



## Well-being: the impact of volunteering

This factsheet reviews Big Lottery Fund's understanding of volunteering and its impact on well-being, from its own research and from research by others that helps to build our knowledge.

**'I feel very lucky that it was so easy for me to find volunteering opportunities... the routine is motivating, when you have a volunteer role you've got to get up, get out... because they rely on you. It keeps you healthy.'**<sup>1</sup>

### Volunteer, Well-being funded project

The 2007 [Helping Out](#) survey<sup>2</sup> by The Cabinet Office found that the most common activities undertaken by volunteers were those that supported health improvements, people with disabilities and sports or exercise, all of which are key aspects of promoting and assisting individual well-being. Three of the top four reasons that people volunteer can also be linked to their own sense of well-being:

- to improve things, help people
- cause was important to me
- to meet people, make friends

We define volunteering as, **"any freely undertaken activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or someone (individuals or groups) other than, or in addition to, a close relative"**. Volunteering is key to the successful delivery of many of the projects we fund at BIG – including our Well-being programme. Through the evaluation of this major programme we have measured significant improvements in volunteers' own well-being, quite apart from the significant well-being gains reported by the people they work with. More detail is available [here](#).

## Volunteering as a route to improving well-being

The depth and variety of improvement to volunteers' sense of well-being across England is explored in the [National Well-being Evaluation](#). The year 2 report describes the difference that volunteering has made for the volunteers, to their social well-being, a sense of feeling valued, more active lifestyles (particularly in retirement) and better mental health. One volunteer explained:

**'My confidence has increased massively – I now have a reason to get up in the morning.'**

Well-being gains for volunteers are a positive result of many of our other programmes, for example:

- Volunteers on projects funded by Developing Communities Scotland valued the development of their skills. One volunteer noted: **"It's not about the end product, it's also about the process, getting from not knowing what you could do to getting to the point of being able to do tasks. It has changed lives. It has changed my life."**<sup>3</sup> They also gained benefits including developing increased confidence in dealings with public bodies over services.
- And 70% of young people in Scotland who volunteered for the Young People's Fund Local Area Panels said that this work had 'made them feel part of their local community'<sup>4</sup>, a key measure of social well-being.

1. Volunteer, Penwith Pathways to Health and Well-being project, Cornwall.

2. The Cabinet Office, National Survey of Volunteering and Charitable Giving 2006-2007 (Helping Out)

3. Clark, Binley and Wethey (2009), 'Capacity Building through the Developing Communities Scotland programme – evaluation summary', p8.

4. Evaluation of Young People's Fund Year 3 Report by Ecogen and Wavehill Consulting, p. 89.

## Beyond BIG

There is a wealth of evidence underpinning the positive impacts we have observed through our programmes:

- People who volunteer have better mental and physical health than those who do not volunteer.<sup>5</sup>
- Those who volunteer have lower mortality rates, greater functional ability, and lower rates of depression in later life than those who don't.<sup>6</sup>
- Volunteering has a positive effect on social psychological factors, such as one's sense of purpose and autonomy, and increases a person's sense of happiness.<sup>7</sup>
- The health benefits of volunteering increase with age and the act of volunteering itself may help individuals to maintain their independence as they grow older and face increased health challenges.<sup>8</sup>
- There is a causal relationship between volunteering and wellbeing. Better health leads to continued volunteering, but volunteering itself also leads to improved physical and mental health.
- Several studies have found that when those with chronic or serious illness volunteer, they receive benefits beyond those that can be achieved through medical care.<sup>9</sup>
- An evaluation of independent charity 'v' found that volunteering opportunities helped young people to develop 'soft' skills linked to well-being, such as confidence and self-esteem, raised aspirations, enhanced social skills and networks, amongst others.<sup>10</sup>

## The wider policy context<sup>11</sup>

According to the Coalition Government the Big Society initiative is a call for greater social action: for people to give up their time, effort and money to support local causes as part of a new culture of voluntarism and philanthropy. Academic studies and our evaluations have demonstrated that volunteering can have a positive effect on a range of aspects of individual well-being, including: happiness, life satisfaction, self-esteem, sense of control over life, improved physical health and alleviating depression. As such, there is the potential for the Big Society to promote higher levels of well-being amongst individuals.

The prominence of the Big Society and Localism agendas also places renewed emphasis on the role of the voluntary and community sector in society and it is an opportune time for organisations to evaluate their role and consider how their activities might fit with the principles and priorities of the Big Society but also well-being.

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5. Brown, Neese, Vonokuir and Smith (2003), 'Providing social support may be more beneficial than receiving it: Results from a prospective study of mortality' *Psychological Science*, 14 (4): 320-327

6. 2004, ICM Research findings commissioned for CSV and Barclays

7. 2004, Economic and Social Research Council Democracy and Participation Research Programme

8. E.g. Van Willigen, (2000).

9. E.g. Arnstein et al., 2002. Individuals suffering from chronic pain experienced declines in their pain intensity and decreased levels of disability and depression when they began to serve as peer volunteers for others also suffering from chronic pain.

10. Ref WM Enterprise Consultants 2009

11. This section is adapted from CLES' Wellbeing Matters Policy Paper #4, commissioned by BIG as part of the Well-being Evaluation.

## Links for more information on volunteering and well-being

- The [Volunteering Impact Assessment Toolkit](#), commissioned by Volunteering England, helps organisations to assess the impact of volunteering, rather than simply the economic value. Organisations can assess the impact of their volunteer programme on all key stakeholders – the volunteers, the organisation, the beneficiaries and the broader community.
- ESRC Seminar report: [The Value of Volunteering](#)
- Big Lottery Fund's Volunteering Evidence Gathering Group Report is available on request.
- BIG's [National Well-being evaluation year 2 report](#)
- [Amazing Stories](#) about the impact of volunteering on health and well-being – hear from volunteer Community Health Champions on the Altogether Better portfolio, funded by BIG's well-being programme.