

# KICKSTARTING A NEW VOLUNTEER REVOLUTION

SOCIAL MOBILITY: UNLEASHING THE  
POWER OF VOLUNTEERING | 2021



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# FOREWORD

The past 12 months have been challenging for most of us and we continue to live and manage uncertainty in our daily lives. For young people who are trying to enter the labour market for the first time, for those who have been furloughed, or are in transition and uncertain about their future career or job prospects, the findings presented in this report offer real hope and optimism.

I have always believed that volunteering has great power to transform lives – both for those needing a helping hand but also those giving a helping hand. However, those with most to gain from the benefits of volunteering are least likely to be volunteers. So, I want to address this.

Over the past 10 years, there has been a strong and growing evidence base on the physical and mental wellbeing benefits of volunteering. We now have compelling evidence of the power of volunteering to drive peoples' social mobility – either through improving their employability, getting their first job, getting a better job, or inspiring them to retrain to seek a new fulfilling career.

As our nation recovers and rebuilds from this global pandemic, I and the charity I lead are committed to supporting those feeling uncertain or facing a change in their employment prospects to step forward to volunteer as a route to a career or job.

Royal Voluntary Service wants to be a charity that supports everyone to grow their confidence, gain new skills and experience through volunteering, and for those that want it, whatever their age or stage of life, to move into a job and career that is fulfilling.

We see this work as a vital contribution to helping national recovery, social mobility and the levelling up agenda. We are keen to work in partnership with others, across the public, voluntary/community and private sectors, to support this type of volunteering. As you read the findings and insight of this report, particularly the Blueprint for Volunteering and Social Mobility, I hope it inspires you to step forward to volunteer or to partner with us on this important piece of work.



Catherine Johnstone, CBE,  
Chief Executive,  
Royal Voluntary Service

**Social Mobility:** *Unleashing the Power of Volunteering is the second in a series of research-led reports in which Royal Voluntary Service, alongside leading volunteering experts, examines the motivations, attitudes, benefits, routes and barriers to volunteering, and discusses the implications for civic life and society. The first report in the series, Kickstarting a new volunteer revolution<sup>1</sup>, explored first-time volunteering and made recommendations for ways to encourage more individuals to volunteer for the first time.*

# VOLUNTEERING AND SOCIAL MOBILITY: OUR BLUEPRINT

Engaging in volunteering can and does have an incredible, transformative power. At its best, volunteering can provide those who take part with the skills and experience to thrive. It can help people into jobs, act as a pathway into new careers and it can help people to get better jobs. It can boost **social mobility**. In short, we argue that the power of volunteering is strong – it can play a key part in our national recovery, helping the United Kingdom and its citizens to grow and to thrive.

Too often, however, the benefits of volunteering are not fully realised. The power volunteering has to change lives is not made accessible to all. And too often the benefits that volunteering can provide for those at all stages of their working lives are not realised.

We believe that the social mobility benefits that volunteering can bring must be embraced and must be available to all. To achieve this – to enable volunteering to improve social mobility – action is needed. Our ambition is for Royal Voluntary Service and for all volunteer-involving organisations to contribute to this action.

**For this to be successful, and for volunteering to play the role we know it can, we must:**

- 1 Find and celebrate the double benefit**  
Voluntary action can and should benefit both the volunteer and the cause. Organisations should embrace this, providing and celebrating opportunities for volunteers to explore and develop.
- 2 Make sure EVERYONE can benefit**  
Those who stand to gain the most from volunteering are also the least likely to engage. Changing this will require building partnerships and positively working to recruit volunteers from under-represented groups.
- 3 Make pathways to employment clear and specific**  
For volunteers who are interested, organisations should provide clear and specific pathways to employment and skills that can be transferred into paid work.
- 4 Work in Partnership**  
The relationship between volunteering and social mobility depends on volunteer-involving organisations, businesses and public sector bodies working together.

