). Few details about the survey are provided in the report. But we know from experience that how we ask about volunteering makes a big difference to the answers we get (Staetsky and Mohan, 2011).

The Community Life Survey is one of the best sources of data on levels of volunteering in England. This found that in 2019/2020 (pre-COVID-19), 64 per cent of the population took part in some form of volunteering; 39 per cent did so on a regular (monthly) basis (DCMS, 2020). Although we would caution against comparison, these figures suggest levels of volunteering considerably higher than those reported above. It may well be that we are witnessing a 'spike in volunteering' (Legal and General, 2020), but conversely, we could potentially be witnessing a dip, or no significant change; we will have to wait for comparable trend data to be sure.

Unfortunately, we don't yet have robust enough data to know for sure how levels of volunteering have been affected, but there are a number of things currently going on that

relate to this question. As the coverage suggests, some people have started to volunteer for the first time during the pandemic. Others have shifted their volunteering activities – leaving previous roles to concentrate on new COVID-19-related efforts. Still more, however, have stopped volunteering – stepping down from roles either because the activities they supported could no longer take place and/or because they were asked to stay home and shield.

A survey commissioned by Sport England in April found that of the 11 per cent of respondents who had volunteered in sport and physical activity over the previous 12 months, half (50 per cent) were still volunteering in either the same or different roles, while others had stopped (Savanta ComRes, 2020). While it is important to celebrate those who have started to volunteer during COVID-19, it is also crucial to remember those who have had to stop; many have had to deal not only with the general challenge of lockdown, but also with a loss of role identity, social interaction, and wellbeing that volunteering can bring (Stuart et al, 2020), and with the feeling of not being able to help at a time when it is most needed.

We should also ask who will stay volunteering as we emerge from the immediate response phase of the crisis, or whether those who have shifted or stopped their previous volunteering will return. Evidence from research on ‘spontaneous volunteering’ (unaffiliated, convergent volunteers, who respond swiftly to crises such as natural disasters) suggests that while many people who volunteer during a crisis weren’t previously volunteering, those with prior volunteering experience are more likely to volunteer for longer during the crisis and are more likely to sustain their volunteering after the event (Barraket et al, 2013). The sustainability of volunteering feels particularly pertinent in the current crisis, which is both widespread and long lasting.

Important questions have also emerged about the scope of volunteering during times of crisis: what can and should volunteers be asked to do? Discussions tend to follow a number of lines: whether volunteers should be asked to take on roles that are ‘risky’; whether volunteers should be asked to do roles which might in other times be considered the preserve of paid staff; and whether volunteers should be asked to volunteer in private sector organisations.

These are not new issues. The volunteering movement is constantly grappling with issues concerned with risk and the boundaries of what volunteers should or shouldn’t and can or can’t do. In 2009 they led to the development of a volunteering ‘charter’, jointly agreed by the volunteering movement and unions, which set out principles to guide relationships between volunteers and paid staff (Volunteering England and the TUC, 2009). These boundaries, however, arguably become even more fluid at times of crisis.

Such questions contribute to the ‘involvement/exclusion’ paradox identified by Harris et al (2017) when researching the role of volunteers in response to floods. The paradox recognises the conflicting pressures on official disaster responders; on the one hand there is pressure to include volunteers, as help is needed and is readily available, but on the other hand concerns about risk and capacity to manage volunteers lead to pressures to exclude.

Who is getting involved in volunteering?

Some people are more likely to volunteer than others. Characteristics such as gender, age, ethnicity, education, and class influence the likelihood of someone volunteering; and those living in rural areas and less deprived areas are more likely to volunteer than others (e.g. NCVO, 2020). Wilson and Musick’s (1997) ‘integrated theory of volunteer work’ suggests that

volunteering is made up of three elements: productive work that draws on human capital, collective behaviour that draws on social capital and ethically guided work that draws on cultural capital. To put it another way, those with more resources (of different kinds) are more likely to volunteer.

It is important to consider how this is playing out during the current pandemic. Volunteering could help to address societal inequalities so brutally exposed by COVID-19, but there is a risk it could also exacerbate them. We don't as yet have the data to tell which way things will go. There is some suggestion that mutual aid groups have functioned more effectively in communities already rich in social capital (Tiratelli and Kaye, 2020). It is also likely that many older volunteers have had to pause their volunteering, creating a considerable gap in resources for some organisations, while also adding to the trauma of COVID-19 for those for whom volunteering was an important source of wellbeing (Stuart et al, 2020). We might also expect more young people to have stepped forward to volunteer, particularly those who have had more time through being furloughed. This would be reflective of evidence from previous crises, which suggests that those who volunteer during disasters tend to be younger (Barraket et al, 2013). There is also a concern that volunteering may exacerbate gender inequalities. Cadesky et al (2019), for example, found that gendered expectations and social norms extend into volunteering, which can affect the roles that men and women are allocated, or take on, in crisis situations (and beyond), and can lead to women shouldering the burden of care.

How are volunteers being mobilised, organised and coordinated?

While it is not clear how overall levels of volunteering will have been affected by COVID-19, what does seem clear is that far more people put themselves forward to volunteer than were actually deployed; that the supply of volunteers has outstripped demand, at least within formal, organisational volunteering roles. This is not unusual in disaster situations. In a review of spontaneous volunteering during natural disasters, Barraket et al (2013) found that in many cases far fewer volunteers were actually utilised than had been mobilised. Knowing what to do with everyone who comes forward to volunteer creates a challenge for those responsible for disaster relief services (as noted above), but also creates a challenge for volunteering: how to ensure that those who put themselves forward but were not deployed are not put off volunteering in the future. As Harris et al (2017) found, deterring people from helping can have a negative impact.

