

# A Qualitative Evidence Review of Space and Place, Intangible Assets, and Volunteering, and their Contribution to the Enhancement of Wellbeing and/or Alleviation of Loneliness for Adults across the Life-Course (16+ years), in the Spheres of Participatory Arts and Sport/Physical Activity

## A Synthesis of Qualitative Studies: Volunteering

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## Key Messages: Putting Volunteering-Based Approaches at the Centre of Wellbeing, Culture and Sport

### What do we mean by volunteering in this review?

By volunteering, we mean any act of helping others which is motivated by altruistic feelings of giving and sharing expertise, skills or experience, or instrumental approaches concerning the development of personal skill or the desire to gain experience. Volunteering in this review is provided for the benefit of others and/or the volunteer and involves activities not undertaken for the primary purpose of financial gain.

### What do we mean by wellbeing in this review?

The term wellbeing is used synonymously with a range of concepts in the evidence in this review. The studies refer to positive and/or negative psychological and emotional constructs of wellbeing. Positive wellbeing is associated with feelings of nostalgia and pleasure, a sense of freedom, security, support and being valued, recovery and healing, a positive sense of identity, confidence, resilience and trust. Negative wellbeing is connected to feelings of fear, anxiety, discomfort (mental and physical) and exclusion. In most cases, the evidence cites particular forms of subjective wellbeing. Studies which provide findings on loneliness refer to the various unpleasant feelings associated with the absence of meaningful relationships (emotional loneliness), and deficits in the quality and quantity of relationships (social loneliness).

### Headline evidence about volunteering in participatory arts and sport for wellbeing and/or loneliness

Our qualitative analysis identified three key ***themes*** that illustrate the wellbeing benefits of volunteering in participatory arts and sport/physical activity in relation to: (i) giving and sharing skills, expertise and experience; (ii) creating places/spaces of security and trust; and (iii) opportunities for personal skill development. These themes point to ***processes*** by which volunteering in participatory arts and sport/physical activity operate to enhance wellbeing and/or alleviate loneliness. They also indicate processes contributing to negative wellbeing experiences through volunteering. Processes in this report may refer to a series of steps or to patterns of behaviours and emotions that lead to positive and negative wellbeing outcomes. These can be personal and inter-personal, but they can also shape organisational rules and roles as well as wider policy environments that affect wellbeing. The evidence in this review, then, has led us to define processes in terms of human relationships extending

to the emotional, social, cultural and organisational ways by which volunteering in participatory arts or sport/physical activity can enhance wellbeing and/or alleviate loneliness.

## Lay Summary

We know that volunteering allows people to help others and make a contribution to their communities, which can enhance the personal wellbeing of the volunteers and also those they help. Volunteering can be a way to give back to people, to share knowledge, skills and expertise and to develop personal skills and gain experience that can contribute to career development.

Whilst volunteering is well-established in the culture and sport sector, the evidence for it has not been synthesised. This review is necessary because evidence on volunteering is scattered across different disciplines, located variously, and has not been fully examined in relation to wellbeing or loneliness. The topic was agreed with organisations who work in national policies for wellbeing and culture and sport in the UK and those who manage, deliver and research it.

In the review, we wanted to identify evidence on volunteering, wellbeing and loneliness in participatory arts and sport/physical activity. This is important because the way we understand volunteering could influence decisions about how best to address the wellbeing of those who volunteer and the people they help in the cultural and sport/physical activity sectors. The topic was agreed with organisations who work on national policies for wellbeing and culture and sport in the UK and those who manage, deliver and research it.

We looked for studies published worldwide between 2009 and 2019. We found twenty-seven sources examining volunteering, wellbeing or loneliness and participatory arts or sport/physical activity. In these studies, we found that the wellbeing benefits of volunteering in participatory arts and sport/physical activity are connected to three key themes: (i) giving and sharing skills, expertise and experience; (ii) creating places/spaces of security and trust; and (iii) providing opportunities for personal skill development. These themes point to the ways in which volunteering in participatory arts and sport can enhance wellbeing and/or alleviate feelings of loneliness. However, the evidence also suggests that volunteering can sometimes make people feel excluded. If volunteers are not given the necessary skills and support, it may leave them feeling worse. It can also be difficult to sustain beneficial effects when a volunteering programme comes to an end.

These studies include a range of participatory arts and sport or physical activities in which volunteers either take part or support the participation of others. Volunteers and people benefiting from volunteering activities include: those with mental health issues; the socio-economically disadvantaged; those involved in outdoor environmental work; runners; and isolated and older adults. The sports and physical activities incorporate: walking and hiking in peer-led groups, skiing and horse riding, rugby, therapeutic horticulture and gardening, event volunteering, running, group exercise sessions, football, gym, tai chi, yoga, Zumba, table

tennis and frisbee. The participatory arts activities include: creative arts, poetry, visual arts, singing, ceramics, theatre and storytelling, museum and heritage activities and knitting, sewing and crochet.

We have moderate confidence that volunteering in participatory arts or sport/physical activity can enhance wellbeing and/or alleviate loneliness through processes of: giving and sharing expertise, skills and experiences; creating social spaces that feel secure and help to build trust; and/or providing opportunities for personal skill development. There is a need to build this evidence base in order to use it in developing volunteering programmes in participatory arts and sport/physical activity that might enhance the wellbeing of volunteers and those they help.

## Executive Summary

### Introduction

The protocol for this review was registered on the International Prospective Register of Systematic Reviews (PROSPERO) (registration number: CRD42019142558). It is available at: [https://www.crd.york.ac.uk/prospero/display\\_record.php?RecordID=142558](https://www.crd.york.ac.uk/prospero/display_record.php?RecordID=142558).

The overall review sought to address the question ‘how are place/space, intangible assets and volunteering conceptualised in the reported qualitative research findings on participatory arts and sport/physical activity for enhancing wellbeing and alleviating loneliness across the adult life course (16+ years)?’ In this review, the focus is on the ways in which *volunteering* is conceptualised and can be seen to enhance wellbeing and/or alleviate loneliness in the spheres of participatory arts and sport/physical activity.

### Review approach

The review included empirical research using qualitative study designs, published between 2009 and 2019, which conceptualised how volunteering can enhance wellbeing or alleviate loneliness for those taking part in participatory arts and sport or physical activity. Grey literature in the form of evaluation reports (2009-2019) were included. The review is a synthesis of evidence found in qualitative studies and sources.

### Results

After duplicates were removed, the electronic searches returned 11,088 published records for screening. For this report, 27 qualitative studies examining volunteering and wellbeing or loneliness in participatory arts or sport and physical activity are synthesised and reported. There are 8 published sources and 19 unpublished reports. The unpublished reports include project evaluations with qualitative data and doctoral theses. The searches, screening, extraction and synthesis on the topics of space/place and intangible assets were completed in November 2019.

### Characteristics of the included studies (qualitative)

The studies in this review explore the connections between volunteering, taking part in participatory arts and sport or physical activities in enhancing wellbeing and/or alleviating loneliness for diverse population groups across the life course. The volunteers include: those with mental health issues and from marginalised groups, including BAME communities and with disabilities; those involved in conservation and therapeutic horticulture work, the World Firefighters’ Games and Park-run; parents at a youth rugby club, sport coaches, runners and

older adults and former participants on an arts-on-referral programme. People benefiting from volunteering include: mental health service users; isolated older men; frail and older adults; and isolated older adults living in rural areas.

The sports and physical activities incorporate: walking and hiking in peer-led groups, skiing and horse riding, rugby, therapeutic horticulture and gardening, event volunteering, running, group exercise sessions, football, gym, tai chi, yoga, Zumba, table tennis and frisbee. The participatory arts activities include: creative arts, poetry, visual arts, singing, ceramics, theatre and storytelling, museum and heritage activities and knitting, sewing and crochet.

