

Volunteering: thinking for the future

Purpose of paper

Following the successful launch of the Vision for Volunteering in May 2022, the start of Phase 2 implementation in April 2023, and the changes to the volunteering landscape since the pandemic, this paper aims to explore the current status of volunteering, and provide relevant information to members to work with the new [Vision for Volunteering](#) programme.

Call to action

The landscape of volunteering is changing and adapting all the time. Volunteers are essential to vibrant communities and human flourishing, and have played a vital part in the country's response to the pandemic and cost of living crisis. For several reasons, volunteers are becoming harder to recruit to all types of tasks and roles, and to retain. Therefore, organisations that support, develop and enable volunteers have a responsibility to demonstrate and promote evolving good practice in volunteering: encouraging flexibility and collaboration, recognising who is excluded from volunteering and putting the gifts, skills and expertise of the volunteer at the centre.

The Vision for Volunteering creates the opportunity for VCS organisations to rethink how they work, share power and practise meaningful inclusivity with precious volunteers. As leaders of the VCSE, local infrastructure organisations have the opportunity to enable VCSE organisations to make the most of this opportunity.

The contemporary volunteering landscape

The landscape in which volunteers operate is changing continually and is currently under considerable pressure. This arises from volunteer fatigue and burnout following the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, pressures from the cost of living crisis, and concerns around what volunteering might involve.

A volunteer in the 2020s is someone who takes action to make a difference and is not paid to do so. Volunteering is commonly defined as activity that is unpaid, uncoerced and of benefit.¹ Simplified to 'making a difference', it is primarily influenced by the choice of an individual, 'about what to volunteer to do, what difference they want it to make, and how this shapes the community an individual wants to live in.'² More simply, a volunteer is someone who chooses to make a difference in various ways.³ This evolving definition is at

¹ Jurgen Grotz, 2021. *Not under the direction of any authority wielding the power of the State: a critical assessment of top-down attempts to foster volunteering in the UK*. Norwich: University of East Anglia, Institute for Volunteering Research. p.5 https://ueaepprints.uea.ac.uk/id/eprint/82074/1/Published_Version.pdf

² Grotz, 2021, p.5

³ NCVO, 2019, *Time Well Spent: a national survey on the volunteering experience*. London: NCVO, p.35 https://www.ncvo.org.uk/images/documents/policy_and_research/volunteering/Volunteer-experience_Full-Report.pdf

variance with the traditional view of a volunteer as someone who carries out a specific, usually functional role for a large charity. Volunteering may be done within a community, be a spontaneous response to a need or through mutual aid groups, communities of interest, or involve online activism and campaigning. It may be formal, carrying out specific defined roles or activities at set times delivering public services, or may be more flexible or informal through community organisations. As the understanding of volunteering develops, and there is more diversity in the type of volunteering undertaken, increasingly people who carry out voluntary activities of various sorts may not even see themselves as volunteers. These changes have implications for how volunteers are recruited, enabled and supported and how organisations see the value of these precious people.

The most recent DCMS Community Life Survey⁴ showed that the proportion of the UK population that volunteered at least once a month in 2021/22 was 16%, down from 23% in 2019/20. The 2022 Time Well Spent survey from NCVO⁵ also shows decline across all forms of volunteering including raising money, campaigning and organising an activity. 92% of those who do volunteer are very or fairly satisfied with their volunteering experience, but this figure represents a decline from 96% in 2018. This decline in satisfaction with volunteering indicates risks associated with the current volunteering landscape, notably:

- volunteering becoming too much like paid work – 26% of those surveyed reported this, an increase from 19% in the 2018 Time Well Spent survey
- the organisation they volunteer for has unreasonable expectations of how much they did – 24%, up from 17% in 2018
- those who volunteer in public sector services are less likely to be satisfied with their experience at 87%, compared to 94% of volunteers in the third sector.

The Time Well Spent survey found that most people stop volunteering due to a change in personal circumstances, but other factors also include a failure to reimburse expenses, expectations of the time availability of the volunteer were greater than could be committed, lack of flexibility, or opportunities to volunteer did not match skills or interests. Diversity, equity and inclusion remain challenges within volunteering, with fewer volunteers reporting that their volunteer group was diverse [66% in 2022 down from 73% in 2018], and younger volunteers [those aged 18-24] less satisfied with their volunteer experience than older age groups. Whilst overall rates of volunteering are similar between different ethnic groups [Black, Asian, other minority ethnic and White backgrounds], there is evidence to suggest that people from Black, Asian and other minority ethnic backgrounds are less likely to volunteer frequently, and particularly older people from these backgrounds.⁶

Increasingly, government and parts of the public sector see volunteers as a crucial contributor to the delivery of public services, particularly in health and social care but not

