

# **VOLUNTARY NORFOLK**

## **Developing Volunteering in Great Yarmouth: Building Pride and Place**

April 2023

# 1. Introduction

A focus of the Know Your Neighbourhood programme is to generate and share learning on how people in disadvantaged areas can be supported to volunteer and improve their social connections. Voluntary Norfolk received funding for a short piece of research to investigate how we can support people into suitable volunteering opportunities and increase social connection for the chronically lonely and isolated, drawing on evaluation of our own work within Great Yarmouth and further research.

At Voluntary Norfolk we believe that volunteering should be for everyone, and that it has benefits for individual volunteers and communities. This project was an opportunity to explore how we bring down the barriers so that those in disadvantaged areas, and particularly the socially isolated, can get involved and enjoy the benefits of volunteering.

Voluntary Norfolk is in a unique position in Norfolk of being an infrastructure provider providing volunteering support to the Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector, delivering services that support those who are chronically lonely and social isolated, and running projects with volunteers. Voluntary Norfolk has a long history of working in Great Yarmouth (including Neighbourhoods that Work (2015 - 2020)) and currently delivers a range of services in the town including supporting those who are socially isolated (Better Together Norfolk), supporting adult and young carers (Carers Matter Norfolk), and providing employment and skills support (Chances, Norfolk Community College). In our research we drew on experience from all aspects of our work to give us an insight into the question of how to increase volunteering amongst those who are socially isolated. This research also contributes to, and has been informed by, our ongoing work developing a Norfolk Volunteer strategy, which will be published in autumn 2023.

Important to this research is the understanding of 'volunteering'. The term 'volunteering' is used here to encompass both formal volunteering with a constituted body (such as a local charity or social enterprise) on a regular basis, and more informal 'helping out' or 'being involved' in local initiatives including good neighbour schemes and volunteer led community groups. Many people who are active under this second definition may not see themselves as 'volunteers', however this concept of volunteering is crucial in encouraging the priority audiences for this research to engage.

We are immensely grateful to all those that took part and contributed their expertise and views to this research. We decided to publish our findings as hope they will be useful to other organisations and can inform future Know Your Neighbourhood projects. We will be using them to inform Voluntary Norfolk's work and to feed into our work on the Norfolk Volunteer Strategy.

“ [Volunteers] bring experience, life, ideas and inspiration to what we do. We keep each other going. They are more important than they realise they are. ”

Rachael Hardie, Dandelions

“ For our organisation [volunteering] is a great asset - what they do is very supportive and enriches us as a team, it makes us bigger and more diverse. ”

Armine Nikoghosyan, GYROS

## 2. Approach

The objective of the research was to explore how to better support people who are socially isolated into volunteering. The timescales for the project were short, with around a week of planning and preparation, three weeks for information gathering, and two weeks for analysis and write-up. We aimed to identify:

- Why people chose to volunteer and the benefits they considered, or others perceived, to result from this engagement;
- Main barriers to volunteering and engagement in community life;
- What changes or use of good practice would encourage or enable other people to volunteer or engage more actively in community life.

We gathered information from a range of people in five ways.

1. Short online surveys to service users, clients and participants in Great Yarmouth based services. Respondents either completed it online or were talked through the questions by advisers or support workers who supported them to complete it.
  - We had 53 people respond, 99% of whom lived in central Great Yarmouth (NR30) or Gorleston area (NR31), and 83% of whom volunteered. 79% of respondents were female, 19% male and 2% other. 68% identified themselves as having a long-term illness or disability, and 94% identified as White British or Irish, with 4% as African and 2% Caribbean. The age profile was younger than might be expected, with 68% of respondents aged between 21 and 49, just 16% were aged 50 or over, and 16% aged between 7 and 20. (In national research and recent Norfolk-wide research people over 50 were the significantly largest age group to volunteer.)
2. A short online survey to professional staff (advisers, coaches, support workers) working with disadvantaged and socially isolated people in Great Yarmouth.
  - We had 37 people respond from a range of organisations and agencies (including Norfolk and Suffolk County Councils, Integrated Care Board, Job Centre Plus, Department of Work & Pensions, NHS, Active Norfolk and Voluntary Norfolk). 88% said that they always or sometimes supported people into volunteering.
3. In-depth discussions with three active volunteers involved in Freshly Greated (a Voluntary Norfolk project running in the most disadvantaged areas of Great Yarmouth).
4. One-to-one interviews, discussions and two focus groups with a further 30 professionals, including Yarmouth-based members of Voluntary Norfolk staff teams, exploring their perceptions and experience drawn from many years of working across the Borough, with a particular focus on the most disadvantaged and socially isolated.
5. Six structured Teams or telephone interviews to learn from the experience of grass-roots VCSE organisations in the Borough that successfully engage with local volunteers.

