



# Taking Part? Research Cluster Report

## **‘Many hands make light work’: The Contribution of Volunteering to Community Cohesion**

Jacqui Briggs, Louisa Parks and Zoraida Mendiwelo-Bendek

November 2013



**CabinetOffice**  
Office for Civil Society

## **Acknowledgments**

Thanks are due to:

Paul Carrick  
Neighbourhood /City of Lincoln Council

Kerry Vaughan  
Neighbourhood /City of Lincoln Council

Annie Brown  
Lead on the Community First Panel

### *The facilitators*

Maaïke Veenkamp  
Alice Carter  
Magdalena Bednarczyk  
Katarzyna Bednarczyk

### *The groups and organisations*

Abbey Community Together  
Abbey Children's Centre  
Monks Road Neighbourhood Initiative  
Development Plus  
Arabic School for All  
Blueprint Film Foundation  
Children's Links  
SoundLINCS  
Volunteer Contact Association  
Lincolnshire Sports Partnership  
Lincoln City Radio  
Tower Action Group  
Monks Abbey Summer Holiday  
Green Synergy  
Carholme Bowls Club  
7th Lincoln Scouts  
17th Lincoln Brownies  
Abbey Parents and Children Together  
AFG Hazara

**List of abbreviations:**

ALAC: Active Learning for Active Citizenship

CDF: Community Development Foundation

DCLG: Department for Communities and Local Government

TP: Take Part

VCS: Voluntary and Community Sector

## Contents

Acknowledgments.....	2
List of abbreviations:.....	3
Summary.....	5
1. Introduction.....	7
2. The Research.....	8
3. Volunteering and Participation Theory.....	9
• Improving democracy?.....	10
• Post-affluence thesis.....	10
• Political engagement and social capital.....	11
4. Methodological Approach.....	12
5. Research findings.....	12
6. Conclusions – lessons learned.....	16
7. References.....	17

## Summary

This report describes research undertaken as part of the Taking Part? ESRC Research Cluster, focused on community based learning and active citizenship. It includes findings from a community based research project undertaken in partnership by researchers at Lincoln University and community groups in Abbey ward, city of Lincoln, UK.

The research used an experiential learning process co-producing knowledge about the value of volunteering in terms of contributions to community cohesion, by discussing what nurtures and motivates volunteering, and barriers and opportunities experienced by community groups.

Using a mutual reflection and constructed conversations approach, the research project supported learning processes to empower people in having a wider participation in their communities. By building upon existing learning experiences and volunteering activities.

Research findings:

The research made important steps to uncovering volunteers' perceptions of the overall value of volunteering to community cohesion, by providing a rare opportunity for reflection about their own skill, knowledge, value and impact of volunteering.

Different articulations and understanding of the label 'volunteer'

- Volunteering perspectives came to light in the course of conversations about everyday work that led participants to think about their motivations. Volunteering was seen as something that helped to bring communities together through a wide variety of activities, beginning with the specific groups targeted by the separate community groups.
- Volunteering can be seen to contribute to community cohesion when conceived as a path - the accumulation of knowledge through extended periods of volunteering. This is reflected by those who did not 'feel' like volunteers, but rather saw their work as a "way of life". It is the spread of this "way of life" that perhaps best encapsulates the contribution of volunteering to community cohesion.
- Volunteering did not generally appear to be accepted as a term which describes many community groups' work.
- Volunteering in groups is seen as a solution to isolation: either their own or that perceived amongst others in the community.
- Volunteering as a reason to lead them to become active citizens.
- Volunteering as a temporal contribution to community cohesion is understood through the development of the next generation: "Having children makes you think about what is good in a wider sense. You want your child's experience to be positive so you become active to change the community for the better."

- Volunteering reflections identified common stories in opportunities and barriers. And have helped groups to recognise their learning needs, in order to increase their capacity to observe the impact of their activities in their communities.
- Volunteering in a flexible way generally fulfill the goals of their different groups, making volunteering a “way of life”, as a duty or responsibility in day to day life.
- Volunteering as instrumental reasons such as developing skills for future employability and giving something back to the community.
- Volunteering has a positive feeling as main outcome of individual commitments. That is, volunteers felt good about what they were doing for their community and achieved some sense of self-fulfillment (also in terms of feeling more confident and self-assertive in their own lives).
- Volunteering allows individuals to acquire skills, to build their confidence and to form friendships. These personal aspects make volunteering attractive, and link to the comments made earlier about avoiding isolation and feelings of self-fulfillment.

