Final evaluation of the Volunteering for Stronger Communities programme

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A report to NCVO

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Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

This final evaluation assesses the impact of the Volunteering for Stronger Communities (VSC) programme based on data collected between January 2012 and October 2013. It explores a range of themes including strategy, delivery, outcomes, learning and sustainability. A companion report - *'Making a difference: good practice and learning from the Volunteering for Stronger Communities programme*' - showcases good practice. Key findings from the final evaluation are outlined below.

Overall summary of impact

The **VSC programme is performing very well.** It has exceeded all of its core targets for supporting participants and VIOs against which it reports to BIG. The programme has displayed an impressive capacity to move individuals into volunteering and paid work. Employment outcomes compare favourably when benchmarked against the national Work Programme. Data also highlights important **'soft' outcomes** around employability, health and well-being which are **sustained over time**. There is a clear **'programme effect'** with participants and VIOs indicating that VSC support made a difference to positive outcomes experienced.

These findings suggest the core model of intensive, bespoke and innovative forms of support to increase access to volunteering is highly effective. Moreover, it is a model that works with comparatively modest funds.

Strategy and delivery

- there was a consensus that the main aim of the programme is to **increase access to volunteering among hard-to-reach groups.** The initial objective of supporting communities in recession has been superseded by a growing emphasis on employability to give the programme a more *'concrete'* focus.

- projects have proved **responsive** by revising services in the face of challenges including lower than expected demand, retention issues, the need to avoid duplication and underperformance against outcomes. This underscores the **value of a two year project** as it allows time to innovate but also reflect on, and adapt to, emerging challenges.

- projects were **positive about the relationship** with the central management team and highlighted their flexibility, responsiveness and support in adapting to challenges. They also valued being part of a national programme because of opportunities to share learning and good practice, although evaluation requirements were sometimes seen as excessive.

- **consortia** of Volunteer Centres **were generally seen to work well** and offer a number of benefits such as opportunities to share funding, gain awareness of mutual activities and draw on respective skills and expertise. However, there are also operational challenges in managing consortia because of variable levels of skills, capacity and commitment to the programme among partners.

- **external partnerships** were identified as an important source of referrals as well as opportunities for signposting, outreach, training and joint working. However, support from partners around referrals has not always been provided to the degree anticipated. VSC projects have responded by working with an increasingly diverse range of providers.

Programme performance

- the **VSC programme is performing strongly** by exceeding all eight programme-wide targets that relate to supporting participants and VIOs.

- achievement against project-specific targets is not quite as strong as programme-level performance, with 40 out of 54 targets met.

- the **main reasons for missing individual project targets** were inflexible output definitions, lower than anticipated referrals, retention issues and difficulties in tracking client outcomes. Positive steps had been taken to address challenges and there was no evidence of 'creaming' to meet shortfalls against targets.

Outcomes for participants

- **the VSC programme is effectively engaging 'hard-to-reach' individuals**: 78 per cent of people who have engaged with the programme meet its definition of being 'disadvantaged in the labour market'. Around half (53 per cent) of participants also have no GCSEs or equivalents.

- survey and interview data shows **tangible and sustained progress among participants**, particularly in terms of:

    - **volunteering**: 69 per cent of all distance travelled participants have volunteered at least once with 54 per cent still actively volunteering after 12 months. Nine out of ten individuals who not yet volunteered by the eight month point reported increased confidence in volunteering in the future..

    - **employment**: over **one in five (22 per cent) survey participants said they had found paid work** since participating in their local project. Data also showed improvements in employability in terms of confidence in finding work as well as the practical skills needed to secure paid employment.

    - **health and well-being:** there were notable improvements in outcomes around confidence and self-esteem.

- data clearly indicates **a clear 'VSC effect'** with a majority of participants agreeing that programme support made a difference to positive changes experienced.

- statistical modelling indicates that **volunteering is associated with a wider range of positive outcomes than work**, especially in terms of health and well-being. One potentially significant implication is that movement into work through volunteering may actually *reduce* positive outcomes experienced.

- the single most important factor identified in bringing about real change for participants was the quality and availability of staff.

Outcomes for Volunteer Centres and volunteer involving organisations

- the primary benefit to Volunteer Centres of involvement in the programme has been to **build capacity to support individuals with more intensive needs**. In turn, this enhanced operational capacity has provided additional strategic leverage to shape local and national agendas whilst leaving Volunteer Centres better positioned to secure future funding.

- survey responses show the project is effective in meeting aims around building the capacity of VIOs:

    - the programme has engaged organisations that tend to be smaller, local voluntary organisations and community groups that are heavily reliant on volunteers to carry out their work. This suggests VSC projects are effective at **targeting VIOs with the highest level of need** and with more of a community focus.

- VIOs surveyed were **highly positive about the impact of support** received from Volunteer Centres and identified improvements in their capacity to recruit, manage and develop the skills of volunteers.

- a total of 77 per cent of VIOs reported **a positive increase in volunteer numbers.** A significant degree of that increase in volunteer numbers was attributed to the support received from Volunteer Centres.

Sustainability

- sustaining VSC activities beyond the lifetime of the Programme is a **key concern** of projects given the constrained funding climate. Some projects are using VSC as a platform to reposition themselves strategically to secure funding from new commissioning structures and funding streams. Expectations of future funding increasingly centre as much, if not more, on developing contracting opportunities as winning grants.

Introduction

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1.1. The study

In January 2012 Volunteering England (now part of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)) commissioned the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University to conduct an evaluation of their Volunteering for Stronger Communities (VSC) programme. This final evaluation report looks at the **impact of the programme** based on data collected between January 2012 and October 2013. The programme formally ends in December 2013 so there may be further outcomes in the remaining two months of delivery. These will not be captured in this report but it is unlikely these would substantively change the findings presented below.

This evaluation draws on a series of data sources to identify impact:

- baseline and 'distance travelled' surveys of participants
- in-depth interviews with stakeholders, project staff and project participants
- a survey of volunteer involving organisations (VIOs).

Section 1.2 below provides an overview of the VSC programme. More detail on aims, objectives and the methods used in the study are outlined in Sections 1.3 and 1.4.

A note on terminology: for ease of understanding, the 15 VSC projects are referred to in the report as 'projects' whilst the overall VSC project is described as the 'programme'.

1.2. The Volunteering for Stronger Communities programme

Volunteering for Stronger Communities (VSC) is a £1.9 million programme funded by the Big Lottery Fund (BLF) to run from October 2011 to December 2013. Its **core aim** as outlined in the Business Plan[1] is to:

'use volunteering to help communities to tackle the effects of the economic downturn and subsequent public spending reductions whilst building and strengthening the capacity of volunteering infrastructure to provide more effective support to communities in future'.

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[1]Volunteering England (2011) *BASIS project Business Plan*. London: Volunteering England.

To this end, the Business Plan identified **a set of related objectives:**

- **increasing levels of volunteering** within disadvantaged groups and communities

- **improving employability** through volunteering and other forms of employment support to help those outside the labour market move closer to, or into, paid work

- **enhancing the skills, knowledge and resources of** both Volunteer Centres and the VIOs they support

- **strengthening the ability of Volunteer Centres and VIOs to influence** local, regional and national policies and practice through shared learning.

The VSC programme is managed centrally by NCVO but delivered locally by 15 different Volunteer Centres across England. Each project had a budget of approximately £100,000 over two years to deliver against programme objectives. Projects were selected through a competitive process on the basis of economic deprivation within their areas and their capacity to engage and support groups who are 'disadvantaged in the labour market'.

This 'disadvantaged' group includes the formally unemployed, as measured by benefit status, as well as those outside the labour market who are not in receipt of out-of-work benefits. Each project was asked to develop its own of definition of 'disadvantaged in the labour market' and the groups targeted across the programme include:

- demographic groups such as young people or ethnic minorities

- individuals with physical or mental health conditions or disabilities

- individuals with a record of homelessness, substance misuse or offending

- individuals living in disadvantaged areas as measured by statistical indicators of deprivation or worklessness

- lone parents

- specific groups out of work such as the long-term unemployed, young people not in education, employment or training ('NEETs') and the newly redundant.

The precise definitions of groups targeted by each project are listed in Appendix 1.

The 15 Volunteer Centres funded to deliver the programme are:

- Voluntary Action Sheffield

- Volunteer Centre Liverpool

- Blackburn with Darwen CVS

- Volunteer Bristol

- Volunteer Centre Sutton

- Tamworth Council for Voluntary Services

- Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action (OCVA)

- Volunteer Centre Dacorum (leading the Hertfordshire Consortium)

- Nottingham Community and Voluntary Services

- Voluntary Action Islington

- Lincolnshire Community and Voluntary Service
- Volunteer Cornwall
- Volunteer Centre Camden
- Exeter CVS
- 2D (County Durham).

For shorthand, projects are referred to by the place in their organisational name (for example, the 'Sheffield VSC project') with 2D described as 'Durham' and Volunteer Centre Dacorum as 'Hertfordshire'.

The strategic approach and mix of activities implemented by projects is discussed in more detail in Sections 3.2 and 3.3 below.

1.3. Aims and objectives of the evaluation

The aim of this evaluation is to assess the impact of the VSC programme upon the individuals and organisations involved. It addresses the original research brief which outlined a need to:

- **provide evidence of the impact** that this programme has, which can be used by Volunteering England (now part of NCVO), IVR and Volunteer Centres in future funding bids
- **identify learning** from the experiences of projects
- **provide examples of good practice** and identify learning from the programme which can be shared with the wider volunteer centre network and voluntary sector.

This final evaluation report focusses on the first two objectives in terms of identifying outcomes, impact and learning during the lifetime of the programme. A companion report highlights good practice from the same period.

Discussion with key stakeholders at an early phase of the research also identified three **priority themes**:

- the ability of the project to **increase access to volunteering among disadvantaged groups**
- the impact of project activities on the **employability** of participants
- the extent to which the VSC project **strengthens the capacity of Volunteer Centres and VIOs.**

These themes are explored throughout the remainder of this report. It should be emphasised that **this evaluation focuses on programme-wide processes and outcomes**. It does not attempt to measure the relative performance of individual projects against each other. This would not be appropriate given the different scale, aims, delivery methods and contexts of the 15 different projects.

A separate research programme is being undertaken by IVR to inform debates around volunteering at a national level and to provide useful insights for Volunteer Centres and practitioners who work to promote volunteering locally. This evaluation seeks to avoid any duplication, therefore, by focussing closely on the impact of the VSC programme rather than broader debates around volunteering and the role of Volunteer Centres.

1.4.   Research approach

This impact evaluation is informed by research undertaken between January 2012 and October 2013. Data collected up until October 2012 was presented in an Interim Report[2] published in November 2012. The findings presented in this final evaluation draw almost exclusively on data collected since the publication of the Interim Report, although a small amount of relevant information from the Interim Report is reproduced where relevant.

The research underpinning this report is based on four strands of activity:

- **a review of project and programme information** including business plans, progress reports and data collected for reporting to the Big Lottery Fund (BIG)
- **a series of in-depth interviews** conducted by telephone or face-to-face:
  - three interviews with key stakeholders from organisations involved in delivering VSC
  - 21 interviews with project or Volunteer Centre staff (1-2 per project)
  - 41 telephone interviews with project participants (approximately three per project)
- **a 'baseline' and 'distance travelled' survey of project participants** (explained in Sections 4.3 and 4.4)
- **an online survey of VIOs** (explained in Section 5.3).

Comments from participants and staff are sometimes presented without reference to the project concerned to protect anonymity where appropriate.

1.5.   Structure of the report

The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

- **Section 2** outlines the **policy and economic context** in which VSC projects operate
- **Section 3** considers the VSC programme in terms of strategy and delivery
- **Sections 4 and 5** look at overall programme performance and impact on participants (Section 4) and Volunteer Centres and VIOs (Section 5)
- **Section 6** concludes the report by reflecting on overall impact, learning, potential improvements and sustainability.

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[2] Available at http://www.volunteering.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/volunteering-for-stronger-communities1

The political and economic context

<div style="text-align: right">**2**</div>

This section looks at the economic and policy context in which the VSC programme operates. It reflects on the role of the evaluation in exploring how VSC projects are responding to these challenges.

2.1. Challenging times for Volunteer Centres and VIOs

The previous New Labour government actively **promoted volunteering** as a means of improving social and economic outcomes for both hard-to-reach groups and disadvantaged areas. The *Volunteering for All* strategy announced in 2006, for example, sought to provide volunteering opportunities for, among others, adults at risk of social exclusion. The Coalition Government has continued to support volunteering with David Cameron advocating a 'Big Society' after coming to power. This was built around a broad base of social action, including volunteering, as part of a wider agenda of 'localism'. A range of policy initiatives were introduced at the beginning of this term in office including the National Citizens Service, the Community Organisers Programme and the Giving White Paper, published in May 2011.

New initiatives continue to come on stream. The Centre for Social Action, a joint Cabinet Office and Nesta initiative, has been set up to help organisations *'mobilise people to take part in social action'*. The Department of Health's Health and Social Care Volunteering Fund (HSCVF) aims to support local and national voluntary sector organisations develop volunteer-led services in health or social care. Local examples of funding and support for volunteer-led and volunteering-involved projects are also emerging, particularly around health, public health and social care agendas. Radically reformed public sector structures and funding arrangements have also provided **new opportunities** for volunteer involvement in commissioning and service delivery.

This support for volunteering needs to be understood in the context of **sustained economic uncertainty and public spending cuts**. At the time of writing, the UK is experiencing a period of growth but unemployment has remained around 8 per cent of the working-age population since July 2011. As a result, many Volunteer Centres are facing high demand for their services from workless individuals who see volunteering as a way of building skills and experience to help them find employment. At the same time, local authority cuts as part of austerity measures have seen core funding for second tier volunteering infrastructure scaled back or stopped altogether. Supporting individuals and VIOs at a time of declining resources therefore represents a **major challenge** for Volunteer Centres, some of which have already shed staff or are under threat of closure.

VIOs also face cuts due to public spending reductions that could amount, according to one estimate, to £3.3 billion being lost from the sector each year[3]. Research undertaken in the Yorkshire and the Humber by CRESR shows these cuts could hit economically deprived areas hardest[4]. These areas are more dependent on public funding but, conversely, have lower levels of volunteering that could, potentially, 'fill the void'. At the same time, competition for other resources, particularly grants and philanthropic donations, is intensifying[5]. As a result of all these changes many VIOs, particularly those operating at the community level, increasingly need to use volunteers to deliver services previously provided by paid staff. This **places additional demands on volunteering infrastructure bodies** in terms of supporting VIOs to develop volunteering roles and build their capacity to recruit and support volunteers on limited resources.

Against this political and economic background, this evaluation of the VSC programme plays **an important role in demonstrating the value and effectiveness of Volunteer Centres.** It will show whether, and how, they are supporting individuals and VIOs to develop innovative responses to withstand current and future economic challenges.

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[3] NCVO (2011) *Response to the Giving Green Paper*. London: NCVO.
[4] Wells, P. *et al.* (2011) *A Big Society in Yorkshire and The Humber*? Sheffield: CRESR.
[5] See Macmillan, R. (2008) Understanding the idea of 'grant dependency' in the voluntary and community sector. *People, Place and Policy Online,* 1 (1), pp. 30-38; and Pharoah, C. (2011) Private giving and philanthropy – their place in the Big Society. *People, Place and Policy Online*, 5 (2), pp. 65-75.

The VSC programme:
strategy and delivery

3

3.1. Overview

This section looks at a series of themes related to strategy and delivery including:

- the strategic approach of the VSC programme and projects
- staffing and services
- the delivery model
- partnership working.

