

DIVERSITY IN VOLUNTEERING: FOCUS GROUPS WITH BRITISH ASIANS

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BACKGROUND

Jump and Breakthrough are working with a number of organisations which are reliant on volunteering, to help them better understand trends in diversity with regard to voluntary activity. BAME individuals are underrepresented among volunteers and a literature review conducted by Professor Kevin Hylton of Leeds Beckett University has helped to illuminate some of the potential causes of this underrepresentation. This made clear the need to disaggregate the constituent ethnicities and cultures that make up BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) and is Appendix 2 in this report.

A detailed look at the data revealed that among the multiple demographics that make up BAME, only the Asian demographic were statistically significant in their reduced levels of volunteering. The data also suggested that there were factors relating to gender and age, but that the limits of UK Government data meant that qualitative research was needed, to better understand any cultural sensitivities around volunteering. The detailed data review and conclusions are at the end of this report.

Breakthrough Media was commissioned to run a series of focus groups with British Asians, for whom volunteering levels were found to be particularly low, in order to explore the barriers and motivations concerning voluntary activity for these communities.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This project was conceived to explore the following research objectives:

- Understand any specific barriers to volunteering amongst British Bangladeshi and British Pakistani communities
- Explore barriers to volunteering as they pertain to age, gender and recency of immigration
- Understand how motivations to volunteer are understood
- Understand what might encourage more members of the British Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities to take up volunteering
- Measure recognition of a selection of major UK charities representing a broad swathe of volunteer users, and understand willingness to volunteer for each organisation

METHODOLOGY

The small scale of the qualitative research required a sample that would be in some way representative of British Asian communities (which encompasses a range of ethnicities) whilst being homogenous enough to facilitate a helpful discussion which could uncover commonalities in experience and understanding. For this reason, focus group participants were recruited from the British Bangladeshi and British Pakistani population, as these two groups make up the largest proportion of the British Asian community¹, who, despite representing a diverse array of individuals, share many cultural similarities. This recruitment approach has

¹2011 Census Data: Population of England and Wales

<https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/british-population/national-and-regional-populations/population-of-england-and-wales/latest>

meant that there is an emphasis within the qualitative findings on participant's experiences as Muslims, which reflects the reality that a large proportion of British Asians are also Muslim².

Breakthrough conducted six focus groups in total, with a mixture of first and second generation males and females. Groups were run across the country, with two in London, two in Derby and two in Greater Manchester:

Group 1: Female, Second generation, East London

Group 2: Male, First generation, East London

Group 3: Female, First generation, Greater Manchester

Group 4: Female, Second generation, Greater Manchester

Group 5: Female, First generation, Derby

Group 6: Male, Second generation, Derby

The primary criteria for all participants was that they do not currently undertake any voluntary activities³, therefore allowing the moderators to explore the perceived barriers to volunteering amongst this group. The decision to run distinct groups for first generation and second-generation participants was taken on the basis that second-generation immigrants, who had been born in the UK would experience volunteering very differently from an individual for whom English was a second language and who had not had the same opportunities to build a social network and understanding of life in the UK.

As time commitments are frequently cited as a barrier to voluntary activity, all respondents in groups 1, 2, 4 and 6 were asked to complete a week-long diary recording their daily activities, in order for researchers to triangulate findings from the focus group discussions.⁴

² 2011 Census Data: Ethnic Group by Religion <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/census/2011/LC2201EW>

³ The definition of voluntary activity was taken from the Community Life survey.

⁴ Respondents in groups 3 and 4 had much lower levels of English-proficiency and were therefore not asked to complete the task.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Understanding of Volunteering - the language and interpretation of volunteering

The focus group participants had a very broad understanding of the term volunteering. All the groups agreed that volunteering meant undertaking unpaid activities. However, this appeared to span from formal, organised volunteering, to one-off assistance to an elderly neighbour. This may suggest that focus group participants viewed volunteering less as a distinct vocation and more as part of their everyday identities as Muslims.