⁴ DCMS, 2023. *Community Life Survey 2021/22: Volunteering and charitable giving*, Updated 3 May 2023. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202122/community-life-survey-202122-volunteering-and-charitable-giving>

⁵ NCVO, 2023. *Key findings from Time Well Spent 2023*. <https://www.ncvo.org.uk/news-and-insights/news-index/key-findings-from-time-well-spent-2023/#/>

⁶ NCVO, 2019, p.20

limited to these sectors. The NHS Volunteer Responder programme being run by the RVS [a three year £30M contract], instrumentalises volunteering into purely task-based, service-led, time-limited volunteering. There is concern that some of the roles proposed for volunteers risk replacing paid employment. Although the original intention was to create an emergency reserve of volunteers to be activated in a crisis, part of the programme will provide volunteers for 'business as usual' activities in hospitals and now also within social care. This is despite many local and regional reviews of the NHS Volunteer Responder programme during the pandemic finding poor coordination with existing services and volunteer activity, duplication of provision, low take up, and variable quality in service delivery. It is also not clear where this cohort of volunteers will be found, as volunteering participation rates are declining.⁷ National volunteer recruitment initiatives such as the Big Help Out [8 May 2023] may produce a spike in interest focused on large national charities offering formal volunteering opportunities, but are less likely to assist smaller, local or informal organisations, or bring in a greater diversity of people to volunteering, as initial evidence suggests.

The cost of living crisis is already having at least six impacts on volunteering and voluntary activity. (1) Reduced numbers of volunteers, either through people being unable to fund their voluntary activity or needing to take on more paid employment. In places where the impact of the crisis will be felt most acutely, volunteer recruitment may be the most difficult. (2) Increased costs for VCS organisations, community activities and events, particularly in relation to venue hire, food and energy costs. (3) Service users especially those on fixed incomes, unable to afford even small contributions to attend an activity but without which the activity is not sustainable. (4) Grant funding or contracts no longer covering the full operating costs, so that without additional funding or contract uplifts the activity is not sustainable. (5) Reduced donations and increased demand on all sources of funding. (6) Increasing demand for services and activities provided by volunteers and the VCS – without the numbers of volunteers or appropriate funding needed to provide it.

The volunteer contribution to society

Volunteering is built around relationships and connections, especially when it occurs in communities. 81% of people volunteer locally and 58% of frequent volunteers do so for local organisations.⁸ Volunteering also helps people establish a sense of belonging.⁹ This contrasts with task-based or service-led volunteering where relationships and connections may be more difficult to establish, and volunteering activities are typically delivering a specific task contributing to service delivery or projects.

Volunteering in communities builds relationships and connections which contribute significantly to **community resilience**.¹⁰ A resilient community can engage with the issues

⁷ DCMS, 2023. *Community Life Survey 2021/22*

⁸ NCVO, 2019, p.25, p.29

⁹ NCVO, 2019, p.53

¹⁰ Her Majesty's Government, 2019. *Community Resilience Development Framework*. London: HMSO. p.8
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/828813/20190902-Community_Resilience_Development_Framework_Final.pdf

that matter, respond to disruptive challenges, and adapt to long term change.¹¹ Volunteering contributes to much needed social action, filling the void left by various parts of the state and currently providing a safety net against destitution. A resilient community provides the basis for communities to thrive, with economic viability, high levels of social capital, democratic participation and people who have healthy and fulfilling lives.

Volunteers are primarily from a limited range of backgrounds. It is imperative to **improve the diversity of volunteers** to bring a broader variety of life experiences, expertise, connections and relationships into wider decision making, co-production and social action. Volunteering needs to be open to everyone who wants to participate, something that is seen to be done throughout life, and be a fun, sociable and good experience for all.

Volunteering is about choosing to do something unpaid, to make a difference, to change the world¹² [even just a little bit], and this autonomy directly contributes to **human flourishing**. The decision to volunteer often leads to significant benefits for the person themselves as well as for communities – local, national, or international. For individuals, volunteering contributes to: an increased sense of belonging [to a place, community or group]; improved health and wellbeing through encouraging physical activity, a sense of achievement and purpose; improved mental health and reduced social isolation; personal growth – learning new skills and gaining confidence; and a greater appreciation of others' social values.¹³

In the current societal circumstances, the contribution of volunteering to society becomes even more important and the decision to volunteer one that is often essentially altruistic. Volunteering fosters values of solidarity, people standing side by side with each other in times of need. It contributes to the common good where all can benefit, thus focusing on the inherent worth – the dignity of each person. At its best volunteering puts those most in need at the centre of activity as volunteer as well as beneficiary.

Increasing volunteering and its impact

Support for volunteers and volunteering through local infrastructure organisations and volunteer centres is essential to sustain the wider benefits of volunteering to society and to individuals who volunteer.

