



Respond, recover, reset: the voluntary sector and COVID-19

May 2021

Project partners



Nottingham Trent
University

The Centre of People, Work and Organisational Practice at Nottingham Trent University

The Centre of People, Work and Organisational Practice is based at Nottingham Trent University and works with organisations and policy-makers to understand and to seek to improve how people are managed within organisations. We are committed to producing theoretically rigorous work that is not only published in top academic journals but also transforms lives and society. Working with collaborators from different parts of the world, CPWOP has conducted research with and for organisations such as the CIPD, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Government Equality Office and the Lloyds Foundation. The centre focuses on the way in which people are managed in the face of critical challenges facing the economy and society, given growing concerns about work quality and a proliferation of insecure and precarious jobs within the UK economy.

**Sheffield
Hallam
University**
Knowledge Applied

The Voluntary Action Research Group at Sheffield Hallam University

The Voluntary Action Research Group (VARG) brings together researchers from across Sheffield Hallam University. VARG serves as a forum to showcase and build on internationally significant research and evaluation and shaping debates about the past, present and future of voluntary action.

NCVO

National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)

With over 15,500 members, NCVO is the largest membership body for the voluntary sector in England. It supports voluntary organisations (as well as social enterprises and community interest companies), from large national bodies to community groups working at a local level. NCVO believes its members, and those with a stake in civil society, need the best quality evidence base to help them inform policy and practice, and plan for the future.



Introduction: Volunteering through and beyond the pandemic

From supporting food banks through to being involved in the vaccine rollout, volunteering and community activism have been core to the UK's pandemic response. The report this month focuses on how volunteering has changed during the pandemic and some of the lessons learned.

Over the last year, volunteering and the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisations volunteers support, have been heavily impacted. Lockdowns, furloughing and remote-working have meant that some people have been able to volunteer more, whereas others have shielded and been unable to participate. The impact on VCSE organisations has been mixed. In the monthly barometer 24% of organisations reported an increase in volunteers since March 2020 – through a mixture of new volunteers wanting to help during a period of crisis and having more time to volunteer, whilst 36% reported a decline – through social distancing and lockdowns reducing the opportunities for people to come together. This report explores some of these experiences and how it might impact organisations in the future.

The report also presents some of the trends that we are beginning to see. This is our seventh monthly barometer and we can see trends unfolding for VCSE organisations, including recent improvements in the short-term financial position alongside a significant increase in the expected demand for services. As we travel along the roadmap, our barometer will continue to provide real-time data on the impact on the VCSE sector and how it is responding.

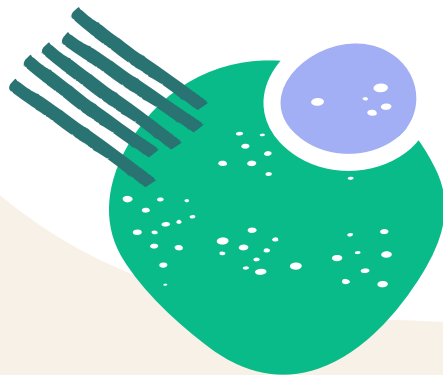
“ 24% of organisations reported an increase in volunteers since March 2020 – through a mixture of new volunteers wanting to help during a period of crisis and having more time to volunteer, whilst 36% reported a decline – through social distancing and lockdowns reducing the opportunities for people to come together. ”

COVID-19 voluntary sector impact barometer

The monthly barometer survey

The purpose of the monthly barometer survey is to produce timely snapshots of the condition of the voluntary and community sector (VCSE) throughout the life of this project. We have tried to create a survey that is inclusive, quick and easy to complete. In this wave of the barometer, we explored changes in the pattern of volunteering in VCSE organisations, the demographics of volunteers and their level of involvement since March 2020. This information will also be available online via the [data dashboard](#). The dashboard now includes an analysis of trends across the seven waves of the survey completed so far.

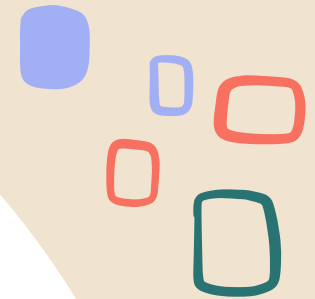
The seventh wave of the survey was completed between 19th April and 26th April 2021. This generated responses from 579 organisations across the UK. We remain keen to extend coverage of the survey in each of the UK nations as this will allow us to better understand any geographic differences in the impacts of the pandemic on the sector.