# THE UK IN 2021

We sit at a historic crossroads. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to over 127,000 deaths<sup>2</sup> across the United Kingdom and further exposed the inequalities that persist in our society. In addition, unemployment has soared, with young people and those aged over 50 particularly hard hit<sup>3</sup>. Yet it has also shown the country at its very best. An astonishing **12.4 million people** have volunteered during the pandemic, **4.6 million** of them doing so for the first time<sup>4</sup>. Our generosity has been further displayed by the **£33 million** donated to NHS Charities following Captain Tom Moore's herculean fundraising efforts. And the Black Lives Matter protests have shown people's willingness to speak out when they see – and experience – injustice.

The challenge we are now facing is how to sustain this passion for helping friends and strangers alike *and* to channel these efforts into supporting the post-COVID recovery. Central to this will be **social mobility**, enabling everyone to fulfil their potential and be the best they can. This means supporting those who are unemployed – whether newly or otherwise – into fulfilling work. It means helping those who have been furloughed – all 11.2 million of them<sup>5</sup> – to resume and thrive in their roles. And it means giving those in employment everything they need to fulfil their full potential.

We believe passionately that volunteering can and should play a central role in this. At its best, volunteering connects people with communities, provides a double benefit for those being helped and the helper themselves, promotes wellbeing and develops a range of skills and experiences which are both personally enriching and professionally rewarding. Yet all too often volunteering doesn't deliver these benefits to everyone – with those who have the most to gain from volunteering the least likely to engage in formal volunteering<sup>6</sup>.

So as we approach this crossroads, as the lockdown begins to unlock and as things begin to get back to 'normal', we have an opportunity. An opportunity to do things differently, to make volunteering and the benefits it can bring accessible to all. An opportunity to ensure that volunteering provides opportunities for everyone who wishes to develop and grow while helping others at the same time. An opportunity, in short, to level up individuals and communities.

*To help us to make the most of this opportunity, we have undertaken this research to explore the benefits that volunteering is bringing to people across the UK. We wanted to better understand the connections that people make between their volunteering and their paid work.*

We first conducted a literature review to give a clear overview of the existing knowledge about volunteering and social mobility<sup>7</sup>, followed by two surveys, a quantitative survey conducted by the market research organisation PCP of 1,000 adults aged 16-65 who are current or recent volunteers and a qualitative survey of Royal Voluntary Service volunteers aged 16-65.

The survey data makes clear the positive impact that volunteering has had on the volunteers during the COVID-19 pandemic. And while those who are unemployed are typically under-represented in formal volunteering, we found that those who are currently unemployed or have been furloughed are considerably more likely to have started volunteering recently, with **25.5%** having been volunteering for less than a year compared to just **10.8%** of those who are currently working. If this engagement can be sustained, the benefits will be huge.

There is no shortage of academic research and policy rhetoric celebrating the power that volunteering has to change lives, both for the volunteer and for the recipient of their help. The literature review conducted as part of this research shows that the benefits to the volunteer are wide and include improvements to health and wellbeing, increased confidence, self-efficacy and self-esteem, a range of soft skill improvements, workplace experience, accessing training, increasing aspirations and growing social networks<sup>8</sup>. This is quite the list of positive outcomes, and all for the relatively minimal investment of a few hours a week!



# HELPING OTHERS WHILE HELPING OURSELVES

While these benefits to the individual are clearly significant, they aren't generally the main reasons people cite when asked why they started volunteering. Certainly, few volunteers talk in terms of 'social mobility'. That said, employment-focussed reasons for volunteering were cited by a significant number of volunteers we spoke to, with **23%** of all volunteers saying that learning new skills was a reason why they started volunteering and exactly the same percentage saying that volunteering gave them a chance to use their existing skills. Even more explicitly job-focussed drivers were also commonly cited – **15%** of volunteers started their volunteering in part because they felt it would help their chances of getting a new or better job, while **11%** felt volunteering would provide them with qualifications which would help in their paid career. Getting on in paid employment is clearly an important reason why people volunteer.

These numbers are higher still for younger volunteers, perhaps unsurprisingly. Being motivated in part by the hope that volunteering will improve job prospects is most commonly cited by younger volunteers, with **22%** of those aged 20-29 citing this compared to **15%** of volunteers overall. The same pattern is true of gaining new skills and qualifications.