Key messages from this section include:

- there is a consensus that the main aim of the programme is to **increase access to volunteering among hard-to-reach groups.** The initial objective of supporting communities in recession has been replaced more by a growing emphasis on employability to give the programme a more *'concrete'* focus.

- projects have proved **responsive** by revising services in the face of challenges including lower than expected demand, retention issues, the need to avoid duplication and underperformance against outcomes. This underscores the **value of a two year project** as it allows time to innovate but also reflect on, and adapt to, emerging challenges.

- projects were **positive about the relationship** with the central management team and highlighted their flexibility, responsiveness and support in adapting to challenges. They also **valued being part of a national programme** because of opportunities for sharing learning and good practice, although evaluation requirements were sometimes seen as excessive.

- **consortia** of Volunteer Centres **were generally seen to work well** and offer a number of benefits such as opportunities to share funding, gain awareness of mutual activities and draw on respective skills and expertise. However, there are also operational challenges in managing consortia because of variable levels of skills, capacity and commitment to the programme among partners.

- **external partnerships** were identified as an important source of referrals as well as opportunities for signposting, outreach, training and joint working. However, support from partners around referrals has not always been provided to the degree anticipated. VSC projects have responded by working with an increasingly diverse range of providers.

3.2. Strategic approach of the VSC programme and projects

Interviews with key stakeholders and project staff show that the VSC programme is conceived fundamentally as a way of **increasing access to volunteering among hard-to-reach groups**. This fulfils a number of related objectives:

- **enhancing the health and well-being of individuals:** helping individuals facing barriers such as health conditions or disabilities, low confidence, social isolation or poor self-esteem is seen as a key part of projects' remit.

- **improving employability:** all projects cited improving employability as an important objective, although the degree of emphasis varied across projects. One observed, for example, that volunteering remained the '*ultimate objective*' with employability a valuable but secondary object. This view was sometimes validated with reference to the lack of 'hard' employment targets attached to the programme. Others saw enhancing employability as a critical part of their remit: '*the justification is work*'.

- **developing the capacity of volunteer centres:** some projects regard VSC as an opportunity to increase existing, or develop new, capacity particularly in terms of supporting individuals with additional needs. Delivering VSC was also seen as way of encouraging '*learning*' [Sheffield] and reflection to improve practice. Stakeholders emphasised the role of VSC as a valuable 'demonstration project' to showcase innovative forms of delivery to promote and support volunteering among more vulnerable groups. They hope the experience will leave projects and the wider Volunteer Centre network better placed strategically to secure future funding opportunities, particularly where related to improving employability.

- **building the capacity of VIOs:** projects consistently identified building the capacity of VIOs as an important objective in terms of supporting them with recruitment and management of volunteers; establishing volunteer roles and policies; and training volunteer co-ordinators. Central to this is encouraging and supporting VIOs to provide placements to volunteers with additional needs who they might not otherwise be able to host

- **creating more resilient communities:** projects continue to see their activities as strengthening communities 'by default'. This occurs either through the direct support of Volunteer Centres to individuals in disadvantaged areas or by working with VIOs that have social aims and objectives. However, there was also a clear sense that VSC had become less of a '*recession project*' [stakeholder] to support communities as originally envisaged. Instead, there was now a greater emphasis on improving individual employability. This refocus was considered appropriate as employability was seen as a more '*concrete and tangible'* aim than supporting communities.

Cutting across accounts was a sense that, if anything, the **need for the project had intensified** even if the UK had officially moved out of recession. It was noted, for example, by one project that demand for volunteering experience as a route into work had grown since programme inception, both among the unemployed and the 'underemployed' seeking to secure better work or longer hours. Some projects also observed that VIOs hit by cuts in funding were increasingly looking for volunteers to maintain capacity. Furthermore, support needs had increased among VIOs that could no longer afford a dedicated volunteer co-ordinator.

3.3. Staffing and services

The 15 projects all have at least one paid member who is usually supported by volunteers who assist with a range of tasks including administration, arranging appointments, providing advice and guidance, promoting activities, running workshops or volunteer clubs, liaising with VIOs and undertaking outreach activities.

There is **widespread variation in the package of activities each project provides** although common to nearly all is a core volunteering brokerage service. Using VSC funding, projects have developed existing services into **an enhanced 'brokerage plus'** offer through some combination of:

- **implementing or extending outreach activities** to engage potential volunteers outside the centre: these are undertaken in a number of ways such as 'drop-ins' at community centres or on the premises of community-based organisations; stalls at Jobcentres or job fairs; and workshops delivered for external organisations working with vulnerable groups.

- **providing more intensive one-to-one support for new participants:** the precise nature and frequency of contact varies but all projects offer a series of in-depth 'one-to-ones' with clients to explore needs, aspirations and experience.

- **providing 'Introduction to Volunteering' workshops** to explore the nature of volunteering and how to get involved. This is mostly unaccredited although Blackburn is set to offer an Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) accredited course delivered on the premises by Accrington College. Oxfordshire also run accredited Community Volunteering courses. In addition, some projects run workshops on other themes such as anger management and confidence building to reduce the barriers to volunteering.

Alongside this core 'brokerage plus' package, projects have **used VSC funding to enhance or introduce other forms of support** to individuals, organisations and communities such as:

- **employability support:** this covers Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) including sessions from visiting National Careers Service (NCS) advisers; 1-2-1 or group support with CV writing, job applications or jobsearch; mock interviews; signposting to training or educational opportunities; and Job Clubs delivered in partnership with other organisations.

- **training for volunteers:** projects offer a range of free training for participants that includes courses on First Aid, Food Safety and Health and Safety.

- **additional support for VIOs** such as helping them develop volunteer policies and agreements; creating new volunteer roles and profiles; and running workshops, courses or networking forums for volunteer managers. Central to this is delivering support to VIOs to enable them to host volunteers with additional support needs such as mental health issues or those with a background of homelessness or offending.

- **training and supporting mentors:** five VSC projects (Bristol, Sutton, Durham, Lincolnshire and Liverpool) have recruited and trained mentors to work more intensively with clients with additional needs. Mentors help participants to access volunteering, training or employment as well as support them in addressing a range of personal issues such as low confidence or self-esteem. Activities include taking clients to visit organisations, undertaking social activities to build confidence and helping to arrange volunteering placements.

- **signposting to other provision** including courses on ICT, ESOL or basic skills, confidence building, enterprise support and 'informal training' at local community centres such as using computers, mobile phones or skype.

- **training volunteer co-ordinators** to support VIOs: uniquely among projects, Camden has trained a cohort of volunteer co-ordinators to help VIOs recruit, support and manage volunteers.

The core package of services delivered by projects has remained broadly consistent since programme inception. However, some projects have **made changes to particular activities** in response to emerging issues. These changes include:

- **reducing the duration of involvement:** some projects reduced the length of activities when they realised participants found it difficult to commit for the period initially expected. Camden cut its one-year mentoring programme down whilst Hertfordshire divided its four day employability course into discrete one-day components to increase take-up in three out of the nine districts it operates in.

- **increased tailoring of activities:** VSC projects sometimes discovered that demand for activities did not materialise as expected and revised activities accordingly. Tamworth found take-up of general 'taster' days at VIOs was low despite widespread promotion so arranged bespoke taster sessions for participants with VIOs of interest.

- **expanding the reach of projects:** Sheffield sought to increase its community reach by delivering services one-day a week through an additional community venue. This followed the recommendation of a mid-term evaluation that the project expand to support volunteers and VIOs in new areas.

- **cutting courses to avoid duplication:** training around employability, anger management and confidence building was cut back by some projects once they realised there was provision elsewhere in the district. This enabled them to focus on core strengths around promoting and supporting volunteering.

- **introducing new services:** Cornwall implemented a wholly new package of training activities in response to lower than anticipated demand for its Timebanking activities. This reconfiguration is helping it to progress quicker towards achieving targets around supporting individuals new to volunteering.

These examples illustrate that **projects have proved responsive** by revising services in the face of unanticipated challenges including lower than expected demand, difficulties faced by participants in engaging with projects, the need to avoid duplication or underperformance against outcomes. This underscores **the value of a two year project** which allows time to innovate but also to reflect and adapt to emerging issues.

3.4. The delivery model

The VSC programme is managed centrally by an external programme manager with the support of an internal programme assistant. The programme manager is responsible for ensuring that programmes are delivering to budget and making progress against targets, as well as helping them plan for sustainability. The current programme manager was recruited mid-way through the lifetime of the programme to replace the first programme manager.

Project staff interviewed were invited to comment on their relationship with the programme management team and their experience of the change in personnel. They were positive about the current manager who was described respectively as *'great'*, *'accessible'*, *'responsive'* and *'a very strong wall to lean on'*.

The relationship was seen to work particularly well in terms of:

- **flexibility around targets:** projects felt the programme manager had been responsive to requests for re-profiling where there were legitimate reasons for shortfalls against targets.

- **responsiveness:** the programme manager was described as supportive and quick to respond to requests for information or support.

- **appropriate levels of communication:** excessive levels of emails and information were seen to have become more manageable with the change in programme manager.

- **support in adapting to challenges:** one project that revised activities to boost outcomes in the face of shortfalls against targets credited the programme manager with facilitating that change: *'Without her we would be submitting a failure report'*.

Projects also reflected, though, that the change in personnel did cause **some loss of continuity** as the new staff acquainted themselves with the programme and projects. Working with two central programme staff members for the first time was also seen as less straightforward at first until the responsibilities of each became clear.

Projects largely valued the experience of delivering the VSC project as **part of a national network**. Benefits identified include:

- **the opportunity to share learning, resources and good practice:** bi-annual group meetings were highlighted as useful forums to learn from peers: '*Two or three of the other projects are running a mentoring based project. It's always good to catch up with them'* [Sutton]. Themed webinars on topics such as supporting volunteers with mental health issues were viewed as highly useful, particularly as virtual hosting eliminated issues with the location of meetings.

- at the same time, the wide variety of activities delivered by projects meant opportunities for sharing and adopting specific elements of good practice were sometimes limited: *'we all run different projects and we all run them in different ways'*. That said, projects clearly valued peer support around generic issues such as managing multiple projects.

- **being part of a national evaluation:** some projects felt the evaluation will provide useful data in showcasing achievements in future funding bids. At the same time, the demands of monitoring and particularly evaluation were sometimes considered excessive (see also Section 6.3).

- **receiving information about future funding opportunities:** projects shared information on options for sustainability. For example, one project that successfully set up a contract with their local Probation Service to mentor service users inspired a number of other VSC projects to explore this possibility.

3.5. Partnerships: consortia and external partners

All VSC projects have developed partnerships with other organisations. This includes **consortia** with other Volunteer Centres or CVSs in the case of six projects as well as **external partnerships** with organisations in the public, private or third sector. This section considers each in turn.

Consortia

The Durham, Hertfordshire, Cornwall, Exeter, Oxfordshire and Tamworth VSC projects are all delivered through consortia of local Volunteer Centres with one Volunteer Centre in each area acting as the lead partner. In some cases, the lead partner has set up formal subcontracts or Service Level Agreements (SLAs) with the other participating centres. Consortia were **generally seen to work well and to offer a number of benefits** that included:

- **expanding the number of Volunteer Centres benefitting from VSC funding:** sharing funding across consortia was considered a vital way of sustaining Volunteer Centres in a period of constrained funding.

- **better understanding of their respective offer:** Volunteer Centres participating in consortia valued the opportunity to learn more about the approach and delivery models of partners.

- **increasing the range of skills and expertise:** Oxfordshire noted, for example, that Volunteer Centres within their consortium drew on respective expertise to build mutual capacity in working with vulnerable groups. This proved particularly useful for smaller Volunteer Centres with less prior experience of supporting the hard-to-reach.

At the same time, delivery of VSC projects through consortia **presented a number of challenges:**

- **instability within the consortia:** a small number of Volunteer Centres within consortia closed down due to lack of funding or experienced staff changes. One consortium had' *'tailed off'* because key staff in other Volunteer Centres had either left the organisation or not engaged to the level expected.

- **bridging different approaches:** one lead partner observed that communicating with partners that took a less strategic and more delivery-focussed approach had been challenging.

- **variable levels of commitment to VSC activities:** one project found that staff in other Volunteer Centres did not provided the referrals anticipated despite the availability of payments. This was attributed to '*sheer pressure'* among Volunteer Centres *'struggling'* to operate with reduced staff and funding. Another project described having to *'badger and badger'* some partners that were making less progress with achieving targets or reporting outcomes.

- **sharing targets:** one consortium that shared targets equally among partners observed, with hindsight, that this did not reflect different levels of capacity. One partner, for example, received a number of referrals from the National Careers Service whose clients tended to be more interested in securing work than volunteering.

The mixed experience of delivering projects through consortia suggests that **effective partnership across Volunteer Centres requires careful planning and management**. Responsibilities and targets need to be allocated in a way that reflects variable capacity across Volunteer Centres. As one stakeholder reflected, lead partners also need the time and resources to manage consortia. There are a number of benefits to working with other Volunteer Centres, not least in building expertise, but this has to be balanced against the operational challenges of delivering a project across multiple organisations.

External partners

Working with external partners is widely regarded as **enhancing the scope, reach and effectiveness of projects** in a number of ways including opportunities to:

- **bring in additional expertise to support clients:** some projects offer participants IAG sessions with visiting NCS advisers.

- **secure outreach venues** to run drop-in sessions, training or workshops at venues including supported housing, community centres and Jobcentre Plus.

- **generate referrals from key agencies** such as Jobcentre Plus, IAG providers, housing associations, universities, Probation Service, support services for individual with disabilities or mental health conditions, and drug and alcohol support agencies.

- **provide opportunities to signpost to external provision** including employability provision, accredited training, Work Clubs, IAG as well as provision around health, welfare rights and housing.

- **build the capacity of project staff to work with vulnerable clients:** Bristol's relationship with the local Mental Health Trust not only generates referrals but also enables them to benefit from training and peer support from the Trust around working with individuals with mental health conditions.

- **develop new volunteering opportunities:** Liverpool are currently developing a link with the Norris Green Community Alliance which has provided new volunteering opportunities.

However some **challenges** were observed in relations with external partners such as:

- **partner agencies not delivering the promised levels of referrals:** Jobcentre Plus and, in particular, Work Programme providers were seen as failing to make referrals despite the potential value of VSC support to their clients: *'there are a lot of organisations out there that are being paid to do something we can do better'.*

- **partner agencies making inappropriate referrals;** Jobcentre Plus was criticised by a number of projects for referring individuals under threat of benefit sanctions. One project noted that this conflicted with the voluntary ethos of projects and also lowered retention rates: *'at least 50 per cent don't turn up for their interviews. Of those that do, half of them are only there because their advisor told them to attend an appointment'.* Inappropriate referrals were seen to be increasing as Jobcentre Plus refer growing numbers of individuals who have completed the Work Programme but not found employment

  A number of projects have tried to engage with Jobcentre Plus to resolve this issue with variable success. One project found them willing to make more appropriate referrals on the basis they did not want clients to lose access to volunteering opportunities Others have found JCP staff difficult to access or unreceptive to requests to change their referral approach.

- **the closure of referral services:** one project observed that the closure of several employability services as European Structural Fund support ended had cut off an important source of referrals,

- **competition from other providers:** a previous referral partner for one VSC project started competing for similar clients following successful bids to deliver training and employability provision.

