

# **The New Alchemy**

**How volunteering turns donations of time and talent into human gold**

**Part 1 – the changing political, technological, social and economic landscape for volunteering**

**August 2014**

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# Introduction – the rise and fall of the selfish volunteer

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Our last major report on volunteering in 2005 ended with the conclusion that, considering the seismic shifts in socio-demographic trends and the expectations of 21<sup>st</sup> century life, it was no longer enough to rely on the older lady helping out in the charity shop five days a week.

Volunteers of all ages needed greater flexibility, more meaningful experiences and more creative recruitment and management to help unleash their potential; it was, we argued, the age of the 'selfish volunteer'.

*"To help people be altruistic, we need to help them be selfish. Volunteering can help volunteers overcome loneliness, meet friends, gain skills, get jobs, or just feel good about themselves. The selfish volunteer is not a bad person, or part of an unwelcome trend – it is at the heart of the future of volunteering."*

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Volunteer (2005)

This insight still holds true in 2014 and to an extent, this revised report builds on the concept of unleashing the 'selfish volunteer'. Indeed, for a time, it was our working title. However, during the course of our research, it became clear that while many things have changed in volunteering, there is a great deal that stays constant. We could talk about the myriad of reasons that prompt people to give their time. We could talk about how volunteering is under-resourced compared to fundraising, its testosterone-charged big sibling. We could talk about the spectrum of quality of volunteers and management.

However, what has really struck us this time is that volunteering, at its core, remains transformational. It transforms both the giver and the receiver. It transforms the organisation's ability to deliver to beneficiaries cost-effectively. Put simply, volunteering can bring out the very best in people.

The process of volunteering is therefore a kind of alchemy. Volunteering takes up that most universal of human resources - time. It takes that universal resource, so often squandered, and uses it to transform people's lives. It takes a universal base asset and turns it into the human gold of changed lives.

It is all too easy for researchers like us to stay distant from our work, to be 'dispassionate' about our subject matter. In the case of volunteering, we have been sucked into the universality, the power and the passion when volunteering works at its best; when donations of time and talent are turned into the equivalent of human

gold.

The last page of this report describes how this is the first part of seven. This first bite-size chunk (admittedly quite a large mouthful at over 25 pages) looks at the changes in the external climate, covering several issues.

Section one of this report looks at the changes in the **political climate** for volunteering. In particular, it examines the impact of austerity, of the 'Big Society' and of the excitement and hubris generated by the Olympics.

The next section looks at the impact of rapid changes in **technology**, particularly the impact of the internet and smartphones and the potential for micro-volunteering.

Section three looks at **social** changes, including ageing, changing family structures, changing leisure patterns and the rise in cultural diversity.

The **economic** impact is outlined in section four, including how spending power is increasingly going to be in the hands of older people.

The **final section** expands a bit on the importance of two specific issues, **new retirees** and the **growth in choice**, and how both of these will impact on volunteering.

Where there is a quote in italics without a source or a reference, it will be from the 20 or so interviews we carried out for the report. We have kept them anonymous to emphasise the collective wisdom of our interviewee input, rather than single out the individual contributions.

# Political impacts on volunteering

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## Recessionary economics and the age of austerity

Since the 2008 crash, the public and individual purses have been extremely tight. Banks were bailed out, economies shrank and unemployment and under-employment grew. For individuals, the obvious priorities have remained securing and retaining employment, meeting rent or mortgage payments and getting food on the table. While charity donations and volunteering have stayed surprisingly stable (as the next part<sup>1</sup> of this report will show), the all-too-understandable concern within the third sector has been how to capture public generosity during a downturn. To volunteer your time for a charitable cause, you must first have it available to give and financial insecurity has left this in short supply.

The austerity policies of the coalition government, a response to the later years of the crisis, are meanwhile having even more complex structural implications for volunteering, which may take several more years to be fully understood. At the broadest level, public spending cuts during a time of economic hardship have created increasing demand for services. Charities have stepped into the gap left by the state and are working to offset the impact of cuts in housing, welfare and other key public sectors. There has also been a significant expansion of specific volunteered services such as food banks in direct response to welfare changes.<sup>2</sup>

The picture is therefore mixed. On the one hand, the demand for volunteers is higher than ever at the very time individuals have their work cut out looking after their own families. On the other, austerity may or may not be boosting volunteer levels regardless (seen in the 2012-13 Community Life survey, discussed further in part 2) as people step in to save local services, ranging from libraries<sup>3</sup> to search and rescue services<sup>4</sup>. This apparent increase has been hailed by coalition ministers as a sign that their Big Society agenda is working<sup>5</sup> (though a dip in the most recent Community Life survey makes that argument more difficult). However, critics have

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<sup>1</sup> See the endpiece of the report for details on the different parts of this report

<sup>2</sup> Curtis, Andrew (2013) 'Volunteering for Stronger Communities Research Project Year one Report: Summary and Key Findings' Institute for Volunteering Research. <http://www.ivr.org.uk/images/stories/VSC%20Research%20Project%20Summary%20Final.pdf>. Viewed April 22, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Hope, Christopher (4 January, 2014) 'Is The Big Society Finally Here? Big Surge in Volunteers Helping Out at Libraries' The Telegraph. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/10549932/Is-the-Big-Society-finally-here-Big-surge-in-volunteers-helping-out-at-libraries.html>. Viewed April 22, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Hardcastle, Jim & Derounian, James (20 October 2011) 'Search and Rescue Volunteers Lost in Budget Cuts'. Guardian Professional. <http://www.theguardian.com/voluntary-sector-network/community-action-blog/2011/oct/20/search-rescue-volunteers-budget-cuts>. Viewed April 22, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Hope, Christopher, 'Is The Big Society Finally Here?'

pointed out that in some cases, volunteers may be taking the places of paid staff. For example, the 44% increase in library volunteers in 2013 was accompanied by a 7% drop in paid staff.<sup>6</sup> Such moves have unknown consequences for the quality of services and for local employment, as well as for the long-term direction for the delivery of key communal goods.