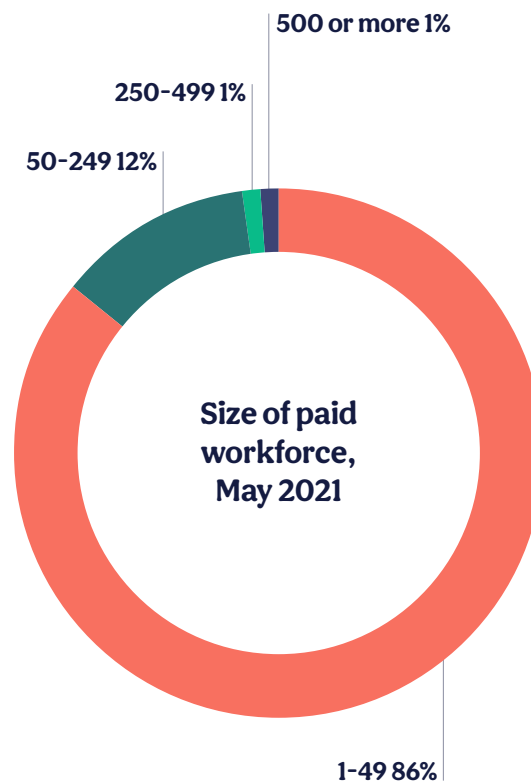
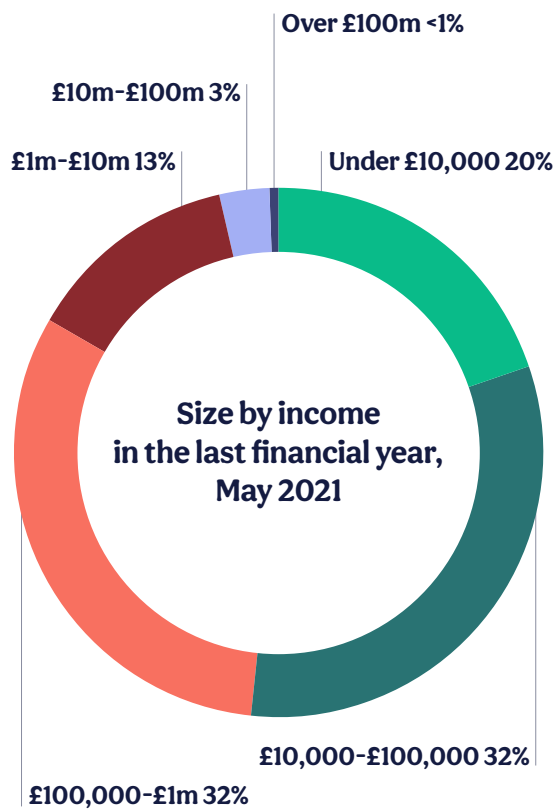


The sample

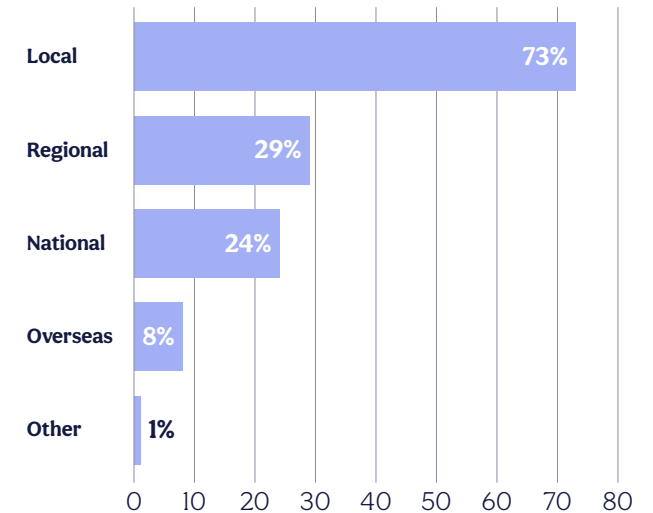
As we saw in the last six waves of the survey, a wide range of organisation types and a hugely diverse range of activities are represented in our sample. 66% of the organisations identified as registered charities, 20% indicated that they have limited company status and a total of 11% of participants reported being community interest companies or voluntary associations.

- 24%** of organisations (138) identified themselves as a social enterprise
- 20%** (114) described themselves as age-specific
- 13%** (77) described themselves as a deaf and disabled peoples' organisation
- 12%** (68) described themselves as a BAME organisation
- 7%** (41) described themselves as a women's organisation
- 5%** (31) described themselves as LGBTIQ+ organisations

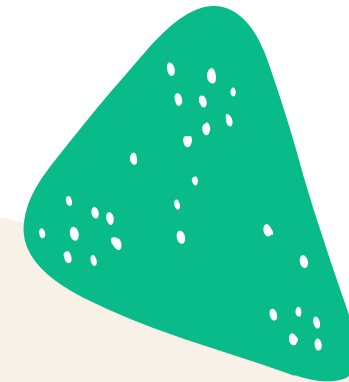
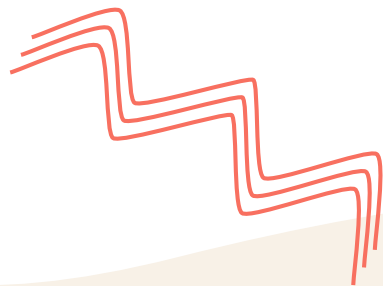