The review includes qualitative evidence variously collected from: focus groups; structured, semi-structured (face-to-face and via the telephone) and in-depth interviews; field notes; textual and digitally recorded logs; case studies; research and mood diaries; questionnaires; workshops; participant and ethnographic observation; qualitative evaluation reports; and participant photography. The evidence has been interpreted and synthesised to identify and discuss conceptualisations of volunteering and its connection to wellbeing enhancement or the alleviation of loneliness. The limitations in the published qualitative studies included inadequate discussion about the relationship between the researcher and participants, unclear reporting of whether the data were rigorously analysed and a lack of theoretical detail about how the studies conceptualised wellbeing or loneliness. The limitations in the grey literature involved a lack of detailed description regarding the data-collection procedures and data-analysis process, insufficient reporting of participant details and inadequate detail on the theoretical implications of the findings.

The review includes published and unpublished reports from more than 1,125 participants from three countries: Canada, the United States (USA) and the United Kingdom (the UK) (including England and Scotland).

### Summary of study findings (volunteering)

Twenty-seven qualitative studies included in this review focus on understanding the connection between volunteering and wellbeing and/or loneliness in participatory arts, sport or physical activity. Three key thematic areas and their findings have been identified in relation to the wellbeing benefits of volunteering in participatory arts and sport/physical activity: (i) processes of giving and sharing skills, expertise and experience in relationships which may be altruistic and characterised by mutual benefit; (ii) the creation of places/spaces of security and trust which may also be free from harassment and stigma; and (iii) providing opportunities for personal skill development, including creative, organisational, social and leadership skills that may also have career and employment relevance.



We have moderate confidence that volunteering in participatory arts or sport/physical activity can enhance wellbeing and/or alleviate loneliness through processes of giving and sharing expertise, skills and experiences, creating social spaces that feel secure and help to build trust and/or providing opportunities for personal skill development. Most published studies obtained appropriate ethics approval although this was not always reported extensively. Methodological weaknesses of these studies include: a lack of exact details about the researcher's role, potential bias and influence on sample recruitment, settings and participant responses; and a lack of data analysis and rigorous theorisation of findings. The grey literature was of mixed quality. Moderate quality (credibility) reports (n=10) provided appropriate descriptions of data-collection procedures, some detailed data analysis and theoretical implications. High quality (credibility) reports (n=4) provided detailed information, critical reflection on the methods and analysis and included theoretical implications of the findings. Low quality (credibility) reports (n=5) provided little detail on data-collection procedures and data analysis, with insufficient reporting of participant details and inadequate theoretical implications being drawn.

### Strengths and limitations of the review

The focus on the complex relationships between volunteering, wellbeing and loneliness in participatory arts and sport/physical activity presented a challenge to the search and sift process in this review. It is possible that certain relevant studies may not have been included. However, we undertook a comprehensive search strategy to identify all existing eligible studies published for the search dates. The pre-publication of our protocol on PROSPERO ensures methodological transparency and mitigates potential post-hoc decision-making, which can introduce bias to the process. Dual screening of the searches and data extraction and an independent quality assessment using CERQual (confidence in the evidence of reviews of qualitative research) criteria ensured a rigorous process.

Taking published studies as the sole evidence increases the potential risk of publication lag wherein possible important new evidence that has not yet been included in published reports is not identified and included. The grey literature review allowed recent unpublished data from evaluations completed (2009-2019) to be included.

The use of the CERQual criteria introduces an element of subjective judgement. A consistent approach to judgements across the different concepts has been applied, and more than one reviewer was involved in making decisions while recognising that these judgements are open to interpretation.

### Implications for research policy and practice

1. The evidence in this review shows that volunteering in participatory arts and sport/physical activity can enhance wellbeing and may alleviate loneliness (for volunteers and those they help) through processes of giving and sharing expertise, skills and experience, creating places of security and trust and providing opportunities for personal skill development. This means that volunteering has an important role to play in culture and sport policy and practice seeking to promote wellbeing and alleviate loneliness through volunteering.
  
2. The evidence also shows that volunteering in participatory arts and sport/physical activity can create negative wellbeing experiences if there is a lack of support and training for volunteers, when workloads become burdensome, if volunteers do not feel they belong and if those being helped feel the volunteers are strangers. In addition, it is noted that negative wellbeing can be experienced by volunteers when volunteering programmes come to an end. Consideration should, therefore, be given to:
  - Collaborative partnerships and activities that amplify inclusivity and relationship building, and which serve to share organisational burdens;
  - Identification and delivery of more explicit forms of volunteer training and support;
  - Identification and implementation of the structures of resources and supervision for volunteers that can continue after a volunteering opportunity has ended.
  
3. Volunteers are diverse, and people volunteer for different reasons. Volunteering opportunities in participatory arts or sport/physical activity should reflect diversity and develop more inclusive opportunities for a wide range of volunteers.
  
4. In evaluating the findings in this review, we have moderate confidence in the evidence that volunteering in participatory arts or sport/physical activity can enhance wellbeing and/or alleviate loneliness through processes of giving and sharing, creating places of security and trust and providing opportunities for personal skill development. However, the evidence base is limited in extent and scope and lacks methodological rigour. There is the potential to generate a more robust evidence base through research that:
  - Identifies and examines the complexities of volunteering and wellbeing in terms of who volunteers, why, when and in what contexts;
  - Explores the barriers to and facilitators towards a more inclusive strategy for volunteering including those from BAME and socio-economically deprived backgrounds.

# **A Synthesis of Qualitative Studies on Volunteering and Participatory Arts, Sport or Physical Activity for Enhancing Wellbeing or Alleviating Loneliness across the Adult Life Course (16+ years)**

## Introduction

### Background

This qualitative review of volunteering, wellbeing and/or loneliness and taking part in participatory arts, sport or physical activity stems in part from previous reviews on loneliness and culture, sport and wellbeing (Mansfield et al., 2019; Victor et al., 2019; Pennington et al., 2019). It supports current priorities in UK policy and practice for understanding and addressing loneliness and wellbeing in culture and sport. It has been produced as a collaborative form of stakeholder engagement with key UK government departments, local and regional public health experts and certain community groups. The review is necessary because there is currently little evidence on the role of volunteering in the context of sport/physical activity and participatory arts, and the subject has not been systematically or fully examined in relation to wellbeing and loneliness.

By volunteering, we mean any act of helping others which is motivated by altruistic feelings about giving and sharing expertise, skills or experience or instrumental approaches concerning the development of personal skill or desire to gain experience. Volunteering in this review is considered to be provided for the benefit of others and/or the volunteer, and it involves activities not undertaken for the primary purpose of financial gain (see for example Handy et al., 2000; Thomas and Finch, 1990; Lukka and Ellis, 2001)

Volunteering is promoted as fundamental to a thriving and open society, and volunteers and those they help are known to benefit through acts of giving and supporting (NCVO, 2014). Volunteering is important to the successful delivery of participatory arts and sport/physical activity in which positive experiences of and environments for volunteering can empower and connect people together, stimulating change in peoples' lives (Join In, 2014). Volunteering is important to wellbeing because it provides the potential for people to experience a range of positive feelings including enhanced confidence, self-worth and pride (Lawton and Watt, 2019a, 2019b). This value in volunteering though means that there is a need for investment in the form of both financial and non-financial resources from policy makers and funders to ensure effective design, implementation and evaluation of volunteering programmes. It is also important to ensure inclusive, secure and trusting opportunities and relationships in volunteering. Volunteering in the culture and sport sector also depends on a sustainable network of volunteers who are inspired, trained, supported and valued, and there is a need to develop a robust evidence base in which to invest and to advocate both quality and quantity in volunteering in the culture and sporting sectors broadly (McGlynn, 2016)

The systematic review assessed all the relevant evidence on volunteering, wellbeing and loneliness and participatory arts, sport and physical activity across the adult life course (16+ years). This report is a synthesis of the included qualitative studies.