Overall, there is a clear view of the importance of working with partners combined with a recognition that anticipated benefits do not always materialise. It was notable, therefore, that in the period since the interim report VSC projects appear to have **diversified the range of partners** they work with. This perhaps reflects an early realisation of the risk of relying on a small number of more obvious partners, particularly in terms of key employment service providers such Jobcentre Plus. There seems far more engagement with statutory providers and voluntary and community sector organisations working in different areas such as health, education, care and the prevention of re-offending.

Programme-wide performance and participant outcomes

<div style="text-align: right; font-size: large;">4</div>

4.1. Overview

This section considers the performance of the VSC project in terms of:

- overall achievement against targets

- capacity to engage and support hard-to-reach individuals

- outcomes experienced by participants in relation to volunteering, employment, health and well-being and community involvement

- explaining outcomes.

Key findings include:

- the **VSC programme is performing strongly** by exceeding all eight programme-wide targets that relate to supporting participants and VIOs

- **achievement against project-specific targets is not quite as strong** as programme-level performance, with 40 out of 54 targets met

- the main reasons for missing shared or individual targets were inflexibility of target definitions, lower than anticipated referrals, retention issues and difficulties in tracking client outcomes. Positive steps had been taken to address challenges impacting on outcomes and there was no evidence of 'creaming' to make up shortfalls

- **the VSC programme is effectively engaging 'hard-to-reach' individuals**: 78 per cent of people who have engaged with the programme meet its definition of being 'disadvantaged in the labour market'. Around half (53 per cent) of participants also have no GCSEs or equivalents

- survey and interview data shows **tangible and sustained progress among participants**, particularly in terms of:

  - **volunteering:** 69 per cent of all distance travelled participants have volunteered at least once with 54 per cent still actively volunteering after 12 months. Nine out of ten individuals who not yet volunteered by the eight month point reported increased confidence in volunteering in the future

- employment: over **one in five (22 per cent) survey participants said they had found paid work** since participating in their local project. Data also showed improvements in employability in terms of confidence in finding work as well as the practical skills needed to secure paid employment

- **health and well-being:** there were notable improvements in outcomes around confidence and self-esteem.

- data indicates **a clear 'VSC programme effect'** with a majority of participants agreeing that support made a difference to positive changes experienced

- statistical modelling indicates that **volunteering is associated with wider range of positive outcomes than work**, especially in terms of health and well-being. One potentially significant implication is that movement into work through volunteering may actually *reduce* positive outcomes experienced

- the single most important factor identified in bringing about real change for participants was the **quality and availability of staff**. Other success factors identified by staff included mentoring to support clients with additional needs; the skills and expertise of staff; additional capacity provided by project volunteers; outreach work; discretionary funding and addressing the full range of barriers experienced by participants.

4.2.   Overall achievement against targets

The VSC project reports on 11 'shared' programme-wide targets on a six monthly basis to the Big Lottery Fund (BIG), with data collected quarterly. Cumulative performance against eight of the 11 key targets over two years is detailed in Table 4.1 below. These indicators have been selected because they directly relate to supporting volunteers or VIOs[6].

Table 4.1: Cumulative targets and performance of the programme up until Quarter 8

TARGET	Q8 cumulative target	Q8 cumulative achieved	% or target met (except where indicated by *)
Numbers of individuals new to volunteering taking part in the project	4674	5114	109.4
Numbers of volunteers supporting the project	222	305	137.4
Numbers of volunteers trained/awarded qualifications	803	1206	150.2
% of individuals supported that have started volunteering*	25%	33%	+ 8 percentage points
Number of individuals participating in the project from groups defined as disadvantaged in the labour market	3568	4485	125.7
% of individuals in target group that have started volunteering*	25%	34%	+ 9 percentage points

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[6] The other three indicators relate to 'engagement with local partners', 'dissemination of reports' and 'articles published'.

New volunteering roles created	702	1100	156.7
New volunteer involving organisations supported	259	382	147.5

*Calculated as percentage point change (rather than cumulative achieved as a proportion of cumulative target) because base figures expressed as a percentage.

These figures show that t**he VSC project is performing strongly against core targets against which it reports to BIG.**

In addition to programme-wide targets, each project has unique 'individual' targets that relate to their specific activities. For example, Bristol has a target around recruiting mentors whilst Hertfordshire has a target for number of local businesses involved. Out of a total of 54 targets, 41 have been matched or exceeded[7]. The remaining 13 outputs were missed by varying degrees with only seven missed by a margin of more than 20 per cent. This indicates that **performance at project level against project-specific targets is not quite as strong as it is at programme level**. It is perhaps to be expected, however, that individual project targets are more likely to be missed than programme-wide targets. Underperformance cannot be 'balanced out' by overperformance by other projects in the same way.

Where shared or individual targets had not been reached, projects were asked to reflect on the reasons for underperformance. Explanations for missing targets included:

- **challenges in recruiting individuals new to volunteering:** projects expressed frustration that even one day's prior volunteering in the last 12 months meant individuals could not be counted against this target. It was suggested the criteria could have been relaxed to differentiate between committed and occasional volunteers

- **a lack of anticipated referrals from key partners** (see section 3.4)

- **innovative approaches failing to engage clients:** one project that had not followed the core brokerage model adopted by most other projects found their approach failed to engage target numbers. One reason suggested is that they lacked minimum staffing levels widely regarded as essential to deliver their community-based approach

- **difficulties in retaining clients:** a small number of projects reported 'no shows' or 'drop outs' as a factor limiting achievements against targets. Reasons included competing demands from mandatory employment provision as well as 'chaotic lifestyles' and health issues that made it difficult for participants to maintain commitment. One project suggested the targets set did not recognise the intensity of work required to support more vulnerable individuals

- **challenges in tracking outcomes among clients:** low response rates to emails requesting information on destinations following 'drop-in' support was identified as a contributing factor to lower outputs by one project. This lack of information meant reported outputs may underestimate the true number of individuals that moved into volunteering.

Projects that had not yet achieved targets had **taken active steps to address barriers**. This included re-profiling targets with the agreement of the Programme Manager and reconfiguring, or introducing new, services to generate additional outputs. Encouragingly, there was **no evidence that projects had attempted to**

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[7] As measured by cumulative performance up to and including Quarter 8 against lifetime target.

meet shortfalls by 'creaming' more volunteer-ready individuals. Moreover, there also confidence among projects that they could meet lifetime project targets in the time remaining.

4.3. Engaging the hard-to-reach

One of the VSC programme's four core outcomes on which it reports to the Big Lottery Fund is that 'more people from 'hard-to-reach' groups will be volunteering and barriers to their engagement will have been identified and removed'. The definition of these groups is detailed above in Section 1.2. As shown in Table 4.1. above, the VSC programme has exceeded targets for engaging individuals who are 'disadvantaged in the labour market' by 27 per cent by recruiting 4,524 individuals against a target of 3,568.

Additional data collected for the evaluation confirms that the VSC programme has **effectively reached disadvantaged individuals.** This data was collected through **a baseline survey** undertaken with all participants when they first engaged with the programme. It covered key demographic details such as age and gender as well as information about qualifications, volunteering history and labour market status. Data collected on a total of 2,393 new participants by the end of August 2013 shows:

* 15 per cent of people identified themselves as having a disability

* 23 per cent were from ethnic minority groups self-reported as black (ten per cent), Asian (six per cent), mixed (five per cent) and 'other' (two per cent)

* 15 per cent had no formal qualifications at all whilst 53 per cent had no GCSEs or equivalent

* 70 per cent were unemployed while only eight per cent said they were in paid work. Of the remaining 22 per cent, seven per cent were 'non-employed', six per cent were unable to work, five per cent were students, two per cent had retired and three per cent were housepersons.

Particularly significant in terms of evidencing engagement with hard-to-reach groups are the high numbers out of paid work (90 per cent across all non-working categories excluding retirees) as well the proportion of those with limited levels of formal education (53 per cent with no GSCEs).

Overall, the baseline survey shows **78 per cent of people who have engaged with the programme meet its definition of being disadvantaged in the labour market**. Qualitative work supports this conclusion in highlighting engagement across projects with ex-offenders, individuals with learning disabilities or mental health conditions, residents in supported accommodation, recovering substance misusers, the former homeless, and long-term carers for sick or disabled family members. This clearly shows that the project is engaging with some of the most marginalised or isolated groups in society. Evidently, it is important not just to engage this group but also to support them into volunteering, paid work or other activities in order to achieve positive outcomes. The following section considers these outcomes for participants.

4.4. Outcomes for participants

Outcomes for project participants have been captured through interviews with project staff and participants as well as data collected through the baseline and 'distance travelled' surveys. The baseline survey is explained above (Section 4.3) whilst the distance travelled survey is detailed below.

The distance travelled survey

The distance travelled survey collected information on a selection of participants from each project every four months. For each project, this involved selecting up to ten individuals who joined the project at four different points in time (approximately 40 in total per project). The timetable for recruiting and measuring distance travelled for these four cohorts is shown in Table 4.2 below. For example, Cohort 1 was recruited by each project in the period shortly before April 2012. Each individual in this cohort completed a baseline questionnaire in this period. Projects then follow up this cohort every four months until July 2013 to complete a total of four distance travelled questionnaires. Overall, distance travelled data was collected for 330 participants across the programme.

Table 4.2: Timetable for recruiting participants and measuring distance travelled for each VSC project

	Month in which individuals joined the project	Months in which distance travelled was measured			
		July 2012	*November 2012*	*March 2013*	*July 2013*
Cohort 1	*Prior to April 2012*	✔	✔	✔	✔
Cohort 2	*July 2012*	N/A	✔	✔	✔
Cohort 3	*November 2012*	N/A	N/A	✔	✔
Cohort 4	*March 2013*	N/A	N/A	N/A	✔

Projects experienced quite **high levels of diminishing returns** from the distance travelled questionnaires. It became increasingly difficult to track participants after the first distance travelled questionnaire was completed four months after signing up. Table 4.3 provides an overview of the number of distance travelled questionnaires completed at each time point:

Table 4.3: Number of distance travelled questionnaires completed at each time point

	Time since first engagement with VSC projects			
	4 months	*8 months*	*12 months*	*16 months*
Number completed	330	116	50	9

This pattern of diminishing returns is not surprising. Some participants may have changed contact details. Others declined to take part in later repeat surveys, especially once they were no longer involved with the project. Nonetheless, the ability to measure progress for a significant number of participants up until 12 months after initial contact provides a **rare opportunity** to assess change brought about by the project over time.

Analysis shows that the subset of participants for whom distance travelled was measured were **comparably disadvantaged to *all* participants** as measured through the baseline survey. Ninety one per cent of 'distance travelled' participants were not in paid work compared to 92 per cent of all 'baseline' participants. Moreover, 69 per cent were looking for work compared to 73 per cent overall. Distributions in terms of age, gender and ethnicity were also broadly similar. In other words, the distance travelled subset closely resembles the overall body of participants. This

means that findings around distance travelled are therefore to reflect progress made by all programme participants. It is *not* a self-selecting sample of those likely to perform best.

Participant outcomes were measured around **four broad themes** linked to the overall aims of the programme: volunteering, employability, health and well-being, and involvement in the community. These are addressed in turn in the sections that follow. The majority of the analysis focusses on outcomes at 4 and 8 months following first engagement with the VSC project as the data is more limited for participants at the 12 and 16 month point.

Volunteering

Responses to the distance travelled survey show the VSC programme has played an important part in helping individuals to move into, or consider taking up, volunteering positions. Overall, 69 per cent of all distance travelled participants have volunteered at some point. Looking at responses among only those who completed distance travelled forms after eight months provides a picture of how outcomes are sustained over time:

- three quarters (75 per cent) of participants had **engaged in volunteering**. Of these, two-thirds (66 per cent) said they were volunteering on a regular basis (at least several times a month). However, 28 per cent were not volunteering any more.

- a large majority (95 per cent) of participants who had volunteered acknowledged the **importance of the support provided by VSC projects**: 67 per cent said it had been 'very important 'and 29 per cent said it had been 'quite important' in helping them volunteer.

- nine out of ten (91 per cent) respondents who had not yet volunteered said the support provided had helped with their **confidence about volunteering** at some point in the future: 67 per cent said it had helped 'a lot' and 24 per cent said it had helped 'a little'.

Project support clearly plays an important role in supporting individuals to move into volunteering and, crucially, **sustain volunteering activities**. Additional data shows that the total proportion of all distanced travelled participants actively volunteering at least once a month remains stable: 57 per cent at four months; 51 per cent at eight months; and 53 per cent at the 12 months. This suggests active volunteering does not drop off over time.

Data also indicate **low levels of 'deadweight'** in terms of the extent to which volunteering would have occurred anyway. The survey shows nine out of ten respondents feel the project played some role in finding volunteering placements.

Interviews confirm survey findings with many individuals crediting VSC support with moving them closer to, or into, volunteering through **making volunteering accessible.** For example, one participant new to volunteering who found a placement supporting individuals with learning disabilities observed the pivotal role of the VSC project worker: '*I was not sure how to go about* [volunteering] *but the* [project worker] *sorted it all out for me. Without them I would never have known how to get into it'.* Projects also helped participants **overcome barriers around low confidence and self-esteem** (see Box 1 below). Some interviewees suggested they may have found placements anyway but the majority indicated that VSC support contributed in some way to volunteering activities.

Box 1: Building confidence and self-esteem

Karen lives in supporting housing unit in a city in the south of England. She has only worked sporadically over the last five years due to a history of substance misuse. Karen became interested in volunteering after attending an outreach session provided by one of the VSC projects. She felt this would provide a valuable opportunity to spend time outside of her flat and get experience in a structured but supportive environment: '*I wanted to get out of the life I was leading, away from drugs and idiots but I was worried about jumping into work and messing up'.*

The VSC project identified a suitable opportunity in the distribution centre of a local charity. Karen observed she may never have taken this up without the support and encouragement of the project worker: *'I would have backed out the interview otherwise, walked there and wimped out. I don't like rejection. I had a major confidence issue but* [the project worker] *makes you feel so much better'.*

Karen now volunteers regularly and describes feeling '*a lot happier in myself. I don't feel so worthless'.* She plans on undertaking a Health and Safety course as part of the placement. There is also a possibility that the VIO where she is placed might be able to provide her with a paid position. Finally, the experience of volunteering has made a real difference to her confidence and motivation to work: *'I'm now actually applying for jobs and want to work. Before volunteering I didn't want to try'.*

Employability

Data from surveys and interviews shows the VSC project has been effective in moving participants into work. Overall, **72 participants (22 per cent) who completed a distance travelled survey said they had found paid work** since participating in their local project. This is a credible performance, especially when benchmarked against outcomes achieved by national programmes. The latest figures for the Work Programme, for example, show that 14.7 per cent of all referrals achieve a job outcome payment.[8]

Of the individuals who found paid work following participation with a VSC project, more than half (58 per cent) had been out of work for over 12 months. This shows that the majority of those supported into work have been without paid employment for periods usually associated with 'long-term unemployment'. Moreover, 72 per cent (52 individuals) of those who found paid work were 'disadvantaged in the LM' at the baseline stage. VSC projects are **clearly effective in supporting individuals some distance from the labour market back to work**.

Furthermore, there is evidence that **VSC support was perceived to make a difference where individuals found work**. Two-thirds (66 per cent) acknowledged the importance of the support provided with 38 per cent saying it had been 'very important' and 29 per cent that it had been 'quite important'. **VSC also had a notable impact in terms of moving individuals closer to work**.