Yet these numbers are dwarfed by more altruistic motivations. In our sample, **58%** of volunteers said they volunteered to improve things and help people and **35%** because the cause is important to them, the two most frequently cited categories. When we asked all volunteers what their main reason for starting volunteering was, **35%** cited wanting to help people, by far the most commonly cited reason.

**23%**

*started volunteering to learn new skills*

**15%**

*started volunteering to improve their chances of getting a new or better job*

## Heather's Story

*"I was desperate to find work and make something of my life, but no one would take me on because I had only ever been a full-time mum.*

*About six years ago I couldn't take it anymore. I was in the job centre and spotted a Get Back to Work programme and gave it a go. It started off with volunteering, spending time with people at a local day centre. I was so happy to be out of the house. I realised I actually had a responsibility for the people there, and with that my confidence grew rapidly and I started to believe I was capable of so much more. I also found the people so interesting.*

*I spent six months at the day centre then joined the team that visits people in their homes. Two years after I began I finally felt confident enough to apply for a support worker job and I got it. I have never felt so brilliant and haven't looked back since then. If it wasn't for my volunteering journey I wouldn't be where I am.*

*I'm now a support worker for adults in supported living. It is full-on, but I love it – getting to know people and knowing what I can do to make their lives better. It is really satisfying to know that I am making a difference to someone's life every day."*

However, this picture changes somewhat for those who are either unemployed or have been placed on the Government's furlough scheme, who were much more likely to state – like Heather – that they started volunteering at least in part because of the boost to their employability that it might provide. It was particularly notable that when asked what the single most important reason for deciding to start volunteering was, **10%** of those who were unemployed or on furlough cited volunteering improving their chances of getting a job as being the most important reason, compared to just **3%** of those currently in employment. This meant that for **unemployed or furloughed volunteers**, improving their chances of **getting a job** was the second most frequently cited reason for starting volunteering after wanting to improve things and help people.

So people's reasons for volunteering are complex, a mix of more and less self-interested reasons. Significantly, the double benefit of volunteering – improving things for others and improving the lives of volunteers – is made clear here<sup>9</sup>. Volunteers are clear that they want their efforts to have an impact on causes that they are passionate about. But they are also clear that they are anticipating benefits for themselves. These different outcomes are not in opposition to one another. We can and should celebrate and shout about what people can do for their communities, but also what doing so can do for the volunteers themselves.





**34%**

*of 16-19 year olds report  
that volunteering helped them  
get their first job*

**30%**

*of 30-39 year olds feel  
that volunteering helped them  
get a better job*

# VOLUNTEERING'S SUPERPOWERS

We know, then, that wanting to get on in paid employment is one of a number of drivers of volunteering, and that it is particularly important to volunteers currently outside of the paid labour market. And on the whole, volunteers are positive about the impact that volunteering can have, younger volunteers in particular. Overall, **26%** of volunteers strongly agree and **32%** somewhat agree that volunteering has improved their job prospects – meaning **58%** of volunteers credit volunteering with improving their job chances.

Notably, while those currently unemployed or furloughed expressed hopes that volunteering would help their labour market prospects, employment status doesn't seem to have an impact here, with a greater proportion of those in work (**62%**) agreeing that volunteering has helped their employment prospects compared to the nonetheless high **53%** of those who are currently either unemployed or furloughed. This is maybe unsurprising – those unemployed or on furlough are by definition less sure of their employability – but it suggests there is work to do to match up some volunteers' expectations of the employability and social mobility advantages of volunteering with the outcomes. Showing clear pathways from volunteering to paid employment – for those who want them – could help to make this match.

Beyond perceptions of increased employability, many of the volunteers we surveyed felt that volunteering has had a real impact on their paid employment

- **34%** of volunteers aged 16-19, **22%** of those aged 20-29 and **10%** of those aged 30-39 report that volunteering helped them to get their first job.
- **23%** of those aged 16-19, **27%** of those aged 20-29 and **30%** of those aged 30-39 feel that volunteering helped them to get a better job.

The existing academic literature is less confident about this relationship. While research in Europe and North America suggests a link between volunteering and employment, evidence from the UK provides a more mixed picture. One study, using the British Household Panel Survey, found no positive effect of volunteering on young people's transition into employment, no matter how much volunteering they did<sup>10</sup>. Research like this may miss the complexity of the relationship between volunteering and paid work, but it certainly suggests a potential mismatch between what people believe may be happening (as demonstrated in the data above) and the actual recruitment decisions being made by employers.

