

# The Impact of Volunteering on the Health and well-being of the over 50s in Northern Ireland

Summary Report

An investigation with existing,  
new and non-volunteers,  
and stopped volunteers



## 1.0 Executive Summary

### **The Impact of Volunteering on the Health and well-being of the over 50s**

The primary aim of this study was to explore the impact of volunteering on the health and well-being of volunteers. The study investigated the experiences, perceptions and attitudes of those currently volunteering [new and existing], non-volunteers [not currently in a volunteering role] and stopped volunteering.

The outcome of the analysis of the data emerging from the three homogenous focus groups and individual interviews demonstrated that overall, volunteering had a positive impact on mental and physical health and well-being and played a significant and important role in the lives of participants. In keeping with the findings of other studies (for example, Lum & Lightfoot, 2005; Musik & Wilson, 2002; Piliavin & Siegl, 2007), the beneficial effects of volunteering were endorsed in the study.

The following is a summary of the main themes emerging from the study:

- Volunteering supports mental and physical health by providing stimulation, something to do, exercise, as well as routine and structure in life
- The social aspect of volunteering is highly valued. It provides the opportunity to be socially connected thus buffering the effects of depression, loneliness and social isolation
- Volunteering has a positive effect on attitudes, stress and coping style
- Volunteering takes people out of their own environment, helps them to gain perspective and broaden their outlook
- The additional benefits in terms of positive outcomes for volunteers are the feel good factor of making a contribution to the lives of others and being appreciated and valued for what they do
- Change in health [including stroke] contributed to stopping

## 2.0 Summary of the research

### 2.1 Literature Review

Over the last decade there has been a growth of interest in investigating the relationship between volunteering activities and health. From this growing body of literature the idea that volunteering has beneficial effects for the volunteer, as well as the recipient, is strongly suggested (Musick & Wilson, 2002). Additionally, research findings are showing that it is older people who are benefiting most from the positive effects of volunteering (Nazroo and Matthews, 2012; Piliavin & Siegl, 2007). This may be particularly pertinent right now, given that the ageing population worldwide is growing (Martinez, Frick, Glass, Carlson, Tanner, Ricks & Fried, 2006). Recent population projections for Northern Ireland are predicting a 70% increase in the over 50's and a 73% increase in the over 65's by 2030 (Volunteer Development Agency, 2009). Attention has often been focussed on the social costs associated with a rise in the ageing population, however, if adequately organised, this group, largely utilised as a resource, could potentially offset many unmet social needs, as well as contributing substantially to health promotion within an aging society (Martinez et al., 2006).

### 2.1 Participants

The total sample of participants who took part in the focus groups was 22. The aim was to recruit a sample representative of three individual homogenous groups within the volunteering sector existing volunteers, new volunteers and non-volunteers [those currently choosing not to formally volunteer

The central aim of the group discussions related to the impact of volunteering on the health and well-being of older people in Northern Ireland. In particular, the purpose was to a) elicit views and attitudes to volunteering; b) the perceived impact in terms of health and well-being including benefits or drawbacks. The sample breakdown was as follows:

<b>Volunteer Group</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Approx years of experience in total</b>
Existing	3	6	122
New volunteers	3	2	40
Non	3	5	3

## 3.0 Findings

The following gives highlights of emerging themes:

### 3.1 Health and Well-Being Review

The theme of health and well-being encapsulates a wide range of elements. It includes physical and mental health benefits - buffering loneliness, isolation and depression. Volunteering provides people with an outlet to make a difference to their own lives and the lives of others; to feel included and purposeful. Being appreciated and gaining a sense of perspective in life were among the positive outcomes reported in the study:

- *People who have worked all their lives need to be volunteering* [existing]
- *If you are going to sit in the house all day you are not going to do yourself any favours*
- *I feel that you have within you, talents and abilities ....you don't want to waste them, you want to use them. Volunteering is another way to do that* [new]
- *Your level of confidence might depend on the type of volunteering your might want to do.* [non]
- *The main reason for volunteering was to get out and meet people and do things.....keep my days full.....to keep busy* [existing]
- *I have had severe arthritis from I was young. I would still went out to volunteer.....I'm a fighter you could say.* [existing]
- *I couldn't begin to quantify the benefits in my personal life, particularly from a mental health point of view.* [existing]
- *I would say volunteering has had a very positive effect on my attitudes and health.*
- *It takes your mind off your own problems and you see other people who are worse off than yourself.* [new]
- *Going in to help people and some of them saying I am like a ray of sunshine you know. It is good to see satisfaction.* [non]
- *Volunteering ....makes you get out and about so you are benefiting physically by it .....walking from A to B.* [new]
- *It upset me because I loved it and really looked forward to it.....My lifestyle is good. I don't sit and mope....I go cycling every morning.* [stopped]

### **Volunteering: a healthy choice to make – ‘it lifts your spirits’**

Maintaining mental health and well-being was central to the decision to volunteer. Keeping busy [particularly in post-working years] could help to protect personal health and well-being. In essence, progressing from working life to a volunteering role was considered to be an important choice to make:

*..people who have worked all their lives need to be volunteering...[existing]*

Participants evaluated the factors that precipitated their decision to volunteer. For example, getting depressed in the house coupled with the need to ‘get out’ emerged in the new group. Similarly, state of mental health [ie. depression] had originally encouraged a member of the stopped group to seek out voluntary work.

The decision to volunteer was not only influenced by the desire to be busy, it was necessary to ward off boredom and loneliness. In all groups it was agreed that being idle was not a healthy choice:

*...If you are going to sit in the house all day you are not going to do yourself any favours.*  
[new]

*...the main reason for volunteering was to get out and meet people and do things... ...keep my days full ....to keep busy... [existing]*

The choice of a less active life-style had a negative outcome as indicated in the non-group:

*I have put on weight. I used to walk an hour every day and I didn't realise at the time that that must have been keeping the weight down. I just don't feel comfortable at this particular weight. I have never been as heavy in my life. ...people that are 30 stone and say that they are happy in their own body, I don't know how they can be*

The phrases - 'an innate sense of doing the right thing' and 'giving something back to society', underpinned by a sense of having 'something to give' - were voiced in the 'new' group as motivations for choosing the route of volunteering. Making the choice to volunteer was considered to be most beneficial [in the first instance] for *Yourself*:

*....you know it gets you out and makes you have something to do so; something to plan for..... it lifts your spirits.* [new]

It was thought that those who were 'down or depressed' could volunteer *to get out of the house*. An early retiree in the non group added that the *social aspect* was an important factor. Specifically:

*....you get something social from it ...working with a group of like-minded people....*

As the reasons for undertaking volunteering were discussed, attention turned to particular groups in society such as those alone, pensioners and people lacking in confidence.

### **Volunteering: good for those alone and not alone**

Getting out and keeping busy was considered a choice that would be beneficial to people who are alone and to those not living alone, a view affirmed in all groups:

*[volunteering] can be beneficial to people who live alone but at the same time it is beneficial to people who don't live alone.* [existing]

*..I just think it would be beneficial to anyone not just those on their own..*[new]

A member of the non group suggested that 'pensioners should volunteer' to accommodate the 'loads and loads of lonely people' who exist in the community. Drawing on a personal example, another member went on to explain:

*In my line of work I am amongst the elderly people. Even my mother, after my father died, said that she could go out and wash dishes for nothing for something to do. [non]*

### **Start volunteering – build confidence**

The lack of confidence or feeling 'very, very self-conscious' was considered a drawback that prevents potential volunteers from taking the step into a voluntary role. As such, these factors may mean that there are those who are losing out on the health benefits [of volunteering] that others gain:

*... if you don't have the confidence you get to be a bit of a recluse; you get that you don't want to go out....*

