

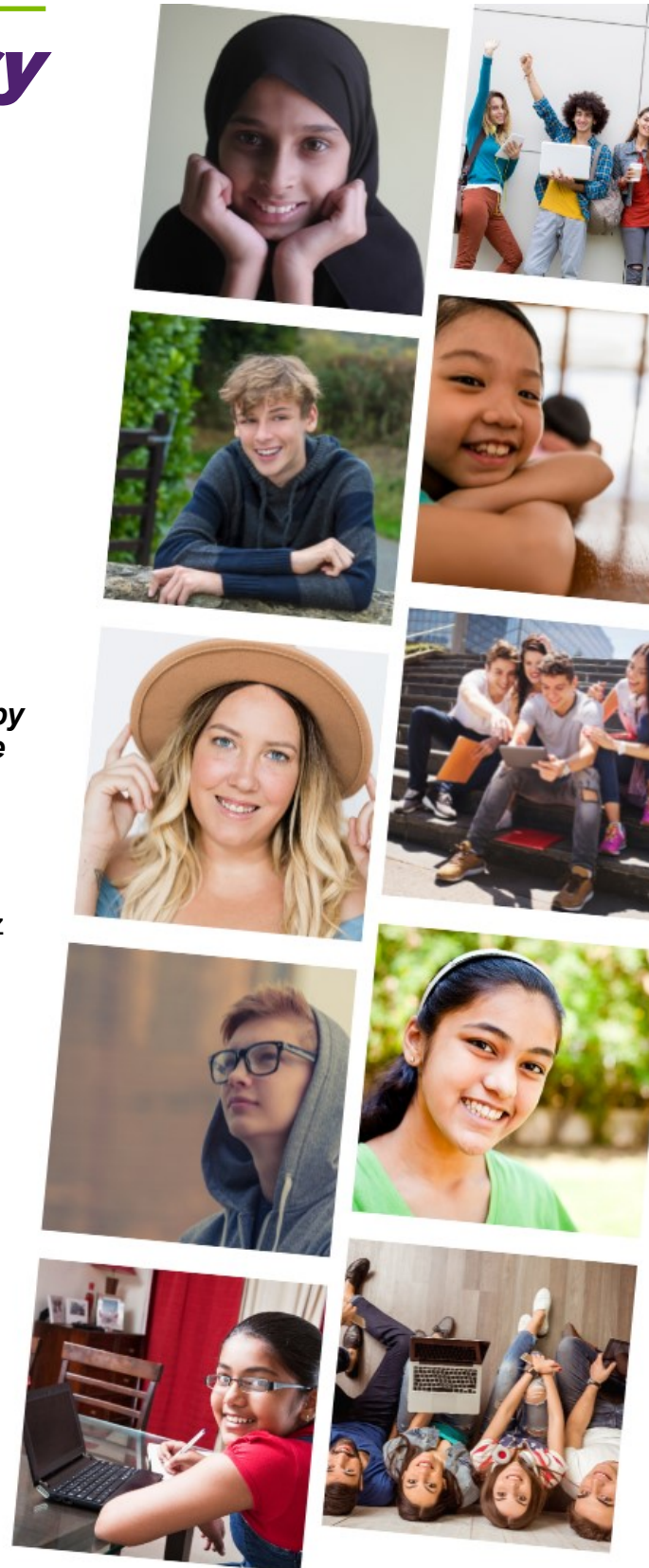
Review of Youth Volunteering in Northern Ireland

Executive Summary

Commissioned by Volunteer Now and undertaken by Queen's University Belfast in collaboration with the University of Kent

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1. Introduction

In October 2021 Volunteer Now commissioned a consortium of academic researchers from Queen's University Belfast and The University of Kent to undertake a review of youth volunteering in Northern Ireland with the aims to understand key trends in youth volunteering, and to raise its profile with stakeholders and policymakers.

2. Methodology

This report is based on a secondary data analysis of large-scale surveys on volunteering, a review of youth volunteering policy and literature, and data collected in four focus groups with policymakers, organisations involving young volunteers, and young people.

