Present Struggles, Past Origins: Current Challenges in Volunteering Amidst Two Decades of Decline

An analysis of the VCSE Barometer Survey by the VCSE Data and Insights National Observatory

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PRO BONO ECONOMICS

Introduction

"It's just tough." This quote from Wave 6 of the VCSE Barometer captures the challenge many face in recruiting and retaining volunteers. As detailed in this report, four in ten voluntary, community, and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations lack sufficient volunteers to meet their primary objectives. Unsurprisingly, organisations have cited volunteer recruitment as a top three concern in every Wave of the Barometer over the past year.

Volunteers are a vital part of the VCSE sector. For many, especially small organisations, they are the lifeblood, crucial for achieving their mission. Economically, volunteering contributes an estimated £18.7 billion annually to the economy by improving employability and enhancing transferrable skills[1]. Evidence also shows that volunteering benefits the volunteers themselves, enhancing social connections and providing meaning and purpose.

However, with the ongoing cost of living crisis and economic uncertainty, individuals' time and resources are more scarce than ever. Recent trends also indicate declining volunteer satisfaction and a lower likelihood of continuing to volunteer[2]. As the latest wave of this Barometer indicates, many organisations are struggling to engage volunteers effectively.

These challenges are not new. As Figure 1 shows, the last 20 years have seen a sustained decline in volunteer numbers across all types of volunteering. Given these challenges, it is vital to assess how organisations are adapting, which strategies are effective and which challenges persist.
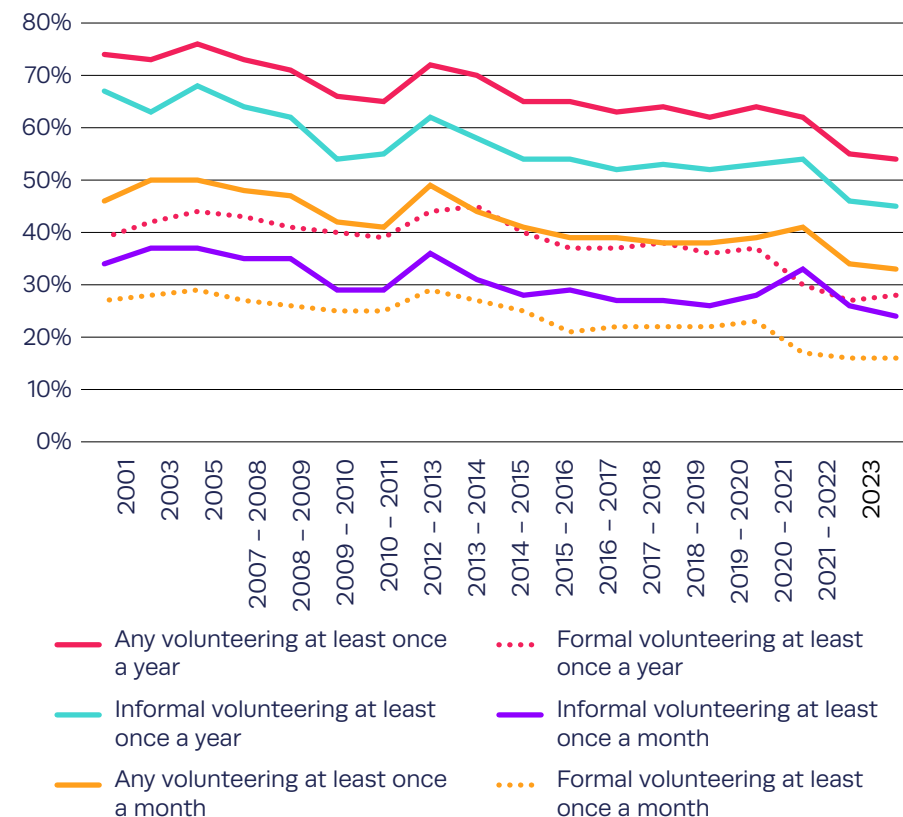
A year ago, in Wave 3 of the Barometer, respondents told us about the significant challenges they were facing in volunteering. In April 2024, we revisited these questions to understand what, if anything, had changed. This report offers a snapshot of these findings, detailing how organisations approach volunteer recruitment and retention, including the methods they use and the barriers they encounter, highlighting any changes from last year. It also offers organisations points for reflection that may serve as useful prompts for discussions within teams and Boards in the coming months.