Furthermore, voluntary activities were often viewed through the lens of motivation; as one participant summarised, "there is volunteering for skills, [...] and there is volunteering for your soul." When discussing volunteering motivated by altruism, participants often noted that the activities discussed were simply part of "being a Muslim" and that a sense of duty and responsibility to all others is a core component of the Muslim faith. On the other hand, volunteering was also universally understood to be an effective way of gaining skills and experience, particularly for those seeking employment or to better their career prospects. This finding is consistent with the findings in the Jump data that ethnically diverse groups are more likely to volunteer in order to gain skills / get on in their career.

Perceptions of Charitable Giving

Related to the concept of volunteering as part of 'being a Muslim', - Muslims also have 'Zakat' - the mandatory giving of money to charity. This is one of the five pillars of Islam and all participants described giving 2.5% of their income to charity as a matter of course. Discussions of volunteering were therefore tightly bound up with notions of regular charitable contributions through money, rather than time.

Barriers to Volunteering

The many barriers that prevent the general population from volunteering were present during all of the focus group discussions, some of which were particularly relevant to British Asian communities due to their priorities, for example the significance of time with family, in addition to some other, specific cultural barriers, such as perceptions of activities outside the home.

Time: a lack of time was the most common reason for not volunteering. Family commitments were particularly significant: the sense that "family comes first" meant that participants felt that, where possible, spare time should be spent with relatives. In addition to childcare, providing care for older family members was also common, particularly for women. Despite these concerns, the journal task given to participants prior to the focus groups revealed that most did have some spare time every week, although this varied considerably between individuals.

Status: Some participants felt that because volunteering was so often undertaken by those seeking to gain skills or experience, it therefore had a lower status, particularly compared to paid work, which was viewed as a more productive use of time. Whilst this understanding of volunteering was a motivation for some participants, it appeared to discourage others, as they felt it might label them in some way 'lacking'.

Speaking English: For many of the first-generation participants, low English language proficiency was a significant barrier to volunteering. This echoes the findings of the detailed data review in Appendix 3. Although these participants were some of the most motivated to volunteer in order to gain skills, they expressed concern about communicating and many did not feel comfortable travelling to unfamiliar locations.

Cost: Money was also an important consideration for volunteers. A number of the participants described concerns about money and questioned why a person would work for free when they could find paid employment.

Travel: The travel required to volunteer was also seen as a barrier, both in terms of time, cost and difficulty, which was a particular concern for some first-generation women, who lacked confidence in navigating public transport alone. This was partly as they rarely travelled far from home, and also due to their lack of confidence in speaking English.

Skills: A number of participants also believed that further skills training might be required to become a volunteer. This

was discouraging for two reasons: firstly, because participants felt they simply would not meet the entry criteria, and secondly due to the perceived time commitment required to up-skill.

Family perceptions: Reflecting the centrality of family, women in both the first and second-generation groups noted that family members might raise questions⁵ around motivation and personal safety if they expressed a desire to volunteer. As a result, many felt that volunteering would not be worth the friction it would create within the household.

Encouraging more people to Volunteer

Insight from the focus groups highlighted five key opportunities which could help to encourage greater volunteering among this target audience.

Raising awareness

There is a big job to do around raising awareness of organisations in need of volunteers. In addition to this, clarity around the role played by volunteers will be crucial to recruiting a more diverse audience.

You can bring friends and family

Bringing friends or family members was well received and seen to reduce any fear or nervousness about something new. It would also allay any concerns raised by others about women volunteering alone.

Money is not enough

Communications to the target audience should position volunteering as an integral part of being a good person, and counter the impression that giving financially to charity “ticks the box”.

The heroics

There is an opportunity to highlight the benefits of volunteering - its heroic nature and benefits “for the soul” - as well as for the community. For most participants, volunteering was very much viewed as a burden/duty: the positive outcomes associated with volunteering were therefore not immediately recognised.

Targeted benefits

For certain groups – young people and recent arrivals – the transactional benefits of volunteering are clear. But for everyone else, benefits should be clearly communicated without a focus on skills or experience (e.g. health, community and heroics).

⁵ Questions suggested included: Why would you give time to X, not your family? Who else will be there? Will other men be there? Will you be safe, if it's in the evening and dark outside?

