

Youth volunteering in a recession

Talking with organisations

Executive summary

Introduction

This report is the second strand of a National Youth Agency research project exploring the impact of the recession on young people's volunteering. The research was carried out as part of the NYA's work with the Office for Civil Society (OCS). The project set out to explore whether young people are more likely to volunteer now than before the recession, their motivations for volunteering, and the role of volunteering as part of a pathway to employment.

It also sought to consider whether volunteering could be seen as offering a lifeline to young people during and after a time of recession and conversely, whether the increased interest in volunteering among people of all ages may make it more difficult for young people, particularly the most marginalised, to find appropriate volunteering opportunities and support.

The first strand, undertaken by Dubit Limited for the National Youth Agency, used a variety of online methods to seek young people's views and experiences of volunteering and the recession. This second strand aimed to explore the effect of the recession on organisations providing or brokering volunteering opportunities for young people, including the most marginalised young people.

It is based on semi-structured interviews carried out in April and May 2010 with managers and staff in 22 organisations, including volunteer centres, further and higher education institutions, v and v-funded projects, national voluntary and volunteering organisations, youth organisations and Connexions. These organisations engage a wide range of young volunteers, including those from marginalised groups. Most work with young



volunteers aged 16 to 25 (in line with the Russell Commission's national framework for youth action and engagement, although some provide volunteering opportunities for young people under 16).

The project also reviewed research evidence which consistently asserts that volunteering can improve young people's confidence and self-esteem, raise aspirations, and provide many of the skills needed for employment.

Key findings

- Those working with young volunteers see a clear link between volunteering and increasing employability. Most of those interviewed reported a noticeable increase in young volunteers during the past 12 to 18 months, and although it is difficult to demonstrate a conclusive link, they believe that this is at least in part because of the recession.
- There was widespread agreement that young people's increasing awareness of the more competitive employment market has increased their interest in volunteering as a way of increasing their employment-related skills and making themselves more attractive to employers.
- Volunteering is seen to offer young people opportunities to test out different employment paths, gain practical experience for an already identified career, and develop a range of skills valued by employers, such as team work, time management and communication skills.
- Volunteering is seen to benefit both young people who have achieved well in formal education – offering opportunities to complement academic qualifications with practical skills and experience – and those who have struggled at school or who have additional support needs. For the most marginalised young people, for whom paid employment is even less likely as a result of the recession, volunteering can provide structure, links to the community and a chance to be accepted and valued.
- Young people and employers are seen to value the skills and experience developed through volunteering as markedly different to those that can be gained through formal education and training. Volunteering is based on an exchange, rather than a one way transaction, and is seen to offer young people opportunities to take on significant levels of responsibility, and to meet and work with a broader range of people than in other areas of their lives.
- There is widespread agreement that more work is needed to improve the understanding of the value and legitimacy of volunteering as a route to employment among Jobcentre staff.
- Young people were reported to have mixed attitudes towards accreditation, but many – particularly those who had gained few qualifications through formal education – were said to welcome

some kind of accreditation providing it was not too onerous to complete and was proportionate to their level of involvement. In some cases volunteers were said to be more interested in references from an organisation that was well known and respected within the sector where they hope to gain employment.

- The importance of offering young people opportunities to reflect on, and support in articulating, the skills and experiences they gain through volunteering was consistently highlighted. This was seen to be particularly important because of employers' relatively low levels of understanding of specific accreditation systems and awards.
- The research included a specific focus on how volunteering can engage marginalised young people, and the interviews reveal some successful approaches to involving harder to reach young people. These include engaging staff who can gain the young people's trust and are prepared to go the extra mile to support them; partnership work to draw on other organisations' experience and expertise; creating a comfortable and relaxed environment in which young people feel able to ask for support; involving young people in engaging their peers; opportunities targeting specific groups; taking care of practical arrangements such as expenses and transport; providing incremental opportunities and, finally, being realistic about young people's readiness to volunteer and continue volunteering.
- Despite the perception of a clear relationship between volunteering and employment, those taking part in the research stressed the importance of not reducing volunteering simply to work-related activity. In their experience, young people also see volunteering as giving their time to help others and make changes that matter to them, have fun, gain new experiences, and take on roles at levels that suit them.
- The community dimensions of volunteering are seen as critical. Projects which bring together volunteers of different ages are seen to have an important role in improving understanding and acceptance between different generations. In the context of widespread negative stereotyping of young people, many people stressed the importance of young people having their positive contributions recognised, and the consequent improvement in their sense of self-confidence and worth.



The full report is available on the National Youth Agency website at www.nya.org.uk



About the National Youth Agency

The National Youth Agency works in partnership with a wide range of public, private and voluntary sector organisations to support and improve services for young people. Our particular focus is on youth work and we believe strongly that by investing in young people's personal and social development, young people are better able to live more active and fulfilling lives.

Working with young people, we advocate for more youth-friendly services and policies. We have four themes:

- Developing quality standards in work with young people
- Supporting services for young people
- Developing the youth workforce
- Promoting positive public perceptions of young people.

We deliver our work through training and consultancy, campaigning, publishing and online communications. Through our activities we want to ensure that young people have a strong voice and positive influence in our society.

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