



# Research Update



## Youth Volunteering: Making a Difference to Community Relations

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### Background

Often when society discusses young people the focus tends to be on social and personal issues, such as anti-social behaviour, underage drinking, school bullying, and poor mental health. By comparison, much less time is spent considering the valuable role which young people play in their communities. This Research Update aims to redress this imbalance by highlighting the positive contribution that young people make to society through voluntary activities. It will also evidence the positive experiences that volunteering has given young people, which include providing opportunities for them to meet people who are different to them, racially, socially, politically, or religiously.

Volunteering is the commitment of time and energy for the benefit of society without financial gain and is one way in which people of any age can have meaningful engagement within their community. Since 2001, the number of people volunteering formally (within an organisation) has remained static whilst the number of people volunteering informally (as an individual within their neighbourhood) has fallen (Volunteer Development Agency, 2007). It is imperative that those who wish to support youth volunteering and involve young volunteers in their



work understand how and why they get involved, in order for recruitment messages to be tailored and for opportunities to be created which meet specific interests and lifestyles. Research has shown that people who have a positive experience of volunteering as a young person are more likely to stay connected to volunteering throughout their life (Davis Smith and Gay, 2005).

The effectiveness of schemes which encourage community relations among young people has been researched in Northern Ireland, and YLT has contributed to the existing body of evidence (Schubotz and Robinson, 2006; Schubotz et al., 2008). However, there was a knowledge gap with regard to the impact of volunteering on community relations and cultural diversity amongst 16-year olds, as a specific group and within a Northern

Ireland context. This research has helped to fill this gap.

In 2009, the Volunteer Development Agency commissioned ARK to ask 16-year olds in the YLT survey about their experiences of volunteering which included specific questions on the impact of volunteering on community relations i.e. whether volunteering has increased their network of friends and/or contact with those from different community or religious backgrounds. The YLT survey is undertaken annually and uses the Child Benefit Register as a random sample frame. In 2009, all 16-year olds living in Northern Ireland who celebrated their birthday in February or March received a letter at their home address and were invited to take part in the survey. The survey was completed by 857 respondents on paper or online.

## Which 16-year olds volunteer?

Of the respondents surveyed in the YLT survey, 54 percent had volunteered in the past 12 months, 30 percent had done so formally through an organisation, 17 percent had volunteered informally in their community and seven percent had volunteered both formally and informally. Mirroring general volunteering patterns, females were more likely to say that they volunteered (58%) than males (50%). Although overall, females were more likely to volunteer, males were slightly more likely to say that they volunteered informally (19% and 17% respectively).

Table 1 shows that young people from less well-off backgrounds were much less likely to volunteer than respondents from better-off backgrounds. This reflects the general pattern of volunteering activity in Northern Ireland (Volunteer Development Agency, 2007). There was no difference between family financial background and the reported increase in respondents' network of friends. However, there was a significant difference with regards to contact with people from different backgrounds. As Table 2 shows, respondents who reported coming from not well-off backgrounds were much more likely to say that volunteering increased their contact with people from different community or religious backgrounds.

There were differences between volunteering activity and the religious composition of the area that a young person lived in. Young people from Protestant or religiously mixed areas were more likely to say that their contact with people from different communities or backgrounds had increased due to their volunteering (44%) compared to those who lived in Catholic areas (37%).

