

**Volunteering:**  
Supporting Transitions

Becci Newton

Joy Oakley

Emma Pollard





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# Executive summary

## Introduction

**v**, The National Young Volunteers' Service, is committed to supporting young people to be at the forefront of strong communities, encouraging them to be socially and economically active. In Autumn 2010, **v** commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) to explore the unique contribution of volunteering to the development of employability skills and attributes, networks and contacts, qualifications and accreditation, and the relief of the negative consequences of unemployment or inactivity.

The research was based on longitudinal, qualitative case study research with a panel of 36 young people, drawn from a number of settings: 17 volunteered on a part-time basis and 10 volunteered full-time through the **v**talent year programme. To provide a comparison group, nine young people were recruited to the research who had gained work through the Future Jobs Fund (FJF), a government-sponsored job creation initiative. The organisations involved facilitated contact with their young volunteers and workers, who were offered an opportunity to opt into the research. In addition to interviewing young people, detailed discussions were held with all managers (or mentors) involved in supporting young people's activities, as well as a range of stakeholders, including staff from local agencies and youth advice organisations.

## Gains and benefits for young people

**Hard outcomes:** Young people recognised volunteering and work as a means to improve their employability by enabling them to develop generic and specific skills and to enhance their CV. Their expectations in relation to these factors were exceeded. Other types of hard outcome gains included improved insight into future careers and, for volunteers especially, the development of networks which might assist future transitions and the opportunity to earn certificates and complete qualifications.

**Interpersonal and soft skills:** Young people also felt they had improved and developed their soft skills, such as communication, team-working, problem solving, planning and management. Volunteers particularly reported that their activities had helped them to greatly improve their personal time-management.

**Personal attributes and development:** The demonstration and development of personal attributes, such as commitment, motivation and enthusiasm, was seen as an important outcome from work and volunteering. Again, young people reported that their expectations were exceeded, particularly with regard to gains in confidence. This newly developed confidence often translated into an improved understanding of their potential and being more able to realise their capabilities through undertaking new activities and projects.



## Gains and benefits to organisations and communities

In addition to developing their skills and attributes, young people made a valuable contribution to communities and organisations. Organisations reported significant increases in capacity which meant they could offer enhanced services to clients, develop new projects and/or new approaches to their work. Volunteers particularly were felt to have brought fresh ideas, energy and new perspectives to organisations. Young volunteers were differentiated from young workers by their altruistic motivations: they wanted to 'give something back' and have the satisfaction of helping other people. Volunteering enabled young people to demonstrate a positive contribution to the community or environment, and to their show commitment and enthusiasm to be involved. This feeling of giving something back and making a difference to society allowed volunteers a sense of satisfaction and self-worth which did not appear to be available to the same degree, or as directly, to those in work.

## Supporting young people


The support that young volunteers and workers received, from mentors and managers, programme coordinators, other staff and volunteers, played an integral role in their development. This support helped young people to identify development opportunities and offered them the feedback that they needed to reflect upon their progress and to set new achievement targets and goals. Many young people felt that the support they received had been central to their increased confidence in their abilities, which meant they had taken on challenges that they would not previously have done.

Voluntary organisations offered continuous and in-depth support to young people. This meant that these environments were particularly suitable for vulnerable young people seeking to increase and develop their capabilities. Support tended to extend beyond the conclusion of the activities for volunteers and, less frequently, workers, and included regular updating and sharing of information about upcoming work and voluntary opportunities. This ongoing relationship provided critical transition support for young people, since it focussed on their onward progression.

## Youth transitions

Following their placements, many of the volunteers made a transition into learning. For the full-time volunteers this represented new learning opportunities since most had been unemployed or in low skilled work prior to volunteering. The more vulnerable and low skilled part-time volunteers also frequently had commenced new learning opportunities. For both of these groups, this transition demonstrated significantly increased aspiration.

The more highly skilled part-time volunteers were often engaged in a programme of learning alongside their community activities and continued to pursue further or higher education qualifications. Volunteering for this group was a means to gain practical experience, to experiment and pursue their interests. A small number of part- and full-time volunteers had progressed into employment. This group tended to believe that volunteering had led to work which they were more certain and confident about, suggesting a more sustainable transition had been achieved. There was a roughly equal split among the young workers of being in work or returning to the unemployment register. Those in work most often had been offered an extension to their FJF contract and, as part of this, an apprenticeship.



The destinations of young people suggest that volunteering is particularly successful in supporting vulnerable and low-skilled young people to make a transition into learning and in raising their personal and/or career ambitions.

## Policy implications

This research has revealed a number of key outcomes from volunteering – and from work placement programmes – which may help to inform future policy development around youth transitions and youth unemployment. These may be outlined as follows:

### Volunteering and youth unemployment

- There is a need to provide long term development activities for young people, whether this comprises work or volunteering, in order to help them to build skills and capabilities and circumvent the boredom and disengagement of unemployment. With the discontinuation of the FJF programme, the replacement for which has been relatively short-term work experience programmes, there may be a greater need for long term, structured volunteering programmes to fill the gap. These would be particularly valuable to the most vulnerable young people who need greater support and flexibility to develop their skills and capabilities in readiness for more sustainable transitions to education or employment.
- There is an ongoing need to promote the benefits of volunteering to young people who are unemployed to provide a means to make a contribution and to find a focus for their time. There is also a need for clear and consistent information regarding the receipt of statutory financial support while volunteering to ensure stability in support arrangements and to safeguard against young people being deterred from volunteering. **v** will soon launch research findings from a study which investigates the effectiveness of existing advice about volunteering to unemployed young people as well as advice about the implications for their state benefit entitlements, which will reveal more about the current situation and future requirements on this point<sup>1</sup>.

### Volunteering and education and training

- This research demonstrated the success of volunteering in engaging young people, helping them to gain qualifications and secure positive progression to further education. Given the policy commitment to raising the participation age to 18 by 2015, structured volunteering placements may provide a critical transition route for young people who are keen to develop their skills and gain qualifications in a non-formal educational setting. Volunteering may also help vulnerable and disadvantaged young people to (re)engage with formal learning.
- Volunteering part-time is valuable to young people involved in higher education since it provides a means to apply their skills in a practical setting, gain career insights and explore different interests. Highly skilled young people also feel that volunteering supports the transition to work: a large-scale survey conducted for **v** found that 51 per cent of recent graduates under the age of 30 who were in paid work reported that volunteering helped them to secure employment<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> CFE and v, The role of Jobcentre Plus and information, advice and guidance (IAG) providers in promoting and signposting volunteering to young people; forthcoming May 2011

<sup>2</sup> Brewis G, Russell J, Holdsworth C (2010) Bursting the Bubble: Students, Volunteering and the Community, available from: [www.publicengagement.ac.uk](http://www.publicengagement.ac.uk)



## **Social cohesion, citizenship and well-being**

- Volunteering helped young people to develop their networks and mix with a more diverse social group. It also increased their ability to work within and across authority structures. This suggests that providing volunteering opportunities to a wide range of young people will help to break-down social barriers and lead to greater community cohesion and personal well-being.
- The positive contribution made by young people to the organisations and communities with which they were involved, helped to overcome the negative stereotypes often applied to them, and improved perceptions of young people amongst adults such as staff, volunteers and service users.
- Many young people are currently in a precarious economic position with the high level of youth unemployment, and some commentators are warning of a lost generation. Helping young people to stay connected to society and their communities, to develop leadership and employability skills that will shape their future, is one of the most urgent and critical tasks of the next decade.
- This research demonstrates that supportive, developmental volunteering (and work) opportunities can play a crucial role in building the personal resilience and capabilities that young people need to succeed in an uncertain world.

# 1. Introduction

Volunteering has received increasing attention in recent years. It is viewed as a means for young people to engage positively in their communities, thereby delivering to the citizenship and social inclusion and cohesion agendas.

*'Volunteering is an important expression of citizenship and fundamental to democracy. It is the commitment of time and energy for the benefit of society and the community, and can take many forms. It is freely undertaken and not for financial gain.'*

Volunteering England Information Sheet, 2008

Volunteering also has benefits to those who get involved. For instance, it can play a key role in developing and providing a means to apply and demonstrate skills and attributes, as well as enabling young people to make a positive contribution to communities and society. More than this, finding a focus for 'making a contribution' and 'making a difference' can help to develop a sense of purpose and self-esteem, potentially leading to enhanced wellbeing.

The policy of the new Coalition government towards youth volunteering is still being clarified. When it came to power, it proposed the concept of the Big Society which would seek to empower individuals and give them control to improve their lives and the communities in which they live. A stated aim of the Big Society is to rebalance the relative power of the state in favour of communities. Within the Big Society, volunteering sits alongside philanthropy and the encouragement of social enterprises to deliver local services.

For young people there is a focus on social action which will be developed through the introduction of the National Citizen Service (NCS), which aims to promote and support social action among 16 year olds. A structured, programme of personal development is to be provided in the summer following GCSE examinations which will aim to encourage young people to develop leadership skills and to identify challenges faced by their communities, devise solutions and lead activities to create a positive change. The NCS is being piloted between 2011-12 to inform national implementation. The impact of NCS on youth volunteering may be clarified as a result of these pilots.

**v**, The National Young Volunteers' Service, was the body established as a result of the Russell Commission on Youth Action and Engagement which reported in 2005. It has worked with over 500 organisations to create over one million voluntary opportunities since its inception in 2006. However, while these numbers speak of the scale of its work, **v** was also keen to explore the unique contribution of volunteering in terms of the quality of the experience and the outcomes achieved.



To this end, v commissioned the IES to assess the role of volunteering in the:

- acquisition and development of employability skills and attributes
- engagement of young people in activities that are perceived to be of benefit to them and others, and extent to which this helps them develop social networks
- gaining of qualifications and accreditation
- relief of the negative consequences of unemployment.

Furthermore, the research also explored the transitions that young people were making, and the support they received and perceived to be important to these.

The research was undertaken using a case study approach which centred upon young people. Longitudinal, qualitative research was undertaken with a panel of 36 young people, which was complemented by linked interviews with their managers or mentors. Through mentors, and based on recommendations from young people, further links were established to wider stakeholders, who were also interviewed in depth.

This report presents the findings from this research and covers young people's entry routes into and perceptions of volunteering, the outcomes and gains from their activities, and their progress over a period of around six months.

## 1.1 About the research

The research model explored the 'internalisation' of benefits of volunteering, ie the gains and outcomes for young people (those aged between 16 and 25) who volunteer. This entailed exploring the different types of volunteering activity that individuals engage in, and whether participation results in different types of outcome, such as employability skills and attributes, career knowledge and planning, and civic or community gains. It also explored the similarities and differences of volunteering when compared with work-based interventions targeted at unemployed or inactive young people.

The 'externalisation' of the benefits of volunteering was explored by capturing the perspective of the organisations through which young people volunteered, and through these organisations, the wider communities with which they worked.

The interface between this 'internalisation/externalisation' was measured through perceptions of increased citizenship and engagement of young people within organisations and their communities.

### 1.1.1 Research aims

The aims for this research were to:

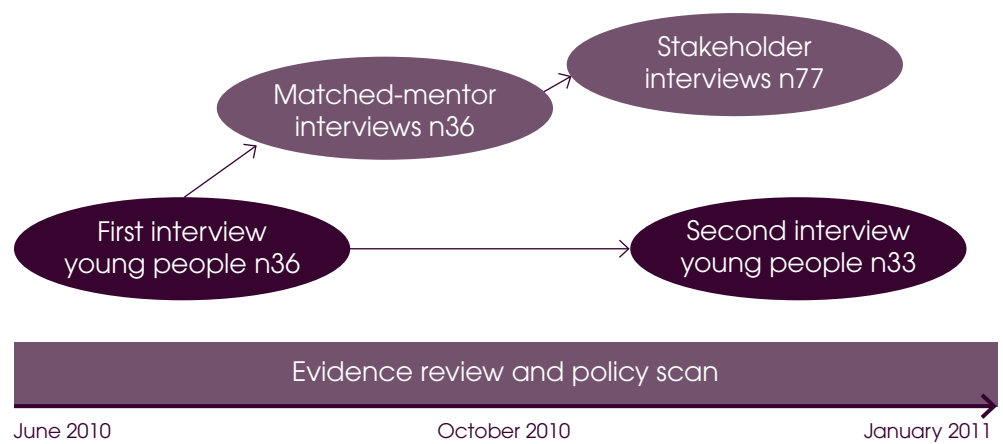
- Identify and characterise the unique features of volunteering in comparison with other interventions aimed at unemployed young people.
  - There was an emphasis on identifying the development of skills and attributes that enhance employability, and the career/work decisions, of young people.
  - Information about capability, work-readiness and wellbeing also emerged although this had not been an objective for the investigation.
- Explore in depth the drivers for engaging in volunteering and the importance of 'giving something back' to the community among young volunteers.
- Examine whether and how volunteering contributes to developing a community ethos and, through this, social cohesion.
- Assess the contribution of volunteering to supporting transitions, specifically the re-engagement in learning, training and work of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET)<sup>3</sup>, or the transitions into work or learning among young unemployed or inactive people.
- Identify and assess how volunteering might be linked to policy development related to education, employment, citizenship and wellbeing areas.

### About the research approach

The research programme was based upon three stages:

1. Longitudinal, qualitative research with a panel of 36 young people, complemented by linked interviews with staff from the organisations with whom they had volunteered. Through these organisations, links were established to the wider communities in which the organisations have influence in order to conduct interviews with community stakeholders. The qualitative research process is illustrated in Figure 1.1 below.
2. Evidence review to inform the research design and to suggest ways in which the findings might be tested for scale and traction. This explored where comparisons might be drawn between volunteering and other provision to relieve unemployment, as a means of identifying any additional effect of volunteering.
3. A policy scan and expert roundtable meeting to identify how volunteering may best fit within youth policy formation and development.

<sup>3</sup> NEET is a term applied to young people aged between the ages of 16 and 18, who are not actively engaged in education or training and who, in most cases, are not entitled to receive unemployment benefits (see eg Maguire and Thompson, 2007)



## 1.2 About the projects and sample

At project inception, key dimensions of the young person sample were agreed with **v**: namely, full-time and part-time volunteering in urban and rural settings. A comparison group within the sampling frame was young people working full-time as a result of a targeted intervention for young unemployed people.

Each element of the sample is explored in more detail below.

### 1.2.1 Part-time volunteering

The part-time volunteer sample was drawn from three of **v**'s Match Fund flagship projects and comprised half of the sample (17 part-time volunteers were recruited).

The three projects which assisted the team to generate this sample were:

- **Foresight**, is a charity that provides support and activities for young people and adults with disabilities, including learning difficulties and disabilities. It is based in Lincolnshire. Voluntary opportunities span supporting centre users, office and administrative work, and hospitality, among other activities.
- **ITV Fixers**, a project managed by the Public Service Broadcast Trust. It supports and mentors young people to design and develop media-based social campaigns across the UK. Young people gain opportunities to develop project management, creative and communication skills as a result of the developing their campaigns.
- **The Waterways Trust**, a national charity. The research was undertaken at its centre and museum in the North West, which provides a range of volunteering opportunities, including conservation and environmental, and creative and cultural, as well as office and administrative, activities.

The part-time volunteering organisations offered to cover, in some cases, the expenses that young people incurred as part of their activity, such as travel costs, in order to support their participation.

### 1.2.2 Full-time volunteering

The full-time volunteering sample was based upon young people involved in the **v**talent year programme, which was introduced by **v** in 2009-10 in local authority settings and further education colleges. The **v**talent year programme provides long-term, structured full-time volunteering placements (up to a year, 30 hours per week) to young people who also study for a qualification such as an NVQ Level 2 or 3.

The **v**talent year programme sample was generated with the assistance of Plymouth City College and Manchester College. The placements available to young volunteers included acting as learning mentors and assisting in student support and liaison departments. Through these placements there were opportunities to develop projects including induction programmes, assisting with awareness campaigns or organising a sports or other type of event.