DETAILED FINDINGS

Daily Routines

1. Although day-to-day activities varied among participants, family was by far the most important priority for all participants across all groups. As such, time outside paid employment was predominantly spent with immediate family. Parents, both male and female, spent a great deal of time with their children, and female participants in particular also reported caring for elderly relatives.
2. During the focus group discussions, most participants reported feeling busy, with only a minority stating that they had a lot of free time. However, the diary task helped to illuminate this further, revealing that free time varied considerably, from two hours per week to 60 hours per week. Female participants had more free time, on average, than male participants, with an average of 29 hours of free time per week, compared to 15 hours for the male participants, partially reflecting the lower levels of employment among the women we spoke to.
3. Female participants were also more likely to state that they were able to make time for themselves. They described watching television, browsing social media, reading, shopping and socialising with friends.

Understanding of volunteering

4. Respondents were asked what they understood by the term 'volunteering', to which an almost-universal response was "free" or "unpaid" work. Nonetheless, this did not inevitably lead respondents to feel negatively about volunteering, indeed many thought it was admirable.

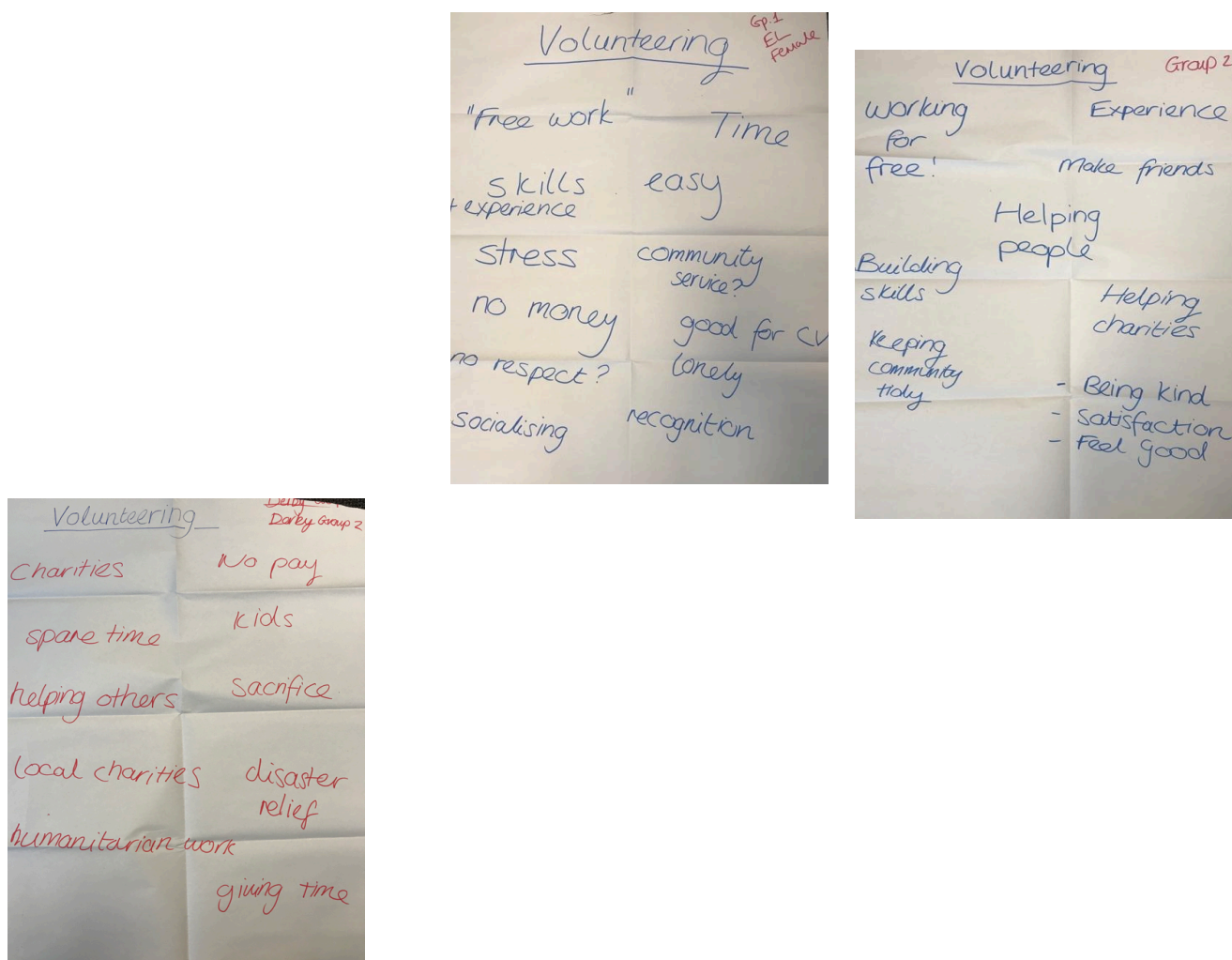


Figure 1. Spontaneous responses to the word "volunteering" L-R: Group 1, Group 6, Group 2

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5. When describing the kind of person that might volunteer, participants used phrases such as “a good person”, “someone who wants to help others” and “someone who is patient”. A number also noted that those with spare time would be more likely to volunteer, for example retirees, students, the self-employed, as well as those with “financial security”. Indeed, for this reason, a number also expressed the opinion that volunteering was the domain of the wealthy, who could afford to outsource some of their other commitments.

"I know this lady who does loads, she's a doctor and everything so she's like really busy but she's rich so she can get a nanny for her kids. That's the only reason she can do so much volunteering." (Group 4)

6. As discussions progressed and focussed on other ways in which people might ‘do good’, the term volunteering began to be used in a much more fluid and flexible way. Some participants used it to describe one-off good deeds, such as helping older people to carry heavy shopping bags or paying a visit to a neighbour during Eid festivities.
7. The obligation for Muslims to give a certain amount of their income to charity - Zakat⁶ – was also often referenced in these conversations, with all group members saying that they fulfilled this obligation as a matter of course. Although respondents did distinguish for the most part between donating money to charity and volunteering, in some conversations, words began to be used interchangeably. In these instances, it appeared that again volunteering was being used as a catch all phrase for ‘doing good’.