Recent work by the Institute of Volunteering Research has also suggested that the coalition government's welfare reform may be leading to an increase in demand for volunteer placement services in a different way, as the unemployed are increasingly told to undertake volunteer work to retain their benefits.<sup>7</sup> This demand comes at a time when volunteer centres have lost, on average, 12% of their local authority funding. The Institute's initial report paints a picture of voluntary services facing increased demand alongside decreasing resources. While the true impact of austerity on volunteering may still be unclear, many within the sector report significant concerns, particularly in light of the toll taken on the infrastructure for developing UK volunteering:

*"I think the cuts have been a bad thing because there just isn't the infrastructure there to support volunteering anymore ... less than 10 years ago this country was hailed internationally as having one of the best programmes on developing volunteering infrastructure in the world and now it's about as far from that position as it could possibly be."*<sup>8</sup>

## **From bloated government to 'Big Society'?**

When the coalition government took over from Labour in 2010, we heard much about the advent of the 'Big Society', imagined as a much more integrated yet informal, spontaneous and bottom-up flourishing of the voluntary and community sectors. Alleviating the social impacts of public spending cuts, we would see investment and support that emphasised grassroots civil society and creativity over the more structured support model that had developed during thirteen years of Labour government. We would be exchanging a well-funded but arguably unsustainable third sector policy for a lower-cost, more user-driven model that emphasised local ingenuity and the true spirit of voluntarism. So far, so sensible.

The rhetoric of the 'Big Society' has had substantial influence on the national conversation about volunteering, though opinions vary more regarding tangible impact. Encouraging and increasing volunteering was a central tenant of the Big Society agenda set out by the coalition in summer 2010<sup>9</sup> and its flagship initiative

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Curtis, Andrew (2013) 'Volunteering for Stronger Communities Research Project Year One Report.'

<sup>8</sup> We interviewed 20 volunteering experts for this report and we quote them throughout it. Their insights underpin much of what we say and it's unfair to name and praise by attributing quotes. The list of interviewees will be available in the final report.

<sup>9</sup> The Cabinet Office (2010). 'Building the Big Society'

has been the creation of the National Citizen Service, a residential citizenship programme, with an element of volunteering, open to all 16 and 17 year olds in England.<sup>10</sup> The programme has expanded quickly, from an initial pilot of 8,500 young people in 2011 to 26,000 in 2012, with an anticipated total of 90,000 this year.<sup>11</sup> More broadly, the government also committed to training 5,000 Community Organisers to 'identify local leaders and bring people together to act on what matters in their communities'.<sup>12</sup>

Such government-led initiatives are not new, but they add to the roster of schemes we noted in our first report, such as the Millennium Volunteers, the Citizenship Survey (which preceded the current Community Life programme), the ChangeUp volunteering hub that are now no more. Back in 2005, Dr Justin Davis Smith of the Institute of Volunteering Research (and now part of NCVO along with Volunteering England) felt that volunteering had made its mark on the agenda, regardless of future government changes, suggesting:

*"Whoever is in power in the future, volunteering will be high on the political agenda for two reasons: 1) As part of the public sector reforms (i.e. public sector can't deliver on its own) and 2) Due to increasing recognition that volunteering is good for society and good for the community cohesiveness."*

Sadly, his optimism now seems misplaced. So while new initiatives have not been in short supply, the big picture for volunteering infrastructure has tended to look much bleaker. An example of this is when Volunteering England merged with NCVO in 2012 after the Cabinet Office halved their strategic partner grants, which led to large income drops and staff losses on both sides. Some of the most common criticisms of the Big Society rhetoric have been its perceived failure to deliver concrete results rather than just be rhetoric. Others have argued that it has worked primarily as a diversion to austerity measures; the necessity of charities and volunteers stepping into the gap left by a receding state re-packaged as a liberating opportunity for local innovation and more sustainable models of service delivery.

### **Volunteering for better for worse in a time of austerity**

Opinions within the volunteering sector remain mixed, with strong concerns about the reduced funding environment mingled with the recognition that there are some benefits to being forced into more innovative approaches. There is undoubtedly a hard edge to this as charities have been forced to survive with less. Lots of

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<sup>10</sup> The Conservative Party (2014) 'Big Society' [http://www.conservatives.com/Policy/Where\\_we\\_stand/Big\\_Society.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/Policy/Where_we_stand/Big_Society.aspx). Viewed March 26, 2014. National Citizen Service <http://www.ncsyes.co.uk/>

<sup>11</sup> Natcen Social Research (2013) 'Evaluation of National Citizen Service: findings from the Evaluation of 2012 Summer and Autumn NCS Programme.

[http://natcen.ac.uk/media/205475/ncs\\_evaluation\\_report\\_2012\\_combined.pdf](http://natcen.ac.uk/media/205475/ncs_evaluation_report_2012_combined.pdf). Viewed March 26, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> The Conservative Party (2014) 'Big Society'

organisations have seen a growing reliance on volunteers. In some instances, this is because they kind of embrace Big Society, but in lots more instances it's because of the cuts agenda. The latter has meant they've had to find alternative ways of delivering services with less money than they had in the past.

In this way, the economic crisis and the political responses to it have had impacts that are difficult to unravel and which combine both harmful and productive impacts. It has certainly changed the way many organisations have had to think about their funding mix, their service delivery and the whole range of resources at their disposal, sometimes for the better and sometimes purely out of funding desperation.

In some cases meanwhile, it is possible to overstate the impact since, as Rob Jackson notes, paid and unpaid work are often not in zero-sum opposition but coexist, while the majority of voluntary sector organisations have never had paid staff and remained reliant on volunteers throughout. The biggest impacts have therefore been around the kind of strategic thinking and future-proofing that organisations have needed to undertake, as well as the broader questions raised about how the public, private and third sectors will intersect in the delivery of public services and shared goods in the future.

### **Austerity may be the root of volunteering innovation**

A number of interviewees emphasised that the silver lining to the drying up of statutory funding in recent years has been more initiative at sector, organisational and individual level; the sense that we have all needed to roll up our sleeves and come up with more creative solutions.

*"I think that when there is less money around... actually what it can do is bring out the creative and innovative aspects of society. Rather than just that these services close, people come together and make them happen in their own way and I think that's been a marked change which the recession has had a direct impact on."*

*"Because there's less central government funding out there people are being forced to innovate."*

*"One of the impacts is that 5 years, 10 years ago, we would have always said the state would deliver for us and it was a public service - a lovely example is libraries, libraries were a public service that local authorities delivered and now a vast number of libraries are volunteer-led and are not public service... that's a really big shift and I think that shift is only going to grow."*

At a broader level, the key concerns that sector commentators have raised during the research conducted for both editions of this report have related to the same key areas and are systemic, rather than related to specific governments:

- Government initiatives are often not structured in a considered and sustainable manner
- Such schemes can be great in awareness-raising and generating demand for volunteering, but are less helpful when it comes to developing the infrastructure necessary for the supply side, e.g. investment in effective volunteer management to create appropriate and engaging opportunities
- New, headline-grabbing programmes such as the National Citizenship Service are prioritised, rather than building on what is already working and is sector-led (which would be more cost-effective and more sustainable)

So whether we have Big Society or Big Government, volunteering continues to have a strongly political dimension and the outcomes of this often fall down in a similar way. Few would argue for less sector-led innovation and creativity or a command-and-control government relationship with third sector development. However, it also seems clear that a strong funding environment and stable political support for volunteering infrastructure, such as Volunteer Centres and effective volunteer management, are invaluable in ensuring the national commitment to volunteering we've so long paid lip-service to goes beyond the sound bite.

