Review of Youth Volunteering In Northern Ireland

A study commissioned by Volunteer Now

Undertaken by Queen's University Belfast in collaboration with The University of Kent

vsb
Foundation

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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. The aims of the proposed study were twofold, namely:

1. To understand key trends in youth volunteering, and
2. To raise its profile with stakeholders and policymakers.

The research, which is presented below, consisted of:

- An analysis of UK youth volunteering policy;
- A review of existing Northern Ireland datasets on volunteering with the aim to extract particularly relevant information with regard to youth volunteering where this was feasible, and
- A series of four focus groups consisting of policymakers, organisations involving young volunteers, and young people, some of whom were involved in volunteering and some who were not.

2. Methodology

This report is based on a mixed-methods approach consisting of a secondary data analysis of large-scale surveys on volunteering, a youth volunteering policy and literature review and data collected in four focus groups.

Policy and strategy documents in relation to youth volunteering are publicly available. Relevant literature was sources through the university library services at Queens University Belfast and The University of Kent respectively.

One of the limitations of undertaking secondary data analysis is that the original data were not necessarily collected and published with the same research aim and objective, so they may not meet all needs exactly. One of the main limitations for this review was therefore that some of the volunteering surveys were administered to a general population rather than specific samples of young people. Whilst these studies may have asked respondents about their actual age, the data is often only available for secondary analysis in aggregated format in age groups (mainly to protect individuals' identities, but also because the research aim and reporting framework of the original studies is different from this review). For example, while data from the Continuous Household Survey (CHS) can be accessed via the UK Data Archive, this is only available for combined age groups (ie, 16-24 years, 25-34 years

etc.).We therefore had to operate with, and make sense of, the data in the available format and age range. Where this was possible and meaningful, we re-ran analyses. In other cases we elicited findings from already existing reports and contextualised these here with evidence form literature, policy review and groups discussion data.

Data from a survey undertaken among young people in Northern Ireland who have taken part in the National Citizens Service (NCS) programme in 2022 were also provided to us for inclusion in the report.

Four focus groups were conducted in total, and participants represented Northern Ireland based policymakers and stakeholders and volunteer-involving organisation representatives in two of these group discussions, both of which were conducted online via MS Teams, and two small groups of young volunteers and non-volunteering young people who took part in face-to-face group discussions. The online discussions with professionals lasted for approximately 45 minutes, whilst the face-to-face group discussions with young people lasted approximately 90 minutes each. While a schedule of questions was designed, the focus groups were semi-structured to allow for discussion and interaction between group members. Participants' views were sought on policies and strategies around youth volunteering; understandings of youth volunteering and the importance attached to it, both societally and individually; drivers and barriers; and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Youth Volunteering: An Overview

What is volunteering?

In its simplest terms, volunteering is any activity which involves the giving of time and effort for no financial payment, of an individual's own free will and to provide for those beyond their close family (Cnaan et al., 1996). This includes both volunteering done through groups, clubs or organisations in the public, private or voluntary sectors and volunteering which involves giving time to an individual, family or informal group.

Rochester et al. (2011) sought to make sense of this expansive range of activities by proposing that all 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 is volunteering in order to develop skills and pursue interests. Many volunteering activities will span across two or more of these categories, for example a young person volunteering as a junior rugby coach who, in doing so, gains coaching qualifications.

What shapes youth volunteering?

Young people's engagement in 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.

1. Parental influence

A key factor shaping volunteering by young people is parental influence. Numerous studies have demonstrated the habit of volunteering tends to be passed from one generation to another (Musick and Wilson, 2008 for an overview). Two main mechanisms are at play here: socialisation, by young people hearing parents talk about community involvement and; role modelling, by young people seeing their parents volunteer (Musick and Wilson, 2008).

2. Peer influence

The actions of peers also have an impact on whether young people are likely to volunteer. As well as modelling the volunteering activities of their parents or caregivers, young people's engagement in volunteering is also influenced by peers acting as role models. Youniss et al. (2001) found that the social groups young people identified themselves as being a part of, and the level of engagement of their peers in volunteering, had a significant impact on the likelihood of volunteering.

3. Social class

The relationship between socio-economic status (however measured) and volunteering is well established. A number of large-scale studies in the UK, USA and elsewhere in Europe have found that people from more advantaged socio-economic groups are more likely to volunteer than those in less advantaged socio-economic groups. This pattern is established in childhood. It has been observed in the USA (Gaby, 2017), Denmark (Bonnesen, 2018), across the European Union (Gil-Lacruz et al., 2016) and in the UK (Bennett and Parameshwaran, 2013). However, the nature of this relationship isn't well understood. It could be due to how we define volunteering, excluding the activities of less advantaged socio-economic groups, or it could be that volunteering is more appealing and/or accessible to people from more advantaged socio-economic groups. It is also possible that people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds do not recognise or 'label' time they give for free as 'volunteering'.

Barriers to youth volunteering

Various barriers have been identified that prevent some young people from volunteering. Some relate to the factors identified above in reverse – a lack of parental or peer volunteer role models. Four other barriers that have been identified are briefly discussed below.

1. Lack of time

A number of academic studies have found a lack of time being cited by young people as the main reason for not volunteering (Ellis, 2004; Gaskin, 2004; Hill et al., 2009; Pye and Michelmore, 2016). Some studies have linked this lack of time to time pressures such as exam pressures (Clement and Lafferty, 2015) and family commitments (Shannon, 2009).

2. Lack of information

Government-funded surveys (Low et al., 2007) and academic research (Brewis et al., 2010) have found that young people often cite a lack of information about volunteering opportunities as a barrier to their participation. However, while Ellis (2004) found that some young people were citing this as a barrier, the same study found that other young people felt there was too much information on volunteering opportunities, so much so that it became confusing and overwhelming.

3. Lack of confidence

Both Ellis (2004) and Brewis et al. (2010) found that a lack of confidence was a barrier to volunteering. This is in terms of both whether they would fit comfortably with other volunteers and whether they had the skills and experience be able to make a meaningful contribution. Stereotypical ideas about volunteering – linked to socio-economic class, age and ethnicity – contribute to this lack of confidence and may result in fewer young people from disadvantaged backgrounds or minority ethnic backgrounds coming forward to volunteer.

4. Lack of suitable opportunities

Volunteering has been described as a 'local phenomenon' (Musick and Wilson, 2008: 139). Therefore it follows that there are more opportunities for volunteering in areas with more voluntary organisations and infrastructure bodies to support this. McDonnell et al. (2020) show that across the UK, there are more registered charities – and therefore more volunteering opportunities – in more affluent areas.

Summary

Volunteering activities that young people undertake are facilitated and constrained by a range of factors. Understanding these help us to have greater awareness of volunteer needs and to attract and retain young volunteers.

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

Overview

Volunteering policy is devolved in the United Kingdom, meaning that decision-making is delegated by the UK Parliament to devolved institutions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The result is that volunteering policy looks quite different in each of the devolved nations. In this section we first provide a comprehensive and clear overview of the Northern Irish policy environment, going on to place this in the context of the wider UK, identifying points of similarity and difference across the different policy contexts.

Youth volunteering policy in Northern Ireland

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.

It sets out to do this across five key areas:

1. Recognising the value and promoting its benefits;
2. Enhancing accessibility and diversity;
3. Improving the experience;
4. Supporting and strengthening the infrastructure;
5. Delivering the strategy.

There is a commitment throughout the document to investment in diversity, with specific strands of the Strategy Action Plan targeting different categories of volunteers, including young people. Actions 2.1a, 2.1f and 3.3c in particular focus on young volunteers, as shown in **Tables 1a-c.**

Table 1a: Action 2.1a from '*Join In, Get Involved*' (DSD, 2012)

Action	Enable children and young people to become involved in volunteering and help them develop skills and gain experience through their voluntary activity.
Key Performance Indicators	• Increased numbers of young people volunteering • Increased participation in the Millennium Volunteers programme
Measurement Options	• Numbers of young people volunteering • More young people and placement organisations participating in the Millennium Volunteers programme

Table 1b: Action 2.1f from '*Join In, Get Involved*' (DSD, 2012)

Action	Deliver a series of roadshows for schools to make young people aware of the benefits of volunteering and the opportunities that are available.
Key Performance Indicators	• 2500 young people attending roadshows each year
Measurement Options	• Number of schools involved, pupils attending and levels of volunteering in young people

Table 1c: Action 3.3c from '*Join In, Get Involved*' (DSD, 2012)

Action	Enable careers information in schools to present volunteering as an option for gaining skills and experience.
Key Performance Indicators	• Increased recognition of volunteering to support career development
Measurement Options	• Feedback from schools /students • Leaflets distributed • New volunteers

These three actions are all rooted in existing volunteering and/or youth structures, with specific, measurable and achievable performance indicators to be delivered by public and voluntary sector partners. That being said, they are relatively unambitious and do not represent a 'step change' in youth volunteering.

Since the 2012 Strategy, 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: Improving Young People's Lives through Youth Work (Department of Education, 2013).

Despite the focus on youth work, this strategy document makes numerous references to the importance of engaging young people as volunteers. As with the 2012 Strategy, it focusses on supporting existing youth organisations to meaningfully involve volunteers, rather than proposing any new support.

The Children and Young People's Strategy 2019 – 2029 (Northern Ireland Executive, 2019)

One of the eight key outcomes for children and young people in this wide-ranging strategy is that young people can make a positive contribution to society. The focus is broad, with mentions of 'resourceful citizens' and 'active citizenship' rather than specific focus on volunteering by young people. Co-design of youth services is given greater prominence than the engagement of young people in wider social causes.