**v**talent year programme providers are charged with targeting young people, aged 16 to 24, who have not been in education, employment or training for four months or more, and who do not possess Level 2 qualifications. Young people are entitled to claim a means-tested allowance equivalent to the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and expenses associated with volunteering in order to support their participation. Ten full-time volunteers were recruited to the research.

### 1.2.3 Full-time work

The full-time work sample was based on young people completing Future Jobs Fund (FJF) opportunities and nine young people were recruited who were in this category. The inclusion of the FJF group was to enable a comparison between volunteering and another programme that aimed to help young unemployed people to develop and demonstrate employability skills and attributes.

The FJF was an Active Labour Market Policy (ALMP) introduced by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) as part of the Young Person's Guarantee, under the Labour administration. Young people<sup>4</sup> who had been unemployed for six months were offered full-time work (25 hours each week) lasting a minimum of six months. The young people we interviewed were working in three quite different FJF sectors, including a social enterprise attached to further education, local authority services and a charity.

The organisations that assisted the research to recruit FJF employees were:

- **Global Action Plan**, an environment charity which offered FJF positions through a contract for FJF, which **v** had successfully bid to deliver. Roles available to young people included administration and campaigning.
- **NewVic College**, (Newham Victoria Further Education College), which supported and brokered FJF positions within the college and in other locally based organisations. Jobs available included acting as a production assistant or as a point of liaison between the college and community-based organisations.
- **Portsmouth City Council**, which led a consortium of local authorities across urban south Hampshire to deliver 900 FJF positions. The jobs on offer included administrative support to FJF, work within a regeneration charity, as well as managing the reception in an information and advice centre.

<sup>4</sup> Some vulnerable adult groups were also targeted by this initiative

### 1.2.4 Sampling strategy and achieved sample

Staff within the organisations that had agreed to be involved highlighted the project to their young volunteers and workers and invited them to participate. The research team encouraged the inclusion of young people who had been not in employment, education or training (NEET)<sup>5</sup>, unemployed or inactive before starting the activity. The sample must therefore be viewed as opportunistic and not representative necessarily of the cohort in each setting.

Table 1.1 shows the composition of the achieved sample, across full- and part-time volunteering and full-time work. The gender breakdown of the sample is also shown as is the number of young people who were NEET or unemployed when they commenced volunteering or work.

**Table 1.1: The sample**

Activity	Achieved sample	NEET or UE*	Males	Females
Full-time volunteering	10	6	5	5
Full-time work	9	9	4	5
Part-time volunteering	17	8	7	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>20</b>

\* NEET or UE (unemployed) indicates status on becoming involved in volunteering or work and not at the point of the research.

Source: IES 2010

### 1.2.5 Activity completion status at the outset of the research

The full-time volunteers were nearing completion of their year when they were first interviewed for the research. Part-time volunteers frequently did not have a planned end date for their activities and had been involved for differing lengths of time. The FJF employees had spent differing lengths of time in work, with around half at or nearing the end of their job, which was typically of six months' duration, when they were first interviewed.

<sup>5</sup> NEET is a residual statistical category applied to young people aged between the ages of 16 and 18, who are not actively engaged in education or training and who, in most cases, are not entitled to receive unemployment benefits (see eg Maguire and Thompson, 2007)



## 1.3 Report structure

The next chapter of this report (Chapter 2) offers a description of the characteristics of the young people involved in the research and differences between part- and full-time volunteers and workers.

Chapter 3 details findings from the rapid evidence review, which assessed employers' demands when recruiting young people and the differences for those young people according to whether they have higher or lower levels of skills.

Chapter 4 examines young people's routes into volunteering and work and then explores their reasons for participating. Chapter 5 assesses and compares the gains and benefits that resulted from volunteering and work.

The support arrangements available to young people are examined in Chapter 6 while Chapter 7 explores young people's satisfaction levels with volunteering and work and their longer-term outcomes.

Chapter 8 sets out the differences young people and stakeholders perceived between volunteering and work. The report concludes in Chapter 9, where implications for policy arising from the research are considered.

The report uses young people's stories as a means to illustrate the analysis. On first introduction of a young person case, detail is provided about their background and circumstances. If they appear a second time, material is attributed although their biography is not repeated. Matched information from their mentor is included in case examples, where appropriate. The names of young people have been changed to protect their identities.

## 2. About the young people

### Key insights

- The sample of young volunteers and workers comprised a diverse group of young people in terms of age, experience and qualifications.
- Many had experienced some disadvantage or could be categorised as vulnerable. Some had experienced multiple disadvantages.
- The majority were not in work, training or learning prior to commencing their voluntary activities or FJF work.
- Many full-time volunteers had low qualifications since talented year providers are required to recruit 40 per cent of their cohort from the group of young people that is disengaged from learning, and not qualified to Level 2.
- The qualification levels of full-time workers and part-time volunteers were more varied and spanned low to high skill levels from Level 2 to postgraduate degrees.

This chapter explores the characteristics and early experiences of young people, including the similarities and differences in the experiences of full- and part-time volunteers and full-time Future Jobs Fund (FJF) workers.

### 2.1 Vulnerability and disadvantage

Two-thirds of the sample could be described as having experienced some disadvantage or as having a recognised vulnerability. This proportion does not take into account those who had simply been unemployed for six months, which at a young age is also an recognised form of disadvantage<sup>6</sup>.

The vulnerabilities and disadvantages young people had faced included being a care leaver, having a learning difficulty and/or disability (LDD), chronic or traumatic health conditions, mental health issues, caring responsibilities, having missed significant periods of schooling as a result of bullying, truancing or family difficulties, criminal convictions or substance misuse difficulties (other types of vulnerability were also mentioned). In some cases, young people had experienced multiple disadvantages.

It was apparent, however, that many had overcome the immediate barriers associated with the challenges they faced. For example, where health conditions were concerned, young people had come to terms with their situation and gained support, which meant they were more able to cope and were ready to move forward. Where challenges surrounded the negative consequences of their own behaviour, young people had realised that they needed to change or would spiral downwards and find it difficult to get back up. It was apparent that support agencies and youth workers had been an important source of support for some, helping them to realise the need to change. Notably, some of the sample had engaged in volunteering or work as part of their process of change.

<sup>6</sup> For example, the Activity Agreement Pilots, introduced by Department for Education, targeted vulnerable young people, a category in which it included young people NEET for 26 weeks.

## 2.2 Previous volunteering experience

Across the part- and full-time samples (which included volunteering and work) just over a third of young people had volunteered previously. Examples included gap year and overseas projects, youth work and faith-based volunteering. All examples encompassed formal volunteering (ie within or through a group or organisation) and none in the sample mentioned informal volunteering (ie which takes place between individuals). While a small number of the full-time workers had previously volunteered, it was also the case that two young people recruited to the research as volunteers had gained work through FJF. The following section describes the characteristics of the young people at the outset of the research.

## 2.3 Full-time volunteers and workers

Most of the **full-time sample**, ie volunteers and FJF employees, were aged over 20: the youngest was 17 years old while the eldest was 24 years old. While FJF work was available only to those aged over 18, young people from the age of 16 are able to join the **vtalent** year programme.

It was common for the full-time volunteers to have relatively low educational attainment, with most qualified at or below Level 2. Many had gone on to college following school to study for vocational qualifications at Levels 1 or 2. There was a mix of young people completing these post-16 qualifications or deciding to withdraw from learning prior to completion.

**Dermot** was 22 years old and a full-time volunteer. He had struggled at school and had been bullied. He gained a few GCSE qualifications and went onto college to complete a Level 1 qualification. Following this he decided to seek work although he did not have much luck. With little to do, he fell in with a 'bad crowd' and began engaging in substance misuse. In this period there were a couple of incidents where he became violent and which led to a criminal conviction. He realised that if he continued, he would end up in prison. He decided to make a positive change in his life. Through a contact in an organisation he had volunteered with some years before he heard about the **vtalent** year programme and decided to apply.

**Rachel** was 17 and a full-time volunteer. She truanted a lot during the early years of secondary school although through support, she re-engaged with school and gained some GCSEs. Up to the age of 16 she was in care, and at the age of 16 she began to live independently. She had been unemployed for nearly 12 months when she started volunteering. Her volunteering mentor reported that she had lots of barriers associated with family relationships and living independently. Volunteering was an opportunity to demonstrate commitment, get a reference for improved attendance and develop a sense of routine.



Educational attainment among the FJF employees was more varied, and all were qualified to at least Level 2. Around half of this group had completed an undergraduate degree and one of these had completed a masters degree.

**Drew** was 23 years old and involved in full-time work. He had experienced a traumatic health condition while at primary school, which affected his transition into secondary. Despite this, he gained nine GCSEs and went on to college to complete a diploma. He progressed to an apprenticeship and qualified to Level 2. He was made redundant when the employer closed the business. He had spent around six months without any luck in finding work.

**Tunde** was 23 years old and had completed an undergraduate degree in the creative sector. She had gained some work in the sector following graduation although the contracts had been short-term and temporary. While she still wished to pursue a media career, she felt she needed to gain more work experience and it was better to be in work and applying for other jobs than to be unemployed. She had done some volunteering in a youth centre when a bit younger.

Many of the full-time group (volunteers and FJF workers with lower levels of qualification) reported that school had been 'a struggle' and it was apparent that many had encountered challenges during their school years. This included being bullied, being a carer, being looked after (ie in care) or challenges related to substance misuse. In some cases, similar challenges were experienced post-16 when some young people started to live independently. It was more common for the full-time volunteers, and to a lesser degree workers, to either be living independently or to have done so at some time post-16, than the part-time group.

It was reasonably common for the full-time volunteers and workers to have been employed at some stage post-16. The jobs they had done were mostly low skilled positions and had often been temporary and/or part-time. The majority of the full-time volunteers had not been employed for some significant time prior to joining the vtalent year programme, while the regulations surrounding the FJF meant that all these employees had to be unemployed for six months prior to starting work.

Those who had been unemployed before starting full-time volunteering were keen to find some focus for their lives, to improve their opportunities for future employment and to overcome the boredom and isolation of unemployment. The vtalent year programme was attractive to some of these young people because they perceived it to be less formal than full-time education and training, perhaps since many had not progressed very far in the education system. Some also felt that the vtalent year programme was suited to people who were more 'hands on'.

The FJF employees were simply motivated by the opportunity to work – even if this was only for a limited period. They welcomed the opportunity to be doing something and gaining skills, and some were attracted by the types of job on offer.

## 2.4 Part-time volunteers

The large majority of the **part-time volunteers** were over 19 years old and most had completed intermediate education, including A Levels, and vocational and access courses following school. The eldest was 25 years old and had completed a postgraduate qualification while the youngest was 16 years old and in their final year of school. Clear patterns in the characteristics of the part-time sample were hard to discern since the projects in which young people volunteered bore some relation to their characteristics and experiences. For instance, those developing media campaigns often had experience of a particular barrier or challenge that they wanted to share. Similarly, young people volunteering through the disability support organisation were often disabled themselves.

Part-time volunteering attracted and gave opportunities to a diverse group of young people, who had different drivers for their involvement. The educational attainment of young people varied considerably, although it did not determine whether a young person might be considered as vulnerable or disadvantaged. Around a fifth of the part-time volunteers were involved in, or had completed, HE studies (foundation, undergraduate or masters), and often their volunteering related to their studies.

Few of the part-time volunteers had spent any significant time not in employment, education or training (NEET) or unemployed/inactive, prior to volunteering. However, volunteering part-time while being unemployed or NEET was relatively common. Those who were unemployed or who had spent time NEET reported that this period of their lives was 'boring' and they wanted to be undertaking more productive activities.

**Mark** was a part-time volunteer aged 20 who had received a statement of special needs during compulsory schooling years. He had left full-time education when he was 18 with a range of Level 1 vocational qualifications.

**Shawn** was a part-time volunteer aged 24. He had found school very difficult since he struggled with a mental health condition that had led to him being bullied. He left school at 16 and moved out of the area to live independently and attend college, where he gained Level 3 qualifications. He got involved in volunteering through a charity which supported other young people.

**Casey** was a part-time volunteer aged 25. Before volunteering she had been unemployed and seeking work, although a chronic health condition limited her availability and capacity for work since she required regular medical input. She was qualified to masters level, although completing her education had been a struggle since her health condition had first manifested during her studies.

# 3. Making the transition to work

## Key insights

- The youth labour market is constrained and very few employers recruit young people direct from education.
- Employers often prioritise soft skills such as interpersonal and communication skills over technical skills.
- Employers value personal attributes such as motivation, flexibility and willingness to learn.
- Employers often rank qualifications beneath soft skills and personal attributes but may check qualifications as part of short-listing processes.
- Young people may be perceived as lacking maturity but also as more willing to learn than older adults.
- If a young person has spent a long time unemployed, they may be judged as ill-prepared for work, fuelling concerns that they are likely to quit at short notice.

A key focus for the research was the ways in which volunteering and short-term work might assist young unemployed people to develop, apply and demonstrate employability skills and attributes in order to support their transition into sustainable work and/or engage in learning to underpin this. It is important therefore to understand what it is that employers are looking for when recruiting young people into their workforce. A review of evidence was an underpinning element of the current research, and a summary of the key issues which arose from this is presented in this chapter. This provides a context for understanding the outcomes of young people as the analysis progresses.

There are two key dimensions to the young person sample surrounding educational attainment which must be taken into consideration when looking at employers' skills demands. One group of young people had relatively low attainment levels, with their highest level of qualification being Level 2 or below. The second group had a sufficient level of qualification to gain access to higher education (HE), ie Level 3 and above, and some of these had progressed to undergraduate and postgraduate studies.

The chapter commences with a summary of employers' demands for young workers, then turns to their skills demands when recruiting generally. The chapter then explores the differences between their skills demands when recruiting to lower and higher skilled positions.

### 3.1 Employers' demand for young workers

Recent evidence (Shury et al., 2010) shows that a minority of employers recruit young people direct from education, whether that is following compulsory, tertiary or HE. For example, six per cent of employers had recruited a school leaver, 11 per cent had recruited a young person aged 17 or 18, and 10 per cent had recruited a graduate aged under 24 to their first job.

Where young people had been recruited, a majority were seen as well or very well prepared for work although a significant minority were not (Shury et al. *ibid.*). Among those employers who had recruited a 16-year-old, two-thirds (66 per cent) felt the young worker was well or very well prepared; for those recruiting 17- or 18-year-olds, this proportion rose to 74 per cent; and for graduates it reached 85 per cent.

More generally, the analysis demonstrated that the labour market was somewhat constrained at the point of the survey, with the number of vacancies available having fallen compared to previous surveys (Shury et al. *ibid.*). It is also salient to note that the proportion of hard-to-fill vacancies had fallen compared with previous surveys.

On the basis of this evidence, it is plausible to suggest that young people are facing considerable competition in the labour market and need to be able to demonstrate skills and attributes that set them apart from others. Gaining qualifications beyond Level 2 would appear to contribute to greater likelihood of gaining work, and young people with higher levels of qualification appear better equipped for work.

This raises a question of what it is that employers consider makes young people more work-ready and whether it is simply the higher level of qualification or some interplay between qualification and other factors. The next section reviews the evidence about what employers say they look for when recruiting.

### 3.2 What employers look for when recruiting

When they are recruiting, employers assess a range of personal attributes, skills and qualifications. Their emphasis on each of these factors varies by occupation and sector. The qualifications demanded by employers at the recruitment stage also vary by sector and occupation.

Taylor (2005) reports a competency-based employability framework (see Table 3.1) which offers a view of the mix of personal attributes and skills that employers seek. Bunt (2005) assesses these to be motivation, flexibility, willingness to work and learn, appearance, behaviour, confidence, and positive mannerisms.