The protocol for this review was registered on the International Prospective Register of Systematic Reviews (PROSPERO) (registration number: CRD42019142558). It is available at: [https://www.crd.york.ac.uk/prospero/display\\_record.php?RecordID=142558](https://www.crd.york.ac.uk/prospero/display_record.php?RecordID=142558).

## Research question

How are space or place, intangible assets and volunteering conceptualised in the reported qualitative research findings on participatory arts and sport/physical activity for enhancing wellbeing and alleviating loneliness across the adult life course (16+ years)?

## Methodology

### Overall review strategy

The SPIDER (Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research Type) framework was employed to identify the relevant literature for inclusion (Cooke et al., 2012; Methley et al., 2014). This approach reflects current guidance on search strategies for qualitative evidence reviews (see for example Barnett-Page and Thomas, 2009; Noyes et al., 2008; Thomas and Harden, 2008; Walsh and Downe, 2005; Harris et al., 2018). The approach aligns with current debates on developing systematic reviews for social policy (e.g. Wallace et al., 2004).

A combined search strategy was used to identify the published papers on participatory arts or sport/physical activity and wellbeing, including the alleviation of loneliness, and space/place, intangible assets or volunteering.

### Sample

The review included participants across the adult life-course (16+ years), healthy or with any morbidity. This included any group or individual taking part in or watching sport a physical activity or those participating in the arts, including theatre, dance, music and the visual or literary arts. Our protocol incorporated studies from countries economically resembling the UK (i.e. other high-income countries with similar economic systems and in the same group as the UK in the OECD Development Assistance Committee categories), or with study populations that have a similar socioeconomic status to the UK. The studies included that did not meet this inclusion criteria (three studies including participants from Timor-Leste,

Samoa and India, Cambodia, Sri Lanka and the Philippines) presented analysis on the phenomenon of interest that was highly relevant to the review.

## Phenomena of interest

To be included, studies must have conceptualised space or place, intangible assets or volunteering in relation to participating in or watching sport/physical activity or the participatory arts.

By 'sports/physical activity', we mean any kind of sport or physical exercise. By 'participatory arts', we mean the active participation in any form of creative activity using voice, body or inanimate object to convey artistic expression.

By 'volunteering', we mean any altruistic approach undertaken by an individual or group to provide a service for the benefit of another individual or groups for no financial or social gain.

This report includes a synthesis of the qualitative evidence findings for volunteering. The synthesis of qualitative evidence on space and place and intangible assets are reported elsewhere.

## Design of studies

We included empirical research published between 2009 and 2019. The included studies needed to have employed an identified and established qualitative method, technique or set of methods/techniques for the purposes of data collection and analysis. We identified relevant systematic reviews published for the purposes of hand searching the reference lists. We hand searched the reference list of systematic reviews published between 2009 and 2019. Grey literature (2009-2019) in the form of evaluation reports or doctoral theses was also included.

## Evaluation

The included studies must have theoretically examined how space and place, intangible assets or volunteering contributes to enhancing wellbeing and/or alleviating loneliness when taking part in participatory arts, sport or physical activity.

## Research type

We included qualitative or mixed methods studies employing a qualitative method or technique.

## Search Methods for the Identification of Reviews

### Electronic searches

The electronic databases were searched using a combination of controlled vocabulary (MeSH) and free-text terms. Search terms were incorporated to target qualitative studies exploring conceptualisations of space or place, intangible assets or volunteering and the evaluation of wellbeing or loneliness in relation to participatory arts or sport/physical activity. The search strategy was informed by expert consultation with policy makers, practitioners and researchers familiar with this field of study. The example search strategy can be found below. All database searches were based on this strategy, but they were appropriately revised to suit each database. The following databases were searched from 2009 to 2019.

- PsycINFO
- Ovid Medline
- Eric
- Web of Science (Arts and Humanities Citation Index; Social Science Citation Index; Science Citation Index)
- Scopus
- PTSDPubs
- CINAHL Plus
- SportDiscus
- Performing Arts Periodicals Database
- Hospitality and Tourism Index

### Demonstration search strategy

An example search strategy for Ovid Medline is shown below. Details of all the search strings are available on request from the lead author.

(physical activity OR exercis\* OR physical exertion OR sport\* OR dance\* OR walk\* OR cycl\* OR swim\* OR meditati\* OR participatory arts OR music OR sing\* OR choir OR visual arts OR performing arts OR creative arts OR drama) AND (communit\* OR neighbo\* OR local OR town OR city OR village OR urban OR rural OR heritage OR physical environment OR landscape OR blue space OR green space OR public park OR playing field OR leisure centre)

OR

(physical activity OR exercis\* OR physical exertion OR sport\* OR dance\* OR walk\* OR cycl\* OR swim\* OR meditati\* OR participatory arts OR music OR sing\* OR choir OR visual arts OR performing arts OR creative arts OR drama) AND (traditional custom OR cultural practice OR cultural belief OR skill OR knowledge OR artefact OR cultural representation OR informal sport OR stories)

OR

(physical activity OR exercis\* OR physical exertion OR sport\* OR dance\* OR walk\* OR cycl\* OR swim\* OR meditati\* OR participatory arts OR music OR sing\* OR choir OR visual arts OR performing arts OR creative arts

OR drama) AND (volunt\* OR community support OR helping OR voluntary action OR volunteer carer OR community ambassador OR community champion OR voluntary service OR peer-to-peer OR peer)

AND

(lonel\* OR solitude OR social isolation OR social relations OR well being OR well-being OR wellbeing OR happiness OR anxiety OR life satisfaction OR belonging OR self esteem) OR (quality ADJ life)

## Searching other sources

The reference lists of all the relevant reviews from 2009 to 2019 were hand searched to identify additional relevant empirical evidence. A search of the grey literature was conducted via an online call for evidence, employment of expert input, a review of key sector websites and a Google search (via keyword searches and reviewing titles of the first 100 results). Grey literature (2009-2019) was included if it was an evaluation or report generating empirical data examining volunteering in relation to taking part in participatory arts or sport/physical activity in ways that enhanced wellbeing or alleviated loneliness, and which included details of the authors (individuals, groups or organisations).

## Identification of studies for inclusion

The search results were independently checked by two reviewers, and the eligible studies were included. Initially, the titles and abstracts of the identified studies were reviewed. If it was clear from these that the study did not meet the inclusion criteria, it was excluded. Where it was not clear from the title and abstract whether a study was relevant, the full article was checked to confirm its eligibility. The eligibility or inclusion criteria were independently applied to the full papers of the identified reviews by two reviewers. The eligibility criteria are summarised in Table 1. Where two independent reviewers did not agree in their primary judgements, they discussed their differences and attempted to reach a consensus. If they could not agree, a third member of the review team considered the title, and a majority decision was made. Only studies in the English language were included. A table of the excluded studies can be found in Appendix 1.