This raises a number of important questions, not least of which is how best to mobilise and coordinate volunteers during crises – a question that should also extend to 'normal' times. There is an argument for shifting our attention away from the supply side of volunteering (asking more people to volunteer) to the demand side (how organisations facilitate volunteering). While national and regional efforts seem to have been successful in *mobilising* people, it is at the local, neighbourhood level that most people actually volunteer (McGarvey et al, 2020). Barraket et al's (2013) research into volunteering in response to floods in Australia points to the importance of 'brokers', of which they distinguish two types: individual network brokers (local people or groups who make connections between people and groups by drawing on their personal relationships and status), and organisational brokers (organisations tasked with the role of linking volunteers to organisations). Their research found that individual brokers were more effective at building sustained involvement. While they acknowledged the importance of organisational brokers, many

volunteers were dissatisfied with their experience of them, which impacted upon their willingness to stay involved or to get more involved.

Similarly, based on an extensive study of volunteering in the Global South, Lough (2019, p. 10) points to the importance of local leadership in volunteering:

"The complex relationships between place-based local leadership and non-local external leadership was a recurrent theme in people's discussions and descriptions of voluntary action."

Also relevant are discussions within parts of the volunteering literature from the UK about how volunteering can be guided less by personal choice and more by social relations (O'Toole and Grey, 2016a), and how it can be associated with a deep sense of ownership, raising important questions about how to strike the right balance between autonomy and control in volunteering (O'Toole and Grey, 2016b).

Why and how are people volunteering?

It is a widely held view that the reasons why people volunteer, and the ways in which they do so, are changing. Hustinx and Lammertyn (2003) suggest a move from collective (based on group membership, stable, unthinking) to reflexive (cause-oriented, based on self-realisation, volatile intensity) forms of volunteering. This is reflected in changes in the reasons that people give for volunteering (more instrumental, less altruistic) and the ways in which they volunteer (shift to 'episodic' volunteering).

During times of crisis and challenge, however, evidence suggests that collective modes dominate, initially at least. Lough (2019) identifies a mix of necessity and obligation, combined with solidarity and proximity underpinning volunteering during crises in the Global South. Similarly, Barraket et al (2013) found a mix of individual and emotional, relational, and external factors amongst spontaneous volunteers responding to natural disasters in Australia. Importantly, however, they note that what initiates (spontaneous) volunteering may not be what sustains it:

"...the overwhelming initial motivation for spontaneous volunteering in response to natural disasters is a desire to help the community, which is consistent with the collective mode of volunteering. Yet, for those who are new (or newly returned) to volunteering through such events, opportunities for more reflexive modes of volunteering beyond the immediate crisis appear to be important in translating initial enthusiasm into sustained civic engagement." (p.35)

Both studies highlight the significance of relationships to people and place in getting people to start and stay volunteering: that is, volunteering as a locally embedded, collective response. How this has played out during COVID-19, when people were largely in lockdown, kept apart from each other and out of the places they would usually interact, remains to be seen.

Other developments, however, are also at play. Recent years have seen the growth of online, virtual or micro-volunteering (Heley et al, 2019). Exactly how and to what extent technology has been utilised to facilitate and enable volunteering during COVID-19, and what this will mean for its future, are points for further investigation.

What does all this mean for how we value and understand volunteering?

The contribution of volunteers in the response to COVID-19 has rightly received considerable attention: this has highlighted their role both in formal responses through initiatives such as NHS Responders and organisations such as St John Ambulance, but also – and arguably more significantly – through more informal, local, community-based responses. Volunteers are behind much of the mutual aid that has played such a significant role in communities across the UK.

Whether or not they would call themselves volunteers is a moot point. But this is not new for volunteering; many people who volunteer on a day-to-day basis in their communities would never refer to themselves as such (Ellis Paine et al, 2010). What is new (at least in recent times) is the level of attention and value being placed on volunteering as an expression of community, mutualism, solidarity and care. A pre-occupation over recent years with more individual, instrumental, organisational, formal forms of volunteering has perhaps at times blinded us to the true extent and nature of volunteering. Volunteering research, policy and practice has tended to privilege certain forms of volunteering over others. While more individual, episodic, forms of volunteering may have been on the increase, collective forms had not gone away. What we are witnessing during COVID-19, is not a new form of volunteering, but arguably a recognition and valuing of what has always been there. The question is whether the increased interest that has been generated in it will nurture or stifle its ongoing development. As Burns and Taylor (1998) note, “mutual aid and self-help can easily be distorted by attempts to incorporate them into mainstream initiatives” (p. 1).

Briefing 6 will explore how these issues are playing out within communities across England. It will ask how volunteering has occurred in communities during COVID-19, what form it has taken, how it has been mobilised and coordinated, who has and has not been involved, and what all that might tell us about the role of volunteering in crises responses and beyond.

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About this research

Local Trust commissioned in-depth research in communities across England into how they respond to COVID-19 and how they recover.

They are places where:

- residents have been supported over the long term to build civic capacity, and make decisions about resource allocation through the Big Local programme
- residents have received other funding and support through the Creative Civic Change programme
- areas categorised as “left behind” because communities have fewer places to meet, lack digital and physical connectivity and there is a less active and engaged community

The research, which also includes extensive desk research and interviews across England, is undertaken by a coalition of organisations led by the Third Sector Research Centre.

The findings will provide insight into the impact of unexpected demands or crisis on local communities, and the factors that shape their resilience, response and recovery.

About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places where they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision-making into the hands of local communities, to enable them to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live.

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding through our work supporting local communities make their areas better places to live, and to draw on the learning from our work to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place

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