The evidence suggests that employers may be less demanding about technical skills when recruiting: they may consider training to improve technical skills should applicants demonstrate an appropriate mix of employability and soft skills, and positive attributes (Winterbotham et al., 2001). However, young people may not understand this to be the case since they emphasise the need for technical skills over soft skills (ORC, 2010)

**Table 3.1: Employability skills framework**

Attributes	Employability	Soft skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loyalty</li> <li>• Commitment</li> <li>• Honesty &amp; integrity</li> <li>• Enthusiasm</li> <li>• Reliability</li> <li>• Personal presentation</li> <li>• Common sense</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive self-esteem</li> <li>• A sense of humour</li> <li>• Balanced attitude to work &amp; home life</li> <li>• An ability to deal with pressure</li> <li>• Motivation</li> <li>• Adaptability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Teamwork</li> <li>• Problem-solving skills</li> <li>• Self-management skills</li> <li>• Planning &amp; organising</li> <li>• Technology skills</li> <li>• Learning skills</li> <li>• Initiative &amp; enterprise skills</li> </ul>

Source: Taylor, 2005

While there appears to be a greater emphasis on soft skills over technical skills (for instance, problem-solving and communication skills), how these are measured is often an inexact process. Evidence suggests that employers rely on their perception of the interaction with potential recruits at interview (Hogarth and Wilson, 2003; Maguire and Newton, 2010). Similarly, perception of the interaction at an interview is all important to the assessment of positive attributes.


Long duration unemployment is an area of concern for employers, and some perceive that job candidates who have been unemployed for an extensive period will lack any work preparedness. This may fuel a concern that recruits from this group are more likely to quit at short notice and after only a short period in work (Devins and Hogarth, 2005).

While many employers rank demands for qualifications beneath their need for positive attributes and soft skills in recruitment frameworks (Bunt, 2005; Jenkins and Wolf, 2005; Maguire and Newton, 2010), qualifications are frequently used to inform the short-listing process. Hence it is increasingly important that young people achieve their potential, in terms of their qualifications, in order to gain access to a job interview.

### 3.3 Employing lower-skilled young people

There is some evidence of age stereotypes intervening in employers' requirements when recruiting young people. Snape (1998) reports positive stereotypes of young people to include receptiveness to learning and training, flexibility, and lower wage costs. Less favourable views include the perception that young people have less life-experience, are unable to handle certain types of work and will cost more due to supervision and training needs (Snape, *ibid*).

Despite the stereotypes, there are some messages about the employment of young people which may assist those with lower skill levels. For example, employers may be willing to disregard or downplay qualifications if applicants display other positive personal attributes (Canny, 2004; Jenkins and Wolf, 2005). Furthermore, employers will not always look for the possession of well-developed soft skills in young candidates, instead looking for indicators of potential to develop these (Dench et al., 1998).



Where young people have little or no work experience, extra curricula activities –such as volunteering – may be used as the basis for assessing employability and soft skills (Dench et al. *ibid.*). A further consideration may surround perceptions of whether the young employee could be moulded to fit in the organisation’s culture (Fuller et al., 2005; Maguire and Newton, 2010).

Employers of young people may also seek evidence of dependability and commitment, which might be measured through their school attendance rate or a reference from school or other agency (Fuller et al., 2005). Qualifications, however remain important and employers may set minimum qualification requirements. They may also require applicants to sit a series of aptitude tests, as well as attend an interview, particularly if recruiting to apprenticeships (Fuller et al. *ibid.*).

Employers may have particular concerns about recruiting long-term unemployed young people, although their considerations in recruitment may also slightly vary for this group. For example, Elam and Snape (2000), reporting an Active Labour Market Programme (ALMP), found an emphasis on potential, a good attitude to work and a willingness to train and learn the ropes, and ‘work readiness rather than job readiness’. Employers felt it was valuable for young people to combine the ALMP work with training and to gain qualifications in order to support their transitions to work, although it could be difficult to deliver a qualification within the duration of the ALMP.

### **The needs of lower-skilled unemployed young people**

Young people who are disadvantaged and/or NEET, often have an ingrained sense of failure as a result of either their earlier experiences of education, or problematic or chaotic personal circumstances (Vernon, 2006). While the group considered NEET is highly heterogeneous, the most vulnerable young people have a greater likelihood of unemployment at a young age. The group includes young people with disabilities, and young parents and carers (Maguire and Thompson, 2007). This suggests that the group is likely to require considerable support in order to make a transition into work or learning.

Long-term inactivity or unemployment can lead to a sense of listlessness and a lack of focus or direction. Working with someone to review progress may enable an individual to gain a better understanding of the progress they are making, which can help embed a sense of achievement (Newton et al., 2009).

The evaluation of the Activity Agreement Pilots, which aimed to re-engage and support young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), demonstrated that confidence was at the core of young people’s development and progression. The evaluation also showed that confidence did not result from focused confidence-development activities: instead it emanated from achievement of a range of activities and different types of accreditation or certification. Regular monitoring of progress including regular reviews with their advisers helped young people to understand their achievements and to develop increased confidence and improved self-esteem.

### 3.4 Work transitions of more highly skilled young people

Graduates have enjoyed a higher rate of employment than their peers (Bates et al., 2009). However, in recent years unemployment rates have been increasing for new graduates and evidence shows that those emerging from Higher Education (HE) are facing increasing competition (HESA, 2010). Three in five HE students expressed a concern that growing numbers of graduates would make it hard for them to get a graduate job (Johnson et al., 2009). A degree is no longer enough to secure a job – graduates need to have something extra.

A focus on the employability of graduates has arguably been assisted by the additional income received from the increase in tuition fees introduced in 2007. It is set to increase further with the plans set out in the policy document 'Higher Ambitions: The Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy' (2009) and be re-enforced by the recommendations of the Browne Review (2010). This requires all universities to state how they promote student employability. Furthermore, employability factors such as prospects for term-time employment, and the employment track records of alumni are becoming more important in student choices about higher education (HE).

#### **What do employers want from graduates?**

There is a history of employers bemoaning the quality of new graduates, with criticism centred on a lack of employability skills such as business awareness, self-management, ICT skills, and team-working skills. The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) found that although employers were generally more satisfied with the employability of graduates (than school or college leavers) 'significant problems still remain'. One in ten reported that graduates lacked basic literacy and numeracy skills, one-quarter expressed dissatisfaction with time management and problem-solving skills, and half were concerned about graduates' lack of business and customer awareness (CBI, 2010).

A key mechanism to develop employability and employability skills is practical experience, which if engaged in alongside HE study can raise the profile of a graduate when competing for jobs.

*'The value of experience gained through volunteering or work emerges strongly when employers are asked for their most important advice for a young person looking to find employment in a difficult labour market. Two thirds of employers – rising to nearly three quarters of the largest employers – believe practical experience is the most valuable step young people can take to improve their prospects.'*

**CBI, 2010**

## Student and graduate engagement with work

Many HE students work while studying: Johnson et al., (2009) found that around half of full-time students had undertaken paid work during term-time and the vast majority had worked during the summer vacation. This appeared to be driven by a need to top-up income or 'pay their way' rather than gain experience.

Moreover, soon after graduating most graduates gain paid work, although this may not be graduate-level work or in a permanent or career position. Generally, graduates recognise that they will need further work experience in order to progress in their careers, and for some, work placements or internships can lead to more permanent roles. Graduates value work experience as a means to demonstrate their commitment to an industry and their understanding of the work area (Pollard et al., 2010). Work experience also builds contact networks that can be essential for entry to particular careers (Ball et al., 2010).

The importance of work experience to graduates was acknowledged with the launch of the Graduate Talent Pool (GTP) in summer 2009<sup>7</sup>. This was essentially a brokering service, matching graduates to employers with placements or internships, in order to improve the long-term employability of recent UK graduates. Evaluation of the GTP (Mellors-Bourne, Day, 2011) reported that graduates found the internships (paid or unpaid) to be a positive experience that they would recommend to others, and felt they had gained substantially in terms of employability, skill development and self confidence. They had gained work experience, which they saw as 'the first step along the road to their career' and which they could evidence in future job applications. A substantial group, around one-third, went on to long-term employment with their internship employer, and others moved on to gain work with different employers.

## 3.5 Practical experience supports transitions

While the lower- and higher-skilled labour markets operate in different ways, and the challenges associated with high- and low-skilled young people making a transition from education to work are quite varied, there are some areas of commonality.

These surround the application of soft skills and the demonstration of positive attributes within a practical setting. However, the extent to which these two groups (low- and high-skilled) can be autonomous in seeking out opportunities is likely to vary considerably as well, and the most vulnerable are likely to require high levels of support to engage in practical, developmental activities.

In the following chapters we explore the transitions made by young people in the research sample, starting with their routes into volunteering and work.

<sup>7</sup> This is sponsored by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

# 4. Getting involved

## Key insights

- Young people had instrumental reasons to volunteer or take-up FJF work which surrounded developing generic and vocational skills, improving their CV, gaining qualifications and work experience.
- A strong driver to involvement was to have something to do to relieve the boredom of unemployment or inactivity.
- Volunteers also had altruistic reasons to get involved which surrounded giving something back and the satisfaction that arose from helping others.
- Further reasons to volunteer included the opportunity to experiment with something new, and to challenge stereotypes.

The report now turns to how the young people found out about volunteering and work, and how they initially became involved. It also reviews their reasons for getting involved and the relative weight they gave to different reasons.

## 4.1 Routes into volunteering and work


### 4.1.1 Getting involved in volunteering

Most of the volunteers had found their volunteering activity through referral by another organisation with which they were working as a client or volunteer. This included charities, Connexions, social services, community and volunteering centres, mental health charities, an NHS trust and the Prince's Trust. Young people had either been referred to a named contact, or given sufficient information to pursue contact independently.

**Paul** was a part-time volunteer, aged 22 and registered disabled. He was qualified to Level 3, having completed a vocational qualification at college. He was keen to volunteer in order to develop administrative skills which would support his transition into work. What had attracted him to volunteering had been the description of the activity by his support worker, who had then referred him to a volunteer mentor:

*'(They told me about) what you get out of it, and what skills you gain, and you meet loads of people and different things.'*

It was apparent that organisational networking was important to young people's entry; furthermore, the depth of information young people received about volunteering suggested the effectiveness of links established. Discussions with mentors and stakeholders in the volunteering organisations confirmed a variety of routes into volunteering, including referral, although the emphasis on this varied between organisations.



Friends and family were also a source of referral to volunteering. Some of the young people had asked people they knew who were volunteering and 'picked this person's brains' about the projects they were involved in. One of the mentors interviewed for the research noted that their project positively promoted volunteering through its activities since it encouraged the young volunteers to act as mentors to other young people in the setting:

*'We have a cycle of young people who (volunteer) and they tend to adopt a mentoring process with other younger people. There is a natural progression route of people attending our courses and services and actually becoming volunteers... to support others who were like them when they first came in.'*

#### **Mentor**, part-time volunteering

Much less frequently mentioned by the young people was attendance at events such as a volunteering fair or presentations in schools. However, a number of the voluntary organisations had conducted outreach activities and were working closely with schools, local colleges and universities to promote volunteering opportunities, so this experience may not have been particularly representative of the variety of routes in.


Some volunteers had found out about volunteering following research on the internet, either while looking for opportunities on a volunteering website, or for paid work on job-search websites. Stakeholders in advice organisations noted the benefits of the online brokerage of opportunities supported by v.

*'What I like is you can put your application online and then within a matter of days your young person's inundated with opportunities. So my young person's got eight cracking volunteering opportunities to think about and they're so diverse as well.'*

#### **Connexions adviser**

Mentors in the volunteering organisations reported that as youth volunteering programmes became more established and opportunities increased, they had benefitted greatly from 'word of mouth', as volunteers spread the word about their own positive experiences.

**Jenet** was 22 years old and a part-time volunteer. She was studying towards an undergraduate degree and was volunteering in two organisations which related to her studies. We met her through a third voluntary activity, which was not related to her course. She was interested in pursuing something different, and had heard about the opportunity through a friend who was involved.



Many of the volunteers went through an application procedure before starting, although not all were fully aware of what they had applied for. For example, some of the full-time volunteers had understood they were applying for volunteering, but had not understood the 'ins and outs' of what the volunteering would comprise. They understood it would be different from learning and closer to work. Once they had gained more information, they were attracted by the opportunity to volunteer to gain skills and find a focus to make a contribution, while undertaking some training (typically NVQ Level 2 or 3) at the same time. Interviews with the coordinators at the colleges helped to improve their knowledge and to assess their interest in order to find suitable voluntary placements.

Overall, it was difficult to gauge demand for volunteering since the organisations had different priorities and had been involved for differing periods. At the point of the research the vntalent year programme providers were planning for its second year of operation, so the first year might not be indicative of the demand for its offer. The organisations offering part-time volunteering opportunities had more experience and had seen demand increase over time. Some felt this was a result of the organisation's own increasing perception of young people as potential volunteers, and young people's perceptions of volunteering as something worthwhile that they would consider doing.

#### **4.1.2 Getting work through the Future Jobs Fund**

The route into FJF employment was more straightforward since it was an Active Labour Market Programme (ALMP) targeted at young people who had been unemployed for six months. Typically, Jobcentre Plus (JCP) advisers promoted the opportunities to young people as part of the regular meeting and encouraged them to apply for a position. Following application, they might be short-listed for interview and from this might gain employment.

It was apparent from the sample that most young people had been successful almost immediately in their applications, although feedback from stakeholders suggested this might not always be the case. While feedback about FJF was generally highly positive, there were some criticisms of the recruitment process. Among them were that some of the young people referred by JCP were not well prepared or did not know what they were applying for, or they might not have an interest in, or be appropriately skilled, for the job.

The organisations offering FJF positions had experienced highly varied levels of demand. For example, one had been unable to fill all the planned FJF jobs; whereas another reported high demand, and was successful in recruiting to all target jobs and had agreed to help another organisation meet its FJF targets.

It was apparent that few of the FJF employees had a detailed understanding of what their job would involve. However, this might be a result of how the jobs were brokered since JCP advisers outlined them to the young claimants, who then applied for the vacancies<sup>8</sup>. Consequently, interviews with the work organisation were the main source of information about the activities and support available. This did not affect enthusiasm to take up a job among young workers.

<sup>8</sup> It was also possible for employers to refer suitable candidates for jobs to JCP.

**Ruhina** was 23 and qualified to degree level. Her parents were putting pressure on her to find work. She had become quite pessimistic about her chances of getting a job since she had been signing on for six months. When Jobcentre Plus informed her about an FJF job, it appealed to her since she felt it would give her experience of working in an environment related to her prior studies.

*'I wasn't quite sure about what it was ... I was intrigued that I might be able to develop a project with families in the community.'*

Her Jobcentre Plus adviser gave her some feedback on interview techniques and she then attended an interview and a few days later found out she had been successful.

#### **4.1.3 Attitude and motivation underpinned recruitment decisions**

Selection for the full-time roles (work and volunteering) was more formal than for the part-time volunteering, often with some degree of initial sifting or screening and in most cases interviews (sometimes in two stages) conducted by staff in the organisations and departments that the young people would be working in. In interviews, staff would assess potential recruits' suitability and 'work readiness' against the experience, knowledge and particularly the attitude required for the job (as set out in the person specification in the case of FJF). However, the interview would also be used to explain more about the roles and what would be expected of the young people.

For full-time volunteering and work, attitude was the most important criterion as young people were not expected to have much work experience. Staff sought a willingness to learn, openness to new ways of doing things, ability to commit, and an understanding that the role may be challenging at times. Where young people demonstrated these attitudes, staff were confident the young person would be able to sustain the placement or work.

A concern raised by staff involved in full-time volunteering (and some of those offering FJF positions) was that some young people were not ready for the full-time opportunities which might affect retention. This surrounded work-readiness such as turning up at the agreed time. One mentor suggested that some form of pre-placement experience through part-time volunteering or a short-term work placement could help with their preparation. This was a particular concern since the full-time volunteering examined for this research was undertaken in further education environments:

*'A short programme would be a useful stepping stone... it can help the young people immensely around gaining the confidence to come into the college - it can be quite intimidating for young people who have failed previously in learning - we forget (that), when we work here every day.'*

**Mentor**, full-time volunteering

More generally for volunteers, an assessment of skills and learning needs would be conducted to ensure appropriate support was made available to young people.