There were also differences in volunteer involvement between respondents who attended different types of school, with grammar school students being significantly more likely to say that they volunteered in the past 12 months (67%) than respondents from integrated schools (51%) or secondary schools (40%). The

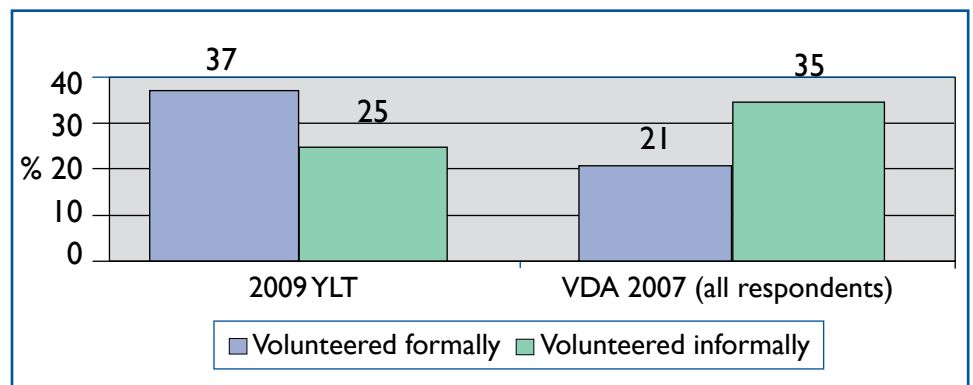
Table 1: Respondents who have volunteered in the past 12 months by financial background

	%		
	Not well-off	Average	Well-off
Formally (for one or more than one organisation)	21	31	38
Informally (not for an organisation)	13	20	18
Both for an organisation and informally	5	6	10
NOT volunteered	60	43	35

Table 2: Contact with people from a different community or religious background by family financial background

	%		
	Not well off	Average	Well-off
Increased	53	41	39
Remained the same	42	52	58
Decreased	0	<1	0
Don't know	5	6	33

Figure 1: Proportion of respondents volunteering. By survey and age group.



difference was largest with regards to 'formal' volunteering. Grammar school students were over twice as likely as secondary school students to say that they had formally volunteered in the past year (40% and 19% respectively; integrated schools 24%).

Figure 1 compares the 2009 YLT results with those from previous research carried out on volunteering in Northern Ireland (Volunteer Development Agency, 2007). The Figure shows that the proportion of 16-year old YLT respondents who volunteered formally exceeds that of the general population, whilst informal volunteering is more common among the wider population.

Where young people lived influenced whether they volunteered and the type of volunteering they were involved in. In particular, there was a higher level of formal volunteering from young people who lived in the outskirts or suburbs of towns compared to any other place of living (i.e. big city, small town, country village, farm or countryside). Young people who lived in rural areas were more likely to say that their network of friends had increased as a consequence of volunteering compared to those from the outskirts or suburbs. Conversely, people who lived in the countryside were least likely to report an increase in their contact with people from different community or religious background

Table 3: Type of volunteering activities undertaken

	%
Organising or helping to run an activity or event	75
Helping in church or a religious organisation	46
Visiting people, befriending or mentoring people	41
Coaching in a sport	29
Practical help (e.g. shopping, gardening, building, meal on wheels)	26
Looking after a property or a pet for someone who is away	16
Improving the environment (e.g. wildlife conservation or picking up litter)	12
Secretarial, administration or clerical work	10
Other	18

due to volunteering. This suggests that whilst young people from more rural areas are benefiting from volunteering by having a greater network of friends, they are not meeting a diverse range of young people.

## How much time do 16-year olds spend volunteering?

YLT respondents were asked how many hours approximately they had spent volunteering in the previous four weeks. The largest proportion (42%) said that they had volunteered for one to five hours. This is a similar pattern to the number of hours which volunteers of all ages spent volunteering across Northern Ireland (Volunteer Development Agency, 2007). In fact, a significant percentage of YLT respondents were volunteering more than this; 40 percent stated that they had volunteered for six hours or more in the past four weeks.

As well as being more likely to volunteer, females were also likely to spend a greater number of hours volunteering than males. Respondents from less well-off financial backgrounds were most likely to say that they had spent more than ten hours volunteering in

the previous four weeks, compared with those from better-off financial backgrounds. This suggests that whilst it is harder to recruit respondents from less well-off backgrounds, once they get involved in volunteering, they spend more hours than their better-off counterparts on the voluntary work they do.