Volunteering does not happen in a vacuum. Apart from spontaneous volunteering in response to an immediate local or individual need, voluntary action happens within some form of informal or formal organisation, community or place. A vibrant VCSE sector needs full support to thrive, typically provided by high quality local infrastructure organisations [LIOs]. In some areas there are volunteer centres [VCs] that focus specifically on enabling volunteering.

¹¹ HMG, 2019, p.2

¹² Institute of Volunteering Research <https://www.uea.ac.uk/web/groups-and-centres/institute-for-volunteering-research>

¹³ Institute of Volunteering Research, 'What are the benefits for the volunteer?'

https://utv.uea.ac.uk/GetMP4.ashx?ppID=1&file=60067_5g~7TNdMQOKdA.mp4&source=8&bb=0&bt=0&po=0&pi=0&ds=90.12&so=4&st=0&tf=0&cs=ylmf8ZZYqLH6NczHRSv3pMmMxwXTCnruCYRQBZg5zLAIWCLRCp_JCS_oO76kJu~ADQ1WK9~3ZArY9c8vP5DgXoQ&_ga=2.24273022.558142050.1656059272-715536419.1655733132

There are four functions that LIOs contribute to foster resilient communities: leadership and advocacy, partnerships and collaborations, capacity building, and volunteering.

- **Leadership and advocacy:** Mobilising and encouraging community action, strengthening the sector's voice and influence on key decision-makers and funders.
- **Partnerships and collaborations:** Creating opportunities and driving effective joint working by building networks of local organisations and strategic partners.
- **Capacity building:** Providing practical support and development for local people and organisations, to nurture skills and build community resilience.
- **Volunteering:** Building an environment in which volunteers and their communities thrive, by encouraging and nurturing volunteering opportunities.

These four functions of local infrastructure contribute to creating a vibrant space for VCSE organisations to develop and flourish. Volunteer Centres offer complementary services focused on volunteering, across five identified functions.

- **Strategic development of volunteering:** creating a positive environment in which volunteering is flourishing through partnership and engagement with local networks and decision makers.
- **Good practice development:** organisations are encouraged and enabled to improve or attain positive consistency in their volunteering programmes.
- **Brokerage:** the general public and all parts of the VCSE sector are better informed about and have access to an effective and efficient volunteer brokerage service.
- **Developing volunteering opportunities:** work to improve the quantity, quality and diversity of volunteering taking place locally.
- **Voice of volunteering:** local VCSE, funders and decision-makers have an increased awareness of issues impacting on volunteering.

Together, VCs and LIOs help people from all backgrounds and experiences to participate in voluntary activity and for volunteering organisations to recruit, train and develop volunteers. At their most effective, this network enables thriving communities where people belong and can take action on the things that matter to them.

However, this work is being squeezed through limited core funding. A survey of NAVCA members in March 2023 found that funding for core infrastructure support work is precarious and usually does not cover the full costs. The main funders of core support work are local authorities, grant making organisations and health systems. Costs of core support are cross subsidised through commercial or other earned income, management fees for project delivery, contracts or top slicing project grants. Other challenges include the patchy nature of the network of local infrastructure or volunteer centre provision, which includes cold spots without any providers, and other areas with poor quality or competing provision.

The Vision for Volunteering

Due to the significant changes in recent years in how people want to volunteer, who volunteers and what organisations want and need, a far reaching vision has been developed. The [Vision for Volunteering](#), developed by NAVCA, NCVO, Volunteering Matters,

Association of Volunteer Managers and Sport England, aims to put the volunteer, their capacities and motivations at the heart of future good practice. It tackles the biggest challenges and sets the frame for conversation and action. By focusing on the skills and life experience that volunteers bring rather than on the tasks to be completed, VCS organisations have the best chance of developing resilient communities, enabling human flourishing, and encouraging people from a wide diversity of backgrounds to volunteer.

The [Vision for Volunteering](#) seeks to develop voluntary action over the next ten years in five key themes, laying out the principles by which volunteering can develop to better serve the needs of volunteers and communities.