*'A proper assessment at the outset is absolutely crucial to inform the placement and ensure what they do in their volunteering role is not above their ability or below it. We have volunteers who are below Level 2 but others who are graduates so we are looking at quite a wide range of skills as well as ages.'*

**Mentor**, full-time volunteering

The organisations offering part-time volunteering tended not to have formal selection or assessment processes. Instead, organisations tried to accommodate all those interested in becoming involved, to be as inclusive as possible. This approach had implications for support, in terms of getting young people ready for volunteering. For example, some organisations offered taster sessions and an informal discussion with the volunteer coordinator to learn more about what volunteering involves, and for the coordinator to gain an understanding of what the young person's interests and expectations were.

#### **4.1.4 Working with young people was less challenging than expected**

In general there had been no particular challenges or difficulties for the organisations consulted in having young volunteers or workers in their organisation, despite some initial concerns and reservations about how well young people would fit in. For example, some organisations reported staff were concerned that young volunteers or workers might not make sufficient commitment, would be unreliable and not turn up; and integration challenges between young and old were anticipated. However, their experiences had proved these concerns were unfounded and that, instead, having young people had energised their organisations.

*'Their enthusiasm is contagious, older volunteers have been really inspired and have embraced the idea of working with young people and passing on their skills.'*

**Mentor**, part-time volunteering

## **4.2 Reasons for getting involved**

### **4.2.1 Volunteers wanted skills but also had altruistic drivers**

Volunteers noted a range of reasons for getting involved in volunteering. Many spoke about the volunteering as a means for them to get into a future job, by developing generic and specific skills, and by having more to put on their CV. Full-time volunteers were also attracted by the opportunity to obtain a qualification alongside gaining experience through volunteering. For some this was the main reason rather than wanting to do volunteering per se, although it was also apparent that they had concerns over taking up full-time learning.

**Caitlin** was 23 and a young parent. She had a part-time temporary job but was interested in developing a career. Full-time volunteering offered a chance to gain relevant experience and gain a qualification.

*'It looks good on your CV, doesn't it, volunteering, and I'm trying to build that up because I've not got much on it from school... I wanted to go to college to get a qualification but I didn't want to sit in a classroom.'*

Many young people talked of altruistic reasons for volunteering, surrounding giving something back, and the satisfaction arising from helping others. Furthermore the views of those involved in full-time volunteering became influenced by the understanding that they were volunteering and that doing this was different from learning or training – and more rewarding.

**Natalie** was 23 and had volunteered prior to joining the vtalent year programme. She had been homeless in the past, but had gained support through a hostel. Subsequently, she started volunteering part-time for the hostel. She gained a clear sense of reward and self-esteem from volunteering.

*'The buzz, everyone's doing it for free, and they don't care that they're not getting paid, they just like being part of something, and being one to help.'*

Highlighting an issue that had affected young people personally was a very important reason to volunteer, in order to raise awareness and through this help others affected by it.

Other reasons young people got involved in their activities included:

- overcoming the boredom of being out of work (also common among the FJF group<sup>9</sup>)
- trying new things which were not work-oriented and an opportunity to experiment outside a work situation
- challenging stereotypes, for instance a part-time volunteer who was registered disabled wanted the chance to do something challenging.

**Adrian** was a part-time volunteer aged 23 who was registered disabled. He had been volunteering for around six years and saw it as an opportunity to prove himself to others who might not believe in his capabilities.

*'I think it was the fact that I was given a chance, you know I wasn't paid but the fact that someone has thought, you know, give him a chance, because so many people think that he had got a disability he can't do it.'*

<sup>9</sup> Evaluation of the Activity Agreements Pilots, which targeted young people who had been NEET for an extensive period, also showed that relief of the boredom of unemployment was a reason to participate

### 4.2.2 Young workers wanted skills but also to be busy

For the young people entering full-time work through FJF, the drivers to involvement were quite different. Under the Young Person's Guarantee (of which FJF was an element) all young claimants who had been long term unemployed would be offered a job or training in order that they gain experience and skills which might assist them to make a transition into more sustainable employment. Engagement in an element of the Young Person's Guarantee was a requirement if benefit payments were to be maintained.

Despite this element of mandating, the young employees' reasons to start work surrounded the opportunity to gain skills and experience. In addition, all were keen to have something to do to relieve the boredom of unemployment. Unlike many of the volunteers, few of the FJF employees had ambitions to pursue the type of work they were offered, at least initially.

*'I just saw it as money and a job'*

**Drew**, full-time worker

**Linda** was 22 and had been unemployed for six months. Her experience at senior school had been marred by bullying and she had gained few qualifications. She had subsequently progressed to college where she completed Level 1 vocational qualifications. She realised that to improve her chances of employment, she needed to develop skills and gain experience.

*'Most of it (the reason to do this FJF) really was to learn new skills. I'd looked at office jobs before but thought I can't go for them because I've got no experience whatsoever of working in an office, but these jobs are great because you don't need experience, you just need to be willing, be there to learn.'*

### 4.2.3 Most important drivers to involvement

A list of possible reasons to volunteer, some relevant to employment, was explored with respondents. Young people were encouraged to add detail to the categories and to add further reasons to make the list personal and specific to them. They then ranked the list of reasons to get involved in order of importance for them. The reasons they could select from included: the activity, learning new skills, developing CVs, 'giving back' to the community, keeping busy, helping others, making new friends, and making a difference. Whilst young people agreed with the reasons on the list, not all were felt to be drivers to involvement. Instead, some factors had gained importance as the young people progressed in volunteering or work.

Helping others was most important to the volunteers. This group also highlighted the development of new skills and keeping busy, as well as building CVs. In contrast, FJF workers focused on employability benefits of their work, such as gaining experience and skills and keeping busy. Helping other people was important for them too although was more limited in scope since it related to the work that they undertook which involved, for example, the signposting of advice sources to the users of an information and advice centre.

The reasons for getting involved are explored below in the order in which the volunteers' ranked them. Examples are given of the ways in which activities helped young people to achieve their aims. While not ranked, the full-time workers' perspective on each factor is also explored.

### A means of helping others

Helping others motivated a majority of volunteers and was demonstrated through the activities that they were doing. Young volunteers saw helping others as a 'good thing' to do. Frequently, they wanted to help others to avoid the challenges and mistakes they had made in their own lives.

Helping others was also important to the young workers, although it was an opportunity presented by their job, rather than a reason to get involved. This group, however, included helping themselves within this category through establishing new contacts with people who might share their interests. Their concept of this driver was therefore less altruistic than that of the volunteers.

**Thea** was 21 and a full-time volunteer. She had been a young carer but had moved to live independently around the age of 17. She gained few qualifications from school although she completed a Level 1 qualification at college. She had received little support while she was a carer and had become isolated. Through this experience she understood how a little personal contact could make a big difference. This drove her to want to help others.

*'If you can just make a tiny difference (by helping people) you are one step closer, a tiny bit better.'*

### A chance to learn new skills

Learning new skills (and refreshing old ones), such as social skills and administration skills, was important to many young people. The full-time employees were more specific than the volunteers about the skill areas they wished to develop, which included IT packages and public speaking. Full-time volunteers put the greatest emphasis on gaining qualifications for the new skills they were acquiring.

**Brett** was 23 and was qualified to undergraduate level in the creative sector. He had been in care as a child and now lived independently. He had done some volunteering, and had a long-term aim of setting up a company to offer creative activities for vulnerable young people. His FJF job was a means to acquire new skills and to make new contacts.

*'I'm learning new programmes, I'm learning new systems, and it opens doors for me. I've been speaking to so many different partners and so many different organisations, which can benefit me when I leave here.'*

### A way to make a difference

Making a difference to the environment and people was important to volunteers. They realised that seemingly small things could change a person's experience for the better. Its ranking was much lower among the full-time workers, and around half did not give this factor a ranking. Where they did, making a difference surrounded making a positive change to their personal situation.

*'So many young people have no one to talk to, so many young people feel alone, it is just trying to get through to some people, you can make someone's day just by asking after them, you can make a difference.'*

**Rachel**, full-time volunteer

### A means to keep busy

Keeping busy was important. Many of the volunteers, and all the FJF employees, had been unemployed either immediately prior to starting their activity or job, or in the past. Keeping busy was a strong motivator to avoid negative outcomes. For example, some interviewees discussed having had problems such as substance misuse, crime or falling in with the wrong crowd while they had been unemployed and saw volunteering or work as something to keep them away from this life. For this factor, there was little difference between the views of volunteers and workers.

**Megan** was 19 and a full-time worker. While at school she had gained qualifications to Level 2 and had worked in retail. She progressed to college although she withdrew before completing a qualification. After this, she left home and moved into an environment with a few other young unemployed people. While she was fine at first, the people she lived with were misusing substances and she soon became involved. Realising the potential long-term consequences of this behaviour, she decided to move back home. For Megan, it was important to be doing something since she was aware that doing nothing could lead to feeling isolated, and bad about herself. She was keen to keep busy in order to avoid another downward spiral.

### The activities on offer

Many volunteers felt the activity was an important reason for their involvement since it provided the mechanism through which they could help others, keep busy and/or learn new skills. Doing something enjoyable was a way to escape from other difficulties they had encountered in their lives, such as chronic, long-term health problems.

*'After all the horrible things I've been through, I'm not going to do something if I don't like it.'*

**Casey**, part-time volunteer

The extent to which the type of job (the activity) had been important to the involvement of the young workers depended on how much they knew about it before they got involved, and whether or not they had received a choice of FJF jobs to pursue. As we noted earlier, not all young people had received many details about the work they would be doing.

## Developing the CV

Volunteers noted that building up their CV was linked to gaining new skills and keeping busy. This enabled them to gain valuable vocational experience and demonstrable skills which they thought would assist with future employment. In some sectors, such as health and the environment, having experience may be a prerequisite for entry to work and/or higher-level learning. Through volunteering young people were able to gain practical insight and critical skills and experience to support their transition into the profession to which they aspired.

**Ruth** was 24 and was volunteering part-time while studying towards a masters degree. She was using her voluntary activities to contribute to a work placement for her studies. She was motivated to volunteer because she knew that in order to gain work in her sector, experience was critical. 'When I was looking up job opportunities, practically all of them said they wanted experience. So it was purely selfish reasons really, even though I do care about the environment, I do actually need to do this volunteering.'

The FJF employees did not rank this factor so highly. While they felt that having recent experience was a potential benefit, most tended to feel their CV was well developed. To some degree this reflected slightly more extensive work and learning histories than was the case among some of the volunteers.

## An opportunity to give back

The opportunity to give back was of particular importance to young volunteers who had received support themselves for health or personal/ social problems. In many instances, volunteers wanted to give back in order to help others avoid some of the problems they had experienced.

**Ben** was a full-time volunteer aged 20. He had been fostered at a young age. He fared quite well at school and progressed to college where he completed a Level 3 qualification. He had volunteered part-time for many years, and had been overseas to volunteer. He was keen to volunteer to support others because of the support he had himself received when young.

*'I was in foster care when I was young and so, for me, it was quite a massive thing to give back, give something to other people.'*

**Flis** was 19 and had been a high-flyer at school until she experienced severe mental health symptoms at 15 which meant she was unable to attend school or college for 18 months. She made significant efforts to re-integrate following this period of ill-health, including volunteering in the health sector. She wanted to give back to the medical community which had helped her when she was ill. She also wanted to help people in her situation and be there for them, by undertaking befriending activities and raising awareness more generally of the barriers associated with her condition.



### **Making new friends**

Making new friends was not an important reason for getting involved in either volunteering or work. However, it was viewed as a side-benefit particularly of volunteering. Young people had made friends with other young volunteers, the staff and adult volunteers who worked in the projects. Volunteering also provided significant opportunities for social mixing, bringing young people into contact with a different group of peers than they might normally mix with and adults who they would not have met otherwise and who might provide links to future opportunities. The young workers also identified that widening their social circle, as well as their networks, through their job was an unanticipated benefit of getting involved.

### **There were other reasons to volunteer too**

Further reasons for volunteering identified by young people were to gain confidence, to help a cause they were passionate about, to give a meaning to their life and to try something new. One young person volunteered as an expression of her individuality and appreciated the freedom to be herself while volunteering. This chimes with Adam's comments reported earlier (section 4.2.1).

*'In (voluntary organisation), they appreciate you for who you are, that you're different; they're more open-minded about your approach. You don't have to conform, you just can be yourself and everyone's got different qualities and they recognise that as well.'*

**Natalie**, full-time volunteer

# 5. Gains and benefits

## Key insights

- Volunteering and work exceeded young people's expectations of developing:
  - hard outcomes such as improved qualifications and CVs
  - soft skills such as communication and teamwork
  - personal attributes such as confidence and commitment.
- Young people reported few differences between volunteering and work in terms of acquiring skills and developing personal attributes — although volunteering provided additional benefits surrounding making a visible contribution to society.
- Volunteers could exert some control over their activities and so could focus their development to their goals. Taking control also helped them to develop their sense of empowerment.
- For volunteers particularly, being trusted and relied upon was essential to increasing their levels of confidence. Opportunities to develop their leadership skills led to increased capability and realisation of their potential.

This chapter explores young people's expectations with regard to skill and development opportunities, and the extent to which these were met during their volunteering experience. They were presented with a range of hard outcomes, soft skills and attributes and asked to rate the extent to which they hoped or expected to develop these through volunteering or work, and the extent to which they felt these had been achieved.

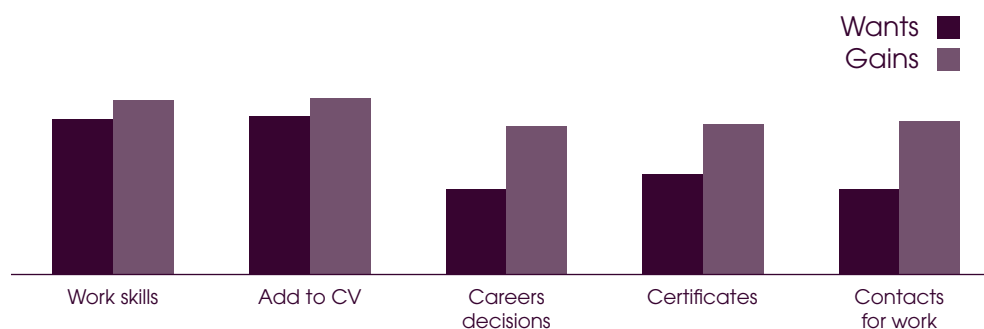
While it is important to avoid attributing too much significance to the ratings since they were gathered through a qualitative approach, the charts in the following sections provide an indication of the average importance of each outcome, and the relationship between wants and gains. At the outset, it should be noted that young people's expectations were exceeded on every measure.

Discussions with the manager-mentors and stakeholders also covered the gains and benefits resulting from volunteering and work, although they were focused more broadly to include the benefits for young volunteers/workers, the organisations they were working with, and the wider community.

## 5.1 Developing and achieving hard outcomes

Young people noted 'new work skills' and 'adding to CV' as outcomes they wanted and expected to gain from their experience, with only a handful stating that they were not hoping for outcomes (see Figure 5.1). There were some slight variations in the expectations of volunteers and workers, with workers having greater expectations of gaining new contacts while volunteers put greater emphasis on gaining qualifications.

**Figure 5.1: Hard outcomes**



Note: graph is for illustrative purposes only

Source: IES 2010

Some groups were more likely than others to seek 'hard' outcomes from volunteering and this reflected the nature of what they did and their reasons for choosing it. For example, those who had developed media campaigns and some of those working with children were more likely to be undertaking the activity in order to 'give something back' to the community, or raise awareness of an issue, while those involved in the conservation or environmental projects were often undertaking the placement in order to build and demonstrate core skills, and gain contacts to support entry into a competitive area of work.

### **New work skills were important, but gains were even greater than expected**

Almost all of the young people said that they had gained new work skills and, for the majority, this gain was greater than expected. Some had started their activity with clear ideas of the skills they hoped to develop or apply, for example those associated with a particular job. Others had developed skills that they felt would be useful at work, despite not expecting or needing to do so. The opportunity to gain these unexpected skills was often attributed to mentors, who alerted the young people to opportunities and encouraged them to take them up.