3. Youth Volunteering: An Overview

What is volunteering?

Volunteering is any activity which involves the giving of time and effort for no financial payment, of an individual's own free will. Volunteering activities fall into three overlapping categories: unpaid work in the service of others; activism that seeks to change (or maintain) the status quo and; serious leisure in order to develop skills and pursue interests. Youth volunteering is shaped by a number of contextual factors, which influence both decisions to volunteer at all and decisions of what organisations or causes to volunteer in support of. Previous evidence shows that there are three key contextual factors: parental influence; peer influence; and social class with people from more advantaged socio-economic groups being more likely to volunteer.

Various barriers have been identified that prevent some young people from volunteering. These include a lack of: (a) parental or peer volunteer role models, (b) time, (c) information about volunteering opportunities, (d) confidence, and (e) suitable volunteering opportunities.

4. Youth Volunteering Policy in Northern Ireland and across the UK

Volunteering policy is devolved in the United Kingdom, meaning that decision-making is delegated by the UK Parliament to devolved institutions, therefore youth volunteering policy looks quite different in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland - each of the devolved nations. In particular, they vary in terms of whether they identify young people as a specific group of volunteers, if at all, and in terms of whether the strategy proposes mainly top down or mainly collaborative approaches to supporting and developing youth volunteering.

The most recent comprehensive volunteering policy for **Northern Ireland** is 2012's *Join In, Get Involved: Build a Better Future: A Volunteering Strategy and Action Plan for Northern Ireland* (2012), produced by the Department for Social Development (DSD). The document is a broad volunteering strategy, with a focus on supporting and developing existing voluntary activity. The Department of Education and the Education Authority have published a number of policy documents which seek to support and grow volunteering among young people, including: *Priorities for Youth* (Department of Education, 2013), the *Children and Young People's Strategy 2019 – 2029* (Northern Ireland Executive, 2019) and the *Regional Youth Development Plan* (Education Authority, 2020).

In **England**, the 2018 Civil Society Strategy is the most recent overarching policy covering volunteering in England. Of the Strategy's fifteen 'missions', one of these concerning the creation of opportunities for young people. The government states that it wants to empower young people to shape the future of the country. This means helping

them to develop the skills and habits of social responsibility during their childhood and youth. They propose to do this through three inter-connected schemes, the National Citizens Service, the International Citizen Service, and the #iWill Fund. All three of these schemes are to a greater or lesser extent cross-UK, rather than England-specific.

Scotland has the most recently published volunteering strategy of any of the four nations in 2019's *Volunteering for All: Our National Framework*. This document is both a review of existing volunteering activity in Scotland and an outlining of the Scottish Government's objectives for volunteering and the role it can play in wider Scottish life. While the Framework doesn't focus on youth volunteering explicitly, recommendations made in the National Youth Volunteering Improvement Project published in March 2019 are supposed to be taken into account.

Wales' most recent volunteering strategy is 2015's *Volunteering Policy: Supporting Communities, Changing Lives*. Distinct from all of the other nations' volunteer strategies is a clear understanding of and commitment to funding volunteering. Notably there is also a commitment to providing a wide range of appropriate awards for volunteering.

5. **Statistical Evidence on Volunteering in Northern Ireland**

From 2012-2016, questions on volunteering were included in the Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey, and since 2017, statistics on volunteering have been collected annually through the Continuous Household Survey (CHS). Volunteer Now also commissioned Social Market Research to undertake a study on the impact of COVID19 on volunteering and they were also part of an ESRC-funded UK wide research group that investigated post-Covid volunteering. A pertinent question was also included in the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Opinion Survey. Limited, specific data on young people's experiences and perceptions of volunteering in Northern Ireland are available through a module of questions on volunteering asked on behalf of the Volunteer Development Agency that was included in the 2009 Young Life and Times (YLT) survey of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland. The majority of these questions were repeated in YLT 2017. In 2019, questions on volunteering were also included in Northern Ireland's Young Person's Behaviour and Attitudes Survey (YPBAS). Unfortunately, different age bands, definitions and methodologies used in these surveys do not allow for cross-survey comparisons.

