



volunteer ireland  
obair dheonach éireann



The impact of  
volunteering on  
the health and  
well-being of the  
volunteer

## Foreword

Volunteer Ireland are delighted to present this report on Volunteering and its contribution to a person's general health and well-being. We have long known that volunteering is good for you based on anecdotal stories from volunteers and people's own testimonies of their volunteering experience.

In 2017, we now have the opportunity to review some existing research and combine this with our survey of almost 1800 volunteers and also the findings of three focus groups with volunteers which we carried out in April and May. We hope that this report will shine a spotlight on the many positive benefits of volunteering to the individual and by extension to the local community and society as a whole.

A report of the National Economic and Council (NESC) from 2009 describes well-being as being about a positive physical, social and mental state. It highlights the importance of the individual's sense of purpose and ability to participate in society as components of well-being. Throughout the volunteering network in Ireland, we see examples of people benefiting from their volunteering experience every day. This reports highlights some of the factors which make the experience a positive one for the volunteer and what exactly that means for the volunteer. Of central importance to this is the preparation, support and recognition which the organisation gives to the volunteer. This is an area which we in the volunteering network are passionate about and constantly aim to support those organisations who engage with volunteers.

This report is a first step in providing information and some analysis of the true benefits of volunteering and we hope that it will serve as a catalyst for further Irish based research on this issue.

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*Supported by*



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## Introduction

Ireland has a long and storied history of volunteering. According to the most recent CSO data, over 1 million people in Ireland volunteer, which is over a quarter of the adult population.<sup>1</sup> Ireland is also ranked number one in Europe and number ten in the world for volunteering time on the World Giving Index.<sup>2</sup> With such a large number of people volunteering in Ireland, it is clear that volunteering makes a major contribution to citizen participation and promotes a healthy and active Irish society.

Volunteering has been proven to have a positive impact on a person's overall health and well-being. As this link between volunteering and well-being has been identified in other research, this report aims to delve deeper into what that means for the volunteer.

Identifying the feelings that people experience during and after volunteering are vital to understanding the way in which volunteering positively impacts on health and well-being. Furthermore, identifying what it is about their volunteering experience that elicits these feelings allows us to further understand how volunteering specifically impacts on a person's well-being.

Through this analysis we can explore the different factors which may affect the impact that volunteering has on a person's well-being, for example, the type of activity or amount of time spent volunteering. In doing this, we can identify the optimal conditions needed for volunteering to positively impact a person's health and well-being.

This short report combines a brief literature review with the findings of some primary research carried out in 2017 by Volunteer Ireland and the network of Volunteer Centres and Volunteering Information Services around the country and aims to promote discussion and awareness of the connection between a person's volunteering experience and their well-being.

## Methodology

### National Survey of Volunteers

A national survey of volunteers was conducted between 9th February 2017 and 9th March 2017. The survey took the form of an online questionnaire which gathered data about the volunteer's experience and the effect that this experience had on various aspects of their health and well-being. The survey was sent to all volunteers registered with the national volunteer database, I-VOL, through local Volunteer Centres and Volunteering Information Services. The survey received 1797 responses.

### Focus Groups

Volunteer Ireland invited Volunteer Centres around the country to participate in the research by hosting a focus group in their area. Three Volunteer Centres (Tipperary, Wicklow and Kerry) participated in the process and invited a sample of local volunteers to attend a focus group on a given date in their locality. Every effort was made to achieve a mix/balance within the group attending each focus group. This included a mix across age, gender, ethnicity, length of time volunteering and type of volunteering experience. Focus Group participants were briefed on the process and its purpose. All were assured of confidentiality in that their contributions would remain anonymous in the analysis and reporting of results.

Each focus group was approximately two hours duration and lunch was provided. The focus groups ranged in size from 12 to 15 participants. There were two aspects to the methodology, a short individual questionnaire (see appendix A) followed by open facilitated discussion using a set of guiding questions (see below). The focus groups took place during March and April 2017.

### Questionnaire

The focus group participants were invited to complete a confidential individual questionnaire. This gathered data about the volunteer's volunteering experiences, organisations volunteered with, length of time volunteering and frequency of volunteering. Respondents were also asked to rate the effects they believe that their volunteering experience has on their general well-being using nine criteria and a five point rating scale. (See Appendix A).