**Rachel**, who volunteered full-time, had gained many more work skills than she had anticipated. Alongside completing an NVQ Level 2, she had taken a number of short courses, including behaviour management and introduction to training skills. She had also had the opportunity to apply these newly gained skills in her placement. These were unexpected benefits that she felt would help with securing work in the future. Her mentor felt that the achievement and application of these work skills provided a sound footing for Rachel, and also demonstrated her ability to achieve something positive for herself – despite the barriers she faced. Following full-time volunteering, Rachel had progressed to study for a Level 3 qualification.

## Volunteering and work boosts young people's CVs

Adding to their CV was the second highest rated hard outcome for volunteers. Young workers rated this slightly less. Volunteering was felt to be a useful way to build up a CV because volunteers could exert greater control over their activities than people in paid work. Their activities therefore could be closely tailored to what they felt they needed in order to progress. A side-benefit of this was the sense of empowerment that arose from taking control. Some had also found that volunteering had made a good impression when they applied for work.

**Belinda** was aged 20 and was volunteering part-time. She had gained Level 3 qualifications following school and had progressed to university, although she had subsequently withdrawn because she had changed her mind about the degree subject. She had been claiming Jobseekers Allowance for around six months and became eligible for the Young Person's Guarantee. She applied for a Future Jobs Fund position. She had mentioned her volunteering 'as an afterthought'. However, the employer asked her questions about it during the job interview, and subsequently offered her the position. With hindsight, she feels that the volunteering had given her the edge over other candidates.

*'I didn't think about it before but I think volunteering can be a really good thing to have on your CV because it shows that you're interested in other stuff, you're not just interested in getting a job for the money.'*

Her volunteering mentor felt that, for Belinda's transition to work, it was not simply being able to talk about her activities. Much could be attributed to the support offered, and the confidence she had gained, through the experience of volunteering:

*'(She has) really grown in confidence... and went on to get a job afterwards... She was a little mouse when she arrived, and she went from that to speaking at our meetings and coming across like a total professional... she just needed a little push.'*

There was little to differentiate the self-reported gains in hard outcomes from volunteering when compared with work or vice versa. The young workers felt that their work roles contributed a great deal to the skill set they could mention on their CV. They also felt it gave a good impression to have recently been working. The young workers' rating of hard outcome gains was at much the same level as the volunteers. The additionality of volunteering, however surrounded the making of a contribution or a difference to society, and gaining a sense of worth from this, which work did not allow to the same degree or as directly.

## An insight into careers

Almost half of the young people said they did not expect to gain an insight into careers but for many their experience had offered this and their expectations had been exceeded. Full-time volunteers were particularly keen to gain this insight as were some among the young workers. For some the insight surrounded work experience which helped them make up their minds about pursuing a particular career. Others felt that the experience of work or volunteering had helped refine their choices, since it had made them aware of the various roles on offer.

**Austin** was 21 and volunteering full-time. He was qualified to Level 3 and while he had aspirations to progress to university he had left it too late to apply. As a result he had been unemployed for six months before starting to volunteer. Initially, he wanted to become a nursery assistant and was able to take up a role in a crèche. However, he found the job was not as he thought and approached his mentor to see if it was possible to change tack. His mentor was able to support this and Austin went on to become a learning mentor and took relevant qualifications. His mentor reported that Austin's key development surrounded his confidence. The mentor reported that it was often the case that young unemployed people were quite capable but they lacked confidence in their abilities.

'Over the year he developed a much more assertive personality, in the way he engaged with the learners. He started off being quite unsure, quite timid and really developed in those ways. He's now gone on to do a preparation course for teaching in the lifelong learning sector, and the latest update is he's doing really well.'

The degree to which work through Future Jobs Fund and part-time volunteering had delivered insight into careers varied, depending on whether the young workers had fixed ideas for their future. For example, those who were more highly skilled tended to have well-developed career aspirations and their FJF work (or part-time volunteering) might be a temporary step on the way to something else.

**Sarah** was 20 years old and had been unemployed for six months when she became eligible for Future Jobs Fund. She was pursuing a career in the creative sector and had a place at university to take her studies further. She took up her FJF post as a means to keep busy and earn money until the start of the academic year. Her employer offered her an extension of contract, which meant that following FJF she did not return to unemployment. Her employer would have further extended her contract had she wished. Sarah decided not to take this up since she could not commit to the full extension period due to her upcoming studies.

For those who did not feel that volunteering had helped with careers decisions, it was often because they had either decided upon a career and volunteering was a means to gain experience or they had decided to volunteer as a hobby. For instance, one young person needed to demonstrate practical experience in a work environment to enter work in their chosen field. Another was motivated to volunteer for the opportunity to do something different and would volunteer in the future for the same reason.

'I'd always want to have something completely different to my job... I'd always volunteer just to get a bit of variety'

**Jenet**, part-time volunteer

## Young people value certificates and qualifications

A majority of the volunteers expected to gain certificates from their volunteering, and in practice almost all had. Most were pleasantly surprised at the number and range of qualifications available, and the extent to which support workers encouraged them to develop and gain accreditation for their skills.

**Lizzie**, a part-time volunteer, had left school with two GCSEs and had worked in a succession of low-skilled jobs post-16. She decided to take a year out to weigh up her options and this was when she started volunteering. Alongside volunteering she decided to re-take her English and Maths GCSEs at a local college. While volunteering she took a number of courses to help build up her confidence, including fire marshalling and communication skills, and completed Level 1 qualifications. As a result of the step change in her confidence and her belief in her ability to learn she then completed a Level 3 qualification and progressed to a foundation degree, which she also completed. She reported that volunteering had been a great assistance to her when completing the course work for her degree and had helped her reach a decision that she wanted a career in the health and social care sector. To take this further, she had plans to undertake further study.

While some had not expected certificates, they were usually pleased to have the opportunity to 'prove' to prospective employers that they had undertaken particular tasks and attained a certain standard. This was particularly important for volunteers who felt they had performed poorly in GCSEs. In these cases, recent evidence of achievement would compensate and improve employment prospects. For a handful, certification had helped them to prove to themselves that they were capable of accomplishing a certain standard of work, and this helped them to improve their confidence about work.

Gaining qualifications was less important to the young workers, perhaps since many were qualified at or above Level 3. However, some (often those with lower qualification levels) had completed vocational qualifications as part of their job, and in some cases this had led to the offer of an apprenticeship to take their training further.

**Linda** was 21 years old. Her education had been disrupted and she had left school with a few low-grade GCSEs. She continued to college to complete qualifications at Level 2. She had spells where she had been employed in low-skilled work although she had spent six months unemployed. She became eligible for Future Jobs Fund and an administrative post was offered to her, and alongside this she completed a Level 2 NVQ and basic skills qualifications. She initially had aspirations to take an access course and progress to university. However, she had been offered an extension to her FJF contract with a Level 3 apprenticeship, which she felt was a really good option. Her mentor reported that Linda had developed a great deal as a result of FJF. In terms of soft skills she was more able to take the initiative and be more self-directive. Her communication skills had also increased and she was more confident.

## Young people developed their networks

Around half the volunteers said that they had wanted or expected to gain contacts for work through volunteering. Those who already had clear career ideas and were seeking experience of a particular work area were most likely to consider volunteering as a means of 'getting a foot in the door', particularly in competitive areas of work such as conservation.

The remaining volunteers had not considered that they might meet people who would be able to help them secure employment, and sometimes highlighted this as an unexpected benefit. Young people were surprised by the range of contacts they met and how their network developed. Even those who decided not to pursue a career related to their volunteering commented that they had been able to use their network of contacts to seek advice or routes into alternative careers. One part-time volunteer had gained some paid work through a contact he met while volunteering, which is an illustration of how widening networks through volunteering could support transitions.

The young workers were more focused in this regard and had more often anticipated gaining new contacts which might lead to work. However, while their expectations were exceeded, they did not appear to gain more in this regard than the volunteers had.

### 5.1.1 Wider views of hard outcomes

There was a general consensus among mentors and stakeholders that each form of opportunity (full- and part-time volunteering and FJF work) presented a chance to develop hard outcomes such as accreditation or certification of training and development, new work/vocational skills, experience to add to CVs and insight to help focus future goals.

It was also reported that young people developed networks and contacts as a result of their volunteering or work, which in some cases had led on to work or future learning plans (in the case of volunteers) or permanent positions (in the case of FJF employees).

In one setting where full-time volunteering and FJF positions were offered, a view was expressed that it was more likely that FJF positions would lead to work than would full-time volunteering. It was suggested that the reason for this might be that those involved in FJF were perceived as 'seeking work', whereas those who were volunteering full-time were viewed more as being 'in transition'.

*'A lot more of the FJF employees have been offered paid work as a result of their placement than have the volunteers – one of our reception workers came from FJF and one of the marketing team and one of our site services jobs – so they have gone into full-time paid employment. I don't know whether it is seen on a slightly different platform – maybe a little bit higher because they are paid. Maybe it is an attitude towards staff related to pay that people think they will move into work.'*

**Stakeholder**, full-time volunteering

More generally, there was a perception that when applying for work, being able to do so as an employee (or someone actively engaged in an activity that was recognisable to an employer), rather than as an unemployed person, made an individual more attractive to employers since the negative connotations of unemployment were not brought into play.



It should be noted that a hard outcome in terms of employment, full-time training or learning might not be appropriate or possible for all volunteers, depending on their vulnerabilities and/or disadvantages. The voluntary setting offered a supported environment whereas in employment there would be greater expectations of performance and less capacity to take account of or respond to young people's needs.

There was greatest variance in the hard outcomes, in the opportunity to gain accreditation between organisations and between work and volunteering. For example, young people were expected to take an NVQ as part of full-time volunteering. In contrast, taking a qualification was an option as part of FJF which not all young employees took up, and for those with a prior qualification above Level 2 it would be challenging to achieve appropriate National Qualification Framework (NQF) accreditation within the (typical) six-month job contract. More frequently, FJF employees might take up corporate or work skills training opportunities.

Among the part-time volunteering projects, the provision and take-up of accredited training depended on the young person's needs and the training opportunities available in the organisation. Across the part-time volunteer cluster, however, (NQF) accredited training was much less frequent although take-up of the vInspired awards (which encourage the documenting of time spent on, and skills gained through, voluntary activities) was far more common.

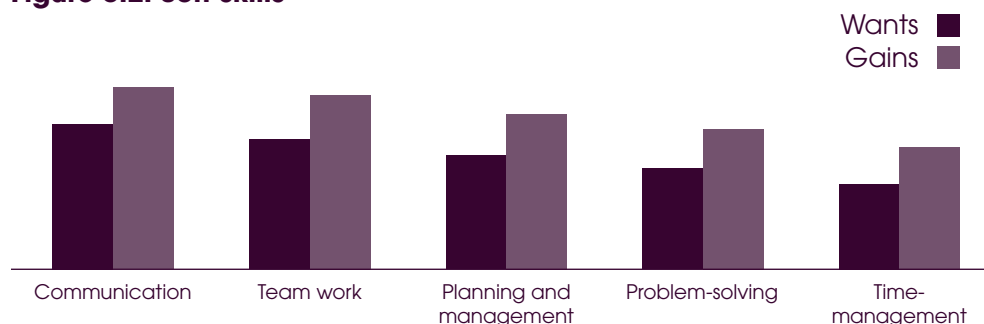
## 5.2 Interpersonal and soft skills development

Developing soft skills was not usually the main reason for becoming involved in volunteering or work, but the majority of young people felt that they had improved in this respect, or had been able to demonstrate that they already possessed certain soft skills. Communication skills and teamwork were those that young people were most keen to develop (see Figure 5.2). The greatest disparities between wants and gains could be seen in 'time management' and 'problem solving' as young people were often unaware that they would have the opportunity to work on these skills.

Gains in soft skills often appeared to reflect an increase in confidence, with many young people stating that they were more confident and better able to communicate with a range of different people and in a range of settings. In addition, even where they already felt they possessed these skills, the volunteers had often learned how to recognise and be explicit about which skills they had developed during a particular activity, and demonstrate these effectively on job application forms.

There were no great differences in the aspirations of volunteers and workers for soft skill development or in the degree to which work and voluntary opportunities offered the chance to develop soft skills.

**Figure 5.2: Soft skills**



Note: graph is for illustrative purposes only  
Source: IES 2010

## Communication and teamwork were the most wanted soft skills

Communication and teamwork were the soft skills which young people were most keen to improve, or in which they wished to demonstrate existing ability. These often went hand in hand, with many stating that the main benefit of teamwork was learning to communicate effectively in a group. Some young people had gained new techniques for sharing ideas and information while others had found communicating in groups an uncomfortable experience at first but had understood the value of challenging themselves in this regard.

**Amber** was aged 18 and a young carer. She had gained good GCSEs at school and progressed to college to complete a Level 2 qualification. She aspired to do more training but was unable to do so due to a lack of financial support. She was unemployed but regularly attending a support group for people in her own situation. She was keen to raise awareness of what it was like to be a young carer. She had developed a project and through this felt her confidence had grown. She had led a number of presentations to local stakeholders and had become an ambassador for the local young carers group.

*'I speak out more now. Before if there was a crowd, I would have thought oh no, I don't want to do that. But now I don't mind and that's visible for everyone to see.'*

Her mentor also felt that she had gained immensely from the project in terms of confidence, which would help her in the future.

*'In terms of confidence levels, it's going through the roof and I think that's probably helped her at college and things when she went on to further education.'*

Young people cited other activities that had helped them improve communication, including working with different types of people, chairing meetings, presenting project proposals and speaking to the media. Some reported that developing their communication skills had helped them in other aspects of their lives. For many this was a result of increased confidence, with some reporting that they had become 'better with people', 'less shy', or 'no longer nervous when meeting people'.

## Unexpected opportunities for planning and management and problem-solving

Many of the young people were surprised at the amount of responsibility they were encouraged to take on, both in terms of planning their own projects and activities and sorting out problems when they arose. It appeared there was greater opportunity and expectation for young people to do this as part of volunteering than as part of work.

Developing their own projects was often a big confidence boost although this also presented a steep learning curve as many were not used to taking the initiative or being trusted 'with stuff that matters'. A few young people had the opportunity to develop and manage their own projects from conception (developing, presenting and defending a proposal) to execution, including enthusing and recruiting other volunteers and problem-solving at every stage. Those who had this opportunity were often surprised about their capabilities.

While there were fewer opportunities to develop a project as part of work, FJF employment had led to the development of planning and management, and problem-solving skills. As young workers gained confidence, they would more readily make decisions to overcome problems they encountered.

## Personal and time-management improved

Another benefit that young people had not expected was the ability to manage their own time, and volunteers appeared keener to develop this skill than the workers. Often, this was a result of feeling committed to the project and knowing that they were relied upon to be there. Many young people claimed that they were already good at time management, but that volunteering and keeping a good attendance record would demonstrate this on their CV. For some, improving time management was an important goal.

*'I definitely wanted to get my time management sorted and I did. I started out quite low, my time keeping was awful— I can get up early and still manage to be late.'*

**Rachel**, full-time volunteer

### 5.2.1 Wider perspectives on the development of soft skills

Stakeholders and mentors prioritised the development of soft skills as part of volunteering and work. Among these skills were team-working; communication, including diplomacy; and customer service/handling or learning how to handle people and situations.

Also apparent in the different types of voluntary opportunity (but less prevalent in FJF due to the nature of the work) was learning about professional and personal boundaries. This was the case among volunteers who were in roles that involved mentoring or supporting other young people, although it was also apparent, in a slightly different way, among young people developing and disseminating a media campaign on an issue that concerned them.

Rather than either work or volunteering offering advanced or better opportunities than the other to develop soft skills, the types of soft skills developed and applied relied much more upon the role performed by young people. The roles available in FJF and through volunteering were highly varied, meaning that the organisations were frequently able to tailor roles and projects to suit young people's aspirations and development needs. However, it should be noted that there was a greater emphasis on tailoring roles to suit young people's capabilities and development needs in volunteering than there was in work.