Continuous Household Survey

Results from the 2019/20 CHS sweep showed that 28 per cent of participants had been involved in volunteering in the preceding twelve months, a figure similar to that reported in previous survey rounds in 2018/19 and 2017/18 (27%). Whilst 16-24 year olds are most likely to volunteer, statistically, there is very little difference in the level of engagement in volunteering activities between age groups.

According to the latest CHS data, most respondents spending less than eight hours (40%); just over one-fifth spending 8-16 hours (23%); and 16 per cent committing over 17 hours to volunteering each month. Around one-fifth of respondents had not volunteered (19%). While respondents aged 16-34 years (26%) were most likely to report not being involved in volunteering and least likely to commit 17 hours or more, nonetheless, nearly four in ten committed less than eight hours and one quarter 8-16 hours.

The three most popular types of organisations for volunteering were church/faith based organisations and groups (39%), sports organisations (29%), and community and neighbourhood groups (17%). For respondents who were 16-34 years of age only around three in ten were involved in church/faith based organisations (31%) compared to nearly

six in ten of those aged 65 years plus (58%). A similar proportion of those aged 16-34 years were involved in sports organisations and groups (31%) followed, unsurprisingly, by youth/children's activities outside school (23%) and children's education/schools (21%), participation in community and neighbourhood groups (16%) mirrored the overall trend.

Respondents aged 16-34 years were most likely to find out about volunteering through personal contacts within an organisation (44%) followed by word of mouth (28%) and church/religious organisation (26%). It is important to note, that respondents aged 16-44 years were more likely to indicate that social media (15%) was an important source of information than respondents in other age groups.

Between six in ten and two-thirds of respondents aged 16-34 years felt that volunteering positively influenced their feelings of self-worth, helped them contribute to society, have fun, and make friends. The value of volunteering in acquiring and developing skills is regarded as more beneficial to respondents under 34 years of age than others. The value attached in relation to career planning (23%), qualifications (15%) and studies (11%) is also worth noting.

The main reason given for not volunteering was lack of time (40%); this was particularly relevant for those in the 16-34 year age band and least for those aged 65 years plus. The second most frequently cited reason for not volunteering was work commitments (36%). This was most likely to be the case for respondents aged 35-44 years (53%) and those in the 16-34 age group (48%). Respondents in the lowest age band were more likely than others to report 'not knowing how to get involved' (11%) or 'not hearing about opportunities to volunteer' (10%).

Coronavirus and volunteering

Respondents were asked to identify any voluntary/unpaid help they provided, both before and during the pandemic. Findings from the survey indicated that 40 per cent of respondents volunteered both before and during the pandemic - most likely in informal volunteering. During the pandemic the proportions of respondents engaged in formal volunteering and mutual aid were similar (18% and 19% respectively). Younger respondents were more likely to have been involved in all aspects of volunteering both before and during the pandemic. When asked about volunteering during the pandemic, respondents aged 18-34 years were more likely to have been involved.

In terms of volunteering intentions, once the COVID-19 crisis is over (i.e. lockdown has been lifted and we are no longer in a pandemic), 35 per cent of respondents said they would engage in mutual aid, 27 per cent formal volunteering and 24 per cent informal volunteering. Respondents who indicated that they intended to volunteer post COVID-19 were asked about their planned time commitment in comparison to pre pandemic. One half of these respondents said they intended to spend more time giving voluntary unpaid help (12% a lot more time: 38% a little more time); 38 per cent the same amount of time, six per cent less time (5% a little less time: 1% a lot less time) and six per cent undecided. Younger respondents were more likely to say they intended to give the same amount of time to volunteering post pandemic.

2009 and 2017 Young Life and Times (YLT) surveys

In both 2009 and 2017 female respondents were more likely to say they volunteered in any capacity (59% and 77% respectively) than males (50% and 53% respectively). In 2017, respondents from well-off backgrounds (77%) were significantly more likely to have volunteered than those from not well-off backgrounds (56%), particularly in respect of formal volunteering.