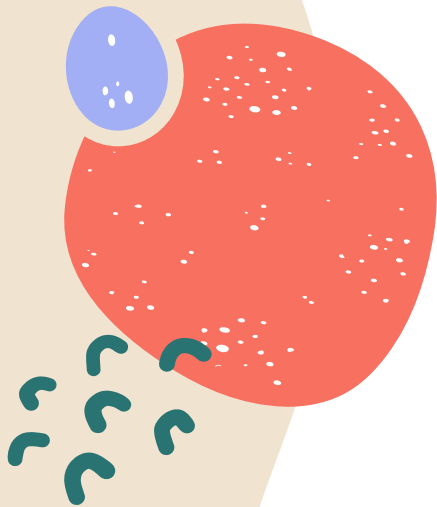


Operational level of the organisations, May 2021



The most common activity types for organisations reported by survey respondents were in health, hospitals and nursing homes (including mental health) (13%), community and economic development (8%) and individual and family social services (7%).





Headlines

People

579 organisations responded to the survey

69% employ a paid workforce

Finances

30% reported a deteriorating financial position in the last month

25% saw their financial position in the last month improve

44% reported a stable financial position in the last month

58% expect their financial position to remain the same over the next month

19% expect their financial position to deteriorate over the next month

Services

37% indicated that their range of services has decreased since March 2020

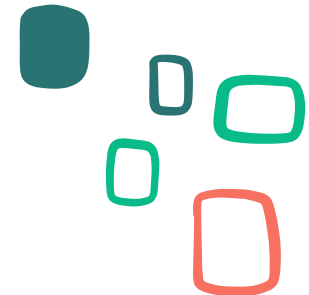
38% reported an increase in their range of services since the beginning of the pandemic

66% expect an increase in demand for their services over the next month

Outlook

64% of respondents expect COVID-19 to have a moderate or significant negative impact on delivering their objectives next year

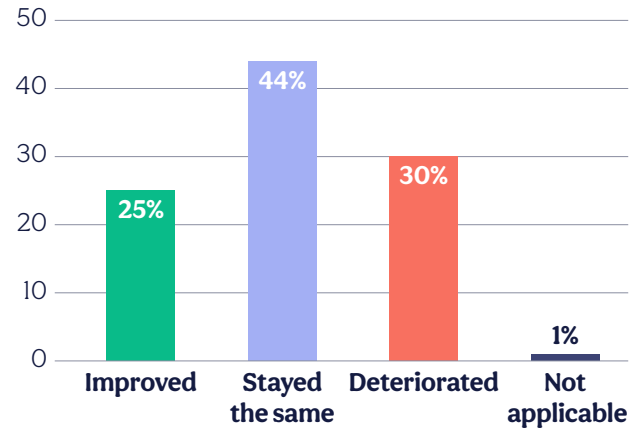
6% reported that it was quite likely or very likely that their organisation would no longer be operating next year (a decrease from 8% last month)



Finances and Operations

In Wave 7, 30% of the organisations reported that their financial position has deteriorated in the last month compared to 25% with an improved financial position.

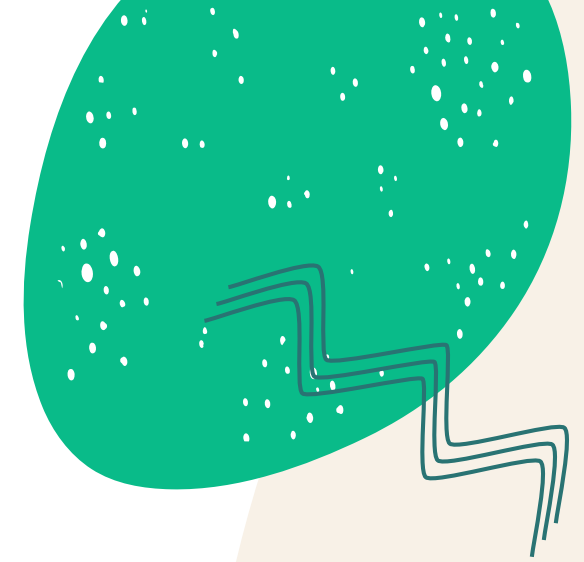
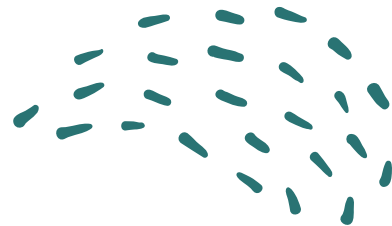
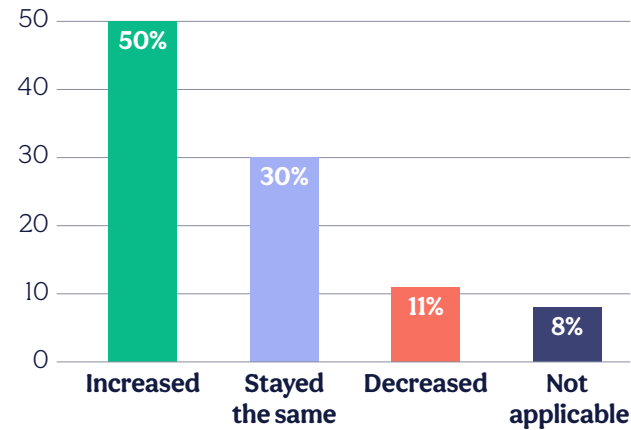
Change in the financial position over the last month, May 2021



