



VOLUNTEERING: A FAMILY AFFAIR?

SUMMARY REPORT

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Introduction

Our research set out to explore the relationship between families and volunteering, from family and organisational perspectives. It aimed to address evidence gaps and to support volunteer-involving organisations to develop or improve volunteering opportunities and experiences for families.

We did this by reviewing existing evidence, mapping family volunteering opportunities, undertaking analysis of the UK's Time Use Survey, and organisational and family case studies.

This summary report brings all this together under five themes.

- What? (Defining and describing family volunteering)
- Why? (Why and how family volunteering comes about)
- How? (How family and organisational contexts shape family volunteering experiences)
- To what effect? (The outcomes of family volunteering for families and organisations)
- So what? (Conclusions and considerations)

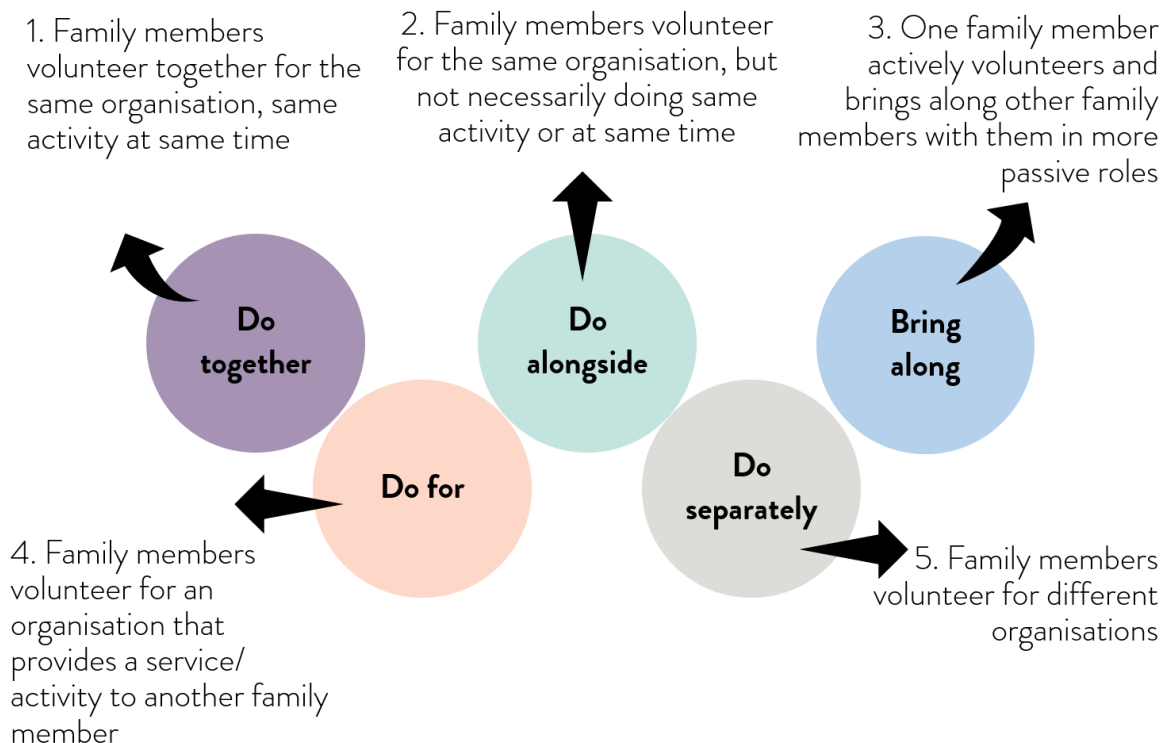
We hope that the findings will be used to help enhance the experience for all those involved.

Defining and describing family volunteering

Families are involved in volunteering in many different ways

Family volunteering looks and feels very different in different families and organisations. It includes, but is about far more than, parents and children volunteering together within the same organisation. We identified five types of family volunteering: do together, do alongside, do for, bring along and do separately.