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/q-vwb/qnhsvolunteeringandwell-beingq32013/>

<sup>2</sup> World Giving Index 2016, Charities Aid Foundation

## Literature review

There is a growing body of research, particularly in the United States, that indicates a strong link between volunteering and health and well-being. Studies have been conducted across a range of parameters including whether volunteers are happier than non-volunteers, whether volunteers are physically healthier i.e.: they visit the hospital less, than non-volunteers and if volunteering leads to lower levels of depression.<sup>3</sup>

This report is primarily focused on understanding the specific positive effects of volunteering and how they impact individual volunteers. As this approach assumes that volunteering has a positive effect on health and well-being, it is important to outline the relevant literature which supports this assumption.

In an Irish policy context, successive governments have recognised the benefits of volunteering to society as a whole. In a 2000 white paper, the Government at the time recognised that statutory support of the Community and Voluntary sector has an importance to the well-being of society that goes beyond utilitarian concerns to do with 'purchase' of services by this or that statutory agency.<sup>4</sup> The importance of volunteering to well-being was recognised by the Government in 2005. The launch of a report into volunteers and volunteering in Ireland noted that social capital impacts on every aspect of community life and also has beneficial effects on the personal well-being and the life satisfaction of volunteers, their clients and society as a whole.<sup>5</sup>

Little research has been done in this area in Ireland; however the most recent CSO data available supports the assumption that volunteering has a positive impact on the volunteer. According to the CSO, those who volunteered, whether they were male or female, were more likely to rate their level of life satisfaction as 'very high' or 'high' than those who did not volunteer.<sup>6</sup>

Meier and Stutzer in their 2008 research of the collapse of East Germany and its volunteering infrastructure, found that people who volunteer frequently are more likely to report greater life satisfaction than non-volunteers.<sup>7</sup>

A key piece of research in the US that focuses specifically on this area is The Effects of Volunteering on the Volunteer. The study explores the impact that volunteering has on citizenship, physical health and mental health using prior research and primary analysis of longitudinal data. The analysis confirms and adds to previous conclusions about the impact of volunteering on mental health. The data – tracking depression in volunteers over time - provides strong evidence to support the view that becoming a volunteer can have beneficial consequences on subjective well-being.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> John Wilson & Marc Musick, The Effects of Volunteering on the Volunteer, 62 Law and Contemporary Problems, 141-168 (Fall 1999); Stephan Meier and Alois Stutzer, Is Volunteering Rewarding in itself?, *Economica*, Vol 75 Issue 297 39 – 59 (Feb 2008); Eric Kim and Sara Konrath, Volunteering is prospectively associated with health care use among older adults, *Social Science & Medical Journal*, Vol 149 122 - 129 (Jan 2016)

<sup>4</sup> Government of Ireland, A White Paper on a Framework for Supporting Voluntary Activity and for Developing the Relationship between the State and the Community and Voluntary Sector, (March 2000)

<sup>5</sup> The Joint Oireachtas Committee on Arts, Sport, Tourism, Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, The Joint Committee On Arts, Sport, Tourism, Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs Launches Its Report on Volunteers and Volunteering in Ireland on Tuesday 25 January 2005 in Leinster House 2000, <http://www.oireachtas.ie/viewdoc.aspx?UserLang=GA&DocID=3428&&CatID=36&OrderAscending=0>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/q-wvb/qnhsvolunteeringandwell-beingq32013/>

<sup>7</sup> Meier and Stutzer, 2008

<sup>8</sup> Wilson and Musick, 1999

## Facilitated Discussion

The same facilitator facilitated all three focus groups. A note taker was present at each and the process was structured to generate open discussion in response to the following five questions:

1. In what way has volunteering had a positive effect on your overall health and well-being?
2. What specifically during your volunteering experience contributed to this feeling?
3. What types of volunteering have you done? Did different types of volunteering elicit different benefits? What made this so?
4. Was the positive impact more pronounced if you volunteered more or less?
5. Does the age/stage of life you are at influence the benefits you get from volunteering?

