

Why do people volunteer at Thrive?



Results from a study conducted by
Imperial College with Thrive

2018

In 2018, Thrive was involved in a study to investigate what motivates individuals to volunteer for us and the benefits that volunteers receive from their volunteering. The study was conducted by Gail Sucharitakul as part of her M.Sc. at Centre for Environmental Policy, Imperial College London.

The following report is a summary of the results from this study.

Thrive is the leading gardening for health charity in the UK using gardening to improve the lives of people living with disabilities or ill-health or who are otherwise disadvantaged or vulnerable. This approach is known as social and therapeutic horticulture (STH).

Benefits of Social and Therapeutic Horticulture (STH)

The benefits of STH include improving physical and mental health and wellbeing, helping people engage with learning or work and improving cognitive skills, helping people to develop social and personal skills, increasing their social inclusion and community engagement and enabling individuals to access nature and benefit from the inherent therapeutic value of restorative environments^(1,2).

Thrive and its Volunteers

Thrive has an active volunteering program⁽³⁾, with 255 volunteers working alongside our practitioners in a range of client-facing, gardening, and administrative roles across our 3 sites (London, Reading and Birmingham). This study explored the motivations and perceived benefits for volunteers with the intention of helping us to better understand why people are willing to give their time to the charity and how we can support and encourage them in their work.

“ Thrive’s volunteers are at the backbone of the charity. Many go beyond what is expected of them, supporting events and activities in the evening and at weekends or going that extra mile in supporting disabled people and of course baking cakes!

Faith Ramsay, Chair of Thrive (2017)

”

Who participated in this study?

17% of the participants were male, and **84%** of the participants were female.

33% of the participants had direct experience with disability.

The majority (**41.7%**) of participants were employed part-time.

The majority (**29.2%**) of the participants were of the 60-69 age range.

87% of the participants work directly with the clients.

Exploring the Motivations and Benefits of Volunteering: A Social and Therapeutic Horticulture Case Study with Thrive (2018)

This report summarises the results from a study conducted by Gail Sucharitakul as part of her M.Sc. at Centre for Environmental Policy, Imperial College London⁽⁴⁾. The study looked at what motivated people to volunteer for Thrive and the benefits that they received from their volunteering.

The study also looked at whether the people who volunteer for us had any common characteristics, in particular in regard to their beliefs about environmental and social responsible behaviour or their personal experience of disability or disadvantage. It was hoped that this information would help us to improve the experience of individuals volunteering with Thrive and hence increase the recruitment and retention of volunteers.

What we did...

Data was collected from volunteers in two phases.

The initial phase in April/May 2018, involved in-depth, face to face interviews with 9 volunteers at two of Thrive's regional projects; 6 at Battersea Park in London and 3 at Beech Hill near Reading. Thrive also has a third regional centre at Kings Heath in Birmingham, but this was excluded from the study for logistical reasons. The common themes that arose from these conversations were used to develop a questionnaire to be sent out to gather information from a wider group of volunteers.

This questionnaire was sent out via email in July 2018 to 137 volunteers and responses were collected over a 17-day period. In total, 32 volunteers responded.

The questionnaire included sections looking at:

- the relative importance of the different functions that volunteering can fulfil for different people
- what people felt they had gained from their volunteering
- their beliefs about social responsibility and our responsibility to the environment
- the demographics of the volunteers (age, gender, current employment status etc)

What we learnt...

Demographics

The mixture of people who responded to the survey mirrored the overall demographics of Thrive's volunteers. The majority were female (83%) and ages ranged from early 30's to late 70's, with the average being in their 60's. 38% of the sample were retired and the majority volunteered directly with the clients. 1/3 of the sample reported personal experience of disability either themselves or via a close family member.

There was a difference between the volunteers at the two regional centres in the study. Many of the volunteers at the London centre were in the younger age range and interested in gaining experience for a potential future career in gardening, care or STH while those at the Reading centre, tended to be older and many were retired.

Overall retention of volunteers was good, reflected in the fact that the average length of time that individuals had been volunteering for Thrive was about 4 years (3yrs, 343days). One of the volunteers who was interviewed had been working with Thrive since the charity was founded in Reading.

Underlying beliefs of volunteers

As might be expected, the volunteers expressed a belief in the importance of gardens and gardening and in caring for the environment (pro-environmental beliefs).

“Being in a beautiful garden, the garden is very important.”

Volunteers also believed in the importance of helping others (pro-social beliefs) and found that this gave them perspective on their own issues.

“I realised that actually I would get better, it would get fixed, but these people here are going to be the way that they are for the rest of their lives.”

Key Motivations

Motivations for volunteering in social environmental programmes typically fall into 3 categories: altruistic (a desire to help others); biosphere (a desire to help the environment) and egotistic (motivated by personal needs/benefits)^[3].

The survey suggested that the main motivation of Thrive volunteers were altruistic (focused on helping and understanding the client). Biospheric motivations (looking after the garden) came second highest. This was particularly important for those with horticultural backgrounds such as retired gardeners, who appreciated the high standards of the gardens at Thrive. Many of the volunteers interviewed expressed their enjoyment of the natural environment and stated that being outdoors is an extremely important part of their motivation to work with Thrive.

