

Digital technology and volunteering beyond the pandemic. Insights from the voluntary and community sector July 2022

The shift to digital ways of working during the pandemic has opened-up opportunities and brought challenges for volunteering. This briefing brings together findings from recent research to explore this and potential implications of this shift. It is aimed at those interested in volunteering or anyone working with volunteers including those in volunteer-involving organisations, policymakers and funders.

The briefing identifies key ideas for action and can be used to help organisations, the volunteering sector, funders and policy makers navigate digital changes in volunteering.

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:

- The use of digital technology
- Collaboration
- Volunteer wellbeing



Why focus on digital technology?

One of the most significant changes driven by the pandemic has been the uptake and use of digital technology. Two in three voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations (VCSEs) moved their services online during the pandemic ([King et al, 2022](#)) and many are embedding their online provision or are developing 'blended' services, bringing together online and face-to-face ([Volunteer Now, 2022](#), [WCVA, 2021](#)). Some volunteers moved to virtual roles during the pandemic and the use of technology enabled them to continue with their volunteering ([Volunteer Scotland, 2022](#)). Virtual volunteering is not new ([see McGarvey et al, 2019](#)), however, the pandemic has accelerated this trend with some organisations developing 'blended' or new virtual roles.

Alongside this there was a shift in the use of digital technology and social media to recruit, mobilise, organise and support volunteers during the pandemic. From the use of WhatsApp groups and Facebook amongst mutual aid groups to the development of online platforms to recruit and manage volunteers. Communities and organisations have innovated and tried different digital tools to mobilise, work with volunteers and collaborate across community and organisational boundaries.

Research for the [Mobilising UK Voluntary Action](#) project highlights how for some organisations the shift to digital has helped improve their reach to service users and volunteers, enabled the inclusion of volunteers who felt unable to engage face-to-face and improved communication with, and between, volunteers across geographies ([Volunteer Scotland, 2022](#)). Technology can act as an enabler of volunteering, with internet use a predictor of volunteering for disabled people, for example ([Donahue et al, 2022](#)).

Research on the digital shift during the pandemic highlights future considerations for how to embed these changes effectively and fairly:

- **Digital inclusion** – the move to more digital ways of working presents barriers to volunteering for those with less digital access. Research suggests the pandemic has exacerbated the digital divide with those who are older and in lower socio-economic groups less likely to have access to the internet ([Ofcom, 2021](#)). However, digital inclusion is also about confidence and skills ([Centre for Ageing Better, 2021](#)); some volunteers did not feel able to adapt their roles or take up new ones during the pandemic. The shift to online roles, 'blended volunteering' and digital ways of recruiting, managing and supporting volunteers may further exacerbate barriers to involving and engaging those with less digital access, skills and confidence as we move beyond the pandemic.
- **Digital skills of staff and volunteers** – as organisations embed digital and 'hybrid' services and new ways of working, digital skills remain a significant challenge for the VCSE sector ([Digital Skills Survey 2021](#)). The need to upskill staff to recruit and involve volunteers in digital roles and activity has been highlighted in research ([Volunteer Now, 2022](#)). The Charity Digital Skills Survey (2021) reports that one in four charities think that increasing their digital skills would help them engage and support volunteers more effectively and over a third would like funding for training staff and volunteers in digital ([Digital Skills Survey, 2021](#)).
- **Adaptation, iteration and resourcing digital change** - digital services and processes were developed at speed, meaning approaches to recruiting and managing volunteers, including virtual roles themselves may not meet the current needs of volunteers. Research on the use of technology in small organisations highlights the importance of 'taking stock of things' and iterating where needed ([IVAR, 2021](#)). This may include identifying how digital ways of working with volunteers need to be adapted and developed. However, financial constraints and a lack of resources is identified as a key challenge to further develop and embed digital ([Volunteer Now, 2022](#)) with IT the biggest barrier to digital progress for charities ([Digital Skills Survey, 2021](#)).

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](#))



What are the ideas for action?

We summarise these research insights to share some of the things we think will help organisations, the volunteering sector, funders and policymakers develop their approach to digital technology and volunteering beyond the pandemic. These focus on taking a balanced approach to digital, using and developing the best parts of digital while recognising its limitations. As highlighted in the [Digital Skills Survey 2021](#) ‘*across the sector, foundations need to be put in place, including skills, infrastructure and taking an inclusive approach to technology*’.

For organisations	What this looks like
Take an iterative learning approach to digital, responding to the needs of users and volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital approaches that work well and areas for development are reviewed, learned from and incorporated into plans, including the use of technology in the recruitment, management, training and support of volunteers • The needs and circumstances of volunteers are understood, including their barriers to going online • ‘Blended’ approaches bring together the best parts of online and face-to-face to support volunteering and volunteers
Prioritise digital inclusion of volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteers’ experiences of digital exclusion are understood and action is taken to address this, for example, accessible training to develop digital skills, peer digital support and provision of offline roles
Ensure remote and virtual roles are accessible to all and supported	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The barriers to participation in remote and virtual roles are understood and addressed, including skills and confidence • Volunteers are well supported and staff have the skills and confidence to support those in remote and virtual roles.

For the volunteering sector	
Ensure digital inclusion is prioritised in the sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisations and communities build on their efforts to address digital barriers including sharing practice on digital inclusion and volunteering and raising awareness of support available to individuals and organisations
Support collaboration on digital and volunteering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital resources, tools and ideas are shared between organisations and communities • Joined up working, such as cross organisational digital projects, platforms and services support progress on digital
Develop and share digital guidance and support to build digital capabilities and capacities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff and volunteers can access high quality external digital support, guidance and training including from local infrastructure organisations, digital experts and champions, such as Catalyst



For funders/policymakers	
<p>Support organisations to develop and improve digital and skills</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Core digital costs can be included in funding applications, including digital infrastructure and upskilling volunteers and staff • Organisations and communities are supported to experiment with digital including virtual roles and new ways of recruiting, managing, training and supporting volunteers • Organisations have access to ‘funder plus’ support on digital including training, networks, advice and digital expertise
<p>Ensure digital inclusion is prioritised within policy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisations are supported to address digital exclusion • The costs associated with digital inclusion are taken into account amongst funders and policymakers • Local organisations and infrastructure that provide digital support to individuals and communities are recognised and supported by funders and policymakers • Funders and policymakers play a stronger role in signposting individuals and organisations to resources and support on digital inclusion

Useful additional resources

[Catalyst](#) - network helping to build digital skills and processes

[Charity Digital Skills Report](#) (2021) (Zoe Amar, Skills Platform and Nissa Ramsay)

[Learning from the digital fund - Online, Digital and IT](#) (National Lottery Community Fund)

[Digital and the volunteer journey](#) (2019) (NCVO)

[Guidance and resources on virtual volunteering](#) (Jayne Cravens)

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.

