



Motivations of Sport Volunteers in England

A review for Sport England

January 2016

Summary Report

This summary mirrors the main report, which contains far more detail with reference to the sources reviewed

Dr Geoff Nichols, University of Sheffield – co-ordinator / lead author

Dr Eddy Hogg, University of Kent – volunteering expert

Caroline Knight, Helen Mirfin-Boukouris, University of Sheffield and; **Ryan Storr**, Victoria University, Australia – in-depth reviewers

Cumali Uri, University of Sheffield – literature searching

I. Methods and structure

I.1 This report reviews over 130 academic papers and research reports, fifty nine of which were selected to be reviewed in depth. These include previous reports for Sport England and Sport Wales. Thirteen experts or organisations were consulted to gather relevant information.

I.2 The report starts with an overview of the organisations in which sports volunteering takes place. It then gives an overview of volunteering in England, covering:

- Defining volunteering in relation to leisure
- Numbers and trends in volunteering
- Overview of motivations
- Researching motivations
- Changes in volunteering
 - Towards episodic / micro volunteering – the relation to sports participation
 - A balance between altruism and self-interest
 - Younger volunteers
 - Older volunteers
- Summary of influences on volunteering

This helps understand volunteering in sport. It is the first time general understandings of volunteering have been combined with work specifically on sport.

I.3 The results of the review are presented in the following structure:

- *Descriptive statistics on volunteers*
- *Motivations of volunteers at club level*, where the majority of sports volunteering takes place
- *Volunteers at mega-events*, which shows how this differs from other forms of sports volunteering but may be related to it
- *Volunteers at regional events*, which is more closely related to other forms of sports volunteering
- *Coaches as volunteers*
- *Volunteers in education and youth organisations*, which often involve sport despite not having it as its main focus
- *Young people and students as sports volunteers*
- *Older people as sports volunteers*
- *Volunteers' effect on the experience of sports' participants and promoting motivation*
- *Explanations of volunteers moving between roles*, particularly over their lives as circumstances change and also in response to changes within clubs and sports

However, this structure is complicated by the sheer range of volunteer motivations. This range and how it can be understood is explored through an examination of the wider volunteering literature.

2. Insights from volunteering literature

2.1 General levels of volunteering by adults in England have been static over the last ten years, as has sports participation.

2.2 People think of volunteering, like leisure, as being characterised by free engagement. Within the organisation of volunteering and what motivates people to do it can be seen as:

- ‘unpaid work’ providing a service to others
- ‘serious leisure’ with long-term personal rewards
- ‘activism’ promoting a cause, such as a particular sport

While this helps understand motivations, these three categories overlap and different people may have different motivations within the same organisation or even the same roll. Indeed some roles may overlap these types, as the diagram below outlines (Billis, 1993).



Views of volunteering. Source: Billis, 1993

2.3 Motivations to volunteer are complex and varied – it is very hard to generalise between types of people and volunteer roles. A useful way of understanding it is provided by the *Pathways Through Participation* research which viewed people’s volunteering biographies as being the result of personal values and attitudes; circumstances; and the influence of past experience (Brodie et al, 2011). In this model, volunteering is influenced by:

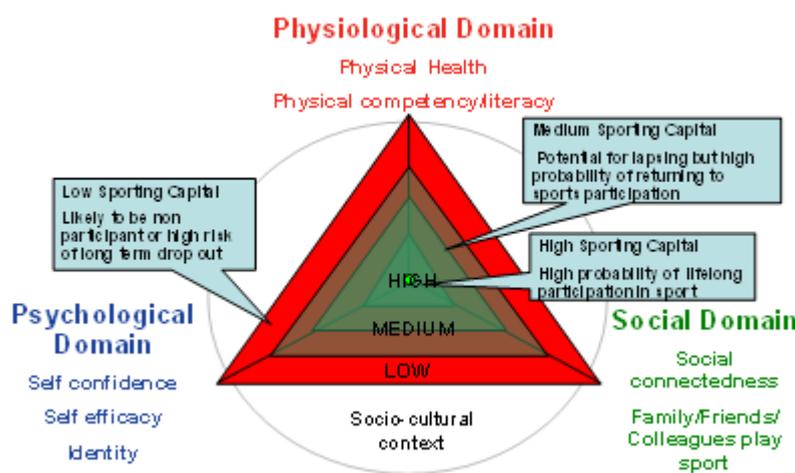
- *Individual factors* such as their personality, values, identity and resources
- *Relationships and social networks* with family, friends, neighbours and colleagues
- *Groups and organisations* of which they are a member and the way these are organised
- *The local environment and place* where they live, including public spaces, events, institutions and politics
- *Wider societal and global factors* such as national and international events, social movements and trends