## The positive impact of volunteering

With a strong link between volunteering and positive health and well-being already evidenced in prior research, this report aims to further explore the 'x factor' or 'feel good feeling' that people get from volunteering. Over the course of three separate focus groups, participants were asked to discuss how they feel when or after they have volunteered. A number of common themes emerged, presented below in order of frequency of mention.

- Feeling useful, **purposeful and valued** and good about doing something practical, making a worthwhile and meaningful difference (29)
- Feeling **friendship**, social interaction, meeting new people and getting to know people (17)
- Feelings of **enjoyment**, happiness, fulfilment and contentment, positive energy and a buzz (15)
- Feeling a sense of **personal growth and development**, an opportunity to learn and practice (new) skills, professional development, e.g. English language, building CV, enhanced employment opportunities, etc. (12)
- Feeling **connected to community** and a sense of **belonging**, socially included and being part of a team (9)
- Feeling an increased sense of **self confidence** (7), which can come from any number of sources including positive social interaction, enhanced skills, e.g. English language.
- Feeling better mentally, **feeling good about myself**, a sense of purpose and structure, uplift in mood and a zest for life (7)
- Feeling fortunate, a sense of meaning and perspective on life, **gratitude and appreciation** for life's blessings (6)
- Feeling more **tolerant and open** to people and their diversity (2)

This analysis indicates that volunteering elicits a range of positive feelings amongst volunteers many of which are common across age and gender groups. The main feelings identified during the focus groups were also evident in the online national survey with 59% of respondents reporting an increase in their range of friendships and 66% reporting an increased sense of belonging to their community.

Discussion during the focus groups suggests that there are considerable individual differences, including situational, attitudinal, personal motivation and personality factors at play in each person's experience of volunteering. The complex interplay of these factors means that each person's experience of volunteering is different and so too is any effect on well-being.

Some studies<sup>9</sup> have also connected motivation to the level of impact volunteering has on well-being. Meier and Stutzer conclude that people who feel their volunteer work is satisfying their needs or their reasons for volunteering are most likely to reap its mental health benefits. For example, it has been shown that volunteering is not internally rewarding if people volunteer primarily in order to get a (material) reward like a better job.<sup>10</sup>

It is clear from the above research that the link between volunteering and well-being exists. Studies have been conducted in this area exploring age, health and length of time volunteering and all conclude that volunteering has a positive impact on well-being.<sup>11</sup> Further research has also shown that the level of this impact is dependent on the motivation of the volunteer.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Meier and Stutzer 2008; Wilson and Musick, 1999

<sup>10</sup> Wilson and Musick, 1999

<sup>11</sup> Wilson and Musick, 1999; Meier and Stutzer, 2008; Kim and Konrath 2015

<sup>12</sup> Meier and Stutzer 2008; Wilson and Musick, 1999

According to Mental Health Ireland, good mental health is characterised by positive relationships, contentment and connection with other people and the community amongst others. These characteristics have also been identified as by-products of volunteering and indicate that volunteering can contribute to positive health and well-being.

It is worth noting that in a small number of incidents respondents reported a decrease in relation to certain criteria, i.e. interest in volunteering (2), sense of physical health and well-being (1) and feeling of being involved and less alone. Based on the discussion and stories shared during the focus groups the main factors that influenced these low ratings were negative experiences of volunteering such as poor or limited training, poor support offered within the host organisation, individual fatigue and possible burn out and frustration with specific types of volunteering, largely because they were not aligned with the volunteer's preferences and competency.

### Case Study: Alison, 32

Alison began volunteering when she was between jobs and study. While she was exploring her options she wanted to get stuck in instead of just sitting around and doing nothing. She met with her local Volunteer Centre and began volunteering as an English tutor. She was teaching English to migrants who had fled their homes to make a new life in Ireland. Seeing their determination gave her a real wake up call.

According to Alison, 'I began to look at things differently after meeting migrants in my local community. I had kind of been feeling sorry for myself in my current situation but when I saw how they approached life with such drive and vigour, it really gave me a new perspective.'

Helping people made Alison feel valued and that she has something to offer. She knew she was making a real difference in people's lives.

Alison recalls one particular meeting that made her feel extremely happy and proud of what she was achieving. 'I bumped into a woman who I'd taught previously. She was extremely qualified but her low level of English made it difficult to get an appropriate job at the time. Then last year when I met her she had found a new job, her English had improved greatly and best of all she was happy. Knowing I had played a small part in that made me feel so pleased.'