## 5.3 Demonstrating positive personal attributes

Personal attributes were rated higher by young people than hard outcomes and soft skills on the 'wants' and 'gains' scales. This may be because they were often important reasons for volunteering, particularly making a contribution and increasing confidence, and volunteers formed a majority of the sample. Young workers rated demonstrating a commitment a little more highly than volunteers, and put less emphasis on showing enthusiasm.

**Figure 5.3: Positive attributes**



Note: graph is for illustrative purposes only  
Source: IES 2010

However, understanding of 'wanting' and 'gaining' personal attributes was also more open to interpretation than the skills areas. While some young people hoped to gain enthusiasm by doing an activity, for many the aim was to demonstrate through their activities personal attributes they felt they already had.

### **Confidence is the greatest gain of all**

Confidence was the area in which most young people claimed to have gained the most: all had gained confidence to the extent that they had hoped, and for the majority, their expectations were exceeded (see Figure 5.3). A variety of different activities led to increased confidence, but the majority cited an improvement in communication skills as the main reason. These activities varied by project but included working with a variety of people, learning to speak up in meetings, explaining activities to children and adults with learning difficulties or behavioural problems, and delivering presentations to the public or the media.

Shawn instigated a project to develop a website and set up a charity for people who shared his experience of mental illness. He felt he had gained confidence in his abilities and confidence in his own ideas. The project had also led to him making a number of presentations on the subject, which had also improved his confidence.

'I think first and foremost I gained confidence in my own ideas and my abilities. I'd done quite a bit before anyway, and if you could apply it, using that combination of skills and experiences that I've developed through volunteering, to be able to create my own project in an industry that I felt passionate about.'

For the mentor, the most important outcome for Shawn was the development of a career with the establishment of the charity, which would not have been possible without this step change in his confidence:

'The man that I met two, three, years ago now is completely different. He's chairing the trustee meetings... handing out the minutes from previous meetings, organising vision and strategy days, discussing expenditure, getting more and more awards and recognition and money for the project.'



For others as well, their confidence had been developed by work-specific tasks, such as becoming competent with new software, collecting and analysing data, or looking after children with special educational needs.

Being trusted and relied upon to carry out a task was also essential to improving confidence. This related to their ability to work within a team, across authority structures and to provide some element of leadership. As well as raising confidence and self-esteem this helped young people to realise and develop their potential and capabilities.

**Austin's** role as a full-time volunteer entailed acting as a learning mentor to young people engaged in the Entry to Employment programme at the college. He commented, 'volunteers are often the lackies' and said he appreciated the fact that the paid staff accepted him and treated him as an equal. This led to an increased sense of confidence as a result of volunteering.

Similarly, **Jenet**, a part-time volunteer, said that she had gained confidence through being responsible for designing and delivering a project, commenting that '*doing stuff like this is always a confidence boost, as people are confident in you*'.

More generally, young people might gain a greater sense of self-worth as a result of volunteering and a greater sense of self belief.

As a result of volunteering **Bethany** recognised herself as a nicer person than she had previously. This had resulted from the opportunities to make a difference but also the social relationships she had formed while volunteering:

*'The fact that we were doing something good and meeting all the different people, I managed to fit in with them and I was friendly. When I was at school it wasn't quite the same because people weren't always friendly towards you so I didn't feel very friendly back, but this time I felt friendly and happy so it was quite good.'*

Taking responsibility may be particularly important for young people who have been out of work for a while and doubt their abilities. One FJF employee said that being 'on the dole' had dented her confidence and that she had found it difficult to communicate with others because of the isolation she had experienced. However, this had changed dramatically during her six-month placement, during which she began to take more and more responsibility for her work.

## Young people make and demonstrate a contribution

Making a difference was an important reason for deciding to volunteer, and this was reflected in the young people's expectations and gains: all but three reported that this was important to them when they started the volunteering, and all felt that they had made a contribution through their voluntary activities. The knowledge that their volunteering was appreciated by support workers and colleagues was critical to this perception.

**Caitlin**, a full-time volunteer, described how she had taken the administrative burden from colleagues on a new programme working with young people who were not in employment, education or training (NEET), in order to free them up for other work. Her mentor reported that Caitlin had made a significant contribution which was highly appreciated by her staff colleagues.


*'There was an awful lot of pressure on that programme to succeed and the staff that worked on it were very experienced, good skilled members of staff, well used to working with a difficult client group. But without Caitlin's support, there would have been a lot less time working with the client group, and a lot more time doing administration. It was a massive boost for staff to have her around, and those young people, the knock-on effect is that they got more staff time because of that. Caitlin was able to support that team.'*

Other young people gained a sense of contribution through the feedback from individuals with whom the work was concerned, for instance the children attending a day centre or members of the public on a nature trail. Some also noted that the knowledge that they were making a difference, such as through raising awareness of an issue or helping to improve a community through working with young people to reduce crime, reinforced the nature of their contribution.

## Commitment and enthusiasm is demonstrated

Commitment and enthusiasm tended to go hand in hand: those who felt enthusiastic about a project (or work) also tended to be committed to it. Young people hoped volunteering or working would help them to demonstrate their commitment about, and enthusiasm for, their chosen path.

Some young people wanted to prove to others, or to themselves, that they were capable of making a commitment to a project and sustaining that commitment for a period of time. This was more common among full-time volunteers who had been unemployed and the young employees. For example, a full-time volunteer had questioned his own ability to hold down a job; through volunteering he had demonstrated to himself that he was capable of it. In another example, a young worker wanted to commit to something in order to improve her self-esteem and 'get out of the doldrums' (**Linda**, full-time worker).



**Marianne** was 24 and unemployed. Following school she had completed an apprenticeship but had been made redundant. She was volunteering part-time as a means to keep busy. Over time she had gained greater responsibilities, including helping out with reception duties and deputising for permanent paid staff. Her parents were very supportive of her volunteering and noted that she had changed and was now more relaxed and much happier

*'I just wanted to help out because being unemployed, it's hard to get into doing something. If you haven't got a job and you're looking for a job, that becomes your life. You're just looking for a job all the time, or you just go round to your friends' houses who are not employed either and just wasting your days away. If there is something you can do, you might as well be doing it.'*

Her activities had been greatly appreciated by the voluntary organisation and when a full-time job became available it was offered to Marianne. She was not sure if this would have been the case without her period of volunteering:

*'I was quiet, not very confident. I didn't really know how to speak to people. I actually forced myself to become a volunteer because I thought I'm not having this anymore ... I've really overcome those barriers now and I think by overcoming those barriers while I've been volunteering, they've noticed me and they've seen my potential.'*

Young people felt that developing and demonstrating commitment and/or enthusiasm often resulted from volunteering. Those who had been out of work for a while, or who felt demoralised about their academic achievements, had not felt enthusiastic about or committed to the project at first, but had begun to do so over time. This was attributed to the feeling that they were making a difference, either to work colleagues or a wider community, in a voluntary setting.

### **Demonstrating integrity was a low priority**

Integrity was not usually something that the volunteers had thought about before joining the volunteering project and their responses demonstrated different interpretations of the concept. The concept had more traction with the volunteers than with the young workers.

For some young people, integrity (and demonstrating it) was about doing something that felt right for themselves. Dermot, a full-time volunteer, mentioned that it was important for him to work with young people and to help them before they dropped out of education. He felt he could offer this support as he had been there and was 'an example of how it can go wrong'.

Others mentioned that, through volunteering, they had found career directions that enabled them to be true to themselves, while a couple also mentioned that they had found their vocation.

For another group it was about demonstrating trustworthiness and moral values, either to themselves, their friends and family, or prospective employers. However, none claimed it was an area they needed to work on, as they associated it with an intuitive sense of honesty and truthfulness which they felt they already possessed.

### 5.3.1 Wider perspectives on demonstrating positive attributes

Mentors and stakeholders agreed that confidence was the critical outcome from volunteering and from work and that it developed as a result of individuals understanding their own progress, and developing projects or aspects of their work. Accordingly, there was a consensus among staff that giving feedback was important to young people's development in this regard.

'I think their confidence really grows, they are not confident in the first place, you know, so at first the way they communicate is very informal but gradually you see them using more appropriate language and being able to deal with people at different levels. All those skills that you pick up in the workplace and it's a lot to do with the day-to-day support from staff.'

**Mentor**, full-time volunteering

These respondents linked other areas of personal development to confidence, noting that young people developed a sense of self-worth, self-esteem, and self-awareness, including of their capabilities, as a result of their volunteering and work activities.

Volunteering also offered some freedom (over work) in which to take risks or to do something that a young person would not attempt otherwise. Part-time volunteering, particularly, was felt to offer young people an opportunity to make a 'real-life contribution'.

The employability attributes that were explored with young people included commitment, time-keeping and enthusiasm. Demonstrating these attributes through work or volunteering appeared to have some traction with the manager-mentor and stakeholder samples. Among the attributes, demonstration of time-keeping and commitment gained the highest support among interviewees. Other attributes noted included being able to demonstrate a work ethos.

## 5.4 Gains and benefits to the organisations

Volunteering and FJF roles added capacity to organisations, which meant they were able to increase or add to what they did in some regard, a point which was recognised by young people and the adults in the research. In some cases this additional capacity meant that more activities or more people could be supported while in others, new projects or approaches might be tackled.

Beyond capacity there were other types of benefit arising from the activities of young people. In one setting, young volunteers were felt to have brought energy, new ideas and new perspectives to existing ways of working as a result of young volunteers enhancing an adult volunteering group. Referring to a project initiated by a young volunteer, a stakeholder reported:

‘One of the young volunteers said, “We’ll try it this way and if that doesn’t work we’ll just change direction really quickly and do something else,” and for a massive organisation like ours, we’re just not used to just changing direction quickly so that has actually been quite refreshing.’

**Stakeholder**, part-time volunteering

Young people also valued the opportunity to work with adults or with a social or peer group than they might normally encounter, for example young learners with learning disabilities or difficulties. They felt benefits had arisen from this increased social mixing.

**Jenet** felt there had been really positive personal benefits arising from the social mix she encountered while volunteering. She had worked with older adults on a range of activities and felt that she had learned a lot as a result. ‘The more people that you meet, the more people that you talk to and the more experience people share with you, then you build your character as a person because you’re learning all these different things rather than just doing the same thing with the same people all the time.’

For those involved in FJF, while initially the job might be pitched at an entry level, the work could become more tailored over time, which might enable particular projects to be tackled. However, the extent to which this might happen depended on a young person’s motivation and commitment. Where young people were motivated, it was apparent that FJF employers were as keen to ‘stretch young people’ as the voluntary organisations, through individualised projects and encouraging them to take on new tasks.

*‘Normally they all start off with quite simple admin roles, but then some of them have taken the initiative to develop different roles and different things that we’ve allowed them to and got a lot more experience, whereas others just turn up, do their job and go home...’*

**Mentor**, full-time work

There was some suggestion among staff that offering young people FJF employment meant the organisation had been able to do something to help young people who were struggling to get a toe-hold in the labour market. In the voluntary setting which supported people with disabilities, the activities on offer provided an opportunity to acquire and apply skills, and to feel a sense of making a contribution for a group whose employment opportunities might be limited, which led to a symbiotic support and assistance model.

## 5.5 Gains and benefits to the community

Concepts of 'community' varied considerably between the voluntary opportunities and between volunteering and work. For example, one part-time voluntary setting described its community as a 'community of interest' surrounding issues of disability. Other settings could claim national or regional communities as well as communities of interests. In general terms, young people understood a community to be the people living in the local area or accessing the project they were involved in.

The FJF employing organisation determined the community that young workers might influence: those working in third-sector organisations had greater scope for benefiting the local community directly compared with others. More frequently, the community was the department or setting in which the young person worked.

Similarly, since the full-time volunteering was restricted to roles within the colleges, young people understood the community to be the staff and students their work supported. There had been opportunities for community-based projects for some, which widened the influence sphere of the vtalent year groups.

*'Gains for the community was not an aim for this project – we're not allowed to place volunteers out in the community... But there are gains for the college community in that youth work volunteers helped to keep young people in college who might otherwise have dropped out. The vtalent year is a path to becoming useful members of society, so they will contribute to their own communities.'*

**Mentor**, full-time volunteering

In general terms, volunteering was perceived as having a greater impact on the community than work since young people were seen doing something positive such as helping people, conservation activities or regeneration work. There was a generally held view that giving profile to positive messages about young people could help overcome some of the negative stereotypes that have attached to them as a result of press coverage of the minority involved in, for example, anti-social or criminal activities.

Furthermore, benefits emerged for young people surrounding an increased understanding of the work of different groups in the community and how these could benefit a community. Being involved was highly rewarding on this basis.

*'I never really realised what these projects involved... how they helped to improve communities. When I got involved in the work I realised how beneficial it was... getting people involved in something and helping them improve a certain aspect of their area.'*

**Jenet**, part-time volunteer

However, doing this type of activity could also lead the general public to make assumptions that young people were involved in reparation activities for anti-social or criminal activity.

*'The community sees young people engaged in useful activities ... which helps to challenge perceptions of young people as layabouts, although our (activity) groups are often asked by passers-by what crimes they are paying back for...'*

**Stakeholder**, part-time volunteering

Young people were very aware that negative stereotypes were applied to them in the press and welcomed opportunities to try to change these stereotypes – for themselves and for the benefit of other young people. Working directly with older people could help change their perceptions about young people, which might be unduly influenced by negative press coverage.

*'There's more negative press than positive press about young people, all the people that (I volunteer with) are older... once they know that we're not all chavs with hoodies, then they're interested.'*

**Casey**, part-time volunteer

**Thea**, a full-time volunteer, felt that the message was getting out there that young people could and do make a positive contribution to society. She was aware that a lot of negative press coverage could do a disservice to young people but was also aware that their more positive activities might help to change these conceptions.

*'Yeah, definitely, because everyone is like "oh youth today" and that, but I was reading in the paper the other day that they're starting to change their views on young people like they're like, "the generation today is like what we were". I don't know if it is true, but like 80 years ago, "back in the day when everything was good and people were better", they're thinking we are doing the same.'*

Most of the organisations involved in the research had encouraged media coverage of the positive activities young people had engaged in or had encouraged young people to take to the stage to promote themselves and the organisations. This included both those with volunteers and those that had employed young people. Emphasis was placed on celebrating success – which helped to raise the profile of the organisations as well as shining a positive light on young people's achievements.

# 6. Supporting young people

## Key insights


- It was critical that young people received support to enable them to perform voluntary and work roles. All were provided with a manager or mentor who had oversight of their activities.
- Support needs included problem-solving, advice and direction, reviews of progress and achievement and identifying further development opportunities.
- Volunteering organisations offered young people an assessment of needs and aspirations at the outset. This underpinned the development of a relationship of trust with a mentor which meant personal support needs could also be met.
- Other people were important to the support of volunteers and workers. This included other members of staff at work. For volunteering the support network encompassed peers (other young volunteers), staff and adult volunteers.
- Financial support helped to sustain young people's engagement particularly in full-time volunteering. Where young people lived independently, financial support meant they had an equal opportunity to volunteer as those living with parents.

This part of the report explores the support young people received while volunteering or involved in FJF work, and considers the impact of support on the volunteering experience and the young people's development.

## 6.1 Supporting young people to volunteer and work

The support needs and requirements of young people varied considerably depending on their background and the roles and activities they were engaging in (whether jobs, placements or less formal/structured activities). In addition, the nature of support varied according to the ethos of the organisation with which young people volunteered or worked. In all organisations, young people received formal support from line managers or supervisors who had oversight of their roles. Furthermore, in many cases, young people received additional pastoral care from a specialist who either had responsibility for the relevant project or the group of volunteers/employees (depending on the setting). These specialists often had training or experience in youth work.

Other ways to support young people involved tailoring activities to the interests and capabilities of the young people (most frequently for volunteers), initial intensive work to prepare the volunteers/employees for their roles (often through some form of induction), and regular feedback to see their progress and understand their contribution to the organisation (all young people).



