

VOLUNTEERING WITH RDA

HORSES, HEALTH AND HAPPINESS



A report into the impact of volunteering with RDA on health and wellbeing; the benefits for both participants and volunteers and the power of the RDA community.



Foreword

“
96% of our volunteers say that RDA has improved their overall satisfaction with life.”

At Riding for the Disabled Association (RDA) our horses benefit the lives of 25,600 disabled children and adults all over the UK. Throughout RDA's fifty year history, our amazing volunteers have been an integral part in delivering this work. We are proud of the time, energy and commitment that our 500 groups and 18,000 active volunteers give to help transform the lives of those we help.

We are therefore pleased to be able to present this important report that recognises and celebrates our volunteer contributions and achievements. This Report has been made possible with vital funding provided by Sport England as part of a wider grant to support volunteer development throughout our organisation.

With a clear sense of our future vision, purpose and direction, RDA is committed to attracting and supporting increasing numbers of volunteers.



Ed Bracher
RDA Chief Executive



Lindsay Correa
RDA Trustee and
Chair of Volunteer
Development

The findings of this report will help us achieve our ambitious plans, which are vital if we are to meet the demand for our services.

The Report gives us a very clear picture of who our volunteers are and, importantly, how they feel about their time supporting RDA. We celebrate the fact that we attract so many female volunteers and those with a stated disability, compared with other sporting organisations. We also welcome having a vibrant and active older cohort of volunteers.

In our 50th year, RDA has much to celebrate but also still much to do if we are to increase the number of people who can benefit from what we do. We hope you agree with and will act upon the Calls to Action in this report, so that RDA can address the future with confidence.

Executive Summary

This Report focuses on the impact and dual benefit that volunteering with RDA makes for the volunteers themselves and for wider society.

Volunteering at RDA has an important role to play in addressing wider societal concerns around loneliness, mental health and wellbeing. It offers opportunities to gain confidence, acquire new skills and knowledge. Volunteering with RDA is an active experience which delivers physical health benefits too.

RDA has clear and robust evidence to show that our volunteers feel more useful and better about themselves. They are more sociable and physically active. They have learnt new skills and gained more confidence.

RDA recognises that these benefits apply equally to our large number of older, female and disabled volunteers, target areas for Sport England and others.

RDA welcomes the steps that government, agencies and funders, are taking to recognise the dual benefit that volunteering brings and the moves to include volunteering as a fundamental part of civil society and our integrated care systems.

RDA has ambitious plans to grow the number of our volunteers so that we can meet the increasing demands placed on our services.

For RDA to deliver its future ambitious plans we have three calls to action:

1 Government to **recognise that volunteering for RDA delivers dual benefit** for both the community we serve and the individual volunteer; and also contributes to tackling loneliness, and improving mental and physical health.

2 Local government and appropriate agencies, such as Clinical Commissioning Groups and local GPs, to **signpost and refer volunteering opportunities** through social prescribing, for volunteers to work with RDA.

3 Existing and new funding partners to **support RDA in reaching more volunteers** and enabling more people to benefit from our activities.



“
Taking action on the issues people care about has enormous benefits for individuals and for society. There is evidence that being involved is good for your health and that it can lead to increased life satisfaction, wellbeing, and self-esteem.”

Civil Society Strategy, 2018





RDA aims to deliver an excellent service and experience for all participants and volunteers.



About RDA & Background to our Volunteer Research

What we do at RDA

- ▶ RDA benefits the lives of 25,600 disabled children and adults all over the UK
- ▶ 500 RDA Centres around the UK
- ▶ Using activities like riding and carriage driving, we provide therapy, fitness, skills development and fun.
- ▶ We deliver a measurable impact in life enhancing areas such as physical ability, communication, relationship building and confidence

Our Values



1

RDA is a community of people who believe that it's what you can do that counts and who enable participants and volunteers to achieve their goals



2

RDA values the input of all people who are involved – participants, volunteers and paid staff



3

RDA ensures that development and achievement is recognised and celebrated across the organisation



4

RDA aims to deliver an excellent service and experience for all participants and volunteers



5

RDA recognises the central part that horses and ponies play in everything we do

The importance of RDA Volunteers and how we help them

RDA's **18,000** amazing volunteers contribute over **3 million** hours of their time each year to support our riders and drivers. This incredible commitment and input is the backbone of the organisation's success.

Commitment to ongoing improvement and impact measurement

Since launching the RDA Outcomes Tracker in 2012 we have been able to match anecdotal evidence of

our impact with reliable data and measurable outcomes.

This has kickstarted a commitment to ongoing research and insight measurement into the impact of our work. This Volunteer research is an important part of this process, enabling us to **build a strong response** to the need for volunteer support and recruitment in the years ahead.