According to Alison, having once been a commuter who slept rather than really lived in her community, volunteering opened up a whole new world for Alison. She met new people, learned more about what was going on in her community and even found a paid position teaching English. According to Alison 'You feel better in yourself when you know you're part of something.'

## What contributes to the positive impact of volunteering?

The positive impact of volunteering is evident from our research findings – 55% of respondents to the online national survey of volunteers stated that their mental health and well-being had increased following their volunteering experience. Participants in the focus groups were asked to identify specific attributes of volunteering that contribute to the positive impact it has on them.

Thematic analysis of the focus group discussions indicates that the contributory factors cluster under seven themes with some overlap within and across the themes. There was broad agreement about these themes and yet individual differences, preferences, attitudinal and situational factors were also noted.

1. Contributing & Being Involved
2. Purpose
3. Making a Difference- Seeing Results
4. Enjoyment
5. Personal Choice & Preference
6. Self-Awareness
7. Being Valued and Appreciated

### Factor One - Contributing and Being Involved

One of the most frequently cited factors that focus group participants believe contribute to an increased sense of well-being is knowing that you are giving back/contributing to your community, sharing your knowledge and experience with others and for greater good. The sense of bringing a practical solution to an issue/problem in society or in a community elicits a feel good feeling of satisfaction and involvement. This can have a positive effect on self confidence. This is further evidenced by the national survey of volunteers where 81% of respondents felt they were making a useful contribution to their community.

## Factor Two - Purpose

Many participants mentioned that they feel good using their skills, sharing skills that they are good at and doing what they are trained to do. This sense of being useful, purposeful and achieving something brings positive feelings to many. For example, students felt good when they used and developed their skills through volunteering and those who were retired derived a sense of well-being by continuing to practice well honed skills that they had built up during their working life.

## Factor Three - Making a Difference - Seeing Results

Participants believe that seeing results and tangible signs that they are making a difference is an important factor that contributes to the increased sense of well-being that they experience when volunteering. Examples cited included seeing someone learn to read having received literacy support or seeing a family relieved when a loved one is rescued or returned to them. Many reported feeling good when seeing the positive effects that their contribution has had on another person's life or improving a service or some aspect of society. Some derived satisfaction from playing a role improving their own community for their family members and neighbours. The most popular reason cited for volunteering is 'wanting to do my bit to make the world a better place'<sup>14</sup>. As the desire to make a difference is what drives a lot of people to volunteer so it follows that seeing the impact of their actions would have a positive impact on the volunteer.

## Factor Four - Enjoyment

Many participants spoke of the enjoyment that they get out of volunteering and noted that this contributed to their sense of well-being. There was a general view that it is important for people to seek/choose volunteering experiences that they know they will enjoy, that the activity will be something that they are truly interested in, doing something that they love and that is congruent with their interests and skill set and not something that they know will cause them stress or discomfort. Examples cited include people who are interested in being outdoors volunteering in a community garden, people who are interested in office work volunteering to do this line of work and people who enjoy and are interested in young people, older people and/or social interaction seeking out volunteering experiences in settings that will facilitate these interests. There were also examples of volunteers learning, growing and mastering a new skill through their volunteering experience, e.g. learning English. This tangible benefit and sense of accomplishment brought about feelings of enhanced self confidence and enjoyment.

## Factor Five - Personal Choice & Preference

There was discussion during the focus groups about choice and personal preferences and expressing these through volunteering. Many believe that it is important that volunteers are conscious of their personal agency and choice-making and exercise their power to make personal choices when they decide to volunteer. The disposition and attitude that a person brings to their volunteering will have an effect on their well-being. Expectations also have a part to play and this includes realising that preparation is important and that volunteering can be like paid work in many ways, e.g. there will be organisational politics and challenges.

## Factor Six - Self Awareness

Some people expressed the belief that people need to know themselves and be self aware when they are making decisions in relation to their volunteering. This is about knowing their own capacity, their distinctive motivations and reasons for volunteering, their personal strengths, energy levels, time constraints and limitations. By consciously taking these factors into account a person can enhance the possibility of having a positive volunteering experience and related benefits to their well-being. The opposite also seems to be true in that those who step into volunteering without aligning it with their personal circumstances and capacity are less likely to experience positive change in their well-being. There was a view expressed by some participants that you have to be mentally and physically well to volunteer and that once you are volunteering it will bring increased energy and well-being.

