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Retire into Action

a study of the benefits of volunteering
to older people

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FOREWORD

By Sarah Boyack, MSP for Edinburgh Central

I was delighted when RSVP secured its grant from the Community Fund to further develop the excellent work it had started in 2002, with health and education projects involving volunteers aged 50+. Volunteers of all ages make a huge contribution to communities across Scotland, and are often unrecognised for their efforts.

Demographic changes over the next decade present us with an ideal opportunity to start planning now to harness the energy of our 50+ population. RSVP are to be commended for this exercise in disseminating the lessons they have learned with funding from the Scottish Executive. CSV in Scotland is paving the way in its commitment to involving volunteers in public services. This report reflects the benefits to volunteers themselves as well as the communities where they provide services.

I know from my work with older volunteers in my own constituency the practical rewards experienced both by those who volunteer and those they help. Older volunteers can be proud of the real improvement in the quality of life that they help to bring about in their communities.

I hope that education, health and social work authorities all across Scotland are ready to recognise this great untapped resource of older people.

Sarah Boyack

INTRODUCTION and BACKGROUND

RSVSP - the Retired and Senior Volunteer Programme - is part of Community Service Volunteers (CSV) and provides quality volunteering opportunities for people aged 50+.

The programme is steadily expanding, fuelled by the trend towards redundancy and early retirement. Nearly 10,000 RSVP volunteers are now working in the UK to benefit their communities through volunteer-led educational, environmental, community care and health projects. About 700 of these volunteers are working on projects in Scotland.

In 1999 the Scottish Executive funded a series of demonstration projects linked to the "Active Communities" strategy. These projects were designed to examine ways of extending volunteering to various "hard to reach" groups in the community, including the 50+ age group. The initiative was successful (1) and RSVP subsequently received an Executive grant to develop a national programme to provide quality volunteering opportunities for older people. In 2002 they received funding from the

Community Fund for a project specifically designed to develop opportunities in health and education.



CONTEXT of this STUDY

The work done by volunteers is highly regarded and is known to benefit their communities. In financial terms, the value to the economy of Scotland alone has been estimated at £1 billion per year (2).

However, less is known about the effects on the volunteers themselves. Do they enjoy the experience of volunteering, or do they feel

exploited? Do they feel they have anything specific to contribute? Is it good for older people to be active outside the home - or should they be allowed to "rest in peace"? To answer such questions, in 2003, RSVP Scotland commissioned a research study specifically to evaluate the effects of volunteering on the volunteers themselves (3).

DETAILS of the STUDY

This was a small-scale study in which the researcher aimed to gather the views of a typical group of active volunteers engaged in the health and education development projects. Twenty people (13 women and seven men) were interviewed.

Those interviewed ranged in age from under 50 to 70+ and their length of involvement in volunteering from less than one year to over seven. Most devoted between three and nine hours per week to their volunteering activities although several spent over 15 hours. Many were involved in more than one type of activity.

The majority were working in the education projects. Some were classroom based and helped teachers, for example, by hearing reading or organising learning resources and teaching materials. Others assisted with breakfast and lunch clubs. One helped with netball practice, another ran poetry workshops. Male volunteers were particularly welcomed as role models in primary schools.

Health project volunteers were engaged in buddying schemes for people with mental health problems, recording newspapers for blind people, providing hospital transport and visiting the housebound.

THE BENEFITS of VOLUNTEERING

A striking finding of the research was the very positive views expressed by those interviewed. All enjoyed their volunteering and felt that they, themselves, had benefited in many ways. Some of those benefits are listed below, illustrated by quotes from individual volunteers (in italics).

A sense of purpose

Often people who have left work feel sidelined and "thrown on the scrap heap". Many said

that their volunteering restored a sense of purpose and made them feel useful and needed once more. Jessie is from South Lanarkshire. She said *"It gives me a sense of purpose, makes me feel I'm doing something socially useful."*

Sadly, several of those interviewed felt resentful that they had been forced to retire at a fixed age, or to take early retirement. They were glad that other members of the community valued the skills which their employers had so easily dispensed with. Volunteering was helping to restore their self respect.

Opportunities for self development

Several commented that initially they felt a bit shy and wondered if they would really have anything to offer. They felt that all they could do was just "help out". However they soon saw that their presence and experience was valued and so they found themselves being drawn in more and more and extending their activities.

Tom was one of those who discovered that they were developing their own skills and





An escape from relatively isolated domestic lives

Loneliness can be a problem in older age. For many volunteering provides both a purpose to life, and social contacts.

"It gets me out of the house, I never sit and wonder what I am going to do today". (Rhona, 75 this month, phones housebound people every day to talk to them and make sure they are OK).

Similarly those caring for partners often need a break from their duties and a chance to improve their own quality of life.

drawing on hidden talents. He volunteered to assist the tutor in a computer learning project and found that *"I've improved my own computer skills no end!"*

A sense of achievement

This was a very common observation, particularly from those working with children. They talked lyrically about the pleasure of seeing the children's smiling faces and the light of recognition and appreciation when they succeeded in explaining something to them.