Financial changes within the sector remains a major theme in our research and different aspects of it will be explored in some depth over the coming months – through this barometer survey, the panel survey and in-depth interviews that are being conducted as part of this project.

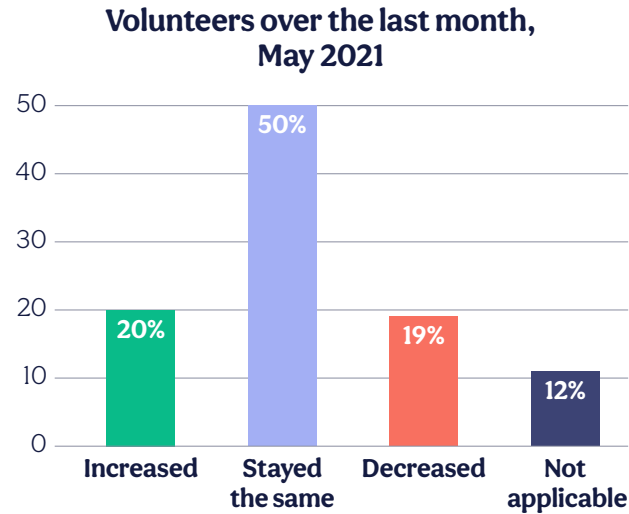
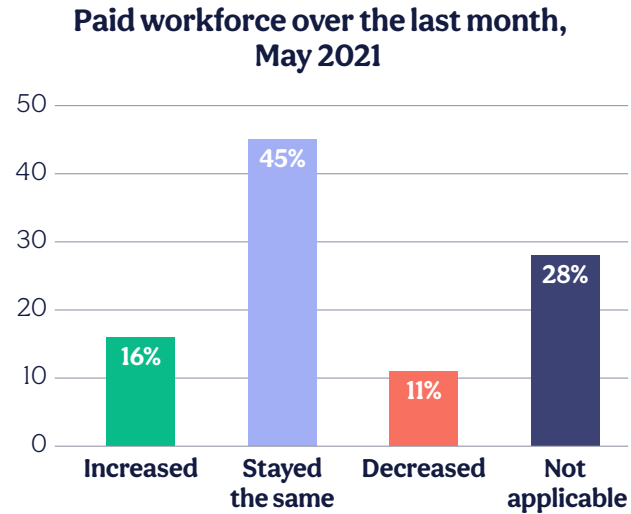
Last month, the demand for services provided by the voluntary and community sector maintained the upward trajectory revealed in the previous waves – with 50% of organisations reporting an increase in demand for their services.

Demand for services over the last month, May 2021



Workforce and Volunteers

Over the last month, the employment position in the sector is reported as relatively stable, with 45% reporting the same number of paid employees compared to previous months.



Volunteering During the Pandemic

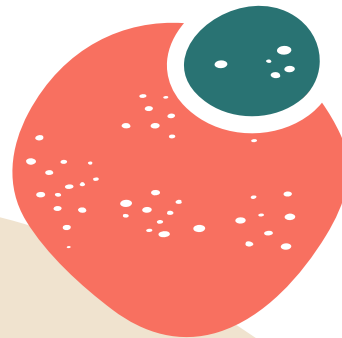
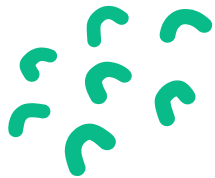
The challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic across the UK, including lockdowns, social distancing measures, remote working, home schooling and a considerable decrease in social activities can act as a barrier to volunteering, while there is evidence that remote volunteering has benefited certain groups, such as disabled volunteers or furloughed employees interested in volunteering. In this wave, we explored the topic of volunteering further to identify possible changes in the sector.

In Wave 7, 24% of organisations have reported an increase in the number of people volunteering with their organisation since March 2020, while 36% of respondents have experienced a decline in the number of their volunteers.

The amount of unpaid time contributed by volunteers decreased for 38% of respondents, whereas 29% reported an increase in the amount of unpaid time contributed by their volunteers since the beginning of the pandemic. Similarly, the range of activities undertaken by volunteers reduced for 40% of respondents. 40% of the organisations reported a decrease in the intensity of volunteering in their organisations, including less activity being undertaken by their volunteers as well as less frequent and shorter time of availability.

