TIME WELL SPENT 2023

A NATIONAL SURVEY ON THE VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

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CHAMPIONING VOLUNTARY ACTION

NCVO

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Foreword

By the Rt Hon Stuart Andrew MP, Minister for Civil Society

Volunteers have stepped up again and again over the past few years, in a myriad of ways. When moments of celebration and crisis have arisen, volunteers have played an important role. Tens of thousands kept us safe during covid-19 by delivering supplies and helping to administer the vaccine. People opened their homes to those fleeing war in Ukraine.

These are incredible acts of generosity and kindness, but volunteering does not only occur at times of immense need. It is a part of many people's day-to-day lives, whether they volunteer themselves or receive support from a neighbour or a volunteer-involving organisation.

We want volunteering to be a positive experience for everyone, everywhere. Timely, useful and accessible research can help us achieve that. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) commissions the Community Life Survey, which provides official statistics related to volunteering, charitable giving and community engagement. It captures vital information including the proportion of people who volunteer each year, showing 25 million people in England volunteered at least once in 2021/22.

However, it is research like NCVO's Time Well Spent that provides a unique opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the volunteer experience, beyond what we can learn from the Community Life Survey. This is why we're proud to support this research and report.

These latest findings from Time Well Spent make for essential reading. It's great to see that volunteers on the whole have a good experience. They see the difference they make, and feel positive towards the organisations they volunteer with. When it comes to formal volunteering, this is a credit to the organisations and volunteer managers who help make volunteering a worthwhile and rewarding endeavour.

The report also highlights volunteers' motivations, along with barriers and enablers to volunteering. I take particular interest in the findings about equity, diversity, and inclusion, which highlight the essential work that needs to take place to ensure that anybody can and does volunteer.

Research such as Time Well Spent and the Community Life Survey provides crucial information for government and all sectors involving volunteers, to help us develop a positive way forward. The world around us is constantly changing, as is our society. We must make strides to adapt to those changes in how we involve and support volunteers.

This is especially important as we continue to work together through initiatives like the Vision for Volunteering. This 10-year, sector-led strategy, aimed at making sure volunteering is fit for the future, must be based on evidence like we see here with Time Well Spent. We look forward to continuing to support the Vision, and to supporting the voluntary sector to create and embed necessary changes to make volunteering rewarding and accessible for all.

Volunteering is critical to a vibrant and resilient civil society. We hope that the data and insights in this report will help you to help volunteers get the best from their roles and make an even bigger impact in their communities. I wish you all the best with your volunteering endeavours.

The Rt Hon Stuart Andrew MP

Minister for Civil Society

1. Introduction

Overview

This section introduces our research. It explains the research context, aims, methodology and scope, and defines key terms used throughout the report.

1.1. About the Time Well Spent research programme

Time Well Spent is NCVO's biggest research programme on people's experiences of volunteering. With a better understanding, we aim to provide rich and practical insights that will inform practice and policy, address knowledge gaps, and generate new evidence.

Our first report, Time Well Spent: A national survey on the volunteer experience, was published in 2019 and based on 2018 survey data of 10,103 adults across Great Britain. It explored volunteer participation, motivations and barriers to volunteering, the quality of people's experiences, and the impact of volunteering.

We published a further four reports between 2019 and 2022, which focused on different areas of interest, based on the original data and additional qualitative research:

- Time Well Spent: Employer-supported volunteering
- Time Well Spent: Diversity and volunteering
- Time Well Spent: Volunteering in the public sector
- Time Well Spent: Impact of covid-19 on the volunteer experience.

Time Well Spent 2023 is the first of a new series of reports, based on another large-scale, nationally representative survey we conducted during November and December 2022. This time we heard from 7,006 members of the public in Great Britain (more detail in the Appendix). We also surveyed a boost sample from respondents who are part of ethnic minority communities, but their responses are yet to be analysed and reported on, and are therefore not covered in this report.

Time Well Spent 2023 has been designed to compare with the original 2019 survey. It also aims to complement existing research such as the government's 2021/22 Community Life Survey and many recent projects by academic and voluntary sector partners, some of which are cited in this report.

The original Time Well Spent series came out of an identified need to fill a gap in research and evidence, namely an in-depth understanding of the experience of volunteers. This new series

continues the same focus, building particularly on the initial findings from our Time Well Spent: The impact of covid-19 on the volunteer experience report, released in 2022.

1.2. Context of this research

Since the last Time Well Spent survey was carried out, among other events, we have seen an economic and political crisis, a global pandemic, and increased support for social justice movements. These have inevitably impacted the way people volunteer.

Covid-19

The outbreak of covid-19 in 2020 forced organisations to drastically rethink the way people volunteer and the activities they get involved in. For some, this included moving towards more virtual volunteering, or changing the nature of volunteering so people could deliver essential services.

Volunteers had an unprecedented sense of purpose in local communities, and the boundaries between formal volunteering (unpaid help to groups, clubs and organisations) and informal volunteering (unpaid help to individuals who are not a relative) became more blurred, especially with the rise of mutual aid groups[1]. In its blog on the future of mutual aid groups, LSE (The London School of Economics and Political Science) estimates there are around 4,300 mutual aid groups in the UK.

A significant part of this report focuses on the experience of recent volunteers, defined as those who have given unpaid help in the last 12 months, covering the period from November/December 2021 to November/December 2022. This was a period of transition, spanning a time with some restrictions (for example, face masks and limits on large scale events) still in place in December 2021 in response to the Omicron variant, to the lifting of all official restrictions (in February 2022 in England and March 2022 in Scotland and Wales), including the need to self-isolate. Free mass testing stopped in spring 2022. In the summer, mass events that had been cancelled in previous years started again, and the rest of the year largely saw society return to 'normal'.

An abundance of research has been dedicated to the impact of the pandemic on volunteering, including projects such as:

- Respond, Recover, Reset: The voluntary sector and covid-19
- Time Well Spent: Impact of covid-19 on the volunteer experience.

[1] A mutual aid group is 'a volunteer-led initiative where groups of people in a particular area join together to support one another, meeting vital community needs without relying on official bodies'.

Many of these projects give a mixed picture and the full effects are yet to be seen.

While the pandemic may have the most lasting impact on volunteering in recent history, other events and changes have also affected the voluntary sector and volunteering.

Brexit

There is an estimated shortfall of 330,000 workers resulting from Brexit, according to recent research cited in this Financial Times article. This poses a capacity and recruitment challenge for the voluntary sector.

Global movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo

These have put a spotlight on issues relating to equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). In the Respond, Recover, Reset research report published in July 2021, almost three-quarters (74%) of voluntary organisations surveyed said they had plans to address EDI in their organisation, and 59% of these had revised their EDI approach since March 2020.

The outbreak of the Ukraine war

This saw the public mobilise in a time of crisis, with Guinness World Records citing record-breaking donations to the Disasters Emergency Committee, and tens of thousands of people volunteering to host over 100,000 Ukrainian refugees.

The cost of living crisis

This has had a major effect on society, and in turn a huge ongoing impact on volunteers and charities across the country. High inflation has created a surge of people needing support from voluntary organisations. At the same time, voluntary organisations have been grappling with their own increased costs, especially in light of rising energy prices and fewer donations. The Charities Aid Foundation explores the latter in its UK Giving Report 2023.

Evidence of the impact and scale of the cost of living crisis is still being gathered, but we have seen a negative impact on the wellbeing of service users, staff and volunteers. This impact is explored in more detail in Volunteer Scotland's bulletin: The Cost of Living and Wellbeing Crisis: Impact on volunteering and volunteers, and in our Road Ahead 2023 series.

A fundamental change in how we work

ONS data shows that throughout 2022, two in five adults (35–40%) worked from home at some point in the past seven days. And our Time to Flex: Embracing flexible working report highlights a growing interest in how to implement more flexible working in voluntary organisations, for both paid staff and volunteers.

How we socialise has changed

As explored in this article by the Guardian, since the covid-19 pandemic outbreak we have seen a decrease in the number of people going out and a rise in the number of people staying at home. It is still unclear if these trends will fully bounce back to pre-pandemic levels.

1.3. Overall aims

We want everyone involved in volunteering to have a positive experience. But we can only improve experiences if we can measure and understand them. The government's Community Life Survey helps us understand what volunteering looks like at a national level. Our Time Well Spent research goes beyond this, and was funded specifically to provide an in-depth exploration of the experience of volunteers.

This latest Time Well Spent report recognises the significant change in the external context since the original survey, and the need to understand its impact on volunteering and the volunteer experience. This research therefore focuses on the following key question:

What does volunteering and, in particular, the volunteer experience look like now?

We explore aspects such as:

- motivations to volunteer
- enablers and barriers to volunteering (including among people who do not volunteer)
- satisfaction of volunteers
- perceptions of volunteer management and organisations that involve volunteers
- the impact of volunteering on volunteers.

As part of this, we explore what has and has not changed since the last Time Well Spent survey (2019). In section 1.5 we explain how we will refer to the previous and most recent survey throughout the rest of this report.

From our findings, we aim to identify learnings and questions that can shape how we make volunteering a quality experience for everyone.

1.4. Our approach

The findings in this report are based on a survey of 7,006 adults aged 18 and over in Great Britain, through YouGov's online panel. The sample was recruited to be nationally representative according to key demographics including age, gender, education level and social grade. The survey ran from 23 November to 6 December 2022. Read the Appendix for more detail on the methodology, sample and limitations.

In order to make comparisons between the 2019 and 2023 surveys, we kept most of our questions consistent across both surveys. However, some questions were amended to reflect the current volunteering context. This included questions about participation, which were changed to include informal volunteering, as well as some specific questions linked to the covid-19 pandemic. We explain these changes further in the Appendix.

Where there are limitations as a result of these changes, we highlight them in this report. We have also brought in wider research to support these findings where necessary. To mitigate the impact of questionnaire changes, we kept our survey population and recruitment methods consistent across both time periods.

Throughout the report, we only report differences that are statistically significant.

1.5. Definitions of terms used throughout this report

Our understanding of volunteering is constantly evolving, and its definition is different for different people. For consistency and comparability, this report follows the definition of formal and informal volunteering given in the Community Life Survey:

- **Formal volunteering**: unpaid help someone gives to groups, clubs or organisations.
- **Informal volunteering**: unpaid help someone gives another person who is not a relative, and which is not given through a group, club or organisation.

We wanted to make the survey as accessible as possible so that respondents could present their experience accurately. While we use the term 'volunteering' throughout the report, in the survey we used the phrase 'unpaid help'. This helped ensure that people did not limit their responses to one type of volunteering.

We also refer to different types of volunteers:

- **Recent formal volunteers**: people who have given unpaid help through a group, club or organisation in the last 12 months. At the time of fieldwork, this referred to the period between December 2021 and November 2022. Note that if someone gives their time to multiple organisations, in this report the findings relate to their main experience of volunteering, unless stated otherwise.
- **Lapsed volunteers**: people who have not given unpaid help in the last 12 months, but have in the last three years.
- **Non-volunteers**: people who have never volunteered, or have not volunteered in the last three years.

The fieldwork for the two Time Well Spent surveys was carried out in 2018 and 2022. But for consistency we will refer to them under the year each respective report was published: 2019 and 2023.

1.6. Scope of this report

As with the 2019 survey, we gathered so much data that it would not be possible to share all our findings in a single report. This report will therefore be the first in a series of different outputs based on this dataset.

This report focuses primarily on formal volunteering (volunteering through groups, clubs and organisations), so we can draw comparisons between our findings in 2019 and 2023. We know that informal volunteering played an important role during the pandemic, so we also included it in this year's survey. However, we will explore it in a subsequent report.

This report also mainly explores the collective experience of volunteers, but includes specific analysis of different demographics and types of volunteering where findings are noteworthy. To address our particular interest in the experience of ethnic minority communities, we have included a boost sample in this year's survey. However, we will analyse and report on this separately.

1.7. Acknowledgements

The Time Well Spent 2023 report series has been funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. In addition to the financial support, NCVO is grateful for the department's support and contributions.

Additional thanks go to Kim Donahue and Véronique Jochum for their research and writing contributions, Bradley Fern from NCVO for data analysis support, and to Catherine Goodall, Chris Walker and Helen Tourle from NCVO for reviewing the final report.

2. At a glance

Overview

This report outlines the findings from our latest Time Well Spent research. It explores what volunteer participation and experiences looks like in 2023, against a backdrop of five years of significant external change. And it considers how we can use this insight to improve volunteering. This section summarises our main research findings, broken down by each section of the report. It's useful for those short on time.

Volunteer participation

Section 3 highlights key ways in which people give unpaid help and explores how this has changed over recent years.

Summary of key findings

- Wider data shows a trend of decline in formal volunteer participation. In our Time Well Spent 2023 research, the impact of the pandemic is evident in the decline in certain volunteering activities. These include raising money or taking part in sponsored events (11% in 2019 to 6% in 2023).
- Volunteers continue to contribute to a range of causes, but most commonly to local community and neighbourhood groups (21% of recent volunteers), reflecting the surge of local activity in the pandemic.
- Public sector volunteering has increased from 17% in 2019 to 23% in 2023, likely due to initiatives such as NHS Responders.
- Volunteering remotely is now commonplace. Almost a third of volunteers (31%) say they volunteer online or over the phone. This is one of the most common ways in which people volunteer. 18% of recent volunteers do their volunteering exclusively remotely. Volunteering remotely is more common among disabled, compared with non-disabled people[2].