We extend particular thanks to Véronique Jochum for her insight during our early drafts and Gethyn Williams for his interpretation and commentary.

1. Benefact Group. (2024). Value of Giving Report.
2. NCVO. (2023). Time Well Spent 2023: A national survey on the volunteer experience.
3. Time series analysis conducted by Nottingham Trent University's National VCSE Data and Insights Observatory on volunteering data from the Citizenship Survey (2001 – 2011) and Community Life Survey (2012 – 2023).

Figure 1. Volunteer numbers in England over time[3]

Citizenship Survey and Community Life Survey

Legend:
- Any volunteering at least once a year
- Informal volunteering at least once a year
- Any volunteering at least once a month
- Formal volunteering at least once a year
- Informal volunteering at least once a month
- Formal volunteering at least once a month

Source: Time series analysis conducted by Nottingham Trent University's National VCSE Data and Insights Observatory on volunteering data from the Citizenship Survey (2001 – 2011) and Community Life Survey (2012 – 2023).
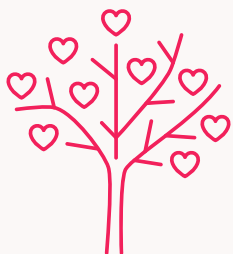
Methods

The findings in this report are based on an analysis of Wave 6 of the VCSE Barometer, a quarterly survey of VCSE organisations designed and administered by Nottingham Trent University's National VCSE Data and Insights Observatory. The VCSE Barometer offers a snapshot into real-time trends, changes, and challenges in the UK voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector. It is supported by over 50 major social sector membership organisations and networks, and findings are shared every quarter with national policy and decision-makers, local infrastructure organisations and the VCSE sector.

This report presents data from Wave 3 and Wave 6 of the VCSE Barometer, where the same questions on volunteering were asked in both waves. By comparing these waves and contextualising the findings within the broader landscape of volunteering, the report aims to understand the challenges in volunteer recruitment and retention over the past year. The report concludes with several reflective points, offering valuable prompts for discussions within teams and Boards about the challenges and opportunities in volunteering.

Wave 6 of the VCSE Barometer was conducted between 10 April and 1 May 2024 and comprises the views of 569 VCSE organisations completing at least 90% of the survey. Wave 3 was conducted between 9 and 23 May 2023, generating responses from 1,283 voluntary organisations. Data for both waves were prepared and analysed using Microsoft Excel and R Studio. Data tables are available upon request.

Last year, more than

4 in 10

organisations stated that they did not have enough volunteers to meet their primary objectives

Last year,

1 in 3

organisations reported that the unpaid time contributed by their current volunteers had risen in the past year

> " It's a gradual progression. Increase in retirement age and cost of living pressures mean that fewer volunteers are available. Reduction of council/state/other services locally (public transport/nursery provision/post office), and nationally mean that this area is dependent on volunteers for just the basics.
>
> Small Community Interest Company
> "

Volunteer Recruitment

April 2024 Headlines

1. **Ongoing Recruitment Challenges:** Volunteer recruitment is difficult for 61% of organisations and has featured as a top three concern since May 2023.

2. **Competing Priorities:** Organisations cite the public's lack of time and interest as the most significant barriers to volunteer recruitment.

3. **Resource–Efficient Recruitment Strategies:** Word of mouth is the dominant recruitment method, with fewer organisations using social media and in–person events compared to last year.

