

Research Bulletin

Generation V: Young people speak out on volunteering

Introduction

This bulletin reports on key findings from research which was commissioned by the Home Office to inform the Russell Commission on the attitudes towards volunteering and extent of involvement in voluntary activities of young people in England.

Over 2,000 young people were consulted during the course of the research, which included both qualitative and quantitative elements. The research was conducted by Dubit, Kikass, Youth Action Network, YouthNet UK, Metro, and the Research, Development and Statistics Directorate within the Home Office, on behalf of the Institute for Volunteering Research.

Young people's attitudes towards, and practice of volunteering

The extent of volunteering by young people

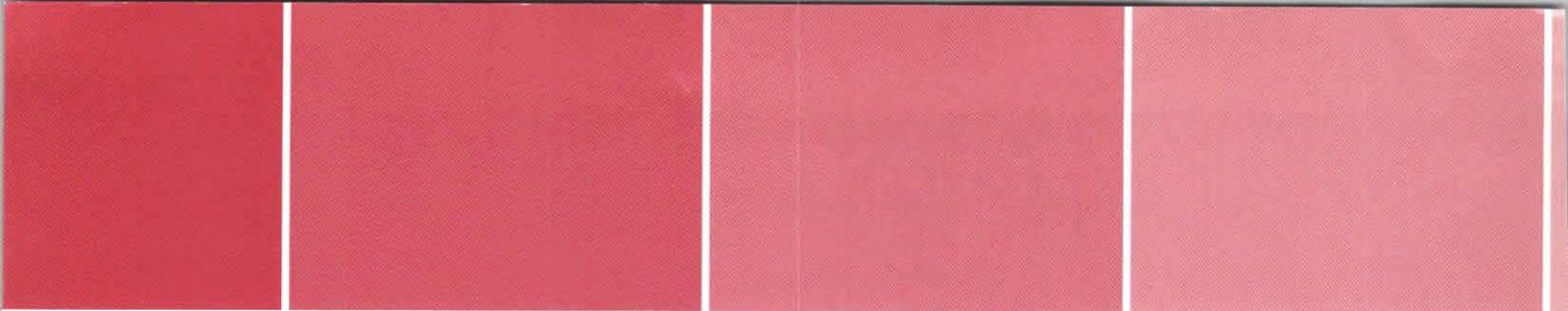
The 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey (HOCS) found that 40% of 16-24 year olds had been involved in formal volunteering and 73% had been involved in informal volunteering in the 12 months before interview. These results suggested that young people volunteer at a similar, or higher, rate when compared to older people. This contrasts with earlier research findings which suggested a slump in young people's voluntary participation.

Young people are involved in a range of voluntary activities, especially sport, hobbies, recreation and arts, and social clubs. They also volunteer in children's activities, both in and outside schools. Their most common type of activity is organising or helping to run an activity or event, followed by raising or handling money, and offering practical help or giving advice or information and counselling.

Perceptions of volunteers and volunteering

Most young people have positive views of volunteering - helping people out, being a good citizen and a way to gain skills and experience. However, perceptions that volunteering is boring and 'not cool' are held by a minority. A narrow, stereotypical view still prevails among many who do not volunteer, particularly among disaffected (hard to reach and marginalised) young people, because of a very limited knowledge of what volunteering involves.

Young people who do volunteer have a wider appreciation of its scope and potential, and are less likely to label volunteers according to traditional stereotypes. In fact, while some young people continue to see volunteering as the domain of older people, others emphasise that volunteers are likely to be younger people because they have more free time.



There is a general feeling among many young people that the volunteering 'brand' needs an overhaul to enlarge its appeal. While the term itself is seen as problematic, the alternatives - such as community service - are no better. Therefore volunteering needs rebranding to reflect young people's lifestyles and its relevance to them, and to emphasise the opportunities it offers to everyone. It should be promoted as being cool, progressive, respected, beneficial, relevant and enhancing.

Motivations and benefits of volunteering

Young people volunteer for a range of reasons and get a host of benefits from volunteering. These group broadly into personal feelings, such as satisfaction and a desire to meet new people; personal needs, including gaining a pastime, respect, and interaction with others; altruism expressed in helping others and doing good; experience, skills and career prospects; and personal inducements in the form of certificates, rewards, qualifications and jobs.

The importance of different motivations and benefits vary with age. Those who are already volunteering often find that their expectations are exceeded by the experience, particularly in the amount of enjoyment and fun they have.

Barriers to volunteering

Young people who are not currently volunteering are often unaware of the potential benefits and this acts as a barrier to involvement. They feel that having more knowledge of what volunteers can gain from their activities might motivate them to become volunteers.

This is just one of several barriers to volunteering for young people. They also point to lack of time; negative peer pressure; lack of confidence; and problems with finding out information about volunteering.

Time is one of the biggest barriers. Volunteering is just one of many competing demands on their time, including studying and paid work. Their view that volunteering is very time-intensive means that it has to justify itself by giving them clear returns for their investment.

"I find it really beneficial to get me back out and become part of the community. Before I was really lost"

Additionally, time spent volunteering is time not spent earning money, and many young people feel they cannot afford to volunteer.

Cost is also a factor in other barriers, particularly travel and childcare. Many young people lack transport and tend to favour volunteering activities close to home. Those with children find childcare and associated costs a major barrier.