In 2018, RDA received a three year grant from **Sport England** to help us understand the motivations and

benefits for our volunteers in order to inform our future plans for volunteer development.

Commissioning the Research

The research presented in this report comes from a **survey of 1,629 RDA volunteers**, conducted online between 16th October and 16th November 2018. Significance testing gives us strong confidence that this research applies to our entire volunteer base of 18,000 volunteers.

18,000 volunteers

92% female

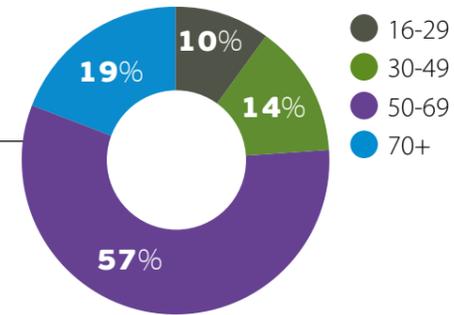
72% live in rural areas

3/4 over age **50**

24% have a disability which affects their day to day lives

85% give 2 days or more a month, with 26% over 6 days per month

80% of Volunteers spend their time actively supporting participants



We all do it for the challenge; for the rewards of helping people achieve their goals and because we believe in what RDA does.

RDA is a constant reminder of the quality of life and the importance of sharing it.

How RDA is addressing Sport England's Volunteering ambitions:

Sport England is committed in its 'Volunteering in an Active Nation' strategyⁱⁱ to bring in more people from under-represented groups, including those with a disability and to attract more women.

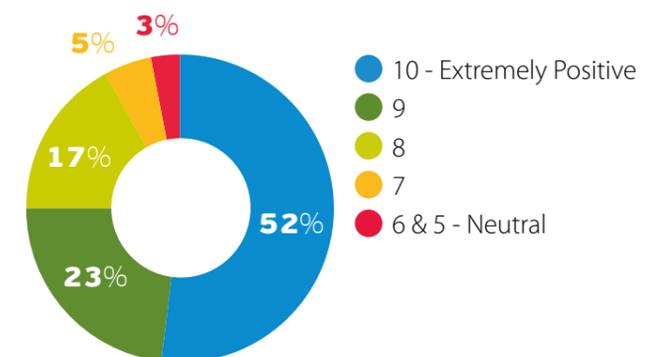
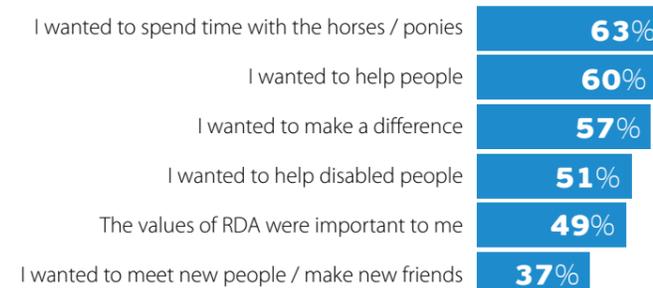
RDA's volunteer profile demonstrates that it appeals strongly in attracting female volunteers – indeed, its 92% female volunteer profile is much higher than the 40% cited by Sport England.

RDA can also demonstrate that our disabled volunteers (who make up 24% of our volunteers)

have a positive experience. A recent Sport England and Activity Alliance reportⁱⁱⁱ highlighted 48% of disabled people having a negative experience when volunteering. RDA disabled volunteers reported an overwhelming positive experience, with 95% rating their experience as 7 out of 10 or higher.

Motivation & Satisfaction

RDA volunteers are equally motivated in wanting to make a difference as well as spend time with horses and ponies.



Three Quarters of RDA volunteers give experiences a **9** or **10**. RDA has had a positive effect on the lives of **94%** of volunteers

Tackling Loneliness

Carol Williamson

When my only daughter left home, taking her dog and pony with her, it left a big gap in my life. There was always something to do when they were around, and suddenly I wasn't the busy mum I had been. You might think I was lucky but it didn't feel like that. I would say I was a lonely, and a bit isolated. I noticed I had I started going to bed earlier and getting up later as I didn't have anything to get up for.

When I got a call from one of the volunteers saying they had set up an RDA Group and would I like to come along, I jumped at the chance. Thursdays became the highlight of my week.

I've made new friends, helped with competitions and RDA holidays and I'm now even an RDA carriage driving coach. It has even given me the confidence to get my own pony – so now I have a fulfilling home life again as well, and I always have something to get up for in the mornings.



The Challenge

Loneliness is not prejudiced and affects people of all ages and walks of life, with an estimated 9 million people saying they are always or often lonely. 3.9 million of older people say the TV is their main companion.