1. **Awareness and appreciation** so that volunteering becomes part of everyday life at all stages of life, and is seen as important and enriching. Volunteers can decide when and how to engage rather than completing a prescribed task, and are involved in the design and leadership of the activity they are contributing to.
2. **Power** is needed for volunteers and communities to build the future they want. Enabling all who want to volunteer to do so, valuing experience, creating flexibility, asking who is missing or excluded, and creating the conditions for communities to take decisions for themselves. Those supporting volunteering need to treat volunteers as equals, be accountable to them and support emerging ideas even if disruptive of the status quo.
3. **Equity and inclusion** mean that the benefits of volunteering are equally distributed, with inclusive cultures fostered. Listening to excluded groups to break down barriers and ensuring that the leadership are reflective of the communities they serve are important contributors. LIOs supporting volunteers need to champion inclusion and work with VCS organisations to learn and adapt, and proactively form relationships and collaborate with marginalised or excluded groups.
4. **Collaboration** should be a natural part of voluntary activity, growing out of coalitions of interest and collaborative activity in communities, rather than imposed from outside as a requirement to work in partnership. Volunteering must move on from being purely a transactional relationship focused on task or service delivery, to one that is adaptable to expertise, interest and capacity of volunteers. Collaboration to value lived experience, make use of human-led design and co-production principles will help break down barriers to participation.
5. **Experimentation** is to be encouraged as part of everyday volunteering, being able to be creative and ask questions about what needs to change. Creating a learning culture, one that is less fearful of failure and willing to learn from mistakes, successes, and unexpected sources. Building these expectations into project design and funding agreements will help embed the principle of experimentation.

Volunteering builds relationships and connections in communities. It brings people together to help each other and contribute to resilience and flourishing. Implementing ideas within these five key principles will create an opportunity to do more than just deliver tasks and solve problems. It creates the space for VCS organisation to rethink how they work, share power and practise meaningful inclusivity.

Achieving the Vision for Volunteering

Putting the volunteer at the centre of the vision for the future means taking a strengths-based approach, rooted in what volunteers want and need, one based around their capabilities and motivations and one that enables the individual to make their most effective contribution. There are no easy answers or quick fixes as to how this approach to volunteering might be integrated into mainstream activities and projects. As with so many changes, it will be about evolution rather than revolution.

Many LIOs and VCs have already started work on creating a new or updated volunteering strategy for their local area; renewing online volunteering support services; or co-producing revised volunteering policies and practices. Consultation across the breadth of the VCSE sector has been widely used as a foundation for the work by these organisations. A flavour of the different approaches is given below.

In-person consultation events to bring together volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations have been used as the basis for co-production of work programmes. Where multiple events have been held, wider groups of representatives have been invited such as service commissioners – local authorities or health services – local grant makers and funders, civic anchor organisations, large employers and universities. Care has been taken to ensure that the voice of the volunteer is heard, acknowledged and acted on within these consultation processes.

Consultation has allowed the details and nuances of each of the themes of the Vision to be explored in depth with a focus on translating and applying it in the local area. This means that the context of a place can be taken into account when co-designing or co-producing the next steps or stages of the process. All the themes have been considered in consultation, but most LIOs have used this as an opportunity to focus on weaker areas or where they want to focus new developments. These are the themes of equity and inclusion, collaboration or experimentation.

Equity and inclusion is a priority for all, with a focus on listening to people with lived experience of exclusion from volunteering, identifying the barriers they had experienced, and being guided by this group to identify the changes needed for inclusion across different excluded groups.

The need to encourage collaboration in all parts of the VCSE sector: between volunteers and paid staff, between communities, organisations and local government etc. is a given but barriers such as competition for funding can limit collaboration. The need to create new or enhance existing meetings where different organisations and groups can come together to discuss meaningful collaboration, was highlighted.

It was identified that the interests of potential volunteers have changed so that people are looking for creative, exciting and impactful roles. There may be a mismatch between the capacity or willingness of an organisation to experiment with volunteering and their volunteers desire or lack of desire to experiment. Creating a culture of experimentation

therefore needs support within all parts of an organisation, and from commissioners and funders, so that experiments that experience difficulties will not lose funding.

What next?

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has funded the next stage of the project, which will focus on how volunteering must adapt and evolve in the five key areas of the Vision. This work has now started to:

- engage with partners and stakeholders to raise awareness of the Vision and provide training and tools
- build a movement to champion the Vision
- share stories of positive change
- and collect evidence and share learning.

The aim is to achieve systemic change so that VCSE organisations are able to apply the Vision to their circumstances and activities, and are supported to implement the changes needed to place the volunteer at the centre and make volunteering a usual part of everyday life.

We will share more information over the coming months on how you can engage with the vision, develop and share your stories, and make sure locally-focused community volunteering is developed as a key part of the vision for 2032.

Work for 2023 focuses on movement building with 25 local roadshows taking place across the country between June and December. Most will be in person opportunities with at least one a month online to maximise participation. The roadshows will be open to all VCSE organisations, volunteers and community groups. There will be six national hybrid conferences between September 2023 and March 2024, one each focusing on the five themes of the Vision and the final one planning for the next phase of work. The Vision for Volunteering team are running a monthly tea break drop in – open to anyone – for informal chat, questions and updates. For more information see

<https://www.visionforvolunteering.org.uk/events>