Survey findings are also supported by qualitative evidence illustrating how VSC projects played a role in moving participants into paid employment through:

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[8] This is measured by job outcome payments made to providers. Outcome payments are first made at either 13 or 26 weeks depending on the client group. Job outcome payments for ESA claimants are notably lower at around four per cent but it would be misleading to compare these to VSC outcomes as only 15 per cent of clients reported a disability when completing the baseline questionnaire. Figures refer to all referrals onto the Programme between June 1 2011 to June 30 2013. Data is taken from '*Work Programme Official Statistics to June 2013'* available at
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/245184/work-programme-statistical-release-sep13.pdf

- **expanding social networks as a source of job opportunities:** one participant placed as a volunteer with a local swimming club found two jobs as a driver through contact with parents whose children attended the club.

- **enhanced confidence and motivation:** a volunteer administrator with one of the VSC projects attributes this experience during a period of depression with renewing her resolve to find work. She eventually secured two positions as an adviser and administrator and attributes this to her volunteer placement: '*I doubt that I'd be back in the workplace if I had not volunteered. My confidence definitely improved'.*

- **improved job search skills:** one participant now working for the local authority felt that VSC project support with interview preparation played an important role in securing the post.

More detailed examples of how VSC projects helped participants to access employment are outlined in Box 2 below:

Box 2: Where volunteering leads to paid work

Example 1: Debbie

Debbie had not worked for two years because of a debilitating health condition. Prior to this, she had been *'in and out of work'* in the care industry. She approached her local Volunteer Centre to find out more about volunteering opportunities and was offered a part-time placement at the Volunteer Centre as an administrator. She flourished in the role and felt she gained a range of valuable skills and experience, enhanced confidence and opportunities for social interaction:

'Before I started I had no confidence. Now I've got enough confidence to put myself forward. I'm on a lot better on the phone. Before I was really nervous and stuttering. It's certainly boosted my IT skills. I've also made a lot of new friends. Everyone in the CVS is great. It's like one big family.'

Debbie was eventually offered a paid role as an administrator at the Volunteer Centre and is now responsible, among other things, for liaising with clients and ensuring evaluation questionnaires are completed. She attributes the progress she has made and moving into work directly to the experience of volunteering through the VSC project: *'The job came about through volunteering. I could not have got it without it'.*

Debbie has since gone on to gain a Btec in Business Administration and also reports improved quality of life with spillover benefits for family and friends: *'My husband says I've been a lot better and a lot more confident. He says it feels like a 'new me'. I haven't got to sit and dwell on health problems'.*

Example 2: Kate

Kate began volunteering as an adviser with one VSC project after being made redundant from a paid IAG position she had held for over 20 years. The role involves interviewing clients interested in volunteering and helping them identify volunteer opportunities. She also provides support with CV writing and interview preparation.

Kate values volunteering as an opportunity to enable her to maintain the practical and vocational skills she honed in her long career as an IAG adviser. Other benefits from volunteering identified by Kate included enhanced confidence as well as a sense of routine and structure: *'There's nothing worse than being at home and not having a structure. It was getting quite dispiriting. Applying for work was demoralising as well as I wasn't getting anywhere. The competition's tough'.*

Kate has also gained new experience in working with individuals facing additional barriers to work such as addiction or mental health problems. She credits this experience with helping her to find a job as Work Club manager for a charity that supports disabled people into work: *'My careers background helped but the experience of working with people with different impairments also made a difference at the interview. Getting that job was a real achievement'.*

| **Example 3: David** |
| --- |
| David previously worked in a skilled business administration role but had to give up his job after suffering an injury. He then struggled to get back into work as his qualifications were out of date. David eventually started to volunteer through one of the VSC projects in a customer service role in a financial organisation to gain new skills and experience. He was highly positive about the role, not least because it matched his interests and aspirations: |
| *'I didn't realise there was that much opportunity and scope in volunteering. I went to check it out and I was just really surprised. It wasn't a case of working in a charity shop although it was the first thing that jumped into my mind when volunteering was mentioned to me. I didn't realise there were so many professional aspects to it so that gave me a lot of hope and inspiration'.* |
| David credits the volunteering role with enabling him to update his skills and eventually secure a temporary six month job in a human resources department. He does not believe he would have secured a similar job without the experience gained through volunteering: *'If it hadn't been for the project, I wouldn't have experienced the commercial sector and would probably have ended up working on a factory assembly line on a minimum wage'.* Although the post has now finished, it has left him with valuable experience and a desire to pursue a career in the industry. |

Alongside these 'hard' outcomes, the programme has also achieved **valuable soft outcomes** in terms of enhanced employability and progress towards work. The majority of distance travelled participants who had not found employment said they were looking for paid work (67 per cent) and that the support received had made a difference to how confident they felt about finding paid work (80 per cent). The baseline and distance travelled surveys also included five questions about being ready or able to find work. This provides a **measure of the employability** of individuals supported. Participants were asked to score themselves against five statements on a scale of 0 to 10 where 0 indicates complete disagreement and 10 indicates complete agreement. Comparing scores when participants first engaged with VSC projects with later responses provides an indication of changing levels of employability over time.

Figure 4.1 below shows the proportion of participants who scored themselves more positively by at least one point when surveyed after four, eight and twelve months compared with their baseline response. It shows that, for each indicator, at least a third of all participants reported a positive improvement in work-readiness when re-surveyed at those three points of time. It is important to remember these are snapshots of all those who completed surveys at set periods of time after joining projects. Participation diminishes at each point so the figure below does *not* show changes in outcomes for the same group of people over time. Each group at any point in time is a smaller subset of those completing surveys four months earlier.

The most notable outcome change was associated with the **practicalities of finding work** - skills and experience, completing job applications and confidence in attending interviews - which saw positive improvements for between 40 to 60 per cent of participants. This is all the more significant given that 26 per cent of all distance travelled participants were not looking for work and therefore less likely to report increases in employability. Crucially, the evidence suggests that **positive outcomes are sustained over time**. There are small variations over the three points in time for each indicator but there is no marked tendency of initial benefits to 'drop off'.

Figure 4.1: Proportion of participants making positive progress towards employment after 4, 8 and 12 months as measured by increases in self-reported scores
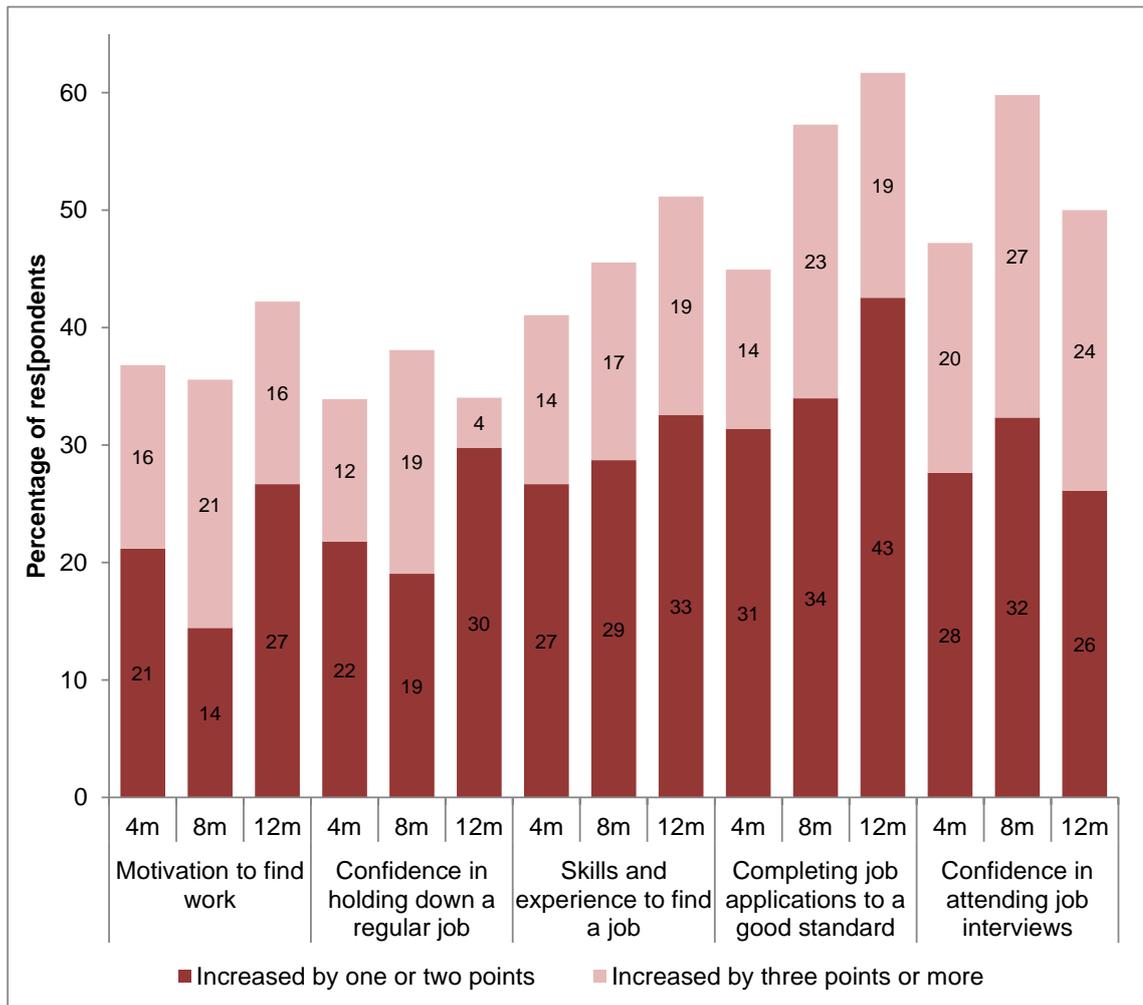
Base: 285-289 (4m); 101-105 (8m); 43-47 (12m)

A follow-up question was also asked to capture what difference projects made ('a lot' or 'a little' or 'none at all') to any change observed. The responses for 4, 8 and 12 months were pooled to provide an overall figure for each category. These are presented in Figure 4.2 below. The findings provide strong evidence of a **'VSC effect'** in terms of impact on employability. Between two thirds and four fifths of respondents said projects had either made 'a lot' or 'a little' difference to how they felt in relation to the five statements.

Figure 4.2 Proportion of participants who feel projects have made a positive difference around employability
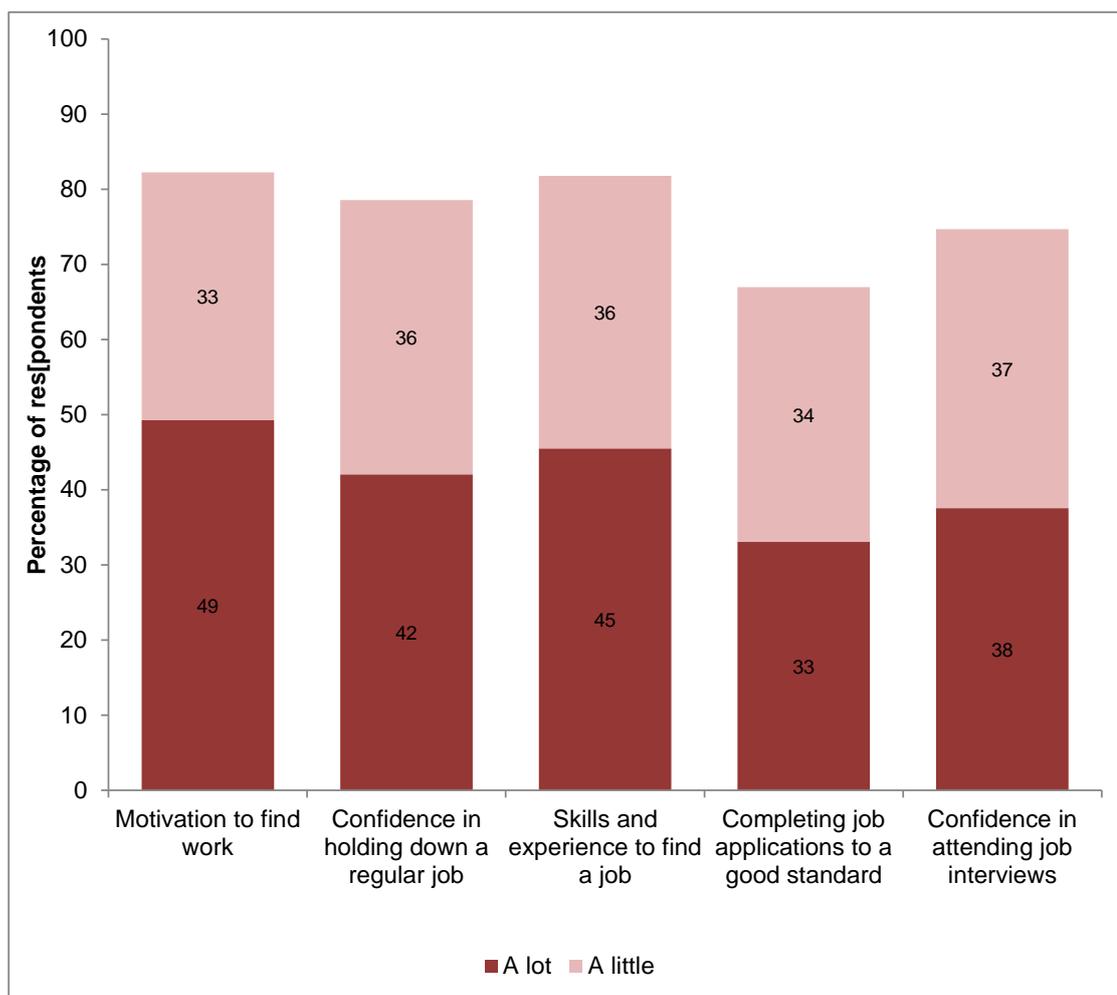
Base: 466-467 (pooled)

Interestingly, more participants said projects 'made a positive difference' to the five outcomes (Figure 4.2) than actually scored themselves more highly over time against the same outcomes (Figure 4.1). One explanation for this is that many participants feel supported by projects even if they have yet to identify positive outcomes as a result of that support.

These positive survey findings are corroborated by the accounts of participants interviewed who highlighted a number of ways in which projects had **improved their employability**:

- **increasing confidence and motivation to work**: one participant volunteering as an assistant on a community arts project described the transformative effect on her expectations of work: *"It's made me realise I can't go like this* [out of work] *for another 10 years. A person can't just exist just sitting round and vegetating. I have to go out and get it. The rewards are there'*

- **demonstrating experience and commitment:** two participants observed, respectively, the importance of volunteering in showing potential employers '*you are motivated and have been doing something'* and *'have things to put on your CV'* after time out of work

- **acquiring vocational skills and training** including ICT skills, accredited training (First Aid, Food Safety, Business Administration), specialist knowledge

(e.g. working with sufferers of dementia) as well as **soft skills** such as working with others and telephone 'manner'

- **testing readiness for work:** one participant looking to return to work after a period of absence due to mental health issues felt volunteering helped her assess capacity for work: '*I think it's a really good indicator as to when I'll be ready for work. Once I can do 16 hours a week volunteering I can start looking for work, but I'm still getting a bit stressed and not ready yet'*.

Health and well-being

The baseline and distance travelled survey included a self-reported measure of general health and well-being and five self-reported measures of mental well-being[9]. Participants were asked to rank themselves on a score of 0-10 for general health and well-being. For the mental well-being indicators, they were given options about how often they felt a certain way (for example, 'feeling useful,) and the answers were converted into a score of 1-5.

Figure 4.3 below clearly shows some positive change in self-reported health and well-being. For each measure, between a third and a half of participants reported progress four, eight and twelve months following their first contact with the VSC programme. The largest change was in the outcomes associated with confidence and self-esteem. After twelve months, 47 per cent of 'distance travelled' participants reported 'feeling more confident', 48 per cent 'feeling good about myself' and 53 per cent 'feeling useful'. Importantly, the evidence indicates that **positive changes in perceived health and well-being were sustained for at least 12 months** following their initial engagement with a VSC project. There is no evidence to suggest benefits drop off over time.