Figure 1: Types of family volunteering



Family volunteering can mean parents and children getting involved in volunteering; more often it means couples. It can also mean siblings, or grandparents and grandchildren. Families may engage in these types of volunteering at any one time, or at different stages of their lives. For example, on moving to a new area, couples may use volunteering as a way to integrate themselves into the community; parents may volunteer for activities in which their young children are involved and then volunteer alongside each other as their children grow older, and they may all volunteer separately after their children leave home.

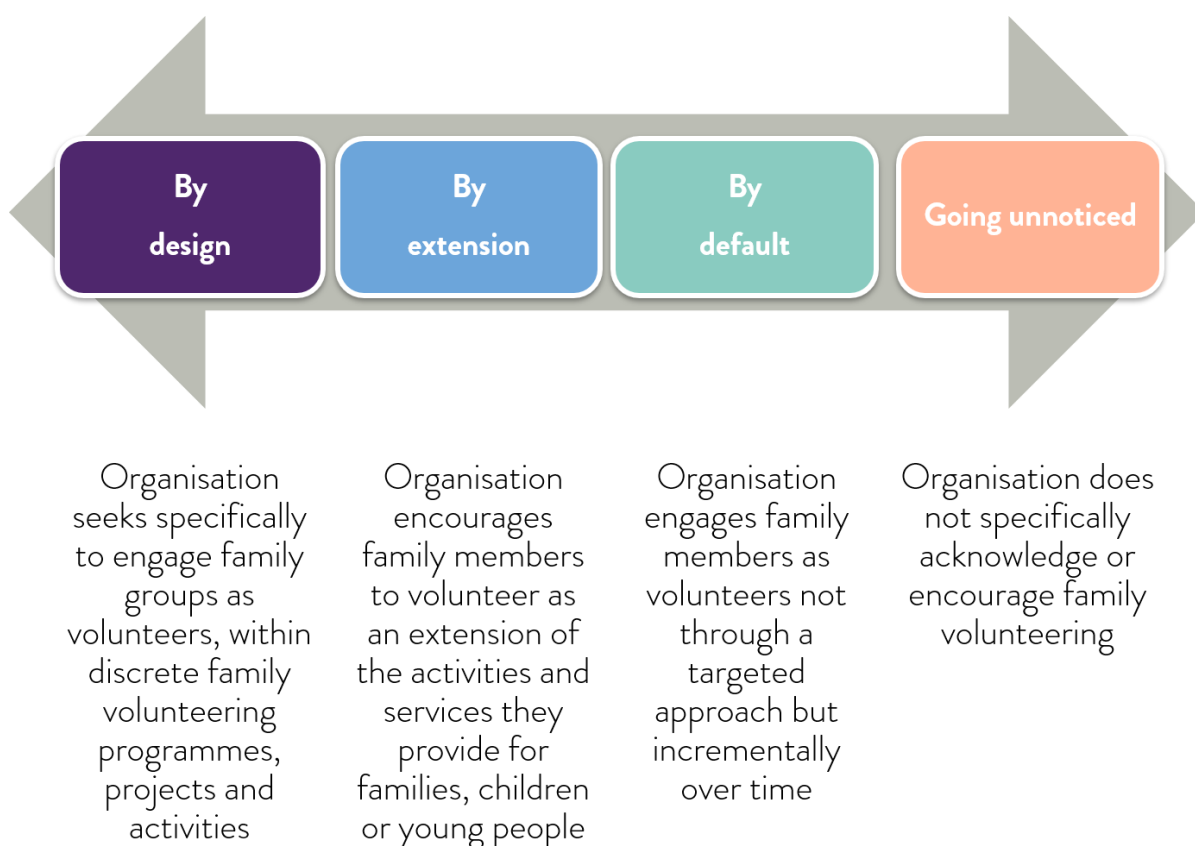
Family volunteering is extensive

According to the Time Use Survey, in 2014/15 one-third of all formal volunteering households in the UK volunteered together as a family, most often as couples without (dependent) children, followed by one parent with at least one child. And we define family volunteering more broadly than is reflected within this Time Use data, which only covers our 'do together' and 'do alongside' categories, suggesting that family volunteering is likely to represent an even greater proportion of volunteering.