Volunteer motivations and values

Section 4 considers what motivates volunteers, and explores aspects of volunteering that volunteers and prospective volunteers believe are important.

[2] Please see the Appendix for definitions for disabled and non-disabled people.

Summary of key findings

- While significant external events have affected many aspects of volunteering, the core motivation of 'wanting to improve things / help people' has not changed between 2019 and 2023.
- For both volunteers and non-volunteers, 'making a difference' is reported as the most important aspect of volunteering. 'Not feeling pressured to give time' comes second.
- Motivations and values vary by demographic. For example, a quarter (25%) of 18 to 24 year olds are motivated to volunteer because they think it will help them with their career or to gain a qualification.

Volunteer experience and impact

Section 5 looks at volunteers' experiences and the impact volunteering has on them. It considers overall satisfaction rates but also includes more detailed findings on the experiences of different demographics.

Summary of key findings

- 92% of recent formal volunteers say they are very or fairly satisfied with their volunteering experience. This is down slightly from 96% in 2019. They report positive impacts on their lives. This includes 89% saying they enjoy it and 75% saying it has improved their mental health and wellbeing.
- While high overall, satisfaction continues to be lower among certain groups. Younger volunteers are less likely to be satisfied than older volunteers, with the most striking gap among those who are 'very satisfied' (30% of 18 to 24 year olds vs 66% of those aged 55 years or older). Additionally, public sector volunteers are less satisfied than those volunteering for civil society organisations (87% satisfied vs 94%). Disabled volunteers are also less satisfied than non-disabled volunteers (88% vs 94%).
- The proportion of volunteers who agree that those giving unpaid help come from a wide range of backgrounds dropped from 73% in 2019 to 67% in 2023.
- Encouragingly, satisfaction rates are equal among recent volunteers who volunteer by phone or online and those who do not (92% of people from both groups are satisfied).
- Practices around reimbursing expenses remain variable. Just over half (55%) of recent formal volunteers say that their group, club or organisation would reimburse expenses, and an additional 16% say that they do not know. The proportion of volunteers who feel like their volunteering is too much like paid work, and that they have unreasonable expectations placed on them, has increased over time (19% to 26%, and 17% to 24% respectively).

- More volunteers are using their skills in their volunteering than before, professional and otherwise. However, disabled volunteers are more likely to feel they have more skills to offer than the ones they currently use.

Volunteer retention

Section 6 explores why people continue or stop volunteering. Our research includes lapsed volunteers.

Summary of key findings

- The likelihood of people continuing to volunteer over the next 12 months has dropped slightly, from 80% in 2019 to 77% in 2023.
- The top three reasons for people continuing to volunteer reflect the motivations people cite for starting to volunteer. The group, club or organisation they help (46%), the difference they are making (46%), and commitment to the cause (41%) are the top reasons.
- The main reason for people saying they are unlikely to continue volunteering is having less time due to changing circumstances (37% of those unlikely to continue).
- While most people cite practical reasons for stopping volunteering, only a quarter (25%) of dissatisfied volunteers say they are likely to continue. Conversely, three-quarters (76%) of satisfied volunteers say they are likely to continue. Therefore, volunteer experience still matters for retention.

Barriers and enablers to volunteering

Section 7 considers things that are stopping people from volunteering, and might encourage them to get involved.

Summary of key findings

- The primary barrier to volunteering among non-volunteers is not wanting to make an ongoing commitment. 34% of non-volunteers cite this.
- Flexibility is valued highly. Flexibility on the time committed (30%) and flexibility about the way people give their unpaid time (26%) are the top things that would encourage non-volunteers to give unpaid help.
- The negative financial impact of volunteering is an increasing concern. The percentage of participants who gave 'I'd be worried I might end up out of pocket' as a reason for not getting involved rose from 5% in 2019 to 14% in 2023. This was higher among 18 to 24 year olds (18%).

- Almost three in 10 (28%) non-volunteers state that 'nothing in particular' would encourage them to get involved. Other ways non-volunteers say they would be encouraged to participate include if someone asks them directly to get involved (15%), and if they know what volunteering opportunities are available to them (12%).

Final reflections

In section 8, we share our overall thoughts on our research findings, including some of the questions they raise for discussion and debate.

Summary of key findings

We have a lot to celebrate

The high overall satisfaction rate of volunteers (92% feel 'very' or 'fairly' satisfied) is testament to the hard work of volunteer managers and others who have supported them through the last few challenging years. Encouragingly, those who volunteer online or by phone are as satisfied as those who do not. They also feel as much of a sense of belonging.

Some things haven't changed

Despite the impact of significant external events on the day-to-day operations of volunteers, the 'core' of what gets people involved is the same as it was in 2019. Ultimately, people volunteer to make a difference, and because they are connected to the cause, group and organisation they choose to volunteer for. However, involvement also has to work practically for volunteers.

We have more work to do

Along with reasons to celebrate, the research findings raise challenges. They highlight signs of declining participation, satisfaction and likelihood to continue volunteering.

The continued lower satisfaction among young people is worrying, especially when looking to the future and in the context of some older volunteers not coming back post-pandemic. It is also disappointing that despite efforts in equity, diversity and inclusion, satisfaction remains lower among disabled volunteers, and a lower proportion of volunteers consider those volunteering around them to be from a wide range of backgrounds.

It is unsurprising that an increasing concern about being out of pocket has become a barrier to volunteering, but this needs to be addressed. The findings also indicate that a lack of flexibility is another key barrier. But most volunteers are happy, in practice, with the flexibility they are offered, so there is an opportunity to showcase this, along with positive experiences of remote volunteering.

There are opportunities to bring people into volunteering
The pressure that volunteers have been under in recent years, and its impact, is evident in this report. We need to acknowledge this.

Actively asking and showing people how they can volunteer may seem obvious, but it can provide a key route in for those not already involved. While these findings have not changed since 2019, they are arguably more important now than ever, especially in the context of a declining trend in volunteer participation.

We need to renew our focus on providing quality volunteer experiences
As we bring people into volunteering, we need to focus on offering and providing them with a quality experience, ensuring volunteering is still 'time well spent'. We also need to reflect on what we can learn from recent years, so we can address challenges while seizing opportunities.

The last few years have shown us how quickly the volunteering landscape can change, and we should continue to expect changes ahead as we settle into the post-covid 'new normal'. The Vision for Volunteering is a 10-year collaborative project designed to create a better future for volunteering. In helping us prepare for the future of volunteering, the Vision is taking exciting steps to propel the voluntary sector and volunteers in a new direction.

There's more to consider
Based on our findings, there are some key questions for volunteer-involving and voluntary infrastructure organisations to consider:

1. How can we remain versatile and continue to adapt to inevitable changes ahead, using lessons learned from the last few years?
2. How can we celebrate and keep showing appreciation for the difference our volunteers make?
3. How do we renew efforts to improve equity, diversity and inclusion?
4. How can we address practical barriers to volunteering and, in particular, review and communicate our expenses policies?
5. How can we create more opportunities to ask people to get involved, and showcase our flexible volunteering opportunities?

Reflections and questions for policy makers include:

1. Volunteering is essential to our society, and we see here real challenges and opportunities. What role do national and local governments play in supporting and enabling volunteering? How can governments work in partnership with the voluntary, public and private sectors to improve engagement and reduce barriers? We explore some of these questions in a report

published in 2021: Volunteering in England During Covid-19: The policy response and its impact.

2. What short-term and long-term policy initiatives would best support the sector to act on our findings? How can legislation, regulation and funding be targeted over the coming years to reduce and remove barriers to volunteering? This is particularly important for younger people, disabled people and people who experience racism and discrimination.
3. Volunteer expenses pose a significant barrier for many volunteers, particularly young people. Are there opportunities to explore how changes to mechanisms like the Approved Mileage Allowance Payment rate could encourage more people to volunteer?

3. Volunteer participation

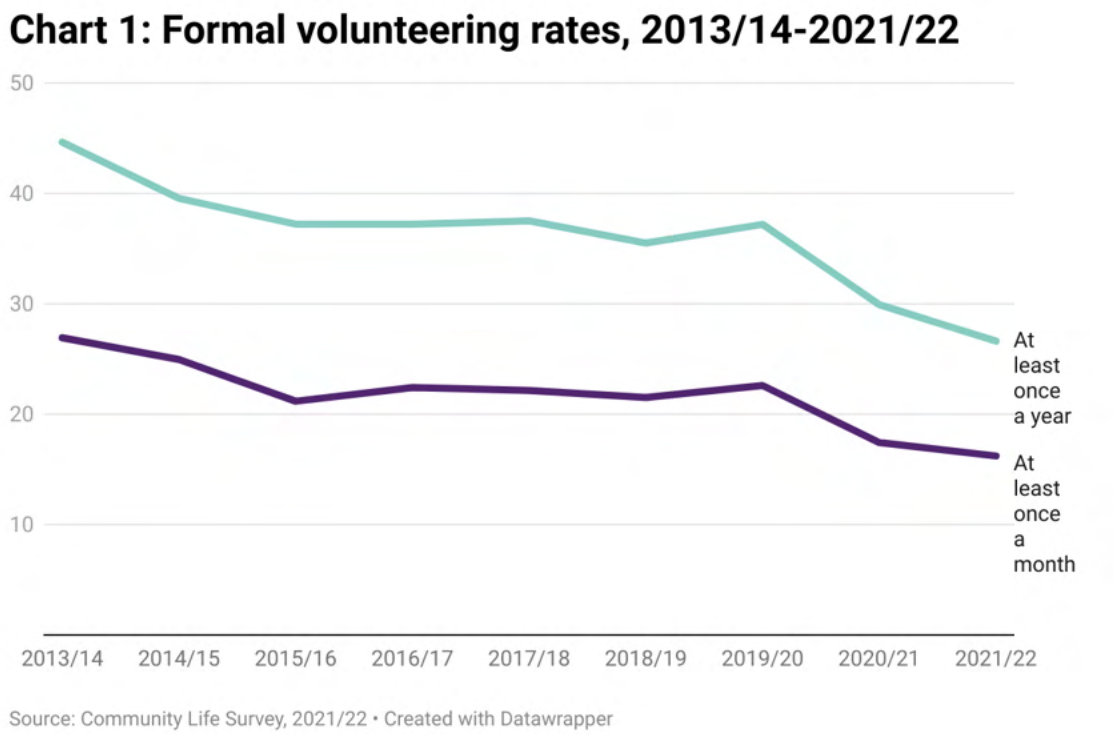
Overview

This section highlights key ways in which people give unpaid help and explores how this has changed over recent years. It draws on wider research, as well as the Time Well Spent surveys.

3.1. How has volunteer participation changed?

A decline in some volunteering activities is likely to be an inevitable impact of the pandemic, but it could indicate a wider trend.

Recent data has shown us that, overall, participation in formal volunteering has fallen in the last few years. The findings from the government's Community Life Survey shows this clearly. Results from the 2021/22 Community Life Survey show the most notable drop: from 23% of the UK population volunteering formally at least once a month in 2019/20, to 16% in 2021/22. See data in chart 1.



The Respond, Recover, Reset project, which involved surveying voluntary sector organisations during the pandemic, also showed overall decreases in formal volunteering. 40% of respondents stated that the range of activities undertaken by their volunteers had reduced. And 40% of organisations reported a decrease in the intensity of volunteering, including volunteers being available less frequently and for a shorter amount of time.

In our Time Well Spent 2023 findings we see that participation in some key volunteering activities[3] has fallen, including:

- raising money or taking part in sponsored events (11% in 2019 to 6% in 2023)
- organising or helping to run an activity (14% to 7%)
- campaigning on behalf of a group, club or organisation (8% to 4%).

As the survey covers a period where covid-19 restrictions were in place (see section 1), it is likely these changes reflect the impact of the pandemic on volunteering activities. This is likely to be particularly the case for sponsored events, which may have been slower to return to 'normal'.

While the pandemic was a seismic moment, chart 1 highlights a steady decline in formal volunteering since 2013/14. It remains unclear whether formal volunteering rates will rebound in the years ahead or if the most recent drop marks a more significant shift in volunteer behaviour, accelerating an existing trend.

Another factor to consider is that we know the pandemic saw a rise in different types of volunteering, and this has blurred some of the boundaries between informal and formal volunteering (read section 1.2).

Wider research shows the covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on who volunteers.

The Community Life Survey found that in 2020/21 the number of respondents aged between 25 and 34 who formally volunteered at least once a month was lower than respondents in every other age group (10% vs between 14% and 23% for other age groups). Age groups that were most and least likely to volunteer did not change, but participation rates were lower across every age group than in 2019/20.

The Respond, Recover, Reset: The voluntary sector and covid-19 report, which explores research on the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on voluntary organisations, highlighted decreases in volunteering among specific demographic groups during the pandemic. For example, 31% of the organisations surveyed experienced a decrease in the number of people aged 50 years or older who volunteered for them.

[3] Where respondents volunteer for more than one organisation, our findings reflect their participation across all their volunteering activities.

18% of the respondents also reported a drop in disabled volunteers, and 9% reported a drop in the number of volunteers who identify as Black, Asian or minority ethnic. Data from the Understanding Society study, which captures life in the 21st century, also highlighted a decline in participation. This was particularly the case for elderly people, who were more likely to quit volunteering.