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[9] These measures were drawn from the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale which is commonly used in the NHS.

Figure 4.3: Proportion of participants making positive progress in their health and well-being* after 4, 8 and 12 months as measured by increases in self-reported scores
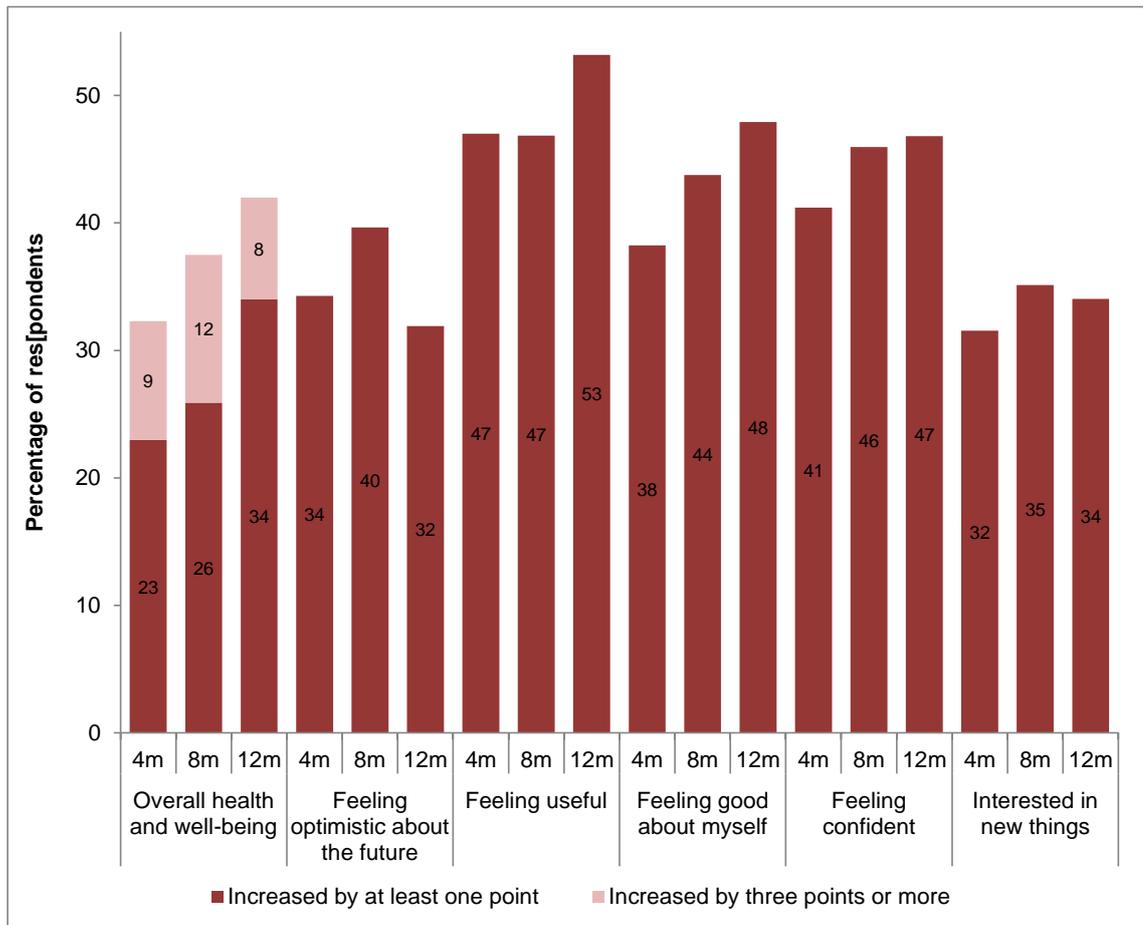

Base: 285-289 (4m); 101-105 (8m); 43-47 (12m)
*The well-being measures used a 5 point scale, so 3 point change is not reported separately

Figure 4.4 indicates that **much of this progress can be attributed to the activities of VSC projects**. More than two-thirds of respondents indicated that the VSC project impacted positively on their overall health and well-being, and more than four fifths reported that it impacted positively on aspects of their confidence and self-esteem.

Figure 4.4: Proportion of participants who feel projects have made a positive difference around health and well-being
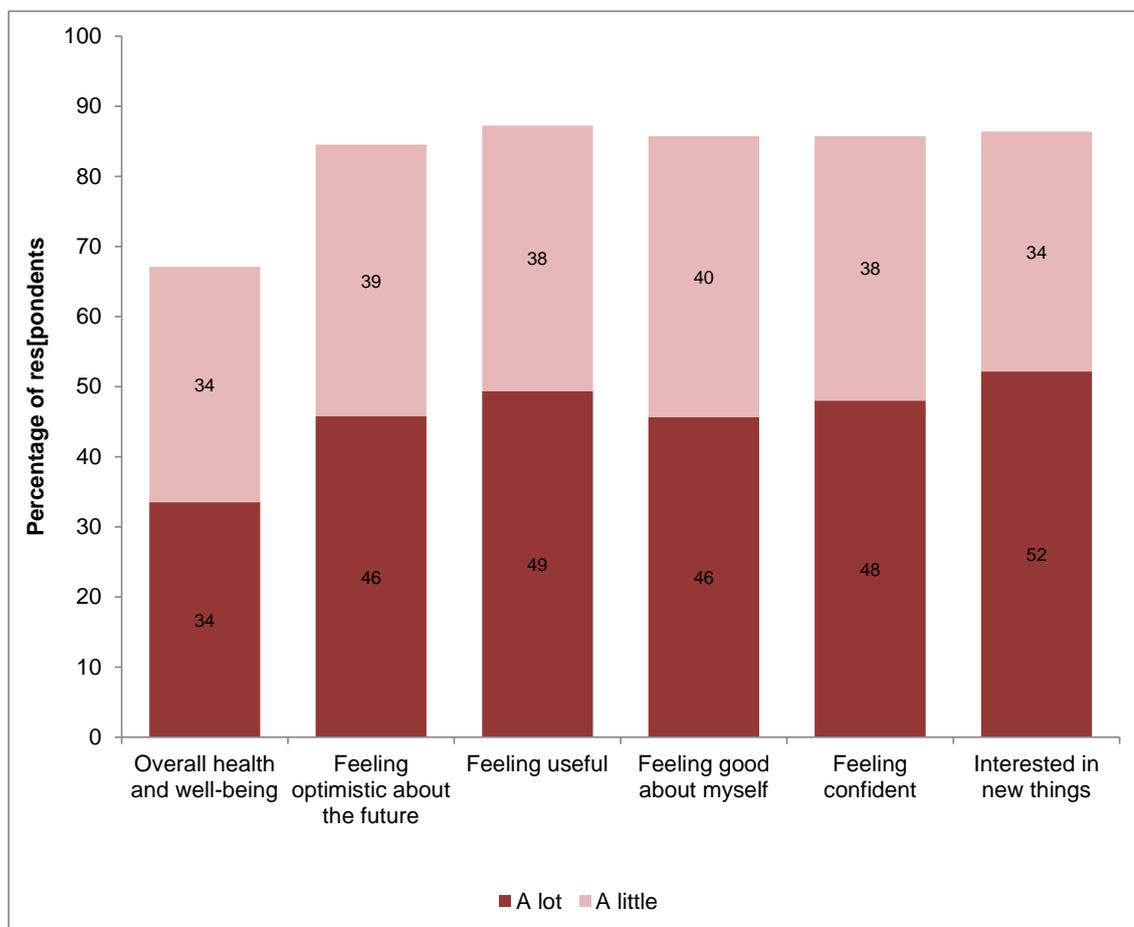
Base: 483-489 (pooled)

These findings once again indicate **a 'VSC effect'** with the programme making a positive difference to participants' overall health and well-being. As with employability, more participants feel projects are making a difference than are reporting improvements in actual outcomes. Again, this may reflect the value placed on support given, even if this is yet to translate into feeling more positive.

Reported improvements in health and well-being also emerge strongly in interviews with project participants. Benefits identified include:

- **improved confidence, well-being and esteem** through volunteering: one participant spoke of how *'mentally it really helped me, to view myself with respect'*. Another reflected that *'before I started volunteering I had no confidence. Now I've got enough confidence to put myself forward'* (see also Box 3 below).

- **enhanced social interaction and peer support:** sharing experiences with peers was seen by one participant to have both a motivating effect and to overcome the social isolation of being out of work: *'It helped me to develop some confidence because when you're unemployed it's easy to spend a lot of time at home alone. Getting out and being on a course like that was good because you are around other people who are in the same situation as you'*.

- **a sense of routine and structure:** participants valued the opportunity to engage in purposeful activity after long periods out of work. One reflected that *'it gets me up in the morning. I have to go even if I'm not feeling good. It's a routine which is very important'*.

Box 3: The positive impact of volunteering on health and well-being

Example 1: Simon

Simon had been out of work for eight years because of a mental health condition. He is not looking for work in the short-term because of the severity of his condition but felt that volunteering could help him regain his health and confidence: *'I'm just taking one step at a time. I'll volunteer and see what happens, get in the swing of things'.*

Simon was supported by one of the VSC projects which provided him with a volunteer role in the centre itself after he expressed an interest in an administrative position. Simon is very positive about his role and feels he has benefitted in terms of social interaction with others in a *'friendly and relaxed environment'.* He also identifies tangible improvements in his health and well-being as a result of volunteering: *'It is a bit of a pick me up. It's brightened me up, rejuvenated me, made me feel positive'.* Project staff have also commented that volunteering has made a real difference to his health and well-being: '*They said that it's made me look younger and that I've come alive.'* In the longer-term, Simon feels that further improvement may bring him to the point where he is ready to consider looking for paid work.

Example 2: Simone

Simone has been volunteering once a week as an assistant for a community arts organisation. This role involves helping attendees in arts and textiles workshop and supporting them to develop and realise their ideas. The main motivation for volunteering is to help rebuild confidence and motivation in order to help her move back into work: *'It's about getting back out with people, to show that I can do it. You start to doubt yourself so much'.*

Simone reported a number of gains from her experience as a volunteer, especially in terms of the impact on her health and well-being. She values highly the sense of usefulness gained from supporting others: '*It's so nice when people put their hands up and ask "can you help me?". It's a wonderful feeling'.* More recent support from the project to help her identify routes back into work have also led to positive change for Simone:

'It keeps you connected. If it wasn't there, what position would I be in? I'd be feeling useless. I could easily drop [out]. *I've always* [wanted to work] *but needed a vehicle to keep me riding along. It carries me that bit further. You have all these holed-up qualities which should be utilised. You need things like this. It gives hope.'*

Community involvement

The baseline and distance travelled surveys asked a series of questions about participants' involvement with, and perceptions of, their local community. These indicators were included to gauge the extent to which the programme was fulfilling the aim of creating more resilient communities. Figure 4.5 below shows the change in responses to these statements. Two indicators - 'getting out of the house' and 'feeling part of a community' - registered improvements in scores from the baseline position that were considerably larger than other measures:

- **getting out of the house:** 40 per cent reported positive change after 4 months, 48 per cent after 8 months and 52 per cent after 12 months

- **feeling part of a community**: 45 per cent reported positive change after 4 months, 54 per cent after 8 months and 62 per cent after 12 months.

These figures indicate, once again, that improvements are **sustained over time**. The increases in the proportion of participants reporting positive scores between different time points needs careful interpretation. It does not necessarily mean that feelings of involvement in the community strengthen over time. The diminishing number of participants at each time point may mean there is a certain degree of self-selection. Those experiencing more positive change may be most likely to take part in each new wave of the distance travelled survey. It is unlikely that this effect is so strong, however, that it serves to mask any trend in the opposite direction. Sustained outcomes shown by data are likely to be 'real'.

Scores against the other three indicators (trust, getting on well with people and viewing the area as a good place to live) are lower, especially when compared with health and well-being and employability outcomes identified above. This is perhaps understandable. Projects are primarily focussed on improving access to volunteering and employability for *individuals* rather than seeking to improve their relationship with others in the community or the area itself (see Section 3.2).

Figure 4.5: Proportion of respondents identifying positive change after 4, 8 and 12 months in terms of self-reported scores for community involvement
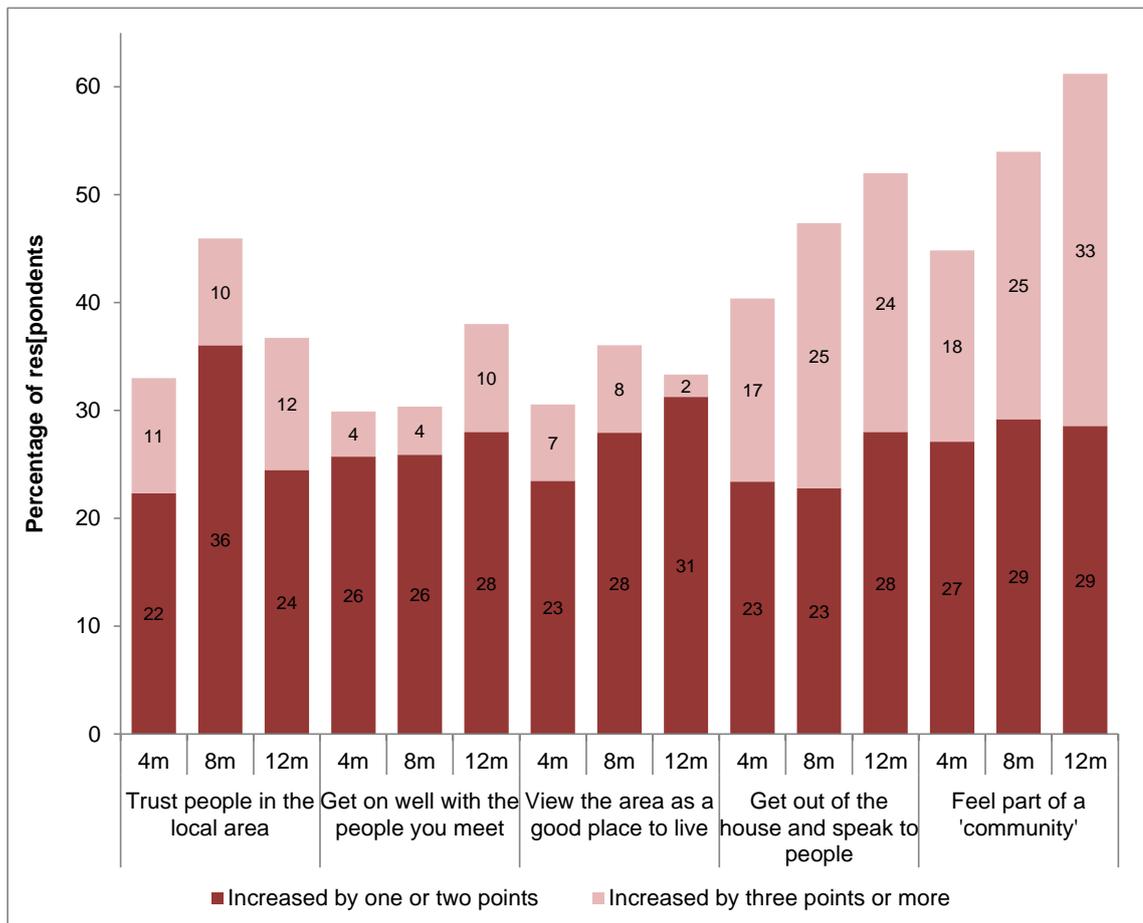
Base: 285-289 (4m); 101-105 (8m); 43-47 (12m)

Figure 4.6 shows that much of this improvement can be attributed to the project, with between at least two thirds or participants crediting the project with making a difference to any change experienced. Once more, there is a **palpable 'VSC effect'** .

