

IS VOLUNTEERING IN NORFOLK IMPORTANT?

WHO SHOULD IT BENEFIT?

HOW CAN IT BE MADE MORE ATTRACTIVE TO FIRST TIME, EXISTING AND FORMER VOLUNTEERS?

CONTRIBUTE TO A COUNTYWIDE DISCUSSION TO SHAPE FUTURE VOLUNTEERING IN NORFOLK

What is the essence of life? To serve others and to do good – Aristotle, Greek philosopher

Britain has so many volunteers who are the backbone of their communities ... millions of people regularly go above and beyond to help others – Stuart Andrews, MP, Minister for Civil Society December 2022

Whilst many people would agree with these statements and consider volunteering* to be a crucial element of our lives, the truth is that fewer and fewer people in the UK are taking part.

Recent national research (Community Life Survey 2021/22) confirms

- The **steady decline in the number of volunteers**, year on year since 2013/14 (apart from a short-lived peak in response to the COVID pandemic).
- Over the last 9 years the number of people aged 16 years or over who have volunteered at least once a year has **dropped from 70% to 55% of the population**.
- Those who volunteer at least once a month has **dropped from 44% to 34% of the population**.
- Both of these have seen **the sharpest decline in the last year (7%)**.

In monetary terms, translating the hours donated into equivalent hourly rates (calculated using a conservative estimate of hours worked and based only on the Real Living Wage) the fall in volunteer time indicates **a reduction of at least £31M p.a. for Norfolk over the last 9 years** (from £105 M in 2013/14 to £74M in 2021/22).

The complex strains and stresses of the last three years, created by the current cost of living crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic and wider societal and political changes have had a huge impact on voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations. They have **accelerated changes to service delivery, ways of working, staffing levels, availability of resources and volunteers that were already happening**. We are now looking at a very different landscape where -

- The overall age, availability, motivations and interest profile of volunteers has changed
- Equitable and inclusive practices that enable social justice have become more important
- Technology-based communications and working practices have become the new normal but can alienate volunteers who want social contact
- Impromptu, informal and more localised forms of volunteering have increased

**We consider 'volunteering' to be doing something which is your own free choice, without being paid, and which is intended to improve the world, a particular community or vulnerable individual's life. It includes informal volunteering where people are helping out friends and neighbours on an ad hoc basis.*

- The cost of living crisis has impacted directly on many VCSE service users, pushing up the quantity and urgency of demand, and also impacted on the resources, staff and volunteers of those VCSE organisations
- Environmental concerns and the increasing risk of extreme weather incidents requires both organisational change and volunteer readiness
- Growing call for volunteers in the health and care system and in other statutory bodies has increased demand for volunteers

The long-term impact of these will be experienced by the sector for years to come.

Recognising that these changes are taking place, and that any organisation in Norfolk that engages with volunteers will need to adapt its working practices and communication strategies, is a vital first step. But it leads on to questions about how to adapt, what constitutes effective and sustainable change, and the long-term resource implications.

What next?

This paper, drafted by Voluntary Norfolk on behalf of the Empowering Communities Partnership, is part of a process **to focus attention on volunteering practice in Norfolk**, and stimulate further discussion to help answer those questions.

It is intended for policy makers and commissioners, for the governing bodies and staff of volunteer involving organisations of all scales and the infrastructure organisations that support them, and for volunteers.

Informed by recent research it sets out to highlight the main barriers to volunteering, and adaptations that would make volunteering more attractive and organisations better equipped to respond to the needs and interests of volunteers. It gives some examples of actions that could be taken to improve volunteers' experience and to increase volunteer numbers across a wide demographic.

Finally, it lists objectives that, if achieved over the next three years, would help ensure that Norfolk can reverse the trend in declining volunteer numbers.

We are inviting you to review these objectives to check that they are the right ones for our particular situation in Norfolk, and to contribute suggestions for additions or changes.

Following this step a Norfolk Vision for Volunteering will be developed and launched in autumn 2023.

The Situation in Norfolk in 2023

To establish a picture of the true situation in the county a research programme began in September 2022 which involved individuals who either were or had previously volunteered, some people who had never volunteered, and organisations that involved volunteers in the delivery of their activities and services, as well as desk research.

It included an online survey for individuals about their experience of, and attitudes to, volunteering which was completed by 251 people, with a spread of responses across the whole county. A separate survey and discussion sessions gathered feedback from 50+ VCSE staff and leaders, local authority stakeholders and other voluntary sector professionals.