## The hubris of the Olympics

While it may seem strange to fixate on a single, albeit global, event as a turning point for volunteering, the 2012 London Olympics has loomed large in discussions of UK volunteering in recent years. So what did it really mean? Did it herald the joyous new world of volunteering spirit, commitment and infrastructure it appeared to that warm summer, or was it just hot air?

The Olympics certainly got many people excited about volunteering. 240,000 people applied for the 70,000 Games Maker volunteer positions and the profile of volunteering was boosted considerably.<sup>13</sup> Surveys of Games Makers taken immediately after the Olympics showed that the overwhelming majority were satisfied with their volunteering experience. Nearly half indicated they expected to volunteer more in the future than they had before the Games.<sup>14</sup> However, the

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<sup>13</sup> Loughborough University (2013) 'Report 5: Post-games Evaluation Meta-Emulation of the Impacts and Legacy of London 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games.

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/224181/1188-B\\_Meta\\_Evaluation.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/224181/1188-B_Meta_Evaluation.pdf). Viewed March 25, 2014.

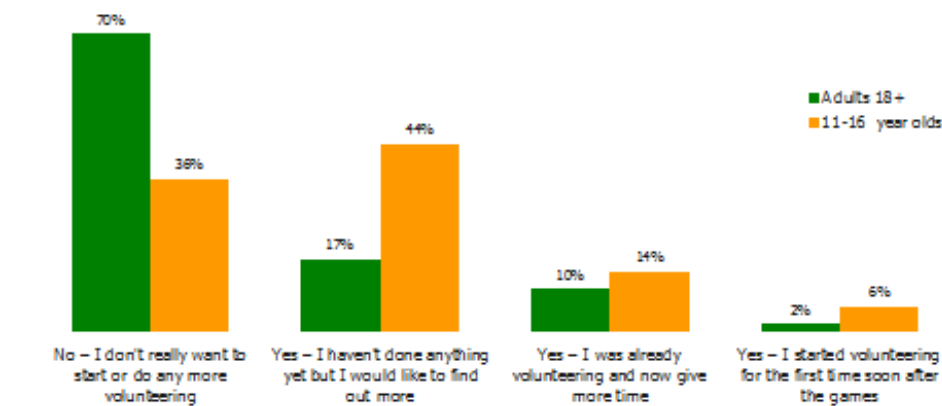
<sup>14</sup> Dickson, Tracey and Benson, Angela (2012) 'London 2012 Games Makers: towards Redefining Legacy' [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/224184/Games\\_Makers\\_Ann](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/224184/Games_Makers_Ann)



authors of the study were keen to point out it had taken place in the immediate 'afterglow' of the Games and they were therefore cautious of this result.

Whether the Olympics impacted upon volunteering more widely is a mixed picture. A 2013 survey by the Olympic legacy charity Join In found that 31% of respondents said the Games Makers had positively changed the way they viewed volunteering, but only 2% had volunteered more as a result of the Olympics.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, nfpSynergy's 2013 research found only 2% more people had volunteered as a result of the Games (see figure 1).<sup>16</sup> This has led some commentators to suggest that the Olympic effect will be short-lived and not translate into a long-term increase in volunteering.<sup>17</sup> This scepticism was reflected in our research.

**Figure 1: Have the Olympic games inspired volunteering?**



Do you think the London Olympic and Paralympic games last year have inspired you to volunteer your time to a charity or community group. Please chose the statement which best applies to you

Base : 2031 adults 18+, 496 11-16 year-olds  
Source: YEM Feb 2013, nfpSynergy, Britain

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### **The Olympics may have been good for the volunteering brand ...**

On the plus side, there is a strong sense that the event boosted the profile of volunteering and meant that for the first time, many people could turn on the TV and think, "Perhaps volunteering could be for me after all."

[ex.pdf](#). Viewed March 26, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Jenna Pudelek (June 10, 2013) 'Half of People Don't Know Where to Find Out About Local Volunteering Opportunities, Survey Shows' Third Sector Online. <http://www.thirdsector.co.uk/news/1185575/Half-people-dont-know-find-local-volunteering-opportunities-survey-shows/?DCMP=ILC-SEARCH>. Viewed March 26, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> nfpSynergy (March 2013) Charity Awareness Monitor.

<sup>17</sup> Jenna Pudelek (19 February 2013) 'Analysis: Is the Rise in Volunteering a Triumph for the Government?' Third Sector Online. [http://www.thirdsector.co.uk/Policy\\_and\\_Politics/article/1171165/analysis-rise-volunteering-triumph-government/](http://www.thirdsector.co.uk/Policy_and_Politics/article/1171165/analysis-rise-volunteering-triumph-government/). Viewed April 17, 2014.

*"I think the Olympics is a good thing in that it lifted the veil for the public about how volunteering wasn't necessarily as stereotypical - the little old lady in the charity shop etc - as a lot of them thought. A lot of people saw, probably for the first time, people of all different backgrounds and ages having a really good time, a lot of people probably more explicitly than ever before, if they went to any of the Olympic sites, came across people who were volunteers. So I think a lot of people felt differently about volunteering after the Games."*

### **But the ball was dropped in the follow-through post-Olympics**

On the other hand, there has been a common consensus that both the sector and the government missed an opportunity to turn the Olympics effect into a meaningful legacy for volunteering. The Games had some excellent examples of how volunteering can and should be managed, i.e. flexibly and creatively, with senior buy-in and whole-organisation engagement. Yet for many, there is a sense that this was not capitalised on at the critical moment.

*"The Olympics was fantastic in terms of how they engaged with volunteers... but what have we as a sector learned from that, and how can we use that in terms of going forward? There's been a big gap there that the sector has missed out on."*

*"I think that message hasn't got out about the effort and learning that went into that, the skills - not the skills of the volunteers but the skills for the rest of the staff in managing volunteers... it was more than just talk."*

Most of the uncertainty may therefore stem from the heightened expectations as to what the Olympics could or should have done for volunteering. After all, it was a unique kind of event, promising an utterly different type of experience to that offered by the majority of charities seeking volunteers.

*"I think there is a big difference between someone wanting to volunteer at the Olympics and hold Usain Bolt's trainers, and someone volunteering at a local lunch club [but] there was this amazing opportunity and I don't think [we] as a sector really built on the fact that the image of volunteering had changed."*

And finally, it is important to remember that, contrary to what coverage may have implied during that period, volunteering was not invented with the Olympics. For the most part, it simply shone a spotlight on the extent of the work already being done throughout the UK in dozens of sectors.