There is a variety of organisational approaches to involving families in volunteering

We identified a spectrum of approaches from ‘by design’ through to ‘going unnoticed’. For many organisations, family volunteering is something that has evolved, largely ‘by default’, over the organisation’s history or as an ‘extension’ of the activities/services that they deliver, which themselves have been focused on families or children. Family volunteering was often not a discrete thing, but integral to the organisation’s engagement with volunteers per se, and often reflective of a general orientation towards families or communities. While some efforts may be made to promote and encourage family members to get involved, particularly in terms of parents being encouraged to help out with activities in which their children participate, often family volunteering goes unacknowledged. Some organisations, however, had designed specific family volunteering schemes in which families (particularly parents and children) were explicitly encouraged to volunteer together, often within discrete projects or activities. There were indications that these types of approaches are on the increase.

Figure 2: The spectrum of ways that family volunteering can develop in organisations



Family volunteering by design at the Whitworth

The Whitworth is one of the main art galleries in Manchester. As part of a drive to become more relevant, representative and embedded within the local community, it has designed interventions specifically aimed at engaging families as both visitors and volunteers. The family volunteering scheme has developed incrementally, building on the success of existing activities targeted at families, including a well-established early years programme. There is a specific family workshop volunteer role (not exclusively for people wanting to volunteer with members of their own family) and parents can bring their babies when volunteering. They are also able to volunteer together, with children of a very young age being encouraged to help with small tasks. All are given a volunteer t-shirt, even the babies. The families that are volunteering are predominantly mothers with one young child, although there are a few cases of older children being involved and some mothers volunteering with several children. In one instance, siblings are volunteering together. There have also been cases of grandparents volunteering with their grandchildren, but this isn't common. Overall, working with and for families is helping to make the gallery more open and relevant, and has enabled it to reach out to people who wouldn't usually get involved.

Family volunteering by extension at Kids Run Free

Recruiting and retaining families is key to Kids Run Free's organisational mission and model. Its aim is to get children healthier, happier and more confident through outdoor running activities, and the support of parent volunteers is an important part of delivering this, although other volunteers are also encouraged to get involved. At the running events, different types of family volunteering are happening, often in spontaneous ways. Most volunteering fits our 'do for' category where parents are organising and supporting the events while their children are participating. Many of these parents are getting involved casually and helping out on the day as an extension of the activities their children are engaged in. Some family members are volunteering together, including couples running the events together or older children providing an extra pair of hands and helping their parents. Other volunteers bring along their children in the hope that they might get involved in running or volunteering. The organisation recognises the important role played by families in the scaling up of the programme into new communities, particularly in setting up new Parks Kids events: 'The family is going to be integral for years because without them, we can't get in to the next community because there's only so many of us here I suppose, so we need them to want it and to, I suppose to run it as well, so we need them to take the lead on their event.' It has not, however, set out to develop a discrete family volunteering programme. Indeed, the organisation wants to keep

volunteering opportunities open to all in the community and this is reflected in their marketing for volunteers.