This intelligence was further enriched by a research study in March 2023 focusing on volunteering patterns and perceptions in Great Yarmouth, which engaged with 120 local people, supporting staff/professionals and grassroots community organisations.

Whilst this is a self-selecting group of people who chose to engage with the research process rather than a representative sample of the population we can use the data collected as an indicator of local people's attitudes to, and experiences of, volunteering. It also provides a useful indication of emerging issues and trends in behaviour and attitude.

What We Have Learned – Key Issues and the Main Challenges

When former volunteers were asked 'why did you stop volunteering' the most significant barriers were –

- increased work commitments
- caring or family commitments
- health and wellbeing issues
- study or college commitments
- recent change of location

Non-volunteers also cited work and caring commitments when asked 'what stops you from volunteering', followed by a lack of knowledge about opportunities for volunteering, that they had never thought about it or did other things in their spare time. However, approximately 95% of respondents said they might volunteer in the future, indicating that people do not rule out volunteering but don't see it as a current priority, which may be partly due to limited knowledge of the opportunities available and how to access them.

When we carried out more in-depth research with some Great Yarmouth residents and VCSE staff working to support socially-isolated residents the main barriers that emerged as preventing people from getting involved were somewhat different. In addition to time constraints due to family, caring or work commitments, the most significant reasons were -

- Anxiety, poor mental or physical health, low self-confidence or self-esteem, and fear of letting people down
- Lack of information or understanding about how to, or what is involved in volunteering, and worry they lacked necessary skills
- Volunteering is seen as exploitative 'unpaid work'
- Financial concerns about costs such as travel, being out of pocket or impact on state benefits
- Lack of interest or awareness
- Problems with accessibility

Most of these issues were also cited by those working in the sector who identified the most significant barriers as -

- Limited knowledge and understanding amongst the public in general, and specifically the most disadvantaged or isolated, of what volunteering is, how to find or access opportunities, and what those opportunities might be
- Consequently, a lack of understanding of the benefits of volunteering accruing not only to organisations and the community but also to the individual volunteers
- A perception that volunteering is 'unpaid' work and a resistance to 'being taken advantage of'
- The changed and changing nature of volunteering from long-term volunteers with a high level of commitment, to shorter and one-off volunteering fitted around other demands and commitments
- The high number of small scale VCSE organisations in Norfolk that have strong local support but are struggling for survival, let alone growth and development, due to rising costs and lack of sustainable funding

What We Have Learned – how to encourage and enable volunteering

- The need for appropriate and personalised support for volunteers so that volunteering is accessible and inclusive for everyone.
- More flexible roles that can be adapted to volunteers' personal situation and availability.
- Better communications about what opportunities exist, where to find relevant information, use of targeted distribution of printed information as well as social media and websites, and more proactive promotion by local organisations of what help is needed and which roles are available.
- Clear demonstration of the benefits of volunteering to individual volunteers as well as to the organisations and wider community.
- Highlighting the fun and sociable aspects of volunteering which enable volunteers to be part of the community, meet people, make friends and feel appreciated.

The professional participants in the two pieces of research cited the main improvements that volunteer-involving organisations need to make as -

- The need for volunteer recruitment and management to be more person-centered and to recognize the practical and personal challenges faced by potential and existing volunteers and their individual needs, interests and motivations
- More targeted, sophisticated and varied modes of communication to attract new volunteers
- Addressing volunteers' increased concerns and pressures due to the cost-of-living crisis and the aftermath of the pandemic
- Simpler and more responsive application processes and more varied pre-application routes into volunteering
- Clear guidelines about roles, responsibilities, and the expectations of new volunteers
- Honest consideration of the nature of the voluntary roles, which are often demanding, difficult and require a high level of commitment, or may be too repetitive and undemanding

Actions to improve volunteer experience and increase volunteer numbers

It is clear from this research that 'business as usual' is no longer an option. If change is not embraced by VCSE and other volunteer-involving organisations the volunteer numbers will continue to decline at a worrying rate and the impact will be felt widely.

Lessons learned from the research project suggest that the following would help to improve the volunteer experience and increase volunteer numbers.