YLT respondents were asked what type of roles they undertook when they volunteered. A wide range of activities were listed by young people (Table 3). By far the most frequently mentioned role was to organise or help to run an activity or event (75%), followed by helping in church or a religious organisation (46%), and visiting, befriending or mentoring people (41%). Regular volunteering activities which young people undertook once per week were most likely to take place in schools, or in local community or youth groups. Activities in the fields of conservation, heritage and environment, as well as animal welfare were undertaken less frequently than others. Volunteering, regardless of the activity, was shown to have a positive impact on respondents' network of friends and contact with those from different backgrounds. Environmental volunteering was shown

to have the most positive impact, with 82 percent stating they had increased their network of friends and 61 percent saying they had increased contact with people from different backgrounds. Helping out in a church or religious organisation and organising or helping to run an activity or event were less likely to be associated with an increase in contact with people from different backgrounds (43% and 44% respectively).

## School and volunteering

School not only acts as an important place for young people to volunteer but also to find out about opportunities to do so. Of the YLT respondents who had volunteered in the past 12 months, 85% said they had volunteered in school. School was also the most likely location through which YLT respondents had found out about volunteering opportunities (62%) and was the most preferred method for finding out about volunteering opportunities (69%).

Other preferred ways of finding out about volunteering were the Internet (43%), articles and adverts in the media (42%) and through word of mouth (41%). A significant number of YLT respondents had heard about volunteering through a friend or family member (48%) or from someone already involved in volunteering (42%). Table 4 shows that the greatest differences between actual and preferred ways of finding out about volunteering opportunities existed in relation to the Internet and articles or adverts in the media. Approximately one in ten young people had found out about volunteering through the Internet and media, yet four in ten stated that they would prefer to find out this way. Church/religious organisations were a source of information for 33 percent of young people engaged in volunteering, despite less than one quarter of respondents (23%) saying

that they volunteered because of their religious or philosophical belief.

Millennium Volunteers is a national programme designed to promote and recognise sustained volunteering among young people of all backgrounds aged from 16 to 24. Only 13 percent of the 16-year olds in this survey had heard of it, 86 percent said they had not heard of it. The small percentage of young people who recognised the programme may be due to the fact that the programme only becomes applicable at the age of 16. The vast majority of the young people who were aware of the Millennium Volunteer scheme had heard of it through school (72%).

## Motivations to volunteer

The reported reasons why young people get involved in volunteering are multiple and varied. As expected, getting on in their career and building up their CV was the most common motivation for volunteering by the YLT respondents (73%). Similarly, a significant number saw volunteering as an opportunity to learn or use skills (59%). Many young people were also highly motivated by altruism (64%); the desire to improve things and help people. Volunteering can also be an important way for people to meet new friends; 42 percent said that this was a reason why they volunteered. A significant proportion of respondents also said they got involved in volunteering because they were asked (43%), because friends and family volunteer (33%), or because of some personal connection with the work of a charity (23%).

The motivation to volunteer varied considerably when gender and financial background were considered (Table 5). Respondents from well-off backgrounds were predominantly driven to volunteer by career reasons

Table 4: Main sources, and preferred sources, of information about volunteering

	%	
	Actual source of information	Preferred source of information
School	62	69
Internet	11	43
Articles / Adverts in the media	8	42
From a friend or family member	48	N/A
Someone else already involved in volunteering	42	N/A
Word-of-mouth	N/A	41
Through a church or religious organisation	33	N/A

*N/A- not an option for this question*

Table 5: Motivation for volunteering\*. By gender and financial background

	%				
	Gender		Financial background		
	Male	Female	Not well-off	Average	Well-off
I wanted to improve things / help people	59	68	78	63	62
I wanted to meet people / make friends	39	44	37	40	48
The cause was really important to me	19	25	33	18	28
My friends/family also volunteered	32	34	34	31	36
I thought it would give me a chance to learn new and/or use existing skills	55	62	70	56	61
I was asked to help	49	40	37	43	45
It helps me to get on in my career and build up my CV	67	77	65	72	81
It's part of my religious belief or philosophy of life to help people	24	23	15	20	31
Other	10	11	11	8	15