"I give my Zakat, yeah. You have to, and we want to. It's about being a good Muslim, and you get rewarded for it. Being a nice person." (Group 4)

"We all give our Zakat, and extra on top. I even give mine on jewellery – you're supposed to. But it's not just money, we need to be good people to, you know? Like help people out, homeless people or old people. It's all about being a good person, volunteering." (Group 1)

Motivations to volunteer

8. Whilst respondents could appreciate a broad range of reasons for wanting to volunteer, there were two key reasons cited most frequently: the desire to do something “good”, and the need to gain skills or experience, most likely in order to get a job.

"There's volunteering for skills, you know, and then there's volunteering for your soul." (Group 1)

9. Respondents all self-identified as Muslim and practising one's faith was the most important reason for doing good and being nice to people. This was most often viewed through the lens of Zakat, one of the five pillars of Islam, which requires Muslims to give 2.5% of their wealth to charity. All of the participants told us that they gave their Zakat, and many more suggested that they gave additional contributions over and above the required 2.5%. Additional charitable giving during Ramadan was also discussed in several of the groups.

"I give my Zakat, of course. But I give to other causes when I need to – like the situation in Syria if they fundraise for that." (Group 3)

"It's a fundamental principle of our faith to help others. Irrespective of their faith or their colour, we just have to. It's a fundamental principle" (Group 6)

10. Because both formal and informal help appeared to count as volunteering: from visiting patients at a hospice, through to one-off “good deeds” such as helping someone who had fallen over, it may also be the case that the

⁶ Zakat is the third pillar of Islam and refers to the systematic giving of 2.5% of one's wealth each year to benefit the poor.

constant care for humanity through every day, small-scale behaviours, in combination with regular charitable giving, provides a sense of wellbeing which others might seek in volunteering, or even that this “ticks the box” and is “job done”, in terms of charitable efforts and duties.

11. At a more transactional level, all participants understood the valuable skills and experience that could be gained through volunteering, and many saw it as a route to getting a university place, a job or potentially a promotion. Parents also noted that skills might be a motivation for their children to volunteer.

“I’m talking to my older son and I’m saying, ‘go to school and do volunteering, then you can get that job next year, you never know” (Group 1)

“Volunteering is something you do for your Duke of Edinburgh, your UCAS application. It looks good. I want my son to be doing it.” (Group 4)

12. Amongst younger, first generation participants, there was a very strong sense that volunteering was an effective route to employment and offered the chance to improve and practise English-language skills along the way.