Actions for Policy Makers, Commissioners and Stakeholders

- Recognise that volunteers are not a homogenous group but individuals with complex and competing demands on their time and resources, who are increasingly driven by personal interests and motivations, so that recruiting, managing and supporting them requires organisations to be properly resourced to do so effectively
- Invest resources in improving public understanding of volunteering through an information and promotion campaign, starting from school-age onwards
- Acknowledge that deprived areas facing disadvantages need additional investment to level the playing field and bring down the barriers to volunteering for these communities
- Reduce the strain on VCSE organisations through longer-term and sustainable support that enables them to build on and improve existing good practice, rather than developing new initiatives to secure future funding.
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Actions for VCSE and volunteer-involving organisations

- Put the volunteer at the centre of the picture, so they can be their most effective – tell them how they make a difference
- Focus on volunteers' experience, shape opportunities to their interests and needs, invest in good volunteer management, support mechanisms and social/fun aspects.
- Adapt roles to fit the needs, interests, availability, and strengths of non-traditional volunteers, e.g. young people wishing to volunteer for life and career skills, or developing transferable skills to help unemployed people into work
- Create 'frictionless' volunteering – easy to access, informal, responsive, adaptable to individual circumstances, and with varied types of opportunities
- Review inclusion policies and practices across whole organisation. Remove barriers that deter a more diverse and inclusive volunteer force, and develop social network opportunities for homebound, isolated and disadvantaged people
- Recognise that there are potential volunteers of all ages but they will have different entry routes, interests, skills, availability, commitment levels, support and guidance needs
- Develop opportunities for co-creation and co-design methods involving volunteers in planning new activities and services
- Accept that change needs to happen at leadership and management levels, and re-assess communications, opportunities offered, physical and attitudinal barriers

Actions for infrastructure and larger-scale volunteer-involving organisations

- Engage with stakeholders to plan a coordinated PR and marketing campaign to promote the benefits of volunteering
- Work more closely together to improve experiences for volunteers – share good practice, debate values and procedures, make closer operational links through networks and infrastructure support
- Extend impact measurement and reporting – so volunteers know they are making a difference and for stakeholders understand the benefits of what you do
- Promote the benefits of volunteering to businesses and statutory agencies
- Provide support to smaller and grass-roots VCSE organisations to achieve best practice in volunteer recruitment and management
- Engage with the process of change and modernisation, pursue research into local patterns of volunteer engagement (e.g. in rural/remote communities, areas of deprivation, amongst ethnically diverse communities and refugee/asylum seekers) and actively encourage diverse voices to be heard in strategic conversations

Suggested Objectives for 2023 – 2026

Effort and resources will need to be invested over the next three years to turn around the decline in volunteer numbers and enable the organisations they support to continue to build resilient, caring and inclusive communities by improving the quality of life of many individuals and developing social capital.

Working together organisations, institutions and individuals can address key objectives and establish a mechanism to support and check on progress.

1. Grow the pool of active volunteers, by

- Developing a broad public campaign to raise awareness of the benefits of volunteering;

- Ensuring easy access to a broad range of volunteering opportunities, including wider promotion and use of Get Involved Norfolk as a countywide platform;
 - Increasing the take-up and effectiveness of employer supported volunteering schemes by promoting the benefits to employers and business leaders.
- 2. Diversify the pool of volunteers, by**
- Attracting, supporting and retaining volunteers from diverse, deprived and minority ethnic communities, those facing additional barriers, and younger people (15-30 years);
 - Recruiting trustees from diverse backgrounds, people with specialist skills, lived-experience and from a wider range of ages;
 - Organisations adapting their practices to become more equitable, diverse and inclusive.
- 3. Increase the resilience of VCSE organisations, by**
- Ensuring availability of affordable training, advice, opportunities for peer support and sharing of good practice for volunteer managers and coordinators;
 - Enabling new and existing trustees and management level volunteers to access high-quality and affordable training, opportunities for peer support, and sharing of good practice;
 - Organisations developing digital skills and understanding at strategic and operational levels.
- 4. Improve the volunteers' experience, by**
- Adopting an agenda for overall improvement in volunteer recruitment, support and management practices which recognise the different motivations of volunteers and prioritise their needs;
 - Ensuring organisations are properly resourced to provide personalised support to volunteers;
 - Encouraging VCSE organisations to assess and share the impact of their activities and the difference they make;
 - Celebrating volunteers' contribution to organisations, to communities and to individual lives through events, campaigns and awards;
 - Introducing more co-production, co-creation and co-design methods into the volunteering landscape

The next steps

This consultation closed at the end of May 2023.

- Launch a Norfolk Vision for Volunteering at an event in autumn 2023, supported by endorsements from key stakeholders.
- Set up a Norfolk Volunteer Strategy Steering Group with representatives from across the public, private, and VCSE sectors.
- Develop a shared programme of work to pilot or trial initiatives with agreed aims and deliverables, and share resulting good practice.
- Agree impact measuring methods and timescales.
- Drive the strategy forward and report back to stakeholders and the sector

Lucy Hogg/Nicky Stainton, Voluntary Norfolk – June 2023