**Table 1. Eligibility criteria**

SPIDER criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Any population group 16+ years</li> <li>Studies from countries economically similar to the UK (i.e. other high-income countries with comparable economic systems) or with study populations that have a similar socioeconomic status to the UK</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participants not meeting the age criteria (i.e. &lt;16 years)</li> </ul>
Phenomenon of Interest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Space or place, intangible assets or volunteering and participatory arts or sports/physical activity</li> </ul>	
Study Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Empirical qualitative research, including the qualitative components of mixed methods studies</li> <li>Grey literature: final evaluation or report on empirical data, evaluating wellbeing, including loneliness, as the central objective, conceptualising space or place, intangible assets or volunteering in relation to participatory arts or sports/physical activity, and which includes details of the authors (individuals, groups or organisations)</li> <li>Studies published between 2009 and 2019</li> <li>Grey literature published between 2009 and 2019</li> </ul>	
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Subjective wellbeing including the alleviation of loneliness</li> </ul>	
Research type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Qualitative or mixed methods studies including qualitative components</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discussion articles, commentaries or opinion pieces not presenting empirical or conceptual research on loneliness</li> <li>Grey literature without details of authorship</li> </ul>

## Data Collection and Analysis

### Data extraction and management (qualitative studies)

For this report, data were extracted independently by a reviewer using a standardised form (see Appendix 2) and crosschecked by a second reviewer. Discrepancies were resolved by consensus. The data extraction form included the following details relevant to the qualitative study designs and qualitative elements of mixed-methods study designs:

- title, authors and year of publication
- objectives of the study
- details of the included participants including a focus on protected characteristics and socio-economic status
- conceptualisation of wellbeing and/or loneliness included
- evaluation and analysis of wellbeing and place/space, intangible assets or volunteering and participatory arts or sport/physical activity, including relevant theories, concepts and/or mechanisms and processes associated with wellbeing
- ethical considerations
- study conclusions
- study limitations, gaps and conflicts of interest identified

For the grey literature, the data extraction included the following details from the Public Health England (PHE) arts for health and wellbeing evaluation framework (Daykin and Joss, 2016):

- project description
- aims, objectives and focus on wellbeing
- evaluation design
- data-collection methods
- ethics and consent
- data-analysis methods (theories, concepts and processes linked to wellbeing)
- costs and budget
- key findings

Our protocol allowed us to contact the authors of the articles if the required information could not be extracted from the studies and if this was essential for the interpretation of their results. We did not need to follow this procedure.

## Assessment of the methodological quality of the included studies

To assess the methodological quality of the included published studies, two review authors independently applied the CASP quality checklist for the qualitative studies, as detailed in the What Works Centre for Wellbeing methods guide. The checklists were used to indicate if a specific study had been well designed, appropriately carried out and properly analysed. A summary of the quality scores for the published qualitative studies is presented in Table 2 (see 'Supplementary Material'). The PHE arts for health and wellbeing evaluation framework (Daykin and Joss, 2016) was used to extract data from the grey literature and to judge its quality in terms of the appropriateness of the evaluation design, the rigour of the data collection and analysis and the precision of the reporting. A summary of the quality ratings for the unpublished qualitative studies is presented in Table 3 (see 'Supplementary Material').

We then employed the CERQual schema (confidence in the evidence of reviews of qualitative research) schema for judging how much confidence could be placed in the review findings developed throughout the synthesis.

Four components are used in the CERQual approach to assess the confidence in the evidence for individual review findings: methodological limitations, relevance, coherence and adequacy of the data (Lewin et al., 2015). The categories of confidence in CERQual are high, moderate, low and very low. Table 5 identifies the review findings for the qualitative research in this report and provides a qualitative evidence profile, alongside a detailed synthesis of the evidence. The confidence was decreased if there were serious or very serious limitations in the design or conduct of the study, including: evidence that was not relevant to the study objectives; findings/conclusions not supported by the evidence; or data of inferior quality, inadequate in supporting the findings. The confidence was increased if the study was well-designed with few limitations: where the evidence was applicable to the context (that is the population, phenomenon of interest or setting) specified in the objectives; the findings/conclusions were supported by the evidence and provided convincing explanations for the patterns found; and the data were of rich and high quality supporting the findings.

## Data synthesis

We conducted a thematic analysis of the evidence examining how space and place, intangible assets and volunteering influence wellbeing including loneliness through participation in participatory arts, sport or physical activity. Thematic analysis of qualitative

evidence is an established method that is explicit and allows a transparent audit trail in the analysis and synthesis of data from primary studies. Thematic analysis in this review takes an inductive approach and broadly follows the process outlined by Thomas and Harden (2008). This involved three stages: (i) a preliminary identification of themes in the data-extraction process by all reviewers and a coding of the extracted data (by AT, AG and KG); (ii) development and explanation of the descriptive themes, agreed by all reviewers; and (iii) generation and definition of analytical/interpretive themes, agreed by all reviewers.

Consultation with expert academic, systematic reviewers and non-academic stakeholders continued throughout the data synthesis stage to develop and establish appropriate reporting and translation strategies.

In this report, we present an evidence synthesis of the published and unpublished qualitative data which conceptualises volunteering in sport/physical activity and participatory arts and shows its capacity to enhance wellbeing and/or alleviate loneliness.

In addition, we tabulate the eligibility criteria, summarise the characteristics of the included studies and quality judgements and identify and discuss important limitations and gaps within the evidence base.

## Results

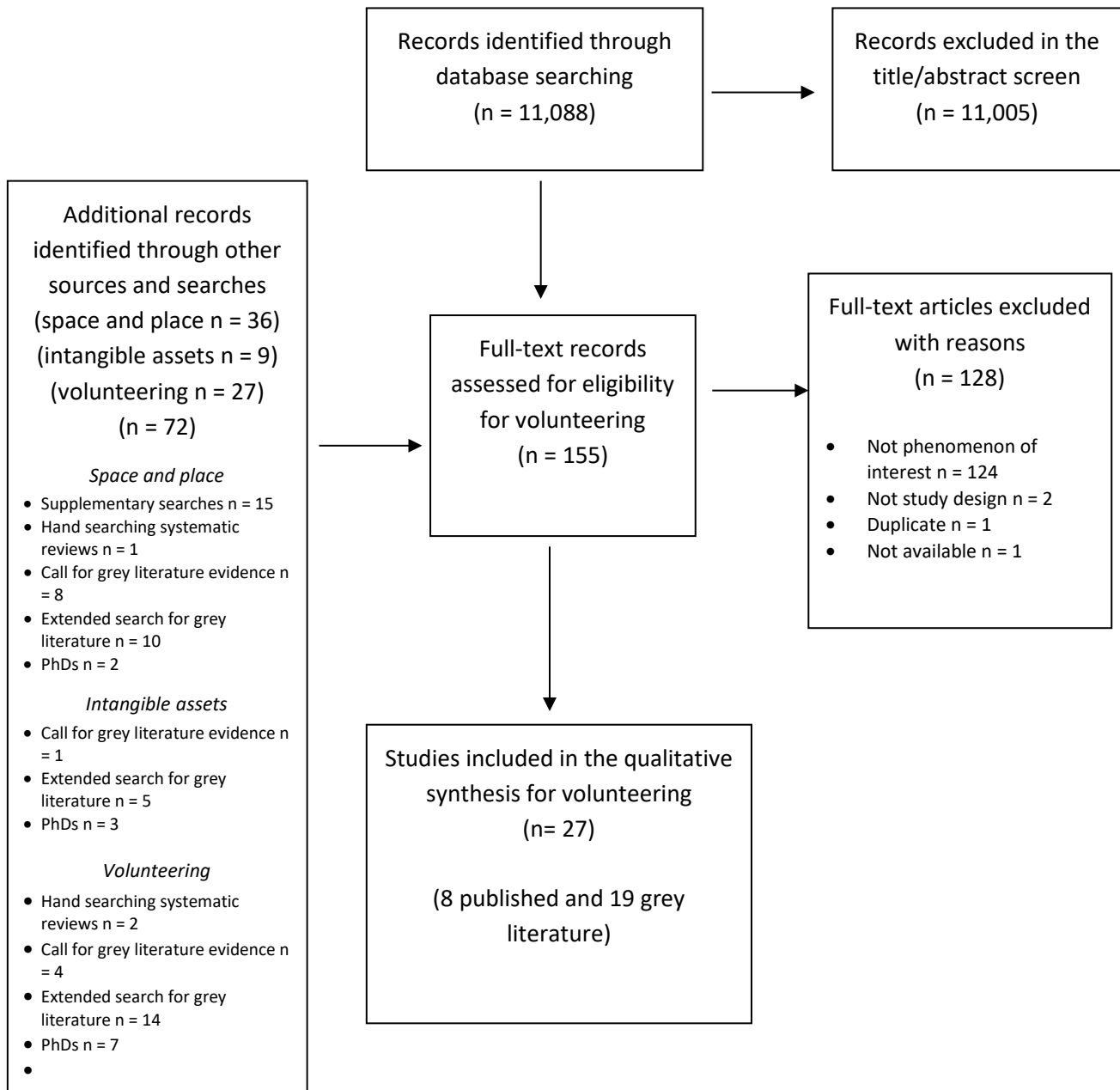
### Results of the searches (published literature) for volunteering

After a removal of duplicates, the electronic searches returned 11,088 records for screening. Of these, 83 records were retained after the abstract and title screening, and 72 additional studies were identified through supplementary searches based on a refined definition of key terms (in consultation with expert stakeholders), hand searching of systematic review reference lists and grey literature searches (a call for evidence on the WWCW and an extended online search). 155 full texts were assessed for eligibility against the inclusion criteria. The full text screening process identified 27 qualitative studies (8 published and 19 grey literature) for inclusion. All included studies examined volunteering in relation to participatory arts, sport or physical activity and in its capacity to enhance wellbeing and/or alleviate loneliness.