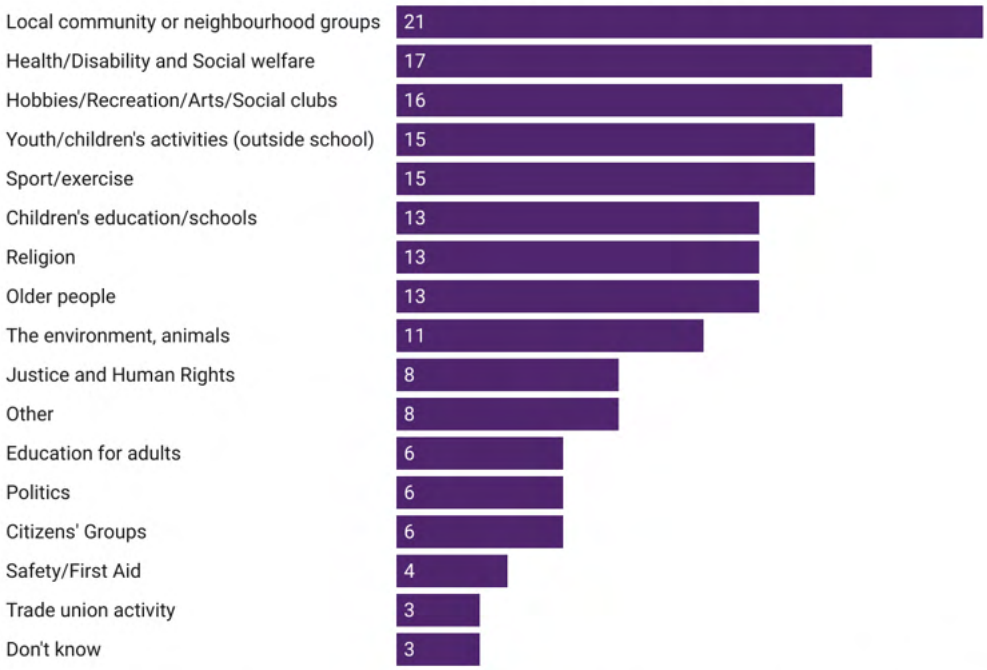
Volunteering in England During Covid-19: Current issues and learning for recovery, a joint report by NCVO and partners, presents a more mixed picture. It indicates that in some ways the pandemic brought more diverse and new people to volunteering. On the other hand, it amplified and created new barriers to volunteering, which led to some groups (such as disabled people) being less likely to return to volunteering.

3.2. What causes do volunteers contribute to?

Volunteers continue to contribute to a range of causes, most commonly to local community and neighbourhood groups.

Our 2023 Time Well Spent data, as shown in chart 2 (below), highlights the variety of areas or causes volunteers give their time to. If respondents volunteered for more than one organisation, this chart shows the cause they gave most unpaid help to. Survey respondents could select more than one area.

Chart 2: Area or cause the organisation is involved in



Base: All GB adults who volunteered formally in the last 12 months (1,278) Note: Respondents could select more than one answer

Chart: Source: Time Well Spent 2023 • Created with Datawrapper

The most common areas or causes are:

- local community and neighbourhood groups (21%)
- health, disability and social welfare (17%)
- hobbies, recreation arts and social clubs (16%).

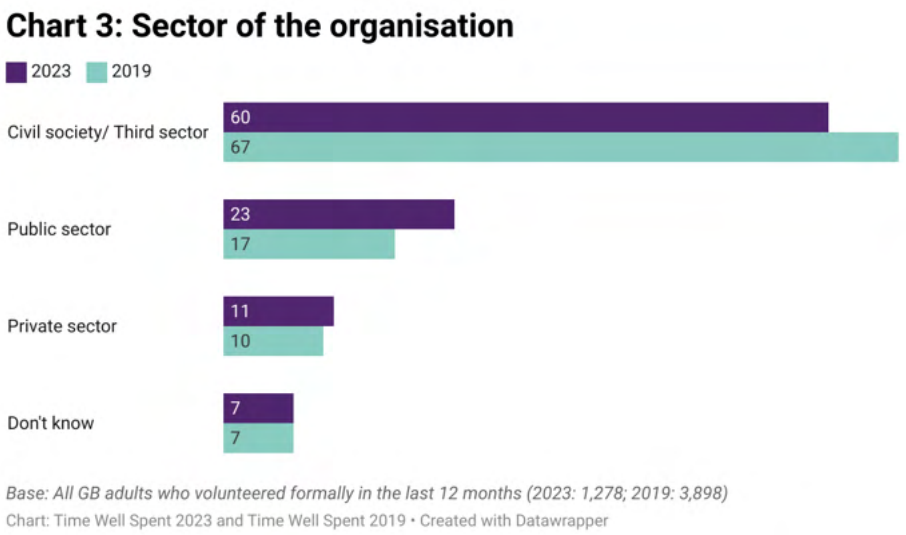
These were also the top areas or causes in 2019.

The most recent data shows a gap has formed between the percentage of people volunteering for local community and neighbourhood groups, and the percentage of people who volunteer to support hobbies, recreation arts and social clubs. These causes were equally popular in 2019, with 20% of respondents selecting each area.

This change is likely to reflect the rise in local activities and new organisations during lockdowns cited in this working paper by Mobilising Voluntary Action, especially through mutual aid groups. The focus on local-based activity is also shown by over three quarters of volunteers (76%) saying they volunteered in the UK in their own neighbourhood. Some covid-19 restrictions that were in place until spring 2022 (see section 1) may also have impacted volunteering activities related to hobbies, recreation arts and social clubs.

Public sector volunteering has increased, reflecting specific opportunities for the public over the last few years.

In 2023, our Time Well Spent data shows 60% of recent volunteers report giving unpaid help to civil society organisations (for example, charities, voluntary organisations and community groups) as their main organisation. However, there is an increase in the proportion of people who volunteer in the public sector, from 17% in 2019 to 23% in 2023. See chart 3 (below). This is likely to reflect widely marketed volunteering opportunities led by the government, including NHS Responders.



As in 2019, 7% of respondents say they do not know which sector they volunteer in. We know that volunteers often find it difficult to correctly identify the sector of their organisations. This may have been exacerbated by volunteering initiatives launched during the pandemic (such as the covid-19 vaccination programme), which often involved a mix of sectors.

3.3. How has remote volunteering changed?

Remote volunteering is now common, and disabled people continue to be more likely to volunteer in this way.

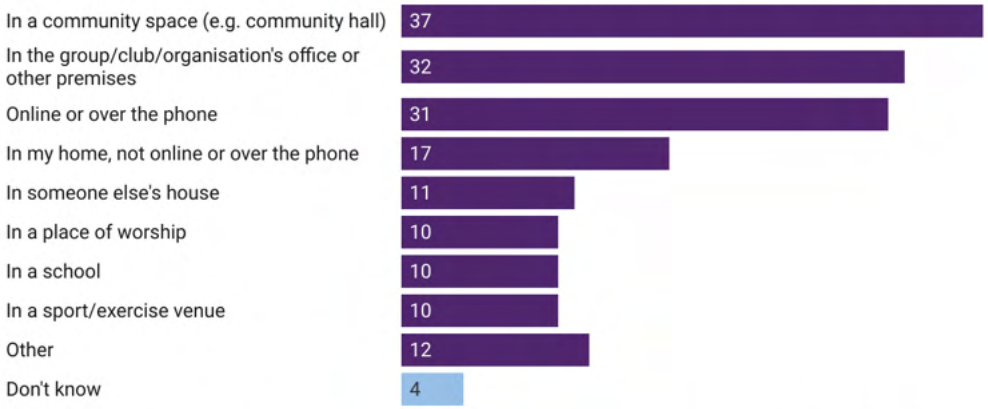
Our 2019 Time Well Spent data showed that volunteers often did a mix of online and offline activities as part of their volunteering. There were some signs that virtual volunteering was on the rise.

Our 2023 findings show that it has become common for people to volunteer remotely, online or over the phone.[4] Remote volunteering is the third most common 'place' for people to volunteer, with just under a third of respondents (31%) saying they volunteer this way (see chart 4, below). It comes behind 'in a community space', such as community halls (37%), and 'in their group's premises' (32%).

These findings are not surprising given the need to shift away from face-to-face activities during the pandemic at an unprecedented scale and speed. In the Respond, Recover, Reset research study, 92% of organisations reported moving services online as a result of the pandemic.

[4] The questions we asked about remote volunteering in our 2023 survey differ from those included in our 2019 survey. Please see the Appendix for more details.

Chart 4: Place(s) where volunteering activities carried out



Base: All GB adults who volunteered formally in the last 12 months (1,278). Note: Respondents could select more than one

Source: Time Well Spent 2023 • Created with Datawrapper

Of the people who do at least some of their volunteering online or over the phone, 59% say they do it exclusively this way. This equates to 18% of recent volunteers. Those who say they volunteer exclusively online, as opposed to both online and by phone, is much lower (5% of recent volunteers).

Consistent with our findings in 2019, disabled people continue to be more likely than non-disabled people to do at least some of their volunteering activities remotely. In 2023, 36% of disabled people cite volunteering online or over the phone compared to 29% of non-disabled people.

These findings reinforce other recent research that focuses on inclusive volunteering and disabled people, Volunteering Together: Inclusive volunteering and disabled people. It highlights the way technology can be an enabler as well as a leveller for disabled volunteers, allowing disabled people to volunteer in a way that suits their needs.

4. Volunteer motivations and values

Overview

This section considers what motivates volunteers, and explores aspects of volunteering that volunteers and prospective volunteers believe are important.

4.1. What motivates people to volunteer?

Wanting to make a difference remains the primary motivation to volunteer.

In our 2019 Time Well Spent research, the main reason people started volunteering was to make a difference. This remained largely the same in 2023 (see chart 5, on page 24). 'I wanted to improve things/help people' remains the top reason to start volunteering (40%), followed by the cause being important (34%), and having spare time (31%). As indicated in 2019, this combination of personal and practical motivations seems to be the key for engagement.

Making a difference is the top reason people give for being likely to continue volunteering[5] (46%), alongside the group, club or organisation itself (also 46%). For more information, see section 6. The similar findings between 2019 and 2023 highlight that while the impact of the pandemic and other external factors have affected many aspects of volunteering, the core motivations for volunteers have not changed.

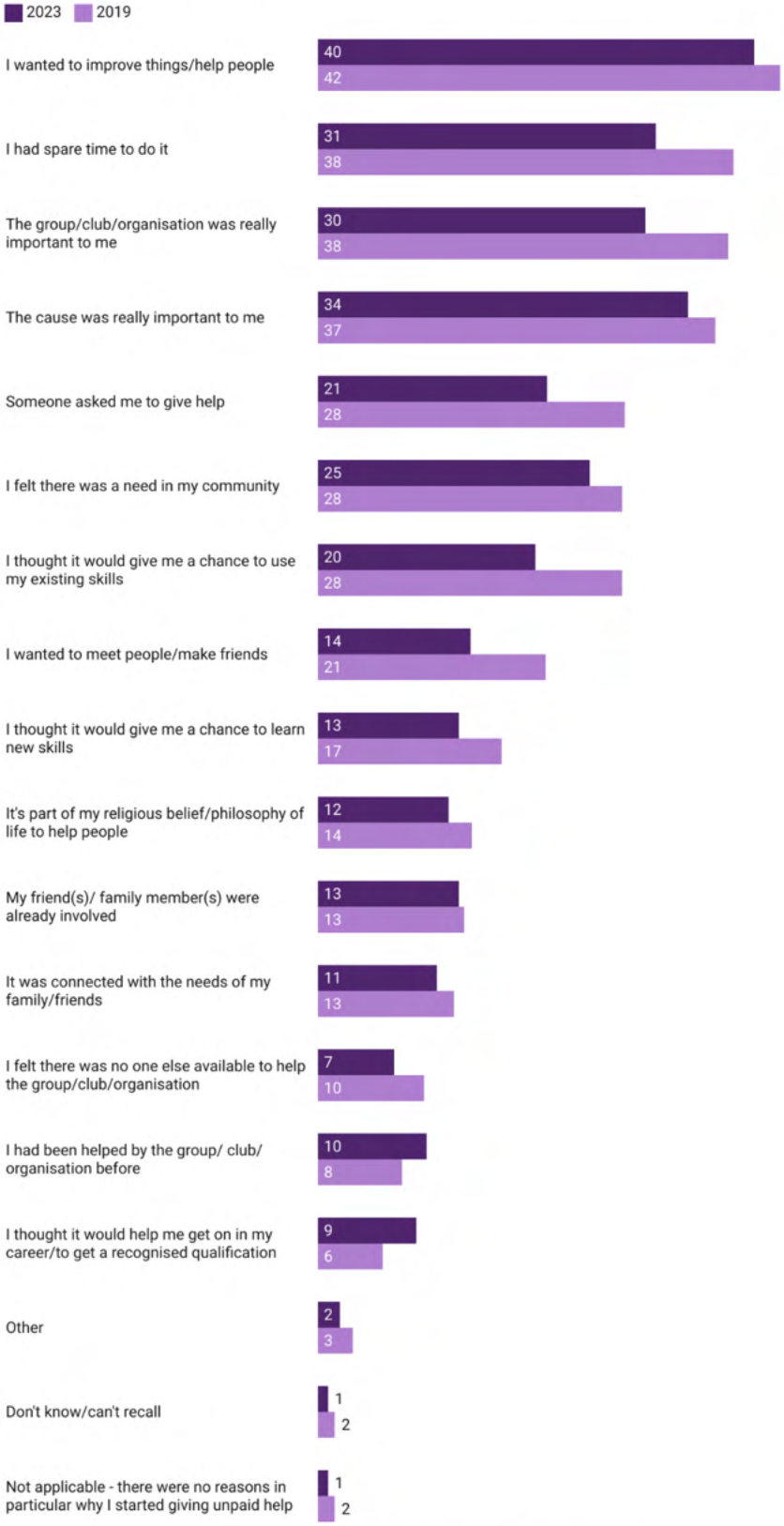
As well as being the primary motivation for volunteers to start and continue their volunteering, other data from our survey confirms the importance of making a difference to prospective, as well as current, volunteers.

