

# VOLUNTEERING IN ENGLAND DURING COVID-19

## CURRENT ISSUES AND LEARNING FOR RECOVERY

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### Introduction

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This briefing presents early findings from research capturing the experiences of those working with volunteers within organisations and communities in England during the Covid-19 pandemic. It provides a snapshot of the current challenges and opportunities faced, and reflections on how to support volunteering as we move towards recovery. The four key themes explored in this briefing are:

- Bringing back volunteers
- Sustaining the involvement of new volunteers
- Volunteer diversity and inclusion
- Collaboration and the importance of 'local'.

It also details four areas which organisations identified as being needed to support volunteering efforts going forward:

1. **Clear, timely and accurate information**, with guidance on how to navigate the new volunteering environment
2. **Collaborative, communicative and flexible ways of working** that are responsive to the changes happening
3. **Recognising and meeting volunteer needs through support**, particularly around mental health and wellbeing, transition to new roles and meeting additional support needs
4. **Making the volunteer effort sustainable for the future through investment in volunteering**, by raising its profile and value and investing in its infrastructure, breaking down barriers to enable the involvement of new and diverse volunteers, and offering a range of flexible opportunities.

This briefing has been written to help those working with volunteers, as well as policy makers, funders and commissioners.

## Our research

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Working with the University of Kent, NCVO invited volunteer involving organisations, infrastructure organisations such as volunteer centres and those working within local authorities in England to share their views and experiences on volunteering during Covid-19 via an **online survey**. The survey asked mostly open questions to enable organisations to share their views and experiences. The survey was shared with a wide range of networks, England wide. During spring 2021, 127 organisations responded. The majority operated in England, with 17 operating across the UK or internationally.

Respondents included:

- Local infrastructure organisations such as volunteer centres and CVSs (Community and Voluntary Services) from every region of England (53 respondents)
- Voluntary organisations (47 respondents)
- Public sector organisations or bodies, including NHS Trusts (10 respondents)
- Volunteering leads in local authorities (eight respondents).

This research adopts a broad understanding of 'volunteering' and survey respondents were encouraged to consider all forms of volunteering, including through organisations, mutual aid groups and neighbours helping neighbours. It should be noted that the survey predominately captures the views of more 'formal' organisations rather than informal community led groups and this is recognised as a limitation. Alongside the survey, **follow up interviews** were carried out with organisations to develop short case studies of interesting or innovative practice in engagement with communities, organisations or volunteers.

Finally, a **virtual workshop** was held in early July 2021 to discuss what we found from the research and to check the findings resonate with those working with volunteers. The 45 participants also shared the challenges and issues they are facing and the actions they are taking, which have been incorporated into this research briefing.

This research is part of a wider study '*Mobilising Voluntary Action in the four UK jurisdictions: Learning from today, prepared for tomorrow*'. The study is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), as part of UK Research and Innovation's rapid response to Covid-19. This four-nation comparative study looks to evaluate volunteering responses to the pandemic to support national recovery and preparedness for the future. A full report from the project will be available in autumn 2021 from the [Mobilising UK Voluntary Action during Covid-19 website](#).

