



Policy Briefing

The Gift of Age: Older People, Faith Communities, and Volunteering

November 2023

About Us

Volunteer Scotland

Volunteer Scotland is Scotland's national centre for volunteering. We believe that volunteering should be an enjoyable, rewarding and fulfilling experience for the volunteer; that volunteers have the right to be safe and protected in delivering their volunteering roles; and that to derive health and well-being benefits from volunteering requires regular and meaningful contributions of time.

Should any queries arise from this briefing, please contact our Policy Officer by emailing **sarah.latto@volunteerscotland.org.uk**

Faith in Older People

Faith in Older People (FiOP) is a small Scottish voluntary organisation with the aim of developing a stronger understanding of the importance of the spiritual dimension in our lives as we age and for those who care for us. It provides innovative methods of encouraging and supporting people to value the importance of the spiritual lives of older people in their care in a practical way - both with faith communities and into the wider sphere of health and social care.

FiOP aims to mobilise faith communities to understand, promote and support the importance of the diversity of social and spiritual needs of older members in their congregations and local communities.

In addition, FiOP aims to highlight the contribution made by our faith communities to the wellbeing of their local community and in particular the role of older people from within these communities.

Introduction

‘It’s not an assembly line. It’s a continuum of helping people’.

This quote reflects the unique nature of faith-based volunteering detailed in the ‘Gift of Age’ report, published by Faith in Older People in October 2022, which provides a wealth of evidence on the vital impact of volunteers from faith communities in Scotland. Faith-based volunteering incorporates people from a range of faiths in services which support people from the cradle to the grave. Despite this, the nature of faith-based volunteering – ‘prioritising action over talk’ – often means that its strategic contribution to policy priorities is overlooked.

The report also highlights that many faith groups are reliant on older members sharing their time on a regular basis, which is a bit of a double-edged sword. In many ways, the ‘gifts of age’ mean that the services offered by faith communities are inclusive, sustainable, and reliable. However, the aging population and the decline in younger people joining faith communities pose a significant threat to faith-based volunteering in the future.

This policy briefing shares the key findings of the Gift of Age report and explores the policy implications for a range of Scottish Government priorities.

Research Summary

The Gift of Age research was conducted by Faith in Older People and Simon Jaquet Consultancy Services Ltd between October 2021 and September 2022. A range of research methods were adopted, including a literature review, scoping interviews, an online survey and case studies.

Statistical findings

- There are roughly 3,700 congregations on Scotland
- 17% of the Scottish population is aged 65 and over¹
- 44% of the population reported having ‘no religion’ or ‘not stated’
- 94% of those people with ‘no religion’ are under 65 years of age
- About half of those surveyed are members of the Church of Scotland, with the other 50% reflecting a vast range of faiths.

¹ Population level figures were drawn from the 2011 census which at the time of writing was the most up to date source of this data.

Key Research Conclusions

1. The variety of faith community volunteering

Volunteers from faith communities undertake a significant variety of activities to support their local communities. These activities support people at all stages of life, from toddler groups to dementia cafes, and often provide inclusive services for the most marginalised groups such as foodbanks, addiction services, soup kitchens and support for asylum seekers. It also found that many of these services are reliant largely on older people.

2. The dwindling next generation of faith-based volunteers

Many older people from faith groups have spent much of their lives giving time to their communities and are ready for the next generation to step up. The Covid-19 pandemic has led to many older volunteers stepping back from their volunteering on health grounds. Many faith community volunteers are concerned at the lack of younger people to assume their roles in the community. This is particularly pertinent for leadership or governance roles.

3. Volunteering by nature, but not always by name

Much of the activity undertaken by faith communities is led by volunteers, but many individuals do not see their contribution as 'volunteering'. This is rooted in perceptions of what 'volunteering' is, and the desire to protect the unique motivations and organic nature of faith based volunteering. Much faith based volunteering is rooted in kindness and compassion, reflecting the messages of individual faiths. Some refer to it as 'service' or duty to serve, others refer to themselves as 'helpers'.

4. Partnership working

Whilst there is evidence of 'fierce independence', there is also clear commitment from many faith communities to work in partnership with other organisations. The main partners of choice are other faith groups and local voluntary sector organisations, with some examples of voluntary activities supporting the development of interfaith collaboration. Partnership work with public sector bodies takes place to a lesser degree, perhaps reflecting the fact that the majority of faith-based volunteer-led activity is based on informal partnership agreements.

5. Hidden in plain sight

Despite being active in most communities in Scotland, the significant contribution of faith-based volunteers is often under-recognised. This is a result of volunteers 'prioritising action over talk'. Unfortunately, an unintended consequence of this is that the contribution of faith-based volunteers is under-reflected in local and national policy.

6. The 'gifts of age'

It was acknowledged that older people bring a variety of life experiences to faith communities, manifesting in wisdom, commitment, and practical skills. The research explored the '5 gifts of age' which can be loosely summarised as humanity, social networks, economic sustainability, knowledge of local culture and traditions, and the willingness or ability to give their time.

Wider Volunteering Context

The [formal volunteering rate](#)² has remained static for the past 4 years, with 26-27% of the population regularly giving their time. However, we saw a [significant increase in informal volunteering](#) during the pandemic. The estimated value of both formal and informal volunteering to the Scottish economy is [£5.5 billion](#). This report is primarily focused on formal volunteering, but it is worth noting that many members of faith communities will also likely undertake regular informal volunteering because of their faith.

Volunteer-led services are often community-based and offer solutions that are early intervention or prevention focused. This is particularly true for services offered by faith communities. As a result, volunteering services usually offer a significant return on investment.