Respondents were most likely to say they had spent 1-5 hours volunteering in the preceding four weeks (42%), with around one quarter spending 6-10 hours and similar proportions spending less than an hour or more than ten hours (13% -2009; 16% 2017). Weekly volunteering was most likely to occur in school or a local community/youth group, followed by sports/exercise based volunteering. Volunteering in religious organisations dropped significantly from 2009-2017 reflecting the fact that religious affiliation has decreased among 16-year olds over time.

In both survey sweeps, respondents were most likely to have been involved in organising or helping to run an activity or event (70%) and/or taking part in fundraising or sponsored events (64%), with over half helping with a particular charity or cause (58%) and/or tutoring, coaching or mentoring (54%). Respondents were least likely to be involved in animal welfare (6%) or improving the environment (16%).

The main reasons why young people volunteer continue to be career/skills focused, closely followed by a desire to help others. Respondents from well-off financial backgrounds were much more career/skills driven in their motivations, whereas having family/ friends who volunteer or meeting people/making friends were more important for those from less well-off backgrounds. Respondents, particularly young women, were more likely to feel that they were encouraged to volunteer due to the personal importance of a cause.

Respondents agreed that being involved in volunteering had increased their network of friends (63%), and their contact with people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds (48% and 44% respectively). Around nine in ten respondents felt that, when volunteering, they could cope with the things they were asked to do (89%) and that their efforts were appreciated (90%), whilst 81 per cent felt it improved their self-confidence. Responses were more nuanced in relation to balancing volunteering with other school/ home commitments with 40 per cent of respondents agreeing that it could be difficult to do so, and 35 per cent disagreeing.

The main reasons for not volunteering were high levels of schoolwork (50%); too many other commitments (39%); and the inability to find out about volunteering (17%).

For those respondents who had never volunteered or had stopped/decreased their commitment to volunteering, the top four things that would encourage them to engage/ return to volunteering were more flexibility - volunteering when it suited them (59%), this was particularly the case for females (69%) compared to males (49%); gaining experience in things that would be useful to them (51%); having fun (41%) and recognition of their efforts by businesses and universities (33%).

NISRA's Young Persons' Behaviour & Attitudes Survey (YPBAS)

Nearly half of respondents said they had volunteered in the preceding year (49%), either in school time (19%) or in their own time (38%), nearly one third said that while they had not volunteered they would like to do so in the future (32%), while the remainder had no intention of doing so in the future (18%). Over half of respondents who volunteered did so regularly, that is at least once a month (57%), with 40 per cent volunteering at least once a week. The four most popular volunteering activities were sports or exercise (58%), children or young people's activities outside school (35%), hobbies/arts clubs (22%), church/faith based (19%), with the least popular being justice and human rights (3%) and political groups (2%).

Young people taking part in the National Citizens Service (NCS) programme in Northern Ireland

All or a vast majority of participants joined the NCS programme in order to have an opportunity to gain new skills and meet new friends, whilst a high proportion also reported that their family members, friends or teachers encouraged them to participate in NCS. The main motivating factor for young people to get involved in NCS was the fact that they would be taking positive social action in their communities. A significant minority of respondents who had completed the programme reported that they hoped that their participation in NCS would help their UCAS forms. When asked about the main barriers to volunteering, reflecting the large-scale survey data, demands in relation to school or part-time work commitments dominated the issues raised.

Respondents who had successfully completed their NCS programme reported that the NCS had allowed them to make new friends and learn new skills. The vast majority of these young people also stated that they had challenged themselves with tasks or activities that they would not normally undertake. Young people felt they had grown in confidence and had gained transferrable life skills. When asked about future volunteering opportunities, most young people who had participated in the NCS expressed preferences for short/time-limited, group (rather than individual) volunteering opportunities where young people themselves had some say about the activities involved and that would be meaningful to them and the communities in which the activities take place.

6. Themes Emerging from Focus Groups

Study participants commented on how the **absence of a designated youth volunteering policy or strategy** impacts the volunteering landscape. Some participants appeared to agree that within the NI Executive there was a lack of a sense of need or urgency for a designated youth volunteering strategy. Participants felt that **funding for expanded youth volunteering roles and opportunities** would positively impact the landscape youth volunteering in Northern Ireland.