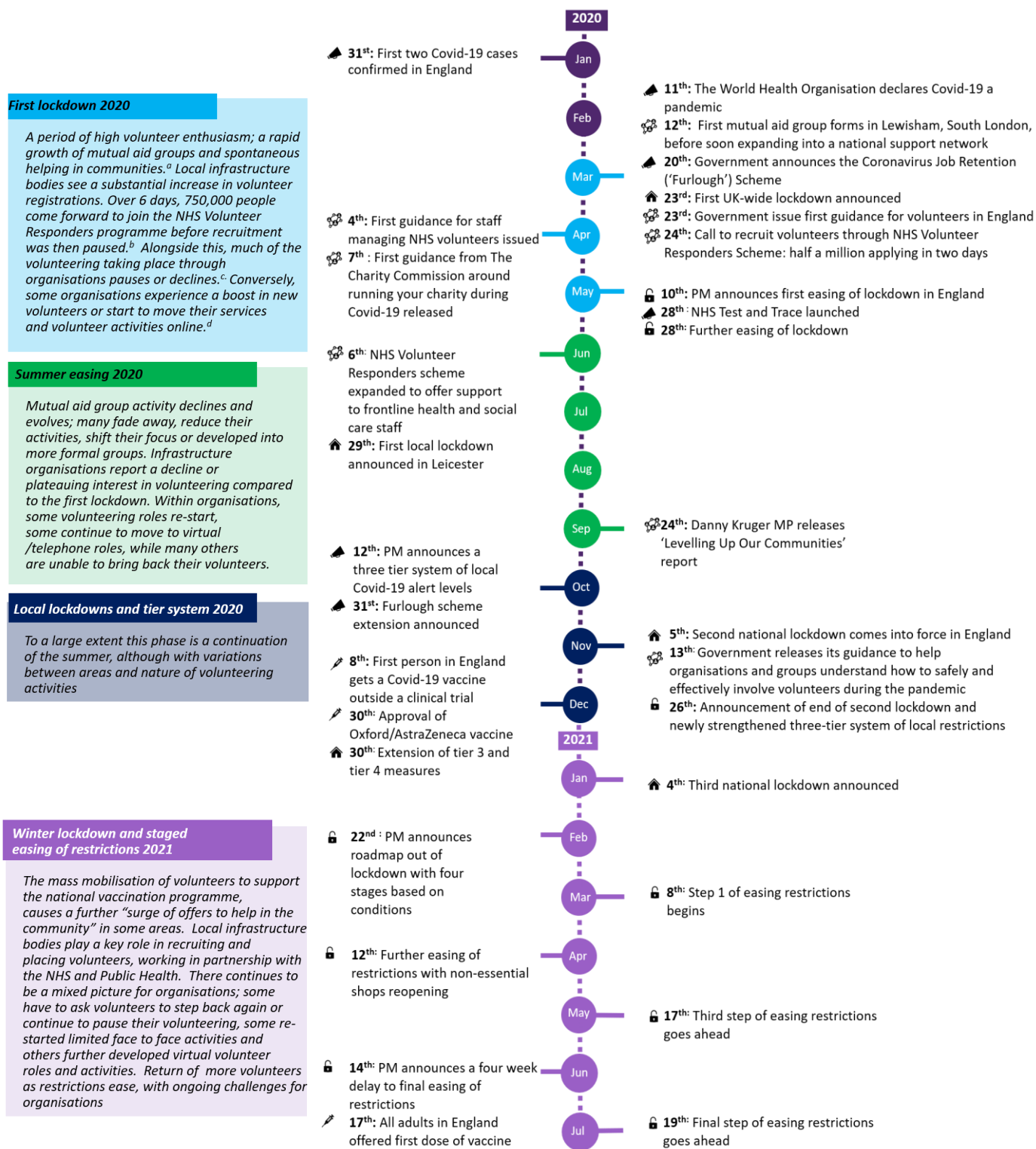
## Volunteering during Covid-19

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Our research highlights how the scale and nature of volunteering changed significantly over the multiple phases of Covid-19. There have been major shifts as individuals, organisations and communities have responded to local needs, changing restrictions and evolving personal

and organisational circumstances (see timeline in Figure 1 below). As such, it is important to not treat the pandemic as one homogenous event, but one that changed over time with varying implications for volunteering<sup>i</sup>. Our research explored the different phases of the pandemic and observed marked changes in the nature and patterns of volunteering. These are outlined in the coloured boxes below:

Figure 1: Timeline of Covid-19 events and changes in volunteering over time



## Key themes for recovery

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### Bringing back volunteers

During Covid-19, many volunteers have had to step back from their roles, often because of shielding, social distancing requirements or services have ceased or changed. Wider research suggests that in over a third of voluntary organisations, the number of volunteers declined between March 2020 and April 2021, while only one in four reported an increase<sup>ii</sup>.

In our research, re-introducing volunteers is a key area of focus, with some organisations adopting or planning a blended approach combining online and face-to-face opportunities.

Particular areas of attention or concern include:

- The wellbeing of volunteers
- Anxiety and fear amongst volunteers about returning to volunteer roles
- Low levels of confidence amongst volunteers, particularly those who have been shielding or isolated
- Lack of digital skills or interest in digital among some volunteers
- The need for returning volunteers to adapt to new roles and ways of working
- Integration of new and returning volunteers
- The practicalities of involving volunteers in an environment that feels safe for all
- Volunteers who were previously involved withdrawing from volunteering completely.

Organisations highlighted that the wellbeing of volunteers is one of the areas they are most concerned about. During the pandemic, they were aware that many volunteers were feeling isolated – especially those previously involved in volunteering activities on a regular basis and reliant on them as a means of socialising with others. Thinking about their return to volunteering, many recognise the significance of coming back after an extended period of time and commented on the need for a ‘gradual and gentle reintroduction.... taking account of mental health and coming out of isolation,’ including a focus on reassurance and building confidence especially around volunteering safely. This need for support is even more important as volunteers may be coming back to different roles, due to the shifts in the design and delivery of services during the pandemic, in some cases requiring additional skills (especially digital).