Findings from Wave 6 of the VCSE Barometer highlight persistent challenges in volunteer recruitment. While half of organisations report no change in volunteer numbers over the past year, recruitment remains a top concern, second only to the challenge of generating income. Specifically, 61% of organisations find recruiting volunteers difficult, with this figure increasing to 82% among those reporting a shortage of volunteers.

In Wave 6, organisations identified people's lack of time (59%) and lack of interest (50%) as major barriers to volunteer recruitment, reflecting individuals' views that commitments such as work and education are significant obstacles to volunteering[4].

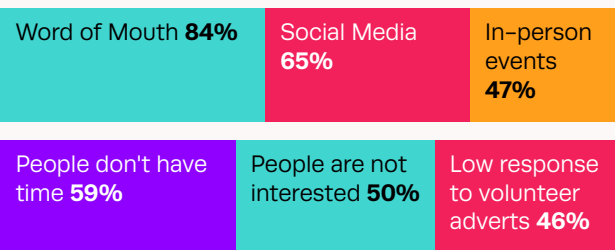## Organisations continue to find volunteer recruitment difficult

Proportion of organisations who found volunteer recruitment easy/ difficult over the last 12 months, May 2023 and April 2024

Wave 3	Wave 6
Difficult 59%	Difficult 61%
Easy 9%	Easy 11%
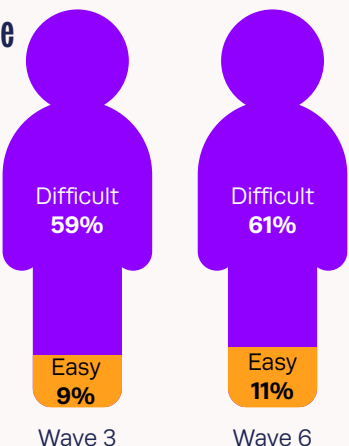
Notes: Wave 6 survey conducted 10 April – 01 May 2024, N = 533. Wave 3 survey conducted 09 – 23 May 2023, N = 1197.
Source: Nottingham Trent University National VCSE Data & Insights Observatory, VCSE Sector Barometer, Wave 3 and Wave 6.

The public's lack of time is the biggest barrier to recruitment, while word of mouth is the dominant recruitment method

Proportion of organisations identifying these factors as recruitment methods and barriers over the last 12 months, April 2024

Word of Mouth **84%**	Social Media **65%**	In–person events **47%**
People don't have time **59%**	People are not interested **50%**	Low response to volunteer adverts **46%**

Notes: Wave 6 survey conducted 10 April – 01 May 2024. Recruitment methods N = 504. Recruitment barriers N = 461.
Source: Nottingham Trent University National VCSE Data & Insights Observatory, VCSE Sector Barometer, Wave 6.

> " We have had some success in taking on new volunteers. However, our pool of older, more experienced volunteers has declined since COVID-19 meaning we are now in a position where we don't have the capacity to train newcomers
>
> Small registered charity
> "

However, there may be early signs of improvement when comparing our current data to the situation 12 months ago. Compared to Wave 3, fewer organisations report decreases in volunteer numbers (down from 19% to 17%), while more organisations report increases (up from 28% to 31%). To varying degrees, positive trends in volunteer numbers are observed across all demographic groups in Wave 6 compared to Wave 3, including older, younger, disabled, and BAME individuals.

This stabilisation or increase in volunteer numbers may explain why fewer recruitment methods are being used compared to May 2023. In–person events have decreased from 62% to 47%, and social media usage has dropped from 77% to 65%.

However, recent evidence indicates that one in five individuals have never been asked to volunteer[4], highlighting the need for a variety of recruitment methods to engage these potential volunteers. Although resource–efficient, the primary recruitment method – word of mouth (84%) – may not effectively reach this untapped group and could limit an organisation's reach and the diversity of its volunteer workforce.