All of these factors interrelate with one another in different ways at different times of life, combining to shape volunteer engagement. Volunteering is a process in which people react to different circumstances and opportunities in their lives, directed by fairly constant values

and influenced by their experiences. Thus a motivation, such as the social rewards of sports club membership, may grow in strength with length of membership.

Consider this example: a young person may have developed an interest in sport at school and through this and other, often parental, influences been socialized into an altruistic set of values. At university they might volunteer to support the sports team they participate in, but are also aware that this can be a marketable experience. The unanticipated rewards of sports committee membership and a basic coaching qualification then influence the decision to volunteer later in life when they have a young family. Volunteering in a sports club to support their child’s participation they experience a range of rewards from providing sports opportunities for others and feeling part of the club community. Identification with the club grows such as they continue to volunteer as a member of the club committee after their children have stopped participating in the club and left home. The sense of purpose and social rewards continue and in retirement they have more time to give to the club, and at this stage they may take on administrative and leadership roles.

2.4 We can understand these life histories of volunteering as ‘volunteering social capital’ which is developed as a personal and collective resource. Values and attitudes are a consequence of early socialisation, primarily in the family - parental volunteering is a strong predictor of young people volunteering. Thus a value such as altruism – which is often held up as characterising volunteering, will be strongly influenced by early socialisation. As people get older, volunteering is further facilitated by personal relationships and organisations.



Sporting social capital. Source: Rowe, 2012

This is paralleled by the concept of ‘sporting social capital’ (Rowe, 2012). This is comprised of physical health and competency; confidence and identity and; social connections. This explains sports participation as a developmental process, again one in which early socialisation is important in establishing a sporting commitment and literacy,

enabling participation to continue through changes in circumstances. This concept was developed to help StreetGames design their activities at an appropriate level for the participants.

2.5 There is an ongoing debate over the volunteer motivations of young people. Young people’s volunteering is often promoted as a route to employability, but this may understate young people’s idealism to support others or a cause.

2.6 As the English population ages, older people offer a massive potential volunteer resource. Volunteering can offer significant personal rewards for older people, especially those who are retired. Those who have volunteered prior to retirement are more likely to do so in retirement – reflecting the role of volunteering social capital in motivating people to volunteer.

2.7 There is a trend towards time-limited volunteering in discrete or repeated episodes, known as ‘episodic volunteering’. This might be termed ‘micro-volunteering’ and may be facilitated by electronic media allowing volunteers to give little bits of time for discrete tasks (such as many volunteers in parkruns). This trend reflects a fragmentation of leisure time, a



guarded approach to time commitment in the face of many competing potential uses of time and, expectations of personal flexibility. It mirrors a trend towards sports participation as an individual or small groups, with a flexible commitment (again – exemplified by parkruns). A consequence

of a larger proportion of episodic volunteers is a greater burden of co-ordination on the ‘core’ volunteers, or ‘stalwarts’ who contribute most time to the open ended roles. This is especially so in organisations led by volunteers, as sports clubs are.

3. Limitations of the Research into Volunteer Motivations

The methods we used were thorough and rigorous. Nonetheless there are some issues with the data that it was felt worth noting:

- Different surveys tend to ask different questions in different ways, so it is hard to compare results
- Little work has tracked changes in volunteering over time. Life-history methods have asked volunteers to look back over their experience
- How questions about volunteering and sports participation are asked affects the answer
- Responses tend to favour the socially acceptable
- Research has to try and understand a depth of motivation that is better shown by interviews
- Some research may be politically influenced or results withheld
- Research tends to under-represent ‘informal’ volunteering, a type of engagement which the participants may not recognise as being volunteering

More details of these limitations are in the main report.

4. Results

4.1 Roles

By far the largest number of volunteers is in sports clubs, followed by other levels of the National Governing Body structure. Young people's organisations, such as Scouts and Girlguiding, have a lot of volunteers but it is unrealistic to think of them as sports volunteers as their main purpose is the development of young people, sometimes using sport as a medium.