Family volunteering by default at St Mary's church

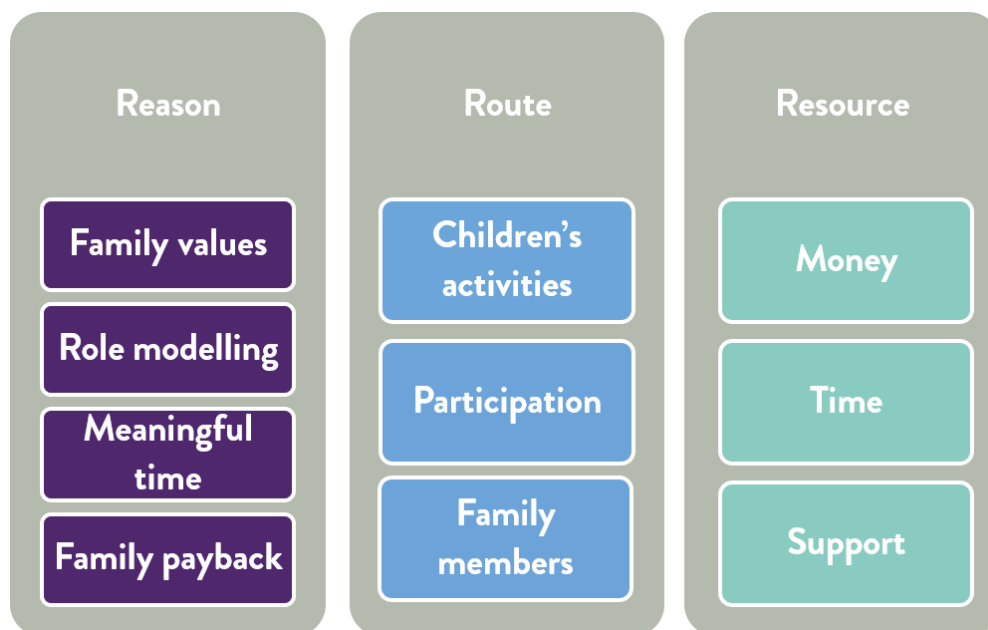
Families have always been involved in volunteering at St Mary's church, which reflects the nature of the organisation. Like all volunteering at the church, however, this is largely organic, self-organised and not formally 'managed', although it is encouraged. There has been no drive to specifically encourage families to volunteer and no discretely designed family volunteering project. Instead, families have got involved in the church over the years by default: they come to the church together and get involved together; roles are often shared out amongst family members or passed on from one generation to the next. This has been further facilitated by the church having a range of activities which tend to focus on different age groups, enabling an informal pathway through participation. Although St Mary's remains an active, lively church, as congregations dwindle and as families face increasing pressures on their time, concerns have been raised that family volunteering is declining and if left unchecked will likely continue to do so.

Why and how family volunteering comes about

Families can provide the motivations for volunteering, routes into volunteering and the resources that volunteers draw on

Existing research shows us that marriage, divorce, strength of relationships, having children, and caring for elderly/ailing relatives can all make a difference to volunteering: some make it more likely that families will volunteer; others have the opposite effect. Our case studies highlighted how family can be a motivation for volunteering through: a desire to instil or express family values; parental desire to be effective role models for their children; wanting to spend meaningful time together (or indeed apart); wanting to give back to an organisation/community as a family. Families can also provide important routes into volunteering: the activities that children get involved in, for example, can be routes into volunteering for their parents and young people themselves, and volunteers often rope others in too! Volunteering also requires resources, and those resources can be found and shared on a family basis, particularly in terms of time and money. They can also be a drain on those resources, creating barriers to involvement.

Figure 3: Family as a driver for volunteering



Family members as a route to volunteering: the Brown family

The Brown family – mum (Tina), dad (Alistair) and two children (Anna, 14 years old, and Emily, six years old) have all been involved in volunteering at Little Village to varying degrees. Tina has been quite heavily involved after first hearing about Little Village through another family-oriented charity. She is described by the family as the ‘linchpin’ who got them all engaged in different activities for the organisation, mostly in an ad-hoc way for Alistair, who helps out with some activities, and Emily, who is brought along sometimes. Anna was initially brought along by her mum but has since been undertaking her own volunteering at Little Village as part of The Duke of Edinburgh Award. Initially, she felt her involvement was more motivated by her mum and less by her own choice, but having got more involved, she feels more self-motivated and especially enjoys coming with her friends, though she also sometimes participates with one of her parents: ‘I feel like it’s 60% my choice and 40% my mum’s ... if a teacher had suggested, “Why don’t you pop along?”, I would have said no, but I’m definitely glad I have. At the beginning it was probably 80% mum and 20% me but it has grown, and I definitely choose to come here ... It’s a really good way to catch up with friends and at the end you feel satisfied you’ve done something really good, so I really enjoy coming.’

