

# Volunteer wellbeing beyond the pandemic. Insights from the voluntary and community sector July 2022

Protecting and supporting the wellbeing of volunteers has been an area of attention and concern for many organisations and communities during the pandemic. This research briefing brings together findings from recent research on volunteer wellbeing. It is aimed at those interested in volunteering or anyone working with volunteers including those in volunteer-involving organisations, policymakers and funders.

The briefing provides ideas for action and can be used to help organisations, the volunteering sector, funders and policymakers support volunteer wellbeing and sustain the focus on volunteer wellbeing beyond the pandemic.

The findings in this briefing are based on 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:

- Volunteer wellbeing
- The use of digital technology
- Collaboration



## Why volunteer wellbeing?

Volunteering can bring multiple benefits to those involved, including to their health and wellbeing. Evidence points to the positive impacts of volunteering on **happiness, life satisfaction, depression and anxiety** ([Stuart et al, 2020](#)). During the pandemic, millions of people supported their neighbours, communities, local groups and organisations across the UK ([Together, 2021](#)). Research suggests that those who volunteered fared better during Covid-19 in terms of their wellbeing compared to those not involved ([Smith and Smith, 2022](#)). 'Community helping' during the crisis has been linked to volunteers building a sense of community, unity and purpose, benefiting their wellbeing ([Bowe et al, 2021](#)).

Wider evidence ([Stuart et al 2020](#)) points to the importance of volunteers:

- **feeling connected with others**
- **feeling appreciated for their contribution**
- **doing something meaningful and purposeful**

However, studies have also pointed to **fatigue and burnout** amongst some volunteers involved during the pandemic, including those engaged in distressing and emotionally challenging roles and activities ([Volunteer Scotland, 2022](#)).

### Terminology

In this briefing we understand **'wellbeing'** as how satisfied people are with their lives, day to day emotional experiences such as happiness and anxiety and wider mental wellbeing.

**'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](#)).



Whilst many people got involved in volunteering during the pandemic, others had to stop or step back from their roles. Evidence suggests that some people have been slower to return to volunteering, including some disabled people ([Rutherford and Spath, 2021](#)), meaning they are **missing out on the wellbeing benefits of volunteering**. Some of those who have the most to gain from involvement are some of those most adversely affected by Covid ([Volunteer Scotland, 2022](#)). Research shows that there are substantial inequalities in access to volunteering; those from lower socio-economic groups, for example, are less likely to get involved through groups clubs and organisations ([Southby and South, 2016](#); [McGarvey et al, 2019](#)). Issues relating to volunteer wellbeing and inclusion are therefore closely intertwined.

Research for the [Mobilising UK Voluntary Action](#) project shows that the wellbeing of volunteers came into sharper focus for many organisations during the pandemic. Organisations recognised the need to look after their volunteers as they faced the challenges of the crisis ([NCVO, 2021](#)). Many developed new approaches, provided additional wellbeing support or built on existing support including peer support sessions, buddying, development of wellbeing plans and one to one sessions with staff. However, concerns have been raised about the capacity of organisations to meet the needs of volunteers and engage those excluded from volunteering when finances are constrained and resources limited ([Volunteer Scotland 2022](#); [Volunteer Now, 2021](#) and [King et al, 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 support volunteer wellbeing beyond the pandemic. These focus on:

- Developing a culture of wellbeing within organisations and communities; and
- Prioritising, supporting and investing in volunteer wellbeing.

For organisations	What this looks like
<b>Ensure volunteer wellbeing is embedded across the organisation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff, trustees and volunteers at all levels understand why volunteer wellbeing is important to volunteers, the aims of the organisation and meeting the needs of service users/communities</li> <li>• The wellbeing of volunteers is at the centre of volunteering activities, plans and strategies</li> </ul>
<b>Bring volunteer wellbeing to the heart of volunteer management and support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The needs of individual volunteers are understood and wellbeing support is suited to them. Support is regularly reviewed and flexible to meet the changing needs and circumstances of volunteers</li> <li>• Volunteer roles are co-designed with volunteers to ensure they meet their needs and those of the organisation</li> <li>• Volunteer roles and commitments are regularly reviewed to reduce the risk of fatigue and burnout</li> </ul>
<b>Ensure the ways of working with volunteers supports their wellbeing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volunteers feel connected with others through their volunteering, including other volunteers</li> <li>• Volunteers are recognised and feel appreciated for the contribution they make</li> <li>• Volunteers feel their role and activities have purpose and are meaningful</li> </ul>

For the volunteering sector	
<b>Ensure volunteer wellbeing is a focus for the sector</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organisations and communities recognise the importance of volunteer wellbeing and understand the ways to help enhance wellbeing, for example through providing volunteers with opportunities to connect with others and improved support</li> <li>• There is open and ongoing dialogue about wellbeing issues within the sector</li> </ul>
<b>Sustain and develop links between organisations so they can work together to support volunteer wellbeing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resources and tools to support volunteer wellbeing are shared</li> <li>• Volunteers feel empowered to share experiences and support one another</li> </ul>
<b>Ensure volunteering is inclusive, accessible and welcoming to everyone</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Barriers to volunteering are identified and addressed and additional support provided to ensure all can benefit from participation (see <a href="#">Vision for Volunteering</a>)</li> </ul>



For funders/ policymakers	
<b>Support organisations in their efforts to protect and enhance volunteer wellbeing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support for funding applications that look to invest in and support volunteer wellbeing. These take into account additional costs linked to supporting those with additional wellbeing needs</li> <li>• ‘Funding plus’ support for organisations and communities on volunteer wellbeing including peer networks</li> </ul>
<b>Invest in communities and the ‘volunteering ecosystem’</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funding and support for the mechanisms, infrastructures and processes that support volunteer and community wellbeing including physical spaces and local infrastructure</li> </ul>
<b>Prioritise and address inequalities in volunteering in policy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Widening participation and reducing barriers to volunteering is a key focus in policy to ensure all can benefit from participation. This might include supporting organisations with digital to help reduce digital exclusion in volunteering or funds to help engage harder to reach groups</li> </ul>

### Useful additional resources

[Review of evidence on volunteering and wellbeing](#) (2020) (What Works Centre for Wellbeing and Spirit of 2012)

[Guide on optimising health and wellbeing benefits from volunteering](#) (2020) (Volunteer Scotland)

[Creating a culture of wellbeing to support staff and volunteers](#) (2021) (TNL Community Fund)

[Case studies of volunteering and wellbeing during the pandemic](#) (2021) (Wales Centre for Public Policy and Leeds Beckett)

[Review of evidence on volunteering and wellbeing in the pandemic](#) (2021) (Wales Centre for Public Policy)

### 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.