In sports clubs:

- The largest percentage of sports volunteers reported being involved as a coach or to help with administration
- Parents, sports lovers and students may take on coaching roles, while 'skilled' volunteers (those with particular skills learned from their paid work) may tend to take on administration, accounting and other specialist volunteer roles
- Older volunteers tend to take on administrative roles, and younger volunteers tend to be coaches, team captain or hold other 'operational' posts



Time spent volunteering is unevenly distributed:

- On average, volunteers contribute between two and three hours a week to their sport
- Some volunteers may contribute more than 11 hours per week and some may contribute an hour or less
- The amount of time volunteered may vary according to role, with coaches, secretaries and chairpersons contributing above the average number of hours and stewards, team captains and equipment managers contributing less than the average number of hours

4.2 Motivations of sports club volunteers

Motivations include, in order of the number of studies citing them:

- Being a parent of a child participating in a sports club and wanting to help friends and family
- Social benefits
- Giving something back to the community, be it the sports community or the local community
- Enthusiasm, or passion, for a sport
- Learning new skills
- Satisfaction

- Pride in helping a club do well
- To remain involved with the sport after retiring from playing
- To enhance a CV

The motivations reflect the range of roles and life circumstances of volunteers. They resonate with the reasons for volunteering in general across all sectors, but need to be understood in the context of the sports club.

De-motivations to volunteer included:

- The time required for the roles
- Training needs not being met
- Other volunteer needs not being met, such as financial needs and the need for information
- Lack of support for voluntary sports clubs from other organisations
- A perceived poor social environment
- An increase in the amount of work and more responsibility required by the roles
- Anti-social hours (e.g. training very early in the morning or late at night)
- Legislation increasing the formal responsibilities of coaches, team managers, event officials etc.
- Not enough volunteers to help out, placing pressure on those left
- Family commitments
- Training courses for coaches being too expensive



Most of these again resonate with de-motivators for volunteers in general although some will be particularly relevant to sports club volunteers.



Sport Wales provided demographic details, roles and motivations of a wide range of volunteers, whom they categorised into four types based on data from the Welsh Active Adults Survey, 2008/9. We develop these in the conclusions. The demographic characteristics of sports volunteers broadly matches sports participants and we can assume a strong link between participation and volunteering because of the volunteers' motives.

This is understood by the overlap of sporting and volunteering social capital.

4.3 Motivations of mega-event volunteers

Mega-events do not happen often and their prestige and media attention generates specific volunteer motivations. The importance of these volunteers is in how they may build on, or develop into, volunteering in other contexts.

- Mega-events offer a distinctive motivation of being part of the event as a ‘once-in-a-lifetime’ experience
- However, other motivations, such as a pride in one’s country and location are also important, especially at regional mega-events such as the Manchester Commonwealth Games
- For some the motivations for volunteering at a mega-event may be distinctive and non-transferable. However, for others there is an overlap with motives for volunteering before and after the event. Many event volunteers have previous volunteering experience.
- A mega-event can generate a strong feeling of wanting to continue to the sense of euphoria and camaraderie experienced at the event
- For some, this can be converted into long-term volunteering if the supporting structures are in place
- These structures can provide the opportunity for repeat episodic volunteering, allowing volunteering to suit individual life circumstances
- Such repeat volunteering can generate a different and deeper set of rewards and motivations. This illustrates rewards that can be obtained from this type of volunteering, irrespective of any connection to a mega-event



4.4 Motivations of regional event volunteers

- Unlike mega-events, regional events tend to be organised around a sport, a cause or a community
- Thus the motive of being part of a once in a lifetime experience is replaced by a connection to the event: a commitment to the sport, cause or community
- As love of the sport is a strong motive it is very likely that regional event volunteers are involved in sports volunteering in another capacity, but research has not examined this

4.5 Motivations of coaches

- Coaches’ motivations are strongly linked to an enthusiasm for the sport – it is a natural progression from participation so ‘giving back to the sport’ is a motivation

- Involvement of one's own children is a factor which varies by sport
- An increasing professionalism of coaching is blurring the boundary between volunteer and professional
- A changed discourse of coaching as 'professional', and increasing regulation, may present a de-motivator, as may management systems in some clubs
- The interaction between professionals and amateurs is a topic for further study