Organisations offer volunteering opportunities for families for a range of reasons

Family volunteering opportunities were seen by some organisations as a way to meet mission or

strategy. This included organisations which aimed to educate and empower children, engage with families, be family friendly or embed themselves within the community. Other organisations had developed family volunteering opportunities with the intention of widening participation in their organisation, particularly – but not limited to – diversifying their volunteer base. Family volunteering, for example, was seen to have the potential to overcome time pressures for people by enabling couples or parents and children to volunteer together or as way to overcome childcare as a barrier to volunteering and so enable a wider range of people to get involved. These were the two main drivers identified by organisations for the establishment of specific family volunteering schemes, but it was harder to identify drivers for the more extensive family volunteering by default, as by its very nature this was less strategically driven

How family and organisational contexts shape family volunteering experiences

Involvement varies according to family circumstances and distribution of roles and responsibilities

Family circumstances can make a considerable difference not just to the chances of volunteering, but also to how it is experienced. With ever-busy lives, fitting volunteering in can be difficult, particularly when it is (often necessarily) given less priority than other roles and responsibilities. There were important gender dimensions to family volunteering, which were reflective of those within wider society, not least of which included women often shouldering the responsibility for making volunteering fit within the family schedule. Sharing resources, including physical and emotional support, amongst family members can be crucial in sustaining volunteering: it becomes a team effort.

Family support: the Williams family

The Williams family consists of mum (Edith) and her two daughters (Jessica and Amelia) who are in their late 20s/early 30s. They all work and volunteer in a range of health, care and educational roles across the local community. Edith's parents were a big influence on the whole family's volunteering: her dad used to volunteer at a day-care centre and at the church they attended, while her mother was a Brownie leader. Edith used to help out with both. This has led to a lifelong passion for and commitment to volunteering and community support: she has been involved in the Brownies ever since. Edith is also heavily involved in St John Ambulance, a role that her daughters support her in both emotionally and practically. Jessica and Amelia, for example, both help to deliver youth work activities when they can, and when they can't attend sessions with their mum, they help her with the preparations for the session at the weekend. Talking about everything together also helps to take the burden off each other

if things do get too much. They describe it as using each other's talents and interests, as working it out between them to make it happen and as being reflective of a wider sense that they have 'got each other's backs'. They describe themselves as a close-knit family who are intuitive about each other's needs. They reflected that not only does volunteering together 'feel good', and represent a 'constructive use of time', it also 'teaches you a way of living and learning' and has contributed to them being a 'small family with big networks'. Enjoyment, they suggest, is key.

How organisations engage with families can shape people's experiences of volunteering

What organisations do and how they do it can make a difference to the opportunities for, experiences of, and outcomes from family volunteering. Creating a family-friendly environment is significant. Key aspects seen to facilitate engagement included: actively encouraging families to get involved in a range of flexible opportunities; opportunities that suit the (changing) needs and interests of different family members (particularly of different ages); having the potential for stepping up and stepping back as circumstances change over people's life course; supporting volunteers in a way which recognises and accommodates both their individual and family circumstances and how these may affect their volunteering. Some organisations grapple with how to balance a desire to be inclusive, particularly of children and young people, with the need to ensure safeguarding measures are followed.

Natural progression: family volunteering at St John Ambulance

As a large organisation that is heavily reliant on volunteers, St John Ambulance has a broad range of opportunities. As well as being focused on different activities/practical tasks, opportunities carry with them various levels of responsibility and require different skills, competencies and time commitments. This is seen to facilitate the involvement of multiple family members within the organisation, while also enabling the progression of individual family members, both of which contribute to volunteer retention. As one person reflected: 'So, you can bring your whole family to Saint John because we have offers for different ages, we have offers for different intensities. Because we work outside of the working day, in the evenings and the weekends and stuff, it is something you can do on family time.' Another said: 'So, the structure if you like is quite volunteer-focused and volunteer-led, so there's lots of opportunities for volunteers to progress and take increasing responsibility in the charity, which is probably one of the things that opens up this kind of sense of where families can get involved in lots of different ways, lots of different areas, etc.' While the organisation has never