Participants shared their experience of **young people's enthusiasm** about volunteering and their desire to get involved. There was agreement that volunteers are an important element of youth service delivery and that their contribution needs to be recognised.

Although drivers for volunteering were once understood to be purely 'selfless', it is now acknowledged that these can be both **instrumental and altruistic**. Several young volunteers said they gained a sense of inspiration from the opportunities to engage in community-based action, giving back to and inspiring others that stem from volunteering. In terms of instrumental drivers, participants identified improvements to social life and self-confidence, opportunities to travel, and improvements to CVs/UCAS forms as motivations and outcomes for some young volunteers. The 'soft skills' around personal and professional development learnt in volunteering roles are considered "very valuable to employers", as several participants agreed.

Focus group participants identified a series of **barriers** to young people getting involved in volunteering, related to rurality and financial/safeguarding implications. Some of these barriers also have implications for the retention of young volunteers in volunteer-involving organisations.

The overall attitude towards COVID-19 as it relates to youth volunteering is how young volunteers have been increasingly valued as crucial to organisations. Focus group discussions did, however, present COVID-19 and impacts on volunteer retention levels as temporary. It is also crucial to state that some participants felt COVID-19 has, in fact,

encouraged young volunteers to step out further than they potentially may have been able to, pre-COVID. The COVID-19 pandemic and related lockdowns have had a series of implications for young volunteers in Northern Ireland, with a transition from physical involvement in volunteering to more limited virtual opportunities, which was described by a young volunteer with additional needs as very difficult. Some formal skills programmes were also disrupted throughout the pandemic.

Focus group discussions generated a series of key findings around what young volunteers, organisational representatives and policymakers think ought to be understood or changed about the youth volunteering landscape in Northern Ireland.

- a. Youth volunteering needs to be understood as a professional engagement.
- b. 'Role matching' is important for volunteering opportunities to find the best roles for the best skills, but there needs to be space for self-defining roles.
- c. Traditional means of communication (ie via schools and youth projects) were reaffirmed as good channels for communicating youth volunteering roles, even though there is also value in communicating via current social media platforms.

7. **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The greatest benefit of this study is perhaps that it brings together everything we know about youth volunteering into one place. In many ways the primary data collected via focus group discussions in this project confirmed and reflected the issues raised by the survey data and the insights from our literature and policy reviews.

Both survey data and focus groups showed that whilst young people may volunteer for altruistic or instrumental reasons, they all do so to make a positive difference to their own and other people's lives. Volunteering has the capacity to bring about tangible positive attitude changes and often results in transferrable life skills for young people that may help them further their personal development and careers whether that is in further and higher education or employment. We have identified six policy and practice recommendations.

Recommendations



Update NI Youth Volunteering Policy

Northern Ireland's volunteering policy is the oldest in the UK. Considering the dynamic of the youth sector, this policy should be reviewed and updated regularly.



Engage with young people to shape volunteering policy and strategy

Participants in the surveys and focus groups were very clear that they want to be involved in determining and shaping what volunteering activities they are involved in.



Re-establish awards and recognition schemes

There is strong evidence that awards and recognition schemes can encourage young people to take up volunteering opportunities. Awards schemes are a good mechanism to recognise the positive contribution that many young people make to their communities.



Improve communication channels about volunteering opportunities

There is evidence that some young people are still finding it difficult to find out about volunteering opportunities that are suitable for them. Multiple, flexible and young people-friendly communication channels should be explored and used.



Better promotion of benefits of youth volunteering

There is very strong evidence for the benefits to young people in relation to the skills and opportunities arising out of volunteering, but also for the benefits for volunteer-involving organisations, communities and society overall. This should be communicated better.



Collect and collate data on volunteering systematically

Data on youth volunteering should be collected regularly to monitor developments and trends. Ideally this should be done in a way that it is consistent and comparable with data collected in other parts of the UK and Ireland and with time series data in mind.