The list of excluded studies and reasons for exclusion can be found in Appendix 1.

The search screening process and current status is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of the search screening process



## Characteristics of the included studies (published literature) on volunteering

The studies in this review explore the connections between volunteering, taking part in participatory arts and sport or physical activities in enhancing wellbeing and/or alleviating loneliness for diverse population groups across the life course. The volunteers include: those with mental health problems; older adults; marginalised groups; parents at a youth rugby club; and those suffering from loneliness, social isolation or poor mental wellbeing. People benefiting from the volunteering activities include: those with complex communication needs; and isolated older adults living in rural areas.

The sports and physical activities include: peer or lay-led walking; yoga and low-impact fitness activities; community-based skiing and horse riding; outdoors environmental work; and rugby.

The participatory arts activities cover: poetry; visual arts; and singing.

Three key thematic areas and their findings have been identified in relation to the wellbeing benefits of volunteering in participatory arts and sport/physical activity: (i) giving and sharing skills, expertise and experience; (ii) creating places/spaces of security and trust; and (iii) providing opportunities for personal skill development.

We define the analytic themes in this report and synthesise the evidence on them. These themes point to the processes by which participatory arts and sport/physical activity operate to enhance wellbeing and/or alleviate loneliness. They also indicate the processes contributing to negative wellbeing experiences. Processes in this report may refer to a series of steps or to patterns of behaviours and emotions that lead to positive and negative wellbeing experiences. The evidence in this review, then, has led us to define processes in terms of human relationships extending to the emotional, social and cultural ways by which volunteering connects with taking part in participatory arts or sporting activities for enhancing wellbeing and/or alleviating loneliness – or not.

A summary of the characteristics of the included papers is presented in Table 4 (see ‘Supplementary Material’). The reference list, at the end of this report, includes details of all the included studies. The list of excluded studies and reasons for exclusion can be found in Appendix 1.

## Grey literature (unpublished studies) searches and results

The grey literature search was undertaken concurrently with the searches for published studies. A call for grey literature evidence was advertised between September and October 2019. The call requested reports evaluating and conceptualising volunteering in connection to the enhancement of wellbeing and/or alleviation of loneliness in relation to sport/physical activity or participatory arts. Additionally, we conducted an extended systematic search of the grey literature by employing expert input that assisted in identifying unpublished sources that might not be readily available in searching the peer-reviewed literature (Benzies et al., 2006). Specifically, we: (i) contacted known experts in the field for recommendations of reports on loneliness; (ii) reviewed websites of organisations prioritising loneliness in their work; (iii) searched the EThOS website for unpublished PhD dissertations; and (iv) conducted a Google search with relevant keywords and reviewed the first 100 results for relevance.

From the evidence call, a total of 13 submissions were screened by the research team of which 4 met the inclusion criteria. A further 14 studies were obtained via the extended search for grey literature. The full texts of these were reviewed for eligibility, and 8 were included. Moreover, 7 PhDs were found via EThOS, all of which were included. A table of the excluded grey literature and reasons for exclusions can be found in Appendix 1. A summary of the characteristics of the grey literature included in this review can be found in Table 4 (see 'Supplementary Material').

In the unpublished (grey) literature, the volunteers included: those with mental health issues; marginalised or under-represented groups; the long-term unemployed or socio-economically deprived; and socially isolated older adults. People benefiting from the volunteering activities include: older, frail and vulnerable adults, including those with dementia; younger rugby players; and the physically inactive.

The sports and physical activities include: walking, running, circuits, Zumba, tai chi, outdoor/combat fitness, table tennis and gym programmes; outdoors environmental and conservation work; rugby; sporting event support; therapeutic horticulture; and running.

The participatory arts activities include: arts on prescription; community arts, including theatre performances and life stories; museum and heritage activities; and knitting, sewing and crocheting.

## Overview of the quality of included studies

The scores for the published qualitative studies quality checklists are presented in Table 2 (see 'Supplementary Material'). For these studies, the methodological weaknesses involve: a lack of exact details about the researcher's role, potential bias and influence on sample

recruitment, settings and participant responses; and a lack of data analysis and rigorous theorisation of findings. The results of the quality checklist for the included studies varied with the best scoring (8 out of the 8 criteria) in 2 sources,<sup>[2,3]</sup> and the worst scoring (4 out of the 8 criteria) in 2 sources.<sup>[4,5]</sup>

The use of the CERQual schema for judging the confidence in the findings from the synthesis of qualitative evidence resulted in a judgement of moderate confidence that volunteering in participatory arts, sport and physical activity can enhance wellbeing and/or alleviate loneliness through processes of giving and sharing expertise, skills and experience, creating spaces that feel secure in developing trusting relationships and providing opportunities for personal skill development.

The grey literature was of mixed quality with predominantly moderate quality or credibility (n= 10) reports that included appropriate descriptions of data-collection procedures. Four reports were of high quality (credibility) and included detailed information, critical reflection on methods and analysis and the theoretical implications drawn. There were five low quality (credibility) reports providing little detail on data-collection procedures and data analysis, with insufficient reporting of participant details and inadequate theoretical implications being drawn.

Using the PHE arts for health and wellbeing evaluation framework, we gave a quality (credibility) rating of high, moderate or low to the grey literature. A summary of the quality assessment for the grey literature is in Table 3 (see 'Supplementary Material'). Of the nineteen included grey literature sources, evidence from two have low quality (credibility) due to limited reporting on participants, data-collection methods and a lack of data analysis being reported. Three studies were rated to be of high quality (credibility) due to the detailed descriptions of the data collection and analysis, theoretical implications drawn and the thorough discussions on limitations and future research.

## **Evidence on Volunteering and Wellbeing and Loneliness in Participatory Arts, Sport or Physical Activity – a Summary and Synthesis of the Findings**

### **Study participants and participatory arts, sports and physical activities**

The review includes published and unpublished reports from around 1,125 participants (375 in the published and 750 in the unpublished studies) and from three countries: Canada, the United States (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK) (including England and Scotland). All the participants were subjects in studies using qualitative research methods.



The participants were drawn from diverse population groups and with different lived experiences. The volunteers in these studies include: those with mental health issues and from marginalised groups, including BAME communities and with disabilities; those involved in environmental and therapeutic horticulture work, the World Firefighters' Games and Park-run; and parents at a youth rugby club, sport coaches, runners and older adults and former participants on an arts-on-referral programme. People benefiting from the volunteering activities include: mental health service users; isolated older men; frail and older people; and isolated older adults living in rural areas.

Where the demographic characteristics of participants were reported, this revealed a mix of gender, age (16 to 80+ years) and socio-economic, employment, educational, mental health and marital and disability status, but with a limited range of ethnic and religious backgrounds reported.