For the 2023 survey, we developed 10 statements that address different aspects of volunteering, and we asked respondents to rate each one.[6] They were not asked about their own volunteer experience, but about their general attitudes to and perception of what is important to volunteering. Note this was not asked in 2019, so there is no comparative data. The results, summarised in chart 6 (see page 25), show that people see making a difference as the most important aspect of volunteering (with a result of 4.57). This aligns with it being a primary motivation for people, as above. Being able to influence the group is considered least important, with a score of 3.77.

[5] Respondents could choose up to three reasons.

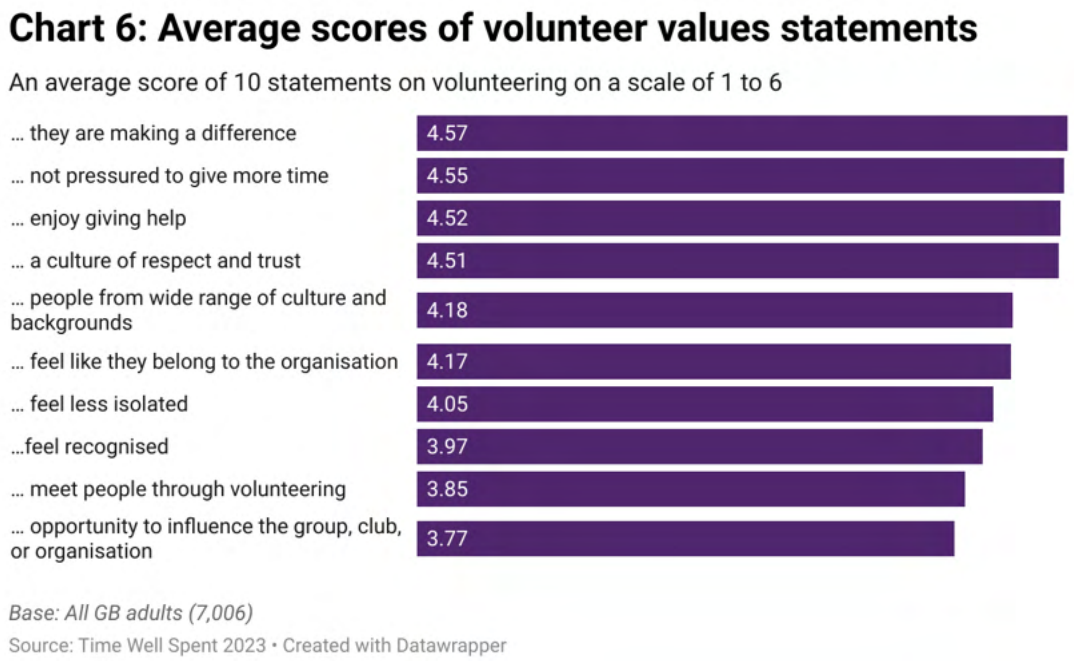
[6] We used a six-point scale for this question. 1: Not at all like me. 6: Very much like me. We explain how we presented and analysed this question in the Appendix.

Chart 5: Motivations for first getting involved in volunteering with the organisation



Base: All GB adults who volunteered formally in the last 12 months (2022: 1,424; 2018: 3,898) Note: Respondents could select up to five responses

Source: Time Well Spent 2023 • Created with Datawrapper



Not feeling pressured for their time is important to current and prospective volunteers.

Wanting to make a difference is seen as the most important aspect of volunteering. But 'not feeling pressured to give time' (see chart 6) follows as the second most important statement to survey respondents (4.55). This suggests that while people are committed to wanting to make a positive impact, it is important for them to feel they are giving their time freely. In section 5 we consider how volunteering can impact people negatively, where it feels too much like paid work, or volunteers believe unreasonable expectations are placed on them.

4.2. How do motivations vary by demographic?

Motivations and values vary by demographic, especially age. This reflects individual priorities, life stage and context.

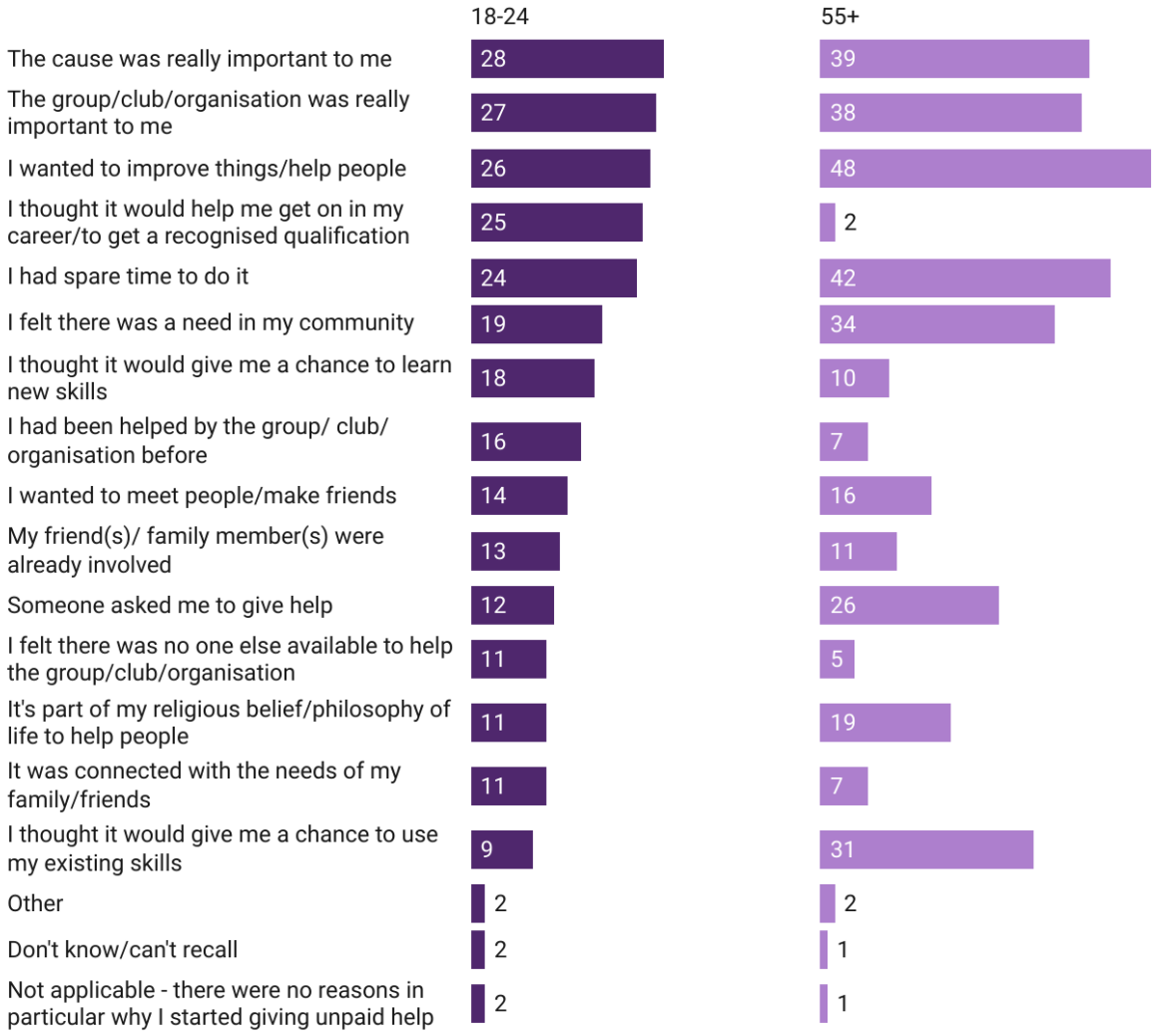
While there is a consistent core motivation that drives the majority of volunteers, a one size fits all approach is not likely to be effective for attracting prospective volunteers. Different groups prioritise different things. This is particularly noticeable in our Time Well Spent 2023 research in relation to age (see chart 7, on page 26).

One of the most common motivations for the youngest age group (18 to 24 year olds) to volunteer is to help them progress in their career or gain a recognised qualification. A quarter (25%) cite this. Older volunteers (aged 55 years and over) are much more likely to respond to the feeling of a need in their community (34%), or someone asking them to give help (26%). This compares to 19% and 12% of 18 to 24 year olds respectively.

Social affluence affects motivations. People from more affluent social groups (ABC1[7]) are more likely than people from less affluent social groups (C2DE) to be motivated to start volunteering because they want to improve things or help people – (43% versus 35%). However, this was among the top motivations for both groups. Finally, women are more likely to say that the cause is important to them (41%) than men (28%).

Chart 7: Motivations for first getting involved in volunteering with the organisation - by age

% in each age group



Base: GB adults aged 18-24 (200) and 55+ (475) who volunteered formally in the last 12 months

Source: Time Well Spent 2023 • Created with Datawrapper

[7] Please see the Appendix for more information about the classifications used for different social groups.

5. Volunteer experience and impact

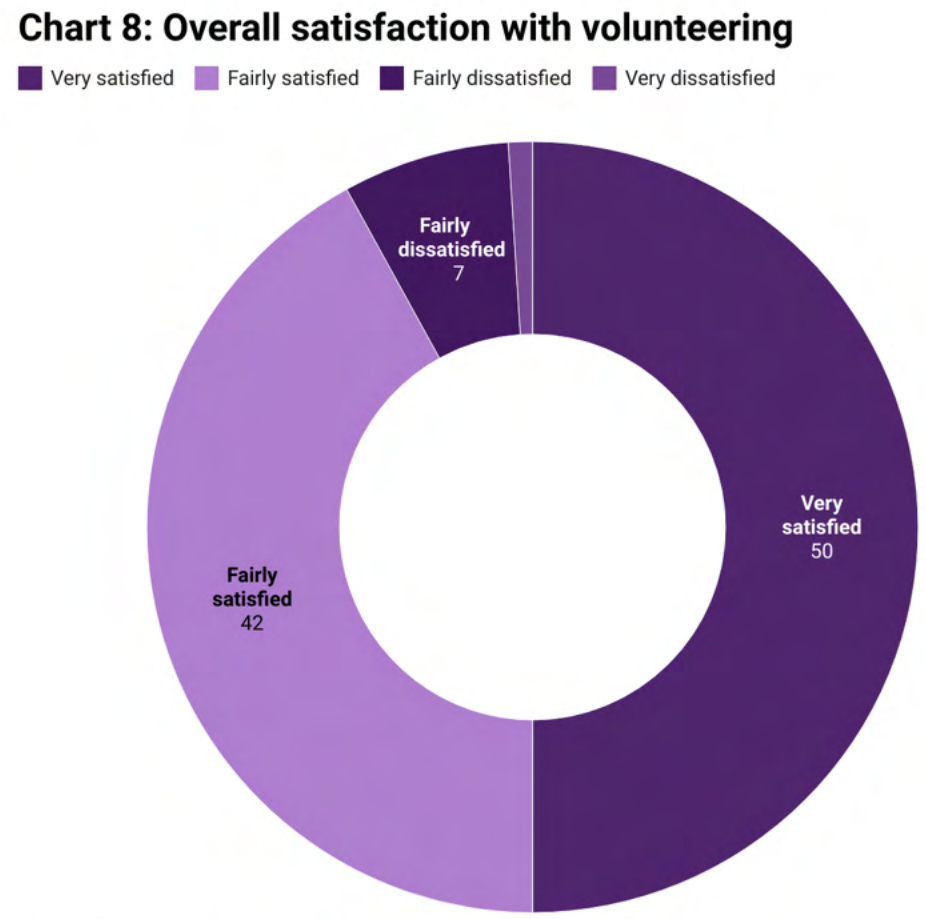
Overview

This section looks at volunteers' experiences and the impact volunteering has on them. It considers overall satisfaction rates but also includes more detailed findings on the experiences of different demographics.

5.1. What does overall volunteer satisfaction look like?

Most people are satisfied with their volunteering experience and report a positive impact on their lives.

Among our 2023 Time Well Spent survey respondents, 92% of formal volunteers who have given unpaid help in the last 12 months say they are very or fairly satisfied with their volunteering experience (this question focused on their main volunteering experience if they were involved in more than one). See chart 8.