Negative peer pressure can be a considerable barrier to volunteering. Many young people are conscious of the low status of volunteering among their age group and speak of the stigma of looking 'sad' or 'not cool'. Tackling this barrier is seen as central to any future efforts to mobilise young people to volunteer.

Some young people are put off volunteering by lack of confidence and fear of rejection. They feel that they have nothing to contribute and that other people will not value their efforts and achievements. This is particularly strongly felt among disaffected young people and those in the youngest age groups, and is a reflection of a broader feeling of disempowerment and social disapproval.



Access to information is another problem preventing greater voluntary involvement. This has two dimensions: first there is an apparent lack of information but, once found, there seems to be so much information that it becomes confusing and difficult to digest. Young people would welcome easier routes to finding something they are interested in and guidance on what they would be best suited to.

Mobilising volunteers

Most young people get into volunteering through word of mouth - being told about it or asked by someone already involved. They feel that this approach should be used more widely to mobilise others to volunteer. Encouragement by friends, people they know, celebrities and the media would help introduce them to volunteering. Friends are particularly important and peer advocacy is seen as the key mechanism to stimulate volunteering.

"I thought it would be a lot of hard work, but didn't realise that it would also be so much fun, [that I would] make so many friends with other volunteers"

Schools are an important site for promoting volunteering, but volunteering should not solely be school-based or school-led, and it certainly should not be 'required' or compulsory.

Promotional campaigns involving celebrities, not just as national figureheads but involved locally, could help increase public recognition of volunteering and raise its status. The message within campaigns should combine all the attractions for young people - have fun, make friends, meet people, give help, get experience, gain skills, be rewarded, do something interesting and exciting - and should vary according to the target age groups.

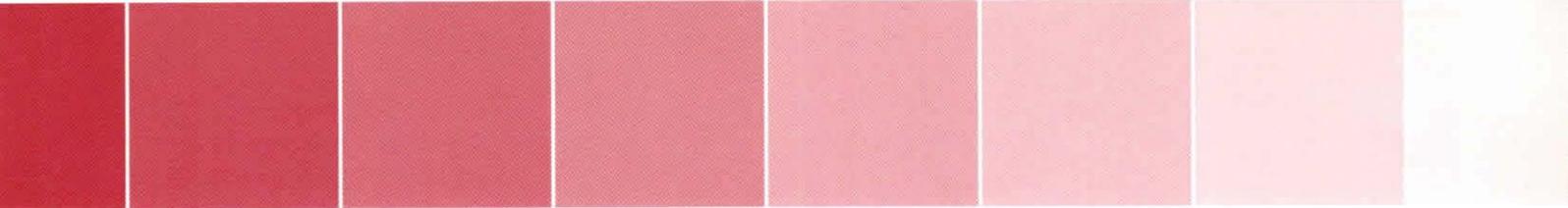
Incentives and rewards

There is no clear consensus among young people on incentives and rewards for volunteering, although most agree that getting training, awards and certificates, and working with friends would encourage more volunteering. Some are concerned that offering rewards would devalue the activity, reduce people's sense of purpose and satisfaction and undermine the essence of volunteering. Most emphasise that recognition and tokens of appreciation would be useful incentives. They want more respect to be paid to the existing contribution of young people, particularly for employers to recognise the value of their volunteering.

Opinion is divided on whether offering cash would act as an incentive to volunteer, but it is generally regarded as being highly problematic. Out of pocket expenses should definitely be reimbursed but most feel that cash incentives would undermine the concept of volunteering, attract people for the wrong reasons, or simply be insufficient to attract them at all. Some, however, recognise that offering some financial support would help those who cannot afford to volunteer and that certain types of volunteering, for example overseas work, should have an associated cash incentive. Many feel that offering educational credits as an incentive would have only limited appeal.

The organisation of volunteering

In terms of how they want their volunteering organised, young people show strong support for group and team activities, taster sessions and new types of voluntary activities. They



place high priority on flexibility in the types of work and the times they can volunteer, but some want a relatively structured programme which they can timetable into their lives.

They feel it is important to have some say in planning and decision making in their volunteering but many do not want to be overburdened with responsibility. They want practical and emotional support and back-up from adults, which allows them to progress

“Knowing friends who do it is the best way as you believe what they say”

to leadership roles at their own pace. However, there are those who do not want the pressure of leadership because of their young age, lack of time or the level of responsibility in other areas of their lives. Clearly it is important that support and opportunities for progression are tailored to each young person's needs.

Conclusions and implications

In conclusion, there is a need to reclaim the concept of volunteering for young people, and this reclamation should be peer-led, using young volunteers to show other young people the diversity of volunteering, its relevance to their lives, and the benefits it brings to them. This, however, needs to be backed up by a re-examination of the ways in which organisations are seeking to engage with young people. There is a need for organisations to provide meaningful opportunities tailored to meet the needs of young people – opportunities that enable young people to engage with issues of importance to them, in ways which interest them, and which are flexible. A tailor-made package of support and incentives, based on access to training, skills development, and rewards, would further encourage young people to volunteer. Once involved, the rewards provided by volunteering itself are considerable.

The full report

To order your copy of the full report 'Generation V: Young people speak out on volunteering' (41 pages, £8.50), or the companion report by Katharine Gaskin 'Young People, Volunteering and Civic Service: A review of the literature' (95 pages, £8.50), call the Institute for Volunteering Research on 0845 305 6979 or email instvolres@aol.com

This research bulletin is available in large print format on request.

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