Regional Youth Development Plan (Education Authority, 2020)

A key area in this strategy is the development of volunteers in the non-formal youth education workforce. However there is no mention of young people as volunteers within these ambitions. This is somewhat at odds with the plans to involve young people's voices in regional, local and community planning and to empower young people to, "*advocate for others in the delivery and moderation of youth funding*" (25). It suggests perhaps a narrow view of volunteering, seeing it as concerned only with service delivery, rather than as encompassing advocacy and involvement in co-production of services.

Comparisons with other UK nations

England

The 2018 Civil Society Strategy is the most recent overarching policy covering volunteering in England. The document itself is somewhat confused about the realities of devolution, with the Ministerial Foreword alone praising the, "*resourcefulness of the British people*" (10) before going on to outline a, "*vision of how government can help strengthen and support civil society in England*" (11).

Of the Strategy's fifteen 'missions', three concern 'people', with one of these concerning the creation of opportunities for young people. This 'mission' covers youth services, social responsibility, youth involvement in policy design and, most significantly, "*Habits of social responsibility*" (42). Expanding on this final policy goal, the Strategy outlines how,

"Alongside providing opportunities, the government also 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." (42)

They propose to do this through three inter-connected schemes:

- **National Citizens Service**, a UK-wide youth volunteering and personal development scheme usually lasting four weeks that young people aged 15 to 17 voluntarily participate in.
- **International Citizen Service**, an overseas volunteering scheme for 18 to 25 year olds from across the UK. It involves three month volunteer placements aimed at talking the "*causes of poverty overseas*" (43).
- **The #iWill Fund**, a £600m investment from the government and the National Lottery Community Fund (known as the Big Lottery Fund at the time of the Strategy) in youth volunteering projects. This aims to create at least 650,000 new volunteering opportunities for young people. Notably its focus changes annually – in 2018 the focus was the NHS and in 2019 it was the environment.

All three of these schemes are to a greater or lesser extent cross-UK, rather than England-specific. The #iWill Fund seeks to work with the existing voluntary sector by funding existing projects and funding new innovations, while ICS is administered by existing overseas volunteering organisation VSO. NCS on the other hand has sought to build or impose a new youth volunteering infrastructure rather than building on what already exists.

Scotland

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.

The Framework identifies a range of actors which are central to the successful implementation of its aims:

- The Scottish Government;
- Leadership bodies in the voluntary sector, including Volunteer Scotland, SCVO and local third sector infrastructure bodies;
- Local authorities;
- Funders;
- Volunteer involving organisations;
- Businesses and employers;
- NHS and social care.

Representatives from all of these actors were involved in the production of the Framework and each of these groups is tasked with continuing to support existing volunteering, with tackling barriers to engagement and with developing new approaches.

While the Framework doesn't focus on youth volunteering explicitly – or on any other group's engagement – the six actors beyond the Scottish Government are expected to take into account the recommendations made in the National Youth Volunteering Improvement Project, published a month previously in March 2019. These recommendations are:

- Training for voluntary organisations on youth inclusion;
- Review of quality assurance marks for voluntary organisations;
- Develop guidelines on supporting young volunteers;
- Local area network meetings;
- Local area volunteering advisory scheme;
- Youth Volunteering Champion schools;
- Create a framework to support young people not in education, employment or training, to gain work-based skills and personal development through volunteering;
- National forum for businesses and the third sector;

- Pilot scheme to support small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to enable staff to take volunteering days;
- Roadshows to promote volunteering in local communities;
- Dedicated access fund for voluntary organisations.

Included in this fairly long list are some very specific and some more broad goals. That a wide range of organisations in Scotland's volunteering ecosystem are required to consider these when planning their own volunteering policies and programmes suggests – at a policy level at least – a prominent place for youth volunteering in Scottish volunteer-involving organisations.

Wales

Wales' most recent comprehensive volunteering strategy is 2015's *Volunteering Policy: Supporting Communities, Changing Lives*. The policy – in common with Northern Ireland's 2012 policy – is clear about the role that volunteering can play in Welsh society. The policy aims to meet three key goals:

- To improve access to volunteering for people of all ages and from all parts of society;
- To encourage the more effective involvement of volunteers, including through appropriate training;
- To raise the status and improve the image of volunteering.

Distinct from all of the other nations' volunteer strategies is a clear understanding of and commitment to funding volunteering, with the strategy noting that:

"Participation in volunteering is improved through grant schemes which support volunteering and the creation of good practice amongst volunteer involving organisations in terms of their volunteer policies and effective management of volunteers." (6)

In common with Scotland, the policy is explicitly collaborative, with a number of key delivery partners identified, including voluntary organisations, sector infrastructure bodies, employers and public sector organisations. Notably there is also a commitment to providing, "*a wide range of appropriate awards for volunteering*" (8).

However, mentions of youth volunteering are few and far between. Only in the final paragraph of the strategy is volunteering by young people mentioned explicitly, it being noted that in the context of government funding for infrastructure organisations that:

"Youth volunteering programmes in particular provide a foundation in volunteering for young people, which can also be a stepping stone to lifelong volunteering activity." (20)

This is not expanded on, nor does the strategy signpost towards other policy documents with a more specific focus on youth volunteering.

Similarities and differences

Table 2, below, outlines the key similarities and differences between the youth volunteering policies in the four nations.

Table 2: Similarities and differences in youth volunteering policy across the four nations

	Northern Ireland	England	Scotland	Wales
Date of strategy	2012	2018	2019	2015
Scope	Volunteering	Civil society	Volunteering	Volunteering
Youth focus	Explicitly covered in the strategy and expanded on in associated policy documents	Explicitly covered in the strategy	Little coverage in strategy but co-produced youth volunteering policy published alongside	Little coverage and no specific national youth volunteering strategy.
Collaborative or top-down?	Broadly collaborative, focus on youth volunteering within youth services	Main focus on large national schemes, e.g. NCS, with little encouragement of collaboration	Very collaborative, focus on key stakeholders in delivering the policy goals	Broadly collaborative, with key roles for volunteer involving organisations and infrastructure groups

The extent to which national volunteering strategies in the four nations of the UK identify ways to support youth volunteering and the way they propose going about doing so varies substantially, as the Table shows. 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 they strategy proposes mainly top down or mainly collaborative approaches to supporting and developing youth volunteering.

Summary

Northern Ireland's volunteering strategy is now a decade old, the oldest of the four nations that make up the United Kingdom. This over-arching policy is augmented by a range of more recent associated policy documents from different government departments and non-departmental bodies. While these cover youth volunteering, it is not their main focus and as such Northern Ireland has had no specific youth volunteering policy since 2012.

In contrast, the other nations of the United Kingdom all have more recent volunteering strategies, albeit with differing levels of explicit commitment to youth volunteering. How the strategies are to be delivered differs too, with England taking a more top-down approach, favouring large volunteering schemes, than the more collaborative policy approaches in the other three nations.

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, this approach in theory suggests a key role for organisations who work with young volunteers and the infrastructure bodies who support them.

5. Statistical Evidence on Volunteering in Northern Ireland

Overview

Studies on volunteering have been conducted, and statistical data collected regionally across the UK over a number of years. While, in terms of continuity and size, England and Scotland have been to the fore in the collection of data on participation in volunteering and the nature of activities people volunteer in, a small range of data is also available for Northern Ireland (Zimmeck, 2018). 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). Whilst there is a level of continuity with which volunteering questions were asked of a general population in NI, this change in methodology means that the results pre and post 2017 are not directly comparable.

The outbreak and spread of COVID-19 focused attention on volunteering, and research on the topic has grown across the UK. In this regard, but primarily focused on adults, Volunteer Now commissioned Social Market Research to undertake a study (Volunteer Now, 2021), and they were also part of an ESRC-funded UK wide research group (Volunteer Now, 2022). A pertinent question was also included in the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Opinion Survey (NISRA, 2020b) (Volunteer Now, 2022).

Limited, specific data on young people's experiences and perceptions of volunteering in Northern Ireland are also available. In 2009 a module of questions on volunteering, asked on behalf of the Volunteer Development Agency, the predecessor of Volunteer Now, and funded by the Youth Council for Northern Ireland, was included in the annual Young Life and Times (YLT) survey of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland. With funding from Volunteer Now, 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, NISRA, 2020a).

While the focus of this report is 'youth volunteering', reasons for engaging in volunteering are complex and influenced by a range of both personal and structural factors, some of which were listed in the Introduction above. Thus, while the findings that follow are presented, primarily, with reference to age, the differences that exist between and within groups of young people reflecting the influence and interplay of, such things, as gender, financial background, and geographic location while not explored are acknowledged. Moreover, at times, the age bands utilised in the data analysis of original surveys do not allow for the identification of what might be considered 'youth', i.e. 25 years of age or less. For example,

the Continuous Household Survey operates with an age range of 18-34 years, and further disaggregation of data, which would match the definition of youth used by policy strategies, such as **Priorities for Youth** (DE, 2013).

Continuous Household Survey: NISRA

The Continuous Household Survey (CHS) defines volunteering as '*the commitment of time and energy, for the benefit of society and the community, the environment, or individuals outside (or in addition to) one's immediate family. It is unpaid and undertaken freely and by choice.*' As currently defined, therefore, it is not possible to effectively disaggregate data into formal and informal volunteering, albeit that data on volunteering activities are collected. In October 2020, NISRA published an overview of the findings on volunteering from the most recent CHS, which was carried out between April 2019 and March 2020 (NISRA, 2020b). The sections below summarise the findings from this overview.

