



# Research Summary: Literature Review to Inform the Development of Scotland's Volunteering Outcomes Framework



**PEOPLE, COMMUNITIES AND PLACES**

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## Introduction

This summary outlines a systematic review of the research literature on volunteering. The purpose of this review is to inform the development of a Volunteering Outcomes Framework to support the critical role that volunteering plays in Scotland for volunteers, beneficiaries and wider communities.

The Scottish Government's (2018) newly reviewed [National Performance Framework](#) (NPF) has the overall purpose of building opportunities for all through increased wellbeing through sustainable and inclusive economic growth led by values such as kindness, dignity, compassion and transparency. The third sector in Scotland has a role in supporting the 11 National Outcomes, which include: 'We live in communities that are inclusive, empowered, resilient and safe'; 'We are well educated, skilled and able to contribute to society'; and 'We grow up loved, safe and respected so that we realise our full potential' (see Appendix One for full visualisation). The National Outcome focusing on inclusive communities specifically mentions volunteering within its vision.

From the [Scottish Household Survey](#) we know that levels of volunteering have remained relatively stable over the last nine years, with around three in ten adults providing unpaid help to organisations or groups. In 2017, 28 per cent of adults provided unpaid help to organisations or groups in the last 12 months.

The Scottish Government's objective in developing the Volunteering Outcomes Framework is to:

- Set out clearly and in one place a coherent and compelling narrative;
- Define the key outcomes desired for volunteering in Scotland;
- Identify the key data and evidence that will inform, indicate and drive performance at national and local level; and
- Allow informed debate and decision about the optimal combination of programmes, investments and interventions.

The Framework is being developed with the sector and is informed by evidence gathered by the Scottish Government and key delivery and strategic partners, and enriched by a series of internal and external engagements and by specific commissions, including this literature review.

## Methods

We used the 'Stirling literature review method' to identify, collate and evaluate relevant literature to be synthesised. This incorporates systematic searches of a wide range of databases, filtering of results for relevance, and the use of a specially designed pro forma to systematically extract key information regarding the subject matter, results, and assess the quality of the research as reported.

In total, 37,031 papers were returned by the database searches. Examination of the paper titles by the review team identified 2,204 papers for abstract review. These papers were then scored on the basis of their title and abstract, identifying 130 papers to be read by the reviewers. The papers that were given a full text review were also assessed for their quality as evidence, taking into account their sample, research design, methods and presentation of results.

## Key Findings, Research Evidence Gaps and Recommendations

Through the course of the review we identified key themes and make a number of recommendations to inform the development of the Volunteering Outcomes Framework.

### 1. A picture of volunteering

Place is important for volunteering in Scotland, with much higher levels of participation in rural areas than urban areas. We need to understand the drivers behind this difference, as well as whether there are lessons to be learned from communities with high levels of participation. Scotland is experiencing population ageing, as well as significant health inequalities. Healthier older age may increase participation around retirement, but health inequalities could perpetuate differences in participation. Changing lifecourses will also change participation: e.g. delaying starting families, longer working lives, increased informal care responsibilities.

### Research Evidence Gaps

- The existing evidence focuses primarily on volunteering amongst younger people and older people. There has been less study of volunteering patterns in between.
- There is relatively little longitudinal data on volunteering, which means that patterns of participation within the lifecourse are not that well studied at a population level.
- Few papers explicitly consider the role of place in volunteering participation. Consideration of the impact of place - comparison of location and settings of volunteering would help us to understand the role that place has in participation.

- The relatively light coverage of informal volunteering in the literature – driven by a lack of data on this form of participation – means that we would benefit from exploring more informal routes into volunteering, and focusing on the more nuanced routes to a wider range of volunteer activities.

## Recommendations for the Volunteering Outcomes Framework

**Recommendation One:** Volunteering is a cultural activity, and the motivations, meaning and factors predicting participation vary across both countries and contexts. Consideration should be given to how both the meaning and context of volunteering may change as the Scottish population changes.

**Recommendation Two:** Volunteering participation varies through time, and across the lifecourse, although it is often studied as a discrete activity at one point in time. Key transitions from the literature include starting a family, and retirement in older age. Evidence on the significance of other lifecourse transitions is more limited. Consideration should be given to how interventions to encourage participation at one point might also influence participation later in life.

## 2. Motivations and Barriers

In Scotland motivations to volunteer will vary by context e.g. urban / rural; community / education. The close links between motivations and place may explain some of the variation in participation across communities, but the research evidence on the role of place is limited.

Attempts to increase participation amongst young people in Scotland have included appealing to the individual benefits of volunteering. The [2017-18 Programme for Government](#) has a specific focus on younger people volunteering. In focussing on volunteering outcomes, it is tempting to prioritise these benefits, and the evidence suggests that this needs to be carefully considered. Focusing on only benefits may overlook structural barriers to volunteering.

Barriers to volunteering participation reflect wider structures of inequality, and so overcoming them in the Scottish context needs to be linked to wider policy. The National Performance Framework in Scotland has tackling inequality and poverty fully integrated across National Outcomes and Indicators, showing that it is a key priority. The evidence demonstrates the reliance that volunteering will have on other policy areas in Scotland.

## Research Evidence Gaps

- Strong arguments are made for ‘starting young’ in volunteering as a way to increase participation. While this may well be successful, there is little longitudinal evidence to explore the effectiveness of this approach.
- Improving our understanding of cultural differences in volunteering participation, particularly in the context of migration, identity and integration.
- Structural barriers to current volunteering processes and how they can exclude certain groups.
- Understanding the consequences of the policy focus on instrumentalist motivations in recruiting young people to volunteer for longer term participation.

