

Collaboration beyond the pandemic. Insights from the voluntary and community sector July 2022

Volunteers played a crucial role during the pandemic, supporting their neighbours, communities and local organisations through the crisis. At the heart of this volunteering response has been the ways individuals, groups and organisations have connected and come together.

This briefing explores findings from recent research to examine factors that promote collaboration and offers ideas for action to support joined up working beyond the pandemic. It is aimed at those interested in volunteering or anyone working with volunteers including those in volunteer-involving organisations, policymakers and funders.

The findings in this briefing are underpinned by recent evidence from research, including from the [Mobilising UK Voluntary Action](#) project which explored voluntary action responses to the pandemic. This research study involved a series of surveys, primarily with the voluntary and community sector, interviews with policymakers and reviews of existing evidence and policy documents from across the four UK nations. Three key themes cut across the findings from the four nations and are the focus for this series of short research briefings:

- Collaboration
- The use of digital technology
- Volunteer wellbeing



Why focus on collaboration?

Relationships and individuals working together have been central to the pandemic response within communities. Community groups, organisations and agencies forged relationships and collaborated, mobilising and co-ordinating volunteers to meet the needs of their communities ([NCVO, 2021](#); [Volunteer Scotland, 2022](#)). From local residents coming together to help people in their communities (see [McCabe et al, 2022](#)) to NHS Trusts and local infrastructure organisations mobilising volunteers for the vaccination programme, there are many examples of highly effective joined up responses and partnership working.

Research highlights how uneven and varied this has been. In some areas the response was disjointed and slow, often a legacy of prior relationships and ways of working ([NCVO, 2021](#)). Some collaborations had to be started from scratch, whereas others were already well established ([Volunteer Now, 2021](#), [Volunteer Scotland, 2022](#)). In some areas, individuals and organisations have reportedly been marginalised in the response due to a reliance on 'existing patterns of relationships' ([McCabe et al, 2022](#)). Sustaining collaborative working has been challenging, particularly given the resource constraints within organisations and efforts needed to build relationships and keep them going ([King et al, 2022](#)).

Here, we bring together the findings from the [Mobilising UK Voluntary Action](#) project and other research to identify the factors which have helped support collaboration:

- **Trust** – this is widely recognised as an important foundation for joined up working and partnerships. A lack of trust during the pandemic was found to create tensions and barriers between groups and organisations which impacted the response ([McCabe et al, 2022](#)). Learning from the [Coronavirus Community Support Fund](#) suggests that agreeing together shared principles and common purpose, such as how efforts will enhance wellbeing, can support the building of trust between organisations.
- **Recognition** – mutual understanding and recognition of the value and strengths of different organisations was important for collaborative working ([Young and Goodall, 2021](#)). Mutual aid groups played a key role in meeting the needs of local communities during the pandemic ([Tiratelli and Kaye, 2020](#)), however, their relationship with other organisations varied. Research suggests that key to strong relationships and effective collaboration was 'recognition of the value and importance of the work of mutual aid groups' amongst other organisations, including local authorities ([Thiery et al, 2022](#)). Recognising, trusting and working with, rather than trying to control mutual aid was fundamental to collaborative working between these groups and local authorities ([Thiery et al, 2022](#); [Tiratelli, 2020](#))

Terminology

'Volunteering' is understood broadly as any activity that is unpaid, undertaken through an act of free will and is of benefit to others or the environment. Volunteering might be structured and organised through a group, club or charity. It may be more self-directed or spontaneous, for example helping a neighbour ([Vision for Volunteering, 2022](#))

'Collaboration' is defined as the interactions that happen across the boundaries of two or more organisations, groups or communities such as between local authorities and [mutual aid groups](#) or between voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations (VCSEs) (adapted from [IVAR, 2011](#)).