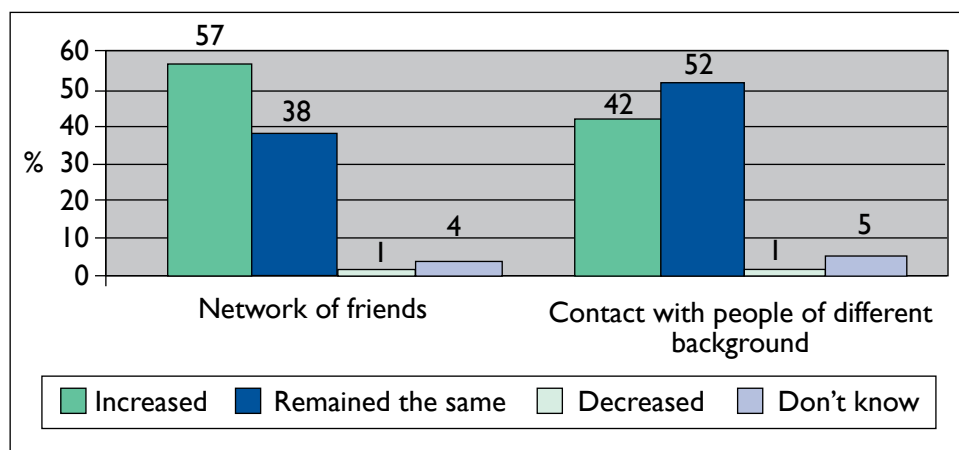
\* More than one answer was possible



Figure 2: What benefits do you get from volunteering? By type of volunteering.



Figure 3: Impact of volunteering on network of friends and contact with people of different community or religious background



(81%), whereas respondents from not well-off backgrounds mainly volunteered for altruistic reasons (78%), namely in order to help other people and to improve things. Females were also more CV and career-motivated in their volunteering than males (77% and 67% respectively). Interestingly, the only motivation to volunteer identified by a higher proportion of males than females was 'being asked for help'.

### Perceived benefits of volunteering

Like young people's motivations to volunteer, the benefits gained from volunteering were equally multiple and varied (Figure 2). Each of the seven listed benefits were chosen by over half of the respondents. In fact the majority of benefits were enjoyed by at least two thirds of respondents.

Meeting people and making friends, enjoyment, broadening experience of life and gaining a sense of personal achievement were some of the most common benefits experienced by respondents. Similarities between the motivations to volunteer and the benefits perceived are evident. Young people's motivation to build skills did materialise as an outcome. However, just over half of those surveyed said that they gained a qualification or improved their employment prospects through volunteering. Respondents who said that they had volunteered both formally and informally were most likely to report benefits from volunteering, regardless of what the benefits were. This was followed by respondents who had volunteered formally only.

### Volunteering and community relations

Figure 3 shows that over half of respondents said that they had increased their network of friends through being involved in volunteering and over four in ten said they had increased their contact with people from different community or religious

backgrounds. YLT respondents who had volunteered formally with an organisation were more likely to say that their network of friends (60%) and contact with people of different backgrounds (45%) had increased compared to respondents who had volunteered informally only (50% and 36% respectively).