## Synthesis of qualitative evidence

The twenty-seven qualitative studies included in this review focus on understanding and conceptualising volunteering, wellbeing and loneliness in participatory arts, sport or physical activity in diverse ways. They do so by using a range of theoretical approaches employing various qualitative methods, including: focus groups and semi-structured focus groups; structured, semi-structured (face-to-face and via the telephone) and in-depth case-study interviews; field notes; textual and digitally recorded logs; case studies; research and mood diaries; semi-structured questionnaires; workshops; participant observation; qualitative evaluation reports; ethnographic observations; observation of sessions and events; and participant photography. Three key thematic areas are defined below and the evidence is synthesised and judged in relation to each of them.

## Analytical theme definitions

### Theme 1: the wellbeing benefits of giving and sharing through volunteering in participatory arts and sport/physical activity

This theme refers to the act of volunteering in participatory arts and sport/physical activity in terms of the wellbeing benefits of doing something for others, and more specifically the processes of giving and sharing one's knowledge, expertise or skills to support others. The theme includes evidence of the altruistic, selfless or giving aspects of volunteering that can generate key processes through which volunteers feel a sense of increased wellbeing such as enhanced autonomy, self-esteem, empowerment, friendship, confidence, escape, respite, empathy and mutual respect as well as an alleviation of social isolation. It also includes evidence of the mutual, shared or reciprocal benefits that can occur through volunteering in which both the helper and the helped feel these positive wellbeing impacts. The evidence provides some indication that the positive wellbeing impacts of volunteering

are not certain, and that there are challenges in realising them if the helper-helped relationship is not the right one, lacks mutual understanding, and if the resources for long-term volunteering support are not provided.

## **Theme 2: places/spaces of security and trust in volunteering for participatory arts and sport/physical activity**

This theme refers to the relationship between volunteering in sport/physical activity or participatory arts, wellbeing or loneliness and places/spaces of security and trust. The theme includes evidence of the complex interconnections between place and space in the act of volunteering. There is evidence in this report that the wellbeing benefits that occur through volunteering are connected to the meaning of the physical and social environments in which volunteering takes place. This theme includes evidence to show that when places and spaces of security and trust are developed for and through volunteering in participatory arts and sport/physical activity, such environments can alleviate loneliness, reduce isolation and enhance personal wellbeing including resilience, pleasure, pride, confidence, sense of community and belonging, self-worth, trust and empathy. Strategies that included peer-led volunteering and include training and support for volunteers to help people in a non-judgemental way are highlighted as potentially beneficial for creating places/spaces of security and trust in volunteering. The evidence briefly notes the potential for places/spaces for volunteering to be precarious in wellbeing terms, illustrating how perceptions of the volunteers as strangers may lead to feelings of anxiety and fear.

## **Theme 3: personal skill development and wellbeing through volunteering in participatory arts and sport/physical activity**

This theme refers to the ways that volunteering in participatory arts and sports/physical activity is associated with developing new skills and putting into practice existing skills and experience, which can bring wellbeing benefits to volunteers. There is evidence that honing creative skills can lead to positive wellbeing impacts, including enhanced confidence and self-worth. The theme also includes evidence that volunteers are motivated by opportunities to develop organisational, social, leadership and wider employability skills, including communication and language skills which are also connected to enhanced wellbeing through feelings of improved confidence and in some cases a sense of achievement or accomplishment. The evidence includes reference to the potential of volunteering to become stressful, creating feelings of anxiety due to high workloads and a lack of training, coupled with feelings of obligation.

**Table 5. CERQual qualitative evidence profile**

Review findings	Studies contributing to review findings	Methodological limitations	Relevance	Coherence	Adequacy of data	Overall CERQual assessment of confidence	Explanation of judgement
The wellbeing benefits of giving and sharing through volunteering in participatory arts and sport/physical activity (n=26)	1,2,3,5,6,7,8,9,10, 11,12,13,14,15, 16,17,18,19,21, 22,23,24,25,26, 27	Moderate concerns about methodological limitations (2 studies have several, 3 minor and 2 with high quality); the grey literature has 5 low, 10 moderate and 4 high credibility)	Minor concerns for relevance (all studies examined the phenomenon of interest)	Moderate concerns for coherence (data are limited on consistency within studies; low consistency across studies for population and context)	Moderate concerns about adequacy (20 studies have moderate to thin data and 6 with a richness of data)	Moderate confidence	Graded as moderate confidence due to moderate concerns with methodological limits, coherence and adequacy
Places/spaces of security and trust in volunteering for participatory arts and sport/physical activity (n=13)	1,2,3,10,11,14,15 16,17,21,22,24, 25	Moderate concerns about methodological limitations (1 study has minor and 2 with high quality); the grey literature has 4 low, 5 moderate and 1 high credibility)	Minor concerns for relevance (all studies examined the phenomenon of interest)	Moderate concerns for coherence (data are limited on consistency within the studies; low consistency across studies for population and context)	Moderate concerns about adequacy (10 studies have moderate to thin data and 3 with a richness of data)	Moderate confidence	Graded as moderate confidence due to moderate concerns with methodological limits, coherence and adequacy
Personal skill development and wellbeing through volunteering in participatory arts or sport/physical activity (n=10)	4,7,9,10,11,18,20 22,23,26	Moderate concerns about methodological limitations (1 study several, 1 minor); the grey literature has 3 low, 3 moderate and 2 high credibility)	Minor concerns for relevance (all studies examined the phenomenon of interest)	Moderate concerns for coherence (data are limited on consistency within the studies; low consistency across studies for population and context)	Moderate concerns about adequacy (8 studies have moderate to thin data and 2 with a richness of data)	Moderate confidence	Graded as moderate confidence due to moderate concerns with methodological limits, coherence and adequacy

## Theme 1: the wellbeing benefits of giving and sharing through volunteering in participatory arts and sport/physical activity

Twenty-five of the included studies explored the act of volunteering in participatory arts and sport/physical activity in terms of the wellbeing benefits of doing something for others.<sup>[1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27]</sup> Six of the included studies focused on the ways in which the altruistic (the selfless and giving) aspects of volunteering was the key process by which volunteers felt a sense of enhanced wellbeing including the alleviation of social isolation.<sup>[1, 5, 7, 19, 26, 27]</sup> Eighteen of the included studies examined the mutual (shared) benefits that can occur through volunteering in which both the helper and the helped feel positive wellbeing.<sup>[2, 3, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25]</sup> Participatory arts and sports/physical activity projects involving peer-peer approaches were identified in eight of the included studies.<sup>[1, 3, 8, 9, 11, 18, 21, 24]</sup>

Six studies emphasise the wellbeing benefits associated with positive experience generated through altruistic aspects of giving one's time, expertise or experience to help other individuals or the wider community. In one study, volunteers with lived experience of mental health issues who were working with mental health service users designed a peer-led walking programme in which the volunteers reported positive feelings of autonomy, self-esteem and empowerment and a sense of connection, accountability or responsibility to others.<sup>[1]</sup> In five studies, giving back to a community or to a group with whom volunteers identified was central to the wellbeing benefits of the volunteering act.<sup>[5, 7, 19, 26, 27]</sup>

Volunteers in a project involving practical environmental and conservation activities benefited from increased social contact and meeting new people, which gave them an opportunity to focus on supporting others.<sup>[5]</sup> Parent volunteers at a youth rugby club reported a sense of civic citizenship in contributing to the club activities, believing that their contribution had a wider and positive influence on community cohesion. It was noted, however, that there could be a darker side to this as there was potential for people's trust to be manipulated by people operating for their own, rather than a wider social benefit.<sup>[7]</sup> Volunteer sport coaches were a key part of a community sport project giving their time and acting as role models to support engagement to provide positive narratives of behaviour, with the result that the participants experienced feelings of belonging and community.<sup>[19]</sup> A sense of environmental stewardship was reported in a project in which volunteers felt an ethical and moral obligation to advocate the environment, which in turn led to a sense of emotional community and personal wellbeing. However, in this study, it was also suggested that if the volunteers felt their work was not recognised or supported by others or their values were not shared, there was potential for a negative experience, or for burn-out if they then went on to do too much volunteering.<sup>[26]</sup> Enhanced feelings of belonging were said to result from participation in other environmental projects through which volunteers participated in shaping and developing local landscapes.<sup>[27]</sup>