Through this research 123 people shared their experience and views with us, giving us a broad and valuable range of opinions and insight which have informed our findings. However, the numerical results are very limited so cannot be considered to be statistically accurate.

### 3. Motivations for volunteering

We began by asking the 44 active volunteers what had got them involved and their motivations to stay involved. The top 5 responses were fairly evenly split between:

- It brings positivity, better mental health and a sense of purpose;
- Enjoyment;
- Closer community connections;
- An opportunity to give back to the community;
- It creates new opportunities.

Other aspects highlighted in the open question were the importance of meeting people and making friends, developing skills, being creative and combatting social isolation.

These results have a different emphasis from national and Norfolk-wide motivations which prioritised the wish to 'improve things/help people' and because 'the cause was really important to me'.

Many of those who volunteered did a lot of it, mostly at a very local level, with 59% saying they had volunteered with more than one group (e.g. playgroup, school, PTA, community centre).

The active volunteers were also asked 'Why do you think people help out in their community? What do they get out of it?'

Overwhelmingly the answers were about the positive feelings of being involved – meeting people and making friends, enjoyment, feeling part of the community and that you were helping people, feeling wanted and useful, a sense of purpose and improving the community.

A much smaller number of respondents cited learning new skills, developing confidence, developing employability skills, accessing training and development opportunities. Some also cited the benefits for mental health and combatting social isolation by getting people out of the house, and that it was something free to do.

## 4. Barriers to volunteering / community activity

When **clients** were asked in the survey what they saw as the main barriers preventing people getting involved in volunteering the most significant reasons were:

- Anxiety, poor mental or physical health, low self-confidence or self-esteem, and fear of letting people down;
- Time constraints due to family or caring commitments, work or other commitments;
- Lack of information or understanding about how to, or what is involved in volunteering, and worry they lacked necessary skills.

Other issues raised were -

- Volunteering can be seen as exploitative 'unpaid work';
- Financial concerns about the costs, being out of pocket or impact on state benefits;
- Lack of interest or awareness;
- Problems with accessibility.

These differ from national and countywide results which cite the most common barriers for volunteering as 'work commitments' and doing 'other things in my spare time'.

When **professionals** were asked in the survey about the barriers to volunteering, or getting involved in the community, for those people who are most isolated from society, the main ones were identified as

- Personal - e.g. anxiety or poor mental/physical health or disabilities;
- Practical – e.g. transport or other access difficulties;
- Perceptual – e.g. not sure what volunteering involves/how much commitment expected;
- Knowledge-based – e.g. don't know what opportunities are available/how to access them/don't know what expected of me.

Slightly less significant were –

- Educational - e.g. lacking in language or basic literacy skills;
- Technological - e.g. lack of digital literacy or easy access to digital devices;
- Motivational – e.g. why bother/it's not my problem;
- Cultural - e.g. people like me don't do that/I don't know anyone who volunteers.