Whilst the formal volunteering participation rate appears to be stable, there are early signs that volunteering is entering a period of decline. The latest [Community Life Survey for England](#), based on results from October 2021 to September 2022, found that adult volunteer participation was down 7 percentage points compared to 2019/20. The Covid-19 pandemic followed by the cost of living crisis have placed significant strain on both volunteers and the organisations that engage them. In 2022 we published a [report](#) which found that many volunteers were experiencing 'fatigue and burnout' coming out of the pandemic, which is reflected in the Gift of Age research.

This situation has been exacerbated by the fact that volunteers, as individuals, are not immune to the effects of the cost of living crisis. As reported in our latest [bulletin exploring the impact of the crisis on volunteering](#), 24% of adults think that they are not managing well financially and 49% feel that their mental health is negatively affected by the cost of living crisis. This situation is undoubtedly having an impact on

² Formal volunteering refers to unpaid work undertaken on behalf of an organisation to help other people or a cause. Informal volunteering refers to unpaid help given as an individual directly to people who are not relatives.

individuals' ability and capacity to volunteer, as evidenced in the early signs of decline in volunteer participation rates.

To conclude, this evidence suggests that volunteer participation is on a precipice. Whilst volunteer-led services offer significant return on investment, they still require dedicated support and resource to succeed.

Policy Implications

This research highlights the important contribution of volunteers from Scotland's faith communities, and their strategic relevance to a range of current policy priorities. Faith communities have an important role in the Community Wealth Building and local living agenda, public service reform and indeed to the wider discussion around Human Rights legislation. In addition, the Volunteering Action Plan, published in June 2022, recognises the need to develop and promote the contribution of volunteers from a range of backgrounds and age groups.

Community Wealth Building and Local Living

The third and community sectors, supported by thousands of volunteers, have been at the forefront of activity related to strengthening communities for hundreds of years; long before the concept of CWB was established. Community organisations work in partnership with the local public sector to ensure that communities thrive, and much of this activity is underpinned by the efforts of volunteers. As detailed in the Gift of Age research, faith community volunteers support services for families, older people, people affected by addiction, homelessness, and financial issues, as well as asylum seekers and refugees. They also support environmental and sustainability initiatives. **As such, ongoing efforts to embed Community Wealth Building should seek to meaningfully engage with faith communities at the earliest opportunity, as detailed in our response to the Community Wealth Building consultation last year.**

Volunteers in faith communities also often maintain and facilitate access to community spaces such as church halls, where this plethora of activity to support community connection and resilience often takes place. Indeed, local living approaches, such as 20 minute neighbourhoods, rely on the presence of community hubs to facilitate social interaction and community identity. **This contribution of faith-based volunteers should be reflected in guidance to embedding local living and 20 minute neighbourhoods.**

Public Service Reform

Volunteers in faith communities are likely to play an increasingly important role in the public service reform agenda, particularly in the areas of Education and Skills and in the ongoing development of a National Care Service.

The publication of reports in recent months reviewing Scotland's skills, qualifications and education landscape all suggest that education and skills reform will be a key feature in this year's Programme for Government. These publications shared a range of recommendations with some common themes. Volunteers from faith communities support a variety of alternative educational experiences for children and young people and this contribution should be acknowledged in workforce planning for the education and skills sector.

In the ongoing conversation around the development of a National Care Service, it is important to acknowledge that volunteers are a key part of the social care workforce. As detailed in our [response to the National Care Service consultation](#) last year, volunteers provide a major contribution to the delivery of social care, and this is particularly true for services delivered by faith communities.

Volunteers in faith communities support the care of people through the delivery of prevention and early intervention services. In particular, faith communities have a significant role in tackling dementia, enduring mental health challenges, bereavement, and social isolation and loneliness. [Research](#) has shown that social isolation and loneliness can be both a cause and consequence of poor health and is linked to increased risk of depression, cognitive decline and dementia, amongst other issues. **It is vital that the contribution of volunteers from faith communities is considered in discussions about the National Care Service – an ongoing priority of the Scottish Government.**

Human Rights Agenda

Volunteers and volunteering have clear links to ongoing discussions about incorporating human rights into Scottish law, with faith-based volunteers having an important role in delivering services which uphold a number of human rights. As detailed previously, faith communities deliver a range of services which put human dignity at the centre whilst supporting people's rights to adequate food, the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, and the right to take part in cultural life.

In addition to upholding human rights, volunteering is an important expression of cultural life for faith communities. Indeed, it is clear from the research that for many faith communities, volunteering is a key part of how they practice and demonstrate

their faith. As such, we would argue that being able to volunteer should be reflected within new legislation and guidance related to human rights around taking part in cultural life.

Volunteering Action Plan

The [Volunteering Action Plan](#) was published by the Scottish Government in June 2022, and includes a range of actions which focus on increasing diversity, improving the volunteering infrastructure, increasing visibility in policy and developing clearer opportunities for volunteers according to life-stage. One action in the Plan refers to ‘Scaling up models of successful community-volunteer engagement through understanding the success factors and supporting wider application’, whilst another stresses the need to ‘understand older ‘potential’ volunteers through research that examines their needs and motivations to volunteer’.

Any efforts to reflect the findings of the Gift of Age research in policy should also reflect on the Volunteering Action Plan.

Next steps

1. Review the Gift of Age research report to better understand the contribution of, and challenges facing, faith-based volunteering.
2. Review the Volunteering Action Plan to understand current commitments to promote volunteering in Scotland, particularly for older people.
3. Reach out to Volunteer Scotland and Faith in Older People to discuss how your influence can be best utilised in advocating for policy solutions to promote and support older people in faith communities to volunteer.