4.6 Motivations of volunteers in education and youth organisations

- Including volunteers in youth organisations as sports volunteers is contentious, as the main purpose of these organisations is the development of young people, rather than the development of sports participation
- This particular purpose of the organisation is a motivator for volunteers and binds them to the organisation
- However, understanding these volunteers may have implications for those in sports organisations
- Initial motivations are often associated with a child's participation although the parent may have had a previous involvement in the organisation
- However, many volunteers remain beyond their child's involvement for a considerable time
- Identification with the values of the organisation and the rewards of friendship in it become very significant for long-term motivators

4.7 Motivations of young people and students as sports volunteers

- It is difficult to disentangle motives for young people volunteering from the personal outcomes because most research has been concerned with programme evaluations
- Gaining marketable skills is a major motive
- However, young people also want to improve things, express positive values and improve the community
- The only study measuring change in motives in young sports volunteers shows that social relationships, expressing values, and personal development become more important with the experience of volunteering (but this is only one limited study)
- Volunteers in student sport are under-researched. The one study shows a mixture of personal and altruistic motives. This is an important group as University sport relies on these volunteers, who change every three years and sports participation in higher education could develop or stultify sporting and volunteering cultural capital



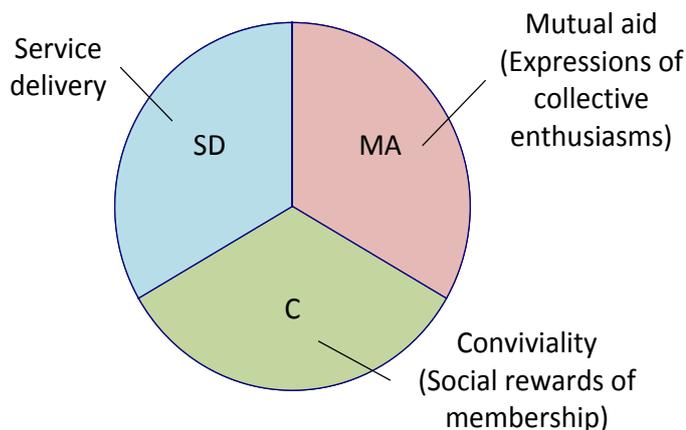
- A very important finding is that young people’s volunteering is strongly predicted by if their parents volunteer

4.8 Motivations of older volunteers

- Older volunteers are a very big potential contributor to sports volunteering
- The administrative roles in sports clubs are often undertaken by older volunteers
- Volunteering can offer older people particularly strong rewards of feeling ‘included’ in communities and society through making an active contribution, social rewards, applying skills, and a sense of worth and status
- Older volunteers can become involved through event volunteering, or remain involved in sports clubs, but there is limited research on other ways of introducing them into sports volunteering. Volunteering after retirement is predicted by volunteering before it – a continuity of interests and social capital

4.9 Volunteers’ effect on the sporting experience - promoting motivation

- Volunteers affect the experience of sports participants - this may be positive or negative.
- In sports clubs the effect of volunteers on sports participants is important, but not normally a strong enough factor to cause them to lapse from sport. Other factors – such as a change in circumstances - are far more important.
- In sports clubs the effect of volunteers on participants will depend on participant’s expectations of the club. This is related to understanding the balance between club aims of: providing a service; expressing a mutual enthusiasm; and providing conviviality. The club culture and purpose will be determined by established core volunteers.
- There is little direct evidence of how motivation of volunteers in clubs can be promoted, but there is evidence of the type of support they want.
- In events, volunteers are an important contributor to the experience of participants and spectators, but again, this is accepted as so obvious it has not been the subject of research.
- Event volunteers can be managed to promote their enthusiasm.



Balance of club aims. Source: Nichols, 2014

- The motivations of volunteer coaches may affect the experience of participants considerably, but we are not aware of direct evidence of this.

Key club members may view the club’s purpose as a particular balance between service delivery (providing a service to members); mutual aid (expressing a collective love of then sport) and conviviality (generating social rewards). New participants may have a different preference. Core members may resist a change, such as towards ‘service delivery’.

Any voluntary association is by definition an association of people who are in some respect similar. The definition of ‘someone like us’ is partly subjective. It will attract some new members, and be alien to others.

We are unaware of research which directly relates interventions to changes in the motivation of volunteers in clubs. A range of studies suggest that club volunteers want support to be of immediate practical use to them. Presumably, if it helps them do what they want it will be motivational!