The main barriers identified by all **professional participants** through discussions can be broken down into themes and actions that volunteer-involving organisations will need to address including:

- Simpler application processes and more varied pre-application routes into volunteering;
- Lack of clear guidelines about roles, responsibilities, and expectations of new volunteers;
- The nature of the voluntary roles, which are often demanding, difficult and require a high level of commitment, or may be too repetitive and undemanding;
- The need for volunteer recruitment and management to be more person-centered and recognize the practical and personal challenges faced by potential and existing volunteers and their individual needs, interests and motivations;
- More targeted, sophisticated and varied modes of communication to attract new volunteers;
- Addressing volunteers' increased concerns and pressures due to the cost-of-living crisis and the aftermath of the pandemic.

At a more systemic and strategic level the following were identified as significant:

- Limited knowledge and understanding amongst the public in general, and specifically the most disadvantaged or isolated, of what volunteering is, how to find or access opportunities, and what those opportunities might be;
- Consequently a lack of understanding of the benefits of volunteering accruing not only to organisations and the community but also to the individual volunteers;
- A perception that volunteering is 'unpaid' work and a resistance to 'being taken advantage of';
- The changed and changing nature of volunteering from long-term volunteers with a high level of commitment, to shorter and one-off volunteering fitted around other demands and commitments.

# 5. How to increase engagement in volunteering / community action

When asked what might help to get more people helping out in their community, there were clear messages about knowing what opportunities are available or how to find out about them – with the majority of respondents highlighting the need for:

- Better communications and messaging about what opportunities exist, whether they are easy to access, where to find relevant information, including local distribution of flyers rather than reliance on social media and websites, and more proactive promotion by local organisations of what help is needed and which roles are available;
- Clear demonstration of the various benefits of volunteering, to individual volunteers, valued organisations and to the wider community;
- The fun and sociable aspects of volunteering, including feeling like part of the community, meeting people, making friends, and feeling appreciated to be communicated;
- The need for, and clarity about, the right support for volunteers, including training, awards and certificates, so that volunteering is accessible and inclusive for everyone.

When the **professionals** were asked about how those who are most isolated from society can be encouraged to volunteer or to engage with community activities there were many valuable suggestions:

- The need for clearer, more effective and more widespread messages about the impact and benefits of volunteering that will change perceptions. Proactive campaigns using accessible language, telling images and real-life stories of volunteers;
- Addressing the anxieties and uncertainties of many first-time volunteers by careful matching of strengths and lived-experience, or hopes and aspirations, with suitable volunteer roles and organisations, and providing initial and ongoing support to those that need it;
- Enabling and encouraging attractive routes into volunteering through enjoyable and short-term activities, creative opportunities, open days or taster sessions, initial 1-to-1 support till confidence built, offers of mentors or buddies, opportunities for socialising and informal team building and a system of rewards and recognition;
- Closer working relationships and more co-ordinated support from the organisations and agencies that engage with most isolated people to send a consistent message about the individual and wider benefits to mental health and wellbeing and progression into employment.

## What works - What respondents say works in their experience

Respondents were asked to rate a number of suggestions for ways of engaging with and supporting volunteers and could select as many as they wanted. The most useful interventions were identified as:

- Work experience opportunities
- Social events with other volunteers
- Better information about what's available and what's involved
- A buddying system for new volunteers
- Taster sessions or Open Days to meet voluntary organisations
- Finding out their particular interests (e.g. animals, gardening) and matching them up
- Finding out their particular skills or knowledge and matching them up
- Rewards system e.g. badges, T-shirts, thank you events

The professional respondents were asked to rate the same list of suggestions. Interestingly they differed in their priorities. They identified the most useful interventions as:

- Taster sessions or Open Days for potential volunteers to meet voluntary organisations
- A trusted person to accompany them for first session or two
- Finding out their particular interests (e.g. animals, gardening) and matching them up
- Finding out their particular skills or knowledge and matching them up
- Better information about what opportunities are available and what is involved
- A buddying system for new volunteers



## 6. Case studies

### Freshly Greated: Involving volunteers through community-led arts

Freshly Greated is a community-led arts programme dedicated to increasing engagement with arts and creativity in the Great Yarmouth area, particularly amongst the least engaged members of communities residing in areas of significantly high socio-economic deprivation. It is funded by Arts Council England and is part of Voluntary Norfolk. To ensure the programme is truly community-led, Freshly Greated established groups of voluntary “community producers”, local people who meet monthly in their neighbourhoods to generate ideas and help Freshly Greated to programme and deliver all its activities, projects and events in the community, including helping select artists, supporting with production and promotion, and helping run the events. The project works with over 50 volunteers in 3 areas, including a group specifically for 14-18 year olds, ensuring that their voice and vision is the drive behind the activity presented.

