



# **Evaluation report of Vintage Volunteers: a project of VAST**

**August 2020**

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## Executive Summary

The findings from the evaluation of the Vintage Volunteers project indicates that it is reaching its target audience of people aged 60 and over and has developed an **expertise** in understanding the volunteering needs of this age group and how to support them into sustainable volunteering.

One of the recommendations from volunteers and other stakeholders is of reducing the target age group to 50 and over so that the project might reach individuals who are in the **pre-retirement** stage of life and who might, therefore, consider volunteering as they plan and prepare for retirement and later life.

Vintage Volunteers is both **responsive and pro-active**; the project team members are up to date with volunteering opportunities that are available locally and are also able to respond to an individuals' specific needs and enable a 'tailor made' placement.

The individuals who were consulted expressed that VAST is well placed to promote volunteering and that they have engaged in activities to promote the mutual benefits of volunteering; finding peoples' personal motivations and supporting them to sustain volunteering. Indeed, Vintage Volunteers have initiated and implemented local research on improving volunteering opportunities for older people<sup>1</sup>.

The project team have been creative in how they have engaged with individuals; people particularly commented on the success of the 'Spitfires and Oatcakes' events and stakeholders noted that the project team are accessible at a range of community events.

***"I saw colleagues from Vintage Volunteers at community meetings where they were promoting Vintage Volunteers and engaging with community members" (Host organisation)***

One of the key elements of the project is that it is **supported volunteering**. The volunteering placements are appropriate and individuals are supported to maintain their placement. Where appropriate project staff attend placement interviews with volunteers and regularly contact them to make sure all is well. Volunteers are enabled to take a break in volunteering, without judgement, and in the knowledge that they can return when ready. Flexibility is an important consideration for new volunteers who have certain perceptions about volunteering which they can find off-putting. Importantly, the project enabled people to feel comfortable about changing their placement.

Importantly, all of those consulted reported that being part of Vintage Volunteers will improve feelings of well-being, increase confidence, build social connections and reduce loneliness.

## Introduction

Vintage Volunteers is a project of VAST, a charity dedicated to developing, advancing and promoting the voluntary and community sector in Staffordshire. VAST is a well-known and well-respected local infrastructure organisation that provides key services and support and encourages professional development within the sector<sup>2</sup>.

VAST's aim is to help the local voluntary and community sector to prosper and to grow whether they be a small community group or a larger regional organisation.

VAST is well placed within the local networks to act as a central 'volunteering hub' and that is a service that has been offered by them when funding was available. Stakeholder organisations spoke of Vintage Volunteers as offering a volunteering brokerage service that would be useful for all ages and client groups although some also spoke of the value of the expertise they have now developed in supporting older age groups.

VAST is also well placed to be a key part of the network of organisations in Stoke and North Staffordshire that have been funded by the National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF) as part of its programme to address social isolation and loneliness.

VAST's application to NLCF was initiated by local and national discussions about the demographic change of an increasingly ageing population and that this presents greater opportunities as well as challenges but that key to it is longer lives lived with good quality of life. VAST set out to explore the role of volunteering after the age of 60 as a means to prevent deterioration in health and to prevent and reduce social isolation and loneliness through older people being involved and participating in community activities.

In advance of the Vintage Volunteers project, VAST worked with and commissioned surveys from the Older Peoples' Engagement Network (OPEN) facilitated by Saltbox, a faith based local infrastructure organisation, to assess the role of volunteering in 'ageing well' particularly leading up to and into retirement.

Those who responded to the survey were already engaged through OPEN and 64% of responders were already volunteering; of those 85% reported benefits to their health and wellbeing because of their volunteering activities.

Of those volunteers, 73% reported that their volunteering activities helped them to develop relationships with other people and 60% said that they had made new friends as a result of it; 46% said that their self-confidence had increased. Of the 36% that did not currently volunteer 70% stated that they did not have the time to commit to a regular volunteering role.