## Factor Seven - Being Valued & Appreciated

Some, and yet not all, participants felt that being valued, noticed and appreciated by others and the organisation that they volunteer with is important to their feeling good about volunteering. There was some discussion about this within the focus groups and the degree of impact on well-being seems to be related to self awareness, personal motivations around volunteering and personality type. Some volunteers place a high value on feeling needed, feeling important and being appreciated through their volunteering. The level of expectation around this will affect the degree to which they feel positive about volunteering. Others are more altruistic, self sufficient and self sustaining in this regard. It seems that individual differences and personality factors are again at play in that there is variation in the degree to which different people need and/or wish to feel appreciated.

There was general agreement among focus group participants that it is important for organisations to show appreciation for their volunteers. This includes briefings, induction, training, support and showing appreciation through small gestures, e.g. tea/coffee, t-shirts, conversation, etc.



### Case Study: Mark, 26

During Transition Year in secondary school, Mark began volunteering for St Vincent De Paul at just age 15.

“We did a weekly soup run alongside other projects such as befriending isolated senior citizens as well as organising an annual Christmas dinner for isolated people in the local area. Working with St Vincent de Paul from such a young age offered me a unique insight into the world of volunteering. Before secondary school I was an extremely shy and reserved person and it was only when I started helping others that I came out of my shell.”

Mark embraced volunteering and has taken on a number of roles in the last eleven years. He feels that volunteering has helped shape the person he has become today.

“Volunteering has enabled me to travel the world and has taken me to places I couldn't have dreamed of going on my own. I believe that the volunteering experiences I have had have helped create the person I am today. It led me into my job as a Care Assistant and my college course on community development. The best thing about volunteering is different for everyone but for me it's the ability to make someone's life immeasurably better by simply giving of yourself. Knowing that even if you don't see the person you have helped again that their life is better because you have been there for them when it all went wrong. As far as I'm concerned I have never volunteered where I gave more than I have received - I think volunteering is my way of keeping things in perspective and it contributes in a big way to my self-worth.”

### Case Study: Karen, 35

Karen was made redundant last summer and although she was highly qualified in her area of work, she knew it wasn't what she wanted to do anymore. Having waited a few months, and becoming disillusioned with the jobs on offer, she decided to give volunteering a try. She didn't have the confidence to apply for jobs in new areas and felt that volunteering would be a good way to try out different things and get some experience.

“While I was originally motivated by gaining experience and building up my confidence, I couldn't believe how much I enjoyed volunteering. Since January I've taught English to migrants one night a week and I really enjoy meeting people from different nationalities and backgrounds. Being able to get these people involved in the community when they are normally on the outskirts looking in is something I'm really passionate about so that's been really rewarding.”

Karen also volunteers two days a week in a local charity shop and loves it so much she says she'd do it every day if she had the time. “Volunteering in the shop is completely different to teaching but I enjoy it just as much. There's a real sense of community in the shop and they have given me a lot of creative freedom to try new things and develop my experience. Thanks to volunteering I know now that my future career lies in the not for profit sector. It has completely changed the way I see myself and I've gained so much confidence from my different roles.”

## Other factors that affect the impact of volunteering on health and well-being

### Type of volunteering

There is a generally held belief that different types of volunteering experiences elicit different effects on a volunteer's health and well-being. In the focus groups, one participant outlined the differences between her two volunteering roles – one in an office based environment and one in a role where she met service users face to face. While both roles elicited different feelings, both were felt to be positive.

The main messages emerging from the analysis are that the well-being effects of volunteering are influenced by the choice of volunteering experience, the culture of the organisation that a person volunteers with and the personality, personal circumstances and capacity of each individual volunteer. More so than the type of volunteering, it is the personal motivation and expectations of the volunteer that has a greater impact on well-being. As stated earlier it is important for volunteers to be aware of their own motivation, their skill set, personal capacity and personality when choosing volunteer experiences and roles. The factors which influence a positive outcome of the volunteering experience are a sense of good energy and vitality from the experience and coming away energised (as opposed to being worn out).