Unsurprisingly, the number of volunteer roles that can be done remotely or online has increased in 39% of the organisations and 26% of respondents have found it necessary to recruit volunteers with different skill sets to their usual volunteers.

COVID-19 has caused a change in the volunteering demographics of our sample. 31% of the organisations experienced a decrease in the number of older volunteers (50+) actively engaged in their organisation. This decrease has been reported by 18% of the respondents regarding disabled volunteers and 9% for the number of volunteers who identify as Black, Asian or minority ethnic.



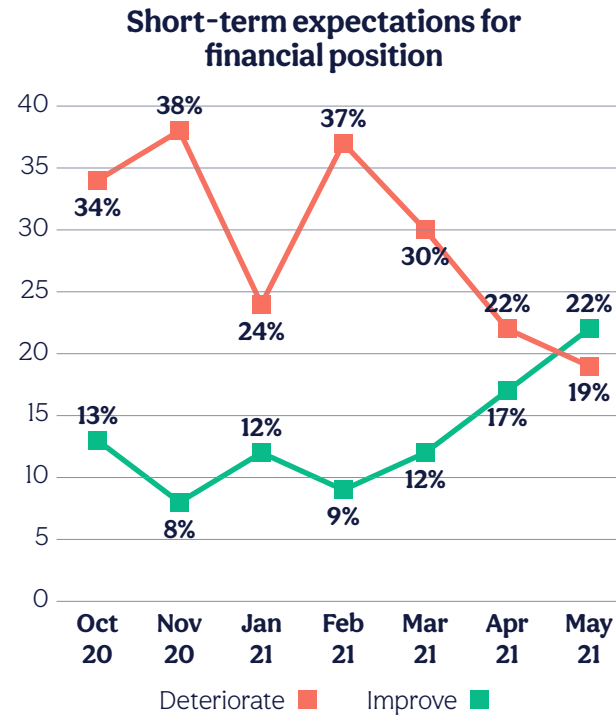
Trends and Developments

Organisations in the voluntary sector have spent much of the past year trying to adapt to the new circumstances. As part of the “Respond, Recover, Reset” project, we are aiming to capture how resilient organisations are thriving amidst the crisis.

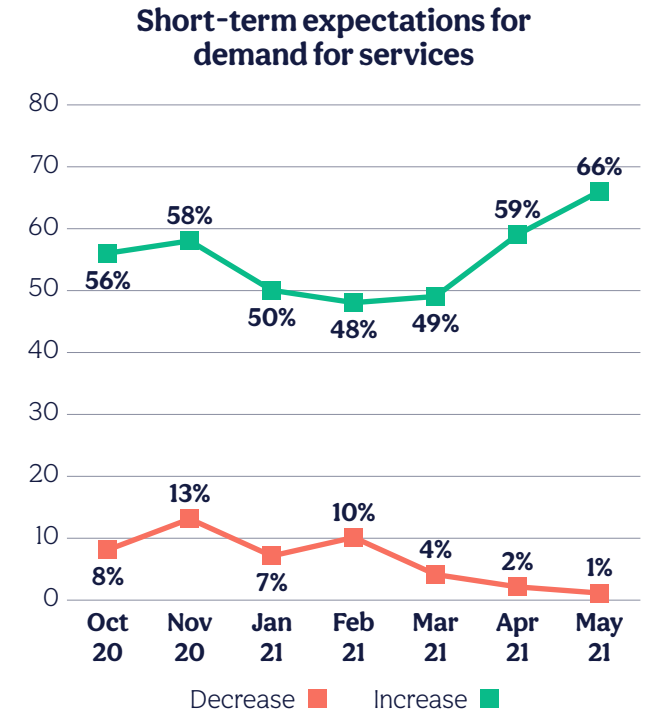
Across 7 waves, there have been 4,135 responses to the survey and exploring the trends shows a very gradual but consistent decrease in the number of organisations who are expecting negative impacts of COVID-19 on delivering their objectives.



For the first time, a balance between the organisations with a deteriorating financial position and organisations who have reported an improving financial position as a result of the Pandemic can be seen in Wave 7.



The number of organisations with short-term expectations of decreased demand for their services has declined to less than 1% compared to 13% in Wave 2. Organisations experiencing increased demand however, have reached their highest number (66%) in Wave 7.



Behind the headlines: The changing face of volunteering through the pandemic

This project explores the impacts the COVID-19 pandemic is having on reshaping the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector, and how organisations are responding. This month we are exploring the ways that volunteering has been impacted through the pandemic.

Whilst there have been a range of types of volunteering throughout the pandemic, such as neighbourhood level support, this report focuses predominately on more formalised volunteering within VCSE organisations. Overall we see a mixed picture, with some organisations seeing many new volunteers, from all walks of life, many volunteering for the first time. Other organisations have struggled, either through volunteers having to shield, or having to suspend volunteering altogether. In the following section we recount some of these experiences and some of the key lessons learned.