## 1. Introduction

As mentioned in the summary, this research aims to understand and articulate the contribution of volunteering to community cohesion. In order to explore this theme and related topics connected to it, this research, drawing upon the learning approach developed by Paulo Freire (Freire, 1972) and its influence on the development of participatory approaches to research, uses a community based participatory methodology (Estella *et al.*, 2000, Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991). This ensures, as far as possible, that the research is not for the communities – in this case - volunteers in the Abbey ward in the city of Lincoln - but to co-produce knowledge with the community.

This research is part of the portfolio of [Taking Part the ESRC](#) a partnership between the University of Lincoln, Goldsmiths University of London and Manchester Metropolitan University, funded by the Economic and Social Research Centre (ESRC) in partnership with The Office for Civil Society<sup>1</sup> and the Barrow Cadbury Trust. The Cluster develops research about active citizenship and community empowerment with third sector organisations and community groups. It is one of three clusters linked with the National Centre for Third Sector Research based at Birmingham University.

The Cluster builds upon the research expertise of the three universities and the track record of the local, regional and national third sector organisations and higher education institutions concerned with strengthening civil society: promoting active citizenship, equalities and community engagement and empowerment. More than anything, the Cluster builds upon the Take Part approach to active citizenship learning, which has been developed over a number of years (Mayo and Rooke, 2006; Mayo and Annette, 2010).

This project, working with communities in the city of Lincoln's Abbey ward, emphasises the experiential learning process and co-producing knowledge about the value of volunteering in terms of contributions to community cohesion, by exploring what nurtures and motivates volunteering, and also barriers and opportunities experienced by community groups. It is also part of a wider research project as a co-production process between universities and community partners (Mayo, Mendiweso-Bendek and Packham, 2012).

Using a mutual reflection approach around experiences, expectations, perceptions and issues as part of the research process, one of the main goals of this research project was to support learning processes among those taking part, in order to observe the structure of participation and to produce embedded processes to help groups build their own community action plan.

---

<sup>1</sup> Formerly Office of the Third Sector

## 2. The Research

The methodological framework was based on an experiential learning process supporting community volunteering groups' capacity to see and collect evidences of their activities. It engaged in constructed conversations with the research aim of learning *together with the communities* rather than merely doing research for the community. This approach has been present in details in [Take Part Learning Framework](#) (Take Part, 2006, 2011).

Using this approach the researchers worked in partnership with community groups at the Neighbourhood Programme in the Abbey ward of Lincoln, to create conversations at the groups' community premises about their own realities of being volunteers. A significant number of volunteers engaged and worked together. The link between volunteering and community cohesion is not an issue volunteers generally reflect on a great deal, so it was a good opportunity to learn in structured conversations, geared towards understanding these connections. In this vein, a conversation guide for our research aim was developed, covering the emergence of the groups, their purpose and how this was achieved, as well as barriers and opportunities they had faced - all leading towards reflections on the meaning of volunteering, and the contribution of this to the community. While the facilitator had formulated this general guide, wherever possible it allowed the volunteers' own discourses, definitions and conceptions to lead the conversations, and tried as far as possible to simply let these take their course towards discoveries and definitions of the role of volunteering in the wider sense of the community.

As the community based research aimed to support volunteers' capacity to improve and increase observations about their own activities, the first wave of conversations was held for the most part with groups of volunteers active in the same organisation. Where possible, it scheduled conversations to take place alongside normal scheduled meetings in the location of their choice. In some cases special appointments were made, but conversations always took place within the Abbey Ward premises. Four groups active in the Abbey Ward area were involved at this stage: students and ex-students at Lincoln University active in sports volunteering in the area; a residents' group; an Afghani group; and finally a parents' group. The conversations were held with each group to explore ideas of volunteering and, eventually, the contribution of volunteering to community cohesion.

Some of the groups had volunteered for a long time as local residents, without seeing the value of their activities to their communities, although they were aware of community needs. Others, like new arrivals, were supporting their migrant communities to maintain their culture and didn't see their role as impacting on community cohesion in their area.

In a second step, conversations involved a wider group of volunteers in a celebration event covering the Abbey, Carholme, and Park wards of the city of Lincoln. These conversations aimed, in wider geographical spaces, to identify volunteering structures, patterns and common activities, as far as possible, towards mutual learning and the recognition of the contribution of volunteering to community cohesion by the volunteers themselves. In this case, some of the previous participants acted as facilitators of the process (students or



former students now active as volunteers in the area) and the event was chaired by a local resident heavily involved in community activity.