Figure 4.6: Proportion of participants who feel projects have made a positive difference around community involvement
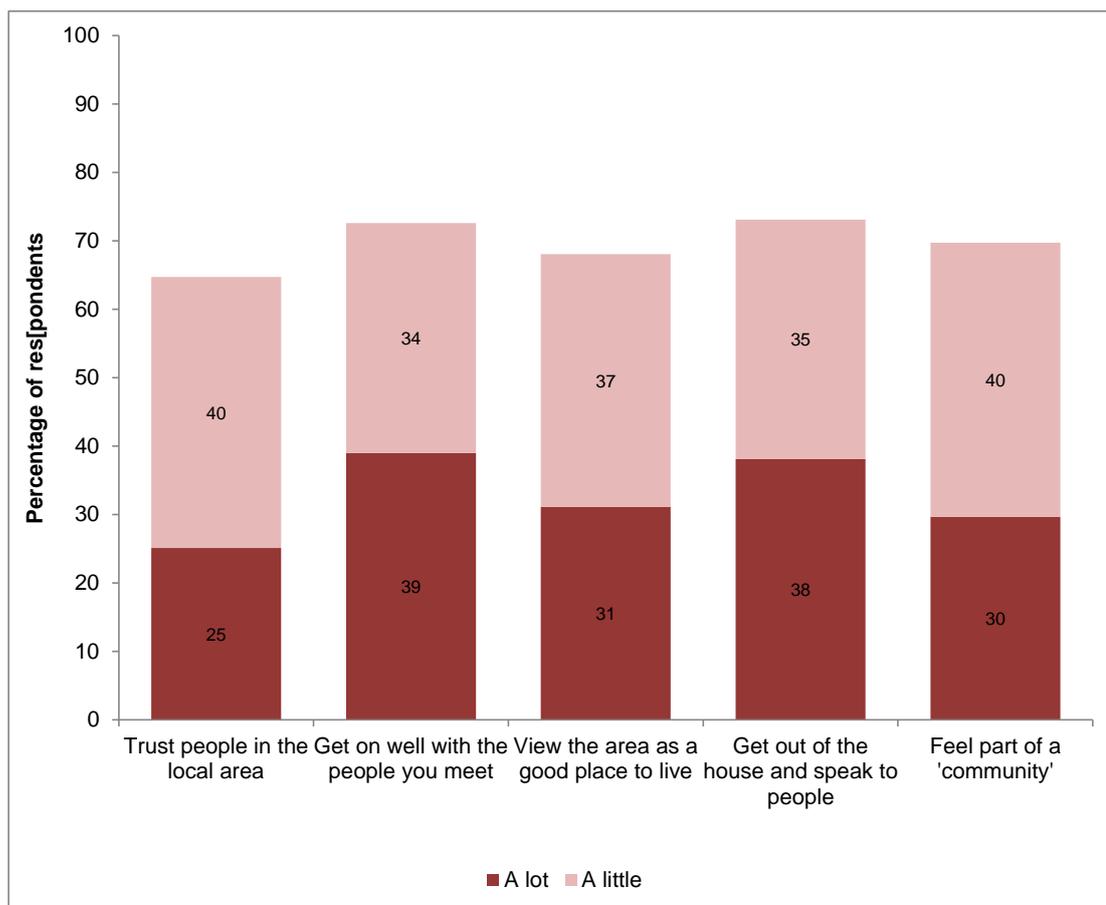
Base: 479-485 (pooled)

There was also qualitative evidence to support survey findings that VSC activities had wider community benefits that include:

- **supporting key organisations in the community:** A number of projects also sought to embed themselves more closely in the area through working with schools and local community centres

- **providing volunteer support at community events:** Exeter recruited volunteers to support a number of community events in more disadvantaged areas including a Play Day for parents and children and a Make a Difference Day to engage local families in creative activities. Blackburn has also provided volunteers for 'Your Call' activities run by the local authority to improve neighbourhoods through activities such as street cleaning

- **helping to sustain local services in the face of cuts:** Camden provided a volunteer co-ordinator to support the work of volunteers at a community library set up in the wake of cuts to services by the local authority.

At the same time, projects observed constraints on supporting communities through volunteering. One noted that volunteering opportunities were more prevalent in the town centre than in more disadvantaged areas. Another felt the distinction between supporting communities and substituting paid jobs was sometimes *'murky'*. There was a shared concern that volunteering provided additional support rather than replaced core public services. These issues notwithstanding, the evidence suggests that projects are delivering activities with tangible community benefits.

4.5. Explaining outcomes for participants

Identifying outcomes associated with volunteering and work

The analysis presented in the previous section provides a strong indication that participants in the VSC programme experienced positive outcomes following their engagement with funded projects. This included 'hard' outcomes such as movement into volunteering and employment as well as 'softer' social and emotional outcomes and capabilities linked to employability, health and well-being and, to a lesser extent, community involvement.

Analysis of survey data makes it possible to see if there is a relationship between hard and soft outcomes. In other words, what benefits are associated, respectively, with movement into work or volunteering? One reason for exploring this is to see whether volunteering and work are associated with different outcomes. In order to test this a series of simple statistical models[10] were developed to identify statistically significant influences on outcome change. To ensure sufficient cases were available for analysis only the first wave of distance travelled data (after four months) was considered. Table 4.4 provides a summary of these models. Each model considered a different social and emotional measure as a discrete outcome and explored its statistical relationship with engagement in volunteering and finding employment.

Table 4.4: Overview of statistical relationships between engagement in volunteering and finding employment with social and emotional outcomes

	Finding Paid Work		Engagement in volunteering	
	Significance[i]	*Odds ratio[ii]*	*Significance[i]*	*Odds ratio[ii]*
Employability				
Motivation to find work	n/s		n/s	
Confidence in holding down a regular job	n/s		n/s	
Skills and experience to find a job	n/s		0.006	2.088
Completing job applications	n/s		n/s	
Confidence in attending job interviews	n/s		n/s	
Health and well-being				
Overall	n/s		0.009	2.056
Feeling optimistic about the future	n/s		n/s	
Feeling useful	n/s		0.009	1.940
Feeling good about myself	n/s		0.044	1.689
Feeling confident	n/s		n/s	
Interested in new things	n/s		n/s	
Community involvement				
Trust people in the local area	n/s		n/s	

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[10] Logistic regression modelling was used. Each model considered the statistical influence of 'finding employment' and 'engaging in volunteering' (after 4 months) as covariates, on binary dependent variables that identified whether a participant had recorded an improvement of 1 point or more (after 4 months) on each outcome measure

Get on well with the people you meet	n/s		0.044	1.778
View the area as a good place to live	0.063	1.772	n/s	
Get out of the house and speak to people	0.001	2.783	0.034	1.754
Feel part of a 'community'	0.034	1.910	n/s	

[i] This provides an indication of the likelihood that the influence attributable to this variable can occur by chance. If this value is below 0.05 it can be considered significant. Only significant values are presented. Not significant values are denoted n/s.

[ii] This provides a measure of the odds that this relationship should occur for individuals who found volunteer placements or work compared with those who did not volunteer or work. For example, an odds ratio of 2 in the volunteering column would mean that a particular outcome is twice as likely to be reported by those who volunteer compared to those who do not.

The models identified the following statistically significant relationships:

- **finding paid work** was a statistically significant influence on improvements in:
    - views about their area as a place to live
    - getting out of the house to speak to people
    - feeling part of a community

- **engaging in volunteering** was a statistically significant influence on improvements in:
    - skills and experience to find a job
    - overall health and well-being
    - feeling useful
    - feeling good about their self
    - getting on well with the people they meet
    - getting out of the house to speak to people.

These findings suggest that **volunteering has a significant association with more 'soft' outcomes than finding paid work,** especially in terms of health and well-being and social contact. People who volunteer are more likely than those who do not volunteer to report improvements in overall health and well-being, confidence and self-esteem, and ability to engage positively with other people in their area. By contrast, the outcomes associated with paid work are limited to involvement in the community. The latter is perhaps explained by the experience of 'getting out into the world' that accompanies a return to work.

These findings are noteworthy given the widespread literature on the positive impact of work on health and well-being[11]. This research suggests it is volunteering that is more likely to deliver these kinds of social and emotional benefits. One explanation is that volunteering offers a more supportive and flexible environment. Certainly, qualitative evidence presented above suggests it can be seen as an opportunity by individuals facing multiple barriers to engage in activity with less expectations and demands than work. In short, it is a less stressful environment. It is perhaps also a reflection that work is only beneficial for health and well-being if of good quality[12]. One implication, therefore, is that movement into work through volunteering may

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[11] See for example Waddell G, Burton K. (2006) *Is work good for your health and well-being?* TSO, London.
[12] Ibid.

actually *reduce* positive outcomes experienced. Moreover, it emphasises the need to value volunteering in its own right given the range of benefits it delivers. It is more than just a stepping stone into work.

Explaining outcomes: the view of project staff and participants

The findings above show VSC projects are making a real positive difference to participants in terms of employment, health and well-being and, to lesser extent, involvement with the community. Where participants experienced positive outcomes, they were asked in interviews to reflect on what elements of the project made a positive difference. Almost unanimously, **the single most important factor identified in bringing about real change for participants was the quality of staff**. Participants were almost universally positive about the support they received from project workers who were described, variously, as *'really good', 'fantastic', '10 out of 10'* and *'spot on'.*

The key features of support provided by staff valued by participants included:

- being **readily available and approachable** by phone, email or in person to address questions and concerns, often without an appointment. One participant described how: '*I knew if I had a problem I could ring up and she would help me through it'.*

- **understanding of health issues**: one participant was encouraged to volunteer by the project manager's reassurance about flexibility in the event of a relapse in a health condition: *'She was very sensitive to me having depression and anxiety. She put me at ease and made it known if I got anxious I could leave. I wouldn't have applied if I just saw it advertised but she just said, 'no pressure, see how it goes'.*

- **providing follow-up support:** participants placed importance on regular follow-up calls to see how placements were going.

- **sustaining motivation and commitment:** one participant spoke of how he readily took up the offer of a mentor because it would mean he would *'keep going and didn't give up'.*

- **responsiveness to aspirations**: one individual with a background in stock control expressed pleasant surprise that the VSC project was able to place him a commercially-oriented environment as a customer services assistant: 'I *went to check it out and I was just really surprised. It wasn't a case of working in a charity shop. I didn't realise there were so many professional aspects to it so that gave me a lot of hope and inspiration'.*

These findings show that the 'brokerage plus' approach pays dividends in terms of supporting individuals with additional needs. Intensive 1-2-1 support was highly reassuring and helped strengthen confidence, motivation and commitment. In some cases, it made the crucial difference in ensuring that individuals did not give up.

Project staff also identified a series of further factors which they felt contributed to progress:

- **the intensive support offered by mentors:** mentors were regarded as important in retaining clients with additional needs. Lincolnshire noted it was particularly valuable in providing continuity of support for service users who normally had a support worker. Mentors could help participants through the process of identifying, applying for and taking up placements once support workers had brokered the initial contact with the Volunteer Centre.

- **a diverse range of skills and expertise within the project:** one stakeholder observed how a team of three staff within one project brought together a uniquely effective combination of skills and expertise around volunteer management, employment support, training and capacity building of VIOs.

- **capacity to broker relationships with external support agencies:** projects that worked most effectively with some of the hardest-to-reach groups were often those that had developed good relationships with key support agencies. These agencies functioned as a source of referrals, advice and training for Volunteer Centres.

- **using volunteers on the project:** volunteers were identified as a highly useful source of additional capacity to work with participants: *'I wouldn't have achieved a quarter as much as achieved in this project without volunteers assisting me'* [Islington]. Roles performed by volunteers included administration, advice work and marketing. At the same time, projects also highlighted retention issues where volunteers found work or, in the case or more vulnerable individuals, left projects because they *'have a fair bit to deal with'.*

- **outreach work to increase accessibility:** having a presence at agencies supporting more vulnerable individuals such as supported housing organisations made Volunteer Centres more accessible.

- **discretionary funding to support clients in placements:** Exeter observed the value of having discrete funds to support travel and lunch expenses as well as pay for clothes. They described how giving one ex-offender a small amount of funding to purchase new clothes after release from prison gave him the confidence to start volunteering in a charity shop: '*When people are given that kind of support they follow through and end up volunteering for months'.*

- **addressing the full range of barriers experienced by clients:** providing support with a wide range of barriers around health, housing, debt, basic skills and benefits was considered vital in helping participants become more ready for to volunteering or employment.

5

Capacity building: outcomes for Volunteer Centres and volunteer involving organisations (VIOs)

5.1. Overview

The section presents findings from the evaluation about the impact of VSC project activities on participating Volunteer Centres and the VIOs they support. It draws on both interviews with stakeholders and project staff as well as an online survey of VIOs which is explained in more detail in Section 5.3 below. Key findings include:

- the primary benefit to Volunteer Centres of involvement in the programme has been to **build capacity to support individuals with more intensive needs**. In turn, this enhanced operational capacity has provided additional strategic leverage to shape local and national agendas whilst leaving Volunteer Centres better positioned to secure future funding.

- survey responses show the project is effective in meeting aims around building the capacity of VIOs:

    – the programme has engaged organisations that tend to be smaller, local voluntary organisations and community groups that are heavily reliant on volunteers to carry out their work. This suggests **VSC projects are effective at targeting those with the highest level of need and with more of a community focus.**

    – **VIOs surveyed were highly positive about the impact of support received from Volunteer Centres** and identified improvements in their capacity to recruit, manage and develop the skills of volunteers.

    – A total of 77 per cent of VIOs reported **a positive increase in volunteer numbers in the period preceding the survey.** A significant degree of that increase in volunteer numbers was attributed to the support received from Volunteer Centres.

5.2. The impact of VSC activities on Volunteer Centres

Volunteer Centres reported a number of benefits from delivering VSC projects. Many of these related to **new or additional capacity to support hard-to-reach groups** with additional needs. Projects felt this enhanced capacity enabled them to engage individuals who might otherwise not have accessed brokerage services. VSC funding was seen to allow projects to work more effectively with vulnerable individuals by:

- **spending more time with clients with additional needs** who Volunteer Centres would otherwise lack capacity to support: '*It's no longer like "this person is too complicated or intense"'.* [Bristol]

- **expanding the skills base of staff** through, for example, gaining experience and training in how to design and run employability and mentoring services as well as support vulnerable groups.

- **working with VIOs to expand their organisational capacity** to recruit, train and manage volunteers with additional support needs.

- **undertaking more outreach work** to access more marginalised clients: providing drop-ins and workshops through support services has enabled Volunteer Centres to increase access to volunteering for service users.

- **introducing additional provision** such as confidence building and Introduction to Volunteer courses to prepare individuals who were not yet ready to volunteer.

Other benefits reported by Volunteer Centre include an **enhanced local profile** where services have been delivered through venues such as community centres, libraries and churches in areas where they previously had little presence. VSC funding has also enabled staff to gain **new practical skills** such as using social media to promote activities and communicate with participants.

This enhanced operational capacity was, in turn, seen to increase the profile and strategic leverage of participating Volunteer Centres and the network as whole by:

- **raising the profile of volunteering**: involvement in the VSC project has helped projects raise the profile of volunteering in local networks involved in the employment and skills agenda. Exeter now sits on the North Devon Worklessness Forum whilst Camden has been able to get more involved with the borough-wide employment and skills network run by the local authority.