**58%**

*credit volunteering with improving their job chances*

**38%**

*feel it improved their confidence*

**39%**

*feel it improved their communication skills*

***“It’s really helping me just getting out and speaking to new people and giving me confidence to potentially apply and change jobs after the furlough scheme runs out.”***

*Female, 20-29, Furloughed, Midlands*

Where there is much clearer evidence is in volunteering’s ability to develop volunteers’ soft skills, which in turn may make individuals more employable. There is evidence<sup>11</sup> to suggest that volunteering can improve employability through building confidence and by providing experience in teamwork and communication. A review of the National Citizen Service scheme found positive benefits for self-confidence, problem solving, decision-making, emotional regulation and resilience<sup>12</sup>.

We found that young people in particular feel that volunteering has improved their confidence and their communication skills. Over a third of all volunteers – **38%** – told us that volunteering has improved their confidence, with over half of 16-19 year olds (**52%**) agreeing. Similarly, **39%** of all volunteers told us that volunteering has improved their communication skills, with **60%** of 16-19 year olds agreeing that these skills have improved.

More formal skills are developed through the training that many volunteers receive. Training is obviously a vital way that organisations can ensure that volunteer effort is put to best use, but it also provides benefits to volunteers themselves. Over half of the volunteers we surveyed (**52%**) have received some training as part of their volunteer role.

Undertaking training as a volunteer was perceived by nearly all of those who undertook it as having improved their employability. Young people overwhelmingly feel that their volunteer training has helped improve their employability – **100%** of 16-19 year olds agreed with this along with **97%** of those aged 20-29.

**91%**

*with training feel new skills gained made them more employable*

Volunteering, it seems, has superpowers. It grows skills, confidence and a whole range of other attributes which make people *feel* more employable. Young people in particular perceive that volunteering is providing them with real benefits which give them an advantage both when entering the labour market and when moving between jobs. When formal training is provided this helps further, with nearly all volunteers reflecting that the training they have received as part of their volunteering has made them more employable.



However, these superpowers are not currently available to all. The challenge we face is to harness the power of volunteering to enable people to be their very best, no matter where they're from or what their background is. The previous research reviewed suggests some ways that this challenge can be met. The National Young Volunteers' Service<sup>13</sup> argued that routes into volunteering – and the positive benefits it can have – need to be carefully considered if organisations are to attract a truly diverse range of volunteers.

In particular, they note the importance of:

- recognising the different reasons why people volunteer;
- allowing people to dip their toe into the water before committing to volunteering, for example through taster sessions;

- responding quickly when people's interest in volunteering is sparked;
- noting the practical reasons which may present barriers to people volunteering, including a lack of opportunities local to where people live and;
- building flexibility into volunteering opportunities to accommodate challenging or changing circumstances.

Other research has highlighted the importance of the right staffing and support being in place for volunteers<sup>14</sup> and the role that this can play in providing volunteers with the skills and confidence to begin engaging in volunteering<sup>15</sup>. Taking such steps provides the basis of a useful framework for how to engage and support volunteers from traditionally under-represented groups.



# MID-LIFE MATTERS

Policy and research on volunteering often focuses on the benefits of volunteering to the employability of younger adults. Relatively little, however, has been discussed about the benefits to people further into adulthood, particularly at points of change and transition. The pandemic is likely to bring about enduring changes in working patterns, with research by insurance provider Aviva finding that **53%** of UK workers plan to make a change in their careers in the next 12 months as a direct result of the pandemic<sup>16</sup>. How we as a society support people to transition to a new career or job mid-life needs therefore to be a bigger part of the COVID-19 recovery discourse than it currently is.

In our research, **66%** of 30-39 year olds and **55%** of 40-49 year olds feel that volunteering has helped improve their employment prospects. Even amongst those aged 50-65, **35%** feel volunteering has improved their employability. Some also see it as a way to **retrain** or gain experience in order to change careers; **20%** of those aged 30-39 and **17%** of those 40-49 stated that they feel their volunteering has helped them to do this. We also wanted to understand what volunteering had *actually* made people do; **12%** of those 30-39 and **10%** of those 40-49 stated that their volunteering actually made them retrain in a different field.