The type of organisation that volunteers engage with plays a part in setting the scene for positive well-being effects. The results indicate that it is important for a volunteer involving organisation to be mindful and careful in their selection, briefing, training and support of their volunteers. Valuing volunteers can impact, not only on positive outcomes for the organisation but also on the well-being of the volunteer involved. Organisations that have a natural culture of valuing, training and supporting their volunteers are more conducive to eliciting well-being than those that are less supportive.

### Time spent/Frequency of volunteering

In his study on volunteering and mortality among older adults<sup>15</sup>, Marc Musick found that the benefits of volunteering were highest among those who contributed fewer than forty hours per year. Although this study was conducted among adults over the age of 65, the study poses an interesting question as to whether there is an optimum amount of volunteering or if there is such a thing as too much volunteering.

This question was posed to focus group participants and the overall sense from participants is that the quality of the volunteering experience has more impact on volunteer well-being than the amount of time, frequency or regularity devoted to volunteering.

<sup>15</sup> Marc A Musick et al., Volunteering and Mortality among Older Adults: Findings from a National Sample (1999)

The quality of the volunteering experience and how it is perceived by the individual volunteer relates to the degree to which the volunteering is in tune with personal preference, capacity, enjoyment and interests. Individual differences, expectations, motivations and preferences, again, play a part with different volunteers citing rich experiences and dividends from seemingly small volunteering roles such as selling flags or being present on an information stand. The intentions of the volunteer, their attitude/disposition and the cognitive commitment that they make to their volunteering all impact on their well-being.

Many focus group participants felt that a regular volunteering pattern is good as it facilitates volunteering to become part of a person's routine and this brings regular positive well-being effects, through structure, purpose and social interaction. Another view held was that novelty is good for the soul and once off volunteering can bring positive effects to some people. Knowing when to cease, transition to a new experience or exit completely from volunteering is another feature to consider. Exiting volunteering, with joy and dignity and without regret was important for participants but finishing the volunteering experience may also be challenging for some and particularly those who are retired and/or have been volunteering for a long time.

The results of this research alert us to the importance of personal agency whereby each volunteer is supported and encouraged to take charge of their own time, know their limitations and fit their volunteering carefully and seamlessly alongside their other commitments in life, e.g. family, work and leisure time. This fits with the concept of self care and how important this is to well-being in general.

Positive self-care relates to self-awareness and a person's ability to know their limitations, activate their personal freedoms and preferences and know when to say yes and when to say no. The importance of self care may be even more pronounced in volunteering where sometimes there can be a tendency to over commit and over give which will, over time, have a detrimental effect on well-being. There were some signs of this evident during the discussions with a small number of participants citing examples of burn out, loss of choice, confusion as to when to exit/cease volunteering and powerlessness. Volunteer organisations must be cognisant of these individual factors as they unfold for their volunteers. It seems imperative that organisations are vigilant, creative and proactive in the ways they support their volunteers to activate and manage their own personal agency in their volunteering choices and throughout their volunteering careers.

### Stage of Life

People volunteer for various reasons, many of which change over time. It is evident from this research that the reasons people choose to volunteer are not specific to age group or stage of life. While 'having something to do' is often cited as the reason some retired people choose to volunteer, this is just as easily applicable to someone who is between jobs or someone who feels lonely or isolated.

When the question was posed to the focus groups, there were mixed views about this which seemed to pertain to the stage of life that participants were themselves at. The overall message is that volunteering is dynamic and positive and capable of yielding multiple benefits for all those involved irrespective of age or life stage.

This is supported further by the breakdown of responses to the online national survey. While more young people had experienced increases across self satisfaction indicators, the difference between younger and older volunteers was minimal.

	Under 22's	Over 50's
Making a useful contribution to the community	86%	76%
Self-esteem	70%	57%
Range of friendships	64%	56%
Belonging to the community	69%	57%
Feeling included and not being alone	66%	52%

*Increases in self satisfaction indicators broken down by age group.*

The largest divergence between under 22's and over 50's was in the effect volunteering had on mental health. 67% of those under the age of 22 experienced an increase in their mental health and well-being while only 43% of those over 50 experienced an increase. However, it must be noted that respondents' mental health was not tracked prior to the survey and increases are self evaluated and self reported. Nonetheless, this finding is important in relation to how volunteering and 'giving back' can be instrumental in contributing to young people's sense of well-being. This is something which may be worthy of further research as there is much current discussion on the issue of youth mental health and well-being.