[There is a need for] mental health support for those who may have lost confidence and are afraid... and compassion and understanding for volunteers who do not feel ready to return to certain activities. (Public sector organisation, youth and children)

Volunteers will need to be supported to return to roles which may have changed. Our services on-site have evolved over the past year and staff are used to working in different ways. Some of our volunteers have not been back since volunteering was ceased in March 2020. They will need additional support to return. (NHS Trust)

### What are organisations doing?

Organisations shared some of the approaches and practices they are putting in place to help reintroduce volunteers to their organisations and roles. These include practical measures, but also emotional support to help volunteers adjust to the changes that have taken place:

- Guidance for volunteers and staff
- New or refresher training, including a focus on digital skills
- Additional support to build confidence and reassure volunteers that they can volunteer safely
- Wellbeing sessions for volunteers (see case study below)
- New volunteer leader roles to help support other volunteers
- Peer support, for example, through volunteer buddies, to help volunteers during the transition
- Communication activities to share information about role changes
- Communications, events and activities to help integrate and reconnect volunteers and make them feel valued
- More involvement from volunteers to design or shape volunteering opportunities
- Development of micro-volunteering opportunities for people nervous about committing to volunteering, and/or lacking in skills and confidence.

### Case study: Bedfordshire Hospitals NHS Trust

[Bedfordshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust](#) is a NHS trust in the East of England.

Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of their volunteers, especially for the majority who have had to stand down during the Covid-19 pandemic due to their age and vulnerability, has been a priority for the Trust. This is driven by a recognition of the important role (especially socially) that volunteering plays in their lives – for many a ‘lifeline’. While staff members can seek help through the Employee Assistance Programme, they saw there was a gap for volunteers.

The Trust led a number of initiatives, including a series of online wellbeing webinars led by a qualified counsellor on themes such as mindfulness, planning for life after lockdown and bereavement. The success of these webinars, which they attribute to the format of the workshops, empathetic approach and practical application of the information shared, led to the roll-out of a similar programme for staff. They also provided wellbeing packs to volunteers during Volunteers’ Week, with personalised thank you notes.

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*We had lots of positive comments, and how useful the tips have been – I think there is some stigma around mental health, especially perhaps among older generations...to keep calm and carry on - but we all need that support at times, and she's demystified that and delivered it in a way that is easy to understand with tips that we can actually employ in our day to day life. (Bedfordshire Hospitals NHS Trust Staff)*

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They will be continuing to provide these wellbeing sessions to volunteers for as long as they are needed. As they look towards the next phase of the pandemic, as well as recognising the need to bring in new volunteers, they hope to welcome back their longstanding volunteers – and support those who do return into potentially new roles. It is going to be a challenging time as those volunteers returning come to terms with the fact that the roles they left no longer look and feel the same, but the Voluntary Services Teams on both sites, alongside placement staff will be on hand to provide support during this phase.

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*We aim to grow back bigger and better and take the lessons learned during the pandemic forward to inform the future of volunteering at the Trust. (Bedfordshire Hospitals NHS Trust Staff)*

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## Sustaining involvement of new volunteers

Research suggests that the pandemic introduced many new people to volunteering<sup>iii</sup>. Research from Together<sup>iv</sup> found that around a third of those who volunteered during the first six months of the pandemic were first time volunteers, an estimated 4.6 million people. This, in part, reflects the high levels of involvement in mutual aid groups and neighbours helping neighbours, with the furlough scheme reportedly instrumental in enabling many working age adults to volunteer for the first time<sup>v</sup>.

Our research supports these findings, with many local infrastructure organisations reporting an influx of new volunteers during the early stages of the pandemic. As well as mutual aid groups, there are also examples in our research of new charities and social enterprises involving volunteers forming (see case study below).

Those involved in our research reflected that the pandemic has helped to raise the profile of volunteering and the important role of volunteers within communities and amongst decision makers but that this needs to be sustained into the future. Some feel that the pandemic increased awareness of the value of volunteers within their own organisations, helping to

open minds about what volunteers could do. This has enabled new roles and opportunities to be created, leading to fundamental shifts in the ways volunteers are involved:

They have been more open to having volunteers support services. Recognising their value and the value and support they can bring to service users, workforce and communities.... there has been recognition and time for volunteers. Staff are more receptive and more creative when considering how volunteers can support service and enhance patient experience. (NHS Trust)

There are, however, challenges with the arrival of new volunteers during the pandemic. It was common for organisations to report an insufficient number of opportunities (due in part to the Covid-19 restrictions) and a lack of capacity to place, manage and support these volunteers. In some areas supply outstripped demand<sup>vi</sup> and this is cited as a key issue by a number of infrastructure bodies: 'We had more than 2000 people respond to our call for general volunteering support but found the opportunities available were much more limited.' Communities and organisations met some of these challenges by creating new roles and opportunities for volunteers. However, this was within the wider context of the considerable challenges being faced by organisations, not least the increase in demand for services and growing financial pressures<sup>vii</sup>.