*"You talk to some people and it's almost like volunteering was invented on the day that the Opening Ceremony started, so everybody's looking at "how can we learn the lessons and build on the legacy of 2012, without really understanding what was there beforehand and how things are changing as a result."*

*"My gut reaction is it's probably the 2012 Olympics that actually made people realise that they were doing stuff anyway."*

Rather than being remembered as a glorious one-off, the Olympics should therefore be viewed as an inspiring, exceptional example of what's possible when we build volunteering into our organisations and harness human interest on a grand scale. Thousands of volunteers have been doing this every single day, before and since.

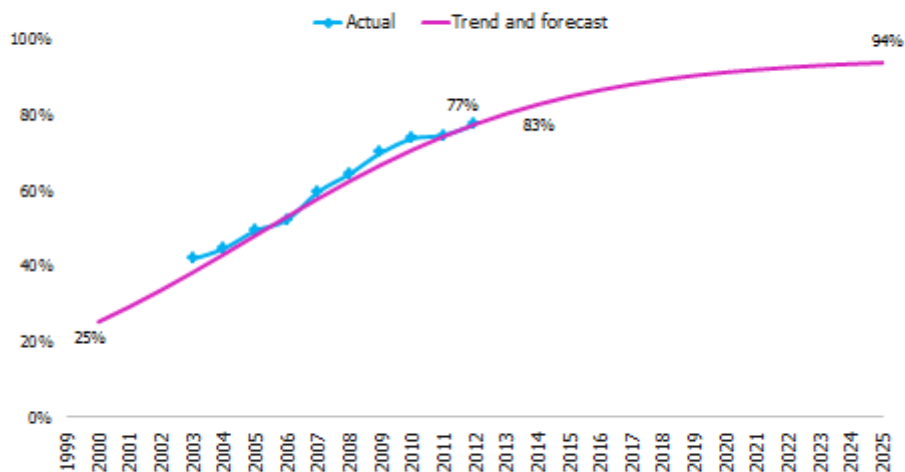
# The technological impacts on volunteering

## New technology, new volunteers?

A decade may seem like a long time ago for some of us. When we stop to think about the communications landscape, it's been a particularly dizzying period of change. Systems and processes still mired in Web 2.0 advanced to whole new levels of sophistication, with user-generated content, interactive forums and a host of web-based and IT solutions to problems and anachronisms that 2005's third sector hadn't even recognised. Facebook (2004) and Twitter (2007) took over the world, becoming verbs in the process and now being used for a wealth of purposes, from marketing to viral campaigns.

As many nfpSynergy reports have emphasised over the last decade, understanding, mastering and deploying new technologies - from how to harness the potential of SMS to embracing global digital fundraising - have become indispensable to charities' toolkits<sup>18</sup>. The growth in online access (see figure 2), whether it be through tablets, laptops, smartphones or TV, is the key enabler of change.

**Figure 2: Internet usage from 2000 to 2025**  
(% using the internet at least once a week, forecast from available data)



Internet penetration continues to edge upwards and we expect more than 90% of British adults to be going online at least once a week by 2020.

Source: Source: Oxford Economics/nVision, UK, 2014

<sup>18</sup> nfpSynergy (2011), *Sending out an SMS 2.0: The potential of mobile phones for charities and non-profits*; (2011) *Passion, persistence and partnership: the secrets of earning more online - 2nd Edition*; (2010) *It's Competition but not as we know it*.

Our use of and reliance on technology to conduct all aspects of our professional and personal lives continue to skyrocket. Today, around 35% of us use our phones to access the internet daily, forecast to rise to 69% by 2020.<sup>19</sup> The 60% taking part in social networking looks set to rise to 78% during the same period.

While a decade ago this still appeared very skewed towards the young, trends are flattening out fast as the baby boomer generation advances into retirement. At the most obvious level, charities have needed to catch up and put such new technologies to use across all traditional activities. This has included exploring what advanced website functionality and social media can bring to volunteer and donor recruitment, communications and evaluation, whether as a complement to existing work or as a new spin on old approaches.

Yet beyond this expansion of existing practices and priorities, the horizon has also shifted for 'new' forms of volunteering. These increasingly seek to adapt to our hectic, plugged-in lifestyles and working hours, with concepts like 'micro-volunteering' becoming increasingly prevalent. The term is new but contested, with some viewing it as a bold new frontier for time-poor, cash-rich audiences, while others dismiss it as a buzzword repackaging the ad hoc opportunities which were always available.

### **Digital technology may create micro-volunteering opportunities**

A recent report by NCVO defined micro-volunteering as 'bite-size volunteering with no commitment to repeat and with minimum formality, involving short and specific actions that are quick to start and complete'.<sup>20</sup> A great deal of micro-volunteering has been conceptualised and undertaken digitally, but there's no reason that it can't be used to define any short donations of time.

The reason the idea has tended to be so contested is that many of the actions defined this way, such as online fundraising or signing petitions, are not universally considered 'volunteering', nor are they novel in their nature. Some also raise concerns regarding the technology-focus of micro-volunteering efforts, viewing this field, along with innovation in the sector more generally, as too youth and tech-obsessed.

*"It's a new name but it's not necessarily new activity. I think it's got a new focus because you can do it on a smart phone, maybe tied into social media a bit more... but at one end of the scale, micro-volunteering is [simply] short term volunteering: doing something for Children In Need, giving a relatively small proportion of your*

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<sup>19</sup> nVision (2013), *Techno-Trends UK : 2020 and Beyond*

<sup>20</sup> Browne, Joni, Jochum, Veronique and Ockenden, Nick (2013) 'The Value of Giving a Little Time: Understanding the Potential of Micro-volunteering' *National Council for Voluntary Organisations*.

*time and you're not necessarily doing it online but that meets a lot of people's definitions of micro volunteering."*

*"Part of the problem is trying to come up with the right range of activities that enable that type of participation and certainly the traditional charity projects don't really fit comfortably into that model... trying to push charities to carve up traditional volunteer roles into bite sized chunks that can be done on a PC or just for an hour in the morning - there's not enough incentive to do that and a lot of the activities just don't translate well. I'm not saying there isn't potential in the future for [micro-volunteering], but I think if you see it more as an opportunity to enable people to collaborate on a common cause and with less obsession about the technology and the virtual aspect of it, then maybe we'll get a bit further with it but so far, I don't think it's taken off in quite the way that anyone thought it would."*

There is a growing demand for volunteering opportunities that are flexible and time-limited to fit into people's busy lives, as future sections explore. Technology also undoubtedly has a key role to play in supporting more time-limited volunteering in order to make large numbers of people donating small amounts of time logistically possible, and its impact more meaningful. While micro-volunteering will not be an appropriate fit for some formats - for example, any requiring substantial training or screening, such as working with vulnerable people or children - it can offer charities a valuable way to engage both new and 'old' volunteers in new ways. In this way, we ensure that the low barriers which prevent many people from fitting volunteering into their lives are increasingly addressed and overcome.