Participation in volunteering

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%).

Figure 1. Volunteering by age group
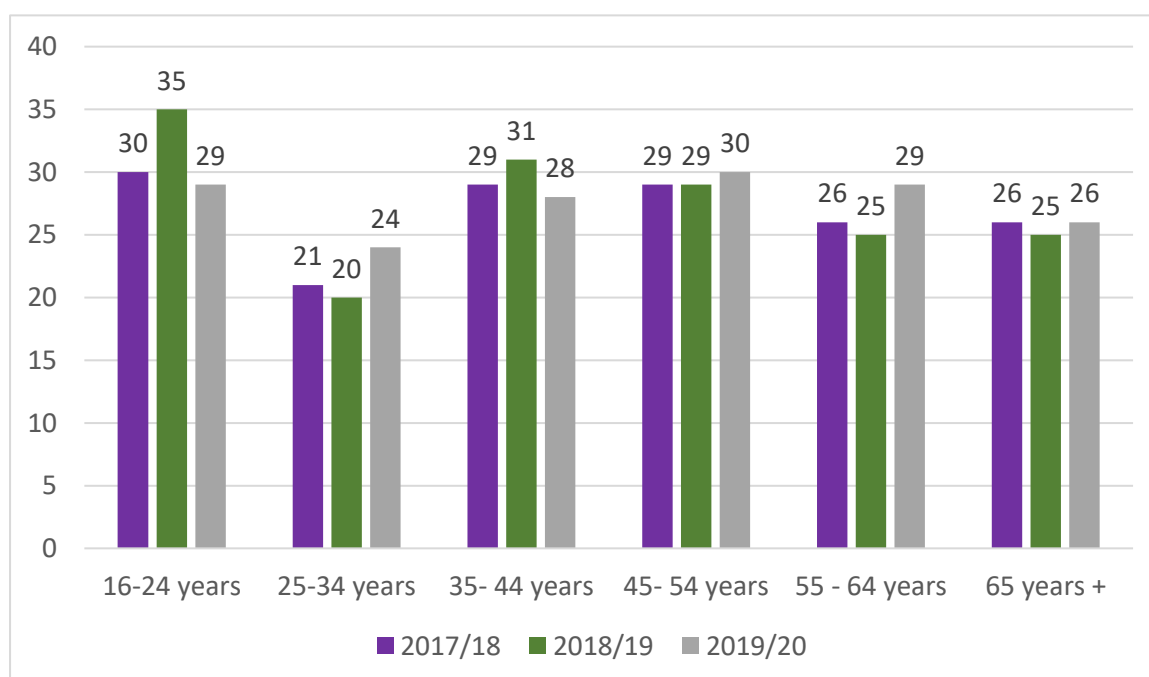
Source: CHS 2017/18; 2018/19; 2019/20 (%)

As detailed in **Figure 1**, the age distribution of those volunteering has remained relatively similar over the three surveys. The Figure shows that 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. The most interesting finding is that the level of volunteering appears to drop off among 25-34 year olds, but then picks up again for those aged 35 and above. Unfortunately, the CHS data does not provide information on volunteering trajectories.

Time spent volunteering

In relation to time spent volunteering in the week prior to the survey data being collected, results from 2019/20 are similar to earlier surveys with 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.

Table 3: Time spent volunteering by age of respondent (%)

Age	None	Less than 8 hours	8 – 16 hours	17 hours plus
All	19	40	23	16
16-34 years	26	39	25	9
35-44 years	22	45	22	12
45-54 years	20	35	23	22
55-64 years	12	44	22	21
65+ years	11	44	23	23

Source: CHS 2019/20

Around one-fifth of respondents had not volunteered (19%) - a figure similar to 2017/18 but less than 2018/19 (20% and 23% respectively). As detailed in **Table 3**, 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.

Volunteering organisations

Following a similar trend to previous years, overall in 2019/20 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%); these were closely followed by organisations linked to youth/children outside school (15%) and children's education/school (15%). For respondents who were 16-34 years of age 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. Only two per cent of respondents said that while they volunteered it was not with an organisation, a proportion that was similar across the age groups.

Sources of information on volunteering

As detailed in **Table 4**, and similar to other age groups, 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.

Table 4: Finding out about volunteering opportunities by age of respondent (%)

Sources of information	16-34 years	35-44 years	45-54 years	55-64 years	65 years plus	All
Someone already involved in the organisation	44	44	52	41	54	45
From a church or a religious organisation	26	26	26	29	33	34
Word of mouth	28	28	20	38	38	33
Through a school, college or university	14	14	19	8	4	10
From previous use of the services the organisation provides	13	13	9	8	7	9
I contacted the organisation directly	7	7	13	9	7	8
Through social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter)	15	15	6	5	3	7
I set up the group with like-minded people	4	4	2	6	2	5
Through the Internet	7	7	1	7	2	5
Through my employer's volunteer scheme	8	8	6	5	2	4
Through a community centre	3	3	3	5	2	3
Through a local event/volunteer fair	4	4	2	1	7	3
Through the local newspapers/ radio/ TV	1	1	-	2	2	2
From a volunteer centre	1	1	1	1	2	1
Other	1	1	3	1	4	2

Source: CHS 2019/20

Benefits of volunteering

As detailed in **Table 5**, in line with overall findings 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. Reflecting the age profile of this group of respondents and their position in terms of their life and career trajectories, the value of volunteering in acquiring and developing skills is regarded as more beneficial to respondents under thirty four years of age than others. Similarly, given our focus on young people, the value attached in relation to career planning (23%), qualifications (15%) and studies (11%) is also worth noting.

Table 5: Benefits of volunteering by age of respondent, CHS (%)

Benefits of volunteering	16-34 years	35-44 years	45-54 years	55-64 years	65 years plus	All
Makes me feel better about myself	65	58	73	67	69	67
Helps me make a positive contribution to society	67	71	67	65	61	65
I had fun	69	62	61	63	51	63
I made new friends	59	61	61	64	60	60
Learned new skills / developed existing skills	57	49	47	43	35	49
Improved my knowledge	37	44	43	46	35	40
Enabled me to become more included in society	35	44	42	37	34	37
Improved mental health	30	41	43	39	30	36
Developed my confidence	39	28	35	30	21	33
Improved physical health	17	28	30	23	21	24
Helped me think about a future career	23	13	12	8	1	14
Helped me gain a qualification	15	12	9	5	2	11
Helped me with studies for school	11	2	2	1	0	5
Helped me get a job	6	6	3	1	-	4
No benefit	-	1	3	-	-	1
Other	-	-	1	1	-	0

Source: CHS 2019/20

Reasons for not volunteering

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

Volunteering and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic: (Volunteer Now, 2021)

As noted at the outset, the emergence and spread of COVID-19 has acted as a catalyst for research into many aspects of volunteering. However, little of that undertaken in Northern Ireland provides focused insights into youth volunteering.

Similar to surveys undertaken in Scotland and Ireland, in 2020 Volunteer Now commissioned Social Market Research (SMR) to assess the impact of COVID-19 on volunteering before, during and post the COVID19 pandemic. The Northern Ireland survey was based on a representative sample of 1,003 adults aged 18 years+. As with the CHS, the age band utilised in this analysis, i.e. 18-34 years, does not allow for a disaggregation of the data by age groups closer aligned with youth policies.

Participation in volunteering and activities undertaken

Respondents were asked to identify any voluntary/unpaid help they provided, both before and during the pandemic, in each/any of the following ways:

1. Through a charity, formally organised group, club or an organisation like the NHS – reported in figures and tables as *Formal Volunteering;*
2. Through an informal group set up by people in your area to support and help others in your local community – reported in figures and tables as *Mutual Aid;*
3. As an individual to help other people outside your family, or to support your local community – reported in figures and tables as *Informal Volunteering.*

Findings from the survey indicated that 40 per cent of respondents volunteered in any/all of the categories both before and during the pandemic. In both instances, respondents were most likely to say they were involved in informal volunteering, the proportion increasing slightly during as compared to the year preceding the pandemic (30% and 27% respectively). During the pandemic the proportions of respondents engaged in formal volunteering and mutual aid were similar (18% and 19% respectively); however, in comparison to pre pandemic (22%) the former had decreased by five percentage points, while the latter had remained relatively unchanged (17%). However in terms of age, as detailed in **Table 6**, younger respondents were more likely to have been involved in all aspects of volunteering both before and during the pandemic.

Table 6: Volunteering pre COVID-19 (March 2019 – February 2020) and during COVID-19 (March – October 2020) by age of respondent (%)

	18 – 34 YEARS	35 – 59 YEARS	60+ YEARS
PRE COVID-19 (MARCH 2019 – FEB 2020)			
Formal Volunteering	35	19	15
Mutual Aid	22	16	13
Informal Volunteering	34	24	25
Any/all of 3 categories	54	35	34
DURING COVID-19 (MARCH – OCT 2020)			
Formal Volunteering	29	14	13
Mutual Aid	24	19	14
Informal Volunteering	38	30	23
Any/all 3 categories	53	37	33

Source: Volunteer Now (2021)

Acknowledging that people may find it difficult to think of themselves as volunteers, or of the help they provide as volunteering, respondents who had answered 'No' or 'Don't know' when asked if they had volunteered *during the pandemic* were then presented with a list of

designated activities and asked to consider if they had engaged in any of these. Of this group who initially identified as non-volunteers (60%), nearly three in ten (29%) subsequently said that they had provided help in at least one of the designated activities. As such, when these respondents are combined with those who had, from the outset, said they volunteered in any/all of the three categories (40%), the overall proportion of respondents who provided voluntary/unpaid help during the pandemic increased to 69 per cent. When broken down by age younger respondents remain most likely to say they volunteer - 18-34 years: 79 per cent; 35-59 years: 68 percent; 60+ years: 61 per cent. Respondents selecting 'No' or 'Don't Know' in relation to pre-pandemic volunteering were not asked to identify designated activities for this period so no recalculation was possible. Similarly when asked about volunteering during the pandemic across this range of designated informal/formal volunteering activities, respondents aged 18–34 years were more likely to have been involved.