A member of the non group suggested that the antidote to a flagging confidence was to 'go out and work with the public', as doing so was a confidence booster. She added:

*...Getting up and dressed and out motivates you...*

To ensure that volunteering **is** beneficial, it is important that the person is matched with the voluntary role that suits them best as confidence can determine choice and outcome in the voluntary role:

*...your level of confidence might depend on the type of volunteering you might want to do. There are levels of confidence in relation to different types of volunteering... [non]*

While level of confidence might initially determine the kind of voluntary role a person takes on, if the step was taken, there is support available to help volunteers develop and build confidence:

*It's not everybody that could answer a phone in the Samaritans and things like that. It would take a special kind of person. It depends on your own skills. And sometimes organisations will train you up.*

Being part of a good organisation can help an individual develop in a number of ways:  
*.....a good organisation ... encourages..... It's an education, an education for life. Skills and learning and experience - know more about yourself and how to deal with life...[existing]*

Such is the value placed on volunteering, many individuals choose to take on and stay in their roles while dealing with recurrent, on-going health issues.

### **Choosing to volunteer - despite health problems**

Some members of the new and existing group had overcome difficult and in some cases

multiple health problems that were not allowed to get in the way of volunteering. Despite health related difficulties, sheer determination prevailed. The choice was made to persevere:

*I have had severe arthritis from I was young. I would still have went out to volunteer ..... if I was in severe pain I would still batter on even if I should be lying down ....I am a fighter you could say.*

And added

*Years ago they told me I would end up in a wheelchair and I said there is no way I am going in a wheelchair. So I think it was that determination to ... keep fighting – just wouldn't give in. It is determination just.*

While coping with multiple health problems, a positive outlook helped overcome adversity: *...I have had a lot of health issues but I tend not to dwell on them because, if you do, you become introverted. I have a pacemaker, I have a hip replacement, I'm waiting for a hernia operation. Earlier this year I had bowel cancer and I had an operation in March for that .... Get on with living and .... volunteering and being active ... [existing]*

On the other hand, a member of the non group said that health, particularly, rheumatic aches and pains was a preventative to undertaking a voluntary role.

### **Changes in health contributes to stopping**

Health was an issue for some of those in the stopped category. A stroke that reduced mobility ended a 30 year voluntary contribution; developing a shake [in the hands] caused by other related health issues brought a blossoming voluntary role to an end. In a third case of health-related reasons for stopping, time off was needed to recover from a broken bone. However, lack of contact from the organisation brought the role to an end:

*....when I broke my wrist I was off sick and it was five weeks before the manager lifted the phone to ask how I was. So after this I decided I'd had enough'.*

Reportedly, a new voluntary role with a different organisation undertaken following recovery was reported as a 'different kettle of fish' where training and support were offered resulting in staff feeling valued.

Dealing with multiple health problems including a number of surgeries did not '*interrupt*' a volunteering role that spanned twelve years [with two large organisations]. Eventually, health turned out to be one of the factors that ended the voluntary role in the caring field, as well as 'unacceptable' changes imposed by the organisation that affected enjoyment of the work. However, bringing the role to an end was distressing:

*'It upset me because I loved it....and I really looked forward to it.....I gave a lot of my time and contributed quite a bit'.*

However, the same stopped volunteer reported:

*My lifestyle is good. I don't sit and mope. .... I go cycling every morning.*

An interviewee [stopped] stated that there was a need for clear boundaries around duties in a voluntary organisation. This was cited as one of the requirements if re-entry to the world of voluntary work was to be considered. Uncertainty through lack of clarity is not helpful: *'If an organisation asks for volunteers, they have a need – they should identify their need clearly'*. In essence, the message is that organisations need to ensure that volunteers know what is expected of them in the voluntary role.

In all, the benefits of volunteering on health and well-being were extolled in the study by all groups – existing, new, non and stopped. Within the non-group appreciation was voiced for those who take on the role; in the stopped volunteering interviews, the benefits of volunteering were reflected on.