The academics at the university worked alongside the facilitators to support the conversations process during the celebration event, focusing on the research questions and recognising areas where groups could work together effectively towards community cohesion outcomes. A further joint conversation involving only groups active in Abbey ward was then organised by the same facilitator, as groups wanted to develop opportunities for a community forum.

The volunteer and citizens working actively in civil society offers a natural space for self-organisation. This is a space where citizens engage with each other in non-hierarchical communications and collective action. But this is also a space where power structures can prevent those lacking skills and organisation from participating, excluding the most vulnerable people. Constructed conversations help civil society to self-organise in a way that enables everyone to take part and be heard. (Mendiweso-Bendek, 2012). These should be facilitated conversations which steer groups towards shared issues maintaining their course through on-going feedback (*cf.* Beer, 1994).

The aim of this forum was to create links across community groups, reinforcing social capital types, a Halpern word explaining the links between family members or minority groups. For example, links between migrants' groups (bonding social capital) across ethnic groups (bridging social capital and across different social classes (linking social capital) (Halpern, 2005). Citizens' participation has a great potential in democratic societies but there is also a risk it can be hijacked by minorities who over influence the direction and quality of outcomes. Those with the resources, power and knowledge to shape discourses and practices can do it to their advantage, increasing power inequalities at the expense of the weakest (Gaventa, 2011).

### 3. Volunteering and Participation Theory

Volunteering provides an opportunity for local people to be involved and have a say in the operation of their community. It enables them to be able to participate politically in the decision making processes in relation to their local area. Having said this, theoretical perspectives on decision making highlight the fact that there are varying degrees of participation. One of the key writers in this area, Sherry Arnstein, made a seminal contribution to the debate with her 'ladder of participation'. Although writing as far back as 1969, her analysis of varying degrees of participation being akin to a ladder remains pertinent today. Indeed, it was adapted slightly by Hart in 1992 to refer specifically to children's political participation. Essentially, Arnstein argues that participation occurs at differing levels or rungs, and there is a qualitative difference as to where you participate. Indeed, some participation is not real participation in that it constitutes therapy, placation or lip-service. This occurs when, for example, people believe that they are participating but, in actual fact their views are simply ignored or at least side-lined. The higher up the ladder the more real participation occurs. As Hart states in relation to children's participation, 'Tokenism might

be a way to describe how children are sometimes used on conference panels. Articulate, charming children are selected by adults to sit on a panel with little or no substantive preparation on the subject and no consultation with their peers who, it is implied, they represent. If no explanation is given to the audience or to the children of how they were selected, and which children's perspectives they represent, this is usually sufficient indication that a project is not truly an example of participation' (Hart, 1992: 10). It is necessary, therefore, to consider the extent to which any participation is in fact real participation or is it mere lip-service or tokenism? John Stuart Mill wrote of the value of participation *per se* and related it to what the Ancient Greeks termed the 'good life'. Volunteers often refer to this aspect of their role. They are often surprised by the unintended consequences that their participation brings. In addition to working towards achieving their stated aims, there are often other benefits such as the camaraderie that volunteering brings, the ability to learn new skills or to recognise and appreciate skills that they already possessed but perhaps had lain dormant or they weren't able to bring to the forefront. Whilst recognising that this notion of participation being an end in itself does have value, there must be a point at which participants, if they have an end-goal towards which they strive, must become disillusioned and feel that they are wasting their time and energies. There has to be a point at which enough is enough. If significant amounts of time and energy are invested but to no avail, questions will eventually be asked as to whether there is a point to the participation.

- **Improving democracy?**

Participation is essential for democracy to exist. Paul Whiteley highlights how political participation is '... at the heart of democratic government and civil society, and without it there can be no effective democracy' (2012: 34). He proceeds to highlight how '...social capital refers to co-operative relationships between individuals based on mutual trust and norms of reciprocity' and proceeds to emphasise the value and importance of volunteering to this social capital. Whiteley states, '... unpaid voluntary activities make a very important contribution to social capital, which, in turn, has all kinds of benign effects on society and politics, and therefore, trends in volunteering take on a particular significance for supporting civil society (2012: 76). Participation takes many and varied forms. As Young points out, 'Among these new forms of participation, political consumption – which I define as a consumer's decision either to punish (i.e. boycott) or reward (i.e. buycott) private companies by making selective choices of products or brands, based on social, political or ethical considerations - is often highlighted as an alternative mode of political/civic engagement' (2010: 1066). It can be seen, therefore, how the notion of participation covers a wide range of activities and extends to non-participation, especially where there is conscious decision making taking place, for example, as in the case of a boycott.