# The social impacts on volunteering

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## The complexity of 21st century life continues apace

Our report draws attention to some of the broader social, political, economic and technological trends with implications for volunteering over the coming decades. We have also highlighted them elsewhere over the year.<sup>21</sup> Many of these themes are still very salient and underline one of the key arguments this report makes; you need to understand your audience and respond to the pressures affecting their capacity to give time. A few of the most prominent trends are reiterated below. However, in planning your volunteering strategy, it's worth doing some further research of your own into the broader trends likely to be impacting your own particular target audiences.

### **We are aging**

As a country, we are getting older (see figure 3). The average life expectancy in the UK is now 78.7 years for men and 82.6 years for women.<sup>22</sup> In the 2011 census, there were 9.2m people aged 65+ in England and Wales, making up 16% of the population.<sup>23</sup> The number of us aged 90 or over increased from a third of a million to half a million between 2002 and 2012.<sup>24</sup>

This trend certainly has serious implications for service demand and delivery across the health and social welfare sectors in the coming decades, but it also impacts the availability of prospective volunteers. On the one hand, older citizens have always made fantastic volunteers and have long been a pillar of many charities' voluntary workforces. They usually have ample time to offer, a strong engagement with charities more broadly and other key motivations, such as making friends and keeping busy into their retirement years.

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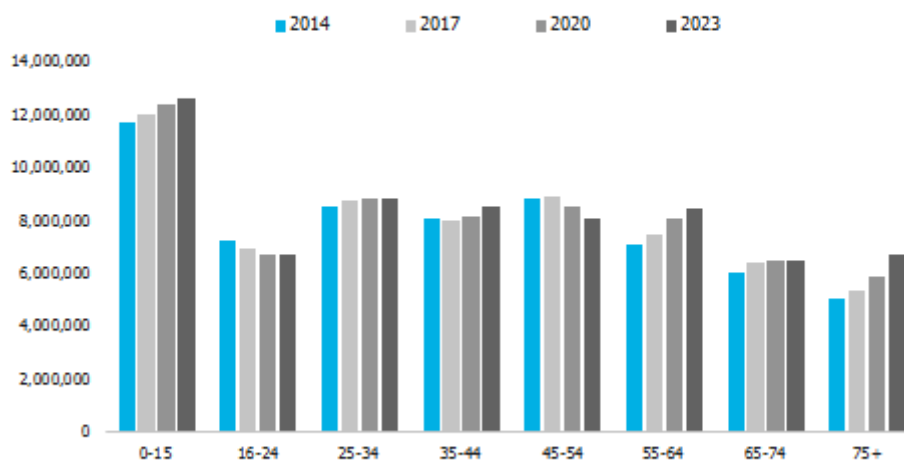
<sup>21</sup> See (2010) *It's competition but not as we know it*; (2011) *Look! nfpSynergy did my PEST analysis for me* (2011).

<sup>22</sup> Office for National Statistics, (2014), Population: '8 facts about life expectancy and the 90 & over population' (Accessed June 2014: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census-analysis/> )

<sup>23</sup> Office for National Statistics, (2013), Population: 'What does the 2011 census tell us about older people?' (Accessed June 2014: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census-analysis/> )

<sup>24</sup> Office for National Statistics, (2014), Population: '8 facts about life expectancy and the 90 & over population'

**Figure 3: Age structure of the population in Great Britain. (Projected populations at mid-years by age at last birthday | ONS forecast, 2013)**



Source: Population Projections, National Statistics/nVision, UK, 2013

On the other, it is crucial to note the ways in which generations now reaching retirement age differ from those of the past. These include health, attitude, affluence, lifestyle and above all the fact that they are likely to be working longer than ever before.<sup>25</sup> See our focus on retirees in a few pages time for more detail.

### **The family is changing**

Family structure has changed a huge amount over the last century, particularly over the last 30 years. Gender roles have transformed, with 71% of UK women economically active in 2012 compared with just 59.3% in 1971.<sup>26</sup> The number of single-person households has also risen steeply since 1979, a trend which is projected to continue. More of us are co-habiting or raising children alone, fewer are living as married couples, and most of us are crossing traditional thresholds such as marriage, procreating and moving out of home later than ever. Family structure also remains very fluid in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with re-marriage, complex extended families and shifting households, which are often smaller in size but less traditional in form.

The implications for volunteering are complex and varied. On the one hand, volunteering often thrives in more integrated communities as part of the broader social tapestry, and more fragmented, anonymous societies can be a challenging environment to build up the social capital which both underlies and nurtures

<sup>25</sup> This is money (2014), 'New state pension age: As we're all told to work longer, when will you be able to retire?' (Accessed June 2014: <http://www.thisismoney.co.uk/money/pensions/article-1679780/New-state-pension-age-retire.html>)

<sup>26</sup> The Fawcett Society (2009), 'Are women bearing the burden of the recession?' March (Accessed June 2014: <http://www.mbsportal.bl.uk/secure/subjareas/hrmemptyrelat/fawcettsociety/138407burden09.pdf>)



voluntary action. Social isolation can also be an aggravating factor for other issues which increase demand for charities' services, such as financial difficulty or health and social care. On the other hand, individuals are more likely than ever to live alone or away from families and so are increasingly likely to seek out social lives and support networks outside the home. With fewer dependents, we may just have more time and affluence to look for causes and challenges beyond our doorsteps.