***“It has built up my confidence and helped me to develop new friendships”***

*Female, 40-49, Unemployed, Wales*

We also asked people whether their volunteering made them consider a career/job choice in the NHS or health and social care sector, particularly relevant given workforce shortages and hence opportunities in this field. Interestingly, a higher proportion of those aged 16-19 and 20-29 said that their volunteer experience made them *think* about pursuing a career in the NHS or health and

social care sector, but those aged 30-39 were more likely to state they were *actively seeking* or *now work/have a career* in the NHS or health and social care sector thanks to their volunteering.

Volunteering therefore could provide a powerful recruitment pathway for our overstretched NHS and wider health and social care sector. Those in mid-life considering a career change should be encouraged to see volunteering as a way of experiencing health and social care work and gaining valuable skills before they commit to a change of career. Volunteering schemes that seek to support those in mid-life who feel that they want to explore a new career path could provide an unprecedented **triple benefit**: volunteers can gain skills and experience, volunteer-involving health and social care organisations benefit from the time and effort the volunteers put in and our local and national health and social care systems benefit from an increased supply of enthusiastic potential staff with experience gained through volunteering.

These findings provide exciting insight into the power of volunteering to help and support people transition to a new career/job/field in mid to later life. With the right support – from volunteer-involving organisations and from employers – volunteering in mid-life can help people to change careers or to progress in their current jobs.

**66%**

*of 30-39 year olds feel  
volunteering improved their  
employment prospects*

**55%**

*of 40-49 year olds feel  
volunteering improved their  
employment prospects*

**12%**

*of those 30-39 credit their  
volunteering for undertaking  
a new career path*

**10%**

*of those 40-49 credit their  
volunteering for undertaking  
a new career path*

## *Kerry's Story*

*"I started in insurance straight from college at 18 and was a loss adjuster for the last 15 years. Out of the blue, with no clue whatsoever, I was told I was redundant. My confidence fell through the floor and I was unsure how I could see myself out of the problem.*

*After a short while though, I knew I had to pull myself together and do something. Coincidentally, only days before I lost my job I had spotted a Royal Voluntary Service notice at the supermarket asking for volunteers. Suddenly I had all this time on my hands and decided I needed to use it well and that volunteering was the perfect answer. I started out helping out at a lunch club. I have never felt so welcome and useful.*

*I applied for and got another corporate job, but after four weeks I left. I just wasn't happy and realised that I no longer wanted that life. I didn't feel I was making a real difference to anyone and I suddenly understood that being a part of my community was what I wanted more than anything. That just happened to tie in with a vacancy in the Royal Voluntary Service office for an administrator. I think the fact they knew me through volunteering stood me in good stead, and I got the job. From that day forward I have never regretted the move. I am exactly where I am meant to be and that feels really good.*

*I tell anyone who will listen they should give it a go – there really is nothing to lose."*

# A CATALYST FOR MORE

Volunteering does not just deliver employability benefits to volunteers in and of itself – it also acts as a catalyst for volunteers to pursue other ways of making themselves more employable.

**32%**

*of volunteers feel that their volunteering has made them want to learn a new skill, and*

**65%**

*of these have gone on to actually learn a new skill*

A smaller, but nonetheless significant, proportion of volunteers feels that volunteering has made them want to undertake more formal education and training:

**17%**

*report that volunteering made them want to go to university for the first time*

**16%**

*that it made them want to take a distance learning course*

**15%**

*that it made them want to return to education having left some time before*

**12%**

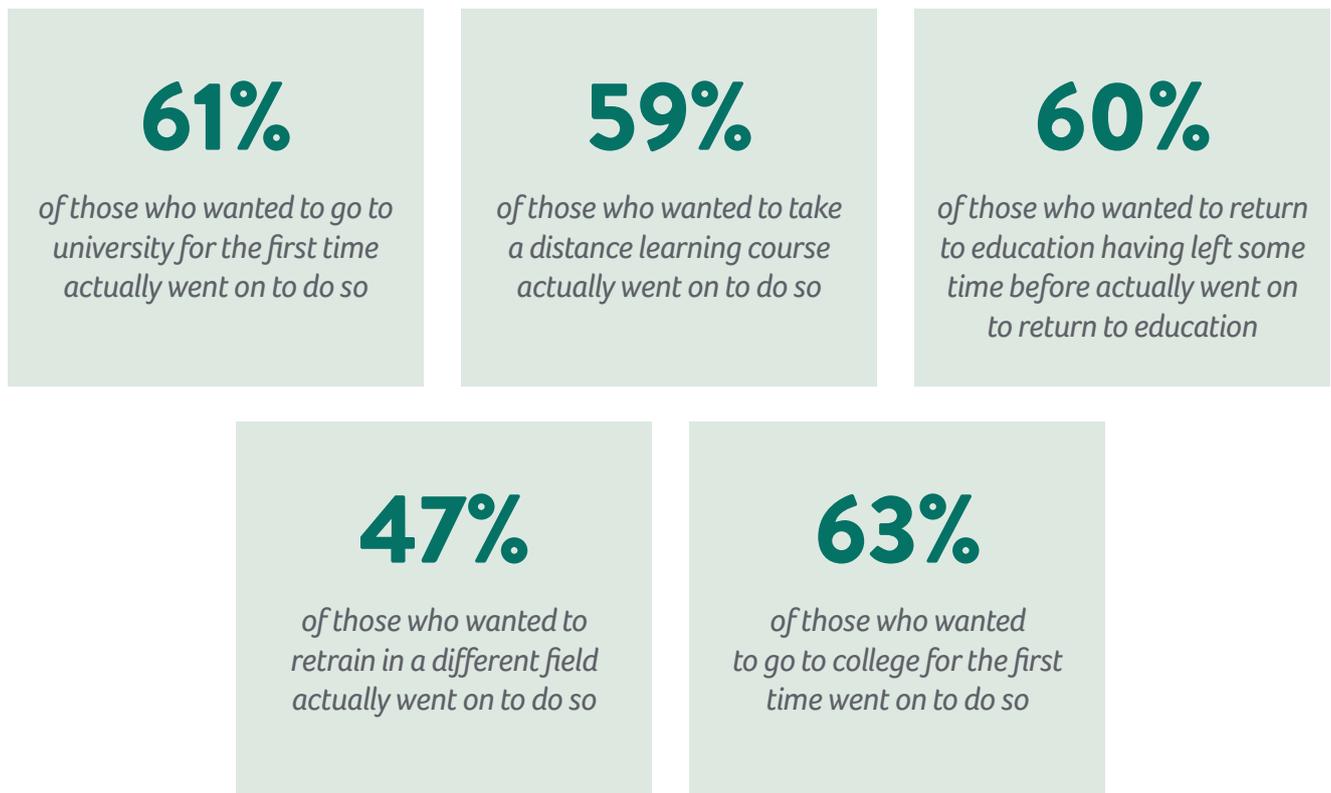
*that it made them want to retrain in a different field*

**11%**

*that it made them want to go to college for the first time*

Perhaps unsurprisingly, young people are more likely to report that volunteering has made them want to and actually go to university or undertake another form of education for the first time, while those in their 20s and 30s are more likely to have been prompted to return to education or take distance learning courses than younger or older volunteers. Current employment status, however, does not seem to have any impact on desire for or actual skill development.

In terms of how many of those who wanted to undertake more formal education or training as a result of their volunteering experiences actually went on to do so:



Only **23%** of those for whom volunteering had made them want to undertake additional formal or informal training had not gone on to do it in some form.

This suggests that volunteering acts for many volunteers as a push engage in additional skill development – a key driver of social mobility. According to the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (2015), as many as 22% of all job vacancies are hard to fill, but they are mainly vacancies for which employers cannot find candidates with job-specific, technical or practical skills<sup>17</sup>.