- **Post-affluence thesis**

Participation is often regarded a luxury that is more likely to take place in times of relative affluence as opposed to in times of austerity. Ronald Inglehart's post-affluence thesis epitomises this notion. The idea being that if people are worried about feeding their children, paying their bills and generally dealing with the problems of basic survival then they are less likely to turn their attention away from their own immediate concerns and become interested

in issues like the environment or animal rights. Using this analysis, the current period of financial downturn and austerity might lead to lower levels of volunteering and involvement as people focus upon basic economic survival. Whilst there is a great deal of merit in Inglehart's thesis, critics point out participatory actions that are associated with austerity and not affluence, the Jarrow March which took place in October 1936 being a case in point or, more recently, the protests against the increase in higher education tuition fees. What is interesting, therefore, as revealed by this research, is the extent to which volunteering remains a key activity for many people. People who are not necessarily affluent but who feel a deep commitment and bond to their local area continue to volunteer and act on behalf of their local community. It does appear to be the case that these people are motivated into action and helping others for more altruistic reasons than the post-affluence thesis permits.

- **Political engagement and social capital**

Using data from the Hansard Society's *Audit of Political Engagement* – which has taken place every year since 2004 – Gerry Stoker highlights how those stating that they have undertaken voluntary work has ranged from 23 per cent in 2003 to 25 per cent in 2010, with the high point being 29 per cent in 2009, the lowest points being 22 per cent in 2005 and 2008 (Stoker, 2011: 25). Essentially, approximately a quarter of respondents claim to have participated in voluntary work. This is relatively high when compared with those who claim to be politically active, for example. Ekman and Amna (2012) refer to latent or 'standby' participation – as opposed to actual or conventional participation. This is to say participation potential as opposed to actual participation or, as the *Audit of Political Engagement 10: The 2013 Report* cites, '... episodic forms of participation when the circumstances warrant it' (2013: 72). Accordingly, 39 per cent of the Audit's respondents fall into the latent or standby category (*Ibid.*: 74). As the Report states, 'On the right issue, and with a suitable political stimulus, around four in 10 standby citizens could potentially be converted from latent to manifest participation in the future' (*Ibid.*: 82). The Audit refers primarily to political participation but it is interesting to postulate that these findings could transfer to volunteering *per se*.

Paul Whiteley examines the role of voluntary organisations and volunteering in encouraging civic engagement. He highlights the notion of social capital as referring to '... cooperative relationships between individuals based on mutual trust and norms of reciprocity' (2012: 76). He proceeds to state, '... unpaid voluntary activities make a very important contribution to social capital, which, in turn, has all kinds of benign effects on society and politics, and therefore, trends in volunteering take on a particular significance for supporting civil society' (*Ibid.*). Social capital has been linked with '... improved health, better educational standards, lower crime rates, enhanced political participation, and improved economic performance' (*Ibid.*). Given the link between volunteering and social capital, it is easy to see the value of volunteering to society *per se*.

Volunteering and active citizenship provides people with the opportunity to become involved in their locality/neighbourhood. In addition to the local community potentially benefitting from their involvement and actions, it is clear that the individual themselves may also benefit from this participation. The opportunity to be able to 'give back' to their community, even if this is only for a few hours per week, potentially manifests itself as a feeling of being valued and having a purpose in life. Too often, life in 21<sup>st</sup> Century western society involves an emphasis upon materialistic aspects and monetary gains. It is clear, however, that volunteering provides the opportunity to 'give back' to the local environment

in a way which goes beyond mere financial reward. This emphasis upon altruism and selflessness for the greater good of the community should not be underestimated. In addition to this aspect, however, it is clear that the volunteers themselves also stand to gain through participation. It is evident that volunteering helps the acquisition and honing of a number of transferable skills – even though the volunteers acquiring these skills may not necessarily be aware of or able to articulate the precise nature of these skills. Confidence-building, group working, negotiating and problem-solving techniques, amongst others, often accompany volunteering activities. The participants themselves may not always appreciate and recognise that they are using these techniques and acquiring these skills but it is certainly the case that this is *precisely* what is inadvertently happening to many volunteers. If, as Whiteley highlights above, social capital involves ‘... mutual trust and norms of reciprocation’ (*Ibid.*: 76) then this reciprocation is clearly evident when examining the benefits accrued by the participants in volunteering activities. They too stand to gain from the experience, alongside the community that they seek to serve. Those benefits may not necessarily be tangible but they certainly exist!