### **We are more educated, but financial independence is more elusive**

The expansion of higher education has been astronomical in recent decades. Overall, by 2011–12 there were around 2.5 million students in higher education, an increase of half a million since 2001–2002<sup>27</sup> and an almost five-fold increase since the academic year 1970/1, when 621,000 gained a degree.<sup>28</sup> Since 2001, the number of students gaining a first degree has risen by 17%, while the number securing a postgraduate qualification has risen by 27%.<sup>29</sup>

However, with the introduction of higher tuition fees in 2010, the process is more expensive than ever. Despite early assurances that reaching the initial cap of £9,000 p.a. would be the exception rather than the norm, a large proportion of universities have opted for higher prices and the indications are that this is likely to rise still higher in the future.<sup>30</sup> So despite evidence that a degree is still ultimately financially beneficial regardless of a competitive job market, research is suggesting most students will still be paying off their loans into their 40s and 50s, while many will never clear the debt.<sup>31</sup>

There are complex intersections here with broader issues affecting young people – and into the future, when they're our working age population at large - such as housing costs and the changing structure of the job market. However, at a basic level this has a number of key implications for volunteering including:

- Students continue to offer a large, accessible pool of potential volunteers and ensuring their CVs are replete with extra-curricular experience is now a necessity for future employment, rather than a 'nice-to-have'
- Those who volunteer will increasingly be highly educated and likely to expect that existing knowledge and skillsets will be used effectively

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<sup>27</sup> Universities UK (2013), 'Patterns and Trends in UK Higher Education' (Accessed June 2014: <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Documents/2013/PatternsAndTrendsInUKHigherEducation2013.pdf>)

<sup>28</sup> The Independent (2010), '1970 vs 2010: 40 years when we got older, richer and fatter,' 3 July (Accessed June 2014: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/1970-vs-2010-40-years-when-we-got-older-richer-and-fatter-2017240.html>)

<sup>29</sup> Universities UK (2013), 'Patterns and Trends in UK Higher Education'.

<sup>30</sup> The Guardian (2014), 'Universities minister refuses to rule out increase in tuition fees,' 23 March (Accessed June 2014: <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/mar/23/tuition-fees-catastrophe-lib-dems-labour>)

<sup>31</sup> BBC (2014), 'Students could be paying loans into their 50s – report,' 10 April (Accessed June 2014: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-26954901>)

- Students are now graduating with substantial and ongoing debts. For some graduates, volunteering for purely altruistic reasons may well become a luxury as soon as paid work is secured (if only for a while)

### **Choices, choices...**

Choice has long been the buzzword across all areas of life, from political rhetoric on mixed public service delivery to the bewildering array of options that govern our lives as consumers. Driven by technological innovation, market competition and deregulation, we have out of necessity become skilled researchers and navigators of this new terrain. We assess the relative merits of fibre-optic versus regular broadband and complex cable TV packages with the same expert eye now required for school and UCAS applications, GP registration and filing tax returns.

By the same process that UK citizens become more adept at managing the proliferation of choice and competition, they also become more discriminating in terms of what they expect when committing to any new venture – and that includes volunteering for you.

### **We are more culturally diverse than ever**

High net immigration in the last few decades, from the EU and beyond, means that British society continues to evolve quickly, with a broader mix of cultures, faiths and languages than ever before. In the 2011 census, 86% of the population identified themselves as white and 81% identified as white British, a decrease from 92% and 88% in 2001. Every other ethnic group saw proportional rises. For religion, 59% identified as Christian, 5% did so as Muslim and 25% reported no religion.<sup>32</sup> While these figures do not appear particularly diverse, there is a strong geographic skew, with a much greater mix seen in London (40% non-white population) and, to a lesser extent, the Midlands. Net migration has also continued to hold positive, despite a slight decline since 2011.

This diversity has implications for charities in a number of ways. On the one hand, it is likely to continue increasing demand for new services, particularly from community and voluntary sector organisations that have long been essential to supporting new immigrants. It is also noteworthy that many austerity impacts have tended to hit minority communities and organisations harder. In volunteering, traditional assumptions about who is interested in your work and able to offer time may prove very outdated. Look beyond your typical audiences and you may be surprised to discover volunteers it never previously occurred to you to target.

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<sup>32</sup> Office for National Statistics (2014), Ethnicity and Identity: 2011 Census Data (Accessed June 2014: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/taxonomy/index.html?nscl=Ethnicity+and+Identity>)

# The economic impacts on volunteering

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## **We are comparatively affluent with raised aspirations**

Income has grown considerably in recent decades, with the median UK salary reaching £27,000 in 2013.<sup>33</sup> There is a long tail to UK earnings, with much of the population earning dramatically more than the average, and it remains a very unequal society, exacerbated by the economic pressures and policies outlined above. However, household disposable income has generally witnessed an upward trend over the last 30-40 years and, viewed apart from the downturn of the last six years, we spend much more of this money on leisure than we did previously, particularly with regard to technology and holidays.

This disposable income has presented opportunities for charities to secure larger donations from a broader spectrum of society. It also provides the chance to access more campaigning and fundraising engagement through harmonising with leisure paths. These include new technologies, participatory 'lifestyle' events and other fundraising methods that tie in with the explosion in leisure spending or 'giving while living' trends. In terms of volunteering, the theoretical promise is of a comparatively affluent generation with enthusiasm and time for new activities, social movements and ideas. More pessimistically, it serves to emphasise the time-pressure most people are under and to ramp up the competitive environment that charities seeking volunteers find themselves in. As one interviewee put it:

*"We all have things we want to do in our lives, and it might not be volunteering. You know, volunteering is not the most important thing in my life. So how we can bridge that gap between what we want and what the volunteers want?"*

## **The importance of baby boomers over the next 20 years**

The most important understanding for charities to reach about their engagement with older generations is how much 'old age' is changing. While some knowledge and assumptions about older individuals may still apply, much is being turned on its head, from the diminishing time we actually have on our hands for 'a bit of charity work to pass the time' to the growing technological literacy that will see mobile internet access increase.

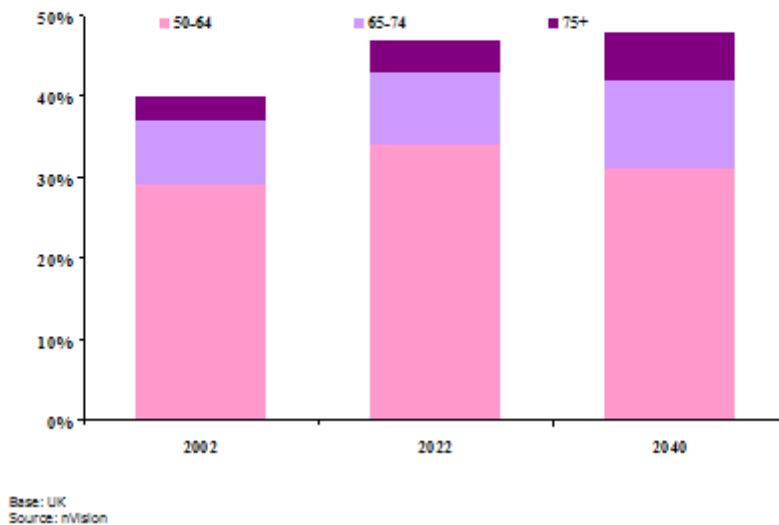
Not only are the generations in their late 60's and older (the baby boomers)

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<sup>33</sup> Office for National Statistics (2013), Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (Accessed June 2014: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/ashes/annual-survey-of-hours-and-earnings/2013-provisional-results/stb-ashes-statistical-bulletin-2013.html#tab-Annual-earnings>)

increasing in number, retirement itself is being increasingly postponed. Even when that time comes, it is spent much more actively and often with significant disposable income. As figure 4 shows below, the share of spending on leisure services and goods by the over-50's has long been substantial and is projected to rise significantly over the next 30 years, particularly among the oldest demographics of 75+.