### **'Life-saving': The benefits of volunteering in terms of Health and Well-Being**

Volunteering was summarised succinctly in the new group as a 'big worthwhile thing'. Similarly, seeing 'good results' from efforts put in was also regarded as 'worthwhile'. In essence, members confirmed that volunteering provided many positives including a social dimension – it became part of life; improved mental health and helped people become more tolerant; it provided stimulation, helped gain perspective on life and was character-building. In addition, volunteers felt appreciated and had the opportunity to be a role model for their children.

### **Volunteering provides 'routine and structure to each day/each week'**

Interviewees in the stopped category reflected positively on the benefits of the role. For example, having suffered with depression, it was the social element of volunteering that was of paramount importance. Another interviewee suggested that volunteering provided a routine and structure to each day/each week that was valued in the aftermath of retirement.

A dedication to the role and enjoyment in the work was reported. In this case, the service offered by the organisation concerned was regarded as 'very good'. While there were 'perks' in the role [such as a yearly bus tour/dinner], it was made clear that if perks were the reason for undertaking voluntary work, *...you would be wasting your time.*

One interviewee spoke about the value of making a contribution, *no matter how small it is* and associated with that a *feel good factor*. In addition, the value of learning new skills; of being 'wanted' and the 'community factor' that can be integral to the work, were cited as important benefits.

The benefits relating to the social aspect of volunteering were endorsed in the focus group discussions.

### **Social aspect: 'company and companionship'**

According to group members, there were numerous bonuses to volunteering, particularly in

relation to the social aspects. The social dimension was described and approved in different ways. For example, 'Being among people' was confirmed as something that was 'positive'. The 'company and companionship' derived from volunteering was valued – an opportunity also to 'give something back to society'. In all, getting out, mixing, and meeting people was one of the most significant factors:

*The social aspect of volunteering is the biggest single benefit for me anyway because I live alone...getting out, meeting people. [existing]*

Getting out and being with other people made a 'big difference' to life, as sitting in the house 24/7 would lead to going 'up the walls'. Two clear dimensions were outlined – it was the sense of *doing something, something worthwhile* [new] and as well as the social aspect, *feeling that you are giving something back* [existing]. As well as helping people it was a 'mind lifting' and rewarding experience:

*It helps to lift your mind so I think volunteering is good for yourself and is good because you are helping somebody else. [new]*

*Volunteering is the first step to meeting people. And as we said giving out you get back so much more. [existing]*

*You get a lot back and you know you are doing things and that it helps you. [new]*

Recognition was given to the integral part of life that volunteering can become for individual.

### **Volunteering becomes part of life, 'it matters an awful lot'**

Volunteering produces good effects on health, well-being and the opportunity to help people as individuals. The level of significance and importance that volunteering holds for those who engage in it was defined in the new group:

*I can see in the [name of organisation] people who have had to be hauled kicking and screaming away from it. It matters an awful lot to them. ...It keeps them going as they get older.*

And added:

*the people they are involved with ..... and the other members of staff become very, very important to them*

In the new group it was confirmed that the consequences of volunteering, ie. – a sense of well-being and helping and supporting people - was 'what it's all about'.

There was tremendous support in the discussions for the impact of volunteering on mental and physical health.

### **Improvements in mental health: ‘Keep depression at bay’**

Volunteering contributes enormously to improving all aspects of health – mental health, physical health. In one case it was described in terms of being an ‘essential’ part of life. The enormous benefits to mental health cannot be measured:

*I couldn't begin to quantify the benefits in my personal life, particularly from a mental health point of view [existing]*

A new group member succinctly described how volunteering *helps you mentally and physically*. Being active was considered as something that was ‘bound to’ have a good impact on mental and physical health. The same group member explained the impact on physical health:

*[volunteering] makes you get out and about so you are benefiting physically by it making you go out and you are walking from A to B. [new]*

*It gave me a reason to leave the house. .... it would have helped me considerably with keeping depression at bay [existing]*