had a specifically designed scheme for family volunteering, it is welcomed, encouraged and celebrated: 'But, we celebrate it, we talk about it wonderfully, it's an organisation that celebrates and recognises long service, it's an organisation that recognises the value of this and that holds up young people as these wonderful examples to society and to a future.' Recently, St John Ambulance has done more to actively encourage parents of children attending the youth groups to become leaders through, for example, the 'three week challenge'. As one person explained: 'you say, "Can you come and help us for three weeks?" and the chances are by three weeks you've either fallen in love with it or somebody has press-ganged you into doing something else so then that's it, that's how you do it, you recruit by stealth!'

The outcomes of family volunteering for families and organisations

Volunteering can have both positive and negative outcomes for families

Volunteering can make a considerable difference to those families that get involved. It can be an enjoyable way to spend (meaningful) time together. Perhaps more significantly, it can deepen the bonds between family members, providing a point of commonality and an expression of shared values and identity. It can also be a route to new opportunities and experiences. It can, however, also add to the stresses and strains of family life. When volunteering becomes too onerous – in time and/or energy – it can take its toll not just on those individuals directly involved, but also on the wider family; other roles and responsibilities can be neglected, opportunities missed and tensions heightened. For some, however, when the stresses were not too great, working through these issues as a family had in itself been developmental.

From the perspective of organisations, family volunteering presents both opportunities and challenges

Whether by design or by default, family volunteering can also have a considerable impact on organisations: it can help them meet their mission and boost volunteer recruitment, retention and resource. It can, however, create challenges for volunteer managers. For example, while recruiting one volunteer can lead to other family members getting involved, the downside is that when that volunteer leaves, the whole family can leave, leading to gaps within the organisation. Family volunteering was generally seen to have led to a widening of participation, but it can also get in the way of inclusivity. For example, there were some instances of 'family takeover', with certain families dominating an activity or group, which risked excluding and putting off others.

Conclusions and considerations

Family provides one of the contextual layers that shape volunteering. More than that, however, exploring family volunteering has highlighted how volunteering is not a purely individual activity – it can also be a collective one. In this case, the collective is the family. We found it to be extensive – even more so than we had imagined. We also found evidence to suggest that, like other forms of collective engagement, it is no longer possible to assume that family volunteering will continue to flourish by default. Changes in the ways that we live and in how organisations involve volunteers are affecting both the chances of family volunteering happening and the experience of it once it does. If it is to be sustained, it needs attention and nurturing. While an increasing number of organisations are looking to design specific family volunteering schemes, this remains a small part of what family volunteering is about.

Ways forward

We suggest a series of questions which organisations may want to consider if they are looking to develop family volunteering.

- 1. How do families currently engage with your organisation?** Family volunteering is diverse, and it is extensive. It includes, but is about far more than, parents and children volunteering together within the same organisation. It can be about any number of family members volunteering and can involve volunteering alongside each other, for each other or together. It goes beyond what people typically think of as family volunteering. Much of this volunteering currently goes unacknowledged by organisations. We encourage all organisations to reflect upon how they currently involve families as volunteers (and members, supporters, participants), how this has been facilitated to date and how it is changing.
- 2. How do you want to involve families and what approach to family volunteering is right for you?** Organisations get involved in family volunteering for different reasons and in different ways. The various approaches to family volunteering affect how that volunteering develops, is experienced and contributes to organisational and family life. After identifying how they have involved families to date, we encourage organisations to consider what more they would like to achieve through family volunteering and what different approaches offer in helping them to get there.
- 3. Can you enhance the volunteering participation for families within your organisation?** Traditional pathways, which had previously facilitated family volunteering largely by default within some organisations, have begun to break down. We encourage organisations to consider the pathways through participation for families within, and indeed beyond, their organisation and how these might be further supported. This could

include developing a wider variety of roles; enabling family members to try out volunteering; encouraging movement through different forms of engagement with the organisation – not just volunteering; supporting people along the journey from being beneficiaries of an activity to actively supporting it, or when they need to take a temporary or permanent step back from their volunteering as their circumstances change. This may require a more systems-based approach to volunteer leadership, that looks beyond individual roles, programmes, activities, teams and even organisations.