The mutual (shared) benefits of volunteering were broadly associated with the development of positive social relations and networks allowing people to support others, share physical and creative experiences and create a sense of purpose through participatory arts and sports/physical activity. The value in shared experiences of taking part in activities whether they be in the arts or in sport/physical activity were highlighted in the evidence.<sup>[2, 3, 6, 8, 9, 13, 23, 24]</sup> Bonds of friendship were reported as important in developing positive feelings of confidence, escape and respite, alleviating social isolation and improving self-esteem.<sup>[6, 9, 10, 11, 18, 21, 22, 24]</sup> Relationships between volunteers and those whom they were helping were characterised by empathy and mutual respect and were noted as important in creating feelings of confidence, a sense of community, shared social ties, and alleviating social isolation in both volunteers and project participants.<sup>[10, 11, 15, 12, 17]</sup> However, in one study examining the participant experience of a walking group in which volunteers took on a 'befriender' role, it was felt that the informal processes of mutual support between participants delivered more positive social benefits than the act of volunteering itself.<sup>[6]</sup> Ensuring volunteering projects reflect practices of inclusivity by allowing wide access to volunteering opportunities and enabling diverse population groups to volunteer were highlighted as important to positive wellbeing impacts.<sup>[18, 22, 25]</sup> It was noted in one study that the volunteering role was a fragile one in wellbeing terms as any wellbeing benefits were difficult to realise if the helper-helped relationship was not the right one, and if resources for long-term volunteering were not provided.<sup>[18]</sup>

## **Theme 2: places/spaces of security and trust in volunteering for participatory arts and sport/physical activity.**

Thirteen of the twenty-seven included studies examined the relationship between wellbeing or loneliness, volunteering in sport/physical activity or participatory arts and places/spaces of security and trust.<sup>[1, 2, 3, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 21, 22, 24, 25]</sup> Reflecting the complex interconnections between place and space, the evidence emphasises that the emotional, social, cultural and political meanings attached to physical and social environments may be shaped by experiences of volunteering. There is evidence in this report that the wellbeing benefits occurring through acts of volunteering are connected to these meanings for the individuals involved. Places/spaces of security and trust are central for developing positive volunteering experiences in participatory arts and sports/physical activity. Such environments can alleviate loneliness, reduce isolation and enhance personal wellbeing in various ways for both the volunteer and recipient.

The creation of welcoming places/spaces for volunteering in a therapeutic horticulture project outdoors led volunteers with mild mental health problems to feel more confident, and as if they belonged within a community and could reconnect with others outside it.<sup>[16]</sup>

Volunteers at the World Firefighters' Games described their volunteering role as stepping into a new space. It enabled increased social interactions between other volunteers, workers and event attendees, leading to wellbeing enhancement through feelings of empathy, trust, and self-empowerment as well as the development of strategies for coping and new personal meanings in life. However, the study also noted the sense of loss felt when the volunteering activities had ended.<sup>[15]</sup> In a regular volunteer-organised running event, Parkrun, the participants stressed the safe, inclusive, familiar and local community nature of the experience. This was created in part through the interactions between the runners and the volunteers; this was emphasised as being key to wellbeing with volunteers reporting improved mood, confidence and sense of identity, along with a feeling of being valued. The feeling of being in a safe space was felt to enable the building of new friendships for people with mental health problems engaging in group physical activities led by a volunteer peer navigator<sup>[21]</sup> and for isolated older men taking part in volunteer-organised physical activities.<sup>[24]</sup> Monthly peer-support sessions for volunteers working with older people in a creative arts programme provided a safe and trusted space for socialising and sharing skills.<sup>[11]</sup> In contrast, it was suggested that activities taking place in settings that participants perceived to be unfamiliar or unsafe could instil a sense of threat, anxiety or fear, which could detract from the potentially positive wellbeing experience associated with taking part.<sup>[2]</sup> Two studies involved home settings.<sup>[3, 14]</sup> In one of these, volunteer runners visiting people's homes to support them in their daily tasks and for conversation created a positive atmosphere within the domestic space by providing a personal service and reassuring participants that they were being listened to by someone who genuinely cared about their wellbeing.<sup>[14]</sup> In another study, older adult volunteers visited the homes of isolated older adults living in rural areas to engage them in art-making.<sup>[3]</sup> Building relationships with volunteers within the safety and security of the home and through artmaking led to feelings of pleasure, self-appreciation and pride in the participants. However, negotiating the complexities and intimacy of the home setting was not always easy; it was recognised that the experience could be initially unsettling, and possibly difficult in the longer term if the volunteer-participant relationship was not well-matched.

Five of the included studies illustrate positive wellbeing experiences through the act of volunteering in participatory arts or sports/physical activity leading to the creation of secure and trusted places/spaces that are also free from stigma or judgement.<sup>[1, 10, 17, 22, 25]</sup>

Volunteers from disadvantaged community backgrounds, at risk of isolation and living with mental health issues, took part in a volunteer training programmes in heritage settings (museums and galleries).<sup>[17]</sup> They reported the place/space as offering an open and transparent volunteering context in which cognitive and emotional capital could be enhanced and people could support each other in a non-judgemental way. The programme allowed them to feel more resilient, self-confident, self-aware and able to cope with life as well as giving them experiences of mutual respect and empathy with fellow volunteers. Three studies involved participants engaging in volunteering in environments that they felt

were free from the stigma of mental health.<sup>[1, 10, 25]</sup> A peer-led walking programme for mental health service users enabled volunteers to feel more autonomous, confident and willing to engage in physical activity.<sup>[1]</sup> Volunteers who had experienced mental health issues engaged in regular gardening and land management ('Green Gym') activities reported the environments as safe spaces in which respectful relationships could challenge the stigma of mental health. This was felt to be central to the development of a shared community experience of physical activity.<sup>[10]</sup> Similarly, Parkrun participants with experience of poor mental health felt that the inclusive and accepting nature of the Parkrun community meant that they could identify as 'runners', rather than people with mental health problems.<sup>[25]</sup>

### **Theme 3: personal skill development and wellbeing through volunteering in participatory arts and sport/physical activity**

Ten included studies identified that volunteering in participatory arts and sports/physical activity is associated with developing new skills and putting into practice existing skills and experience, which brought wellbeing benefits to the volunteers.<sup>[4, 7, 9, 10, 11, 18, 20, 22, 23, 26]</sup>

Two of these studies emphasised that the development or application of existing creative skills in art-making volunteering<sup>[9, 11]</sup> or crafting objects for charity<sup>[23]</sup> was associated with a positive sense of confidence and self-worth. Former participants of an arts-on-referral project, now organising their own follow-on groups, reported wellbeing benefits and social connections resulting from their continued application of creative skills. Their proactivity, fundraising and organisational skills were crucial to the successful running of the groups.<sup>[9]</sup> Older volunteers in an arts project were able to develop creative skills, share their skills and experience and develop a positive sense of self-worth in supporting frail, older people to take part in arts activities.<sup>[11]</sup> Volunteers in active environmental projects valued their new skills, which they connected to feelings of personal wellbeing, but it was noted that there was the potential for some to feel excluded, lose confidence or feel left behind if they did not possess the physical competencies they felt the work required.<sup>[26]</sup> Six studies identified that volunteers were motivated by opportunities to develop and use a range of organisational, social and leadership skills as well as skills and knowledge about locality and community.<sup>[4, 7, 10, 18, 20, 22]</sup> Such skill development was connected to positive feelings of self-esteem, self-efficacy, resilience, and overall mental wellbeing benefits for volunteers in nature-based or environmental projects,<sup>[4, 20]</sup> for parent volunteers in a sports club<sup>[7]</sup> and community physical activity volunteers.<sup>[18]</sup> Three studies examined skills, employability and career development in more detail.<sup>[4, 10, 22]</sup> In one nature-based project, volunteering was reported to support the development of employability skills and was connected to reducing feelings of isolation as a result of an enhanced sense of accomplishment.<sup>[4]</sup> In a Green Gym volunteering project, volunteers valued both the structure offered by the project and the

skills it offered in managing green spaces as helping them make or consider making the transition into employment.<sup>[10]</sup> In the evaluation of Sport England's volunteering investment, the need to offer incentives to under-represented volunteers, including award evenings, training and qualifications were identified as important to volunteer engagement.<sup>[22]</sup>