Time commitment to volunteering pre and post COVID-19

Of those respondents who had engaged in volunteering before the pandemic around four in ten respondents indicated that they volunteered either weekly or monthly, and around one fifth less than once a month. 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. Almost half (48%) indicated they would volunteer in any/all of the three categories and this was the case for more younger respondents - 18-34 years: 63 per cent; 35-59 years: 43 per cent; 60+ years: 42 per cent. 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 - 18-34 years: 62 per cent; 35-59 years: 42 per cent; 60+ years 43 per cent.

ARK's Young Life and Times (YLT) survey

Overview

Questions on volunteering were included in the 2009 and 2017 YLT surveys. YLT is an annual attitudinal survey of 16 year olds living in Northern Ireland on a range of relevant topics. The survey sample for the survey is randomly drawn from the Child Benefit Register and provided directly by HMRC. In 2009, 856 young people completed the survey; in 2017 626 16 year olds did so.

Participation in volunteering

As can be seen in **Table 7**, 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). However, the increase in female participation in 2017 is almost completely accounted for by the significantly higher proportion of females engaged in formal volunteering in that year which had increased by twenty percentage points. In 2017, respondents from well-off backgrounds (77%) were significantly more likely to have volunteered than those from not well-off backgrounds (56%). This was particularly the case in respect of formal volunteering where the difference was fourteen percentage points.

Table 7: Over the last 12 months have you volunteered in any way? By gender and year of survey (%)

	Females		Males		All	
	2009	**2017**	**2009**	**2017**	**2009**	**2017**
I have volunteered for one or more than one organisation	33	53	27	33	30	45
I have volunteered informally (not for an organisation)	17	16	19	12	18	15
I have volunteered for an organisation and informally	9	8	4	8	7	8
I have not volunteered	42	23	50	47	45	33

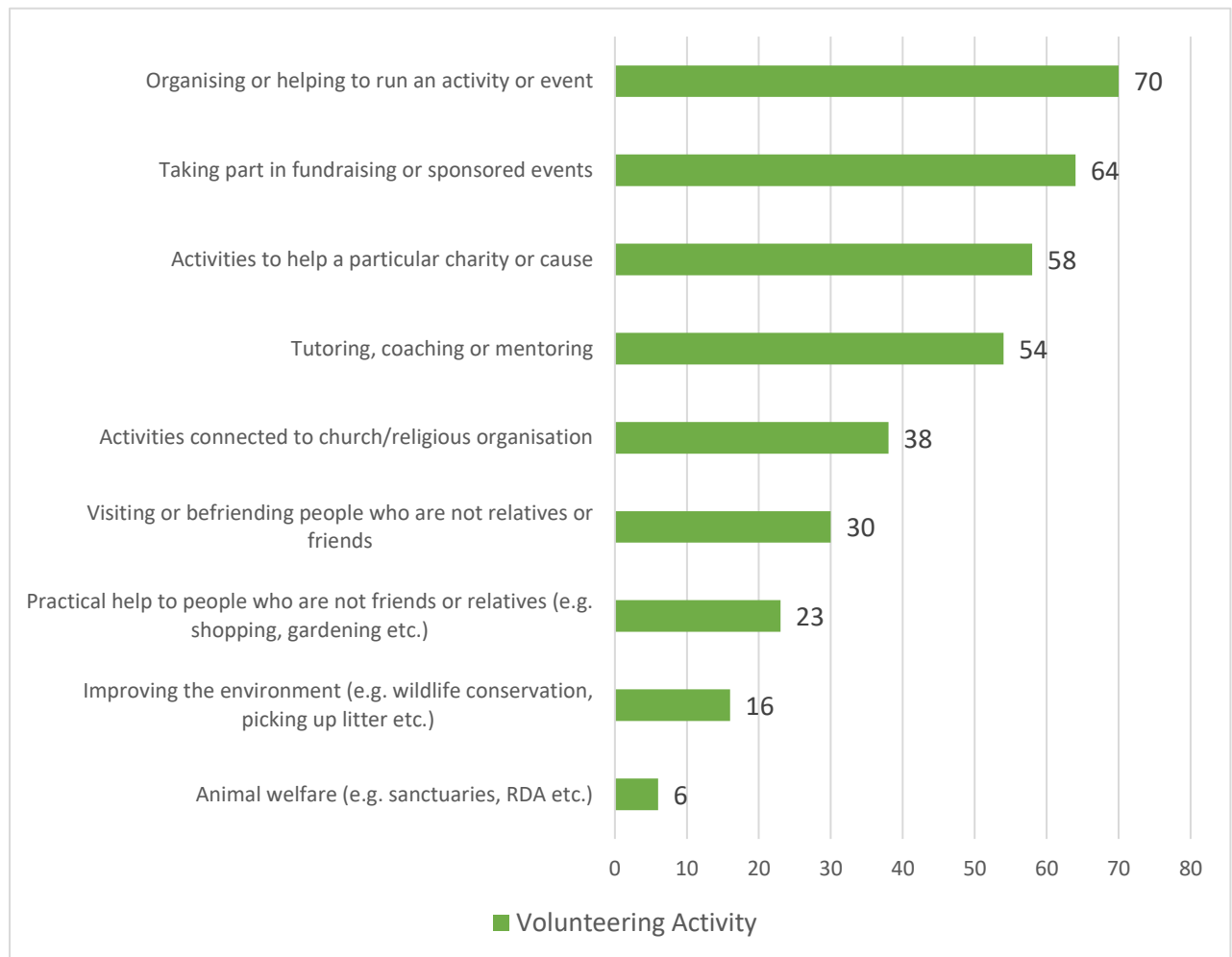**Source**: YLT surveys 2009 and 2017

Time spent volunteering

Responses to questions on time spent volunteering and frequency and type of volunteering undertaken remained similar in both survey sweeps. 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). Similar to 2009, in 2017 weekly volunteering was most likely to occur in school or a local community/youth group (36%), followed by sports/exercise based volunteering (21%). However, while in 2009 around three in ten respondents volunteered weekly in religious organisations in 2017 this was just around one fifth, with the proportion who never volunteered in this context increasing by 14 percentage points (41% to 55%). In 2009, 20 per cent of YLT respondents indicated they were not affiliated to any religion, in 2017 this figure had risen to 30 per cent and in the 2020-21, the most recent survey, it was 41 per cent For those respondents who had volunteered in the previous year, around one half had increased the time they spent volunteering (51%), for one quarter there was no change, while the remainder had decreased their commitment or stopped completely.

Volunteering activities

Respondents' involvement in specific volunteering roles changed little between the two surveys, and findings for YLT 2017 are detailed in **Figure 2**. 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%).

Figure 2: Volunteering activities engaged in the preceding 12 months (%)

Activity	Value
Organising or helping to run an activity or event	70
Taking part in fundraising or sponsored events	64
Activities to help a particular charity or cause	58
Tutoring, coaching or mentoring	54
Activities connected to church/religious organisation	38
Visiting or befriending people who are not relatives or friends	30
Practical help to people who are not friends or relatives (e.g. shopping, gardening etc.)	23
Improving the environment (e.g. wildlife conservation, picking up litter etc.)	16
Animal welfare (e.g. sanctuaries, RDA etc.)	6

■ Volunteering Activity

Source: 2017 YLT survey

As **Table 8** shows, there had been little overall change between the two survey sweeps in respondents' motivations to volunteer. The main reasons continued to be career/skills focussed, closely followed by a desire to help others; and this was more likely to be the case for females. Further analysis showed that 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.

Table 8: Why did you become involved in volunteering? By gender and year of survey (%)

|	Females		Males		All	
	2009	2017	2009	2017	2009	2017
I wanted to improve things/help people	63	70	54	33	60	65
I wanted to meet people/make friends	39	37	33	34	37	36
The cause was really important to me	21	32	16	21	19	28
My friends/family volunteer	28	24	26	25	28	24
Chance to learn new skills/use existing skills	57	65	52	55	55	61
I was asked to help	34	38	44	35	38	37
Help to get on in my career or build my CV (e.g. support my UCAS application)	75	78	62	67	70	74
It is part of my religious belief/philosophy	19	19	21	13	20	17

Source: 2009 and 2017 YLT surveys

Benefits and managing volunteering commitments

In 2017, 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.

Reasons for not volunteering/decreasing time spent volunteering

For those respondents who had never volunteered or had stopped/decreased volunteering in the previous 12 months their reasons for doing so, analysed by gender, are detailed in **Figure 3.** The main reasons given were high levels of schoolwork (50%), a view held by nearly two-thirds of females and around one third of males; too many other commitments (39%); had never considered volunteering (21%), males being more likely to express this view than females (30% and 14% respectively); and did not know where to find out about volunteering (17%).