For this research Freshly Greated interviewed three community producers to explore why they got involved with Freshly Greated as a volunteer, the impact of volunteering on them, and how to encourage others to volunteer. Here we include some key quotes related to this research. Edited films of the interviews are also available.

#### What first made you want to get involved with FG as a volunteer?

“ I think it was at first the skateboarding workshops. I didn't think it was a volunteering thing. I'd never heard of it. Nobody really mentioned it so we didn't know it was something we could be a part of. So coming to those workshops then realising that we can help do things like this. ”

“ Because we were bored. Summer holidays we see on Facebook there was a workshop at the community centre. And we thought, oh, our boys would really like that. So we came down, We came back cuz the kids actually really enjoyed it. So we said we'd come back and we did and we actually got into it ourselves and said yeah, and we really enjoyed it. ”

“ I saw an advert for the skateboarding artwork and my daughter is very much into her artwork and wanted to promote and help her, support her to develop. [...] So saw the skateboarding street art and was kind of like, this is a great thing for her to get involved with. [...] She came over and got joined in and got involved and absolutely had a great time. [...] And then the other two [children] came along I think either the following week or a couple of weeks later. And then me and Sam got talking. And Sam kind of recruited me into the role really. And that's kind of how I got involved. Speaking to the guys at Freshly Greated, seeing what they can do. And here I am a couple of years later. ”

## What makes volunteering with Freshly Greated special / in what way has it had a positive impact on you?

“ The fun we get out of it. The friends we've made. ”

“ Lots of friends from all different communities. ”

“ People that I see in the community and I say 'hi' to on the school run, see them on the street, see them out and about in town, they are now friends. So the friendships that we've made and also the confidence that it's given me. ”

“ Before I was involved in Freshly Greated I was in a shell. It's brought me more confidence. ”

“ We get involved a lot more in different community activity. ”

“ I love seeing the community spirit that it brings. Everything is very much community focused and it's certainly getting me more involved in community things. ”

## What do you think prevents others from getting involved / what barriers do you think people experience when getting involved with volunteering?

“ If they are lacking confidence. ”

“ Volunteering wise, I think people might not actually know that they can get involved. ”

“ It's all about people building confidence so it's starting small, just getting people involved. Then they get to know you, then you go from there. ”

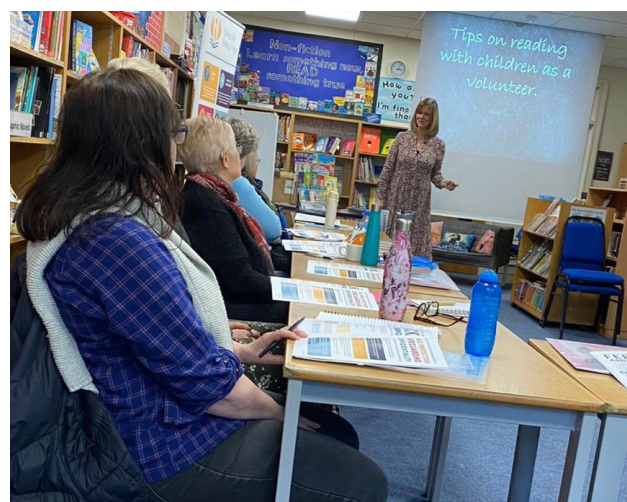
“ Sometimes you, you might hear somebody say, well, why? How come you do all of this? And it's like, well, one, I got asked by the Freshly Greated team, but also I kept turning up to the events and you know, was, was available to, to help out. So I, I think it's a case of not maybe people not wanting to do it. I think maybe it might be a case that I don't think people might fully be aware that they can actually get involved with it. And obviously people's own confidence and things like that, they might not feel [...] they've got the confidence to say, can I come and get involved a little bit more? ”