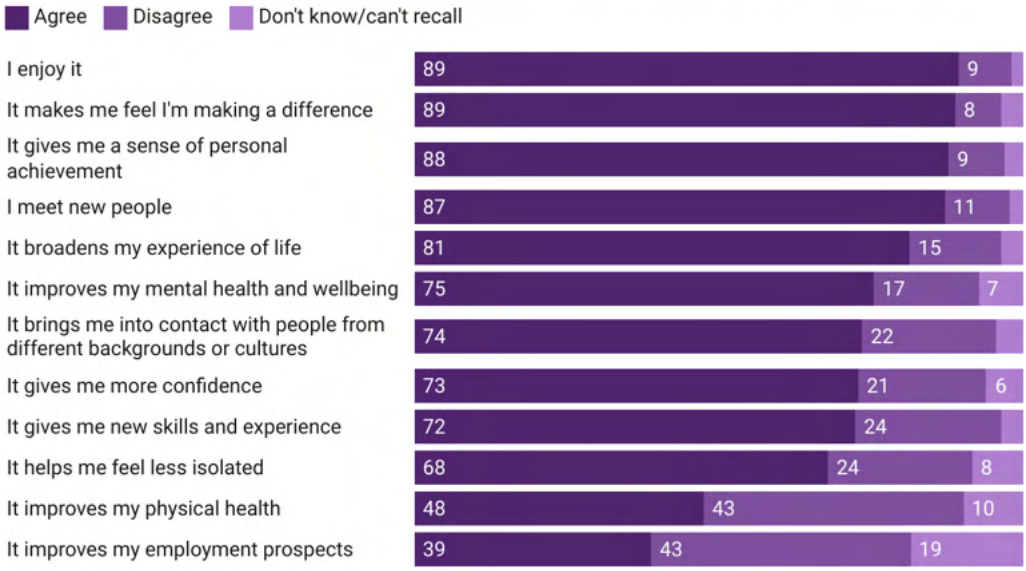


Base: All GB adults who who have formally volunteered in the last 12 months (1,278)

Source: Time Well Spent 2023 • Created with Datawrapper

Volunteers report positive impacts on their lives such as enjoyment (this was the case for 89% of respondents), making a difference (for 89%), a sense of achievement (for 88%), and increased social connection (for 87%). This is shown in chart 9 (below). Three-quarters of recent volunteers (75%) say volunteering improves their mental health and wellbeing. We saw in section 4 how some of these impacts, such as making a difference and enjoyment, are also the aspects of volunteering that people consider to be most important.

Chart 9: Impact of volunteering on volunteers



Base: All GB adults who volunteered through a group, club or organisation in the last 12 months (1,278)

Source: Time Well Spent 2023 • Created with Datawrapper

Perceptions of volunteer management reflect overall satisfaction. The majority of volunteers have positive views, when prompted, on aspects such as a culture of respect and trust (86% agree), the 'right amount' of communication from the organisation (77% agree) and the group, club or organisation being flexible around the time someone gives (82% agree).

However, since 2019, overall volunteer satisfaction and the likelihood of people continuing to volunteer have declined slightly.

While satisfaction is high, in 2019 it was higher, with 96% of volunteers saying they were very or fairly satisfied with their experience (vs 92% in 2023). Similarly, in 2019 80% of recent volunteers said they were likely to continue volunteering in the next 12 months. Our latest research shows this figure has dropped to 77%. A more detailed breakdown can be found in chart 10, on page 29.

Chart 10: Overall satisfaction with volunteering 2023 vs 2019

Base: All GB adults who who have formally volunteered in 2023 (1,278) & 2019 (3,898)
Source: Time Well Spent 2023; Time Well Spent 2019 • Created with Datawrapper

5.2. How does satisfaction vary by demographic?

Satisfaction remains lower among younger volunteers, disabled volunteers and people volunteering in the public sector.

Satisfaction with volunteering remains high, but some groups are less likely to be satisfied than others. A number of key groups stand out, including younger volunteers (18 to 24 year olds), disabled volunteers, and people volunteering in the public sector. We saw a similar trend in 2019, but satisfaction has fallen across all three groups.

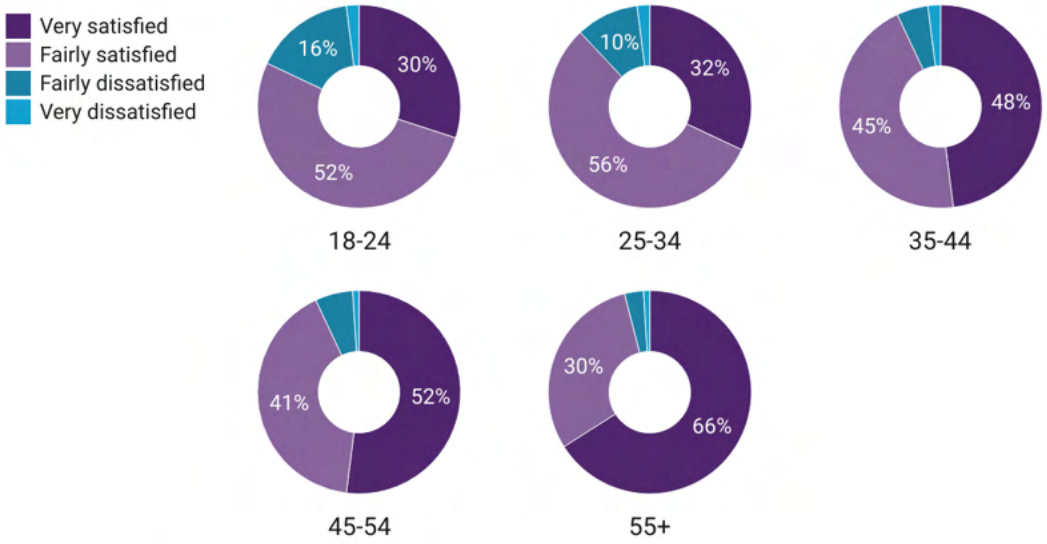
Differences between younger and older volunteers

- Younger volunteers are less satisfied than their older counterparts. In 2023, 82% of 18 to 24 year olds are satisfied with their volunteer experience, compared to 96% of volunteers aged 55 years and over. This gap is most visible for those who are 'very' satisfied (30% of 18 to 24 year olds vs 66% of people aged 55 years and over).
- Younger volunteers are less likely to continue volunteering than their older peers (59% of 18 to 24 year olds vs 86% of people aged 55 years and over).
- In 2019, younger volunteers were also less satisfied than older volunteers. However they were still very positive, with 94% of 18 to 24 year olds reporting they were 'very' or 'fairly' satisfied (vs 82% in 2023).

See chart 11, on page 30.

Chart 11: Satisfaction with volunteering - by age

Base: All GB adults who volunteered formally in the last 12 month - by age (18-24: 200; 25-34: 194; 35-44: 231; 45-54: 179; 55+: 475)



Source: Time Well Spent 2023 • Created with Datawrapper

Differences between public sector and civil society volunteers

- In 2023, public sector volunteers are less satisfied than those volunteering for civil society organisations (87% of public sector volunteers vs 94% of civil society volunteers).
- In 2019, public sector volunteers were also less satisfied than their civil society counterparts, but a higher proportion were 'fairly' or 'very' satisfied (94% in 2019, vs 87% in 2023). As we saw in section 3, there has been a rise in the number of public sector volunteers since 2019.

Differences between disabled and non-disabled volunteers

- In 2023, disabled volunteers are less satisfied than non-disabled volunteers (88% of disabled volunteers report being satisfied with their experience vs 94% of non-disabled volunteers). 10% of disabled volunteers feel their volunteering has negatively impacted their health and wellbeing.
- Disabled volunteers are less satisfied in 2023 than they were in 2019 (93% of disabled volunteers were satisfied in 2019 vs 88% in 2023).

Recent research with disabled volunteers, Volunteering Together: Inclusive volunteering and disabled people, also highlighted that while most felt largely positive about their experience,

many encountered significant challenges. These challenges included practical barriers, as well as cultural and attitudinal barriers from the public, organisations, paid staff or other volunteers.

Volunteers' perceptions of diversity among fellow volunteers have fallen.

In 2019 our research suggested volunteers from ethnic minority communities were less satisfied than their white counterparts (our findings were inconclusive due to low numbers of respondents).

Our data in 2023[8] indicates a similar trend, with 93% of white volunteers satisfied, compared with 78% of Black, Mixed or Asian volunteers. However, our follow up research with a larger group of volunteers from ethnic minority communities will explore their experience further.

Furthermore, a lower proportion of volunteers say that those volunteering alongside them are from a wide range of backgrounds. This figure has fallen from 73% in 2019 to 67% to 2023.

These figures reflect volunteer perception, not actual diversity data. As seen in section 3, research shows a mixed picture on the impact of the pandemic on diversity and inclusion.

Nonetheless, these findings highlight the need for continued efforts in this area. Against the backdrop of global anti-racism movements, we have seen a number of sector-wide, concerted efforts to tackle the lack of diversity and representation, explored in our joint report: Respond, Recover, Reset: The voluntary sector and covid-19. We also explore this in our Time Well Spent: Diversity and volunteering report.

5.3. How has remote volunteering affected experiences?

Encouragingly, remote volunteering has not negatively affected satisfaction, perceptions of support, or feelings of belonging.

As we explored in section 3, volunteering remotely (online or over the phone) is now increasingly common. But what impact has this had on volunteer satisfaction?

Our Time Well Spent: Impact of covid-19 on the volunteer experience report presented a mixed picture of volunteer experience. Encouragingly, in our latest data we see volunteering virtually has not impacted volunteer satisfaction. Satisfaction rates in 2023 are equal among people who volunteer exclusively by phone or online and those who volunteer exclusively in person (both 92% satisfied). Both groups also feel similar levels of support (82% and 81% respectively).

[8] The base size (number of survey respondents) for Black, Mixed or Asian volunteers in our 2023 data was 122. We also conducted dedicated research using a larger 'boost' sample of ethnic minority communities, which will provide more detailed findings about their experiences. We will share these findings in autumn 2023.

Interestingly, people who volunteer exclusively online have an even higher level of satisfaction (98%) and positive perception of being supported (89%).

In 2019, our data showed that people who volunteered exclusively online felt less of a sense of belonging compared with those who did not. In 2023, this imbalance has shifted. People who volunteer exclusively by phone or online[9] are now more likely to feel a sense of belonging compared to those who do not (88% vs 82%). A feeling of belonging is even higher for those who volunteer exclusively online (92%). There may be a number of reasons for this, including the rise in the use of programmes like Zoom and Teams to help keep volunteers connected.

In 2019 people who exclusively volunteered online were more likely to perceive tensions and conflicts in the organisation they volunteered for. This trend remained the same in 2023 (41% of people volunteering exclusively by phone or online agreed with this statement, vs 28% of people who do not volunteer online or by phone). The difference was present, but not as marked for those volunteering exclusively online (35%).

This could be because people interact with each other differently online, over the phone, and face-to-face. A 2021 study on workplace interactions by Portland State University commented how in a remote working world, incivility could go 'more easily unchecked as people hide behind Zoom boxes or chat messages'. The study states that a lack of body language or tone of voice may also contribute.

5.4. What do volunteers think about the entry process?

While most volunteers feel happy with the entry process, over a third of 18 to 24 year olds expect it to be quicker.

Recent volunteers have positive views of the entry process, with 86% agreeing the process of getting involved is 'easy and straightforward'. However, one in five (20%) say they 'expected the process of getting involved to be quicker'.

In 2019, we highlighted that younger people in particular expected a faster entry process, with 22% of 18 to 24 year olds agreeing they expected the process to be quicker. In 2023, this figure has jumped to 33%.

[9] The questions we asked about remote volunteering in our 2023 survey differ from those included in our 2019 survey. Please see the Appendix for more details.

5.5. How do volunteers feel about the way their volunteering is managed and supported?

Most volunteers continue to feel well supported and know how to raise an issue.

Our latest data shows 81% of volunteers feel well supported and 83% know how to raise an issue if needed. This is a testament to the volunteer managers who adapted throughout lockdowns, for example, to provide continuing support to volunteers.

Volunteering in England During Covid-19: Current issues and learning for recovery, a joint report by NCVO and partners, notes that supporting the mental health and wellbeing of volunteers has been a key focus for volunteer managers during and since the pandemic. In particular, this research highlights a focus on 'reassurance and building confidence' and supporting volunteers whose roles may have changed.

Most volunteers feel recognised for their efforts, but younger volunteers feel less valued (and value recognition more).

In 2023, four in 10 (40%) recent volunteers feel it is important to receive recognition for the help they give; a similar proportion to 2019 (39%). Interestingly, this is higher for younger people – 49% of 18 to 24 year olds and 46% of 25 to 34 year olds agree with this statement.

In reality, most are happy with the recognition they receive. In 2023, 82% of volunteers agree they feel recognised enough for their volunteering, compared to 84% in 2019. However, this is lower among younger respondents. Just 69% of 18 to 24 year olds and 76% of 25 to 34 year olds feel recognised for their volunteering, compared with 89% of volunteers aged 55 years or older.

Together, these findings show that younger people place greater importance on recognition but feel less recognised (and, as shown in section 5.2, they also have lower levels of satisfaction overall). These findings indicate that placing importance on recognising volunteers' contributions could help create a positive experience overall, especially for younger volunteers. This might be through celebratory events such as Volunteers' Week, or through regular communications highlighting the value of volunteers.

Practices around reimbursing volunteer expenses still vary.

In 2023, just over half (55%) of recent formal volunteers say that their group, club, or organisation would reimburse volunteer expenses if they want them to. An additional 16% do not know whether expenses would be reimbursed. When asked, 10% say they have experienced

being out of pocket. Our 2019 report painted a similar picture, suggesting practices and communications around expenses have not changed. See chart 12.