Figure 3: Factors explaining why in the preceding 12 months respondents did not volunteer, stopped volunteering or reduced the time spent volunteering, by gender (%)
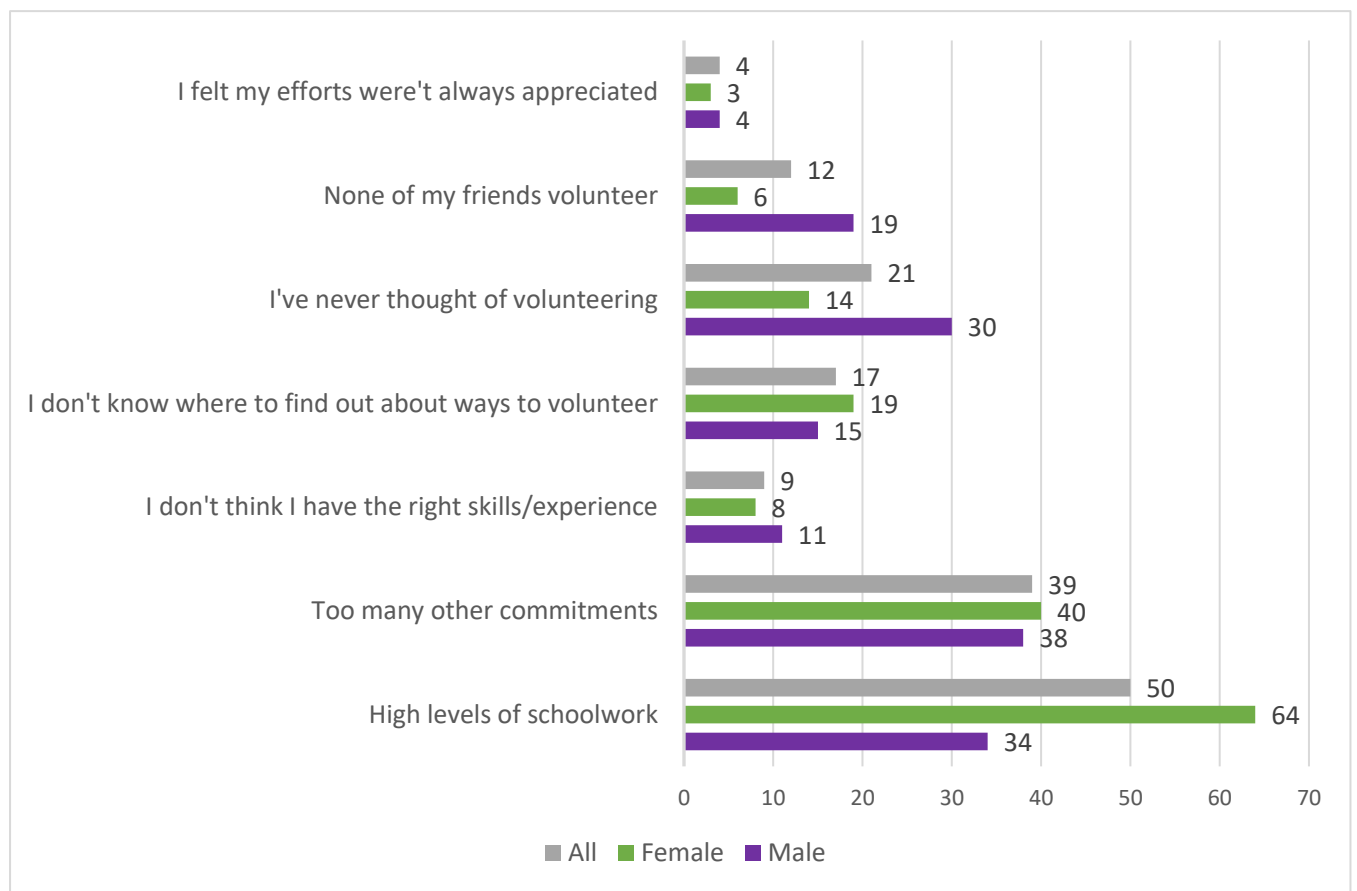
Incentives to volunteer

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%).

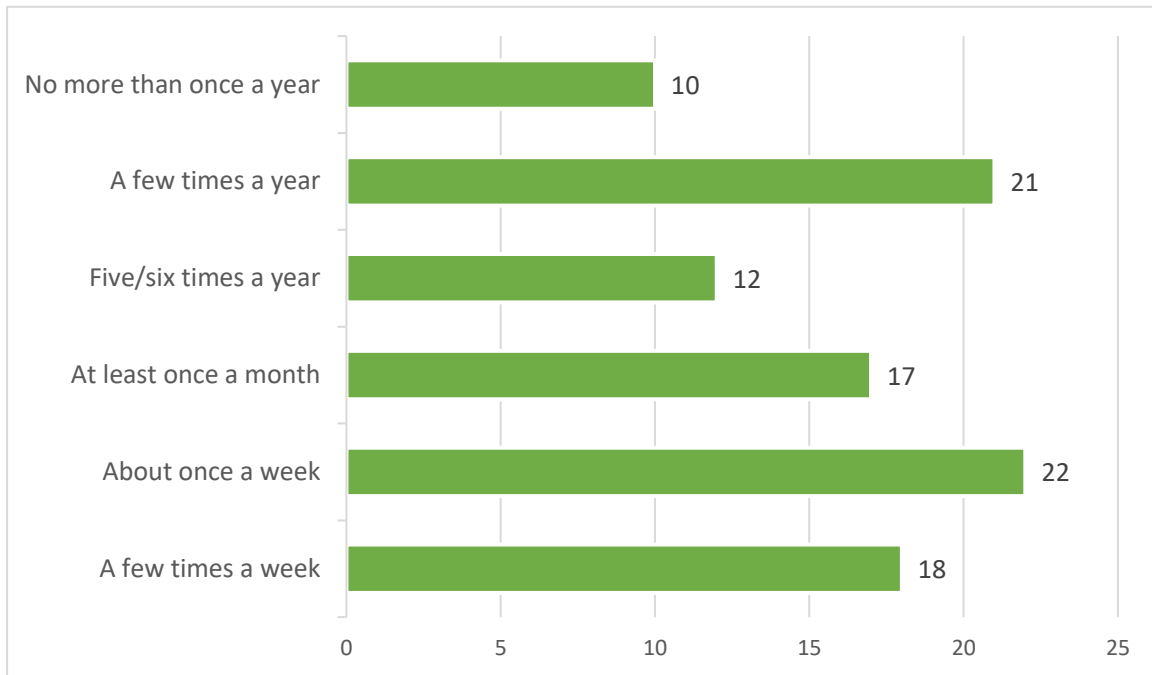## NISRA's Young Persons' Behaviour & Attitudes Survey (YPBAS)

Conducted by NISRA and funded by government departments, YPBAS is a school-based survey of 11-16 years olds in Northern Ireland. All post-primary schools are invited to participate in the survey, and for those who agree one class in each of the five year groups is randomly selected to take part. The survey, which is completed in school, began in 2000 and the most recent survey in 2019 was its seventh iteration and *the first* in which questions on volunteering were included. Unlike in ARK's YLT survey, respondents were not provided with a definition of volunteering prior to answering the questions.

Participation in volunteering

The survey began by asking respondents how often in the past twelve months they had given up any of their time to volunteer or help out with things like clubs, campaigns or organisations. 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%).

Those who said they had volunteered were then asked about the frequency of their volunteering. As detailed in **Figure 4**, 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.
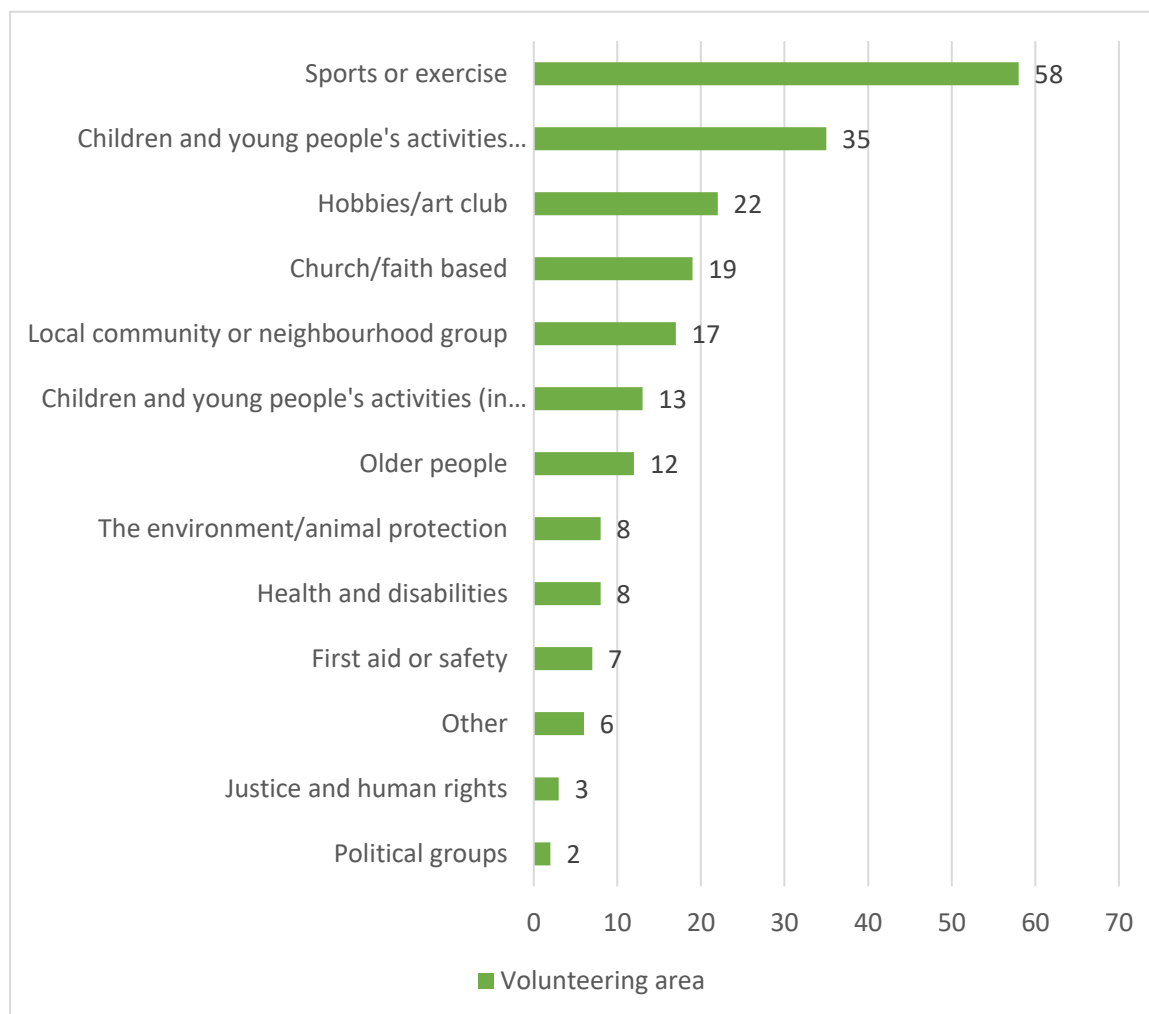
Figure 4: Frequency of Volunteering, YPBAS (%)