# The Norfolk Reading Project: Support to make volunteering accessible and the personal touch

The Norfolk Reading Project is a local charity whose aim is to support teachers in improving literacy standards across Norfolk by providing trained volunteers to support children's reading on a one-to-one basis within Primary Schools. The charity began in 2015 in response to increasing concern about reading standards across the county and the impact this has on future prospects. In the last few years, they have trained over 200 volunteers and are supporting more than 50 schools throughout the county. For this research, Voluntary Norfolk interviewed Anne Thorley, The Norfolk Reading Project's Chairperson, to discuss barriers to volunteering in Great Yarmouth and how the charity has supported volunteers to overcome these barriers.

Currently, the Norfolk Reading Project is recruiting volunteers in Great Yarmouth. Anne explained that volunteer recruitment has been "very hard work", particularly in the Great Yarmouth area. This is thought to be due to a wide range of barriers including people not being sure about how they want to volunteer; getting back to 'regular' social interaction has taken a long time after the pandemic thus individuals may feel anxious; potential volunteers are struggling with transport and being able to reach placements; and particularly with older volunteers using technology to conduct DBS checks and partake in online training can be a struggle for some.

The Norfolk Reading Project is taking numerous steps to reduce these challenges and make the volunteer recruitment process accessible to all. This incorporates bringing volunteers to training in-person and working with volunteers one-to-one to support them with DBS checks so they do not feel intimidated; supporting the older demographic with technology to avoid putting them off volunteering altogether; meeting with volunteers and telling them about the organisation face-to-face; offering flexibility to where individuals can volunteer and enabling people to stay close to their local area; and most importantly, utilising current volunteers who are enthusiastic to chat to those who are contemplating volunteering.







In respect of recruitment, Norfolk Reading Project do not rely on social media to bring in volunteers, as social media can help promote but *“personal touches to reaching out to the community is what will bring in retainable volunteers”*. Using focused advertising, e.g. *“concentrating on NR29-specific publications”*, *“being proactive in recruiting, not stopping at one advert”* and having an in-person presence to chat to people on the street and to *“give them your time”*, was key to recruitment as face-to-face interactions were incredibly appealing to potential volunteers.

With The Norfolk Reading Projects’ county-wide success, retaining volunteers is something they are doing very well. It is apparent that adding a personal touch to working with volunteers was fundamental in ensuring that they were happy. This incorporates offering volunteers constant reassurance, praise, and an *“arms round them”* approach, meaning that people are consistently offered support no matter what and when this is needed. Also implementing simple things like

*“being personal and human, and telling volunteers how fantastic they are”, “remembering names and faces goes a long way”*. Constantly including volunteers’ thoughts and opinions in decision-making is also a big factor in retention, this encompasses *“listening to volunteers to see what they would like and how they are getting on”*. Anne concluded, *“I don’t know how successful our attempts to engage and include our volunteers will be long-term but we are certainly trying to listen to their requests and include them in our decision-making”*.

# 7. Conclusions

Here we identify some key findings and potential recommendations that have emerged from this work, recognising the limitations of these given the short timeframe in which the report was produced. These are informed by the priority of the Know Your Neighbourhood fund of enabling those who are lonely or socially isolated to volunteer, and Voluntary Norfolk's belief that volunteering should be for everyone because it is good for people and good for local communities.

## Motivations

Though the sample size is limited, we were interested to see a difference in the motivations for volunteering that were expressed in comparison to our Norfolk-wide survey and national research. Respondents and interviewees noted the value of volunteering for their well-being with positive mental health, a sense of purpose, enjoyment and 'something to do' featuring more strongly than motivations identified in national and Norfolk-wide research which prioritised the wish to 'improve things/help people' and because 'the cause was really important to me'.