Chart 12: 'The organisation would reimburse me for any expenses if I want them to' - 2023 vs 2019

Base: All GB adults who who have formally volunteered in 2023 (1,278) and in 2019 (3,898)

Source: Time Well Spent 2023 • Created with Datawrapper

The cost of living crisis has had a profound financial impact on volunteers and organisations. Volunteer Expenses: The true cost to charities, a report published in 2021 by the charity vHelp, noted that 44% of organisations said that ensuring volunteers get paid expenses was a problem. Shifting out of Reverse, a survey of charities published by Pro Bono Economics and the Nottingham Trent University, showed that a third of charities (34%) cited the cost of living crisis as an issue for volunteer retention. Expenses are likely to play a more significant role in the experience of volunteers now than in 2019. We explore this from the perspective of prospective volunteers in section 7.

An increasing number of people feel the group, club or organisation they volunteer for places unreasonable expectations on them and feels too much like paid work.

Since 2019, there has been a slight increase in the number of volunteers who think their volunteering is becoming too much like paid work (19% in 2019 vs 26% in 2023). We have seen a similar increase in the number of volunteers who believe their group, club or organisation has unreasonable expectations in terms of what they do (17% in 2019 vs 24% in 2023). When asked directly about the negative effects of volunteering, volunteers' most common concerns were that volunteering can take up too much time (13%) and that volunteers feel pressured to do more than they would like or to continue their involvement (10%). We saw a similar trend in 2019.

There may be a number of other reasons for this increase over time. For example, the increase in remote volunteering and time spent time on digital devices may have contributed to feelings of volunteering being more 'work-like'. However, our data did not establish this correlation.

Although we have not seen a dramatic increase in these feelings, a number of factors indicate that volunteer-involving organisations should pay attention to these findings. First, as we saw in section 4, not feeling pressured to give time is one of the most important aspects of volunteering for volunteers and non-volunteers alike. Therefore, feeling pressured to give time is likely to affect the overall satisfaction of volunteers.

We know from our Time Well Spent: Impact of covid-19 on the volunteer experience research that many volunteers experienced fatigue and burnout during the pandemic. Volunteering and Wellbeing in the Pandemic, a joint report by WCPP (The Wales Centre for Public Policy), WLGA (The Welsh Local Government Association), and WCVA (the national body for voluntary organisations in Wales), highlights challenging, stressful, and potentially traumatic experiences for some volunteers. This is particularly the case for those in direct contact with ill or vulnerable groups.

5.6. To what extent do volunteers use their skills in their volunteering?

More volunteers are using existing skills in their volunteering, but many disabled volunteers feel they have more to offer.

In 2019, half (50%) of recent volunteers reported using their professional skills in their volunteering and 52% told us they used non-professional skills. This increased to 60% and 63% respectively in 2023. At the same time, the proportion of volunteers who say they 'have skills and experience they do not use, but would like to' went down from 16% in 2019 to 12% in 2023. This indicates that more volunteers are contributing skills in the way they would like, which is positive news.

Less positive, however, is that disabled volunteers are more likely to say they have skills that they do not use but would like to. We saw a similar trend in 2019. Almost one in five (19%) disabled volunteers who reported that their day-to-day activities were limited in some way because of a health problem or a disability 'a lot' agreed felt they had underused skills, compared with just 11% of non-disabled people.

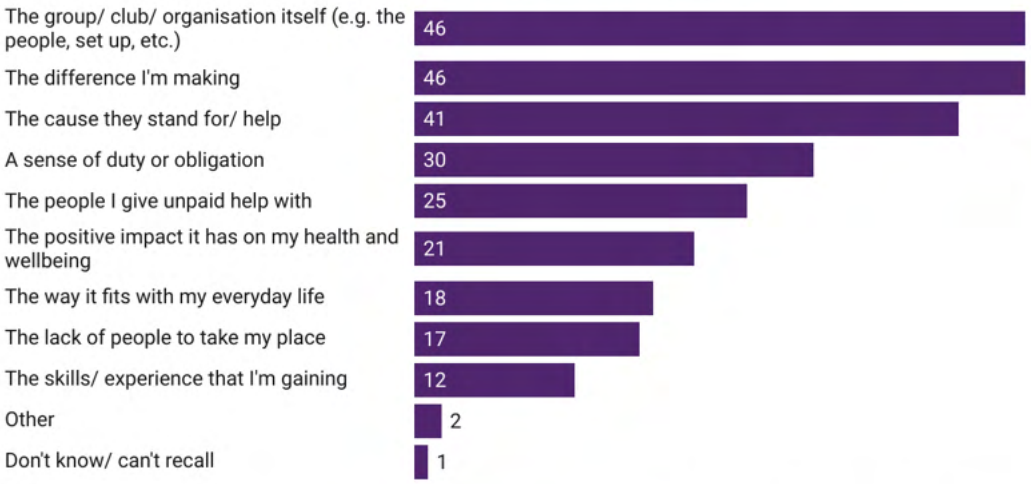
6. Volunteer retention

Overview

This section explores why people continue or stop volunteering. Our research includes lapsed volunteers.

Most people are motivated to continue volunteering for the same reasons that initially led them to volunteer. Chart 13 (below) shows the key reasons why people continue to volunteer. The group/club/organisation they help (46%), the difference they are making (46%), and their commitment to the cause (41%) are volunteers' top motivators. These reflect the reasons volunteers gave for initially signing up to volunteer, as set out in section 4, and have largely not changed since 2019.

Chart 13: Reasons volunteers give for being likely to continue volunteering in the next 12 months



Base: GB adults who volunteered formally in the last 12 months who said they were very or fairy likely to continue volunteering in the next 12 months (982) Note: Respondents could select up to 3

Source: Time Well Spent 2023 • Created with Datawrapper

6.1. Why do people stop volunteering?

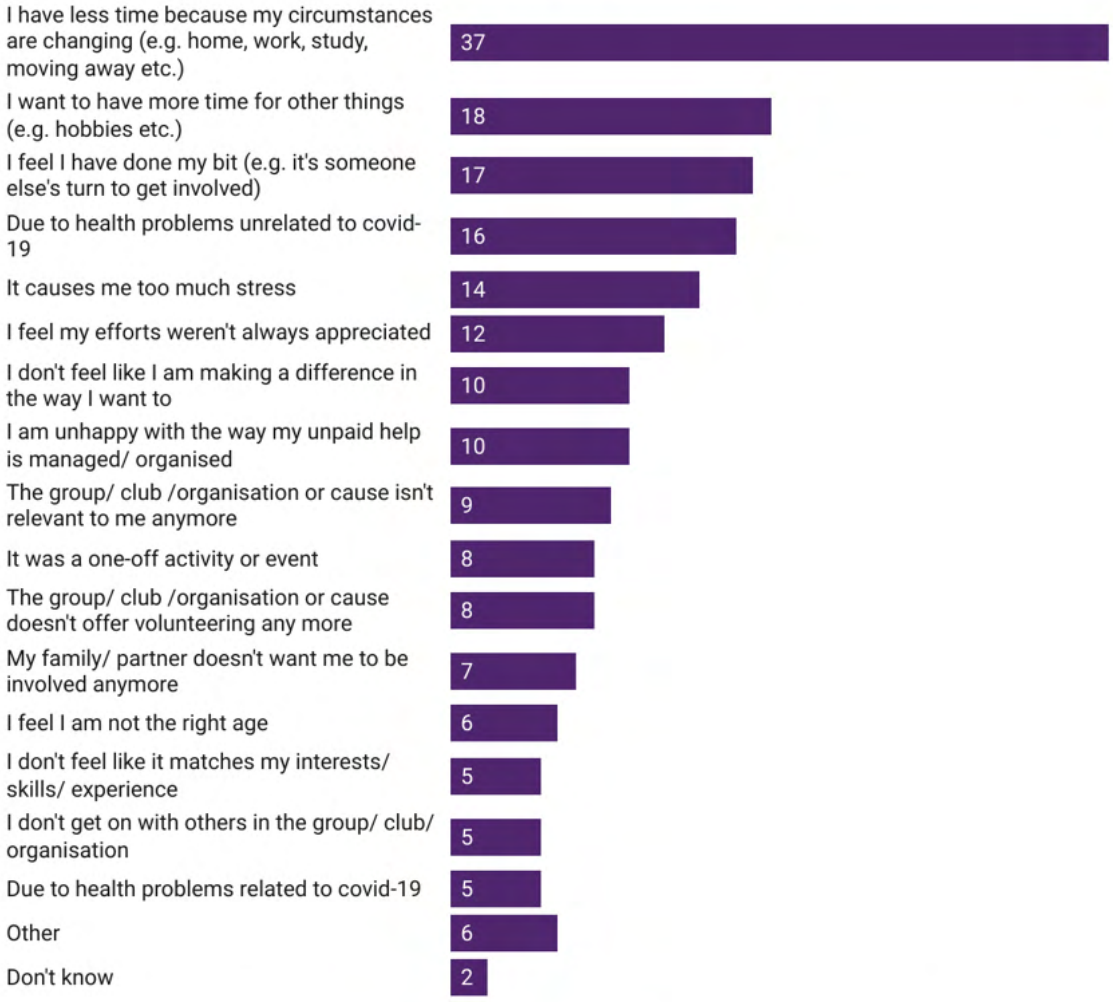
'Changing circumstances' is the main reason volunteers give for being unlikely to continue, but stress-related reasons are on the rise.

Volunteers who say they are unlikely to continue volunteering tend to cite practical, rather than experiential, reasons for doing so. Over a third (37%) of those unlikely to continue volunteering cite 'having less time due to changing circumstances' as a reason. See chart 14, on page 37. Only 10% choose not to continue because they are unhappy with the way their volunteering is organised or managed.

Since 2019, we have also seen a slight rise in the proportion of volunteers citing 'It causes me too much stress' as a reason for not continuing (from 9% in 2019 to 14% in 2023). As we have seen in section 5, in 2023 more volunteers feel unreasonable expectations are being placed on them, which may relate to fatigue and burnout during the pandemic years. These experiences may be contributing to increased levels of stress, and therefore also affecting retention.

More recent research indicates volunteer wellbeing continues to be an issue. Shifting out of Reverse, a survey of charities published by Pro Bono Economics and the Nottingham Trent University, has found that more charities believe their volunteers' wellbeing has declined over the past 12 months than believe it has increased.

Chart 14: Reasons for not being likely to continue volunteering in the next 12 months



Base: All GB adults who volunteered in the last 12 months who said they were very or fairly unlikely to continue volunteering in the next 12 months (194)

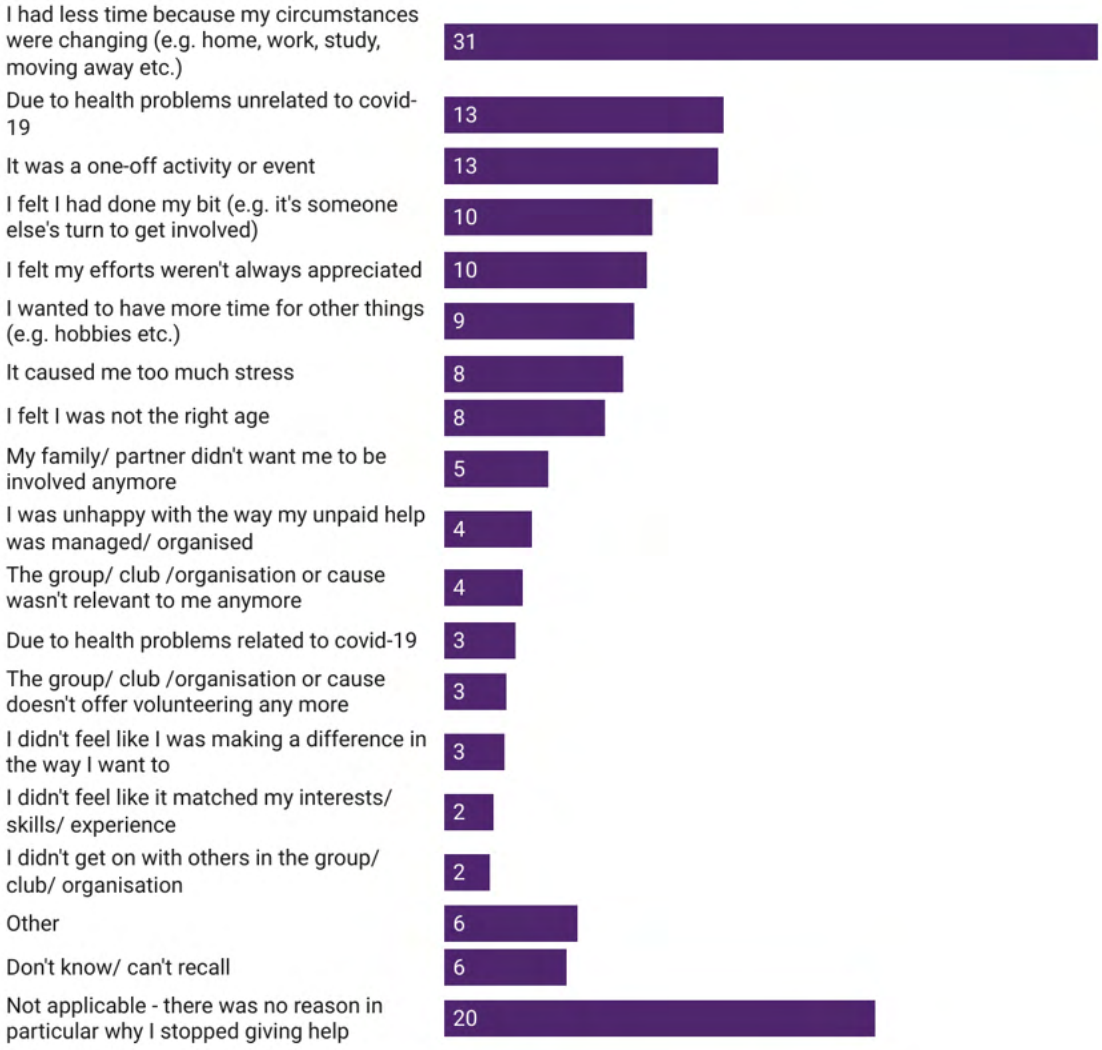
Source: Time Well Spent 2023 • Created with Datawrapper

'Changing circumstances' is also the most common reason that lapsed volunteers stop – though many lapsed volunteers could not give a reason.