Personal Benefits

Although the survey suggested that the main motivations for volunteers related to understanding and caring for the client and the garden, in the interviews the main motivation that the volunteers talked about related to the personal benefits that they received from volunteering.

“You just realised you want to help an organisation, but it's also to help yourself.”

For those looking to establish a career, learning and Thrive's reputation as a training provider were important motivations.

“I saw that there is still training, and they've been around for a long time, so I thought I might as well train with the best.”

For those who were retired (37.5% of the sample), establishing a routine and having a purpose were important motivations. This is often the case for those who have retired and have lost the routine and structure of a work environment.

“It puts you back into a working environment in some ways which is good.”



Experience of disability or disadvantage

Another area of difference between the interview and survey results was in the volunteer's experience of disability or disadvantage. The initial interviews suggested that many of the volunteers (1/3) had experience of mental health support needs or physical disability, either themselves or via a close relative and that their time at Thrive had helped them understand and manage these issues.

The volunteers who were interviewed also suggested that a key motivation for volunteering was the benefits to their own mental health that they thought they received. These ranged from a general sense of "feeling good" as a result of helping others, to a much more complex sense of "self-therapy" for those who suffered from mental illness themselves.

Questions relating to experience of disability and personal therapeutic benefits were included in the survey. Interestingly, the survey did not show any statistically significant evidence that volunteers were motivated to work at Thrive because of the

potential therapeutic properties or that they receive many therapeutic benefits in relation to their mental wellbeing.

One possible reason for this difference in these results could be the impersonal nature of the survey. Individuals may have been more willing to discuss their personal motivations in a 1:1 conversation, particularly where this involves mental health, and the personal contact may have enabled the researcher to draw out deeper motivations.

Difference in motivations between sites

The results also showed that overall there is a difference in the motivation between volunteers at our centre in London, (who tend to be younger and are often looking for training and experience in working with STH with people with disabilities) and those at our centre in Reading who tended to be retired and looking for an activity that gives many of the benefits of a working environment such as social interaction, routine and meaning.

1

ALTRUISTIC

"Helping behaviour motivated by an internal value without the expectation of anything in return"

2

EGOISTIC

"Personal motivations i.e. provides direct or indirect benefit to the volunteer"

3

BIOSPHERIC

"Altruism that is directed towards the environment rather than other individuals"