Whilst there is no evidence that YLT respondents who were involved in volunteering had any more friends in general than those who did not volunteer, there was a significant difference in how often YLT respondents said they socialised with people who came from different backgrounds. Twenty percent of respondents who had never volunteered said they very often socialised with people from different ethnic backgrounds. This figure was much higher among those who had volunteered informally (29%), formally (31%) or both (39%). Furthermore, 18 percent of those who had not volunteered said they never had contact with people from different community or religious backgrounds,

compared to between nine and ten percent of respondents who had volunteered either formally, informally or both. Statistically this increased contact with people from different backgrounds by those who volunteered did not translate into more inter-ethnic friendships compared to those who did not volunteer. However, respondents who had volunteered held more favourable views towards people from minority ethnic communities (15% said they felt favourable compared to 10% of non-volunteers) and were less likely than non-volunteers to agree that they preferred to stick with people of their own kind (11% and 17% respectively). Respondents who had volunteered formally in an organisation were also more likely to think that community relations between Catholics and Protestants were better now than five years ago (63% and 53% respectively).

### Young people who don't volunteer

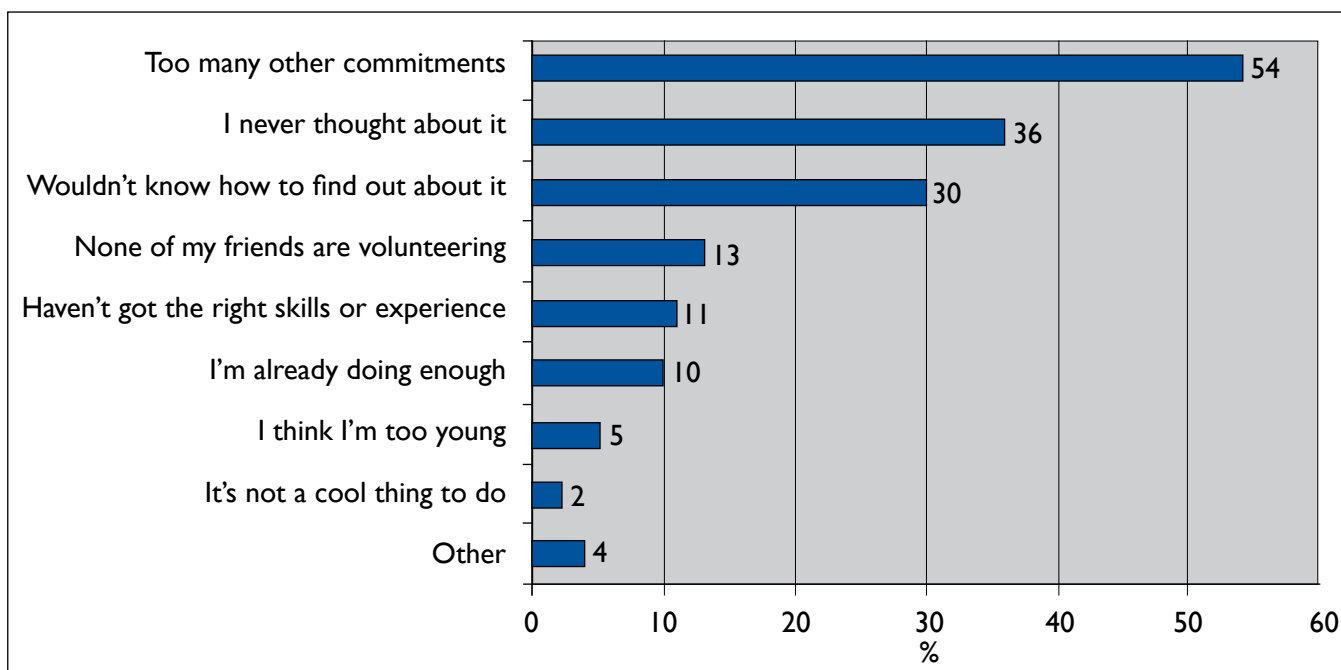
Like the general population, the main reason why respondents didn't

volunteer was that they had too many other commitments (54%, Figure 4). Respondents said that school work, part time employment, family responsibilities, socialising with friends and extra-curricular activities were all bidding for their time. Higher levels of home and schoolwork (11%) were the main reasons why young people stopped volunteering within the previous 12 months.

