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.
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.

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.

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

Lindsay Correa
RDA Trustee and Chair of Volunteer Development

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.

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.

How RDA is addressing Sport England’s Volunteering ambitions:
Sport England is committed in its ‘Volunteering in an Active Nation’ strategy 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 report 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.

I wanted to spend time with the horses / ponies 63%
I wanted to help people 60%
I wanted to make a difference 57%
I wanted to help disabled people 51%
The values of RDA were important to me 49%
I wanted to meet new people / make new friends 37%

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 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 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 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.

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

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 Experiences of RDA Volunteers

RDA volunteers were asked if and how volunteering with RDA makes an impact on their self-esteem and overall wellbeing. 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

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.

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
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 brisk walking into their days as a way to improve their general health and wellbeing.

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

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. 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.

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.
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
- **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.

References

5. [https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/loneliness-research/](https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/loneliness-research/)

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