When we asked lapsed volunteers (people who had volunteered in the last three years, but not in the last 12 months) why they had stopped, having less time due to changing circumstances was, again, the top reason (31%). Interestingly, the second most common response was 'no reason in particular' (20%). See chart 15 (below).

Few lapsed volunteers cited their volunteering experience as a reason for stopping.

Chart 15: Reasons for lapsed volunteers' stopping formal volunteering



Base: All GB adults who volunteered formally in the last 3 years and stopped in the last 12 months (143)

Source: Time Well Spent 2023 • Created with Datawrapper

6.2. How might volunteers' experiences affect retention?

Volunteer experience still matters for retention.
As we have seen, many volunteers who stop volunteering do so for practical reasons, rather than as a result of negative volunteering experiences. However, it is worth noting that volunteers who are less satisfied are less likely to continue: only a quarter (26%) of dissatisfied volunteers say they are likely to continue. Conversely, 81% of satisfied volunteers say they are likely to continue, and the proportion is even higher for 'very satisfied' volunteers (90%).

In the context of fewer volunteers being likely to continue, and a decline in overall volunteer participation (see section 3), these findings highlight the need for a good quality volunteer experience that retains individuals.

7. Barriers and enablers to volunteering

Overview

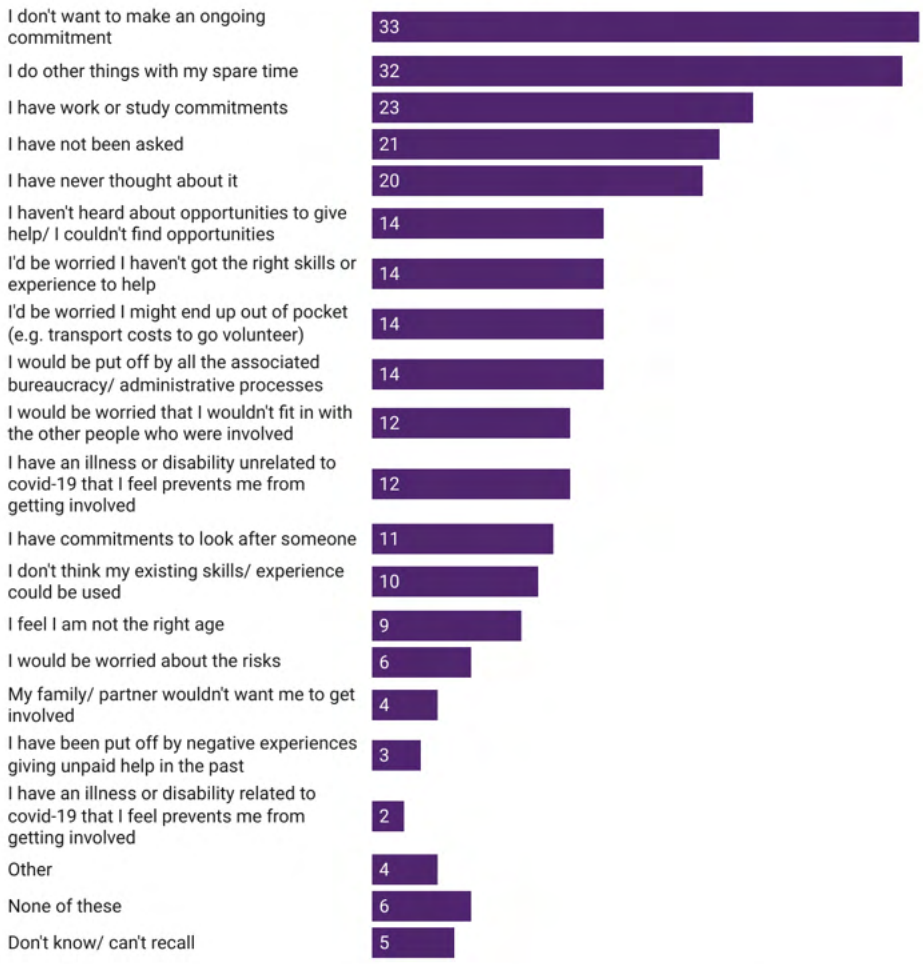
This section considers things that are stopping people from volunteering, and might encourage them to get involved. It focuses on people who have not recently volunteered.

7.1. What stops people from volunteering?

Not wanting to make an ongoing commitment is the primary barrier to volunteering.

We asked people who had not volunteered in the last three years (or ever), what was stopping them. The most common reasons were not wanting to make an ongoing commitment (33%), doing other things with their spare time (32%), and work or study commitments (23%). See chart 16.

Chart 16: Reasons for not volunteering



Base: GB adults who had not volunteered in the last three years or had never volunteered (1,957)

Source: Time Well Spent 2023 • Created with Datawrapper

Our 2019 report revealed similar key barriers, though the order of importance has changed.[10]

People who had not volunteered in the last 12 months, but had looked into it, gave several reasons for not proceeding with their volunteering enquiry. The most common reason was: 'it involved more time than I could commit' (21%). The second most common reasons were: 'there weren't any opportunities available that matched my interest, skills or experience' (14%) and 'it wasn't flexible enough' (14%). These are similar to our findings in 2019.

The negative financial impact of volunteering is an increasing concern.

In section 5, we saw how reimbursing expenses was not commonplace, with only 55% of volunteers saying that their organisation would reimburse them if they asked, and a further 16% unsure. Given the ongoing cost of living crisis, it is unsurprising to see that among non-volunteers, more people are concerned about the financial impact of volunteering.

When asked why they would not volunteer, the number of people who stated: 'I'd be worried I might end up out of pocket (eg transport costs to go volunteer)' rose from 5% in 2019 to 14% in 2023. This figure is even higher among younger people, with almost one in five (18%) 18 to 24 year olds citing it as a reason for not volunteering.

7.2. What would encourage people to volunteer?

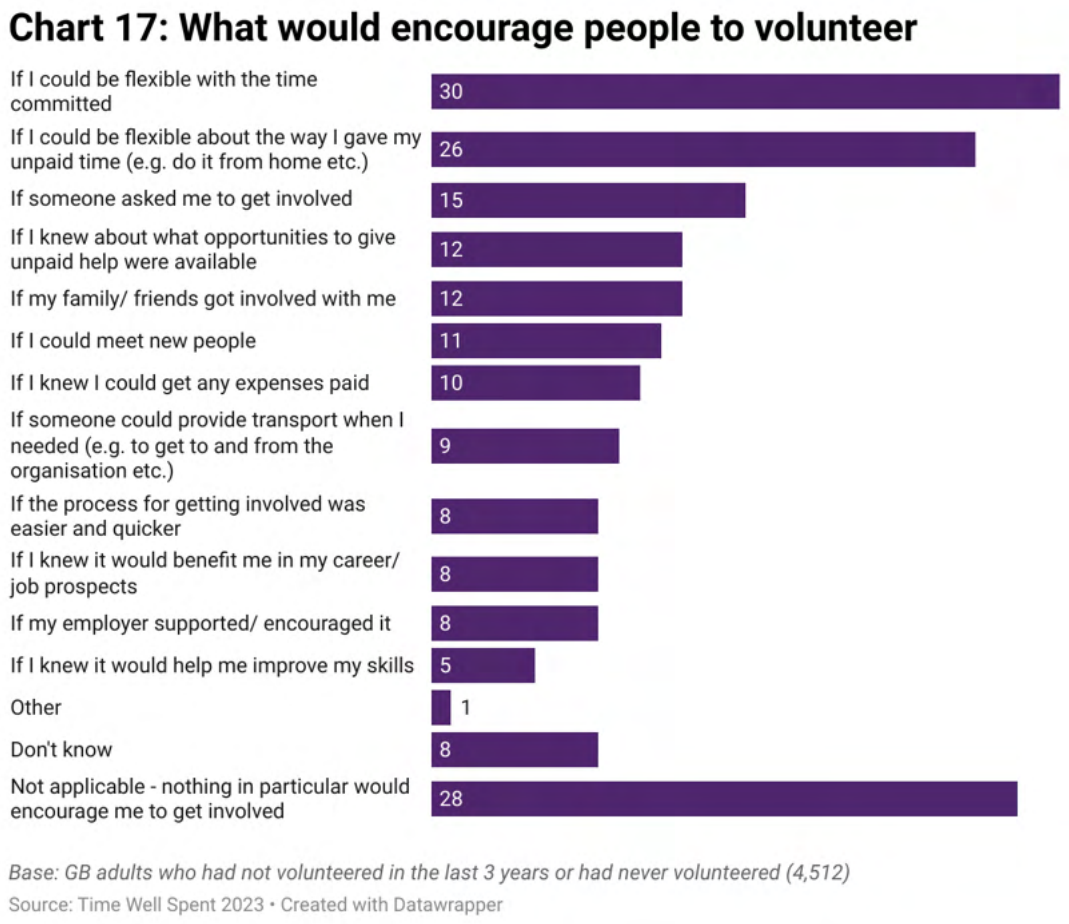
A sizeable proportion of non-volunteers could be encouraged to get involved.

As shown in chart 16, almost three in 10 (28%) of those who had not volunteered in the last three years, or ever, state that 'nothing in particular' would encourage them to get involved. While this shows that there is a proportion of people who may never take up volunteering, it also shows that around seven in 10 could be encouraged.

Prospective and current volunteers value flexibility.

Our research shows that volunteers value flexible opportunities – for many, they make volunteering a more attractive prospect. Volunteering opportunities that allow volunteers to be flexible with how much time they commit (30%) and the way they give their time (26%) are most likely to encourage people who haven't volunteered in the last three years, or ever, to start volunteering. See chart 17, on page 42.

[10] We surveyed a different group of people on this question in 2023 than in 2019. Please see the Appendix for more details.



Concerns about flexibility may be rooted in perception rather than reality. As we saw in section 5, the vast majority of recent volunteers (82%) agree their group is flexible around the time they give.

Expectations around flexibility have already shifted as a result of changes during the pandemic, for both organisations and individuals, and some have adapted better than others. Volunteer Involvement: An introduction to theory and practice, provides an overview of the latest theory and practice for volunteer involvement. It suggests smaller organisations have been particularly good at adapting and being flexible, and larger organisations could learn something from this approach. It is likely that expectations around flexibility will continue to change, as we adjust to a 'new normal'.

Proactively asking and signposting to opportunities may be a helpful first step to encourage people to volunteer.

Aside from flexibility, being asked to volunteer (15%) and knowing what opportunities are available (12%) are among the most likely ways that people could be encouraged to get involved. Therefore, actively asking and showing people how they can help could be a good way engage people not already involved to take part in volunteering.

8. Final reflections

Overview

In this section, we share our overall thoughts on our research findings, including some of the questions they raise for discussion and debate.

8.1. We have a lot to celebrate

Since 2019, when we published our first Time Well Spent report, we have experienced challenging times, both for volunteering and society as a whole. The high satisfaction rate (92%) of people who have volunteered through groups, clubs and organisations across Great Britain is a testament to the hard work of all everyone who supports them – many are volunteers themselves.

Despite radical changes to volunteering, the vast majority of volunteers continue to feel supported, are able to raise issues if they want to, and feel that that organisations are flexible with their time. Encouragingly, those who volunteer online or by phone are as satisfied as those who volunteer face-to-face, and feel as much of a sense of belonging.

8.2. Some things haven't changed

Research data over the years shows us that what motivates volunteers has not changed. Our latest findings highlight that even when significant external events have a huge impact on volunteering, people's core motivators stay the same. People volunteer to make a difference, and because they are connected to the cause, group or organisation they choose to volunteer for. However, practical factors continue to play an important role: volunteers give their time freely and it has to work for them.

8.3. We have more work to do

We must also address the challenging findings this report raises. Overall, rates of volunteering through groups, clubs or organisations have shown signs of decline in recent years. Volunteer satisfaction, while high overall, is also lower than in 2019 – as is the likelihood of someone continuing to volunteer in the next 12 months. This is particularly noticeable for young people who are less positive than their older peers, and less positive than they were in 2019. If we see young people as the future of volunteering, then this is a cause for real concern.

Similarly, disabled volunteers are less likely to be satisfied than non-disabled volunteers. A minority of disabled volunteers even feel that their volunteering negatively affects their health and wellbeing.

Disappointingly, despite efforts in equity, diversity and inclusion, a lower proportion of volunteers see diversity within their volunteer groups. And an initial look at the experience of ethnic minority communities suggests their experience, as in 2019, remains less positive than their white peers'.

