

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Winchester		
Unit of Assessment: A4		
Title of case study: Building Sustainable Volunteering Communities		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2018-2021		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g., job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Debra Gray Dr Michelle Cleveland	Reader in Social Psychology Senior Lecturer in Work Psychology	2013-present 2014-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2018-2021		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Our research addresses key challenges related to volunteer recruitment and retention, by providing a theory-led understanding of volunteer engagement. It has impacted on:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Regional strategic partners, through contributions to strategic recommendations, interventions, and marketing campaigns aimed at supporting and increasing voluntary action across the South East of England; 2. Stakeholder voluntary organisations, by changing debates and practices relating to volunteer recruitment and training in these organisations; and 3. The work of volunteer managers, by changing processes and practices related to the management of volunteers in ways that positively impact on organisational objectives for recruitment and retention and volunteer outcomes. 		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Volunteering is critical to the health of economies, communities, and individuals, and has been central to responses to COVID-19 around the world. However, volunteering faces great challenges as demand for services has soared, raising concerns about sustainability; particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is vitally important that organisations maintain current volunteer levels to meet this rising demand. However, this has traditionally been challenging for voluntary organisations, with a limited evidence base about what works in this space. Our research directly addresses these questions through two research studies, conducted between 2018 and 2019, which examine the experiences, challenges, and outcomes of volunteering from the perspective of volunteers. We uniquely apply a social identity approach (SIA), which is a key psychological theory for understanding the ways in which our group memberships – our sense of ‘we-ness’ – directs how we perceive and experience the world. In doing so, we demonstrate how this approach provides a valuable framework for unlocking how a sense of ‘we-ness’ can be used to improve volunteer recruitment, volunteer retention, and the wellbeing benefits of volunteering. The two studies are:</p>		

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- An interview study (2018) with 40 volunteers (18-74; 68% F:32% M) from the South of England [3.1]
- A mixed methods study (2019) involving interviews with 53 volunteers (18-74; 63%F:37%M) in the South of England and an online survey with 529 volunteers and non-volunteers (18-95; 60%F: 38%M) in the West Midlands [3.2]

The findings from these studies demonstrate that:

- Social identification (group or community belonging) is a key motivator for volunteers and is an important determinant of volunteering activity. Volunteering organisations need to match and manage the identity-related expectations of volunteers to ensure retention, e.g., through peer support networks. Organisations are seen positively if they facilitated building shared identity and a sense of belonging [3.1].
- Volunteering is a life-long activity, but key transitional moments are important for starting this volunteering journey, e.g., becoming a parent, relocating, retiring. Transitional gatekeepers could function as signposts to opportunities [3.1].
- Reciprocity is an important group norm for volunteers, i.e., volunteering is seen as both a way of giving support to others, when a person can, and as a way of ensuring that support is returned, when it is needed [3.1].
- Social identities are key to unlocking the psychological health and wellbeing benefits of volunteering. Volunteering provides access to sources of social support and a sense of collective efficacy. Volunteering is described by volunteers as a key community resource, creating shared community identities, encouraging, and developing social support networks and to contributing positively to the well-being of volunteers and community members [3.2].
- Highlighting these benefits more clearly to people could attract more people to volunteering, as a form of 'social prescription'. This is how a sense of 'we-ness' can be built and harnessed to develop and sustain volunteering moving forward, thereby directly addressing questions about building sustainable volunteering communities [3.1 & 3.2]

These studies involved two academics from the University of Winchester: Dr Debra Gray (Reader in Social Psychology) and Dr Michelle Cleveland (Senior Lecturer in Work Psychology).

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

3.1. **Gray, D.** & Stevenson, C. (2019) How can we help? Exploring the role of shared social identity in the experiences and benefits of volunteering. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 193(1), 1-19. doi.org/10.1002/casp.2448

3.2. **Bowe, M., Gray, D., Stevenson, C., McNamara, N., Wakefield, J.R., Kellezi, B., Wilson, I., Cleveland, M., Mair, E., Halder, M. and Costa, S.** (2020), A Social Cure in the Community: A mixed-method exploration of the role of social identity in the experiences and well-being of community volunteers. *Eur J Soc Psychol.* [doi:10.1002/ejsp.2706](https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2706) Submitted in REF2

Outputs were assessed for quality by anonymous external reviewers.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

1. Impact on Regional Strategic Partners:

Our regional partners include Community First Wessex (CFW) who represent 600 voluntary organisations the South East of England, and Hampshire County Council (HCC) who

support volunteering across Hampshire and Isle of Wight. With these partners, we have:

1. Undertaken a joint insight project, using underpinning research [3.1 & 3.2], along with new data, to develop interventions aimed at increasing help-giving and receiving across Hampshire. Four recommendations resulted, which were taken up by voluntary-sector services commissioning across the region, including the need for peer-support networks for volunteer retention [Evidence 1]. Roll-out was interrupted by COVID-19.
2. Provided expert advice to the COVID Welfare Recovery Volunteering Group, monthly since February 2020, contributing to plans for recruiting volunteers during the challenges of Covid-19 [Evidence 1]. Based on our research, the group took up our key recommendation to focus on the retention of 'new' volunteers by increasing social connectedness [Evidence 1]. Later, we advised a focus on vulnerable volunteers, leading to the development of a 'volunteering for the vulnerable' programme; thereby addressing the Local Resilience Forum's partnerships' strategic requirement to support vulnerable people [Evidence 2].
3. Provided key messages for a county-wide marketing campaign aimed at increasing volunteer numbers [Evidence 1 & 2]. This marketing campaign was highly successful, with 2000 'click throughs' to the Hampshire volunteering portal 'Get Volunteering'. There is also evidence of resultant increases to volunteer numbers, with 595 "Register your interest" clicks to Hampshire Volunteer Centre websites during the same period [Evidence 2].
4. Provided evidence for new e-learning for volunteers: <https://triggertool.connecttosupporthampshire.org.uk/>, thereby addressing HCC's duty of care to ensure people remain independent and healthy through being connected. This e-learning was launched in December 2020 was completed by over 150 volunteers in this month [Evidence 2].

2. Impact on Stakeholder Voluntary Organisations

Our research was disseminated through five key stakeholder events with 268 voluntary and community organisations from across the United Kingdom. Feedback from these events demonstrates impact, with 93% of attendees stating that our research increased knowledge and understanding of volunteer motivations, and 92% that it led to changes in thinking about volunteer recruitment and training. Qualitative feedback demonstrates intended changes to practice, including a focus on social connectedness that was a key recommendation, e.g.:

SH organisation: We struggle to attract volunteers. Next week we will be engaging with our volunteers to provide peer support opportunities. Today has clarified much about how we need to work more with volunteers in terms of feeling part of our volunteer group

Longer-term impact was assessed through questionnaires distributed one-year post-event. Of the 16 organisations that responded, 14 organisation stated that they had used our research to make changes to training or recruitment processes to reflect a need to focus on social connectedness, e.g.:

PC Organisation: 'we have changed the terminology that we use in our training to focus on social connectedness and changed focus of recruitment to advocate the importance of volunteering to form a habit for life'.

3. Impact on Volunteer Managers

To more clearly impact the practice of those involved in volunteer management, two training

workshops and a toolkit (see <https://volunteeringresearchhub.co.uk/resources>) was delivered to 58 Volunteer Managers from across the South of England. 100% of those who attended stated their organisation would use our work to resolve challenges around volunteer recruitment and retention. Qualitative feedback demonstrates key recommendations around social connectedness and volunteer wellbeing were taken up, with planned changes to recruitment, training, and peer support networks, e.g.:

Home Start Hampshire: change recruitment and promotional materials to explain the benefits of volunteering in recruitment; that should get us more volunteers

Age Concern Hampshire: we will strengthen our peer support networks; Changing way volunteers have opportunities to work alongside each other.

Questionnaires were distributed 6 months after the workshop. 11 volunteer managers responded, all of whom had changed organisations practice because of our research. Five organisations provided testimonials to evidence this impact [Evidence 3-7]. Changes included: recruitment messages and materials [Evidence 3 & 4]; training or induction processes [Evidence 4]; a focus on social connectedness [Evidence 5], improved communication; and the use of peer support networks [Evidence 6]. These changes were seen to be positive both for achieving organisational objectives around volunteer recruitment and retention, and for volunteers, e.g.:

Spurgeons Invisible Walls: we have created communities within our volunteer team to enhance a sense of belonging. Increased our communication and ensured that those communications help them feel included as part of the overall team delivering the project. Our volunteers are happier and stay longer.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

Evidence 1: Testimonial from Insight and Engagement Unit, Hampshire County Council.

Evidence 2: Testimonial from a representative of Demand Management and Prevention Change Unit, Adults' Health and Care, Hampshire County Council.

Evidence 3: Testimonial from a representative of Bedhampton Community Centre.

Evidence 4: Testimonial from a representative of Independent Arts.

Evidence 5: Testimonial from a representative of the National Trust.

Evidence 6: Testimonial from a representative of Hampshire & Isle of Wight Community Rehabilitation Company.