- **enhancing the prospects for sustainability:** VSC delivery has opened up new funding options for some projects on the basis of a proven model for supporting hard-to-reach groups. Durham felt their involvement with a national volunteering project that has generated valuable outcomes around health, well-being and employment was instrumental in securing additional funding from Nesta and the local Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG): '*We maximised it with potential stakeholders, partners and funders, influential people. We could say this is what we are doing. We could also present it as model that works. They loved the idea that patients would get IAG and agree an action plan'.*

- **influencing national policy:** the programme manager and other NCVO staff members have showcased the programme in discussions with policy leads in both the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). In both cases, the VSC experience was used as a platform to highlight the expertise of Volunteer Centres in bringing together employment and volunteering services.

5.3. The impact of VSC activities on volunteer involving organisations (VIOs)

The evaluation explored the impact of VSC activities on VIOs. All VIOs receiving support through the VSC programme were invited to take part in an online survey. The survey was undertaken in two waves: Wave 1 between June and August 2012 and Wave 2 between June and August 2013. During wave one 40 valid questionnaires were completed; during wave two 58 valid questionnaires from different VIOs were completed to give a total of 98 unique responses. The data from the two waves was pooled for the purposes of robust analysis.

The survey results provide some indication of the type of VIOs typically supported through the VSC programme:

- **most VIOs supported were small or medium-sized:** nearly two thirds of respondents (62 per cent) identified themselves as very small (22 per cent had an annual income of less than £10,000), small (23 per cent had an annual income of £10,000-£50,000) or medium sized (17 per cent had an annual income of £50,000-£100,000). In contrast, 23 per cent were large (£100,000-£500,000) and 16 per cent were very large (more than £500,000).

- **the smaller size of beneficiaries was reflected in the staffing levels of VIOs**: 36 per cent did not employ any paid staff at all and 71 per cent employed five people or less including those with no paid staff. Instead, VIOs relied more on volunteers: 66 per cent had at least ten volunteers and/or trustees and committee members and 43 per cent had at least 20.

- **the majority of VIOs supported had a local focus:** 37 per cent described themselves as a local voluntary organisation, nine per cent were community or village halls, and four per cent were local branches or confederates of national voluntary organisations. By contrast only nine per cent described themselves as national voluntary organisations. Interestingly, 11 per cent of VIOs responding to the survey were public sector bodies.

- VIOs **received most support from VSC projects** around registering volunteering roles (66 per cent), taking advantages of opportunities for partnership working (58 per cent), receiving referrals of new volunteers (52 per cent) and accessing good practice guidance (48 per cent).

The responses to the survey of VIOs illustrate that the VSC programme has engaged organisations that tend to be smaller, local voluntary organisations and community groups that are heavily reliant on volunteers to carry out their work. This suggests **VSC projects are effective at targeting those with the highest level of need and with more of a community focus,** reflecting the community objectives of the programme.

To measure the effectiveness of support, VIOs were asked to provide an assessment of the impact of each type of support they had received on their organisation. Three options were given: 'a lot', 'a little' or 'none at all'. Figure 5.1 below shows the proportion of VIOs that responded positively.

Figure 5.1: Proportion of respondents identifying positive impacts for their organisation following support from Volunteer Centres
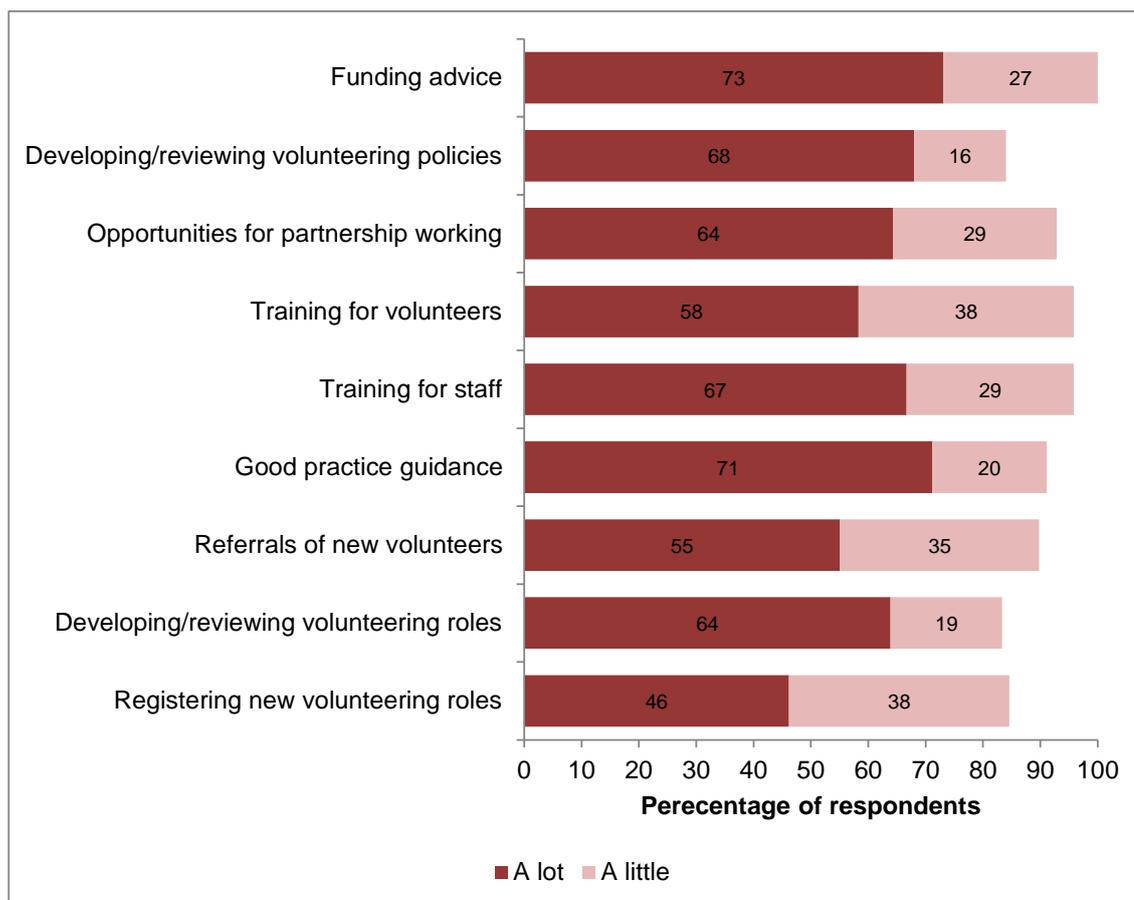
Base: 29-44

These survey responses present **a highly positive picture regarding the effectiveness of the support** provided. Respondents felt projects had made most difference in terms of support around funding advice, training for volunteers or staff, good practice guidance and opportunities for partnership working. Between 90 to 100 per cent of VIOs identified these activities as having a positive impact on their organisation.

The majority of VIOs engaging with the VSC programme reported **a positive increase in volunteer numbers** in the six or twelve [13] months preceding the questionnaire:

- 25 per cent of respondents said their volunteer numbers had increased 'a lot' and 52 per cent said they had increased 'a little'. By contrast only 20 per cent of respondents reported 'no change' and four per cent reported a decrease.

- in total VIOs reported having an additional 814 volunteers providing an average of five and a half hours volunteering each per week (approximately 4,500 additional volunteering hours in total).

A significant proportion of VIOs surveyed **attributed any increase in volunteer numbers to some degree to the support received from VSC project**: 67 per cent of VIOs whose numbers had increased 'a lot' and 30 per cent of VIOs whose

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[13] The wave 1 survey asked about a six month period as the VCS programme had been running for less than a year. The wave 2 survey asked about a twelve month period as the programme had been running for longer.

numbers had increased 'a little' said that Volunteer Centres were responsible for 'a lot' of that change.

Figure 5.2 below shows that VIOs reported a number of other **benefits associated with managing volunteers**. More than three-quarters of VIOs experienced positive change in relation to volunteer skills and experience and managing volunteers, and more than two-thirds in relation to supporting volunteers facing barriers.

Figure 5.2: Proportion of respondents reporting improvements in outcomes for their organisations over the past six months
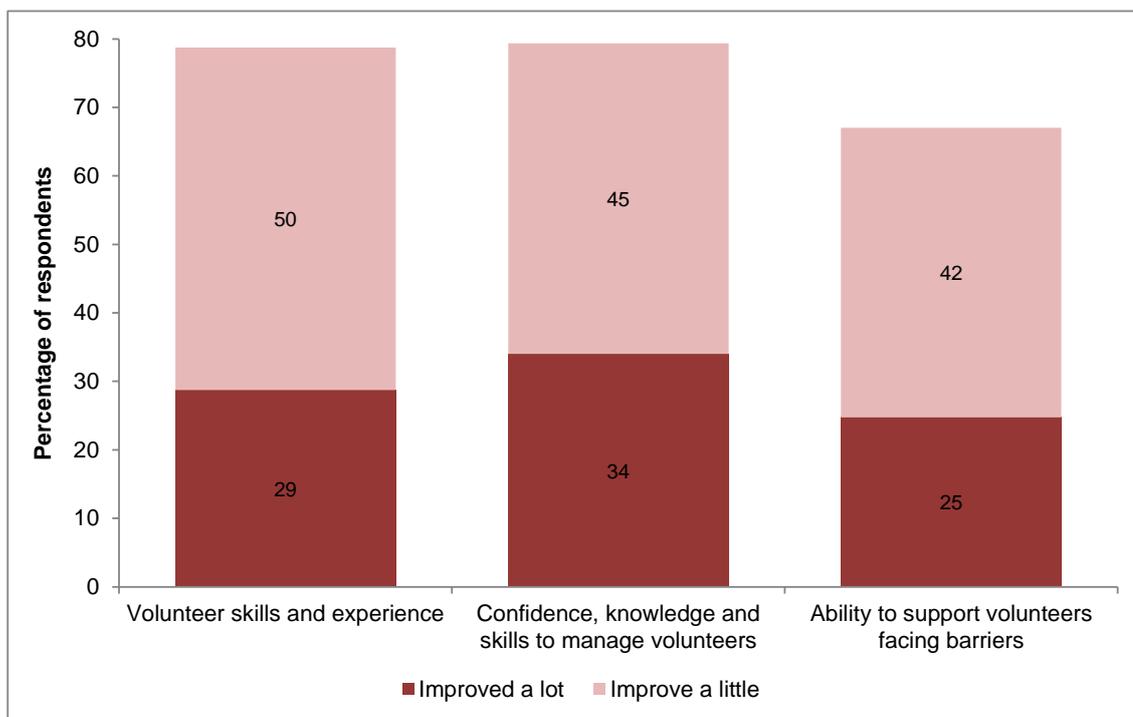
Base: 94-97

Much of this change can be attributed to the activities of Volunteer Centres as Figure 5.3 below shows. More than two thirds of respondents said projects had made a difference (either 'a lot' or 'a little') to volunteer skills and experience and managing volunteers, whilst more than half said they made a difference in relation to supporting volunteers facing barriers.

Figure 5.3: Difference made by VSC projects in improved outcomes for organisations
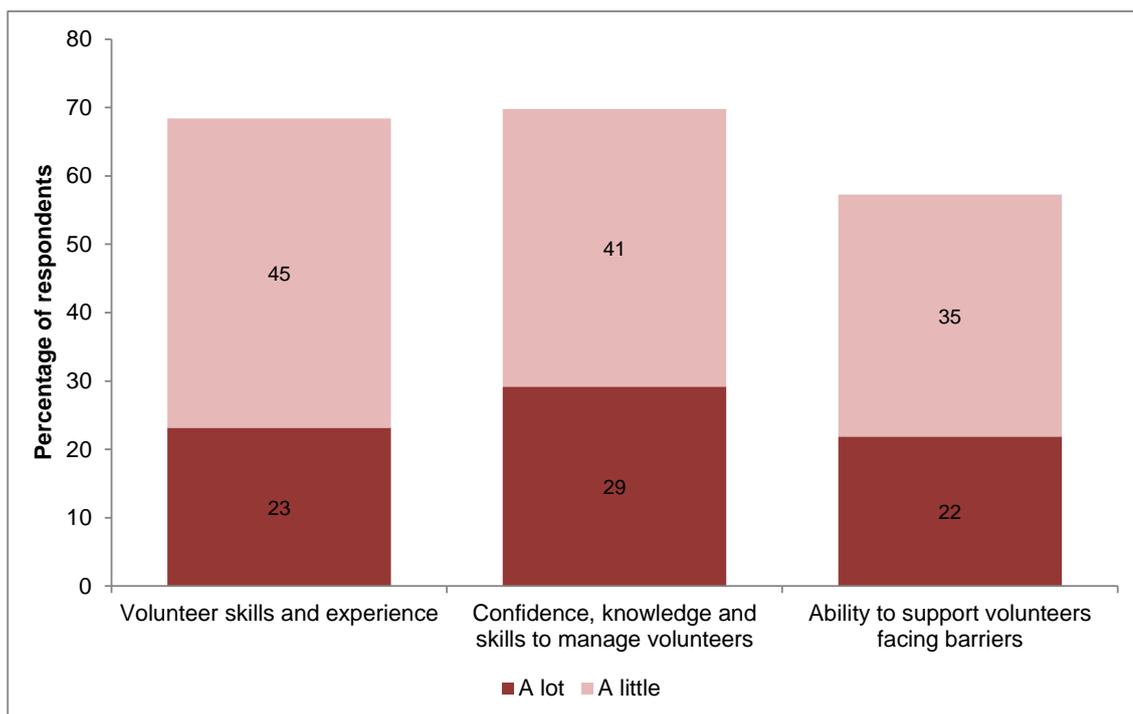
The positive findings from the survey are illustrative of the overall impact that projects are having on VIOs supported. This picture is also supported by claims made by project managers about the benefits of services they provide for VIOs which include:

- **enabling organisations to remain viable**: some projects felt support to particular VIOs had enabled them to survive in an extremely challenging funding climate. For example, Durham currently supports a community-based employment and training organisation in a deprived neighbourhood that was well-funded in the past but is now entirely reliant on volunteers.

- **developing capacity to support more vulnerable groups:** 1-2-1 support and workshops provided by projects have raised VIOs' awareness of, and capacity to support, more disadvantaged groups. Exeter also noted that skilled or experienced volunteers can play a key role in supporting other volunteers with additional needs. One volunteer placed as a kitchen manager in a cafe in a local community centre helps to manage volunteers with learning disabilities.

- **making support more accessible to VIOs:** Liverpool noted that mentors play a crucial role in helping VIOs retain volunteers by providing a named contact who can assist with emerging issues.

- **providing better trained volunteers:** Cornwall observed that offering training such as First Aid, Food Hygiene and Health and Safety provides VIOs with a pool of volunteers that are more competent and skilled. This leaves VIOs better placed to satisfy risk assessments.

In conclusion, there is significant evidence to suggest that projects have **made a valuable contribution to developing the capacity of VIOs**. At the same time, some projects noted they still felt they would like to have more time and resources to work with VIOs. There is perhaps **a balance to be struck**, however, between supporting individuals and VIOs. One project working with particularly vulnerable participants observed that supporting VIOs sometimes takes a *'backseat'* in order to dedicate time to volunteers: *'I know it's an aim to support VIOs but it's hard to provide meaningful support to volunteers and VIOs at the same time'.* It is perhaps understandable if projects prioritise individuals when working with finite resources.