## Recommendations for the Volunteering Outcomes Framework

**Recommendation Three:** There is a rich range of motivations for volunteering, and these are fairly well documented and understood in the literature. The most commonly considered motivations are altruism and personal development, but consideration should be given to broader motivations such as personal values and cultural norms when developing the Framework. We should resist the temptation to focus solely on instrumentalist motivations and routes into volunteering.

**Recommendation Four:** An important distinction is made between barriers to accessing volunteering, and barriers to continuing to volunteer, and a range of these barriers are well described. Consideration should be given to the ways in which these barriers can be tackled that is sensitive to the motivations, context and lifecourse events in which volunteering takes place.

## 3. Outcomes and Benefits

The literature evidence suggests that there are wide and significant benefits for individuals, organisations and communities from volunteering participation. We would expect these benefits to apply to volunteering in Scottish communities. Given the deprivation gradient in volunteering participation in Scotland, we know that the benefits of volunteering are not very equally distributed. We must be careful that support for volunteering in Scotland does not perpetuate these inequalities by only being accessible to those with existing privilege.

## Research Evidence Gaps

- Measurement of broader organisational and community-level impacts of volunteering. In particular, there is a gap in evidence quantifying these benefits, although this is a challenging area.

- The potential negative consequences of volunteering, particularly in perpetuating social inequalities, is not well understood. More exploration into the negative effects of volunteering would help to give more steer for improvements in policy and practice for volunteering.

## Recommendations for the Volunteering Outcomes Framework

**Recommendation Five:** It should be acknowledged that the benefits of volunteering do vary with both activity and context, and benefits are not equally distributed across all volunteering activities. There is a broad evidence base for a wide range of benefits from volunteering, and this will be core to the Framework.

**Recommendation Six:** The relatively limited evidence on community-level outcomes suggests that volunteering has potential to support the development of social networks, solidarity and mutual help within communities, and increasing both bonding and bridging social capital. These outcomes should be related to National Outcomes around building resilient and inclusive communities.

**Recommendation Seven:** The evidence on broader organisational and community outcomes suggests potential for volunteering to have positive impacts, but is limited in its estimation of the scale of those benefits. The Framework needs to recognise that there are wider benefits, but that measuring or quantifying these is very challenging.

**Recommendation Eight:** An underlying assumption in the literature is that volunteering has positive outcomes. This means that there is relatively little study of potentially negative outcomes. Consideration should be given to how potential negative outcomes are incorporated and mitigated in the Framework. Potential negative outcomes can be challenged by include positive support structures for volunteering participation, encouragement of good volunteering management practice, and a focus on increasing the accessibility for currently under-represented groups of within the volunteering sector.

## 4. Informal participation and inequalities

Given the focus to date on formal volunteering in both policy and measurement, there is a risk in privileging formal forms of participation. Informal volunteering may be seen as a route to formal volunteering in Scotland, but this could risk devaluing it as an important form of participation in its own right. The new Scottish Household Survey questions on informal volunteering, introduced in 2018, will provide valuable additional evidence on these patterns in Scotland. Exploring the contribution of informal volunteering can give more light to certain activities and groups that have been traditionally undervalued.

Understanding the structural barriers to participation in Scotland for disadvantaged groups, and how these are influenced by both local and national policy, will be critical if volunteering is to play an effective role in decreasing social inequality. Tackling inequality is a priority in the 2017-18 [Programme for Government](#) and is an essential component of creating sustainable and resilient communities. Informal volunteering has potential to play a significant role in widening voluntary participation in Scotland. Its lower reliance on human capital means that it can be an accessible form of participation for disadvantaged groups. But it still requires social capital, in the form of strong, connected communities in order to play this role.

### Research Evidence Gaps

- Exploring the connection between formal and informal volunteering within traditionally excluded groups.
- Investigate how current volunteering support networks can diversify their support mechanisms to include informal volunteer activities.
- Understanding the structural barriers that apply in Scotland to the participation of under-represented groups.

### Recommendations for the Volunteering Outcomes Framework

**Recommendation Nine:** Informal volunteering is an important form of participation for traditionally excluded or disadvantaged groups. Its lower visibility means that participation amongst these groups is also less visible. The Framework needs to consider ways in which informal volunteering can be recognised and included, without implying a hierarchy in forms of participation.

**Recommendation Ten:** Informal volunteering is distinct from formal volunteering in its activities, participants, motivations, benefits and outcomes. Where there are evidence gaps, we should not assume that these are the same as for formal volunteering. Consideration should be given to taking these distinctions into account within the Framework.

**Recommendation Eleven:** When successful, volunteering can build social capital and connections both within and between communities. The limited evidence on informal volunteering suggests that it has an important role in these outcomes, and the Framework should consider ways in which this can be supported.

**Recommendation Twelve:** There remain distinct barriers and challenges for disadvantaged groups in participating in volunteering. The importance of culture and context in participation accentuate these. Consideration should be given to the diversity of both volunteering and volunteers in the development of the Framework.

## **Conclusions**

Volunteering is a significant phenomenon across countries and cultures, with large benefits to volunteers, service users, communities and society. Our review has described the complexity of volunteers and volunteering in the range of literature that we have considered for this review.

In the course of the review we identify strong links to the Scottish Government's (2018) National Performance Framework, such as building inclusive community and tackling poverty by sharing opportunities, wealth and power more equally. The Volunteering Outcomes Framework provides an opportunity to support these outcomes through identifying the vibrancy and diversity of voluntary participation, and providing a focal point for considering the impact that policy can have on the participation of the Scottish population in civil society.



APPENDIX ONE: Scottish Government (2018) [National Performance Framework](#)





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