

Example 2: Staying or Going (Master's, Social Sciences)

Level and discipline: Master's, Social Policy (Social Sciences)

Word count of the sample: approximately 1,150 words

Context: A full-time one-year MSc dissertation proposal, assessed by a supervisor and a module convenor, and requiring ethics approval because the study involves human participants.

Staying or Going: Early Volunteer Retention in Two Greater Manchester Food Banks

Abstract

This study examines why volunteers leave two food banks in Greater Manchester within their first year. Food bank use across the UK rose to record levels in the early 2020s, according to figures the [Trussell Trust](#) reports annually, and the volunteer base grew to match the demand. Many sites now report that new recruits drift away after a few months, which leaves a small core to do most of the work. The research asks what pushes early-stage volunteers out and what keeps the committed ones in place. The design uses semi-structured interviews with current volunteers, former volunteers, and coordinators at two different sites, one church-run and one independent. A thematic analysis then identifies the conditions that predict who stays past six months. The project gives food banks a practical account of retention in volunteers' own words, a subject the sector's own reports have treated mostly through headcount figures. Findings should interest social policy researchers, voluntary-sector managers, and the regional networks that coordinate emergency food aid.

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Annotation: The gap is framed around a measurable problem the sector already names, early drop-off, so the study answers a question practitioners actually ask. The headcount statistics set up a gap that qualitative work can fill, which justifies the method before the methodology section arrives.

Introduction and background

Food bank use climbed to new highs in the early 2020s, and the volunteer base grew to meet it. That growth hides a management problem coordinators discuss often and study seldom. A large share of new volunteers sign up with enthusiasm, finish an induction, and then stop attending after three or four months. The result is a thin, overstretched core who absorb the shortfall, which raises the risk of burnout at exactly the sites communities depend on most.

Most sector attention goes to recruitment drives and donation levels. Retention ranks lower on the agenda, even though replacing a trained volunteer costs more coordinator time than keeping an existing one. Greater Manchester works well as a setting because it holds both large church-affiliated operations and small independent projects within a compact area, so two organisational cultures can be compared and regional difference drops out as a variable. The study treats the volunteer's decision to stay as the central puzzle and asks what conditions at each site make that decision easier or harder.

Annotation: The introduction turns a practical nuisance into a research puzzle, which gives the project stakes a marker can weigh. The choice of Greater Manchester is defended on method grounds, since a compact area holds two cultures and removes region as a confounding variable.

Literature review

Three literatures inform the project: volunteer motivation, voluntary-sector retention, and the study of emergency food aid.

Research on volunteer motivation has long used the functional approach, which holds that people volunteer to meet personal needs such as values expression, social connection, or skill development (Clary et al. 1998). The approach predicts that retention improves when the actual experience matches the need that drew someone in. It says much less about what happens once a mismatch appears.

The retention literature points to supervision quality, role clarity, and recognition as the conditions most associated with volunteers staying. Most of this evidence comes out of large formal charities with paid volunteer managers, so its fit with small, lightly staffed food banks is untested.

The third strand, the sociology of food aid, has concentrated on users more than volunteers, and it documents the stigma of needing a food bank and the politics of charitable provision. Volunteers appear in this work mostly as a backdrop to the user's experience.

The gap is the meeting point of the three. Motivation theory and retention findings both exist, food-aid scholarship seldom turns its attention to the people staffing the counter, and no study joins them to explain early volunteer drop-off at food banks.

Annotation: The three literatures are arranged so their overlap defines one gap, which keeps the review off a general tour of everything on volunteering. The note

that retention evidence comes mainly from large charities does double duty, since it flags why findings from small food banks would add something new.

Research questions and objectives

One central question anchors the study: what conditions lead early-stage volunteers at the two food banks to continue past six months, and what conditions lead them to stop?

Three objectives support it:

1. Document the stated reasons current and former volunteers give for continuing or leaving.
2. Compare those reasons against the induction, supervision, and recognition practices at each site.
3. Identify which conditions appear consistently among volunteers who stay, across both cultures.

Each objective lines up with a step in the analysis. Objective one comes out of the interviews, objective two out of the comparison against each site's practices, and objective three out of the cross-site thematic analysis.

Annotation: The objectives translate one question into three answerable tasks, each tied to a stage of the method. This one-to-one mapping is the clearest evidence that a proposal can deliver what it promises, and its absence is a common reason panels lose confidence in a plan.

Methodology

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The study uses a qualitative, comparative design that rests on semi-structured interviews at two different food banks, one church-run and one independent, both in Greater Manchester.

A survey was considered and set aside. A questionnaire could reach more volunteers, yet the research question asks why people leave, and the volunteers who have already gone are the hardest to reach through a site's current mailing list. Interviews let the researcher follow up on a vague answer and trace the sequence of events that led to someone's last shift, which a fixed questionnaire cannot do.

The sample targets 24 participants, about 12 per site, and includes current volunteers, volunteers who left in the past year, and coordinators. Former volunteers are recruited through coordinator records and snowball referral, since this group holds the information the study most needs and is the easiest to miss. Interviews last about 45 minutes, follow a common topic guide, and are recorded and transcribed with consent.

Analysis follows Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, with codes developed across the first transcripts and refined over the set (Braun and Clarke 2006). Ethical approval is required, because the study involves human participants, and the application covers consent, anonymisation, and the handling of any distress that surfaces when someone describes leaving.

Annotation: The survey-versus-interview comparison is the move examiners look for, since it shows the method was chosen against a real alternative for reasons the question dictates. Recruiting former volunteers through records and referral meets the main practical risk directly, because the people who left are both the most informative and the hardest to find.

Timeline

The project runs across a twelve-month full-time schedule.

Phase	Months	Work
1	1-2	Secure site access, finalise topic guide, submit ethics application
2	3-4	Recruit participants across both sites
3	3-7	Conduct and transcribe interviews
4	6-9	Code transcripts and develop themes
5	9-12	Cross-site analysis, drafting, supervisor review

Annotation: Ethics approval gets its own early phase, which is realistic, since data collection cannot start until it clears. The overlap between recruitment, interviewing, and coding reflects how qualitative work runs, where early transcripts start informing the later ones.

Expected outcomes and significance

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The dissertation will deliver a grounded account of early volunteer retention at two different food banks that draws on the volunteers' own explanations. Three outcomes follow. The first is a set of themes that separate the volunteers who stay past six months and those who leave, across both sites. The second is a practical comparison of induction and supervision practices, with notes on which practices align with better retention. The third is a short, plain-language briefing for the two participating food banks, so the research returns something usable to the people who hosted it.

The significance runs past the two cases. Volunteer retention is a pressure point for the whole emergency food sector, and a study that explains early drop-off in volunteers' own terms gives managers something more actionable than another headcount report. A conference paper for a voluntary-sector research network is a realistic secondary output.

Annotation: Each outcome names a concrete deliverable, and the briefing for the host sites signals reciprocity, which strengthens both the ethics case and the access arrangement. The scope stays modest, with the conference paper flagged as realistic and not promised.

References

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Clary, E.G. et al. (1998) 'Understanding and assessing the motivations of volunteers: a functional approach', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74(6), pp. 1516-1530.

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