A meeting with a local Community Matron Team indicated that frailty amongst older people was accelerated by anxiety, loneliness, lack of friendships and undiagnosed depression which the project team, based on the available evidence, felt that involvement in volunteering or being the beneficiary of a volunteering scheme could help to address.

National organisations such as the centre for Ageing Better and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation have produced evidence on the need to plan and prepare for retirement and

the role that volunteering can play as one of a number of activities to support a successful transition to retirement<sup>3</sup>.

In the context of the ageing population and to explore the role that volunteering might have in improving health and wellbeing and reducing social isolation and loneliness, VAST successfully applied to the Reaching Communities programme of the National Lottery Community Fund and launched the Vintage Volunteers programme in 2017 with the aim of providing 'a dedicated destination for people aged 60+ seeking rewarding volunteering opportunities in Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle-under-Lyme. Volunteering can help you make a difference to your local community, utilise your skills and expertise, and enhance your personal wellbeing'<sup>4</sup>

Specifically, the project's outcomes are:

1. Improved wellbeing in people aged 60+ through an increased sense of purpose, identity and motivation
2. An increase in social networks and community connectivity for people aged 60+ leading to a reduced sense of isolation
3. Greater recognition of older people as valuable contributors to society through increased community involvement

## **Project activities**

Vintage Volunteers is both a proactive and a responsive project which means that it set out with a plan of activities to achieve its' aims and outcomes, but has been responsive to the learning along the way and altered the 'route' it has taken where appropriate.

An example of this is the original plan for setting up Vintage Volunteer Forums so older people could participate in discussions and peer support. The project team found that a focused approach was more successful and introduced the popular Spitfires and Oatcakes sessions to engage with people around the centenary of the end of World War 1.

The project team have also encountered certain challenges in collecting the evaluation evidence around the difference the project makes. This will be a familiar issue for many local projects and includes:

- Individuals disinclined to complete monitoring and evaluation paperwork
- Some challenges connecting with the more isolated and lonely older people
- The Covid-19 pandemic has completely altered the way most VCSE organisations have and are operating. Staff have moved to working from home with no face to face interaction with clients or volunteers
- Outstanding information where people are relatively new to their placement

During the COVID-19 pandemic the Vintage Volunteers Team worked alongside Stoke on Trent City Council on their Stoke-on-Trent Together portal to support vulnerable, isolated and shielding individuals. In particular the team worked with the over 750 individuals who came forward wanting to volunteer to ensure they could be placed in fulfilling and appropriate volunteer roles and also worked with VCSE organisations to ensure they had the relevant support to accommodate a larger number of volunteers. 212 volunteer placements were made during the initial COVID response period and ongoing dialogue continued with many more potential volunteers (it is unknown how many were over 50 as the older population were more likely to be shielded and we worked with volunteers of all ages through this period) although the numbers available decreased as people started to return to work after the lockdown period.

All of these challenges have had an impact on the final figures for the project when compared with the target numbers quoted within the original proposal to NLCF (see below Table 1.). The project team are in regular contact with their NLCF Funding Officer and any changes to the project have been agreed with them.

**Table 1. Actual numbers compared to target figures**

<b>Outcome indicator</b>	<b>Target for the end of the project</b>	<b>Actual at the end of the project</b>
Number of older people participating in the project who report an increase in their social connections and feel less lonely	120	39
Older people participating in the project are able to utilise their skills, knowledge and experience and feel a sense of pride in their contribution	120	59
Number of volunteering opportunities filled by older people	150	76
Number of older people attending Vintage Volunteer Forums and participating in discussions	150	210

Number of Vintage Volunteer Champions	90	48
Number of older people participating in a new community activity	45	6
Older people report receiving positive feedback following or during their volunteer experience	90	60
Beneficiaries of VCSE organisations supported by Vintage Volunteers report they found their contribution valuable	90	84
Number of VCSE organisations that have developed a more diverse volunteering offer to enable and encourage older people to volunteer	50	45