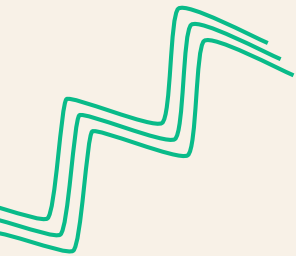
Introducing new volunteers

“ Volunteer numbers have skyrocketed ”
Barometer respondent

Almost a quarter of all organisations responding to our survey (24%) said that they had seen an increase in the number of people volunteering with them since March 2020. Our interviewees reported a number of reasons for this increase. The early lockdowns saw many people on furlough who had increased time available to volunteer, and also many people seeing a need in their community and wanting to help.

Alongside this increase in the numbers of volunteers many organisations also reported a significant shift in the diversity and range of volunteers that participated. With people volunteering because of furlough or having more time due to lockdowns, many organisations reported new volunteers coming forward from a diverse range of age, gender, ethnicity and cultural backgrounds.

“ People from all areas of the city have come to help and we have a wider age range. We have had people from a range of expertise and racial and cultural backgrounds ”
Barometer respondent





One of the key outcomes of this increased diversity was that many of these volunteers brought with them new skills and expertise to the organisations. Organisations gave examples of volunteers bringing digital, marketing or other organisational skills that the VCSE organisations lacked. Some of the volunteers, particularly those that were furloughed, not only had these skills, but also connections with businesses or the public sector that could be useful for the organisation's future, with the potential for partnerships or roles as trustees.

“ We accessed many people with specific skills who had been furloughed, e.g. public authority staff ”

Barometer respondent

Some organisations reported that amongst new volunteers many had either not volunteered for a long time or were first time volunteers. This meant a two-way process of learning where VCSE organisations had to learn how to work with this new range of volunteers, but also the volunteers had to learn how the organisation (and potentially the wider VCSE sector) works.

“ All these people were volunteering at the beginning when they were furloughed, these potentially are people who've never volunteered in their life, they work in the private sector, they don't even know the voluntary sector exists ”

Senior Manager, Local Authority, East Midlands

Organisations reported that many of the people who joined them during the pandemic did it because it helped them feel useful, that they were doing something meaningful and could give back to their community. For some volunteers, being part of COVID-19 'bubbles' at a time of crisis produced a closeness that was powerful, and helped to give a sense of social connection and purpose. For those who had not volunteered before, some felt that this was a powerful experience that might stay with them throughout their lives, and shape their long-term attitudes to volunteering in ways that might not have happened if the pandemic had not occurred.

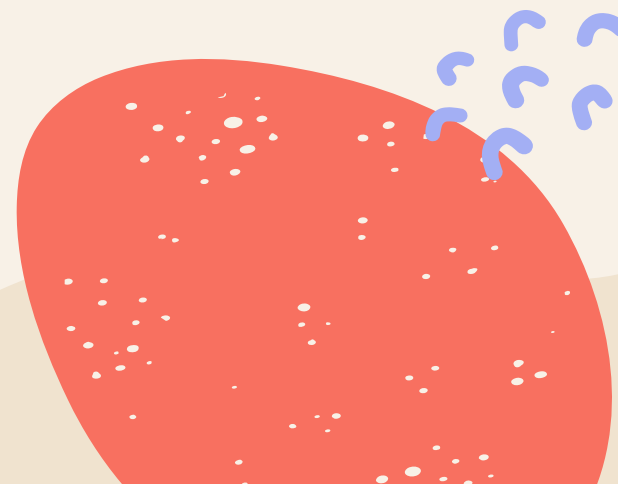
“ I think because we're all in these little bubbles, we become closer, much closer. ... we all offload to each other ”

Volunteer, Foodbank, North East England

However, some interviewees reflected that the upsurge in volunteering and good will towards community action that some people experienced, particularly in the first lockdown, was not built upon, and did not produce the sea change in attitudes that it could have done.

“ Because there was a pandemic, people responded and said 'right I'm going to do something for my community' and all of a sudden there was this huge social action movement, but it only lasted a few months and then everything went back to normal. We missed an opportunity to capitalise on that and say to those people 'right, you volunteered, how can we engage you in continuing to give your time up to help a local cause'. How about becoming a trustee of a local charity? You're an accountant, you work for an accountancy firm, do you know there's a local charity, if you gave one day a month to them, you would help that organisation help so many people ”

Senior Manager, Local Authority, East Midlands





Higher demand from volunteers than capacity

A number of organisations reported having people regularly getting in touch asking if they could volunteer. However, due to space limitations (social distancing), availability of roles and capacity to support volunteers or availability of support these volunteers have to be turned down. Some organisations were concerned a sudden influx of volunteers might disrupt their existing teams and routines. For many organisations, balancing the short-term increase in the availability of the volunteers with organisational needs was challenging. This meant that some had to turn away volunteers.