## 4. Methodological Approach

As mentioned in the Research section, the research draws on the *Take Part* learning approach. Using this approach, the researchers worked in partnership with the Neighbourhood Programme in the Abbey Ward of Lincoln to facilitate conversations at community premises with various groups and forums. There were parallels with focus groups but the emphasis was much more upon the volunteers themselves leading the conversation as opposed to the researchers directing the themes and direction of the discussion. As far as possible, the conversation was free-flowing, with the researchers intervening only on relatively few occasions in order to give the participants a slight steer. A conversation guide was developed covering the emergence of the groups, their purpose and how this was achieved, barriers and opportunities they had faced in order to facilitate reflections on the meaning of volunteering, and the contribution of this to the community. Wherever possible, the volunteers’ own discourses, definitions and conceptions were given space to lead the conversations. Notes on the proceedings of these conversations were then coded according to the scheme suggested by the data, to develop themes around the central research question. A great deal of emphasis was placed upon the volunteers themselves being able to ‘own’ the conversation.

## 5. Research findings

The research findings of this exploratory research are articulated according to the different steps outlined above. First, it will discuss the themes emanating from the conversations held with separate groups in the first step of the research.

As touched on above, one of the first findings to emerge from the conversations held with separate groups was disagreement about the label ‘volunteer’. Volunteering did not generally

appear to be accepted as a term which describes many community groups' work. Many members of the volunteering groups made comments along the lines of "I don't think of this as volunteering". They described their work using different terms, often seeing their work as a duty or a responsibility, especially to their children and future generations in their community. It is interesting to reflect upon the fact that many of the participants do not equate what they do with volunteering and the implications, if any, of this failure to make a connection between their activities and volunteering. This aspect is examined in more detail later in this report.

The drivers behind working to fill these perceived duties and responsibilities varied for different individuals, but aside from these noble feelings a few commonalities did emerge. A number of participants underlined that volunteering in groups had been a solution to isolation: either their own or that perceived amongst others in the community. The enjoyment of working together with people holding similar outlooks and the *fun* to be had through volunteering also came out strongly in the conversations. Feeling worthwhile, empathy with fellow volunteers and sheer enjoyment of the activities organised were the factors most often named as reasons for continued activity and effort.

This overarching theme, the wish to provide opportunities and benefits for children and young people - whether their own or in the community in general, is also linked by volunteers to the reasons that led them to become active citizens. The general feeling here is summed up in the comment "As adults now we are responsible for the future of our children". Providing opportunities for children ranged concretely from language learning and cultural celebrations to providing weekend activities and access to sports. The contribution to community cohesion of centring activities around children was seen as occurring through providing a good example to children and young people by being seen to devote time to the community, as well as by giving them opportunities that some felt they had not experienced themselves when growing up, whether locally or elsewhere. The temporal aspect of the contribution of volunteering to community cohesion was thus often understood through the development of the next generation: "Having children makes you think about what is good in a wider sense. You want your child's experience to be positive so you become active to change the community for the better."

Temporality was also an important theme linked to how much different groups could achieve, with how long a group had existed and the stage of its development highlighted as one of the fundamental barriers or opportunities to contributing to the wider community, depending on the age of the group. Thus, while all the groups we engaged with underlined that they were open to participation by all, only more experienced groups felt that actively promoting their group and their group's work in the community was possible. A certain period of consolidation within groups was seen as crucial for learning how to access various resources, from outside support to funding. Once these first hurdles had been overcome, the groups were able to begin to turn outwards and recruit, extend their activities, and publicise their work. Thus, a member of a more recently established group pointed out that "we are just at the point that we know who we are (...) The next generation will do more. In 5 years we will be helping you!" while another, slightly older group member observed that "We're at the next level now in what we do. We only stepped up to that level recently".

A migrant group has self-organised volunteering within their own community, which has led to an increase in their feeling of safety in Lincoln. The group has evolved from arranging religious festivals to now operating their own supplementary school. It could be believed that this has provided a structure for further engagement.

The students' group experience came from wanting to feel part of the community in which they lived whilst they studied in the city. As they were looking for opportunities to find a job, and also to feel part of the community, they have found a job in the voluntary sector. They have to recognise each other's strengths and learning needs to increase their community knowledge and to play a role.