There was further agreement in the existing group about the positive effects on health and attitudes:

*I would say volunteering has had a very positive effect on my attitudes and health. [existing]*

The changes in attitudes and feelings brought about by volunteering came as a result of the opportunity for further learning and personal development provided within the role. Increased tolerance, a change in coping style and reduced stress were identified as the benefits that emerged. An existing group member explained:

*....The tolerance that you learn pervades the rest of your life. And as a result it probably makes you less stressed. The fact that you are not getting uptight about things that are not done, you kind of accept it – well maybe tomorrow or whatever. You are far more relaxed yourself. You find it brings limitations on yourself and you don't get the things done that you want to do either. You accept that as well. You do become probably a much less stressed person overall....*

### **Mental stimulation**

The ‘mental stimulation’ gained through volunteering was considered to be one of the most ‘important’ health benefits of the role. Female members of the existing group confirmed:

*I think it's stimulating. .... you have been busy all your life with the family and suddenly all that is gone. ....It is very good to go and do something else that takes you out of yourself and involved with somebody else, and if you can do good as well*

*Stimulus and just chatting .... Has been huge for me*

The debates and differences of opinion that can be encountered in the course of duties in the voluntary role helped to 'keep you alert' [existing]. The same member confirmed that once he got into volunteering he found it to be very positive and had no intention of discontinuing with it. He said of it:

*This is good, it is interesting, it's stimulating....*

In essence, learning from other people [clients and colleagues] was a valuable resource that could be applied to personal life if necessary. Making a contribution in whatever form it took was considered an achievement and brought with it a good feeling about doing something.

### **Volunteering 'broadens your outlook on life': gives perspective, builds character**

Having the opportunity to go out and use talents and abilities that group members said are to be used and not wasted, results in many positive outcomes. Both existing and new group members certified that their volunteering role provides a perspective on life that is helpful:

*...it takes your mind off your own problems and you see other people who are worse off than yourself. [new]*

*The key thing is that no matter how badly off I felt these people were in a lot more difficulties than I was. Immediately you tended to put your problems and your ideas in ... perspective. [existing]*

The perspective gained was summarised as that which 'broadens your outlook in life' with the additional benefits explained:

*....you are out and you are meeting people and you are learning new things and that's taking you out of your own environment and you are out in other peoples' environment and seeing how they live ...and it has an effect on you.....*

The contrast between a previous job role and volunteering - with profound consequences - was identified in the existing group.

*I found it very educational and very different from the sort of thing I had been doing beforehand. It builds character. [existing]*

It was confirmed that appreciation shown to volunteers was a key factor in health and well-being and the desire to continue in the role.

### **People showing appreciation keeps you there: saying 'I am like a ray of sunshine'**

In terms of psychological health, positive affirmations of appreciation were gratifying, valued and welcomed. Being appreciated fuels the desire to continue in the role. The sentiment echoed in the focus groups endorsed this view: *Everybody likes to be appreciated.....and a sense of self-respect.....*

*Seeing things happening and things completing and people ....saying...thanks for everything.*  
[existing]

In the non volunteer group, appreciation for any help and support offered was clearly viewed as valuable:

*...going in to people to help and some of them saying I am like a ray of sunshine you know. It is good to see satisfaction...[non]*

*People showing appreciation keeps you there.....that is a big, big plus for you....the fact that somebody says, thanks for doing that for me. [non]*

As well as being appreciated, the idea of being needed is a significant motivator. An existing member commented that when-

*...somebody needs you, that keeps you going. It does help you.....*

In relation to feeling good about the role was the sense that volunteering contributed to 'not being selfish', a factor highlighted in both the new and existing groups:

*you feel better within yourself that you are not being selfish. [new]*

*The obvious thing is not to be selfish in your life but to help other people. [existing]*

The love of volunteering was highlighted by another male member of the non group who commented that a friend's daughter was '....involved in about eight organisations'. He went on to say:

*I think if you brought up another to her tomorrow she just would say yes. Loves it, enjoys it.*

Participants were aware, however, of the need not to take on too much as it could lead to 'burn-out', hence undoing any positive contribution to health and well-being. The need to take time out to 'recharge your batteries' was mentioned in the context of self-care:

*.....you can take on too much. We would call it a burn out. Perhaps you need time away from the organisation just to recharge your batteries.*

Time away from an organisation would be required to 'recharge' as explained by a member of the new focus group:

*I can draw back .... whenever ...its getting too much.*

## **4.0 Discussion**

The primary aim of this study was to explore the impact of volunteering on the health and well-being of volunteers. The study investigated the experiences, perceptions and attitudes of

those currently volunteering [new and existing], non-volunteers [not currently in a volunteering role] and stopped volunteering.

The outcome of the analysis of the data emerging from the three homogenous focus groups and individual interviews demonstrated that overall, volunteering had a positive impact on mental and physical health and well-being and played a significant and important role in the lives of participants. In keeping with the findings of other studies (for example, Lum & Lightfoot, 2005; Musik & Wilson, 2002; Piliavin & Siegl, 2007), the beneficial effects of volunteering were endorsed in the study.

Similar to the discovery of Claxton-Oldfield and Claxton-Oldfield (2007) in terms of what led people to becoming a volunteer, health and well-being was a factor in the decision to seek out something purposeful to do in the post-working years (see Warburton & Cordingly, 2004). The choice to volunteer was motivated by a variety of health-related factors that precipitated the decision to volunteer. These included - the need to lift depression; boredom and loneliness; get out of the house and keep busy; ward off the 'void' created by retirement. The best time for introducing the idea of voluntary activity for an older person is just before or after retirement, thus potentially offsetting losses due to retirement (Hill, 2006). As discovered in the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing [ELSA], retirement significantly increased the risk of diagnosis with cardiovascular disease and cancer. Notably, the benefits gained from volunteering may last well after ceasing voluntary work (Wilson and Musick, 2000) as endorsed in the study by a stopped volunteer: *My lifestyle is good. I don't sit and mope....I go cycling every morning.*

Volunteering can provide social and psychological resources that aid coping with medical conditions (Li & Ferraro, 2006; Lum & Lightfoot, 2005). As noted by Nazroo and Matthews (2012) volunteering does improve well-being. While dealing with multiple health problems, including cancer, the need for operations, and severe arthritis that could have led to a wheelchair existence, members of the existing group were not deterred from volunteering. Individuals chose to volunteer despite having health difficulties. While health issues did not deter individuals from volunteering, changes in health contributed to the choice to stop. Mellor et al. (2008) found that older respondents (65+) were more likely to point to existing health concerns as a reason for not volunteering. In this study, however, age did not specifically emerge as a factor for ceasing or stopping volunteering. Rather, changes in health such as a stroke and developing a shake in the hands [that reduced the ability to continue in the role] were identified by the stopped group.

Volunteering contributed to improved physical and mental health. As noted by a member of the existing group who had suffered with depression : *I couldn't begin to quantify the benefits in my personal life, particularly from a mental health point of view.* Improvements in mental health included increased health and happiness (Borgonovi, 2008) and depression buffered (Musick and Wilson, 2002). Also, sufferers of arthritis found that the voluntary role increased self-confidence and self-efficacy around pain (Barlow, 2001). It was concluded that the benefits of volunteering to health may be substantial in the lives of older volunteers (Piliavin and Siegl, 2007).

In this study, it was felt that those who lack self-confidence or feel self-conscious should 'get out and work with the public' as they may lose out on the health benefits that volunteering can offer. This seems sensible in the light of the findings from Claxton-Oldfield and Claxton-Oldfield's (2007). In their study, volunteering contributed to the personal growth and development of those working in hospice palliative care [61% of whom had retired]. Claxton-Oldfield and Claxton-Oldfield's (2007) study concluded that mental health may be bolstered by the benefits acquired through volunteering than any other activity that people may participate in. In the present study, the desire to offer time to volunteering was also driven by the need to utilise 'talents and abilities' and by the sheer fact of 'having an interest'. Volunteering contributes to skill development (eg. Volunteer Development Agency, 2009; Hoffman, 2008).