“I want to volunteer here with the teacher. You help the teacher with lower level classes, and then maybe I can be [a] teacher in the future.” (Group 3)

13. For the female groups, the benefits of volunteering for mental wellbeing was also touched upon, with volunteering viewed as a way of “getting out of the house” and socialising, and also more specifically as a means of tackling depression.

“It would be a good way of meeting new people, making new friends.” (Group 1)

14. Having a personal connection with an issue was also perceived to be a motivational factor in volunteering, participants discussed a number of causes in this way, for example domestic violence, Alzheimer’s and cancer.

“I think for me, what I’d choose, if I did, would be something that mattered to me. So my Grandma is suffering from dementia and that’s an important issue for me now, how we solve that.” (Group 4)

“My mother has Alzheimer’s, so that would be a big one for me, and it would mean something.” (Group 2)

Barriers to volunteering

Time

15. For the vast majority of respondents, time constraints and family commitments were the main barriers to volunteering. For those who had full time work, spending free time with family was viewed as a necessity. Almost all respondents saw themselves as ‘busy’ and felt that they didn’t have time to take up something new or commit to a regular volunteering slot.

“I have things to do! I need to spend time with my kids when I get home from work.” (Group 2)

16. As mentioned above, the diary task revealed that some of the participants, particularly females, did have some free time during the week. Indeed, even those who worked full time did have some larger chunks of free time during the weekend.

17. Of note, the top three sentiments recording in journals at the end of the day being “relaxed”, “exhausted” and “excited”, indicating that, although often busy, most participants were not completely overwhelmed by their existing commitments.

Family

18. Family was universally recognised as the most important priority by all respondents. Although this was interpreted differently by men and women, who saw distinct duties in relation to their families, all agreed that “family comes first”. Male participants spoke of their financial duty to their families, and the worry that providing for them caused in what were seen as difficult economic times. Female participants spoke of caring responsibilities, primarily for their children but also for their parents and parents-in-law.

“It’s a worry, the mortgage, the bills. Everything just seems to be getting more expensive.” (Group 2)

“It’s my duty, you know, my responsibility to look after the children. And I look after my Grandma too, as she’s not very well. She’s got dementia, so I do a lot for her.” (Group 4)

“My children keep me busy! [They are] Always, always hungry, tidying, [I have to] take them to school.” (Group 3)

19. In accordance with the focus group discussion, the journals revealed that participants were most likely to spend time alone, with their children and with their spouse/partner. As would be expected, the top five activities between 7am and 10pm were: working, meals, housework, sleeping and childcare.
20. Interestingly, some female participants with older children and without parents requiring care reported that they felt this was a time in their lives which they could take for themselves. However, it was understood that their role as carers would resume if their parents required care, or if they were to become grandparents. It may be the case that this distinct role and identity within the family unit provided participants with the meaning and purpose that other communities, or demographics, may seek through volunteering. This quiet time may also discourage volunteering as it is viewed as a reward for the hard work of caring, both in the past and future.

Charitable Giving

21. As explored above, doing good, and being a ‘good Muslim’ were strong motivators for respondents to donate to charity, and for them to consider volunteering. The emphasis on fulfilling one’s Zakat obligations and donating to needy causes did mean, however, that many respondents felt that they were already ‘being good’, and that they did not need to do anything else, such as taking up volunteering.

Cost

22. Money was also viewed as a significant barrier to volunteering. A number of participants voiced the opinion that time spent volunteering was time which could have been spent earning money. For this reason, many believed that volunteering was better suited to wealthy individuals.

“When I think of volunteer I think someone who’s rich! Because they’ve got so much money, they don’t need no more money, so they can volunteer” (Group 1)

23. Furthermore, the costs associated with volunteering were a consideration, particularly the cost of travel, which was also seen as a drain on free time.

Travel

24. Although not mentioned spontaneously, when asked specifically about travel, many participants felt that this would be an important barrier to any voluntary work, expressing a preference for local, more convenient activities.

