

Volunteering: Benefits, Challenges & Opportunities

Volunteers in Northern Ireland have been at the heart of the local community response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Examples include 'Sew Healthy', a group making scrubs for healthcare workers. In addition, hundreds of local sports clubs and community groups are delivering shopping and prescriptions; the South Eastern Trust, Age NI, Volunteer Now and British Red Cross, to name but a few, are involving volunteers to make calls to isolated people; Mindwise is involving volunteers to run online craft sessions for service users. Volunteers are making a difference to how people are coping in these challenging times.

Coronavirus is impacting in so many aspects of our society today so anything we do as individuals to support friends, neighbours and family members' helps to reduce the impact the virus is having. The NHS at the frontline service can cope with the clinical challenge, in part, because everyone else is also playing their part in supporting is helping with the battle against COVID-19. The manner in which civic society has responded to the pandemic can totally refresh how we think about volunteering in the future.

Not a Scarce Resource

The pandemic has changed how we think about volunteering across the UK and Ireland. In the past the narrative has often been about scarcity of volunteers. In the current situation the problem is not scarcity of volunteers but a scarcity of roles – more people have offered to help than appear to be needed and yet we hear stories of burn out and people working under intense stress. So, it seems the challenge is more about effective co-ordination of volunteers and the need to widen our horizons about what the public can achieve when it is mobilised. There are still barriers and blockages to effective involvement. Sometimes organisations are not able to cope with the sheer numbers of people offering help. Local organisations are often more comfortable recruiting people they know than opening up to the potential pool of new people. However this is a huge opportunity to breathe new life into organisations which have at times struggled to recruit new people to volunteer and we should look at this as an opportunity to build for the future.

Managing expectations

Despite huge publicity at a UK level, volunteers are not being recruited in substantial numbers for local COVID-19 response within the NHS in N. Ireland. This has created a real challenge in managing people's expectations of how they can help. This is an immediate issue but again there is the opportunity to harness the good will and build for the longer term but will require further consideration of the specific roles and contributions that the Health and Social Care systems and structures require and can facilitate moving forward to harness volunteering in NI. For example this Australian link provides an overview of the preplanning they have in place for involvement of volunteers in an emergency situation and it provides useful food for thought.

https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/media/4855/aidr_handbook12_v6_webcopy01_181217.pdf

This Japanese example shows the longer term positive impact of volunteering when people have a positive volunteering engagement following an emergency.

<http://www.ijmed.org/articles/655/download/>

People don't need organisations to volunteer

We have seen a huge outpouring of community effort and a lot of this is not coming through traditional organisations but in informal networks, individual WhatsApp groups or Facebook Groups. There has been a trend over the past year or two towards less formal structures for volunteering and that has now snowballed as a result of this crisis. The key issues that this raises are those of co-ordination – how can the state, which needs to ensure access to services for everyone, work with such informal groups especially when these groups have no insurance, safeguarding procedures, health and safety policies, charity registration?

Volunteering and Wellbeing

The Public Health Agency 5 Steps to Wellbeing campaign illustrates how much volunteering maintains and improves our wellbeing, particularly at this time:

- Volunteering allows us to **Connect** with others and that contact enriches our lives and helps us to cope when things are hard and to have someone to celebrate with when things are good. It helps to lessen loneliness.
- Volunteering keeps us **active** – our research shows that especially for over 50-year olds, volunteering increases physical activity levels which helps to keep us mentally and physically well.
- Volunteering helps us **to notice** and engage with the world around us and to **keep learning**. It helps build skills whether planning a future career or thinking of a change in direction.
- Most importantly volunteering allows us to **give**, to make a difference in someone else's life – to not just think of ourselves but to look out for others.

As we work through the challenges of finding people meaningful opportunities, we should all consider the possibility that this current situation provides us a chance to build a future which allows people to volunteer to play a fuller role in all of our community life.

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