Research shows that loneliness and social isolation are harmful to our health: lacking social connections is a comparable risk factor for early death to smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and is worse for us than well-known risk factors such as obesity and physical inactivity. Loneliness increases the likelihood of mortality by **26%**.^{iv}

The Experiences of RDA Volunteers

We asked our volunteers about their interactions with other people. They gave a clear signal that they felt a strong sense of community with RDA.

- > **88%** I feel like I belong to the RDA Community
- > **74%** Volunteering with RDA makes me feel close to other people
- > **79%** At RDA there are people I can trust completely
- > **75%** Volunteering with RDA makes me feel more interested in other people.

Volunteering with RDA is clearly a route to making new friends, with **78%** of volunteers chatting to members of the community much of the time.

In October 2018, Government published their strategy: 'A Connected Society: a strategy for tackling loneliness' in response to the commission set up by the late MP Jo Cox. The Strategy recognises the importance of volunteering as a mechanism for tackling isolation and creating opportunities for positive and empowering social interaction. Government has set a target for all GPs to start social prescribing to address loneliness, citing engagement in community groups as a powerful antidote.



“
Loss of social contact is incredibly damaging to our humanity and to the health and wellbeing of everyone affected. Indeed, research now shows that loneliness is as damaging to our physical health as smoking.

Theresa May, A Connected Society – A Strategy for Tackling Loneliness^v

Boosting Mental Health and Wellbeing



Judi Singer

I was severely agoraphobic but being a horse rider I joined my local RDA Group in Surrey as I felt it would help me change my life – and it did! To start I was only happy leading at the horse's shoulder, not talking to anyone, and then progressed, through the kindness and understanding of my colleagues, to being able to join in the fun that everyone was having. Through the RDA volunteers' non-judgemental understanding I am now able to go anywhere, speak to anyone, chair meetings and speak in public. Thank you RDA!



The Challenge

Approximately **1 in 4** people in the UK will experience a mental health problem each year. In England, **1 in 6** people report experiencing a common mental health problem (such as anxiety and depression) in any given week.^{vii}

Research is clear about the benefits of volunteering for mental health, helping people gain more perspective and be less inward focused – with social interaction and the sense of purpose proving strong stimulants to improved wellbeing.

The Experiences of RDA Volunteers

RDA volunteers were asked if and how volunteering with RDA makes an impact on their self-esteem and overall well-being. The results show that RDA volunteers feel generally better, happier, more confident and more useful as a result of their time with RDA.

Volunteering with RDA:

- > **81%** - makes me feel better about myself
- > **68%** - makes me feel more confident
- > **84%** - makes me feel more cheerful
- > **59%** – makes me feel more relaxed
- > **92%** - makes me feel more useful

“
Study after study is confirming the benefits of volunteering for people with a range of mental health conditions. The social interaction that volunteering offers is extremely important, with group activities that provide conviviality appearing to offer the most benefit.

Sir Stuart Etherington, CEO, NCVO, October 2017^{vi}

We are proud that **92%** of our volunteers agree that their time volunteering with RDA makes them feel more useful, with an impressive **64%** of respondents strongly agreeing with the statement.

Our commitment to identifying and communicating the impact of our activities means that our volunteers not only *feel* they are being useful – they *know* they are.

“
I am a more confident, calm and optimistic person. This has increased my self esteem.

Improving Physical Health

Val Shone

Before I retired I'd spent 17 years working in an office sitting down. By the time I stopped working I was very unfit and overweight and I really wanted to get more active. I started going walking with my husband but found it was too easy to find an excuse not to go. I realised I needed a worthwhile way of walking – something I would commit to no matter what.

I saw an advert for volunteering with Stratford RDA in a local shop and it seemed like just the thing I was looking for.

Now I go there every week to support riders by walking alongside them while they have their lesson. When they do trotting we even do a short run. When I started it was just about as much as I could cope with but now I find it much easier. My fitness has definitely improved.

RDA has made me more confident to try other things too. I've even joined a gym – something I thought I would never do. And it has encouraged me to take up riding again. I hadn't ridden for forty years and never dreamed I'd be doing it after I retired.



The Challenge

Lack of physical activity costs the UK an estimated **£7.4 billion** a year, including £0.9 billion to the NHS alone. Low physical activity is one of the top 10 causes of disease and disability in England. Many adults spend in excess of 7 hours per day sedentary, and this typically increases with age. Physical activity can boost mental wellbeing and help reduce social isolation, a risk factor for depression.^x Experts are encouraging adults to incorporate brisk walking into their days as a way to improve their general health and wellbeing.^x

Promoting physical activity is a core part of government's various strategies to improve the health of the nation, and its promotion is now a fundamental approach taken by Sport England. Volunteering for a sporting organisation brings an identified 'dual benefit' – not only supporting physical activity for participants, but also for the volunteers themselves.