Conclusions: impact, learning, potential improvements and sustainability

<div style="text-align: right">6</div>

6.1. Overview

This section begins by reflecting on the overall impact of the VSC programme before identifying key learning and potential improvements. It concludes by looking at options for sustaining VSC activities.

The discussion on learning and improvements focuses on broader themes across the programme such as working in communities, supporting VIOs, monitoring and evaluation, strategic leverage and sustainability. More specific examples of good practice and learning at project level are provided within the companion Good Practice report.

6.2. Reflections on impact

Overall, the evidence shows that the **VSC programme is performing very well.** It is exceeding all of its programme-wide targets for supporting participants and VIOs. Additional data collated through the evaluation also shows project activities have generated a series of **positive outcomes for participants and VIOs** alike.

The programme has displayed an impressive capacity to move individuals into both volunteering and paid work, especially when benchmarked with national employment programmes. The 22 per cent of participants moved into work compares favourably with the 14.7 per cent of Work Programme who find employment. This achievement is all the more notable given that the VSC programme has no employment targets and supports highly disadvantaged individuals with relatively limited funding (roughly £50,000 per project per year). It suggests the core model of providing intensive, bespoke and innovative forms of support to increase access to volunteering is highly effective in increasing work prospects. Moreover, the model can work with comparatively modest funds.

The distance travelled data also provides a unique opportunity to assess the longer-term changes experienced by participants, including those who are no longer supported by projects. This helps address a concern that 'soft' outcomes generated by initial support can fade if underlying circumstances such as being out of work remain unaddressed. Data collected for the evaluation, which shows change up to 12 months after engagement, indicates that **initial gains around employability, health and well-being have been sustained**. Benefits experienced do not 'drop off' after

initial support in the first few months. It is also significant that improvements occur very early on as measured by positive changes after four months. One implication is that **intensive work can achieve quick results**, challenging the popular notion that time-limited programmes are often too short to produce results.

Data collected through the evaluation also shows that **positive outcomes are consistently attributed to some degree to project activities**. Both participants and VIOs identify the support of VSC projects as 'making a difference' to any positive change experienced. This is a crucial point. It shows that **the VSC programme is an important catalyst for change** and that outcomes may not have happened in the absence of VSC interventions.

6.3. Key learning

Stakeholders and Volunteer Centre staff were asked to reflect on key learning from their involvement in delivering the programme. They highlighted a number of areas where their experiences offered broad lessons that could inform the design and delivery of future activities by Volunteer Centres:

- **embedding activities in the community:** a small number of projects observed that they would have liked more time to develop links with community organisations. One suggestion made, with hindsight, was that some project staff could have been recruited from community organisations. This could have embedded projects more closely in neighbourhoods by enabling them to draw upon the trust, rapport and knowledge of well-established local organisations.

- **supporting VIOs:** there was a common view that many VIOs are facing increased pressure following cuts in spending that reduce their capacity to offer 'quality' placements. One obvious implication is that supporting VIOs will only become more important to ensure appropriate volunteer roles are created. However, Volunteer Centres may need to become increasingly creative in how they support VIOs. Volunteer management training will have less impact where volunteer co-ordinator roles are being reduced or cut by VIOs. The approach of training volunteer co-ordinators from 'outside' pioneered by Camden may offer one mechanism for helping VIOs address declining capacity to support volunteers.

- **monitoring and evaluation requirements:** some projects were critical of the high demands on staff time made by evaluation requirements. A few sought to address this directly by recruiting volunteers to undertake surveys. Others noted that efforts may be balanced by rewards if the final dataset provides a rich resource to support the case for future funding. There may also be opportunities to use the evaluation tools in other contexts. Durham has already adapted the evaluation questionnaire for use in another project that works with GPs to encourage patients to take up volunteering.

  Nevertheless, there are perhaps lessons to be learnt from the experience of implementing the evaluation framework. It could maybe have been better integrated into, and accepted by, projects if dedicated resource had been identified within VSC funding for evaluation tasks. This would have made the scale of the task more transparent and also reduced concerns that evaluation activities were 'eating into' budgets for staff.

- **strategic leverage:** one positive element of the VSC programme stressed by stakeholders is its potential to exert strategic leverage as a demonstration project to enhance the reach and profile of the Volunteer Centre network. It has already been used at national level as a platform to initiate discussions with policy leads from DWP and MoJ around the role of volunteering in increasing

employability (see Section 5.2). At a more local level, however, there appeared to be different levels of ability among projects to draw on experiences to increase strategic reach and influence. Some projects recognised, as one stakeholder noted, that it provided opportunities to engage with commissioners around new agendas and funding opportunities (see also below). Blackburn, for example, had used data on outcomes from the interim report to open up discussion with potential partners including Jobcentre Plus, the Probation Service, the Police and Adult Services: '*We've had great outcomes so far - can we come and talk about options?'.* Other Volunteer Centres were seen as taking a less proactive approach in using VSC experiences as a lever to engage and interest potential funders. One implication is that some Volunteer Centres could benefit from becoming *'more business-like'* [stakeholder] in pursuing contracting opportunities.

- **sustainability:** in a climate of spending cuts and organisation cutbacks it may seem counterintuitive to suggest that Volunteer Centres can benefit from new funding opportunities. However, radical reforms of public service structures and spending could enable Volunteer Centres to capture new funding if they can demonstrate their relevance to changing agendas, particularly around health, public health, care, employment and the prevention of re-offending.

  Some Volunteer Centres are already doing this. In relation to health, for example, five projects (Durham, Cornwall, Blackburn, Lincolnshire and Bristol) have either secured funding from, or held discussions, with local health providers and commissioners including mental health agencies, GPs and CCGs. These developments have been supported in some cases by evidence of achievements through the VSC programme. This growing interest in volunteering as a form of 'social prescribing' illustrates the way in which new opportunities can emerge in a climate of constrained funding, especially around preventative work seen to reduce later 'downstream' costs. This highlights the need for the Volunteer Centre network to be aware of, and able to exploit, such opportunities. The VSC Programme offers both data to evidence achievements relevant to these agendas as well as a delivery model that can be adapted to meet the demands of commissioners for low-cost but effective preventative services.

6.4. Sustainability

All VSC projects expressed a desire to keen to sustain activities in some form beyond the lifetime of the programme. There was concern, however, that funding opportunities remain constrained and the likelihood of securing continuation funding is seen as slim. In some cases, concerns about sustainability of VSC activities extend to the Volunteer Centre itself with some under threat in the wake of cuts to core funding: *'it's all a bit dicey - it's a bit of cliff edge'.* A minority of Volunteer Centres were using reserves to remain viable even before VSC funding ended.

There was a common view that the loss of VSC funding would lead to some **reduction in services,** at least in the short-term. In some cases, VSC staff will not have contracts renewed or will be retained on fewer hours. This will reduce the capacity of Volunteer Centres to deliver the 'brokerage plus' activities such as outreach, mentoring and intensive 1-2-1 support that have proved effective in engaging more marginalised clients. There was a concurrent concern that volunteering will slip down the agenda of potential VIOs if Volunteer Centres lose resources to help organisations develop and manage volunteers.

These concerns were balanced, though, with widespread evidence that many Volunteer Centres are actively pursuing a number of options to sustain VSC activities. This includes:

- **using core funding:** some Volunteer Centres are likely to use core funding to sustain at least some VSC work.

- **securing, or exploring opportunities for, new contracts:**

    – some projects have successfully secured funding from local commissioners to run volunteering programmes. Durham is funded by the local CCG to run a project with four GP surgeries to engage patients with long-term health conditions in volunteering. Bristol have also developed links with the Probation service to provide mentoring services to ex-offenders on a *'spot purchasing basis'*.

    – Blackburn has entered discussions with local statutory providers to open up a Volunteer Academy. This would see the Volunteer centre offer a core training programme similar to the VSC model to provide volunteers and support to participating VIOs. Blackburn hope to secure external funding for the Academy with match provided by VIOs.

    – Durham is looking to set up a consortium with a number of VIOs they already work with to secure future contracts around health and community agendas. Durham would provide volunteers for preventative services such as reducing readmission programmes that could be run by, or at the venues of, consortium partners. Some of the links with VIOs have come about through, or been strengthened by, partnership through the VSC project.

- **accessing capacity-building funding**: Volunteer Centres are being encouraged to apply for BIG Assist funding which supports infrastructure organisations to develop capacity. Durham have already secured funding through this programme to undertake a feasibility study. This will identify quality assurance thresholds they need to meet to win future contracts from local commissioners.

- **ensuring activities become self-sustaining:** projects identified a series of ways in which VSC activities could be self-sustaining:

    – Exeter expressed a hope that forums set up to enable VIOs to share good practice and learning could continue beyond the lifetime of the programme without Volunteer Centre support: '*In these times if they value it they will have to sustain it themselves'.*

    – Blackburn have asked larger VIOs if they will provide peer support to volunteer managers in smaller VIOs once the project ends and some have responded enthusiastically to this.

    – Camden observed they could provide VIOs with role profiles and practical advice on recruiting and managing volunteer co-ordinators, albeit without the full training and supported currently provided by the Volunteer Centre.

- **generating income:** Bristol have already been paid by one organisation (Freeways) to help set up a mentoring project and are looking at further options for *'selling the model'* of the mentoring programme.

Cutting across accounts was a sense that at least some VSC projects were seeking to **position themselves strategically** in anticipation of future contracts. The most proactive Volunteer Centres were strengthening links with existing partners, approaching commissioners to explore funding opportunities and ensuring that quality assurance procedures were in place. This meant they could *'hit the ground running'*, as one project observed, once tenders were issued. It was noticeable that expectations of future funding centred more on winning contracts than grants compared with expectations around sustainability when interviewed for the interim report in summer 2012. This suggests that projects have become more strategic, nimble and innovative in their approach to sustainability. VSC experiences appear to

have contributed to this change, as evidenced by projects drawing on data or learning to support current discussions and bids.

At a wider level, NCVO are also looking to secure funding for a **successor programme**. The precise funding stream to be targeted and the design of any future programme has yet to be determined. Nonetheless, there is a feeling that the experience of delivering VSC leaves NCVO well-placed to secure future funding, not least because of the evidence generated by the evaluation. NCVO are also currently in talks with BIG to discuss options for using Volunteer Centres to provide training and quality assurance to organisations delivering volunteering projects with BIG funding. This illustrates how VSC provides a valuable platform from which to make the strategic case for Volunteer Centres as a unique local repository of knowledge, skills and expertise to support organisations that promote volunteering.

Overall, it is clear that Volunteer Centres face a challenge in sustaining VSC activities beyond the lifetime of the programme. There are grounds for optimism, however, that activities will continue in some form given the strong commitment of Volunteer Centres and NCVO to ensuring the programme has some legacy. The new expertise and relationships developed through VSC should, at the very least, leave Volunteer Centres better positioned to secure new funding to work with more vulnerable individuals. This seems vital given the evidence presented in this evaluation of the range and durability of benefits that volunteering can bring to this group.

Appendix 1: Individual project definitions of people who are 'disadvantaged in the labour market'

A1

Name of Partner	Number of individuals participating in the project from **groups defined as disadvantaged in the labour market** as defined within each individual project
Volunteering Bristol	Defined as individuals who are unemployed and also have the following barriers to entering volunteering: • mental health problems • a history of homelessness • recovering alcoholics • drug misuse.
Volunteer Centre Camden	Defined as individuals who have been unemployed for more than 6 months. This will include (but not be exclusive to): • individuals living in social housing • Asian women • young people.
Volunteer Cornwall	Mainly a geographical definition – Whilst working with anyone within the following estates: • Hayle – Pathway Fields • Pool – East Pool Park • Truro – Malpas and Trelander • Newquay – Mayfield • Bodmin – Kinsman and Treningle • Liskeard – Castle Park. Volunteer Cornwall will be particularly targeting: • unemployed people within workless households • single parents • people who are aged over 55 • people who suffer physical or mental ill health. As these groups of people are disadvantaged in the labour market

Exeter Council for Voluntary Service	Beneficiaries will be anyone over 18 that clearly have current barriers or additional complexities preventing them from accessing employment, including: • lived experience of mental health issues • previous offending • single parents • carers, etc. Within Exeter and Ilfracombe, the project will specifically work within: Ilfracombe • Ilfracombe Central • Ilfracombe East • Ilfracombe West • Combe Martin. Exeter • Newtown • Whipton & Beacon Heath • Wonford • Exwick & St.Davids. These are all super-output areas – those with highest data sets within the indices of deprivation
Volunteer Centre Dacorum	Defined as individuals who are unemployed, who may also be from one of the target groups below: • people with professional skills • people with disabilities • those lacking in confidence/ communication skills • people with mental health problems • refugees and asylum seekers with permission to work.
Voluntary Action Islington	VAI will target unemployed individuals living in Islington who fall into the categories below: • young people • single parents • people with a disability • people with special needs • the long-term unemployed.
Volunteer Centre Liverpool	Volunteer Centre Liverpool are working with the unemployed with a focus on North Liverpool.
Nottingham Community and Voluntary Service	This project will work with individuals who are volunteering to improve their employability, who are currently unemployed.
Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action	The project will focus on individuals who are unemployed and who face other and multiple barriers to employment including: • ethnic minorities • disabilities – physical, learning • mental health difficulties • criminal convictions. There may also be other specific groups, such as carers, ex-army forces and recent graduates that we may want to explore making links with.
Blackburn with Darwen	Individuals who have been unemployed for more than 6 months. Many of these individuals will also be

Council for Voluntary Service	• people with extra support needs • from BME communities • people with disabilities • ex-offenders and • drug service users.
Voluntary Action Sheffield	Volunteer Centre Sheffield will be targeting unemployed individuals within the Manor Castle Estate
Lincolnshire Community & Voluntary Service	This new programme will capture the benefits of volunteering for a broader spectrum of hard to reach groups and excluded individuals. They are: • unemployed people • migrant communities (including families and children of migrant workers where language and cultural differences pose a barrier) • disabled people (including people with learning and developmental difficulties, people with physical and sensory disabilities and people recovering from mental ill health) • people at risk of isolation e.g. rural communities, single parents and other vulnerable groups.
Volunteer Centre Sutton	Volunteer Centre Sutton's project will work with this following "hard to reach" groups: • young people at risk of becoming NEET (age range 16-18) • young people who are NEET (age range 16-19 • unemployed job seekers (age range 16-24), who have been claiming benefits for a minimum of six months and have not been successful in getting work or interviews. We are focusing our attention on the most deprived parts of the borough (as defined by the local council), again to influence worklessness but also to increase volunteering in these areas.
Volunteer Centre Tamworth	The target areas will be: • Tamworth – Glascote • Cannock - Blake • East Staffordshire – Eaton Park, Shobnall, Anglesey • Newcastle – Chesterton, Cross Heath, Knutton, Sliverdale • Stafford – Penkside • Stoke - Abbey Hulton and Townsend, Bentillee and Ubberley, and Eaton Park. The beneficiaries will be: Individuals within the target communities not currently engaged in volunteering, who could benefit from volunteering in a range of ways, e.g. increased confidence and self-esteem, improved employment prospects, improvements to health and well-being. In particular, this would include: claimants of out-of-work benefits, those furthest from the labour market and those facing barriers to volunteering.
2D	This project will target the rural areas of County Durham, including: • Weardale • Teesdale • other areas within the former Wear Valley district • parts of East Durham, Derwentside, Sedgefield. The hard-to-reach groups within these areas which the project will target include: • long term unemployed (more than 6 months) • Individual at imminent risk of redundancy • lone parents • carers • those with health problems, including mental health issues • NEETS.