## **Evidence of Addressing Inequalities in Studies on Wellbeing or Loneliness, Volunteering and Participatory Arts, Sport or Physical Activity**

The studies in this review variously reported (briefly) on the demographic characteristics of participants including descriptions of culture, national identity, citizenship, gender and age. Most of the studies focussed on British white participants, or they did not report ethnicity. These studies identified minimal aspects of the specificity of wellbeing or loneliness and its connection to volunteering through participatory arts, sport or physical activity which are associated with inequality.

## **Completeness of the Included Evidence**

The inclusive review question, precise search terms and the focus on conceptual and theoretical approaches to volunteering returned a moderate number of relevant studies for inclusion. We excluded studies not in English, meaning that some relevant studies may have been excluded. However, the systematic search strategy ensures that this overview represents a comprehensive summary of all the existing eligible studies published prior to the search dates.

## **Summary Statement on the Quality of the Included evidence**

We have moderate confidence that volunteering in participatory arts, sport and physical activity can enhance wellbeing and/or alleviate loneliness through processes of: giving and sharing expertise, skills and experiences; creating places of security which can support the development of trusting relationships; and providing opportunities for personal skill development. Most published studies obtained appropriate ethics approval although this was not always reported extensively. Methodological weaknesses of these studies included: a lack of exact details about the researcher's role, potential bias and influence on sample recruitment, settings and participant responses; a lack of data analysis and rigorous theoretical discussion of the findings; and unclear findings in over half the studies as to whether they contributed to an alleviation of loneliness and an enhancement of wellbeing. The grey literature was of mixed quality with predominantly moderate quality or credibility



(n=10) reports, which included appropriate descriptions of data-collection procedures. Four reports were of high quality (credibility) and included detailed information, critical reflection on methods and analysis and the theoretical implications drawn. There are five low quality (credibility) reports providing little detail on data-collection procedures and data analysis, with insufficient reporting of participant details and inadequate theoretical implications being drawn.

## Strengths and Limitations of the Review Process

The rigorous and systematic search strategy and comprehensive nature of this review is a strength. The pre-publication of our protocol on PROSPERO ensures methodological transparency and mitigates any potential post-hoc decision-making which can introduce bias to the process. A dual screening of searches and data extraction and an independent quality assessment of included reviews ensured a rigorous process.

There is a potential risk of publication lag wherein possible important new evidence that has not yet been included in published articles and reports is not identified and included.

The use of the CERQual criteria introduces an element of subjective judgement. A consistent approach to judgements across the different interventions has been applied, but it should be recognised that these judgements are open to interpretation.

## Implications for Research, Policy and Practice

1. The evidence in this review shows that volunteering in participatory arts and sport/physical activity can enhance wellbeing and may alleviate loneliness (for volunteers and those they help) through processes of giving and sharing expertise, skills and experience, creating places of security and trust and providing opportunities for personal skill development. This means that volunteering has an important role to play in culture and sport policy and practice seeking to promote wellbeing and alleviate loneliness through volunteering.
2. The evidence also shows that volunteering in participatory arts and sport/physical activity can create negative wellbeing experiences if there is a lack of support and training for volunteers, when workloads become burdensome, if volunteers do not feel they belong and if those being helped feel the volunteers are strangers. In addition, it is noted that negative wellbeing can be experienced by volunteers when volunteering programmes come to an end. Consideration should, therefore, be given to:

- Collaborative partnerships and activities that amplify inclusivity and relationship building, and which serve to share organisational burdens;
  - Identification and delivery of more transparent forms of volunteer training and support;
  - Identification and implementation of the structures of resources and supervision for volunteers that can continue after a volunteering opportunity has ended.
3. Volunteers are diverse and people volunteer for different reasons. Volunteering opportunities in participatory arts or sport/physical activity should reflect diversity and develop more inclusive opportunities for a wide range of volunteers.
4. In evaluating the findings in this review, we have moderate confidence in the evidence that volunteering in participatory arts or sport/physical activity can enhance wellbeing and/or alleviate loneliness through processes of giving and sharing, creating places of security and trust and providing opportunities for personal skill development. However, the evidence base is limited in extent and scope and lacks methodological rigour. There is potential to generate a more robust evidence base through research that:
- Identifies and examines the complexities of volunteering and wellbeing in terms of who volunteers, why, when and in what contexts.
  - Explores the barriers to and facilitators towards a more inclusive strategy for volunteering including those from BAME and socio-economically deprived backgrounds.

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## Appendix 1. Excluded studies table

Authors (Year)	Title	Reason for Exclusion
<b>Published studies</b>		
<sup>1</sup> Crittenden (2019)	Volunteering as a strategy for combatting social isolation	Not available
<sup>2</sup> Fagnoli (2017)	Maintaining stability in the face of adversity: Self-care practices of human trafficking survivor-trainers in India	Phenomenon of Interest
<b>Grey literature studies</b>		
<sup>3</sup> Blake (2016)	A growing community: A sociological exploration of values and practices on a third sector mental health project	Phenomenon of Interest
<sup>4</sup> Molsher (2014)	Ecosystem and human health benefits of environmental volunteering on Kangaroo Island, SA	Phenomenon of Interest
<sup>5</sup> Richardson (2016)	Spirit of 2012 evaluation final report	Study Design
<sup>6</sup> South, Guintoli & Kinsella (2012)	An evaluation of the Walking for Wellness project and the befriender role	Duplicate
<sup>7</sup> Sport England (n.d.)	Encouraging more disabled people to volunteer in sport	Study Design
<sup>8</sup> Watmough & Begault (2016)	Action on loneliness in care homes	Phenomenon of Interest

## Appendix 2. Data extraction form including CASP quality check (published literature)

### Data Extraction Form Volunteering - Reviewer Initials:

<b>Author, Year, Title</b>	
<b>Location</b>	
<b>Study objectives</b>	
<b>Study design</b> (e.g. qualitative or mixed methods with a qualitative element)	
<b>Description of the study</b> Identify the type of sport/physical activity or participatory art (n.b. dance identified as a participatory art for this project)	
<b>Participants included</b> Describe details of the participants including a focus on protected characteristics (age, gender, race, sexuality, etc.), socio-economic status, sample type (e.g. community, individuals, groups), and location of the study	
<b>Details of analysis and evaluation</b> Include the type of and methods of analysis (e.g. interviews and thematic analysis)	
<b>For the qualitative themes, describe how loneliness is alleviated and/or wellbeing is enhanced through <u>the role of volunteering</u></b> What results are reported, and what evidence is provided for the alleviation of loneliness and/or enhancement of wellbeing (include details of any theoretical approach to volunteering and loneliness/wellbeing)	
<b>Study conclusions</b> (relevant to this conceptual review)	
<b>Limitations identified</b> List any limitations described by the authors	
<b>Conflicts of interest and sources of funding</b>	
<b>Ethical procedures reported</b>	

Quality of individual papers (based on the CASP Checklist)			
	Y	N	CAN'T TELL
Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?			
Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?			
<b>If answer to both questions above is Y, then proceed with the questions below</b>			
Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?			
Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?			
Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?			
Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?			
Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?			
Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?			
Is there a clear statement of findings?			
How valuable is the research? (brief comments)			