

Report summary

Choosing to volunteer

A small-scale survey to evaluate the experiences of young people involved in volunteering in a range of settings

It is widely accepted that volunteering brings benefits to those who participate, to community groups and to civil society more widely. From the findings of this survey it is also clear that, as with any activity, volunteering must be managed effectively in order for those benefits to be realised. Examples found by inspectors illustrate the complexity involved in getting it right, and the importance of professional skills and leadership in realising benefits.

During the period from April to July 2011, inspectors visited six secondary schools and seven colleges with extensive volunteering activity taking place. They also visited six youth organisations located within the voluntary and charitable sector, and met with two national youth charities. The youth organisations visited targeted their work primarily on vulnerable young people. The Learner Panel provided further supporting evidence. Ofsted also received online feedback from 328 members of its children's and young people's panel. In addition three learner focus groups were conducted. Definitions of what constitutes volunteering vary significantly. Inspectors took a broad view that young people's volunteering involved spending unpaid time doing something which was to the benefit of society.

Across the three sectors visited, schools, colleges, and youth and community settings, inspectors found a rich and eclectic range of approaches reflecting the diversity of volunteering scenarios. Some were linked to a course or qualification, while others were less formal; there was no single pattern. In the best settings visited, volunteering appeared in many guises within and beyond the curriculum, and grew out of active and constructive links with community groups, businesses and sports groups, with resources dedicated to staffing and training.

The great majority of young people spoken to by inspectors thought that volunteering had helped them to develop important skills and attributes such as advocacy, team working, motivation and resilience. Others reflected on their developing sense of responsibility and service to others. Improving employment prospects was a key feature for some, while for others volunteering had helped to develop their political awareness and civic engagement.

A minority stated that difficulties and pressures they currently faced, for example in securing paid employment, acted as a disincentive to volunteering. In Ofsted's small-scale online survey the benefit identified by the respondents least often was gaining an award or certificate, although this was often the focus for providers aiming to demonstrate the value of volunteering activity.

The most effective volunteering programmes were, at least in part, shaped by individual young people and involved a level of risk and challenge. They had clarity of purpose, comprised activities which stretched young people, and achieved a sensible balance between participation and accreditation. Responsive providers created pathways for participants such as volunteering at sports events and gaining an event stewarding qualification, performing and recording music, or becoming qualified youth workers.

The most effective practitioners had been trained in areas such as student-led decision-making, group work, project-planning, sourcing up-to-date resources and community networking. Providers also invested time in training young people, especially those with responsibility for others such as in mentoring, or in relation to management and governance.

In the less effective provision, providers were falling back on longstanding and repetitive volunteering opportunities rather than looking for fresh and appealing ideas. Young people came away from the activity uninspired or no better informed. A minority of teachers spoon-fed students ideas rather than working with them to develop their own projects. In these cases, providers had not reviewed their programmes to identify where simple improvements could be made to maximise learning for young people.

Two key factors emerged in relation to engaging more vulnerable young people in volunteering: skilled practitioners who built strong and trusting relationships with them, and the effectiveness of an organisation in removing barriers to participation. The work of external agencies and charities seen by inspectors was highly effective in engaging vulnerable young people and in supporting volunteering programmes in schools and colleges. However, many of these external agencies were facing very challenging futures due to reductions in grants and other sources of funding. For those young people who might have exhibited behavioural problems or been excluded, taking real responsibility through volunteering helped build their self-esteem and sense of purpose. Some of the young people interviewed who were involved in targeted provision had come to their own realisation that volunteering was a means of building their competitiveness in seeking employment.

Evaluating the impact of volunteering presents genuine challenges. Commonly, the senior managers interviewed in the schools and colleges visited asserted that dedicating curriculum time to volunteering helped raise academic standards. One college presented an analysis of data for some of the students who volunteered, indicating that they enjoyed better success rates than those who did not engage in volunteering. Other colleges cited improved retention and attendance rates.

Measures applied by youth and community groups and charities generally centred on progression to employment, education, training or further volunteering.

In a context of declining resources, there is clearly a need to ensure that opportunities are being effectively targeted where the need is greatest, and that measures of success are clearly focused on the subsequent progress made by participants, not just on the attainment of immediate goals specific to volunteering projects. There were instances where reduced resources had restricted the work of local community groups that was essential in providing opportunities for learners to pursue their volunteering. To differing degrees, young people were prevented from accessing volunteering placements in four providers due to a lack of collaboration and restrictive interpretation of safeguarding requirements by managers.

Key findings

- The volunteering activities seen supported young people's learning and development well and provided a means by which they could engage constructively in civil society. Well-managed volunteering programmes have the potential to realise significant benefits for young people in enhancing their learning experience.
- The most effective schools, colleges, and youth and community settings found creative ways of integrating volunteering within courses and 'in-house' projects enabling young people to take on greater levels of responsibility. They did not consider it as an 'add on' to mainstream learning.
- All of the schools and colleges visited worked with external national charities and agencies either to extend the range of volunteering opportunities on offer or to target specific groups of young people.
- In the targeted provision visited, organisations and practitioners were effective in identifying the support needs of vulnerable or disadvantaged young people and in developing their confidence and building their social skills.
- Providers recognised the need for young people to have skills, confidence and credibility in undertaking volunteering roles. All invested time in training young people, especially those with responsibility for others such as in mentoring, or in relation to management and governance.
- The most effective practitioners had been trained in areas such as student-led decision-making, group work, project-planning, sourcing up-to-date resources and community networking. They were very adept at ensuring young people were able to make informed choices about the volunteering opportunities available to them.
- Evaluating the impact of volunteering presents genuine challenges; there were examples where providers were able to evaluate elements of volunteering programmes, but none was doing so in a comprehensive manner.

- Linking volunteering with accreditation can bring both benefits and problems. Young people often spoke about the intrinsic value of volunteering and how it had nothing to do with gaining a qualification. There was clear merit in providers striking a balance and providing opportunities for accreditation where appropriate.

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