4. NCVO. (2023). Time Well Spent 2023: A national survey on the volunteer experience.

Volunteer Retention

April 2024 Headlines

1. **Retention Challenges Persist:** Organisations face ongoing challenges in retaining volunteers due to external pressures, with little improvement since Spring 2023.

2. **Balancing Responsibilities:** Volunteers are increasingly balancing family, caring, and work responsibilities, making it difficult for organisations to retain them.

3. **Increase in Volunteer Unpaid Hours:** Organisations report further increases in unpaid volunteer hours over the last 12 months.

One in three organisations struggle to retain volunteers

Proportion of organisations who found volunteer retention easy/difficult over the last 12 months, May 2023 and April 2024

Difficult **33%**   Easy **16%**

Wave 3

Difficult **32%**   Easy **18%**
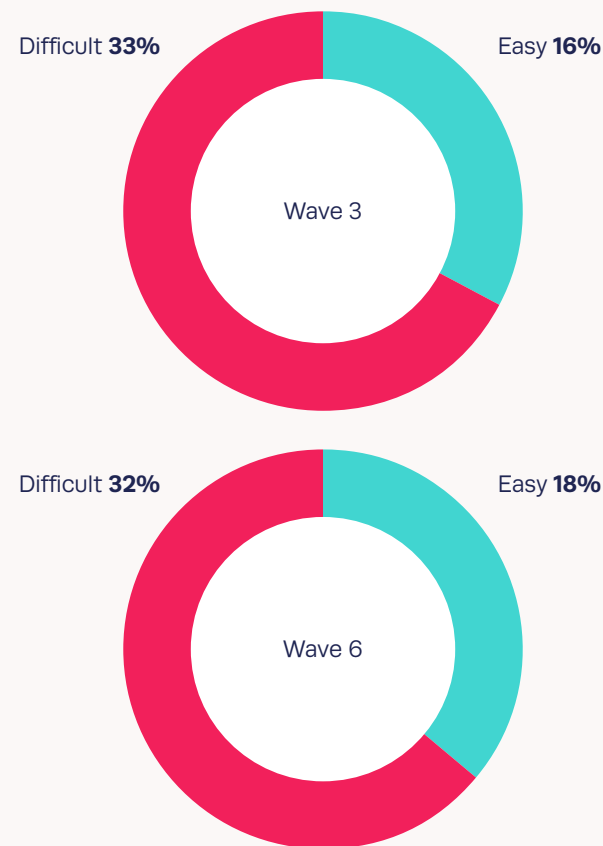
Wave 6

Notes: Wave 6 survey conducted 10 April – 01 May 2024, N = 543. Wave 3 survey conducted 09 – 23 May 2023, N = 1207.
Source: Nottingham Trent University National VCSE Data & Insights Observatory, VCSE Sector Barometer, Wave 3 and Wave 6.

Consistent with Wave 3, the findings of Wave 6 show that one in three organisations find it difficult to retain volunteers, a figure that rises to half among organisations with an insufficient number of volunteers. While the reasons for continuing to volunteer generally remain consistent with initial motivations, the primary driver of volunteer turnover is often a change in personal circumstances, leading to shifting priorities and less time for volunteering[5]. External factors such as the pandemic, cost of living crisis, and global conflict have undoubtedly accelerated this shift, changing the ways in which adults prioritise their time.

The Barometer echoes and amplifies this: organisations consider volunteers' family and caring responsibilities (70%) to be the biggest barrier to retention, an increase of 14% since last year. Work responsibilities also continue to present a significant challenge (65%). These issues are especially problematic for organisations with insufficient volunteers, which are twice as likely to say that the volunteering commitment is too big (42% compared to 23%).