While we can see that many of our research findings are similar between 2019 and 2023, we must acknowledge the context has changed – and continues to change. The increasing concern about being out of pocket as a barrier to volunteering is striking, even if it is not surprising against the backdrop of a cost of living crisis. More needs to be done to ease prospective volunteers' concerns. These practical barriers are even more important to address, if we are to improve and not hamper efforts to increase diversity and inclusion.

Similarly, we know the covid-19 pandemic resulted in new expectations around flexibility. The findings in this report indicate that volunteer-involving organisations should actively address concerns about flexibility, as these may be primarily an issue of perception rather than reality (most volunteers agree their group is flexible around the time they give). We have seen that virtual and remote volunteering is common and that these volunteers have a positive experience overall. This may help address misconceptions from those who do not volunteer currently.

Our findings highlight that more volunteers thought unreasonable expectations have been placed on them and that their volunteering has felt too much like paid work. We know that many feel fatigued – even burnt out – after a challenging few years. We should acknowledge and appreciate this.

Actively asking and showing people how they can volunteer may seem obvious, but it can provide a key route in for those not already involved. Focusing on the proactive ways volunteers can be encouraged is arguably more important now than ever. Importantly, as we bring people into volunteering, we need to focus on offering and providing them with a quality experience, ensuring volunteering is still 'time well spent'.

8.4. Things are likely to continue evolving

The findings from this survey focus primarily on respondents' reflections on the period between November/December 2021 and November/December 2022. We can certainly see various impacts of the pandemic on volunteering during this time. The last few years have shown us how quickly things can evolve, and we should continue to expect changes ahead as we settle into the post-covid 'new normal'.

What this future looks like is not clear, especially with so much wider uncertainty. One example of this is remote volunteering: our research shows that volunteering online or by phone is now commonplace – but what will this look like in a year or two? Will the desire for more face-to-

face time and 'Zoom fatigue' cause us to re-think? What will the hybrid world look like and what will it mean for volunteers' experiences?

As we continue to adapt and evolve, it is likely volunteers' expectations will also change. Organisations will need to develop their volunteering offers and continue to be agile to ensure they meet changing expectations. We must acknowledge that remote volunteering is not an option for everyone – some activities will always require face-to-face interaction.

8.5. There's more to consider

In this report, we have analysed new data, primarily in comparison to 2019, about the collective volunteer experience. But there is much more to explore. In particular, we want to understand the experience of volunteers from ethnic minority communities, especially given the number of areas for improvement we have highlighted in this report. We will share these findings in a separate report.

This report has focused on formal volunteering, to reflect our similar focus in 2019. However, we have intentionally included more questions about informal volunteering in our 2023 survey, to reflect the increasingly blurred boundaries between formal and informal volunteering. We will follow up with further analysis on this too.

For now, we hope that the findings prompt fresh thinking– and, importantly, action – to help us prepare for the future of volunteering. Already, the Vision for Volunteering – a 10-year collaborative project designed to create a better future for volunteering – is taking exciting steps to propel the voluntary sector and volunteers in a new direction. The Vision has ambitions in the important areas of awareness and appreciation, power, equity and inclusion, collaboration and experimentation – themes that reflect the findings shared in this report.

Reflections and questions for volunteer-involving and voluntary infrastructure organisations:

1. How can we remain versatile and continue to adapt to inevitable changes ahead, using lessons learned from the last few years?
2. How can we celebrate and keep showing appreciation for the difference our volunteers make?
3. How do we renew efforts to improve equity, diversity and inclusion?
4. How can we address practical barriers to volunteering and, in particular, review and communicate our expenses policies?
5. How can we create more opportunities to ask people to get involved, and showcase our flexible volunteering opportunities?

Reflections and questions for policy makers:

1. Volunteering is essential to our society, and we see here real challenges and opportunities. What role do national and local governments play in supporting and enabling volunteering? How can governments work in partnership with the voluntary, public and private sectors to improve engagement and reduce barriers? We explore some of these questions in a report published in 2021: Volunteering in England During Covid-19: The policy response and its impact.
2. What short- and long-term policy initiatives would best support the sector to act on our findings? How can legislation, regulation and funding be targeted over the coming years to reduce and remove barriers to volunteering? This is particularly important for younger people, disabled people, and people who experience racism and discrimination.
3. Volunteer expenses pose a significant barrier for many volunteers, particularly young people. Are there opportunities to explore how changes to mechanisms like the Approved Mileage Allowance Payment rate could encourage more people to volunteer?

9. Appendix

Overview

This appendix provides further information about our survey methodology, along with other technical details.

9.1. Sample, quota, and fieldwork dates

We commissioned YouGov to recruit a nationally representative sample of 7,000 adults aged 18 years or older in Great Britain via an online panel. The responding sample is weighted to the profile of the sample definition (see table 1, on page 48) to provide a representative reporting sample. The total sample size was 7,006 adults. All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. NCVO analysed the data independently.

The table shows sampling quota for each of the demographics. The survey data was then weighted to the marginal region, social grade and age, gender, and educational-level distributions. All the percentages presented in this report are based on weighted data.

The fieldwork took place from 23 November to 6 December 2022. The survey was carried out online and lasted approximately 15 minutes. 8,043 started the survey, and 7,082 completed it, resulting in a completion rate of 88%.

For details of the methodology taken in Time Well Spent 2019, please see its appendices. The nationally representative sample of 10,103 adult in Great Britain was drawn from YouGov. Fieldwork was undertaken between 4 and 15 May 2018.

9.2. Social classifications explained

The research followed the standard definition and methodology used in the census and other research to classify socio-demographic groups. The key classifications are described below.

Social grade

Social grade is a classification based on the occupation of the chief income earner of the household, with six categories. Information is collected about their current or last job, so that all respondents (except those who had never worked) are coded. More details on social grade can be found on the National Readership Survey social grade definition page.

Table 1: YouGov sampling quotas

in % of the total sample (7,006)

Location	
North	24
Midlands	17
East, South	33
London	14
Wales	5
Scotland	9
Age and gender	
Men Over 65	11
Men 50-65 High	3
Men 50-65 Mid, Men 50-65 Low	9
Men 40-49 High	3
Men 40-49 Mid, Men 40-49 Low	5
Men 25-39 High	5
Men 25-39 Mid, Men 25-39 Low	8
Men 18-24 High, Men 18-24 Mid, Men 18-24 Low	6
Women Over 65	13
Women 50-65 High	3
Women 50-65 Mid, Women 50-65 Low	9
Women 40-49 High	3
Women 40-49 Mid, Women 40-49 Low	5
Women 25-39 High	6
Women 25-39 Mid, Women 25-39 Low	7
Women 18-24 High, Women 18-24 Mid, Women 18-24 Low	6
Social grade	
A, B	28
C1	29
C2	21
D, E	22

Created with Datawrapper

There are six classification categories:

- A – Professional occupations
- B – Managerial and technical occupations
- C1 – Non-manual skilled occupations
- C2 – Manual skilled occupations
- D – Partly skilled manual occupations
- E – Unskilled occupations

In this report, we group respondents into two broad categories, ABC1 (non-manual occupations) and C2DE (manual occupations and people not working).

Other socio-demographic analysis variables

These are generally taken directly from information collected by questionnaire when people join the YouGov panel. The principal variables are:

- gender
- age
- ethnicity
- highest educational qualification obtained
- working status
- disability.

For disability, we use the following definitions.

- Disabled: reported day-to-day activities being limited in some way because of a health problem or disability which has lasted, or is expected to last, at least 12 months.
- Non-disabled: reported no limitations to day-to-day activities because of a health problem or disability which has lasted, or is expected to last, at least 12 months.

9.3. Questionnaire development

Before developing the entire questionnaire, we carried out a scoping phase, to help shape the research and its focus. This comprised of three parts.

Part 1

We conducted a rapid review of existing literature, and previous and current national surveys on volunteering, to review the existing evidence base on volunteering and identify knowledge gaps. The review focused particularly on volunteering trends during and after the covid-19 pandemic.

Part 2

We carried out five interviews with external stakeholders across the voluntary sector who were familiar with, and used, Time Well Spent 2019. Our aim was to understand their current priorities and interests. We also engaged with volunteer managers at events held by NCVO.

Part 3

From this scoping phase, we identified a number of priority areas, which formed the basis of the questionnaire. We drew on existing survey questions where relevant – especially where these questions had previously undergone cognitive testing.

We also asked experts to review the draft questionnaire; this involved a broad range of stakeholders including researchers, volunteer managers and other voluntary sector experts. These reviews helped us ensure our questions were clear and relevant. They also helped us prioritise questions, given the limited number of questions we could include in the survey. As the bulk of the 2019 survey was replicated, cognitive testing was not carried out.

As part of this process, we decided which questions from the 2019 survey to retain and to amend for comparability between the two surveys. The key questions that we amended are covered in section 9.4 below.

9.4. Methodology of specific questions

How the 2023 survey differs from our 2019 survey

As indicated in section 1, Time Well Spent 2023 sought to replicate the methodology taken in 2019, to ensure as much comparability as possible. Throughout the report, we have made comparisons when the same question was asked in 2019 and 2023. However, we made changes to some questions to reflect the current volunteering context. We have noted these where relevant throughout the report, to highlight where they may be limitations to comparison. For any major changes, such as to participation rates, we draw on alternative sources of data.

The key questions that we amended are outlined below:

Volunteer participation
Our reading of the existing research, especially research on volunteering during the pandemic, indicated an increasingly blurring line between 'formal' and 'informal' volunteering. To accurately capture the breadth of volunteering – some potentially not considered to be volunteering by those giving it – we restructured the 2019 questionnaire to include both formal and informal volunteering.

To do this, the 2023 survey first asked respondents about any unpaid help they had given, gradually filtering their volunteering (or unpaid help) by activities and time periods (last 12 months, last 3 years, or ever). Below is the order of the questions:

- Have you ever given unpaid help to someone who is not a relative?
- Have you given unpaid help in the last 3 years?
- Have you given unpaid help in the last 12 months?
- Which kind of unpaid help did you give in the last 12 months / 3 years?

This ensured we captured all kinds of unpaid help, whether it was given through groups, clubs, or organisations (formally), or given informally. To help our analysis, the survey then asked respondents roughly how much of their unpaid help was given through clubs, groups, or organisations:

- All of it
- Most of it
- Some of it
- None of it

Since this change was likely to affect the comparability of volunteer participation rates, we have used alternative data sources, such as the Community Life Survey, when discussing this element.

Remote volunteering

When we asked where volunteering was carried out, two answer options were amended from 'On the go (eg on my phone/laptop), not in a set location' and 'in my home' (2019) to 'Online or over the phone' and 'In my home, not online or over the phone' (2023). We made this change to address the increased use of remote volunteering and volunteering from home, and to separate those who volunteered online or over the phone from those who volunteered from home without technology.

Additionally, in 2019 we asked survey participants about the extent of their online volunteering using two questions ('online volunteering' included all activities carried out online, for example, starting a petition or responding to emails). First, we asked participants whether they volunteered exclusively online, and then we asked how frequently they volunteered online. In contrast, in 2023 we asked participants whether they volunteered exclusively online or over the phone, and then we specifically asked how frequently they volunteered online.

Barriers to volunteering

When asking why some respondents stopped volunteering or did not intend to continue volunteering, we added an extra answer code. This allowed us to separate those who stopped or

intend to stop due to health conditions related to covid-19 versus those who stopped or intend to stop due to other health conditions.

In addition, in 2023 we asked the same question to people who had not volunteered formally or informally in the last three years or ever. In contrast, in 2019 we just asked this question to people who had not volunteered formally.

Volunteer values questions

This section outlines the process and methodology used to develop a question on volunteer values, discussed in section 4. We added this new question to help us understand what volunteers and non-volunteers value if they are to give unpaid help.

The key findings of Time Well Spent 2019 showed eight key factors that comprised a quality volunteer experience.

- Balanced – It doesn't overburden those who volunteer with unnecessary processes.
- Connected – It gives people a sense of connection to others, a cause and/or an organisation.
- Enjoyable – It provides enjoyment and people feel good about what they are doing.
- Flexible – It takes into account how people who volunteer can give their time and fits around their circumstances.
- Impactful – It makes a positive difference.
- Inclusive – It is welcoming and accessible to all.
- Meaningful – It resonates with people's lives, interests and priorities.
- Voluntary – The volunteer has freely chosen to do it.

Based on this, we developed 10 statements exploring these values. The statements are below:

1. It is important to be given the opportunity to influence the development of the group, club, or organisation.
2. It is important to feel recognised enough for the help they give.
3. It is important to feel like they belong to the group, club, or organisation.
4. It is important to feel the group, club, or organisation is making a difference.
5. They value a culture of respect and trust in the group, club, or organisation.
6. They want people from a wide range of backgrounds and cultures.
7. It is important for them that they are not pressured to give more time.
8. It is important for them to meet people through the group, club, or organisation.
9. It is important for them that they enjoy giving unpaid help.
10. It is important for them that they feel less isolated as a result of giving unpaid help.

To understand the values of non-volunteers, we asked all respondents to imagine a person who is giving unpaid help and to rate each statement on a scale of 1 to 6, with 1 being 'They are not at all like me', and 6 being: 'They are very much like me'. We calculated a mean score for each statement to compare the values.