The view espoused in the groups was that those who live on their own, those not living alone and pensioners would benefit from undertaking voluntary roles. Warburton and Cordingley (2004) determined that older volunteers are less likely to report feelings of loneliness and social isolation when volunteering. In a 2008 report, Help the Aged referred to social isolation and depression as significant issues for older people in Northern Ireland. Television was deemed to be the main form of company and the report showed that 21% of those aged 65+ were 'always or often lonely'. Volunteering therefore may be a protective factor against the losses associated with retirement such as lowered self-esteem and loss of identity offering a sense of belonging, feelings of connectedness and reduction in social isolation (Volunteer Now, 2011).

In the study, volunteering was regarded positively – a healthy choice to make and one that 'lifts your spirits'. This positive outlook fits with other anecdotal evidence that volunteering is good for health and 'has a salubrious effect on volunteers' (Casiday, Kinsman, Fisher & Bamba, 2008, p3). In particular Casiday et al. (2008) found benefits relating to decreased mortality, daily living without functional impairment, ability to cope with own health issues, social interaction and support, and improved self-reported physical and mental health, and life satisfaction.

Overall, the findings in this study supported previous research that endorsed the significant role and contribution that volunteering makes to the lives of individuals (Lum & Lightfoot, 2005; Musik & Wilson, 2002). Piliavin & Siegl (2007) found that volunteering promotes health and enhances mood. In this study, volunteering was not only considered to be 'worthwhile', it brought a welcome and valuable social dimension to the lives of individual, summarised as 'company and companionship'.

Volunteers are motivated by their role and desire evidence of their success and effectiveness (Hill, 2006). Feeling better inwardly and 'not being selfish' were highlighted as significant outcomes. The self-fulfilment needs of older adults contributes to psychological well-being over and above that of an active life-style alone (Piliavin and Siegl, 2007). The study showed that as times goes on, volunteering 'matters' a great deal; it has the potential to become a very important feature of life. Not only did it provide mental stimulation, it had additional benefits such as learning to be more tolerant, gaining perspective on life and character-building. Feeling appreciated was identified as a good outcome by both volunteers and non-volunteers.

Caution, however, was needed to ensure that volunteers did not feel over-burdened or at risk of burn-out [as noted by Gabassi et al.,2002], in relation to the helping professions]. Protecting the self and taking time to 'recharge the batteries' was regarded as an important part of the process of volunteering.

## 5.0 Conclusion

The central aim of the qualitative study was to produce additional insights into the impact of volunteering on the health and well-being of the 50+ age group in Northern Ireland. The research was designed to complement and add to the quantitative longitudinal survey of older adult volunteers over an 18 month period, that began in March 2010. Analysis of focus group discussions and individual interviews [with stopped volunteering] demonstrated that volunteering has a positive impact on mental and physical health and well-being. This study supports previous research that highlighted the benefits of volunteering on health and well-being (Lum & Lightfoot, 2005; Musik & Wilson, 2002; Nazroo and Matthews, 2012; Piliavin & Siegl, 2007). In serving their communities, volunteers found that it is a 'choice' that helps to ward off the 'void' that retirement can bring. It provides stimulation, company and companionship, thus buffering loneliness and isolation.

Regarded as 'life-saving', volunteering is an outlet through which to utilise and embrace talents and skills. Giving time to helping others builds character, keeps depression at bay and develops qualities such as tolerance that can then be applied to other aspects of life.

Importantly, volunteering impacts positively on self-esteem. Those currently in volunteering and non-volunteers [who offer help to members of their community] expressed gratitude for the appreciation shown for their contribution to the lives of others.

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