> "
> We are all getting a little weary of the workload and need more volunteers to spread it out amongst us.
>
> Small registered charity
> "

A shortage of volunteers can increase the pressure on existing volunteers to fulfil responsibilities. This may have contributed to a reported increase in unpaid volunteer hours over the last 12 months (42%) compared to Wave 3 (35%). Organisations struggling with retention are ten times more likely (31%) to report a decline in unpaid volunteer hours compared to those finding retention easy (3%). This could suggest that organisations finding retention easy may be better able to distribute responsibilities and workload.

Nonetheless, there is a growing proportion of volunteers who feel the expectations placed upon them are mounting, making the volunteering experience potentially more stressful and adversely affecting their wellbeing[5]. In May 2023, Wave 3 found that a higher proportion of organisations felt that volunteer wellbeing had worsened than improved. In Wave 6, one in three organisations say that declining physical or mental wellbeing is a barrier to volunteer retention.

The two most common methods used to aid retention are training and development opportunities (74%) and payment of out–of–pocket expenses (64%). Slightly fewer organisations adopted flexible working as a retention incentive in Wave 6 (46%) compared to Wave 3 (54%). Given the reported increase in both flexible and virtual volunteering[5], flexible working may now be seen as standard practice rather than an incentive.

5 NCVO. (2023). Time Well Spent 2023: A national survey on the volunteer experience.

Organisations consider volunteers' family and caring responsibilities to be the biggest barrier to retention, an increase of

14%

since last year.

Organisations struggling with retention are

10x

more likely to report a decline in unpaid volunteer hours compared to those finding retention easy

Organisations offer training and development to retain volunteers, but family, caring, and work responsibilities pose significant barriers

Proportion of organisations identifying these factors as retention benefits and barriers over the last 12 months, April 2024
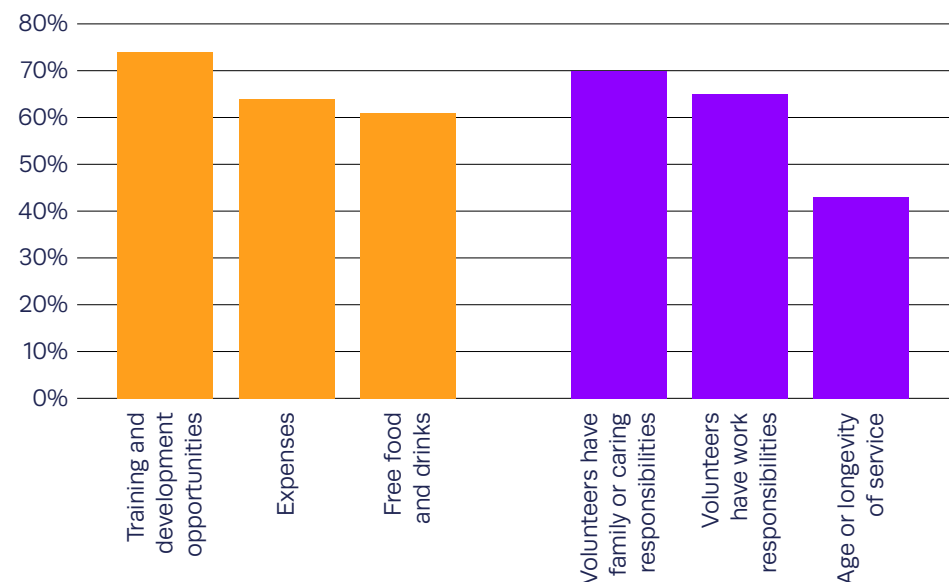
Notes: Wave 6 survey conducted 10 April – 01 May 2024. Retention benefits N = 429. Retention barriers N = 478.
Source: Nottingham Trent University National VCSE Data & Insights Observatory, VCSE Sector Barometer, Wave 6.