“ I think there’s been more volunteers because everybody is wanting to volunteer more, but that brings its own challenges at the moment because for us, we can’t match them ”

Trustee, Children and Young People Charity, West Midlands

Consequently some organisations developed new strategies for engaging with short-term volunteers, particularly through creating new types of volunteering roles and new processes.



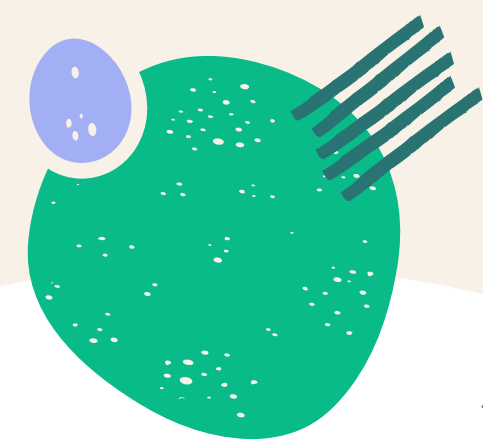
Learning new recruitment and engagement strategies

For those organisations that were struggling for volunteers, or had an increased demand for volunteers, the pandemic necessitated experimenting with new recruitment strategies.

Some organisations used digital mediums for the first time as a way of promoting opportunities to volunteer, and were also able to use other channels, such as local radio, as a way of connecting with potential volunteers. Organisations have experimented with various strategies to keep volunteers connected and engaged, from training sessions to activities like murder mystery sessions for people to connect with each other and feel part of the group. Whilst many of these practices were developed out of necessity, organisations are reflecting on taking elements that worked and keeping them in the future:

“ [We have been asking] how can we adopt some of the kind of Covid era communications and engagement methods that people have used to really retain volunteers [in] the future ”

Line Manager, National Health Research Charity



Volunteer retention and wellbeing challenges

Whilst for some, COVID-19 brought an increase in volunteers, for many others it meant that existing volunteers could not participate. Many organisations had volunteers that were shielding, or at high risk of COVID-19, or had roles that were ‘hands on’ and involved face-to-face contact which were difficult to translate into digital volunteering roles. As a result, 36% of organisations that completed the barometer have seen a decline in the numbers of volunteers.

“ Our older volunteers have largely stayed at home and been unavailable for driving but we have recruited a number of younger volunteer drivers and been able to meet the much reduced demand for this service. We introduced telephone befriending which attracted a new set of volunteers ”
Barometer respondent

Some organisations were not able to move their services online due to the nature of the work, the technology, safeguarding or support that volunteers required. As a result, many organisations faced the difficult decision to have to ask volunteers to step down. For some organisations this meant closing services, for others it meant that paid staff had to do the roles that volunteers used to do, but in quite a different format. This had consequences on the organisations’ operating models and the volunteers themselves.

“ A lot of these volunteers, they give their heart and soul to the work they do and they love what they do and they’re really good at it. To have to say to them ‘sorry, we can’t accept your help just now’ was really tough. Really tough ”
Senior Manager, family and children’s charity, Scotland

For many people volunteering is a core part of their lives, bringing with it social connections, meaning and purpose. Some organisations reported that the social restrictions brought about by COVID-19 had a profound impact for some volunteers, particularly those for whom volunteering was a vital part of their support network. Some organisations, particularly those working in community development or mental health, found that some of their volunteers were returning to drug or alcohol addiction.

“ Often those volunteers essentially just return to being service users ”
Local health charity, Wales

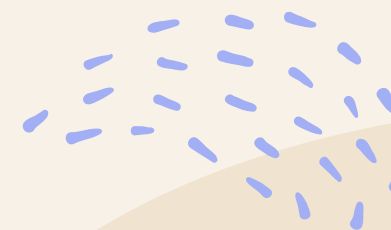
But this also had consequences for the individuals themselves, with many organisations reporting that some of their volunteers have had to step back from volunteering because of their own health or wellbeing

“ But unfortunately we’ve lost a couple of folks on the way because of things with ill health and mental health and stuff like that, that’s been quite difficult to support people. People going back to problems with addiction and stuff like that, and that’s been really tough, that has been tough trying to support the guys that support you every day ”
CEO, community and economic development charity, Scotland



Many organisations stated that they spent quite a lot of time and energy working with and supporting their volunteers, creating regular check-ins, and online gatherings to “maintain team spirit”. For some organisations this involved creating bespoke and individual plans that helped to support volunteers:

“ So it’s a personal development plan and a health and wellbeing plan. I will implement both of those for everyone so that’s staff and volunteers. And we check whether we want to do it with the board as well, it’s something I think is really important ”
Local focused, community development organisation, Scotland