The main determinants of the positive impact of volunteering on well-being are self awareness, choice and personal capacity. Each person is different and meets different opportunities and constraints throughout their life stages and this plays a part in determining which volunteering experiences are optimal for each particular situation.

It was noted by participants that there may be times in life when certain volunteering experiences are particularly attractive, relevant and enjoyable for certain people. The well-being benefits may be more pronounced and valued at different stages and in accordance with different personal needs, conditions and energies. For example, a younger person may seek out more physically active and socially lively volunteering experiences; a retired person may seek out opportunities to share specific skills, wisdom and insight and a parent of young children might seek out opportunities that fit with their child rearing.

It was also posited that those who are retired have the potential to get even more enjoyment from their volunteering as a result of fewer other pressures and demands in their life. While all of the aforementioned were acknowledged and accepted the overriding view of participants was that volunteering is flexible, always evolving and enjoyable at any and all stages of life.

## Case Study: Rachel, 17

Rachel began volunteering in a local nursing home following the death of her grandfather. “I was very close to my granddad and I went through a tough time after his death. My aunt had worked at the nursing home years before and suggested that I might get some benefit from volunteering there.

That was nearly 2 years ago and since then I’ve been there at least once a week – sometimes 2 or 3 times a week. I help set up the room for dinner, help prepare salads if needed and help anyone who needs some extra support to eat their dinner.”

She soon discovered that it’s the little things that make the difference. For Rachel, it wasn’t just what she did but the time she spent with people that mattered.

“I realised the most important thing for the residents was having someone to talk to. Just taking time to have a cup of tea and a chat really made a difference to their day. I knew it could get lonely for people there and taking the time to talk to them and listen to them is really important. What I didn’t realise was how important it would be for me. I really enjoy volunteering there, spending time with people and listening to their stories. It has made such a huge difference to my life – more than I could have imagined. The residents say I help them a lot but they don’t realise that it’s them who help me. I’m in fifth year in school and have started thinking about studying psychology at third level. I’ve had my own struggles with mental health and counselling and volunteering have been a big help. It’s also made me realise how much I want to give back.”

## Case Study: Albert, 75

Albert has been volunteering for 57 years and his passion has always been helping young people. Having wanted to join a youth group at a young age but unable to due to the cost of participating, Albert vowed to create a youth club where anyone could participate at little or no cost. This year will mark the 50th anniversary of the first – but not the last – youth club that Albert began.

Having volunteered for so long with no sign of stopping, Albert feels what he gets most from volunteering is energy. “Young people have so much energy and enthusiasm that it’s impossible not to take that on yourself. It comes over you like a wave and there’s a wonderful synergy between volunteers and the young people. I’ve had a few health setbacks in recent years and knowing the boys and girls are willing me on and wanting me to come back to them has given me that extra push in my recovery each time. It also encourages me to stay on top of my game!”

Although Albert has been volunteering for the majority of his life, he has found that he gets even more from volunteering since he retired. “Volunteering has given me a real zest for life. It’s important that you never really retire – when you give something up, you have to have something else to do to replace it. Volunteering has allowed me to do something that I really enjoy, be at the heart of the local community and helps me to ‘age successfully’.”

## Conclusion

The analysis of the online national survey and the three focus groups show that volunteering can have a significant positive impact on a person’s health and well-being. This is further supported by research in a number of countries linking volunteering with positive health and well-being.

The extent of positive impact seems to be influenced by variables such as personality type, personal agency and motivation, capacity, life circumstances and situational factors. There are a lot of individual differences at play and few definite patterns. The organisations that people choose to volunteer with plays a part in creating an optimal environment for volunteers to thrive and gain well-being benefits.

There were however a number of common factors identified across the survey and focus groups which contribute to volunteers achieving the maximum positive impact from volunteering. When motivations and expectations are identified prior to volunteering this will increase the likelihood that volunteering will have a positive impact on well-being. Similarly, choosing something that the volunteer enjoys and that suits their personality, life situation and skill level will also increase this likelihood.