- 4. Can you do more to help families balance volunteering with family life?** Families provide important reasons for, routes into and resources for volunteering. But family life is busy – increasingly so – and it can be difficult to fit volunteering in. Volunteering is often carried out alongside or as part of other roles and responsibilities. If organisations want to facilitate family volunteering, it is important that they recognise and support their volunteers with this. We encourage organisations to consider how they can be more flexible in their involvement of volunteers and how they can adapt so that volunteering can be seen as part, or an extension, of a family's other roles and responsibilities rather than a source of conflict about a family's resources.
- 5. How can you ensure that family volunteering is as inclusive as possible?** While family volunteering has the potential to create more inclusive volunteering practices and is particularly effective at engaging parents with young children who would otherwise be less likely to get involved, it also has the potential to become exclusionary. Organisations need to consider how they can develop their volunteering offer to make it more inclusive of families, and within that a more diverse range of families, while also guarding against the potential for family takeover.
- 6. How does the balance you are striking between risk management and being inclusive affect the involvement of families in volunteering?** A tendency towards formalisation, professionalisation and centralisation can work against flexibility and inclusivity, and as such against family volunteering by default/extension. A growing amount of 'red tape' created barriers and was contributing to a suggested decline in multi-generational family volunteering in particular. We encourage organisations to think more about how they can strike the right balance between managing risk and being inclusive.
- 7. How can you help to ensure that families, and your organisation, get the most out of volunteering?** Volunteering can make a considerable difference to those families that get involved. It can deepen the bonds between family members and provide an enjoyable way to spend time together, a point of commonality and an expression of shared values and identity. It can also be a route to new opportunities and experiences. It can, however, add to the stresses and strains of family life, particularly when it becomes too onerous.

Organisations can also get a lot out of family volunteering, and the returns are likely to be even greater when families have a positive experience of volunteering. We encourage organisations to think more about how they can ensure that families get the most out of volunteering: not only will this improve the volunteering experience and outcomes for families, it will also improve the outcomes for organisations and their beneficiaries.

Additional resources

To help organisations reflect on how they currently involve families in volunteering and how they could develop this in the future, we have put together a [practical framework](#) based on our research findings

The [full research report](#) for the project, which includes several organisational and family case studies, is also available.

More about the research

Our research included:

An evidence review – a search of existing literature on family and volunteering. We found 232 relevant documents. Read the [full review report](#) and [blog](#).

Secondary analysis of the Time Use Survey – analysis of the UK Time Use Survey (UKTUS) 2014/2015 data. This is a nationally representative large-scale household survey, in which people aged eight and over from 4,216 households in the UK complete diaries about how they spend their time. Read the [blog](#) and [detailed report](#).

Mapping existing family volunteering opportunities – a review of organisational websites, expressions of interest and discussions with organisations.

Organisational case studies – research activities with five volunteer-involving organisations in England – [Kids Run Free](#), [Little Village](#), [St John Ambulance](#), [St Mary's church](#) in Wendover and [the Whitworth](#). Data collected included: interviews with staff/leaders; focus groups and/or interviews with volunteers; family case studies; a review of organisational documents and administrative data; observations of volunteering activities, where possible.

Case studies with families – the 12 case studies with families typically involved a joint interview and mapping activity with as many of the family members as possible followed by a series of one-to-one interviews with individual family members.

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We would like to thank all the people who have been involved in this research project. We are particularly indebted to our five case studies organisations, their staff, volunteers and wider family members: Kids Run Free, Little Village, St John Ambulance, St Mary's church, Wendover and the Whitworth. It has been an absolute pleasure meeting and working with you, and we are very grateful to you for sharing your stories and experiences so openly and honestly. Thank you.

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