**Figure 4: Share of spending on leisure goods and services by the over 50s**  
Forecast based on changes in numbers in each age only



With the over 45s already the most active donors and volunteers, the greater proportion of older people we will witness over the coming decades will continue to offer charities a positive pool of volunteers. In light of what we know about charity engagement trends, it is therefore ironic that, as one interviewee noted, *"We are still youth-obsessed when it comes to volunteering, everything seems to be about young people to the complete non-reference to anything about older people"*. Regardless of prevailing political focus, it is clear that understanding the way in which retirement is changing as the baby boomers enter it has become crucial to charities wishing to continue making use of their best volunteering assets.

# The impact of choice and baby boomers on volunteering

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Our final section looks at two specific areas of people's changing lives, both of which are of particular relevance to volunteering and volunteer managers

## **The explosion of 21<sup>st</sup> century choice and why volunteering needs to play catch-up**

Once upon a time, voluntary organisations had a steady supply of volunteers who did not particularly care either for whom they volunteered or how effective the organisation was, so long as it filled their time and felt like charity work – or at least so it now seems. Today's landscape of infinite access to information, high levels of education, financial strain and myriad of leisure opportunities means a whole new world for volunteer managers hoping to capture an audience for their work. Armed with an extensive education – formally or informally acquired - and the finely honed investigative skills that come from dealing with the proliferation of choice in every aspect of their lives (jobs, shopping, finance, leisure), the average punter has learnt to be more discriminating and more demanding. We know what we want and expect in terms of roles, communications channels, flexibility and customer service. A sign saying 'Volunteers wanted' with a phone number attached is unlikely to cut it.

## **It's competition with weekend breaks and overseas holidays that matters**

As our interviewees reminded us, you are not just competing with other charities – and that's certainly a crowded and tough enough market on its own. You are also competing with everything else an individual might be doing with those precious five hours a week: family time, TV, cinema, the gym, post-work drinks, Sunday lunch with friends and the Saturday sales. Never has it been more crucial to ensure that what you offer potential volunteers is worthy of their time and effort. While we may be tempted to view these prospective volunteers as becoming more demanding or even 'selfish', it is important to remember that it is not individuals who have changed - the world has moved on and it is crucial that volunteer development and management moves with it.

Research from the British Social Attitudes Survey has revealed that 46% of private sector and 53% of public sector workers say 'an interesting job' is 'very important' to them (second only to job security).<sup>34</sup> In all aspects of our lives, we expect to be able to research numerous options and sift through targeted marketing materials,

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<sup>34</sup> Parker, L. and S. Bevan (2011) *Good Work and Our Times*. The Work Foundation, p24  
[http://www.theworkfoundation.com/DownloadPublication/Report/291\\_GWC%20Final.pdf](http://www.theworkfoundation.com/DownloadPublication/Report/291_GWC%20Final.pdf)

whether we're shopping around for jobs, new bank accounts or holidays abroad. As many of our interviewees in the volunteering sector pointed out, we now quite rightly expect sophisticated customer service, responsiveness and multiple communication channels in all areas of our lives. Is there any reason why volunteer recruitment and management should operate in a bubble where antiquated rules apply?

The example of the volunteer centre that argued it was unrealistic to expect them to respond to an enquiry about volunteering within three weeks represents a view from a bygone age.

### **From 28 days to 24 hours**

Twenty years ago, if you bought something through a catalogue or in response to an advert on TV, the accepted norm was 28 days delivery. It is now less than 24 hours or next day. This is because it's now our expectation as people in society - we want to be able to manage our availability online for example, because it's increasingly where we manage our finances. We want to receive a response, even if it's just a holding response, within a couple of hours, not three weeks. People's expectations are changing and we are getting more demanding, but that's because we are doing so as a society.

This is in large part a manifestation of the spread of the consumer model across broader areas of life. However, it also speaks to a deeper need to redress the volunteering balance towards a deal that fits with what *volunteers* really want and need from their experience, rather than just what the organisation requires:

*"As a sector, we are struggling to recognise what is increasingly a more consumer-focused marketplace. If people are expected to give up their free time to do something in the community, yes altruism is always going to be a strong motivating factor, but actually it's also activities that fit in with my lifestyle, that fit in with my interests and my skills and I think this sector traditionally has never really focused on what the volunteer wants, it was primarily focused on what it wants and has just expected people to fit in with that. That's worked fairly well for a fair old while but I think increasingly that model is less attractive."*

*"Personally, I have experienced a much higher level of expectations from volunteers that we (as VMs) will be organised, have meaningful work for our team, give appropriate training, support and recognition and, most importantly, the volunteers will have a say in what the organisation does and how it does it."*

Overall, volunteers now expect much more from charities in terms of being given meaningful work, having a say in how their programme is run and receiving appropriate training, support and recognition. Volunteers are also in many cases better educated, more diverse, more skilled and as a result more demanding.

Crucially, this should be considered a *positive* thing. Charities need to remember that an informed, demanding volunteer is an engaged volunteer – one who knows what you do, why it is important and who is ready to talk to others about it. This is a volunteer not prepared to accept second best and who challenges your organisation to up its game.

*"They're not prepared to put up with some of the things that sometimes go along with shoddy volunteer management, like your expenses being paid late or nowhere for you to park when you turn up or not being told what's going on... People have higher expectations of the quality of their experience. I think that's probably a good thing."*

This doesn't mean charities can or should bend to all volunteer demands. It simply means that new, 21<sup>st</sup> century expectations should be welcomed as an opportunity to rise to the challenge, not as an obstacle to business as usual. The third edition of this report will pick up these themes in detail and look at the key principles that organisations need to be absorbing into their volunteer strategy.

### **Boomtime? What to remember about baby boomers and the new retirees**

As discussed above, society is ageing but not as we've known it. As the 1960s generation approach retirement, their outlook, life expectancy and attitude to ageing are very different to those of their parents, who might only have expected to see out one more decade. National healthcare, improved nutrition, post-war affluence, economic security and home-ownership have all brought today's sixty-somethings to a very different place; one where good medical care and social support can mean even a late retirement could realistically last 30 years or more.