Respondents attending integrated schools were most likely to say they had too many other commitments (70%). This compares with nearly two thirds of grammar school students (66%) and just over half (51%) of respondents attending secondary schools.

Interestingly, a significant number of young people who did not volunteer said that they had never thought about volunteering (36%) or would not know how to find out about getting involved in volunteering (30%). Female respondents were much less likely than

Figure 4: What factors help explain why you do not volunteer? (%)



their male counterparts to say that they had never thought about volunteering (34% and 44% respectively) but were more likely to say that they did not know how to get involved (39% and 23% respectively). For 13 percent of respondents, the reason they did not volunteer was because their peers did not and 11 percent did not believe they had the right skills or experience. Only two percent of young people said

that they did not volunteer because it was not 'a cool thing to do'. Young people were asked what factors would encourage them to volunteer; the most important factor was the desire to have a flexible opportunity that suited their free time (54%). The second most important factor was to have plenty of fun (45%) followed by recognition of their volunteering efforts by businesses and universities

(39%) and gaining experience (39%). Just under one quarter of respondents said that incentives (such as free T-shirts or trips) would encourage them to volunteer (24%).

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## Conclusion

The findings of the YLT survey suggest that there are many factors which determine whether young people volunteer, who they volunteer with, the type of volunteering they do, the time spent on it and the experience they have. It has also demonstrated how volunteering can provide unique opportunities for young people to meet new friends, including people who come from different backgrounds to them. This is particularly important for young people from less well-off backgrounds who may otherwise have fewer opportunities to meet a diversity of people.

This Research Update complements the existing body of work in this area which shows that volunteering provides benefits which can help young people develop personally and professionally. It also offers new insights regarding the relationship between volunteering and cross-community and inter-ethnic contact. This study has shown that young people with volunteering experience within an organisation have greater contact with people from different community or religious backgrounds. This suggests that volunteering programmes have the potential to make a significant contribution to community cohesion and therefore to more favourable attitudes towards a shared future in Northern Ireland by our youngest citizens. The 2009 YLT survey has found that there are still a significant number of young people who have not thought about volunteering and lack the information to source volunteering opportunities; this includes information regarding the Millennium Volunteers programme which is targeted at this age group. There is clearly potential for organisations and programmes, like Millennium Volunteers, to tap into this group. It is also apparent that schools along with churches and religious organisations as well as community and youth groups are important vehicles for promoting and offering volunteering opportunities.

Lack of time and competing commitments are the main barriers to young people starting or sticking with volunteering, as is the case for all age groups, regionally and nationally (Rochester et al., 2010; Hill et al., 2009). For organisations involving young volunteers, the challenge is tailoring roles and programmes to fit with their expectations for volunteering, their lifestyle and which offer greater benefits than other competing activities.

Overall, this research has shown the value that young people bring to their communities through volunteering and the benefits which they can gain. It has also highlighted areas where progress can be made to further develop youth volunteering in Northern Ireland. This includes consideration of the potential benefits from developing targeted initiatives and programmes in disadvantaged communities, where the community relations benefits can make most impact; offering flexibility and diversity in the roles that are offered to young people, making use of the full range of communication technologies for promotion and recruitment and raising the profile of Millennium Volunteers to 15-year olds just before they become eligible for the programme.

Further good practice advice on volunteering can be found at the publication section of the Volunteer Now website [www.volunteering-ni.org](http://www.volunteering-ni.org)

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- Volunteer Now** is a regional to local organisation which works to promote, enhance and support volunteering across Northern Ireland. [www.volunteering-ni.org](http://www.volunteering-ni.org)

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The **Young Life and Times (YLT)** survey is carried out annually and records the attitudes and experiences of 16-year olds in Northern Ireland. YLT is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the young people think about the social issues of the day. Check the website for more information on the survey findings ([www.ark.ac.uk/ylt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/ylt)) or call the survey director on 028 9097 3947 with any queries.

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