Frequency of Volunteering, YPBAS (%):
- No more than once a year: 10
- A few times a year: 21
- Five/six times a year: 12
- At least once a month: 17
- About once a week: 22
- A few times a week: 18

Source: NISRA (2020a)

Volunteering activities

When asked to select the types of volunteering they engaged in the four most popular 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%) (**Figure 5**).

Figure 5: Areas in which respondents had volunteered. (%)

Chart showing volunteering areas (%):
- Sports or exercise: 58
- Children and young people's activities...: 35
- Hobbies/art club: 22
- Church/faith based: 19
- Local community or neighbourhood group: 17
- Children and young people's activities (in...: 13
- Older people: 12
- The environment/animal protection: 8
- Health and disabilities: 8
- First aid or safety: 7
- Other: 6
- Justice and human rights: 3
- Political groups: 2

■ Volunteering area

Source: NISRA (2020a)

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

Survey data from young people who have recently taken part in programmes connected to the National Citizens Service (NCS) in Northern Ireland were provided to us for secondary analysis. According to the NCS Trust website, over 600,000 young people have participated in NCS programmes since 2009 (see https://wearencs.com/faqs). The NCS programmes vary in nature and focus, but they all aim to encourage young people to make positive changes in their communities via social action programmes. One of the programmes that has ran in Northern Ireland is the *Changemakers* programme, which focuses on sustainability and the environment. In all the NCS programmes, young participants have a significant input in what specific social action programmes they want to undertake.

There were too few respondents (n=42) to present the survey results in statistical terms; nonetheless, the survey data provide an indicative sense of these NCS participants' experiences, motivations and views with regard to social action and volunteering.

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, friend 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. These motivating factors mentioned echo findings from other studies on youth volunteering. For about half of the respondents the NCS programme was not their first volunteering experience. Regardless of whether they had previously volunteered or not, all respondents felt that the NCS programme was something positive for them to be involved in. When asked about the main barriers to volunteering, again reflecting large-scale survey data reported above, demands in relation to school or part-time work commitments dominated the issues raised.

All respondents who had successfully completed their NCS programme (n=32) reported that the NCS had allowed them to make new friends and learn new skills; so in that respect their expectations were met. The vast majority of these young people also stated that they had challenged themselves with tasks or activities that they would not normally undertake. The responses after the completion of the programme showed that young people felt they had grown in confidence and had gained transferrable life skills. Almost all participants reported that participation in the NCS programme had resulted in them knowing more about the communities they were involved with and having more positive attitudes about people from different communities, again, confirming our insights about the positive relationship between youth volunteering and attitudes to community relations (Irvine and Schubotz, 2010).

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

Departmental representatives and volunteer-involving organisations

Overview

Group participants were keen to clarify the roles their organisations or Departments respectively had in the design and implementation of volunteering strategy and practice. It was noted by one participant that volunteering falls under the primary responsibility of the Department for Communities (DfC) in Northern Ireland, as "*within the Executive, DfC has been given lead responsibility for volunteering, including provision of funding for this purpose*". Another participant noted the extent of youth volunteering taking place, with around 20,000 volunteers giving 57,000 hours of their time per week in the youth service sector. These departments have a meeting point in terms of the Department for Communities cross-departmental volunteering strategy, action plan and funding, which implicates the DE and EA's work *"in relation to youth volunteering and its delivery within the broader context of the DfC strategy/action plan"*.

Lack of a designated youth volunteering strategy

As reported above in Sections 3 and 4 above, there has been no specific youth volunteering policy in Northern Ireland since 2012 and 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. However, one participant suggested that "…*rather than having a separate youth volunteering policy/strategy, there would be merit in addressing this* [ie a lack of a strategy/policy] *within any planned update to the current strategy, with specific actions relating to encouraging, facilitating and promoting youth volunteering both within and beyond the youth sector*". In any case, there was consensus that there was a need for policy in both volunteering and youth volunteering to be reviewed.

Young people's perceived enthusiasm for volunteering

Participants shared their experience of young people's enthusiasm about volunteering and their desire to get involved, as a sentiment that challenges perceptions of youth volunteering as niche or unimportant to most young people. Resultantly, this brings into play the EA's current Regional Youth Development Plan (2020) and the notion that it captures a too narrow view of what volunteering is about, namely focussed primarily on service delivery rather than advocacy or service co-production drives.

One participant related to the regional assessment of the three-year Regional Youth Development Plan undertaken by EA that showed that *"young people identified volunteering and volunteering opportunities as very high and very important. The result, so one of the key actions within it, is around volunteer development".* Relating to the above mentioned published Regional Development plan (EA, 2020) and our assessment of its narrow focus on what is seen to qualify *as* volunteering, it was interesting to hear that focus group participants shared this sentiment. One participant commented that "*volunteers are such an important element of youth service delivery that their contribution needs to be recognised*". However, there was an appreciation that this contribution comes in various shapes and sizes, including in contributions that young people themselves may not necessarily label as 'volunteering', which confirms the findings from large scale surveys reported in the previous section. Participants said that the recognition of these contributions is normally done through implementations such as the EA's Annual Volunteering Awards Programme, where young volunteers can be nominated for awards to recognise their volunteering contributions, but that the wider landscape recognising the importance of young volunteers would also greatly benefit from a clear and integrated youth volunteering strategy.

Funding Criteria

As youth volunteering falls under their primary responsibility, DfC's responsibility included the allocation of funding for volunteering, with other funding made available by DE. Group participants discussed the fact that under DfC funding processes, seven key bodies[1] have reign of how they use the resources allocated to them within the overall remit and target set by DfC. Funding is provided on an allocated basis annual but, as one participant describes, "[key bodies] *also then have the opportunity to apply throughout the year for additional funding*". In terms of funding agendas, participants stated there are "*opportunities throughout the year*", with events such as the upcoming Platinum Jubilee or Annual Volunteering Awards Programme providing opportunities for bodies to secure funding. While there are a series of criteria these key bodies need to meet to secure funding, this process can be flexible as one participant described:

"*We're very focused on volunteering for schools and different remits … they always made sure that they've got the volunteering, there was always that element in it, that it wasn't just*

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[1] Volunteer Now, North West Volunteer Centre, Limavady Volunteer Centre, Causeway Volunteer Centre, Craigavon and Banbridge Volunteer Centre, Omagh Volunteer Centre and Mid Ulster Volunteer Centre.

direct funding, because you know yourself, they had to show what they were spending the money on and that's why they did it that way, so it met our criteria. It was good that way. When you saw [volunteer-involving organisations'] relationships with the Councils and the volunteering side, it was really good and I think it's even got better as the time went on".

On the other hand, DE's Priorities for Youth (2014) assessments, carried out triennially, clearly set out what can be funded by DE with more rigid scope, as one participant noted:

"*The whole policy thrust was around the assessed needs, a new funding scheme was introduced last year [2021] after a number of years of development and that's completely aligned. So you will only get EA funding through—well, departmental funding—through the EA if you are delivering against those assessed needs. So the way they do that at the moment is: they put out funding opportunities; so they advertise funding opportunities; and some of those you have to be a registered organisation with the Education Authority to deliver those. There are a couple where you don't need to be registered, for example TBUC camps on behalf of the Executive Office: that's open, there to any volunteering organisation*".

Considering successful funding is linked to meeting the criteria set by funding bodies, it is crucial that a broader understanding of youth volunteering underpins these policies. This is evidenced as, emerging in these focus group discussions, a broad range of roles and accountabilities make up 'youth volunteering'. Therefore, funding for expanded youth volunteering roles and opportunities would positively impact the landscape youth volunteering in Northern Ireland.

Young people's motivations to volunteer

Group discussions generated a rich and diverse tapestry of what drives young people to volunteer recognising that individuals volunteer for multifaceted reasons. These drivers tended to be discussed in terms of 'altruism' (community-based) or 'instrumentalism' (self-interested), but it was also made clear that altruistic drivers were discovered by young people once they had started to volunteer, and/or that mixed altruistic and instrumental benefits present a personal and nuanced set of drivers for individual volunteers.