At the joint event, groups' interactions around themes introduced by facilitators, who were also volunteers, have identified more than common issues. This event aimed to guide the conversation towards an evaluation of the value of volunteering in the context of a celebration of what local Lincoln communities had achieved in recent years. The groups ranged from local bowls and Scouts clubs to residents' and parents' groups. The questions, developed by the facilitators engaged as volunteers in community groups, began by identifying the roles and aims of each group and their day to day work, then moved on to ask about motivations for volunteering, common areas and the benefits to the community and the self. They also identified common stories around opportunities and barriers and have helped to recognise the learning needs of groups, to increase their capacity to observe the impact of their activities in their communities.

When speaking about what their roles as volunteers involved, participants mentioned a range of activities but pointed out that they were flexible and generally carried out anything needed to fulfil the goals of their different groups. Indeed, many pointed out that volunteering had become a "way of life", tying in with the view of volunteering as a duty or responsibility in day to day life that emerged during the first part of the research. The motivations for becoming involved in community volunteering also echoed this viewpoint. Although more instrumental reasons were mentioned, such as developing skills for future employability and the like, the majority of comments were related to duty towards the community, "giving something back". Regardless of the original motivations among participants for their original involvement in volunteering, positive feelings were cited as the main outcome of their individual commitments. That is, volunteers felt *good* about what they were doing for their community and achieved some sense of self-fulfilment (also in terms of feeling more confident and self-assertive in their own lives) as a result. Some also expressed an increased sense of belonging to their community through their work. The more negative aspects of volunteering were expressed in frustration about the limits of what could be achieved due to funding problems or the small numbers of volunteers involved in each group, and indeed when things did not go according to plan, meaning they had 'wasted their time'.

On the subject of what was common about their volunteering work, in addition to thriftiness and their need to achieve their aims with minimal resources, participants also identified a general social objective in their volunteering work. Whether their activities were geared towards children, adults, service provision or leisure activities, it was generally recognised that their work was about an attempt to engage the whole community, to "bring everyone in" and mix different groups within the local area with a view to overall cohesion. As the facilitators noted in their report on the event, "In this sense volunteering would appear to

have an overarching objective” that is not tied to either individual motivations or group objectives. This perception is perhaps key to identifying the contribution of volunteering to community cohesion. In further discussions about what might be achieved by working together the idea of “many hands make light work” came to the fore. The participants felt that by developing ties amongst different groups of volunteers a variety of resources could be shared, in particular knowledge resources where similar challenges (often funding-related) had been identified. Working together was also seen to provide possibilities for greater efficiency in terms of identifying areas where more work was perceived to be needed, as well as avoiding duplication. However, others pointed out the danger of multiplying forums for volunteers where this could render existing arrangements superfluous. Any perceptions of competition among groups in a negative sense was generally denied. Focusing once more on the overarching objective of benefiting the community in a wider sense, participants expressed pleasure at hearing of the successes and work of others, even where competing directly for resources. Discussing the event in general, several participants mentioned that meeting with other volunteers had allowed them time to reflect on why they volunteered, a pursuit they did not ordinarily have time for when caught up in day to day tasks. Many also appreciated feeling that “they were not alone” in working for their vision of a better community.

The final joint event between groups active in the Abbey ward focused on more practical aspects of volunteering, which also throw up important elements for consideration. Participants at this event did observe, as in the other sessions, that volunteering not only contributes to local society but allows individuals to develop on a personal level in a variety of ways. Volunteering allows individuals to acquire skills, to build their confidence and to form friendships. These personal aspects make volunteering attractive, and link to the comments made earlier about avoiding isolation and feelings of self-fulfilment. However, the high numbers of groups and levels of volunteering in the area were also linked by participants to the availability of funding due to the area’s status as a deprived part of the city, with a large migrant community and poor health levels. The presence of a City Council Neighbourhood Office and the Abbey Ward Community Organiser provided an important resource not repeated in all areas of the city. Access to volunteering thus depends to some extent on the presence of concrete *structures* in this sense. Though goodwill and personal development are important elements attracting volunteers, institutional frameworks form another essential part of the picture.