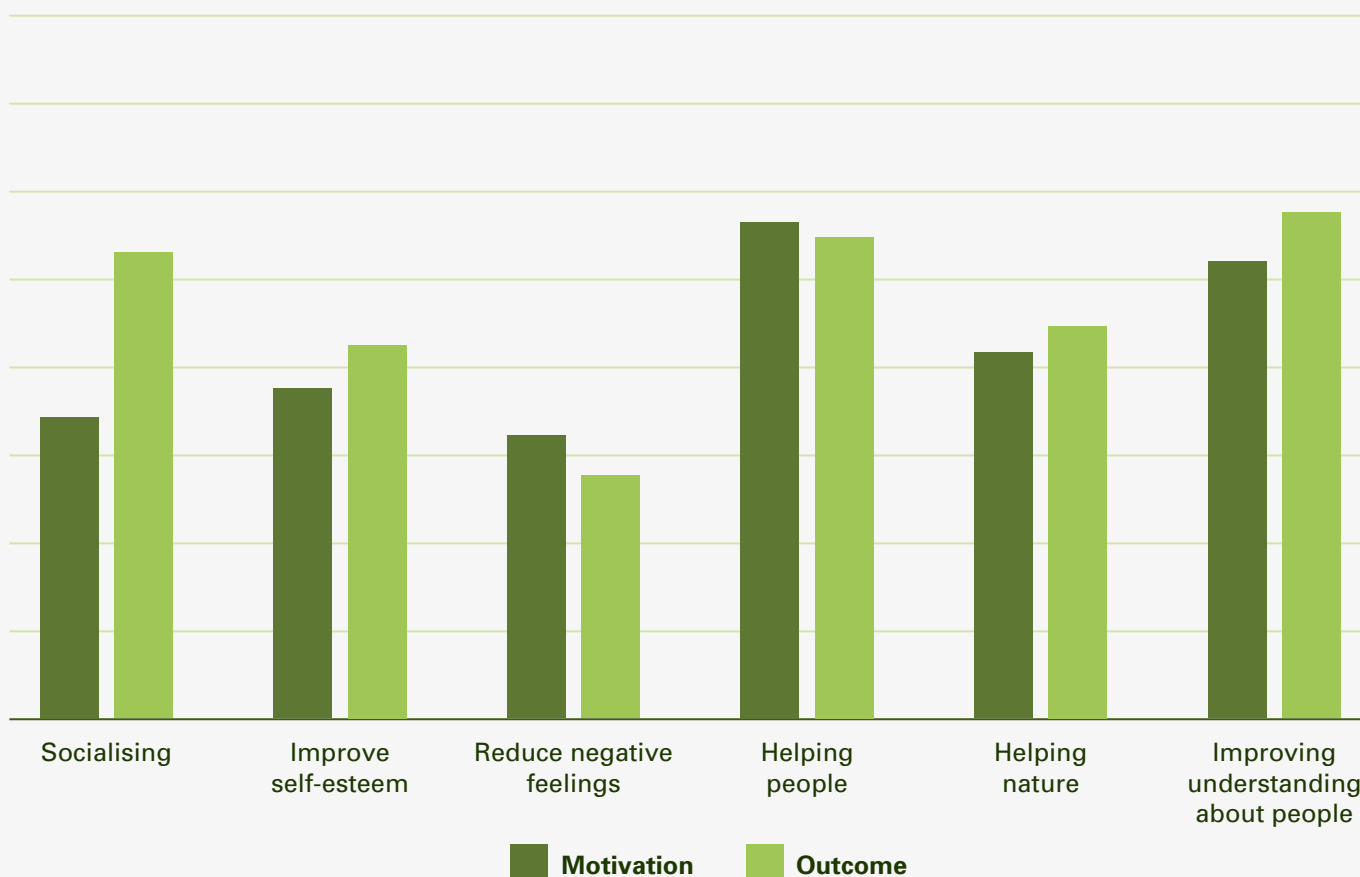
Unexpected benefits

An interesting finding was that although social motivations were not seen as a reason for starting volunteering, many volunteers found that the social benefits were an important unexpected outcome. These social benefits not only include opportunities for social interaction (socialising) but also in providing of a sense of status/reputation from having a socially meaningful role as a "volunteer". This indicates that although the volunteers are not attracted to work at Thrive for social reasons, they clearly receive the social benefits, and this may contribute to continued commitments to work with the charity (i.e. that it is seen as a socially worthwhile activity).

STH benefits for volunteers

The interviews and survey showed that volunteers at Thrive receive many of the benefits of STH. Volunteering provides access to and focus on nature along with opportunities and a reason for physical activity. It increases the mental wellbeing of participants and gives perspective on previous experiences and issues. It provides an opportunity for learning (both about gardening and in understanding the clients and their disabilities) and for maintaining and sharing skills, it provides social benefits both in terms of social interaction and also in terms of having a socially meaningful role as a "volunteer" for a worthwhile cause.

Relative importance of motivations for volunteering



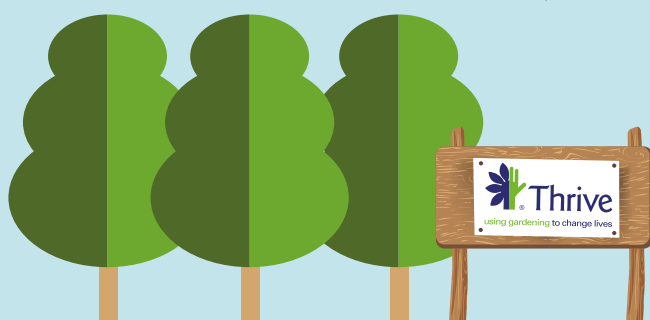
What next?

The study revealed high levels of satisfaction with volunteering at Thrive (with 98.5% saying that they plan to still be volunteering at Thrive in a years' time). This suggests we are doing a good job in retaining our volunteers. We are considering elements of the report which we feel could be implemented to maximise the benefits of volunteering with Thrive and target future recruitment.

As part of our continued commitment to volunteers we will continue to conduct volunteer satisfaction surveys annually and to involve them in any other relevant academic studies. Regional engagement will continue in support of the regional teams' work with their volunteers and a member of the senior management team will periodically attend volunteer meetings at all sites. We will encourage consultation and suggestions, receive feedback, and take the opportunity to update volunteer teams on strategy and other organisational developments. We will also seek to identify areas of expertise within the volunteer community not currently being applied at Thrive to enable them to use their talents to greatest effect and maximise their potential to make a real difference.

Further research

The study involved a very small sample of volunteers, both in the initial interview stage and in the number of responses to the survey, and the sample, by its nature, only included those volunteers who were interested and willing to volunteer information. Due to the time scale of the project, we used email to distribute the questionnaires which will have excluded some volunteers. It would be useful to gather more information from a wider range of volunteer, as well as to investigate how the demographic of volunteers at the Birmingham centre differs from the other sites.





References

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Thrive is the leading charity in the UK using gardening to bring about positive changes in the lives of people living with disabilities or ill health, or who are isolated, disadvantaged or vulnerable. We work with people recovering from injuries, with learning difficulties or physical or sensory impairment, with mental illness or age-related diseases and young people with behavioural difficulties.

Our programmes are designed to improve physical and psychological health, strengthen personal, life and vocational skills and reduce social isolation. Our emphasis is on empowering people and we focus on what they can do, not on what they can't do. We help them move on and make improvements in their lives.

www.thrive.org.uk



**Compiled by Trish Matthews, Thrive Research Officer,
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