Altruistic and community-focused drivers

Although drivers for volunteering were once understood to be purely 'selfless', it is now acknowledged that these can be both instrumental and altruistic. This dynamic is evident in both public policy and discourse, as successive governments have, with differing emphases,

promoted volunteering through the benefits of revitalising communities, building a skilled workforce, developing active citizenship and, more recently, enhancing wellbeing (see Davies (2017) for discussion). As volunteering has dual potential to deliver both individual and societal benefits, it is crucial that the factors which encourage or inhibit participation are explored to enable the development and delivery of appropriate, targeted strategies and schemes.

Several young volunteers in both focus groups conducted with young people 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. There was a sense that "*the personal development [other] young people have made through [a volunteers'] involvement" gives young volunteers a sense of reward, as well as an opportunity to enjoy "good craic" and the means to "meet loads of new people"*, as one young volunteer put it.

Another young volunteer, who revealed how they had gone on to find employment as a teaching assistant, said their volunteering was driven by their personal experiences to help other young people with additional needs:

"I feel like it's making a difference and making it personal, and I volunteer with young people with disabilities and I too have dyslexia and dyspraxia. I don't let it get me down, you know? I just want to see a difference … for young people with disabilities to come out of their shell, to be included in other things like this group. I studied childcare and I loved working with children and of course, I'm passionate about learning disabilities and, of course, that fed into my love for the inclusion group. Now I'm working with young people all with a range of needs, which is so fascinating to me, and I love it. It's just, coming on the Thursday night just makes my day and seeing the young people who started the group with me. It's succeeding in doing different things … also the fact I started in one group tonight … I'm an equal to my youth leader".

Discussions also demonstrated that young people may have been encouraged initially to volunteer by their parents or other family member, originally "*just tagging along*" before finding "*primary motivation because someone has done it for them and they want to give that back*". This feeds into a wider scope of community-based drivers developing once a young person has already started volunteering, so instrumental motivations and senses of altruism merge as a patchwork of drivers for young volunteers.

Instrumental Drivers

In terms of instrumental drivers, young volunteers, and those who represent them at organisational and policy level, 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.

Improvements to social life and self-confidence emerged as both drivers *and* benefits of volunteering for young people, i.e. the beneficial aspects of improved self-confidence and more opportunities to socialise continues to drive young people to volunteer: young volunteers themselves said their volunteering activities have made them "*more confident at school and other things I've struggled with I find easier, like to talk to people and move on from things when they go wrong*". Young volunteers also cited their volunteering as the main reason why they were able to mobilise volunteering-learnt skills, such as public speaking. With the opportunities to socialise on a regular basis, a volunteer-involving organisational representative also stated the importance of volunteering on improved mental health in young people, *"*[helping] *them feel less isolated*" and therefore enjoying greater mental and emotional wellbeing.

Volunteering equips young people with opportunities to travel, which focus group participants discussed as a focal driver for young people to get involved in volunteering. One organisational representative explained that most of the 400 volunteers traveling internationally within their programme were young people. Particularly in terms of young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, some volunteering organisations offer opportunities for international travel, which may be the first time some young people have travelled abroad. Further limited by pandemic-related travel restrictions, there was also a sense that some opportunities that had been available for travel within Europe had been curtailed by Brexit. However, one participant made the point that some young people who have come from deprived backgrounds and originally had been motivated to volunteer by these international travel opportunities may develop other drivers for volunteering, *"[going on] to [stay], and getting employment as youth workers*".

Volunteering is captured as driven by the development of CVs to expand employment opportunities, particularly in young people aged 16+, who may be thinking about getting their first job or mapping out a life after school. The 'soft skills' around personal and professional development learnt in volunteering roles are considered "*very valuable to employers*", as several participants agreed. One policymaker participant said that this is because applying for a job with volunteering experience is "*a real positive for* [volunteers]", so job applications are genuinely aided by volunteering experience. This is mirrored by the idea that the 16+ age range tend to be focused on "*leadership volunteering*" experiences, with more

responsibilities and a broader range of accountabilities, with organisations making this distinction in the roles they give to young volunteers: one participant from a youth-involving organisation outlined how volunteers aged 8+ are involved in weekend community volunteering, such as planting trees and hedgerows, whereas 'young leaders' are usually involved in obtaining badges for more formal volunteering experiences. This brings into play different perspectives on what is meant by *volunteering*, as both formal/recognised and informal actions fall under the umbrella term.

Equally, young volunteers from this age range and other stakeholders spoke in depth about how volunteering is both a driver for and benefit to their UCAS applications. Particularly in terms of how regional awards such as the Duke of Edinburgh make a UCAS application "*stand out*", volunteering experience demonstrates to prospective universities and employers a young persons' ability to "[follow] *rules*, [be] *on time*" and other core qualities which young people may "*underestimate*" as important to prospective employers and universities. This disparity, seemingly around age ranges and subsequent drivers of young volunteers, links to discussions on volunteering as a professional engagement, and a commitment that involves gaining valuable and enduring life skills.

Barriers to Volunteering

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. This section also reports the impacts of COVID-19 and lockdowns as barriers which are likely to have effects on the young volunteering landscape into the future.

Rurality and subsequent poor transport networks in rural areas were discussed by focus group participants as a barrier to youth volunteering in the Northern Irish context. While Belfast and other urban areas benefit from good transport links, young volunteers who live rurally may have difficulty getting to volunteering opportunities, especially if parents/caregivers do not drive or cannot provide transport to volunteering organisations. While one participant noted that in 2021, £500,000 was distributed to Northern Ireland's 11 councils for "*any wish for volunteers alone*", including for use of transport and petrol, the same participant recognised 'connectivity' in rural areas as a key issue.

Given the recent implications of COVID-19, many volunteering opportunities have been or were reorganised online, yet it is also rural areas who benefit least from quality Internet networks. One organisational representative explained using Zoom and other connectivity-

focused software to continue volunteering in the online space came with drawbacks including technical difficulties, dependence on WiFi, and low batteries locking volunteers out of meetings. Therefore, COVID-19 and rurality-based Internet issues may exacerbate rurality as a barrier to youth volunteering. However, online technologies throughout lockdowns also allowed for continued volunteer involvement.

As volunteering is not free for organisations or volunteers themselves, the **financial implications of volunteering** may present a barrier to young people getting involved in volunteering opportunities. This became evident in discussions with volunteer-involving organisation representatives, who explained that young volunteers make financial contributions by way of paying membership fees and/or self-funding excursions and travel:

"*A thing with international volunteering is the cost, and we want our programmes to be open and accessible to as many young people as possible. Some of the trips we've had, a couple of funded trips for community or youth groups from more deprived areas and the impact for some young people who had never been out of Belfast before, never mind the country, but the funding for those kinds of trips is very hard to come by. We had EU funding but that's not going to be available any longer as well … The programme isn't just for those that can and whose parents can afford it, or have a network of people who can help with their fundraising as well*".

This tells the story that young people who are unable to self-fund volunteering activities may prevent them from getting involved in volunteering opportunities and activities.

It was also specified by volunteer-involving organisation representatives that **safeguarding and related insurance** is necessary to "*mitigate risks to your club*" or organisation, but that safeguarding protocols do, nonetheless, have an impact on what kinds of volunteering activities young people can get involved in. For example, some organisations are unable to secure insurance for under-16s for some of the activities they offer, stating:

"*We can't always provide* [opportunities] *for* [under-16s] *doing their bronze Duke of Edinburgh … from an insurance and safeguarding point of view. I think we want to engage young people, but you also have to work within the parameters that are there as well … There needs to be policies on ages and what they can do*".

Safeguarding limitations also extend to how volunteering organisations can and cannot communicate with young volunteers, as a volunteer organisation representative explained:

"We can't even have a WhatsApp group … because then you're able to access everyone's number and we have some under-16s. It's even made complicated for me to send a message to the group because we use ordinary texting and I'll go one by one. When you're 16 you're at the age of consent, you can message people individually but there would be me wanting [to send] *a group message. So, there's more safeguarding about access to phone numbers … Frustrating, just in terms of practicalities".*

COVID-19 and Lockdowns

The overall attitude towards COVID-19 as it relates to young volunteering is how youth volunteers have been increasingly valued as crucial to organisations:

"I think any organisation worth its salt really values its volunteers, you know, especially through this pandemic; when they realised they don't have any volunteers, just how important they are to the success and then the continuation of those organisations. I think [the pandemic will] *certainly sharpen the focus on many organisations to get volunteers and how we engage those volunteers or re-engage volunteers that have stepped away for a certain period of time, because it's not necessarily just older volunteers."*

Focus group discussions did, however, present COVID-19 and impacts on volunteer retention levels as temporary. One participant explained that their organisation receives many emails from young volunteers asking when they can travel and get re-involved in international volunteering activities, and they hoped these will resume in the near future. It is also crucial to state that some participants feel COVID-19 has, in fact, encouraged young volunteers to *"step out further than they potentially may have been able to, pre-COVID"*. This has involved informal volunteering activities throughout the pandemic such as tree planting and delivering food parcels to people in the community. It also manifests as young volunteers being so keen to get back to social interaction at volunteering groups that they have *"came up with creative ways to safely get back, and actually it's really pushed and driven them to think a bit more widely"*. This has also led to some young volunteers going into leadership roles, which they perhaps would not have had the pandemic environment not encouraged them to. During focus groups, there were also discussions around how COVID-19 had given attention to the need to address succession, as volunteering overall holds over-reliance on 'older' volunteers: this point, previously recognised within volunteering, was highlighted by the pandemic. A number of volunteer-involving organisational representatives especially commented that the pandemic demonstrated young people's creativity and

leadership abilities during the pandemic. This particularly relates to young people's artistic and creative talents, ambitions to design their own volunteering roles and up-to-date technological knowledge.