Guest Expert Commentary : Gethyn Williams

Gethyn Williams

Gethyn Williams is a volunteering strategist and non-profit expert, specialising in helping voluntary organisations develop their business, capture their impact, and enhance their volunteer programmes. With over twenty years of experience across the UK non-profit sector, he has worked on significant national initiatives such as the Vision for Volunteering, The Big Help Out and the London 2012 volunteering legacy programme. He has also held senior roles with Volunteering Matters and central government, where he worked on volunteering strategy at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. Freelancing since 2020, Gethyn's combination of strategy and analysis, operational management and business development has given him something of a helicopter view across both policy and practice in volunteering.

www.gethynwilliams.net

In this expert commentary, Gethyn shares his insights on our findings and what this means for organisations and the volunteering landscape.

The wave 6 findings present a picture of challenge and resilience – both for volunteers themselves and the organisations that enable and support them.

The challenges highlighted will be recognisable to many volunteer-involving organisations, and it may be telling that the impact of increased work and family commitments on an individual's ability to volunteer are cited as barriers for both recruitment and retention.

Increasing the flexibility of our offer is the sector's default response to such challenges. How we adapt our practice to the societal shifts influencing volunteers' expectations is widely regarded as the key task of this era, expressed most clearly through initiatives such as the Vision for Volunteering[6].

That said, the wave 6 data reveals contrasting fortunes in how organisations are coping. Those reporting sufficient levels of volunteers appear to have developed resilience strategies, whilst those experiencing insufficient levels are finding it harder. What is striking is how interconnected the findings appear to be – those with sufficient volunteers also report fewer recruitment and retention issues, with remaining volunteers stepping up and doing more than they were in previous waves. In contrast, those struggling for volunteers report the opposite – a knock-on chain of negatively re-enforcing effects, creating a drag on their programmes.

6. Vision for Volunteering (2024, May). The Vision for Volunteering.

> "
> The key insight here may be that volunteering doesn't exist in a vacuum, whether we're talking about the impact of post-Covid burnout or cost-of-living crisis on volunteers, or the need for organisations to maintain a focus on both recruitment and retention, as interdependent, mutually re-enforcing entities.
> "
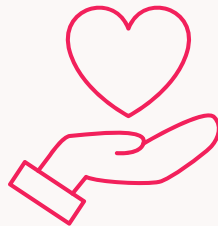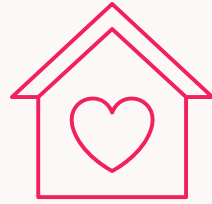
Beware the law of unintended consequences

Though some organisations appear to be coping admirably in trying conditions, before we hang out too much bunting we should be wary of unintended consequences. The coping strategies cited here – scaling back on costs and innovations whilst doubling down on 'back to basics' approaches such as word–of–mouth recruitment – may in the longer–term lead only to the involvement of more 'people like us', to the detriment of increased volunteer diversity.

Likewise, whilst we might applaud the efforts of those volunteers now going above and beyond, we might also recall experiences from the sports sector during Covid which found remaining volunteers experiencing significant burnout[7].

During and since the Covid–19 era we've seen an overall downward trend in our national volunteering data, though not without some signs of growth and recovery; some age groups appear to be holding up better than others (18–24s, 65+), specialist brokers such as Reach Volunteering continue to report strong growth in the supply of skilled volunteers[8] and the latest Community Life Survey results even show a small rise in occasional formal volunteering[9].

> ❝
> What happens in volunteering is often more nuanced than the headlines suggest, and the wave 6 findings echo this. They reveal a need for volunteer-involving organisations to be working smarter, though not necessarily harder, as we seek to balance flexibility with fulfilment, organisational priorities with the changing needs of our volunteers.
> ❞

In the short term this might mean a pragmatic approach to implementing the themes of Vision for Volunteering, or seeking to reach new audiences by taking advantage of national campaigns like The Big Help Out[10]. But what this wave's findings suggest overall is that whether your volunteering programme is in something of a holding pattern or a long–term strategy, the decisions you're making now can have a very real effect on your immediate prospects of successful volunteer engagement.