The organisation that someone volunteers with was also identified as key to having a positive impact on the volunteer’s well-being. In the small number of cases where volunteering had a negative impact on the volunteer’s well-being, poor training and support by the organisation were identified as key factors in the majority of cases. Those who volunteered with organisations that provided training, ongoing support and recognition reported a much more positive impact on their well-being.

Certainly, it seems that careful selection, matching, training and support all contribute to enhanced possibilities of a good volunteering experience and in turn a positive impact in health and well-being.

## Appendix A: Focus Group Questionnaire

### The Effects of Volunteering Experience on Health & Well-Being Questionnaire for Participants

Please reflect on the following questions and return your response to the workshop facilitator. Please rest assured that your individual response will be treated confidentially within our research. Thank you for sharing your views.

#### Part One:

#### Your Volunteering Experience

1. How long have you been volunteering (e.g. number of weeks, months or years)?
2. How often do you volunteer (e.g. weekly, daily, monthly)?
3. What organisations have you volunteered with?
4. What for you have been the most significant effects of volunteering in terms of making a positive difference in your life?
5. What do you believe, from your volunteering experience, are the main factors that contribute to the positive effects that you feel?

#### Part Two:

#### Your Sense of the Positive Effects of Volunteering

What have been the positive effects that you have felt as a direct result of your volunteering? Please consider the following effects and rate the extent of the positive difference that volunteering has made in your life:

Effects of Volunteering on You	Significantly increased	Increased	Stayed the Same	Decreased	Significantly Decreased
My confidence in myself					
My confidence in my abilities					
My sense of physical health and well being					
My sense of mental health and well being					
My social interactions and friendships					
My feeling of making a useful contribution to the community					
My interest in volunteering					
My feeling of belonging to the community					
My feeling of being involved and less alone					

## Appendix B: Focus Group Questionnaire Results

Respondents' Rating of Effect of Volunteering on their Well-being (n=39)					
Effects of Volunteering on Well-being	Significantly increased	Increased	Stayed the Same	Decreased	Significantly Decreased
1. My confidence in myself <i>Mean = 4.28</i>	17 (44%)	16 (41%)	6 (15%)	-	-
2. My confidence in my abilities <i>Mean = 4.26</i>	18 (46%)	13 (33%)	8 (21%)	-	-
3. My sense of physical health and well being <i>Mean = 4.02g</i>	10 (26%)	22 (56%)	6 (15%)	1 (3%)	-
4. My sense of mental health & well being <i>Mean = 4.26</i>	12 (31%)	25 (64%)	2 (5%)	-	-
5. My social interactions & friendships <i>Mean = 4.33</i>	17 (44%)	18 (46%)	4 (10%)	-	-
6. My feeling of making a useful contribution to the community <i>Mean = 4.74</i>	30 (77%)	8 (20.5%)	1 (2.5%)	-	-
7. My interest in <sup>16</sup> volunteering <i>Mean = 4.34</i>	24 (63%)	7 (18%)	5 (13%)	-	2 (5%)
8. My feeling of <sup>17</sup> belonging to the community <i>Mean = 4.52</i>	22 (58%)	14 (37%)	2 (5%)	-	-
9. My feeling of being involved and less alone <sup>18</sup> <i>Mean = 4.02</i>	11 (29%)	18 (47%)	8 (21%)	1 (3%)	-

A total of 39 volunteers returned completed questionnaires during the focus groups.

Respondents were asked to rate the extent of the positive difference that volunteering has made on their life against nine criteria. The above table sets out the results of the analysis of these ratings. It is important to note that this was a self report exercise and at one point in time. The results give a good enough indication of people's sense of the positive difference that their volunteering has made in their lives and yet it is only one indication. The reliability of this data would be strengthened with other psychometrics and standardised pre and post measures of each criterion or indicator of well-being.

Overall, the results show that respondents believe that their volunteering experience has had a strong positive impact on their well-being across all nine criteria.

<sup>16</sup> One person did not respond to this question

<sup>17</sup> One person did not respond to this question

<sup>18</sup> One person did not respond to this question





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