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*". This includes a halt on international volunteering for some organisations, with unclear pathways to resuming the full range of volunteering activities. As some formal skills programmes operated by voluntary organisations take place in schools, these have also been disrupted throughout the pandemic.

Focus group participants also spoke in depth about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the retention of existing young volunteers, with a *"big drop off … and some of the organisations, particularly uniformed organisations, have certified it's hard to bring back in some of the volunteers*". This was due to disturbances to operations, with previously face-to-face meetings taking place online and physical volunteering activities being halted. This was verified by a uniformed organisation representative, who explained that even later some groups have not resumed, due to wariness among medically vulnerable leaders and volunteers who have not returned to volunteering, with overall losses of volunteers throughout the pandemic environment. One participant also stated that, during pandemic-related lockdowns, some volunteers enjoyed the flexibility and freedom from time constraints involved in volunteering and so have not returned. This tells a story of the possible diminished ability to grow and retain volunteering bases, including young volunteers. This is "*not unique to Northern Ireland*", with volunteering groups in the Republic of Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales all experiencing a drastic decrease in volunteers from which they are seeking to recover.

Data Impressions

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

1. Youth volunteering needs to be understood as a professional engagement

Young people themselves recognised volunteering as a key need as identified in the 2020 Youth Assessment of Needs Survey, specifying volunteering as either 'very important' or 'important'. With regulations to follow and a serious commitment of time and energy, focus

group participants felt that youth volunteering needs to be understood, framed and marketed as a professional engagement to excite more young people, retain more current youth volunteers, and to shape policy/funding. As one participant put it:

"*Volunteers are such an important element of youth service delivery that their contribution needs to be recognised*".

Currently, this is done through events such as the annual Volunteering Awards programme, implemented by the EA: this local and regional-level ceremony involves nominations and awards, and is keenly attended by young volunteers. Because of this, participants stated instrumental motivations to get involved in youth volunteering do not need to be dismissed or frowned on. Instead, instrumental, time-limited volunteering presents an opportunity for young people to gain valuable skills, and in return volunteer-involving organisations benefit from their time and energy for a period of time. As one participant said, "'*selfish' is the wrong word, because young people are very good at doing what they need to in thinking about themselves, and actually people should think about themselves and what they need … they get the most out of it and sometimes they actually do stay even though they had no intention to*".

Instead, participants show that youth volunteering has an element of being a professional engagement, and an opportunity to try something out and see if it is right for them. This is the case alongside helping others and meeting new people, highlighting volunteering as a dynamic engagement with societal *and* individual benefits. Participants explained "*doing something different*" through youth volunteering has clarified for themselves and their networks "*what they want to do*" when, before volunteering, they "*just had no idea*" where their focus was. As one participant stated, youth volunteering can give young people an impetus to explore their options, presenting them with options they had not thought of or did not consider they would be suited to. It also gives young people an opportunity to try out what they feel they may be interested in as a career route. One participant recalled:

"*I had an interest in working with young people. That was something I wanted to do in a career later, and then I had a friend who was already a part of the group. She's gone on to university and she said to [volunteer]*".

2. The significance of 'role matching' and self-defining roles

"*There is a volunteer role available for anybody, any ability, any age, but not every role is suitable for every person. So, in my opinion, anybody can volunteer and I think it's really important for young people to get involved, because if they get into the right volunteering role, they feel valued, they feel included, they feel less isolated*"

This quote from one of the adult participants from volunteer-involving organisations exemplifies very much the message given by adults and young people with volunteering experience alike. What one participant described as '*role matching*', or organisations taking steps to listen to prospective young volunteers' skills and ambitions, thus creating and matching ideal volunteering roles to them, was echoed by a number of participants in discussions. This highlights the importance of communicating opportunities for young people to volunteer, and the value of youth volunteering in terms of the career, personal development and skillset expansion opportunities to young people themselves. Role matching also benefits from "*channelling the particular individual's talents*" into the wider organisational frame, ensuring inclusivity by presenting that "*there's a role for everybody*".

The idea of role matching is signposted in terms of the range of volunteering activities organisations offer, with one participant listing:

"*We have practical, hands-on volunteering, so when they're out on teams internationally they'd be involved in building work and also locally, within the* [charity] *shop, sorting donations on the till ... We also have some local volunteering days, building projects, but other volunteering would include fundraising, advocacy as well … any ways of promoting* [our organisation] *as well*".

Another participant demonstrated how self-determined youth volunteering looks in terms of how roles and responsibilities are apportioned between volunteers and staff:

"*An example: this Women's Day event we have coming up, right? These girls have put in, I'd say 95 per cent, of the organisation and the control and the direction as to where it's going. But when it comes down to it, we applied for funding, we got a certain amount of funding and we can say where that funding goes. But we also then, as workers, had to go away and see if we could find another list of pots of money that we could tap into … In as much as it's possible, we allow the young people to direct it, but the admin of these things has to be done by us*".

Role matching young volunteers to their talents, skills and ambitions was presented by participants as supported by young people self-determining and self-defining volunteering roles: this involves normalisation of young volunteers holding places on decision boards,

being organisation trustees and making significant organisational decisions. One participant shared the value of giving young volunteers direct influence within voluntary organisations:

"*We have three under-25s who volunteer and sit on our board ... So we have our youth volunteers and we try and encourage youth volunteering within all aspects. There's potentially an 18-year-old that sits on our Board and has as much say as say the Chief Commissioner or the Chief Executive Officer. So, we tend to try and embed that within all aspects*".

This value is mirrored by the sentiment that volunteering is generally more enticing to young people when they have influence over their own volunteering experiences:

"*People always told us 'young people, we can't get them involved because they're just not interested', but that couldn't be further from the truth. Young people are itching to get involved in the right roles. They want to be valued, they want to be given good roles and volunteering opportunities that can help them grow and develop as young people. It's really important to identify those roles and make them available and accessible to young people*".

3. Reaffirmed value of communicating youth volunteering roles through traditional means

Although participants suggest this is challenging under the COVID-19 environment, schools were presented as the ideal way to communicate youth volunteering roles, particularly 'formal' volunteering roles which are pre-defined or connected to a uniformed organisation:

"*I mean, schools are supposed to be very much connected to their community, so they should be aware and they should be encouraging that connection, both through what they teach and also from the young people delivering within them. But again, it very much varies depending on the youth organisation, because when you think of something like the Duke of Edinburgh Award, that's where they deliver, through schools*".

A number of participants expressed the social media platforms young people use move quickly, so organisations have to move with this if they wish to communicate effectively with young audiences. For instance, Facebook (which participants asserted is the only validated social media platform for volunteering organisations funded by the EA) is no longer widely used among young people in 2022. While Instagram in particular was described by a young volunteer as a good avenue to advertise youth volunteering opportunities to young people, not being permitted to do this makes communicating roles "*more difficult*".

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

In this study we set out to understand key trends in youth volunteering in Northern Ireland compared to other parts of the UK. The intention was for this report to help raise the profile of youth volunteering in Northern Ireland with stakeholders and policy makers. Our study objectives were to:

- Review existing datasets, including Continuous Household survey (CHS), ARK's Young Life and Times (YLT) survey and the Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitude survey (YBAS) to build a picture of youth volunteering in Northern Ireland;
- Review youth volunteering policy in Northern Ireland in comparison to other UK jurisdictions.
- Engage with young people and volunteer involving organisations about their views on youth volunteering and how their volunteering experiences could be improved.
- Provide recommendations for future developments in youth volunteering.

The greatest benefit of this study is perhaps that it brings together everything we know about youth volunteering into one place. Insights from secondary data analyses are ultimately often limited as the study parameters and objectives vary and are often different from the new studies. In this case, the greatest limitation of using CHS, YPBAS, YLT and the recent COVD19 related studies commissioned by Volunteer Now is that they all operate with different age cohorts in relation to youth volunteering. This makes comparisons between studies difficult. However, what is reassuring is that the issues that emerge from these studies are very similar. What is even more re-assuring is that 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.

It is evident that young people engage in volunteering for a variety of reasons which bring both individual and societal rewards and benefits. 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.

Whilst there is strong evidence that volunteering opportunities should be designed around young people's rapidly changing and developing lives, and they should therefore be short-term, young people-led and focused, there is equally evidence that for some young people an odd-hour commitment may evolve into long-term extensive volunteering commitments.

Arguably, there should be space for both. Both young people and organisational representatives were very clear that volunteering opportunities need to meet young people's needs. From a volunteer-involving organisations' point of view, it was clear that volunteering is a serious business that requires resourcing and regulatory good practice, if it is to be of benefit to both the organisation and the volunteers. Paradoxically, some of the regulations with regard to permissible communication channels used to communicate opportunities to young people can result in additional barriers to reach out to young people.

While the value, and indeed necessity, of volunteering, has long been understood, its importance came to the fore in the responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, what is equally evident from the evidence collected for this review is that volunteering cannot, and should not, be taken for granted. As such, it is important to nurture and embed the ethos of volunteering across society and within communities through an inclusive approach in terms of the profile of 'a volunteer' and what constitutes volunteering. To do so requires the review and implementation of a coherent government volunteering strategy, supported by effective policies that understand and recognise the dynamism of the sector.

On the basis of the data collected, 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 an 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 mechansim 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 ar 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 organsiations and 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.

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