It is also less likely to be time for a rest and growing retreat from the world, at least early on. With a unique historic window, it is likely that baby boomers will have lived a more comfortable and secure adult lifestyle than their children will be able to replicate, given 21<sup>st</sup> century pension and housing costs. They are prepared to both enjoy retirement through travel and hobbies and to assist their children's and grandchildren's generations when they may be struggling with education, housing and childcare costs that were more navigable during their own youth.

Attitudinally too, today's retirees see the world differently in ways that shape their preferences, expectations and approach to volunteering.

- **Social change** - as a generation, baby boomers challenged authority. They may have grown up to manage hedge funds and invest in property, but they remain the most adventurous, educated and socially liberal generation of retirees the world has ever seen
- **Expectations of fun** - with kids leaving home, a generation with unprecedented affluence can look ahead to spending more time and money on themselves in retirement

- **Opportunity** - with savings in the bank, mortgages paid off and broad horizons, this is the first generation with the means to actually fulfil their expectations

As one report<sup>35</sup> into capturing the volunteering potential of this generation advised, marketing efforts do well to remember that this generation is not ageing in the sense their parents did and messaging must reflect this: "*Any organisation that aims to recruit baby boomers now and in the future would be well-advised to adopt the strategy of restructuring their recruitment campaign around a more youthful message and to advertise a range of challenging and creative opportunities.*"

Similarly, reports by organisations such as Demos<sup>36</sup> emphasise the different value base of the post-war generation, whose individual and often anti-establishment perspective, combined with financial independence and education, have meant raised expectations and a more critical approach to civic engagement. Their engagement with charities, as with politics, business and social mores, is likely to be more informed and challenging than those who came before.

### **The dutiful volunteers are dying out**

Instead of a generation of older people who are very service-oriented, duty-driven and happy to turn out to volunteer in wind, rain and snow, we have instead a baby boomer generation. If they embrace volunteering, they will want more flexibility, more empowerment and to be more self-directed in what they do. They'll want to be able to drop things so that they can manage their responsibilities, like caring for their parents, children and grandchildren. They have higher expectations of what life is going to be like, longer retirement and more affluence (for some). Several are even going back into work after retirement because of the way the recession has affected pension values.

### **Baby boomers have different expectations**

Meeting these different expectations makes it vital for charities to learn lessons from the changes in external climates concerning service culture, meaningful experiences and professionalism more broadly. Older volunteers can no longer be relied upon as a 'sure thing', driven by a sense of duty and a need to fill their days. They expect an organisation to be run effectively and for their volunteering experience to deliver a tangible sense of achievement. The social dimension is still key, as the chart from our survey of volunteer managers above shows, but this still requires structure. For today's retirees, in good health and often with wide social circles, charity work will be just one of a number of routes to self-fulfilment and socialising. Charities cannot afford to be complacent.

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<sup>35</sup> Economic implications of an ageing Australia - [http://www.pc.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0017/14219/sub028.pdf](http://www.pc.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0017/14219/sub028.pdf)

<sup>36</sup> Demos, *The New Old* - <http://www.demos.co.uk/files/thenewold.pdf>



*"The traditional older volunteers were the ones that we all relied on, who would give that regular time commitment. The baby boomers I think have a different attitude, that's possibly going to be the last remaining affluent group of older volunteers with money. They've got children who they're sending off to university, quite a few of them have good pensions. They're different and they want different things. So it's not simply us just doing the same thing with them, we still have to understand their flexibility and wants from the volunteering with what we do."*

Yet despite this impression of carefree retirement bringing adventure and opportunity, it is also vital to be aware of the unique position of this generation and the pressures this has created. The recession, the pensions crisis, stock market volatility and even successive housing bubbles all raise concerns over whether older people can afford to retire in security, given the ongoing financial burdens and anticipated care costs of their longer life expectancies.

*"I think the biggest threat to this demographic is going to be when the retirement age goes up, whether or not people - because they're going to have to work into later life - will have as much time or motivation to work in an unpaid capacity."*

This has also been the first generation to experience such a tight squeeze in caring responsibilities, with children, grandchildren and sometimes ageing parents all requiring support. Graduate debt, the property market and care costs all contribute to the picture of provider-obligations extending worryingly far into the supposed golden age of retirement for many in their sixties and seventies.

It is also important to note that with busy lives, older volunteers are more likely to consider stepping up an involvement they already have with an organisation than embarking on something totally new. Much of the challenge for volunteer managers, therefore, will be around keeping older volunteers interested and finding ways to deepen their opportunities and reflect their changing needs and commitments. The general principles that apply to all volunteers regarding the need for personalisation, consultation and flexibility are particularly pertinent when it comes to tapping into the potential that has always existed among older volunteers.

And finally baby boomers seem to be much more likely to want to make a difference through their volunteering. Boomers have been a 'change-the-world' generation and want to see that in their volunteering as well. As one commentator puts it, boomers want to make a real difference, not just a contribution

# A report of many parts

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This is our second major report on volunteering. We published The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Volunteer in 2005 and it was our most popular free report for many years. But over time, many things in the world of volunteering, charities and the wider economic, social and political climate have changed.

In the summer of 2013, we decided to update The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Volunteer. Perhaps inevitability, the more we looked at the data, the more people we talked to and the more we looked at the trends, an entirely new report emerged. We found we had enough data and ideas to create a longer report than we would normally write. Inspired by Dickens, we decided to serialise the new report into several parts. These are:

- Part 1 – The political and social landscape for volunteering
- Part 2 – Volunteering trends over the last decade
- Part 3 – Harnessing volunteer motivations
- Part 4 – The changing mechanics of volunteering
- Part 5 – Engaging the young, the old and the family to volunteer
- Part 6 – How do we manage the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Volunteer?
- Part 7 – Conclusions and recommendations

At the end of the process, we will publish the report as a single document, having ironed out any kinks and gremlins that might have emerged during the process. A report like this comes about because of the work of many people in addition to the authors. Particular thanks go to Rachel Egan, Thea Mueller, Kate Cranston-Turner and Bijal Rama. We are also hugely appreciative of all the people who filled in our volunteer manager survey, and particularly of those who took the time to be interviewed. Contact [joe.saxton@nfpSynergy.net](mailto:joe.saxton@nfpSynergy.net) if you have any queries, congratulations or complaints!

## About nfpSynergy

nfpSynergy is a research consultancy dedicated to the not-for-profit sector. Our aim is to provide the ideas, the insights and the information to help non-profits thrive. We run syndicated tracking surveys and carry out bespoke projects. We are widely recognised as one of the leaders in non-profit market research.

We survey a range of audiences, including the general public, journalists, MPs and Lords, young people and regional audiences in the UK and Ireland. Each year we also deliver around 50 projects for non-profit clients. We carry out focus groups, conduct face-to-face and telephone depth interviews, run workshops and perform small and large-scale desk research projects.