Support was often less structured for part-time volunteers than for full-time volunteers and workers. These latter groups had regular, planned meetings with their mentor to discuss and review their progress. Part-time volunteers more frequently could approach their mentor as and when they needed. While this support was more informal, young people were confident that they could access the support they needed.

Despite the differences in formality, the available support covered similar issues and purposes, which included:

- assessment of abilities, needs and interests (common in volunteering although not in work)
- problem solving
- information on what was available, practicalities and logistics
- helping young people choose appropriate activities to match their goals (more common with volunteers than workers)
- helping young people reflect on the progress they had made
- identifying strategic direction and suggesting development opportunities
- personal issues (again, more common among volunteers than workers).

Young people commented that in addition to the support received through their mentor, they received support from other people who worked in the setting, such as other volunteers and/or members of staff. This support was informal and centred around helping young people with the activities they were completing or checking whether they needed any help. Young people generally felt that they had received excellent support. They also felt confident about accessing support when they required it and were not disadvantaged by unstructured forms of support.

Some differences were apparent in the support offered to volunteers and workers. For young workers the support network tended to be limited to immediate colleagues and managers whereas the support network for volunteers was wider ranging encompassing other volunteers (young and adult) and staff. The support received by young workers focused less on tailoring activities and personal support and more on the work task at hand. The types of support made available at work included employment coaches and more traditional supervisory meetings.

It was apparent that the level of assessment at the outset of volunteering provided the underpinning to the ongoing support they received. This assessment activity helped to establish trust, identify young people's needs and interests and develop a shared understanding of the young person's goals. Subsequent support and development could continue to build on this and the relationship of trust that had been established meant that young people felt more able to share any personal challenges or difficulties they were experiencing. In this way the voluntary environments were highly supportive of vulnerable young people.

## Support is crucial to volunteering and work

The importance of good quality and comprehensive support had initially been underestimated by many of the young people. Before starting their activities, they did not anticipate they would need or benefit from support. This was particularly the case among highly qualified young people who were used to working independently.

However once they had started volunteering or work, young people had found that support was an essential element of the process since it had helped them to:

- make informed choices about the activities and opportunities (much more common among volunteers)
- deal with difficult personal/organisational issues (using support to address personal issues was more common among volunteers)
- identify skills gained (common to both groups)
- focus on areas for personal development (again, common to both groups although for workers personal development would be narrower and focused upon the needs of their job).

Through the support they had received, young people felt that they had progressed more than they would have done otherwise and taken on challenges and tasks that they would not have thought themselves capable of. This latter impact particularly affected the volunteers since they had greater opportunity to exert control over their activities.


**Adrian**, aged 23, was registered disabled and volunteered part-time for around 10 hours a week alongside attending college. He had gained good GCSEs and was on track to achieving four A Levels when there was a problem with his funding which meant he was unable to sit the exams. He had gone to take some vocational qualifications but had been unemployed for quite a period following this. Volunteering was a means of keeping busy, but it delivered other benefits to him. He felt that the support, which had included an element of challenge, was important to how his abilities were perceived and his sense of achievement.

*'I was given an opportunity and basically as I have met their expectations I have been challenged and stretched a bit more and it has increased my confidence and skills, everything.'*

Knowing that a support worker was available helped young people to overcome initial nervousness and lack of confidence about taking on new tasks and challenges. This was particularly important to those who had been unemployed or inactive for some time, which could dent their confidence in their abilities.

**Rachel**, who was one of the youngest full-time volunteers, and who had been employed before joining the vtalent year programme, noted the importance of her mentor in offering ongoing support and reassurance to herself and her colleagues.

*'It's very useful and very important (to have this support)... if we're panicking about something he'll help you, he's always there really.'*



Many of the young volunteers felt that they would not have completed their activities if support had not been available. This was less the case among young workers who, unless they left to take up an alternative position, were expected to complete their FJF contract. Other volunteers believed they would have continued with their activities but would have been less engaged with them and as a result would have got less out of the experience. It was apparent that volunteers had formed strong bonds with their mentors which underpinned their ongoing personal and skills development. For young workers, the bonds established helped them to perform their job role to the level expected by their managers.

**Ben**, a full-time volunteer, felt that his mentor had been central to the experience of volunteering. The mentor was someone who could be approached on an ad hoc basis to resolve any anxieties or issues as they emerged. Ben reported that they also met each week to reflect on the experience of volunteering and plan relevant actions for the coming week. It was apparent that the mentor was skilled at engaging with young people and was also interested in their experience, which encouraged them to approach him.


*'Without someone like (mentor) I'm not sure whether it would have been as good, because he's very important to it, he's an incredibly nice man, so nice that you want to open up and tell him stuff and you feel like you can just go to him with stuff. He's there to help you so it's really good.'*

Among the organisations offering volunteering, it was apparent that support was focused on helping young people to get the most out of their experience, which started from their initial assessments of needs and aspirations and later involved tailoring activities to individuals' interests and abilities and generating a sense of ownership. The volunteering mentors tended to develop a strong rapport with individual volunteers, which provided a platform for young people to develop greater independence and take control when they were ready.

### **Financial assistance is helpful but not essential to all**

The offer of financial assistance varied greatly between the voluntary settings and between volunteering and work. Higher levels of financial support were associated with the full-time volunteering and FJF. Young workers received the basic, national minimum wage for the duration of their work and some gained assistance with travel costs for a limited period. At the end of their job if they had not found sustainable employment then their Jobseekers Allowance claim would be re-instated. Full-time volunteers were able to claim a mix of means-tested allowances and expenses associated with travel and subsistence.

There was less likelihood of financial assistance for part-time volunteers although, if offered, it would cover travel expenses and subsistence costs. However, not all part-time volunteers had chosen to claim these. This group reported that volunteering meant giving, not simply their time but in other ways too. Gaining experience and qualifications was felt to be sufficient reward for this contribution.



Young volunteers held differing views of the importance of the financial support. It was essential to those who lived independently and volunteered full-time. Financial support therefore could be seen as an enabler for disadvantaged or vulnerable young people to be involved in volunteering, particularly full-time. Young people living with parents or a partner reported that the financial support enabled them to continue making a contribution to the household while completing the full-time opportunity, hence it was seen as useful but not essential.

**Kara** was 24 and a full-time volunteer. She was also the prime carer for one of her parents. When she joined the **valent** year programme she was in temporary work, unrelated to her career goal, and volunteering alongside this part-time. The programme was attractive since it would enable her to pursue her career goal in a structured way. However, the financial support was crucial to her involvement even though it did not equate to the salary she gained from her previous work.

*'It was a big part of it. If I had got the letter and they said you did it for free, because of my circumstances I wouldn't have been able to do it. It has been a struggle because I'm not getting any income, but to work alongside it as well as looking after my mum and doing my course, I would have no life. We share what we get, me and my mum, and we have lived on the breadline while I have been doing this because I have never not worked since I left school apart from this.'*

### **Working together to support young volunteers is important**

In some instances, young volunteers had additional support needs which required mentors to work closely with an external agency. This might involve a young person bringing a support worker with them and involving them in developing and tailoring the volunteering role. However, it was important that this external support facilitated rather than dictated the volunteering experience, and that the focus was on the young person and their needs and interests.

For example, in one setting staff provided support to help ensure the young volunteers worked within safety guidelines and boundaries while maintaining their enthusiasm. The volunteers had wanted to tackle a particularly challenging issue and interact with an audience in a way that could have safety implications; the organisation had to work to protect the young volunteer.

*'Volunteers can get carried away and want to do things that are unsafe but that doesn't mean we won't tackle difficult issues. Part of our role is to push back boundaries, open doors and to just sail a bit closer to the wind but at the same time making sure they are safe.'*

**Mentor**, part-time volunteering



### After-care support

It was apparent that the support from the voluntary organisations would continue beyond the period of a young person's volunteering activities. This differentiated volunteering from the Future Jobs Fund where continued support was either accessed through Jobcentre Plus advisers if young people returned to the unemployment register or their manager if their work contract was extended.

Voluntary organisations, particularly those engaging part-time volunteers, maintained some contact with young people and, for instance, alerted them to upcoming project opportunities and/or work opportunities as they became available. This support generated among young people a continued desire to be involved in the projects even if circumstances were such that they could not be at the current time.

*'The volunteering staff are quite good, and have sent me a few opportunities that have come their way.'*

**Casey**, part-time volunteer

The full-time volunteering organisations also maintained contact, although this was likely to surround tracking outcomes and destinations rather than providing aftercare support per se. Where contact had continued, young people still appreciated being able to report back on their progress and achievements.

# 7. Satisfaction and outcomes

## Key insights

- Young people reported high levels of satisfaction. Both volunteers and workers had demonstrated capability to themselves and the people around them, had developed skills and a profile which improved their CV. Volunteers' satisfaction extended further, with a sense of having done something worthwhile, which helped to raise their self esteem.
- Most full-time volunteers had signed up to higher level learning which frequently built upon their volunteering activities.
- Part-time volunteers were more often in learning at the outset and continued this. New learning registrations were common among the most vulnerable in this group.
- Full-time workers had either gained employment or returned to the unemployment register. Quite a few of those in work had their FJF contract extended and some of these registered as apprentices.
- Young people felt that volunteering (and to a lesser degree work) had increased the speed at which they progressed. They also felt that volunteering and work had ensured that they had not spiralled down into negative behaviours which may result from long periods of inactivity.

The final section of the report discusses young people's satisfaction with the volunteering and FJF jobs, and their destinations and aspirations once their volunteering project or FJF placement was completed.


## High levels of satisfaction were reported

Satisfaction with volunteering was extremely high. Young people reported that it had been a very worthwhile experience and some had enjoyed it so much that they had extended their activity or planned to continue volunteering even if they went on to gain employment.

*'Volunteering is good all the time, or you wouldn't do it. It's not about the money; it's about what you're giving and what you're getting back. So if you can have that and get paid for it, that would be really good... and if you get a job that you don't really like, then volunteer on the side as well, because at least then you've got something in your life that you like.'*

**Ruth**, part-time volunteer

Very few volunteers suggested ways to improve their experience. Where they did these suggestions related to the type of volunteering they had engaged in or being more assertive about the types of opportunity they would like. For example, those involved in full-time volunteering suggested it would be valuable to volunteer in organisations other than the colleges. They were keen to make a contribution to a wider community than had been possible through the college.



In another example, a high skilled volunteer was initially assigned to an opportunity that did not offer the development she would have liked. While she was pleased to complete it in order to assist the organisation, she also advised other young people in her position to let their mentor know, so that the placement might be tailored to their needs.

*'If a person wanted to volunteer that was a bit more qualified, I'd tell them at the beginning what you're interested in doing. I told (my mentor) about a month in, "I'm bored now, I don't want to do this any more," and she changed (my activities) and I started doing my own projects then.'*

**Jenet**, part-time volunteer

The experience of work had also proved highly satisfactory to the large majority of the young employees although their level of satisfaction varied a little according to whether they had been offered an extension to their contract or not. Understandably they gained some validation of their skill and contribution as a result of being asked to continue in their work. In contrast, concern was expressed that the positive benefits of being involved in work could diminish rapidly on a return to unemployment. If they did not have other plans (such as further study), young workers were concerned for their future.


Given the difficulties they had encountered in finding work, young workers had appreciated greatly the opportunities available through the FJF, which had helped them develop a work profile and skills, which would improve their CVs and give them a recent work history to refer to in applications and interviews.

### **Moving up and moving on – young people's situation six months on**

Young people were involved in follow-up interviews between six and seven months following the initial contact. The purpose of this was to track their activities and explore any impact of volunteering or work on their outcomes. It also enabled the research team to gather the young people's further reflections on benefits and drawbacks of the volunteering and work they had been involved in. Contact was established with a very large majority of the original sample and where it was not possible to re-contact young people, in most cases mentors were able to furnish the research team with monitoring information.

The follow up interviews revealed that as a result of volunteering, young people frequently continued in learning. For full-time volunteers, this represented new learning registrations since none of the young people had been studying prior to volunteering. This new learning covered a range of courses including:

- **vocational qualifications to Level 3** (and in one case Level 4) related to the subject of qualification completed while volunteering full-time; most young people in this group were training to become youth workers
- **post-16 teaching qualifications:** in a couple of examples young people had completed the first level teaching qualification during the vtalent year programme and had gone on to higher levels of learning
- **access course** to prepare for higher education.



While most of the full-time volunteers had gone on to further study this was not in all cases full-time study; rather some were studying part-time and hoping to complete voluntary assignments to support their vocational learning and/or working alongside this.


**Austin** was interested in pursuing teaching as a career. Alongside an NVQ Level 2, he completed an introductory post-16 teaching course while volunteering full-time. He had gone on to complete the intermediate level and planned to register for the final stage. He was seeking relevant work which would enable him to apply his learning and provide experience for his course.

**Dermot** completed the NVQ Level 2 while volunteering full-time. He was registered for the Level 3 qualification and was seeking a suitable voluntary placement to support completion of the qualification. This transition had not been straightforward since he suffered mental health symptoms at the end of full-time volunteering. He was claiming unemployment benefit and was a little concerned about whether Jobcentre Plus would support part-time study and volunteering activities.

A couple of the full-time volunteers had found work. For one, their job related to their voluntary activities and was a step towards a career. For the other, their work did not relate to a career goal. In this case, the young person had attempted to progress to Level 3 learning but had encountered a range of difficulties, some with financial support for independent living, which had led to her withdrawal from learning. In a final example, a young parent was no longer in learning and had not found work but still felt the full-time volunteering had been worthwhile.

**Caitlin**, a young parent, had completed the vtalent year programme and was unemployed and seeking work at the time of the follow-up interview. She was frustrated that she had not had much luck finding a job, but still felt that full-time volunteering had been beneficial since she had gained qualifications, and an insight into different types of work which she had not previously considered. She had also gained more confidence in handling situations and people.

*'I feel like I'm getting closer every time (I attend a job interview) whereas before I hated interviews, I panicked. Now I just go in and just talk to them and not so much folding my arms and holding back. Because at the beginning (of the vtalent year programme) that was my first feedback, don't be so scared. It helped me a lot.'*



**Part-time volunteers** most frequently were in learning at the point of the follow-up interviews, although many in this group had already been registered on courses, including university qualifications, when they commenced volunteering. Since many had been involved in volunteering for some time, they continued to fit learning and volunteering together, or to plan to do so.

**Belinda** had been involved in multiple activities throughout the period of the research. At the point of the follow-up interview, she was continuing to volunteer as well as study towards her distance-learning qualification. In the intervening period between the research interviews she had completed a work contract through FJF.


Although **Jenet** no longer volunteered with the organisation through which she was recruited for the research, she continued to volunteer in two other settings, in addition to completing her undergraduate studies.

In some instances, young people had registered for a new course and in others they had finished their current qualification. New course registrations were common among the more vulnerable or disadvantaged part-time volunteers and were suggestive of increased confidence and self-belief leading to increased aspiration and ambition.

**Lizzie** was completing a Level 4 vocational qualification and had been volunteering for around four years, to try out different activities and career ideas, at the outset of the research. Six months on, she had completed her qualification. She had also gained valuable insight into careers and decided to pursue work with a different target group from that of her volunteering activities. She was considering whether to progress to university.

By the follow-up interview, Flis had registered for an undergraduate degree and had just commenced her studies. This built on an access course she had completed around a year earlier. She was continuing to campaign about the experience of mental ill-health in order to raise awareness of the issue and, through this, help others.

Similar numbers of the part-time volunteers either started work or were unemployed. For some, ongoing health conditions and/or disabilities limited their opportunities, while others were seeking to enter competitive sectors and finding themselves in competition with more experienced, slightly older individuals. For others, volunteering had led to paid work, although not in all cases full-time work. In some instances this better suited health conditions and personal capacities.



**Amber** was working full-time in the hospitality sector, although she had decided this was not a career she wished to pursue. Instead, she planned to become a youth worker and has registered in a suitable voluntary placement to gain experience.