“I mean, I’m not going to want to travel far. There’s lots of other stuff to do and I spend enough time travelling as it is.” (Group 2)

Status

25. Whilst volunteering as a means of gaining skills and experience was viewed positively by some participants, particularly first-generation immigrants and students wanting to develop independence and skills, conversely

this meant that volunteering was viewed as a low-status activity by participants who were not looking to expand their skills.

"Yeah, because I'm gonna think 'oh she's a loner, or she don't have a life, she's a saddy'" (Group 1)

26. Interestingly, this transactional view of volunteering was also viewed as morally wrong by some, who believed that charitable efforts should be grounded in a desire to help others and viewed this approach to volunteering as selfish.

"I know someone who basically just does it for the Instagram likes, she's always strutting her stuff in this top or that t-shirt with some charity name on it. That's not why you should do it, that's not the right motivation." (Group 4)

Family Perceptions

27. Perceptions of volunteering amongst close family was also a significant factor. Female participants in particular noted that parents and husbands would likely be concerned about their personal safety, particularly if they were out of the house after dark. Many therefore felt that the questions that volunteering would provoke amongst family members, and the need to explain their motivations, might not be worth the hassle.

"They're going to be questioning, why do you want to do it? Why do you want to go and do free work? What for? 101 questions!" (Group 1)

"Basically, he's just going to put you in a stressful position! It's just not worth the argument" (Group 1)

"My dad would be all like, is it safe, will you be out after dark? And then he'd end up saying, you know what, I'll give money to that charity and you stay at home." (Group 4)

Language

28. Language was a key consideration amongst those for whom English was a second language. Although volunteering was seen by many of these participants as a means of practising their English, it was understandably felt that a certain level of fluency would be required in order to get started. A number expressed concern that they would find it difficult to understand others, or to make themselves understood. One participant who had been learning English summed up this challenge:

"Before, no, I wouldn't have felt confident. But now my English is better I would feel good about going and talking to people" (Group 5)

"I wanted to volunteer in a shop, but they did not want me. But now I think my English is better I should try again." (Group 3)

29. Low confidence in communicating in English also had a knock-on effect for confidence levels generally. This was particularly visible when discussing travelling to voluntary activities, with less fluent participants concerned at leaving familiar surroundings, or struggling with complicated journeys using public transport.

"I heard about doing this and I had to get the bus to Bury. I haven't been to Bury before and it's far away, so I didn't want to go." (Group 3)

Training

30. Some participants felt that a lack of skills or experience, or a particularly daunting subject matter, could make them feel ill-equipped to volunteer. Indeed, in discussions of volunteering for the NSPCC and the Samaritans, the "rigmarole" of training requirements and the severity of the potential calls to these organisations was seen as a big hurdle to potential volunteers.

"I would think there must be some kind of process you've got to go through, because obviously you're dealing with kids,

so I'd expect training, screening, that kind of thing. So that would put me off straight away. They would need to be quite specific about what they need from a volunteer". (Group 6)

"I just think, woah, I'm not sure I could do that. I think it's a life or death thing and I'm not sure I could mentally take that pressure." (Group 4, on volunteering for The Samaritans specifically)

Encouraging more people to volunteer

Organisation Characteristics

31. In addition to personal commitments and motivations, the characteristics of the organisations requiring volunteers was also an important consideration for some of the participants.
32. A number of the participants expressed general concerns about larger charities, particularly worries about what donations would be used for, for example whether they simply fund high-earning CEOs, and disappointment at unorthodox practices recently revealed amongst a number of larger charities such as Oxfam and Save the Children⁷. It was felt that this emphasis within some of the groups may also have been due to recent communications concerning 'safer giving' to charity during Ramadan, which had only recently finished at the time of the groups.

"I wouldn't want to volunteer for a lot of these charities because when you look at the pay of some of the people running them, it's extortionate, for that reason I would want to contribute to a charity that are giving 99% of their money back, because otherwise if I was to donate I'd think 'I'm paying that guys salary!'" (Group 6)

"I'm not sure they are all doing good, you know. Cancer Research has all this money and there are treatments available but they're not financing them for people. I don't like them." (Group 1)

33. For many of the participants, there did appear to be a hierarchy regarding which organisations were worthier of time and/or donations. Organisations providing "life or death" assistance to people were ranked as highest priority. Many participants noted that personal experience might also cause them to value an organisation more highly, for example knowing someone with cancer or Alzheimer's might encourage volunteering for causes responding to these issues. Sport and heritage did not feature amongst participants' concerns, although nutrition and healthcare did resonate, perhaps indicating a potential future avenue for communications around the need for volunteering.