5. Clustering volunteers and explaining sports volunteering

5.1 Clusters of sports volunteers

Given the complex interplay of motivations, personal circumstances and experience for any one volunteer, the clusters developed by Sport Wales are helpful. These are refined and episodic volunteers added.

- *Young sports enthusiasts:* Typically aged 14-25; motivations are a mixture of seeking experience and skills they think will give an advantage in the employment market and more altruistic ones of wanting to make a positive contribution to their sport. Involvement has to be fun, with friends, and often with limited commitment. Coaching qualifications may be a general CV enhancement, but for some, a role towards paid work and a career. In higher education the love of the sport is combined with awareness that university clubs require volunteers to function and continually need to replace them. Young volunteers are more likely to volunteer if their parents’ volunteered.
- *Participant volunteers:* Typically 20 years of age or older. Volunteering is an extension of involvement as a sports participant, alongside participation or as participation declines. An involvement with the organisation or with the sport as a participant and as a volunteer means people have developed motivations of: social



rewards, status and identity associated with their formal and informal place in the organisation, and a commitment to the organisation and the sport.

- *Parents of participants*: Typically aged 30-50; the impetus to volunteer is to help their child participate. Many of this group will leave the club or organisation when their children do, but some may develop motivations from social rewards, developing a particular role and an affiliation with the club, which are strong enough to maintain their involvement.
- *Established/core volunteers*: Older and typically developing from the participant volunteer with a deepening of motivations. As volunteers move into retirement from paid employment volunteering takes a more significant role in their lives, in terms of the rewards it provides. These volunteers will have a major influence on the direction of the organisation, its culture, and may contribute a high proportion of the total time volunteered in a club. These volunteers maintain the structure of organisations, taking the core roles which allow other groups to volunteer.
- *Episodic*: peripheral volunteers: Motives may include a mixture of those above, apart from those experienced by the core volunteers. Such volunteering could be facilitated by websites, such as provided by the Join In Trust or by the core volunteers in parkruns.

5.2 Explaining sports volunteering and sports participation

Volunteering and sports participation are linked and change during an individual’s life. Both can be understood as an interaction of values, circumstances and experience. The parallel development of sporting and volunteering social capital explains how values supporting both are a consequence of early socialisation, primarily in the family, but promoted by organisations which facilitate and encourage a progression of involvement in each. Sporting and volunteering social capital both have social, psychological and physiological (physical health and physical competency) dimensions. These interact and combine to create an individual’s level of sporting or volunteering capital.

From this perspective volunteering needs to be developed, at the level of the individual, the organisation and society.



6. Further research

A set of further research projects include:

- Research on sports volunteer motivations to build on theoretical understandings.
- A replication of the *Pathways Through Participation* research using the life-history method of interviews to understand how sports volunteering changes during people’s lives and its relation to sports participation. This could develop and apply the concepts of sporting and volunteering capital.

- How is the attitude of young people towards sports volunteering influenced by the volunteering of their parents? If it is, how can young people’s parents be influenced to support their children’s volunteering?
- How is the attitude of young people towards sports participation influenced by the participation of their parents? Again, how can parent’s attitudes be influenced?
- What are the motivations of student volunteers supporting clubs in higher education and what is the balance in these between ‘love of the sport’, social rewards and the promoted discourse of enhancing employability?
- How does student sport volunteering build on sporting and volunteering social capital, and how does it develop it?
- How can parents of participants be encouraged to volunteer and deepen their commitment, such that fewer are lost when their child ceases participation?
- How does the motivation of core volunteers in a sports club determine its ability to adapt to changed circumstances?
- In general – how can pathways through sports volunteering be facilitated?

This review provides an excellent starting point for further research.

7. References

- Billis, D. (1993) *Organizing Public and Voluntary Agencies*. London: Routledge.
- Rowe, N. (2012) *Sporting Capital — A new theory of sport participation determinants and its application to ‘Doorstep Sport’*. London: Sport England.
- Nichols, G. (2014) *Research questions bridging volunteering and leisure*. Conference: Volunteering as leisure: leisure as volunteering. 4-6-14, Sheffield University Management School.

Contact

Dr Geoff Nichols
 Sheffield University Management School
 g.nichols@sheffield.ac.uk

Dr Eddy Hogg
 Centre for Philanthropy, University of Kent
 e.hogg@kent.ac.uk