"At first you're not sure how you come over to the kids, then the next time you go in and they look up and smile - and you know you're doing a good job". (Bobbie does art in a Primary school where the children recently helped her celebrate her 70th birthday).

Giving a structure to life

Retired people have a lot of time to fill. For many this can be a problem - all those empty hours! But volunteering provides activities with a purpose which give a meaning and structure to life.

"I meet people. I can keep a structure to my life and I can mix with all ages" explained Jill, who helps out in a primary school.

Social benefits

There is no doubt that volunteering fulfils a social function. Several of those interviewed welcomed the chance they now had of meeting new people and extending friendship circles.

Gordon, from Glasgow, pointed out that these opportunities are particularly important when you retire because you have then moved out of the world of work and lost the networks which that provided for you. As he put it *"It gives you a sense of belonging"*.

Health benefits

Several said they derived positive health benefits, feeling that volunteering kept them both physically active and mentally alert. They were well aware that retired people could sink into lethargy. Evelyn is a very active person who worked in television until retiring. She said

"I love working with young people, I think it keeps me young and healthy!"

Another volunteer claimed that getting back to her volunteering provided a useful spur to getting up and about again after a bout of 'flu.

The chance to make "a new beginning"

Retirement can be seen as either a negative or a positive experience. Some interviewees said that they felt they had been given an opportunity to rethink their lifestyle, get out of their old familiar ways and try something different.

"I enjoy RSVP - meeting people, new people, and the outings. It gives me a new outlook on life and I have made new friends". (Margaret's group knits "Trauma Teddies" for the emergency services, hospitals, women's refuges etc. to give to frightened children).



Confidence building

Retired people often complain that they feel they have been “flung on the scrap heap” by our youth-oriented society. For several, volunteering was a way of restoring their confidence by providing an arena where their contributions were both wanted and appreciated. *“I feel I’m out and in circulation again” said Frances, who helps with a school breakfast club.*

Furthermore, this gain in confidence is cumulative - once one type of volunteering has been tried, people seem to be keen to try others.

Volunteering differs from paid employment in many ways. Those interviewed found a couple of those differences particularly appealing:

Freedom of choice

Volunteers welcomed the fact that they, themselves, decided what activities they would

undertake. Joan contrasted this freedom favourably with her previous employment (in the Customer Services Department of a major furniture chain). *“I’m doing it because I want to - it’s the one thing I do for me”.*

Flexibility

The amount of time people spend volunteering is entirely their own choice. Some engaged in only one activity, others did several. But all welcomed the fact that the time spent was chosen by them to suit their own preferences and lifestyle. Christine put it very clearly:

“You’re in control of how much time you can offer. I like that flexibility and variety - I like being free to offer time”.

These people clearly derive pleasure and satisfaction from their volunteering. It is noteworthy that not one of those quoted chose to remain anonymous; all were delighted to be associated with the views they had expressed.

A TIME BOMB? OR AN OPPORTUNITY?

The changing composition of our population has been well publicised. Already there are more Britons over 60 than under 16. The number of people of pensionable age in Scotland is projected to rise from 956,000 in 2003 to 1,045,000 in 2013 - an increase of nine percent. Within ten years the 50+ age group may constitute one third of the population. (4).

This increasing elderly population is often portrayed as a burden, a group which increasingly needs to be “looked after”. But medical advances mean that this is not the case. Older people are healthier than ever before and most will stay active for many years.

They are also better educated, possessing an ever widening range of skills and knowledge. The days are gone when retirement meant a year or two in front of the fire. People retiring today can look forward to at least a further 20 years of life and retirees now seek meaningful and rewarding ways of using this time. They want to continue to use and develop their skills, to play a part in their communities and intend to remain active for years to come.

These new retirees are the “baby boomer” generation. They have very

different attitudes and expectations from previous generations and will expect life after retirement to be as fulfilling and enjoyable as it was before.

Far from being a burden, these people are a resource. A resource, furthermore, that is set to increase in size and value in years to come.

Policy and decision makers need to appreciate these changes, to wake up to the new order and to develop strategies that will enable the characteristics and strengths of this group to be used in ways that will satisfy both them and their communities.



SUMMARY

Older people enjoy volunteering. It is seen as a positive and constructive activity. It gives a sense of purpose and a shape to life. It offers opportunities for social interaction and self development. Doing something new and different gives a sense of achievement and develops confidence.

By providing opportunities for older people to benefit in this way, the RSVP programme is not only providing useful services to the community but also improving the quality of life of the volunteers. This means that they are more likely to remain healthy and may make fewer demands on health and social services.

CONCLUSION

Volunteering is one means whereby the so called "demographic time bomb" can be turned into an opportunity. Increasing numbers of older people will be seeking an active, and purposeful, role in society. By encouraging them to volunteer, we will not only be helping the communities they serve but also improving the quality of life of the volunteers and ensuring that, far from being a drain on society, they are a major contributor to it.

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- (4) Government Actuary's Department: Projected Population of Scotland (2002 based).

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