In summary, the conversations with volunteers made some steps to uncovering volunteers’ perceptions of the overall value of volunteering to community cohesion, precisely by providing a rare opportunity for reflection. Thoughts about volunteering and community cohesion came to light in a variety of discussions, but it is interesting to note that few thoughts were forthcoming where this question was posed directly. Rather, visions of volunteering came to light in the course of conversations about everyday work that led participants to think about their motivations. Volunteering was seen as something that served to bring communities together through a wide variety of activities beginning with the specific groups targeted by the separate community groups. As these groups grew older and gained experience, they felt able to reach out to wider sections of the community, to those “who slip through the net”. Volunteering can thus be seen to contribute to community cohesion when conceived as a path - the accumulation of knowledge through extended periods of volunteering is an important factor here. Indeed, this is reflected in the comments



of all those who did not 'feel' like volunteers, but rather saw their work as a "way of life". It is the spread of this "way of life" that perhaps best encapsulates the contribution of volunteering to community cohesion.

During this session, hand-outs were supplied with information that the Local Authority holds in relation to residents' perception of the area. This information painted a negative picture and residents failed to accept this information. (Please let me know if you want to include key findings from the Citizens survey – this would be good – just a brief summary perhaps?) Attendees at both events did not accept this information and conversations were held about the spirit of the Ward. This prompted discussions about how groups can make their activities more visible in the community.

These conversations help to inform the development of a Neighbourhood Plan. The plan is to be delivered by a Neighbourhood Board that brings together local residents with Ward Councillors and key practitioners working in the area.

"On paper, things looked bleak for the Grand Boulevard neighborhood in Chicago in the early '90s. Eighty percent of children there lived in poverty, and a third of adults were unemployed. Yet below the surface, not visible in government statistics or a quick drive through its rundown streets, there was reason for hope. This largely African-American community of 36,000 on the city's South Side was home to no less than 320 citizens groups working to improve life in the neighborhood".

<http://onthecommons.org/magazine/improve-community-build-whats-good-make-things-better>

Residents involved believe that Abbey is a community where people come together.

## 6. Conclusions – lessons learned

The key findings of this project were linked to a range of themes around the main research question. Many participants took issue with the label 'volunteer' and, rather, preferred to regard their work in the light of duty and responsibility, particularly to future generations. The motivations of volunteers varied, but dominant themes uncovered were volunteering as a solution to isolation (either personal or among others in the community), the fun of volunteering and linked satisfactory feelings of empathy, worthwhileness and crucially the wish to be part of a wider community. More concretely, many participants viewed the contribution of volunteering as a duty to children in terms of providing opportunities and services. Learning among volunteers was found to be closely linked to organisational longevity.

More specifically, there were a number of important outcomes unearthed via the research. Firstly, the importance of participation per se was clearly evidenced via the focus groups. This clearly equates with John Stuart Mill's articulation of the 'good life' and the notion that there is merit to be had in participation for its own sake. The volunteers stated that they



enjoyed volunteering and felt that they personally gained from being involved. This had little to do with external gains and achieving their organisations' goals but also involved a feeling of wellbeing and a less tangible reward of a sense of fulfilment or contentment. It is difficult to articulate such feelings and gains attributed to volunteering but through comments such as "...Residents involved believe that Abbey is a community where people come together...", the participants were able to explain the personal benefits of their involvement in their local community. It is difficult to ascertain the 'value' of such involvement but it is clear that the volunteers did feel that they had benefited over and above achieving the aims of their organisations. This aspect of volunteering is often overlooked in the literature that outlines the benefits of a volunteering culture. In addition, the fact that many of them did not recognise or equate their role with volunteering as such is also worthy of mention. They clearly were volunteering but regarded their involvement as being for the good of their community. This depiction of it being a 'way of life' is a perceptive way of capturing their involvement and their view of their own involvement.

The findings indicate support for:

- 1) Mill's view of participation as 'the good life'. Volunteers felt personally fulfilled by their work. This is an important outcome in that intangible benefits such as this are often overlooked. Feelings of wellbeing and of perhaps being less concerned with materialistic outcomes are key aspects. Participants may feel a greater sense of belonging to their community through having volunteered. It is difficult to assess the value of such benefits but, certainly, these are very real and important benefits as our respondents' comments testify.
- 2) Detractors of the post-affluent thesis. This may be connected to the structures put in place to encourage community cohesion in areas labelled 'deprived'. However, the will of many volunteers to provide opportunities to the next generation is also a strong indicator here to dispute the link between affluence and volunteering. The volunteers tend to be acting in an altruistic manner and their involvement does not appear to be restricted by time factors and other resources that would limit their participation levels. For many, there is personal sacrifice involved, be that, time, resources, etc and it is not the case that they have achieved a certain level of affluence that permits them to turn their attention away from basic economic survival and towards these community based issues and projects.