"I think people facing imminent life or death, that would be a higher priority, like disaster recovery, natural disasters, earthquakes, warzones – where people need immediate help and they're not getting it." (Group 6).

34. The majority of participants appeared to value volunteering for local organisations more highly than for national organisations. Many described concentric circles of priority, emanating from family, first and foremost, and then expanding to local communities, before encompassing national concerns.

35. A number of the first-generation women also discussed sending money "home" i.e. to family in Pakistan. Many also automatically perceived organisations that might require volunteers as international in focus, in this regard many also spoke of collections for humanitarian relief in conflict zones, and particularly in Muslim countries, through their mosques. This emphasis may also have had some impact on participants perceived ability to volunteer.

"We do lots of collections for Syria, and things. Like Palestine. The situation there is really bad." (Group 4)

"I send money to Pakistan, for girls in my village to get an education." (Group 3)

Recognition

36. Significantly, recognition of charities varied, with CRUK eliciting the most responses, most likely due to the presence of shops on the high street, television and radio campaigns for 'Race for Life' and the inclusion of the term 'cancer' in the charity name, which was universally understood, and feared. The same applied to a certain

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/15/timeline-oxfam-sexual-exploitation-scandal-in-haiti>

extent with Sport England; participants did not recognise the charity but felt they were able to infer the nature of the organisation very quickly. National Trust was rarely recognised, and when probed participants hypothesised that it must have a climate-change or environmental focus, due to the logo.

37. With the exception of CRUK shop-based volunteers, there was a lack of awareness of the need for and role of volunteers across all charities tested.⁸

Communication

38. When asked what organisations should say to potential recruits to encourage volunteering, the most popular response was highlighting the ease of volunteering. Flexibility was also essential to ease, for example the ability to volunteer on an ad-hoc basis, or for only a few hours at a time. Ease in terms of travel was also important.

"I want to be able to go online and pick a time-slot and sign up there. I want it easy!" (Group 4)

39. Clarity in terms of what is required from volunteers is also crucial - participants expressed concern that volunteering might require training, which was seen as "rigmarole" and an additional time burden. As mentioned above, many first-generation participants also felt that language requirements might prevent them from volunteering. Communications should therefore emphasise the simplicity of volunteering as far as possible. The narrow understanding that many participants had of the organisations discussed also meant that their understanding of volunteering activities was limited.

"They'd need to make it clear exactly what they wanted you to do, I'd love to help people, but I don't think I necessarily have the skills" (Group 6)

40. There was no clear pattern in terms of where the best place to communicate with the participants would be. Young female participants spent a lot of time on Facebook, however some first-generation women stated that they didn't trust social media or saw it solely as a source of news from 'home'.

"I love my Facebook! 'Me time' is just spending hours on there." (Group 1)

"My Facebook, sometimes, is very sad. Lots of news from home which is not good." (Group 3)

Volunteering Schemes

41. A number of respondents liked the idea of volunteering schemes such as family volunteering days, which ticked the dual box of enabling them to spend time with family whilst supporting a good cause.

"You don't want to be advertising to people to volunteer in the evenings, because people have commitments... But if there was something that was running during the school holidays, where you could take your kids as well to go and volunteer and help, and help them to understand things... But I personally don't see anything like that" (Group 6)

42. Although the participants stated that they would not be motivated to volunteer if there were other people from similar backgrounds present, instead expressing a preference for "meeting different people", many also liked the idea of bringing a friend to volunteer, particularly in the female focus groups.

"I would like to meet new people and practise my English." (Group 3)

⁸ NSPCC and Samaritans were also tested, in order not to immediately reveal client organisations during the discussions.

“Positivity breeds positivity as well, so quite often, if in your immediate circle of friends someone was doing something, and you thought you could spare some time, you probably would, and also if you’ve got someone egging you on as well.” (Group 6)