- **Flexibility and openness** – willingness to be flexible helped build collaborative relationships during the pandemic ([Volunteer Scotland, 2022](#)). Research points to the ways some agencies and organisations adapted readily, were less rigid and more flexible, enabling organisations to work more easily and quickly on the response, for example, removing red tape surrounding recruitment and onboarding of volunteers. Having an open mindset about working with others and willingness to adapt processes and practices, such as sharing data and information, helped promote collaboration ([Volunteer Scotland, 2022](#); [Burchell et al, 2020](#)).
- **Support and resources** – joined up working was helped through a wide range of support mechanisms including flexible funding, virtual and physical spaces for making connections, guidance and digital tools ([King et al, 2022](#); [McCabe et al, 2022](#)). Research from the [Local Trust](#) highlights the importance of resources within communities including “the skills and knowledge of local actors, the diversity of their existing networks and relationships, and the ability to directly link access to financial and human resources to local needs”.
- **Communication** – effective two-way communication was important in enabling and supporting joined up working ([NCVO, 2021](#); [Thiery et al, 2022](#)). Research with mutual aid groups highlights how “transparent council information processes, as well as open and reciprocal communication, were key to creating and sustaining collaborative relationships” ([Thiery et al, 2022](#)). Digital technology was important during the pandemic, providing virtual spaces for groups and organisations to connect ([King et al, 2022](#)).

What are the ideas for action?

We summarise these research insights to share some of the things we think could help organisations, the volunteering sector, funders and policymakers support collaboration beyond the pandemic. These focus on **building and sustaining joined up working on volunteering**. Particularly useful are findings from the [Rebalancing the Relationship project](#) which highlights the importance of the following collaborative ‘behaviours’ for organisations and groups:

- Competing in an ethical and responsible way;
- Being open to collaborating with various organisations;
- Developing fair and equal partnerships; and
- Nurturing a collaborative organisational culture and leadership behaviours.

For organisations	What this looks like
Ensure your organisation is open to collaboration with others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisational culture, leadership and practices support the building of relationships and joint working on volunteering, including across sectors • The barriers to collaboration are recognised and addressed such as ensuring staff have the capacity to connect with others and collaborate
Recognise that collaboration is an ongoing learning process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships are regularly reviewed, including those developed during the pandemic and learning is used to develop and improve joined up working on volunteering
Make the most of networks and support to help build and sustain connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External networks and support, including those facilitated by local infrastructure organisations and funders, are drawn on to help build collaboration and partnership working



For the volunteering sector	
Ensure organisations have easy access to spaces where they can connect and collaborate on volunteering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Networks and forums (virtual and face to face) help promote collaboration and partnership working between individuals and organisations. These need to be inclusive of different communities, organisations and groups • Links are facilitated between national, regional and local volunteer involving organisations
Promote and facilitate collaborative (rather than competitive) ways of working within the sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer involving organisations, infrastructure organisations, local authorities and other agencies learn from the pandemic to build and sustain joined up working. This might include joint projects and sharing infrastructure, resources, data and expertise on volunteering
Ensure organisations and groups can easily share learning and practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer involving organisations share examples and learning on effective approaches and practices to collaboration and joined up working on volunteering

For funders/ policymakers	
Promote funding and commissioning practices that support collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration (rather than competition) is incentivised by funders and commissioners. This could include taking into account the costs of building and sustain partnership working, particularly in areas where this has been weaker during the pandemic
Provide support to organisations that promote and facilitate collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisations and structures that support collaboration and joined up working are invested in and supported, including local infrastructure organisations and sector forums
Embed more collaborative working on volunteering within policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policymakers strive to collaborate with a wide range of organisations, including those at the local level on strategies and issues relating to volunteering • Ongoing collaboration and new joint working between volunteer involving organisations, statutory agencies and other bodies improves emergency and resilience planning

Useful additional resources

[Rebalancing the Relationship project](#) (2020) (NCVO, ACEVO, Lloyds Bank Foundation)

[The Bridge Builder's Handbook](#) (guide for building connections and strengthening relationships) (2021)

[Getting started with collaboration: a framework for joint action](#) (2019) (IVAR)

About this briefing

This briefing is written by Joanna Stuart and Laura Crawford. It brings together research on volunteering, drawing in particular on findings from the [Mobilising UK Voluntary Action](#) research study (ES/V015281/1). This project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of the UK Research and Innovation's rapid response to Covid-19. The research study was led by Irene Hardill from Northumbria University and undertaken in collaboration with national voluntary sector bodies and universities from across the UK.