Rethinking volunteering opportunities

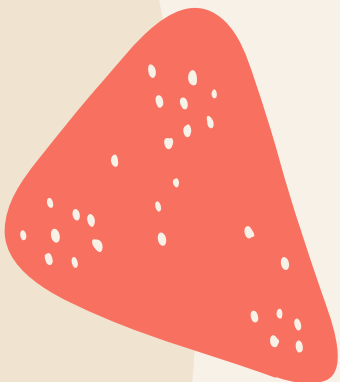
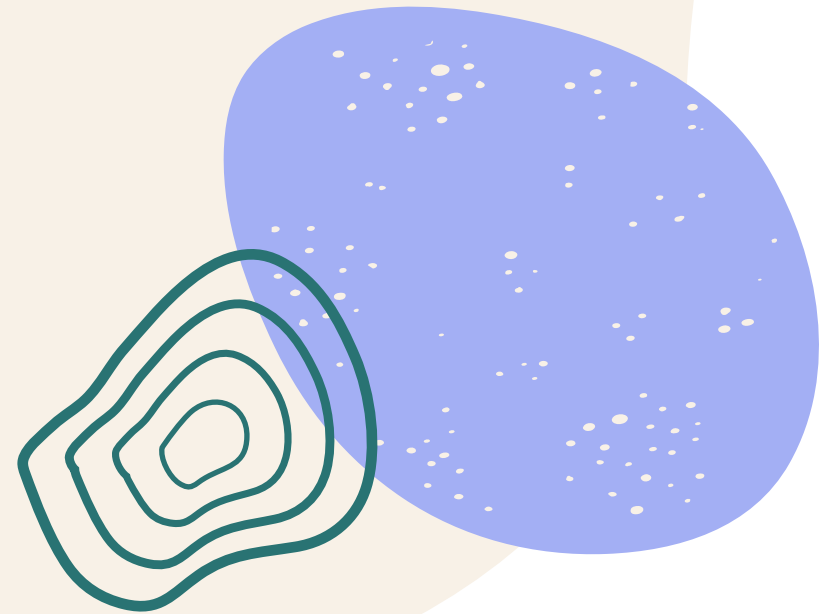
The COVID-19 restrictions also have resulted in organisations being required to experiment in new types of volunteering. There has inevitably been a rise in digital volunteering, with 92% of organisations stating that they have moved services online as a result of COVID-19. Many of our interviewees have been experimenting with new forms of volunteering including digital volunteering and micro volunteering. Whilst some of these practices existed prior to the pandemic, COVID-19 forced a number of organisations to rethink, accelerate or formalise these types of volunteering opportunities.

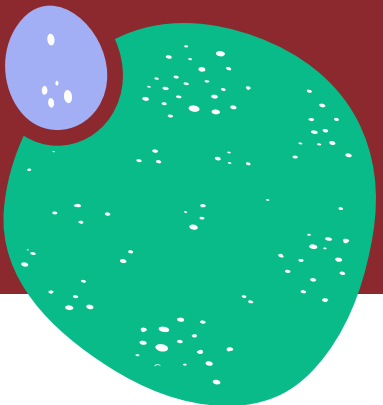
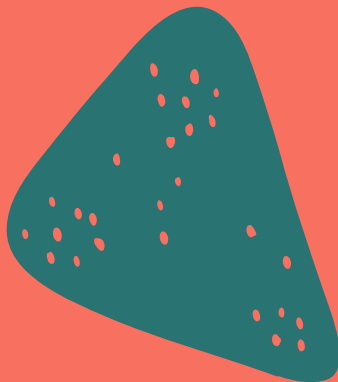
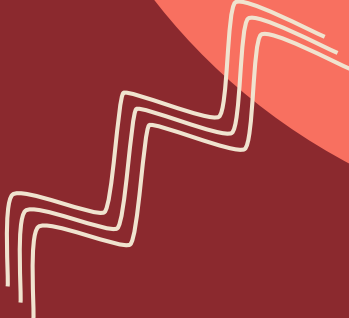
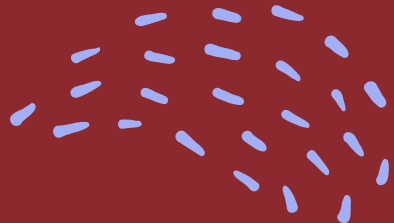
Some organisations have seen their pool of potential volunteers increase due to having more digital roles. In particular running services, meetings or tasks digitally means they can recruit volunteers throughout the whole of the UK. Concerns were also raised about digital exclusion and whether the move to digital ways of working excludes volunteers without access to equipment or limited digital skills or confidence. In particular running services, meetings or tasks digitally.

Other organisations took the opportunity of the forced closures resulting from COVID-19 to reset their volunteers' roles. One organisation described it as a chance to redesign how their volunteers were involved, changing the roles, responsibilities and the structure of the work in ways that would have been much harder if the enforced break of the pandemic had not occurred.

The next report

Our next report looks at Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). We are very interested in hearing your thoughts and experiences around EDI and the lessons learned for the future. If you have something to say on this please contact us on CPWOP@ntu.ac.uk





For further information:
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