By the time of the follow-up interview, **Casey** was seeking work and had stopped volunteering for the time being. Her need for regular medical input continued and this limited to some extent her opportunities for work. Since her volunteering involved working outdoors, she had decided to restart once the weather improved. In the meantime she had found a way to share her experiences and help others, by blogging for a health support organisation.


**Marianne** completed an NVQ Level 2 while volunteering and subsequently had been offered a job with the voluntary organisation. She felt that volunteering had given her an opportunity to demonstrate her capabilities and commitment, and to build a reputation with the organisation which had led to the job offer.

The **full-time workers** had either gained employment or returned to the unemployment register. In a number of examples, work involved training and was with the FJF employer. However, it was common for young people to continue working on short-term contracts of six to eight months' duration, rather than being employed on a permanent basis.

**Drew** had been offered a Level 3 apprenticeship at the end of his FJF contract. While he had initially intended to pursue a different career, he had found his work interesting and rewarding and had changed his goal as a result.

Following FJF, **Jack** was offered a related post with the same employer. By the time of the second interview, his contract had been extended for a second time. Longer term he was considering returning to university to complete a masters degree and pursuing a career in the energy and utilities sector.

In some instances where young people were unemployed, they had a learning place lined up and consequently were 'treading water' until the start of their course. In other examples, young people had gained short-term work relevant to a career goal in the period between completing FJF and the research interview, although they were not working currently. Young workers in these circumstances appeared more able to make these transitions through their own volition.



**Sarah** had been offered an extension to her FJF contract by her employer. She had taken this up and enjoyed the work, although her long-term ambition lay within the creative sector. While a second extension of contract was offered to her, she chose not to take this up since she was due to start a course at university.

By the time of the follow-up research, **Tunde** was unemployed. She had left her FJF position mid-contract in order to take up a contract related to her preferred career goal. While this was good experience for her in terms of career development, the position was short-term. She was hopeful that the reference she had gained would assist her next transition.

Generally, young people felt that volunteering and, to a lesser degree, work had increased the speed at which they had developed and progressed – and produced a better quality of outcome which had led to greater personal satisfaction.


Some believed that they would have achieved a transition into work, training or learning in any case but that volunteering and work had led to a better quality of destination which they were more certain and confident about. It was apparent that volunteering had raised aspirations and provided an attractive means to gain qualifications and soft skills which would underpin future transitions. A number of young people said they would have ended up in a ‘rubbish job’ which they did not enjoy if they had not had the opportunity to volunteer.

*‘I think doing this volunteering, getting the qualification, I can aim higher instead of going towards the bottom doing cleaning, warehouse. I’m aiming higher, not so much, but I feel better because I’ve done it all before (low skilled work) and I didn’t like it, it’s not something I could do forever whereas administration I think I’d feel comfy doing that for a long time’ **Caitlin**, full-time volunteer*

**Austin**, who had volunteered full-time, said that he had applied at dockyard, before he had started volunteering, so might have been there doing manual work. ‘I stopped thinking about what I wanted to do. Once I was on the **vtalent** year, the youth work became what I wanted to do.’

If he had not volunteered full-time, **Ben** thought he would have joined the army since he had been offered a training place however he hadn’t been confident since it required a seven year commitment. Alternatively, he might have been doing coaching abroad in South Africa — he had been offered a place to do this but had turned it down because he wanted to stay in England.

Without the voluntary activity or without the FJF position, a sizeable number of those who had been unemployed felt the negative consequences of inactivity that they had previously encountered, such as crime or substance misuse, might have resurfaced. This group tended to report that if they had not volunteered they would have continued ‘hanging around’ doing nothing of value. Some noted the boredom and potential isolation that would have resulted from this.



A large majority of young volunteers had an interest in continuing to volunteer. It was apparent that volunteering had provided a focus in their lives which meant they were able to turn their backs on their old ways. The increased sense of confidence and self-worth which had resulted from volunteering meant that they were motivated to keep on the right track and to make progress. It was not clear that this would have happened if they had not volunteered.

Without volunteering **Dermot** thought 'I probably would have broke my suspended sentence and would probably be in jail because there's a lot of times where I've wanted to act on something and I've been like, "I can't throw everything away, I've got my baby now, I've got my step-kids", along with that and volunteering I'm not messing up no matter what. If I wasn't doing this, there's probably a few times where I would've chanced it, done something and it's not worth it'.

While some young workers expressed that similar benefits had emerged from their experience, they were also concerned about how long the positive benefits of their work would last beyond the end of their contract, particularly if they did not rapidly find another position.

## 8. Perceptions of volunteering and work

### Key insights

- Choice and opportunity to experiment were crucial elements of volunteering, which might not be available in work. Volunteering was felt to offer greater flexibility and choice than work.
- Volunteering and work helped young people to keep busy and to feel useful.
- Stakeholders and mentors noted that volunteering provided a sheltered, supported environment for young people to develop skills and personal attributes. In voluntary environments there was felt to be greater understanding of support needs among vulnerable young people and more capacity to provide for these.
- It was suggested that volunteering could provide a valuable stepping stone for the least work-ready young people since environments were more permissive and the expected time commitment would be less than in work.
- Longer term opportunities were felt to be of greater value to young unemployed or inactive people than short-term ones since there was a longer period over

This chapter considers the interviewees' responses to differences between volunteering and work. It was apparent that the setting in which respondents operated informed their responses to the differences.

For example, the differences between activities in FJF work and the placements undertaken for the **v**talent year programme did not appear so very great, although the groups supported in full-time volunteering tended to be more disadvantaged than those in the work sample. In the part-time sample, significant differences existed between the opportunities available and the need and supply of support since the young people ranged from highly skilled to those more vulnerable.

### Choice and flexibility

Young people tended to identify that volunteering offered greater flexibility and opportunity to exert choice over their activities while also making a positive contribution than work. This meant that some young volunteers had been able to develop their own projects, which might not have been possible in a job where the role is more defined, rather than being tailored for the person. Choice and opportunity to experiment were crucial elements of volunteering, which might not be available in work.

*'I think it's a chance to do something good but also something you're interested in, say if you haven't got the opportunity in the workplace to do it. You can try out things maybe also that you wouldn't normally try out.'*

**Marianne**, part-time volunteer

Volunteers who had experience of work, and workers with experience of volunteering, felt different benefits were derived from work and volunteering. While a work role might be more defined and offer more development of vocational skills, volunteering could develop soft skills and increase social networks.

**Bethany**, a part-time volunteer, had been unemployed for six months and became eligible for FJF. She took up a position and continued to volunteer since she saw benefits arising from both activities. Both had offered insight into her interests and capabilities. While she had enjoyed the nature of her office job, she had also enjoyed the fact that volunteering was more physical and involved travel. She hoped to find a job that might combine both these aspects.

*'Well, I did different work with both, but I think I got the same kind of confidence-building out of them both, kind of working with other people and seeing different experiences really. The (v project) was a bit more on the social side, where the job was a bit more on the work skills side. But I got a lot out of both of them, I think.'*

Stakeholders and mentors tended to agree that volunteering offered choice and tailoring of activities to young people's goals. Paid work was felt to be less flexible and to allow individuals less control over their day-to-day tasks. There was also the potential for a greater variety of tasks as a volunteer than there would be in paid work.

However, a view was also expressed that organisations could expect to rely more upon workers since they were expected to conform to job roles rather than pursue their own interests. In addition, there was a view that workers would demonstrate greater commitment because they were being paid.

### **A safe and supported experience**

A view expressed by a number of stakeholders and mentors was that volunteering provided a more sheltered, supported environment in which to develop skills and attributes, which might be more suitable for some young people. Since young people were volunteering, there was less expectation of work-readiness in terms of commitment and time-keeping, or of capability to perform particular tasks. Comparing the v talent year programme to apprenticeships, one stakeholder reported a key difference in expectation of task performance.

*'Apprentices feel like they are working and have to be working straightaway. v talent year is more like volunteering with work experience. The group feels part of a team, which apprentices don't; that team approach makes v talent year different.'*

**Stakeholder**, full-time volunteering

However, voluntary organisations also had expectations in this regard. Among all types of volunteering there was an expectation that young people would make a regular and agreed commitment to their activities – and in most cases were capable of doing this. Similarly, those mentoring young workers might be making significant inputs to bring their time-keeping and commitment up to an appropriate level. A work mentor gave an example of this type of input.

*'The big thing is just getting them into a routine. One young person phoned to say, "Oh, my little sister's ill so I'm going to stay home and my mum's going to work". And they don't realise, so when I said, "Why did your mum go to work and not you?", he said, "Because she would have got into trouble if she didn't". And I said, "Well but you didn't think you wouldn't?" "Oh I didn't see that!"'*

### **Mentor**, full-time work

In some of the voluntary settings, a point was made that employment was not an achievable goal for some vulnerable or disadvantaged young people but volunteering provided a means for them to be, and to feel, useful and make a contribution.

More generally, there was a preference for young people to be engaged and busy, for their own benefit as much as because of policy, or the benefit of the wider community, which either work or volunteering would offer. Young volunteers also saw these wellbeing benefits arising from their activities.

**Kendall** was 23 and a full-time volunteer. He had gained only a few, low-grade GCSEs while at school since he had to take a year out due to an injury. He was a young parent, living with a partner, and had undertaken a number of jobs in the construction sector, although had not been able to find himself an apprenticeship. As part of the **v**talent year programme he successfully completed Level 2 and Level 3 vocational qualifications. He had subsequently gone on to study at university.

*'I would recommend it definitely, because of what you give as well as what you receive from it, and I don't mean receive as in qualifications or things like that. I mean what you gain as in enjoyment, fulfilment, two things that you gain from volunteering which don't come on a certificate. Only people that have done it will understand. To a degree you become part of a group that not everyone can just pay to be part of, you have to put the effort in, you have to put the time in.'*

A view was expressed by some stakeholders that FJF was not suitable for all young people and particularly those who were least work-ready (which might equate to the extent of disengagement as a result of long-term unemployment). In these cases, some sort of bridging or pre-work provision was required in order to prepare young people for work. Some stakeholders suggested that volunteering might be ideal for this purpose since there was a greater emphasis on support and development.

### **Longer-term opportunities bring greater benefit**

Stakeholders and mentors expressed a view that longer-term positions – either work or volunteering – were of greater value in developing young people. The comparison they drew was with the typical two-week work experience placement which forms part of schooling, or shorter work trials for unemployed people.

The benefits of a longer-term position related to a return on investment model. In essence, where more time was available to induct and train young people into work activities, this would be rewarded by superior work performance. Over a longer period, skills and personal attributes would be developed and demonstrated and there was greater opportunity for young people to develop independent work skills which might appeal to a future employer (should work be their goal).



## **Volunteering can help young people achieve a range of goals**

Finally, it was suggested by stakeholders and mentors that there was a difference as a result of different routes into volunteering: specifically those who volunteer in order to gain experience to improve their application and likelihood of progression into HE or work, have a different agenda from those whose reasons are less concerned with progression. The former group might treat volunteering in a more mechanistic way, by ensuring their longer-term aims were being met. The latter group were thought to view volunteering more as a developmental process and one through which they give something back.

## **A spectrum of experience and outcomes**

The analysis suggested that a spectrum of outcomes exists in terms of the different experiences of volunteering and work, a view which is supported by the transitions made by young people, described in earlier chapters.

The FJF and to a lesser extent the vtalent year programme (and some part-time volunteering) had a greater focus on progression in the labour market (including training). The outcomes for young people, therefore, were more likely to be work or learning, and their gains might surround making new contacts and extending their networks in ways that brought them into contact with different social groups and developed their capacity to link to authority structures. While this group created capacity in organisations, their community impact might be much less than for other types of volunteer.

In contrast, and in general terms, part-time volunteering appeared to be focused less on labour market outcomes, particularly for the most vulnerable young people. While hard impacts among young people were observed, stakeholders prioritised the contribution individuals were able to make to the communities they worked in, as well as personal development. This group also gained in terms of their social networks although, more frequently, this was in respect of increasing their peer networks and widening their contact with more diverse social groups.


# 9. Conclusions and policy implications

The research provides a unique insight into volunteering and work through the Future Jobs Fund. It demonstrates how high quality, structured volunteering and work programmes offer critical development opportunities to young people. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and/or those who have recognised vulnerabilities, were particularly well supported in voluntary settings and were enabled to develop and demonstrate skills and personal attributes, and gain experience and a greater focus in their lives.

Volunteering could deliver enhanced benefits to young people, when compared to work. This enhancement included greater **flexibility** since activities were developed through a negotiation between the young person and the organisation and were not determined by an employers' particular task requirements; personalised and wide-ranging **support** (support at work was typically role focused) and the opportunity to make a **positive contribution** to society, which was a strong motivator for young people and also provided a sense of personal reward. Volunteering allowed young people to experiment, challenge stereotypes and develop leadership skills through devising and delivering their own projects.

Some key conclusions about the role for volunteering in supporting young people's transitions include:

- Structured full- and part-time volunteering programmes can make a significant contribution to supporting young people to make successful transitions, particularly into learning and further training. Volunteering can play a critical role in helping young people to identify realistic and sustainable progression routes, recognise their existing skills and strengths, take ownership and control of their activities, as well as enhancing their ability to make positive choices.
- With high levels of youth unemployment and the current scarcity of provision for young people who are unemployed, investment in structured volunteering and personal development programmes offers a valuable solution to fill the gap, providing young people with opportunities to:
  - gain practical experience
  - build and improve skills and confidence
  - enhance self-belief in their ability to move forward in learning and work, and;
  - develop aspiration, ambition and a sense of direction, to underpin positive transitions.
- Volunteering can also provide a safe and supportive environment suitable for some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged young people.


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- The commitment to raising the participation age (RPA) of young people in education and training to 18 by 2015 represents a key youth policy directive on the immediate horizon. Around 10 per cent of 16- to 18-year-olds have been categorised as NEET across the past 10 years<sup>10</sup>. Some young people in this category wish to pursue practical routes to develop their skills in non-formal educational or work settings. This study suggests that structured volunteering programmes could play an important role in diversifying the educational offer for 16–18 year olds as well as building on the policy commitment to develop a culture of community engagement and leadership. Structured volunteering can provide an attractive alternative to formal academic study, enabling young people who have become disengaged to join a programme tailored to meet their individual support and development needs, assisting them to build confidence, increase their skills and work towards new qualifications.
  - The findings show that volunteering helped young people to develop their social networks, enabling them to work with more diverse peer groups and increasing their ability to work within and across authority structures. Furthermore, it helped to overcome negative stereotypes held by adults about the role and contribution of young people in society. Through volunteering, some very vulnerable young people had gained opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities, which they had not had the opportunity to demonstrate elsewhere. This is suggestive of a central role for volunteering in policies designed to encourage active citizenship, social cohesion and well-being.
  - There is a need to ensure young people receive advice about volunteering and have equal opportunities to volunteer. The right conditions must be created for this to happen. Youth advisers must understand the value that volunteering delivers to young people, and refer them to appropriate opportunities within local communities. It is also critical that there is consistent advice on the conditions surrounding state benefit entitlements and volunteering. To encourage and embed youth volunteering, financial support may be needed particularly for those young people who live independently and/or live within disadvantaged communities where cultural and travel barriers may make volunteering more challenging.

As we enter the next decade, many young people are in a precarious economic position given the high levels of youth unemployment, and some commentators are noting the risks of a lost generation. Helping young people to stay connected to society and their communities and develop leadership and employability skills that will shape their future is one of the most urgent and critical tasks of the next decade. This research demonstrates that supportive, developmental volunteering opportunities and work placements can play a crucial role in building the personal resilience and capabilities that young people require in order to succeed in an uncertain world.

<sup>10</sup> Based on statistical first release data from the Department for Education  
<http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/STR/d000924/index.shtml>

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**v**, National Young Volunteers Service  
5th Floor Dean Bradley House  
52 Horseferry Road  
London  
SW1P 2AF  
[research@vinspired.com](mailto:research@vinspired.com)  
(020) 7960 7000

