



Background

- The COVID-19 pandemic has changed people's volunteering behaviours
- Informal volunteering (giving unpaid help to those who are not a relative) has increased while formal volunteering (unpaid help to groups or clubs) has fallen¹.
- There is an interest from stakeholders who have experienced increased participation² in maintaining the positive patterns of volunteering, aligning with National Health Service (NHS) objectives and realising benefits in a wider public health context³.

Aims

Using a local COVID-19 public health volunteering programme case study, we aimed to:

- explore the volunteer's journey and perspective using volunteers' reported experiences
- consider the potential for volunteer retention and role expansion into other public health issues beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

Policy and practice partners

The COVID-19 Community Champions programme was established throughout England by local authorities to work directly with their local populations, particularly those most disadvantaged or not accessing mainstream media messages about COVID-19. The scheme under study was operated by Birmingham City Council Public Health Team and enabled Champions to disseminate verified information through their personal, professional, and community networks.

Methods

This research was undertaken rapidly⁴ so the findings could be relayed and implemented before they became outdated:

1. Recruitment was undertaken by Birmingham City Council Public Health Team via the programme mailing list.
2. Semi-structured focus group discussions, one-to-one interviews and email interviews were conducted with volunteers.
3. Data were analysed through directed thematic analysis using an iteratively developed coding frame.

Results

Data from 16 participants were collected from three focus group discussions, four interviews, and one email interview.

Six themes were identified relating to individuals' experience of volunteering and whether it was positive or negative: volunteer motivations and expectations; volunteer management; programme organisation; feeling valued; continued need for role, and interest in new responsibilities.