The Experiences of RDA Volunteers

Even with our older volunteer profile, RDA volunteers consider themselves to be fit and active. And volunteering at RDA helps to keep them physically active. An impressive **93%** of RDA volunteers are physically active in some way when they volunteer with us, with the average volunteer claiming to spend over an hour walking per session.

- **69%** walk continuously for at least 10 minutes when volunteering



When someone provides their time, energy and expertise as a volunteer there's a double benefit - for those playing and for themselves... we aim to harness and increase the dual benefit. It's a vital part of realising our wider commitment to grassroots sport and physical activity in England.

Volunteering in an Active Nation, Sport England Strategy 2017-2021^{viii}



I will be 59 this month and continue to catch the horses in the field, hoof pick, groom and tack up. This is surprisingly quite strenuous, and I break a sweat lifting up heavy leather saddles – it's like a gym workout and I am pretty fit!

Building Knowledge and Skills



James Wiseman

Horses have always been an escape for me. When I was younger I just enjoyed messing around with them – now I realise I want it to be my career.

There were points where I was close to getting in trouble and being kicked out of school but since being at RDA I have noticed the change in me. They have taught me so much, my attitude has changed and the way I treat other people.

RDA has helped to boost me, before when I was at secondary school I had no self-esteem. I was suffering from depression - I didn't talk to anyone. Since I have been volunteering at RDA it has opened my eyes to how everything can and should be. It has taught me so much and that's why I love the RDA. I never expected that from a job.

I started volunteering just over two years ago when I was 16 and I passed my RDA Carriage Driving Coach exam at 17. I want to focus on one thing at a time and get as much experience as possible. Once I have enough qualifications I am planning to join the army with the King's Troop and do an apprenticeship there as a farrier.

The Challenge

It has long been recognised that volunteering offers individuals an opportunity to acquire new knowledge and skills, whatever their circumstances or stage of life. Volunteering can act as a stimulus for gaining employment, but is also known as a way to help people throughout their careers.



Volunteering can improve people's skills, which may in turn help them find employment. Research suggests that volunteering improves both 'hard' skills, such as IT or customer relations, and 'soft' skills, such as teamwork and communication.

National Council for Voluntary Organisations, (NCVO) Research Briefing, March 2018^{xi}

The Experiences of RDA Volunteers

Nearly all RDA volunteers surveyed felt that they had gained knowledge and skills directly as a result of their time with RDA.

- **95%** of RDA volunteers feel they've gained knowledge and skills
- **80%** of those that have gained knowledge feel it has helped in other areas of their life
- **54%** feel volunteering with RDA has improved their career prospects (of those volunteers to whom this applies)



I can have a more CAN DO attitude to life now myself. I'm more computer literate and this helps with on-line bills etc" and "The skills learnt at RDA have been a huge part of my CV.

Current Policy Context and Government Commitment

Many areas of government have highlighted the role volunteering has in helping to tackle wider societal issues. The recent Civil Society Strategy and the new NHS 10 year Plan both refer to opportunities offered through

Social Prescribing as part of a coordinated integrated care system. Government has called on departments and local government to act.

RDA's Future Volunteering Commitments

RDA has a clear commitment in our 2017-21 Strategy to continue to invest in training and support for our volunteers.

We will:



Attract more volunteers, so that 20,000 people can experience the dual benefit of giving time to RDA and ensuring we are able to satisfy the demand for our services



Create a national training centre to support the continued expansion of our award winning training programmes, ensuring future generations of volunteers have a place to learn together and inspire each other on their RDA volunteer journey



Extend our reach by engaging with a more diverse range of volunteers enhancing our communities with new skills, new experiences and new approaches



Develop excellent volunteer leaders through our new volunteer leadership academy, equipping volunteers to shape the future of RDA



Expand our offer by increasing the number of RDA groups, creating more of the positive communities where both volunteers and participants benefit



Promote the dual benefit of RDA volunteering ensuring our existing volunteers and external audiences understand the difference they make and that their contribution is valued

RDA's CALLS TO ACTION RDA needs 3 things to happen if we are to succeed...

1 Recognise Benefits

Government to **recognise** that volunteering for RDA delivers dual benefit for both the community we serve and the individual volunteer; and also contributes to tackling loneliness, and improving mental and physical health.

2 Refer & Signpost

Local government and appropriate agencies, such as Clinical Commissioning Groups and local GPs, to **signpost** and **refer volunteering opportunities** through social prescribing, for volunteers to work with RDA.

3 Funding & Partnerships

Existing and new funding partners to **support RDA in reaching more volunteers** and enabling more people to benefit from our activities

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