In designing the evaluation, account has been made of the number of key stakeholders to the Vintage Volunteers project. The evaluation team recognises that the beneficiaries of host organisations are unable to provide feedback so their view has been included in the feedback from the host organisation. Key stakeholders include:

- People aged 60+ who engage in volunteering
- The organisations they are placed with (host organisations)
- The beneficiaries of the organisations they are placed with
- The VCSE organisations that benefit from the support of the Vintage Volunteers project team
- The Vintage Volunteers Champions

## **Project Impact**

The project team have worked hard to keep in touch with volunteers and project stakeholders and to collect as much monitoring information as possible. But the Covid-19 pandemic has created difficulties for the project evaluation. Based on feedback from volunteers, the project and evaluation team felt that there would not be a sufficient response to questionnaires e mailed out to participants and were unable to conduct the focus groups that were to be a key part of the evaluation process. However, we have analysed the data collected by the project team and the case stories they have produced.

In addition eight individual interviews have been conducted; four volunteers and four host organisations.

The key threads emerging from the data, case stories and interviews are expanded on below:

### ***Volunteering Hub***

Of those consulted about the effectiveness and impact of the project, there was 100% positivity about Vintage Volunteers. It is seen by key stakeholders as a 'volunteering hub'. A common recommendation is for VAST to promote itself as a central point of contact for volunteering with Hanley being seen as an appropriate location for that. It is also recommended to open up small, 'satellite sites' perhaps in areas of high community activity although people recognised that this was impractical for a small project team.

Host organisations reported that Vintage Volunteers has a central role to play in the Volunteer Managers Network and that not enough publicity is given to the role that the project has in supporting other volunteer involving organisations. They have provided assistance in setting up volunteer schemes including advising on setting up appropriate systems, policies and procedures as well as the recruitment, training and ongoing support of volunteers.

As well as researching individual tailor made volunteering opportunities, the project has involved volunteers in its own service; as members of the project Steering Group, in consultation events and as co-researchers, with Staffordshire University, in producing the report '*Improving Volunteering Opportunities for People over 60*'<sup>1</sup>

One of the volunteers reported how important it is to feel valued as a volunteer and that being a co-researcher who was involved in all stages of the planning and production of the report demonstrated an equity between staff and volunteers.

Nationally, the Centre for Ageing Better<sup>5</sup> reported on the need for age-friendly and inclusive volunteering to 'support and sustain the efforts of older volunteers'. From a VCSE network perspective it was helpful and useful to understand the local context and to implement the report findings.

### ***Supported volunteering***

***"Supported volunteering means people can take time out (e.g. to cope with bereavement) and they know they can go back or they can negotiate a different placement. We would work together with Vintage Volunteers if someone wanted a different type of placement" (Host organisation)***

One of the key findings of the evaluation is of the link between supported volunteering and the long-term sustainability of volunteering. Although time intensive, most organisations that involve volunteers, recognise that systems and levels of support enable people with barriers to volunteering to get involved and to sustain their involvement. Volunteers reported that Vintage Volunteers are 'on the journey with them'; from the time of the initial discussion, into the placement and providing contact and support as the placement developed.

76% of Vintage Volunteers sustained their volunteering for six months or more and 24% dropped out for a range of reasons including:

- Personal circumstances (including deteriorating physical or mental health)
- The placement did not live up to expectations or there was a perceived lack of support from the host organisation
- Barriers around 'red tape' (including DBS checks, form filling)
- Delays between applying to volunteer and the organisation activating the application
- It became too much of a commitment
- The needs of the individual have required them to be referred to an organisation for support rather than as a volunteer

It seemed that both the flexibility and the structure of volunteering are important to individuals for different reasons. For those in retirement, a fixed, structured volunteer placement was less attractive than for someone building confidence and hoping to go into work. Volunteers self-reported improvements in their feelings of wellbeing, particularly where they had experienced issues with their mental health to the extent that one volunteer was able to reduce therapeutic appointments provided by local mental health services.