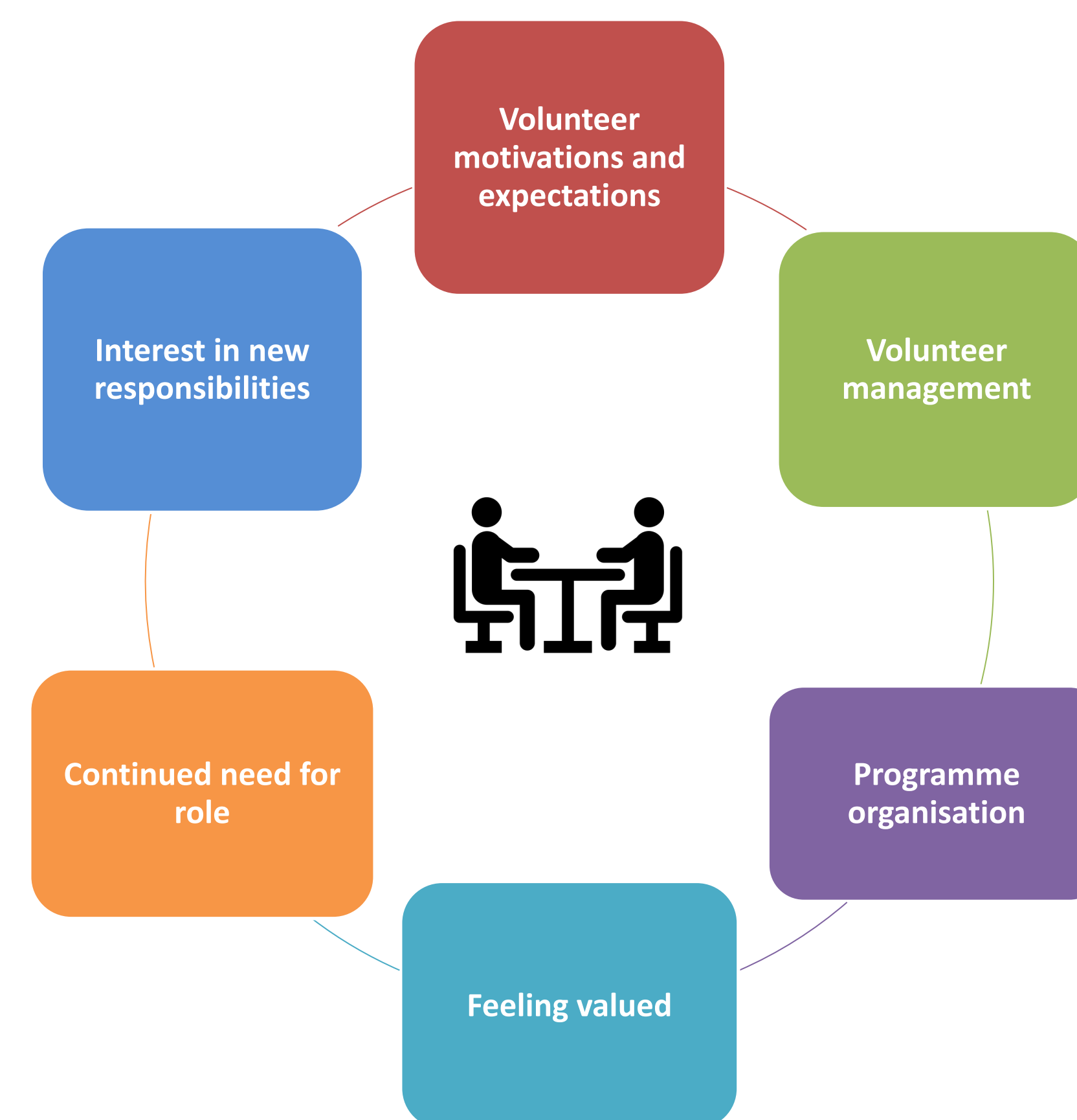


Figure 1 – Themes identified from qualitative data

The factors conducive to volunteer recruitment, retention and re-purposing were:

- maintaining the original terms of engaging with the volunteering opportunity (including retaining the original brief and remit),
- adjusting these through consultative processes with an emphasis on seeking permission from the volunteers already involved, and,
- ensuring a reliable and consistent management and support structure.

Public and community involvement

The ARCWM Public Health Theme Patient and Public Involvement (PPI) group contributed to the design of this study. The group met on three occasions, advising on study conduct, participant preparation and clarifying their expectations during the advance consenting session, remote focus group facilitation, and findings dissemination. PPI greatly strengthened the conduct of this work. Meeting regularly throughout the course of the research enabled input at every stage despite it being a rapid evaluation. The PPI group drew upon their own experiences of volunteering and shared insights into minimising social desirability bias and promoting honest sharing during the discussions.

Conclusions

Our findings indicate that:

- Changing or expanding the remit from COVID-19 to other public health messaging should be undertaken with consultation and consent.
- While some of the learning is specific to the local volunteer programme in question and the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the extent to which this can be generalised to other public health prevention scenarios and settings should be considered.
- Rapid qualitative methods allow for recommendations to be quickly implemented in rapidly evolving contexts such as those relating to COVID-19. These have been shown to generate comparable findings to in-depth methods⁵.

Impact

Following the evaluation, the programme evolved a health improvement focus, opportunities for career progression including further training, and paid opportunities in community research.

References

1. Department for Digital, C., Media & Sport. *Volunteering and Charitable Giving - Community Life Survey 2020/21*. 2021 [cited 2021 29 September].
2. England, N. *England's top NHS nurse says volunteering surge can be positive COVID legacy*. 2021 [cited 2021 29 September].
3. NHS. *The NHS Long Term Plan*. 2021 [cited 2021 29 September].
4. Gale, R.C., et al., *Comparison of rapid vs in-depth qualitative analytic methods from a process evaluation of academic detailing in the Veterans Health Administration*. *Implementation Science*, 2019. 14(1): p. 11.
5. Taylor, B., et al., *Can rapid approaches to qualitative analysis deliver timely, valid findings to clinical leaders? A mixed methods study comparing rapid and thematic analysis*. *BMJ Open*, 2018. 8(10): p. e019993.