## 7. References

- Arnstein, S. R. (1969) 'A Ladder of Citizen Participation', *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, Vol. 35, No. 4, July: 216-224.
- Beer, S. (1994). *Beyond Dispute: The Invention of Team Syntegrity*. Chichester, John Wiley and Sons.
- Carman, C. (2010) 'The Process is the Reality: Perceptions of Procedural Fairness and Participatory Democracy', *Political Studies*, Vol. 58: 731-751.

- Ekman, J. and Amna, E. (2012) 'Political participation and Civic Engagement: Towards a New Typology', *Human Affairs*, Vol. 22, No. 3, July: 283-300.
- Gaventa, J. and M., M. (2008). "Linking the Local and the Global Through Citizen-based Advocacy? The Case of the Global Campaign for Education " IDS Working Paper
- Fals-Borda, O. and Rahman, A. (1991) *Action and Knowledge: Breaking the Monopoly with Participatory Action-Research*, London: Intermediate Technology Publications
- Freire, Paulo: 1996 [1970]. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London, Penguin.
- Freire, Paulo: 1992. *Pedagogy of Hope*. London, Continuum.
- Halpern, D. (2005). *Social Capital*, Polity.
- Hansard Society (2013) *Audit of Political Engagement 10*, London, the Hansard Society.
- Hart, R. A. (1992) 'Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship', *United Nations Children's Fund*, Innocenti Essays Number 4, Florence, UNICEF: 1-41.
- Helliwell, J., Layard, R. and Sachs, J. (2012) *World Happiness Report*, New York, The Earth Institute Columbia University
- Inglehart, R. (1977a) *The Silent Revolution*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press.
- Inglehart, R. (1977b) *Modernization and Post-Modernization: Cultural, Economic and Political Change in 43 Countries*, Princeton, N. J., Princeton University Press.
- John, P., Fieldhouse, E. and Liu, H. (2011) 'How Civic is Civic Culture? Explaining Community Participation Using the 2005 English Citizenship Survey', *Political Studies*, Vol. 59: 230-252.
- Mayo, M., Mendiwelo-Bendek, Z. and Packham, C. (2013) Community Development, Community Organising and Third Sector-University Research Partnerships in eds. Mayo Mendiwelo-Bendek Z and Packham C (2013) *Community Research as Community Development*, London: Palgrave Macmillan
- Mayo, M. and Annette, J. eds. (2010) *Taking Part? Active Learning for Active Citizenship, and Beyond*, Leicester: NIACE.
- Mayo, M. and Rooke, A. (2006) *Active Learning for Active Citizenship*, London: Home Office.
- Mayo, M., Mendiwelo-Bendek, Z. and Packham, C. (2012) 'Learning to Take Part as active citizens: Emerging Lessons for Community Organising in Britain', *Voluntary Sector Review*, 3, 2, 179-195.
- Mendiwelo-Bendek, Z. (2002) 'Citizens of the Future: Beyond Normative Conditions through the Emergence of Desirable Collective Properties', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 39, 1-2, 189-195.
- Mendiwelo-Bendek, Z. (2012) *Supporting Civil Society's Self-Organisation*, EMCSR, European Meeting on Cybernetics and Systems Research (Vienna), <http://www.emcsr.net>.
- Milbrath, L. W. (1965) *Political Participation: How and Why Do people Get Involved in Politics?*, Chicago, Rand McNally.
- Mill, J. S. (2005) *On Liberty*, New York, Cosimo, first published in 1859.
- Parry, G., Moyser, G. and Day, N. (1992) *Political Participation in Britain*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Pateman, C. (1970) *Participation and Democratic Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Power Inquiry, (2006) *Executive Summary and recommendations of the report of Power: An Independent Inquiry into Britain's democracy*, York, Joseph Rowntree Trust.
- Putnam, R. (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York, Touchstone Books.

- Pykett, J., Seward, M. and Schaefer, A. (2010) 'Framing the Good Citizen', *British Journal of Political and International Relations*, Vol. 12: 523-538.
- Stoker, G. (2011) *Building a new politics?*, London, British Academy.
- Take Part (2006, 2011) *Take Part Learning Framework*, <http://www.takepart.org> and <http://www.takepartresearchcluster.org>.
- Whiteley, P. (2012) *Political Participation in Britain: The Decline and Revival of Civic Culture*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Young, M. B. (2010) 'To Buy or Not to Buy: Who are Political Consumers? What do they Think and How Do they Participate?', *Political Studies*, Vol. 58: 1065-1086.