#### ***Person centred volunteering opportunities***

All the volunteers who were consulted commented that a strength of the service is its ability to match individuals to appropriate volunteer placements. One volunteer had tried volunteering in a charity shop but preferred a role supporting people in challenging circumstances and so Vintage Volunteers supported them into a placement with a community organisation who operate a drop in, providing activities and refreshments to community members, which suited them better.

There is no upper age limit on individuals accessing Vintage Volunteers; one person in their 80s was able to use their musical talents by entertaining members of a local charity. The placement provided enjoyment for their audience which in itself was fulfilling for the volunteer but also reduced the volunteers feeling of loneliness by getting them out of their house and mixing with others.

***"It brings me joy – especially when people join in!" (Volunteer)***

#### ***Improved health and wellbeing***

100% of volunteers and stakeholders who were consulted reported improvements to their own mental health or felt that it had improved for the volunteers placed with them. This was especially the case where people were already experiencing difficulties with their mental health.

Local mental health services refer into Vintage Volunteers and volunteering is considered an integral part of some clients' therapeutic journey. Volunteering can be a distraction from e.g. anxiety and depression and from loneliness. It was appreciated that the project team kept in touch with volunteers during Covid-19 lockdown when they were unable to go out

and volunteer. For some volunteers the contact provided a crucial link during a very difficult time.

The Healthy Minds network reported that there would be a gap in provision if Vintage Volunteers did not exist; that the referral process is straightforward and accessible and that they have confidence in referring clients in the knowledge that the placement will be person centred and supported.

### ***Reduced social isolation and loneliness***

100% of volunteers and stakeholders who were consulted believe that being involved in Vintage Volunteers will reduce isolation and loneliness. One person who had retired and felt 'at a loss' as to what to do with their time, recommended it for retirees. Others felt that there is a role for volunteering in dealing with loss and grief.

***“If you are lonely either you access a service yourself or you volunteer to help others and this way gives you more benefit and improves your own wellbeing more” (Host organisation)***

## **Recommendations**

These recommendations for future service delivery are based on the feedback gathered during evaluation from interviews with volunteers, stakeholders and the project team.

1. Broaden publicity routes and extend referral routes  
One volunteer commented that they had picked up a leaflet but they felt that not many people do respond to leaflets. Word of mouth is still seen as the best route for promoting the project and it was acknowledged that the project team do have a presence at community events etc. but are limited by the number of staff on the project team.  
One volunteer commented that Vintage Volunteers will be needed more than ever as we all start to recover from Covid-19 and suggested that businesses might get involved in supporting the project.
2. Further promote and target the health benefits of volunteering and potential cost savings to the NHS
3. There were some recommendations about extending the service so that it is a volunteering hub for all ages and client groups but others highlighted the need to retain the expertise and service around volunteering and older people
4. Promote a life course approach to volunteering.  
Promote intergenerational volunteering and create a culture of volunteering particularly amongst the 50 plus age group as they plan and prepare for retirement and later life. Encourage retirees to get involved in volunteering and encourage businesses to promote it to their employees
5. Using the research report and the learning from placements that have not succeeded, promote to volunteer involving organisations how they might extend

volunteering opportunities to older people and reduce some of the barriers (amounts of paperwork were again highlighted as very off putting)

## References

1. Improving Volunteering opportunities for People Over 60  
Nicola Gratton, Staffordshire University 2019
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3. Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation 2014 – 2019  
<https://gulbenkian.pt/uk-branch/our-work/other-initiatives/transitions-in-later-life/>  
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4. <https://vintagevolunteers.vast.org.uk> accessed August 2020
5. <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/publications/age-friendly-inclusive-volunteering>  
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