This may reflect a difference in those engaged by the research, with larger scale research more likely to reach those undertaking more formal volunteering roles. In this research we purposely referred to 'helping out in communities' as well as 'volunteering' to ensure that we captured the views of those people who might not see themselves as 'volunteering'. We believe that more formal volunteering can learn much from more informal approaches, and that understanding the different motivations that people bring to volunteering is key to identifying effective ways to engage with and support the volunteering of this group.

## A broader understanding of 'volunteering'

The findings from the research challenged traditional approaches to volunteer recruitment and what volunteering is and involves, highlighting the need to think about volunteering differently for this audience. To engage a wider range of people in volunteering we need to move away from an assumption of formal volunteering opportunities supported by often inflexible processes and challenge how we shape volunteer roles, make people aware of them, and support people into and in them.

Those organisations that were doing this successfully were person-centred, valuing skills and the lived experience of people, and working to empower those that got involved and engage them in the organisation. This way of working, focusing on the strengths the volunteer brings, and providing opportunities for volunteers to grow and develop, brings a community development ethos to volunteering.

## Small steps and gradual engagement

The findings highlighted the gradual process of developing volunteer engagement, starting with a small role such as supporting an event, and then developing over time with support. There is a need to develop volunteer engagement strategies that provide 'small steps' in moving people towards and into volunteering, and that use creative and fun activities to engage people in non-threatening and inclusive ways.

Importantly, this gradual building of engagement in a supported way, can address the key barriers identified of low self-confidence or self-esteem, fear of letting people down, lack of understanding of what is involved or required, and concerns about other commitments.

## Hyperlocal volunteering

Many of the examples of successful volunteering were from people getting involved in their immediate neighbourhoods or communities, with great examples of people forming connections and friendships through these. This demonstrates the potential for volunteering and community involvement to help people to form social connections. It may also address some people's perception of volunteering as exploitative or unpaid work, with activities that are helping out in the local community less likely to be perceived this way than formal volunteering opportunities. Furthermore, hyper local opportunities are more important and accessible within more disadvantaged communities, where travel and confidence can be a barrier.

## Reaching potential volunteers

The findings clearly challenged approaches to reaching potential volunteers, in particular a common assumption that online awareness raising, advertising and volunteer recruitment is sufficient in itself. People talked about getting involved through attending events, connections with others involved, and being asked or engaged by those already involved. There is a need to be more creative in how we engage with people and encourage them to volunteer, with a need for initial low-commitment, short-term opportunities, engaging people through events, and approaching people to ask for their involvement.

An under-valued approach may be working with frontline workers, especially those employed within the VCSE who are often seen as trusted community advocates, by ensuring they have the information and contacts they need to understand how people can get involved so they can support people into volunteering. There is a lot of focus on promoting volunteering to the end user, but those closest to communities can be better placed to do this.

## Importance of volunteer coordinators

Investment in volunteer coordinators was an important point raised by organisations. Volunteer coordinators were crucial in volunteer recruitment as they were able to speak with individuals and engage with members of the community interested in volunteering. Where volunteer coordinators were given the time to build relationships and develop volunteer roles with volunteers this more person-centred approach supported volunteer retention and sustainability of the volunteer role. Where organisations take on a lot of volunteers at one time it can be a struggle to give new volunteers the time and support that they need.

## Volunteering link with employment

Work experience opportunities were highly rated by respondents as a way of engaging with and supporting volunteers, highlighting the tangible and important step that volunteering can provide towards employment. This can be overlooked, and more could be done to support people wanting to access employment with skills and experience through volunteering. For those who are socially isolated, employment can offer another way to build social connections and involvement in communities.

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## **Interviewees:**

Lauren Cloke, Voluntary Norfolk

Nicola McCall, CBR Business Solutions

Rachel Hardie, Dandelions

Adrian Gray, Ving Tsun Academy

Armine Nikoghosyan, GYROS

Sheree Hodgson, Feathers Futures

Anne Thorley, The Norfolk Reading Project

Diana Staines and Julie Charles, Centre 81