# A CATALYST FOR MORE *continued*

Therefore, we are left with two significant hurdles if we want to unleash volunteering's superpowers for everyone:

1

**Volunteering alone does not provide all the skills and experiences that make someone employable.**

The soft skills it provides give people of all ages and backgrounds rich experiences and wide social networks to draw on, but it doesn't provide the formally assessed skills and qualifications that many recruiters are looking for. As such, volunteering often serves as a catalyst and support network for broadening people's horizons and guiding them towards further informal and formal skill development. It is important – as the Kruger Report argues – that volunteer-involving organisations work in partnership with businesses and public organisations such as Jobcentre Plus to provide further opportunities for skill development if they are to support the social mobility that will allow our communities to level up<sup>18</sup>.

2

**Volunteering does not always reach the people who need this catalyst and support network the most.**

Even when it does it may not deliver the outcomes – or at least all of the outcomes – that volunteers desire from it. That unemployed and furloughed volunteers were more likely than those in employment to cite employability as a reason for volunteering yet less likely to perceive that volunteering was actually making them more employable is noteworthy. Again, more linked-up thinking is required – volunteering needs to be seen as a viable option, something that 'people like me do' for everyone who wants to get into or get on in paid employment.



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# A BLUEPRINT

The benefits of volunteering are clear. But for many, they alone are not enough to provide the boost in skills and experience that will fuel social mobility.

To really contribute to the levelling up agenda – to support social mobility for all – volunteering needs to do more. It needs to recognise that for many, including those who most need the benefits that volunteering can deliver, it is seen as something of a closed shop. And it needs to find a way of helping those who come to it with ambitions of growing their employability – just like the unemployed and furloughed volunteers who responded to our survey.

The good news? Volunteering has the potential to do this and more. While volunteering cannot change the structural inequalities in society – at least not overnight – it can help people from all backgrounds to develop the skills, experience and networks that enable them to be the best they can. Building on the findings reported here and the literature reviewed, we suggest that there are some key things that volunteer programmes that are ambitious about driving the social mobility of their volunteers can – and should – do.



**1**

### **Find and celebrate the double benefit**

The training that volunteers are offered, the experiences that they have and the skills they develop are all part of the glorious social benefit that volunteering provides. Embrace it! Recognise that altruism and a desire to help is both important and admirable, but it is not the whole story. Provide training to volunteers when they want or need training. Let them use their volunteering to explore and develop themselves and the world around them. Allow them to take your work to places you do not expect – and take them to places that they do not expect in return.

**2**

### **Make sure EVERYONE can benefit**

Those who stand to gain the most from volunteering are also the least likely to engage in it. If volunteering is to play a key role in enabling social mobility, this needs to change. People who currently feel excluded from volunteering need to be shown that they have something to offer by volunteering and that volunteering has something to offer them. This will be hard, sometimes working against societal structures to ensure that everyone has access to fulfilling volunteering opportunities. It needs more than organisations simply being ‘open to all’ – it will require building partnerships and positively working to recruit volunteers from under-represented groups. Approaches to recruiting and managing volunteers need to emphasise flexibility, respond quickly and support volunteers throughout the process of becoming and being a volunteer. Everyone has a contribution to make, and everyone can benefit from making a contribution.

**3**

### **Make pathways to employment clear and specific**

Not all volunteers are interested in the employability benefits that volunteering brings. This is fine. But some are, and we owe it to them to provide clear and specific pathways to employment. This does not need to be resource intensive – there are excellent mentorship and coaching programmes run by organisations as diverse as The Prince’s Trust<sup>19</sup>, Brightside<sup>20</sup> and Career Ready<sup>21</sup> that you could signpost your volunteers towards, while also continuing to support them as they develop skills, confidence and social networks.

**4**

### **Work in Partnership**

The relationship between volunteering and social mobility depends on volunteer-involving organisations, businesses and public sector bodies working together. Pathways that link volunteering with employment *and* employment with volunteering will benefit volunteers and voluntary organisations. This will help to bridge that catalyst for skill development that volunteering brings with the opportunities that employers can offer for employees to grow and thrive.

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“”

# OUR VOLUNTEERS PROVIDE PRACTICAL SUPPORT AND VITAL COMPANIONSHIP TO HELP PEOPLE GET THE BEST OUT OF LIFE.

Catherine Johnstone CBE | Chief Executive



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