7. Sport England. (2023, August). Activity Check–in: Volunteering.
8. Reach Volunteering (2024, May 17). Ever since the onset of the pandemic, we have seen a surge of people wanting to offer their skills and [Post]. LinkedIn.
9. Williams, G. (2024, May). The first in a new series of quarterly releases of national volunteering data just dropped. What does it tell us? [Post]. LinkedIn.
10. The Big Help Out (2024, May). Lend a Hand, 7th – 9th June.

Points for Reflection

At the beginning of the report, we presented a graph illustrating the sustained decline in volunteering over the past two decades. Findings from Wave 3 and Wave 6 of the VCSE Barometer reveal that these are perennial challenges, deeply rooted in societal change and exacerbated by individuals' competing priorities and responsibilities. Adapting to these changes is crucial, but the magnitude of the challenge can make it difficult to know where to start.

So, in this section, we present four points for reflection. Based on our findings, each reflection point outlines a key challenge and offers a practical point for discussion that can be initiated within your teams and Board.

1. Tailor recruitment methods and retention strategies for targeted engagement

Challenge: Despite adopting a wide range of recruitment and retention methods, organisations continue to experience difficulties.

Reflection point: Different demographic groups prioritise different things. Consider how you could tailor your volunteer engagement strategy to specific target demographics. For instance, advertising on social media with a focus on skill development might help to both attract and retain younger volunteers.

2. Integrate flexible and virtual volunteering methods into working practices

Challenge: Volunteers are increasingly balancing family, caring, and work responsibilities, making it difficult for them to commit to traditional volunteering schedules.

Reflection point: With family, caring and work commitments on the rise, flexible modes of volunteering may enable new and continued volunteer participation. Whilst it cannot work in every organisation or volunteer role, opportunities for bitesize and episodic volunteering could be a viable option for strengthening and maintaining your volunteer team.

3. Highlight the benefits you offer in your volunteering adverts

Challenge: Findings from Wave 6 pointed to a lack of time, interest and low response to adverts as the top three barriers to recruitment. This could suggest that advertisements may not be highlighting the benefits offered to volunteers.

Reflection point: Even if benefits like remote working or training and development are already part of your daily workflows, highlight them to prospective and existing volunteers. This helps demonstrate that volunteering can be flexible and accommodating to their needs.

4. Keep diversity and inclusion in mind

Challenge: Fewer recruitment methods are being used compared to May 2023, and word of mouth is the most dominant recruitment method. This approach may present risks to the diversity and inclusivity within the volunteer workforce.

Reflection point: Consider whether relying on informal recruitment methods, such as word of mouth, affects equality of opportunity and inclusive volunteering practices within your organisation.

Resources / Further Reading
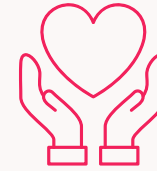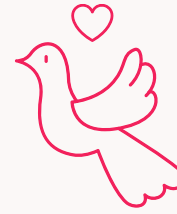
Conversation Starters

· Vision for Volunteering: Toolkit

· NCVO: Investing in Volunteers Essentials (health check on volunteer practice)

· Volunteer Scotland: Guidance and Resources

Flexible Volunteering

· Community Impact Bucks: Bitesize Volunteering

· Charity Digital: Utilising Digital Technology in Volunteering

· Girl Guiding: Flexible Volunteering

Volunteer Management

· NCVO Guidance: Volunteer Management Software

· NCVO Guidance: Planning for Volunteers

· Vision for Volunteering: Measuring your Impact

Volunteer Engagement

· NCVO: Recruiting Volunteers

· Belong: The Power of Connection Toolkit

· CharityJob: How to Recognise and Reward Volunteers

Nottingham Trent University's Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise Sector (VCSE) Observatory develops innovative methods to collect, uncover and unify existing and new datasets so that a clearer, more accurate picture of the nature and value of UK VCSE can be painted for policymakers, practitioners and stakeholders.

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