Another key area of concern is about sustaining the involvement of new volunteers. With furlough coming to an end and vaccination centres closing, some organisations report that they are already starting to lose some of these new volunteers. Particular issues include:

- Insufficient capacity and financial resources to create new roles and support new volunteers, particularly within the current Covid-19 climate
- Questions about whether new volunteers will want to stay involved in roles and organisations as we move into recovery
- New volunteers having less flexibility than they did during the pandemic, eg if going back to work following furlough
- Keeping volunteers interested in 'everyday' volunteering compared with roles in Covid-19 response and in vaccination centres
- Understanding the motivations of new volunteers and developing volunteering offers to meet motivations and needs
- Integration of new and existing volunteers and creating a sense of 'team'
- Keeping Covid-19 response volunteers aware of new volunteering opportunities and keeping them engaged with the community
- Ensuring that volunteers do not end up being perceived as 'free labour'.

### What are organisations doing?

Organisations highlighted a number of ways they are looking to capitalise on the initial enthusiasm of people who came forward during Covid-19 and sustain the involvement of these new volunteers. Some of these relate to volunteer roles, many of which changed over the course of the pandemic. Others relate to looking at different ways volunteers could continue involvement (even if not to the same intensity as previously) in the organisation or the wider community.

- Reviewing processes (eg for onboarding volunteers), to reduce bureaucracy so that volunteers can get involved quickly and easily
- Considering how volunteer passports could make it easier to volunteer
- The development of new flexible volunteering opportunities and roles, including those that do not necessarily relate to the Covid-19 response and opportunities at different times of the week/day to accommodate people going back to work
- Use of volunteering apps to make it easier for volunteers to identify and choose roles
- Engaging volunteers to co-design or actively shape their roles (see case study below)
- Taking active steps to make the volunteer experience positive
- Organising social events, and also take the opportunity to talk to them about different opportunities at these events
- Creating pathways to support volunteers to transition into other volunteer roles
- Links with employers to maintain the volunteering momentum created by furlough
- Activities and events to recognise and celebrate the contribution of volunteers during the pandemic and highlight the value of volunteering
- Creation of 'pools' of volunteer ready individuals who could be called on to support future emergencies or community projects
- Databases of 'Covid-19 response volunteers' who can signposted to future volunteering opportunities
- Empowering local communities to continue to take action through web resources and toolkits.

### Case study: Salford CVS

[Salford CVS](#) is the city-wide infrastructure organisation for the voluntary sector. The CVS led the coordination of the volunteering response to Covid-19 in their area, including the development of a community champions programme. This includes wellbeing champion roles, supporting the vaccination programme. To help develop a longer-term future for the programme with 'a focus on recovery and building back' and to help sustain the involvement of volunteers who came forward during the pandemic, Salford CVS is diverting many of their Covid-19 response volunteers to their community champions programme.

A key part of their planned approach is co-designing volunteer activities and roles with community champion volunteers. Through online workshops they are currently starting



conversations with these volunteers to identify the issues they want to address in their communities and what volunteer roles could look like:

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*Most of the people who have been active for us during Covid have actually moved over to the community champions programme and we are working with them in their thematic role, trying to co-design what it is that they want to do within the city, how they want to contribute and linking them in with various part of the system or things that are going on. (Salford CVS staff)*

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### Case study: Isolation Help Bexley

[Isolation Help Bexley \(IHB\)](#) is a voluntary organisation centred around ‘neighbours helping neighbours’. It was created out of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, responding to the needs in the local area by providing practical support to vulnerable people through the delivery of groceries, utilities and other ad hoc help. Started out and organised by six people who did not know each other previously, within the first two months around 800 volunteers came forward to give support through the organisation.

The organisation attributes their success to a number of factors. These include their leafleting approach, which saw them reach 115,000 households in seven weeks, as well as the software mapping system they created which enabled them to quickly match those who could give help and those who needed it. Their quick and organised response in responding to the needs in the local area and getting volunteers on board was also seen as key. Finally, IHB developed relationships with Bexley Voluntary Service Council (BVSC) and the local authority, who supported them in raising their profile and provided practical advice.

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*People wanted to do something to help, and the fact that we stood up so quickly and got organised quickly worked well (IHB staff)*

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IHB now has a core of about 150-200 volunteers who, while not as active as during the peak of the pandemic, still provide support to the local community. Looking ahead, they hope that the flexibility of their opportunities will keep volunteers engaged, even if in a different capacity, eg as a community reserve.

## Volunteer diversity and inclusion

Research into volunteering consistently highlights the inequalities in access to volunteering; those who are more affluent and better educated, for example, are more likely to volunteer - especially where volunteering takes place in more formal settings<sup>viii</sup>. Research also highlights that some groups face substantial barriers to volunteering and those who stand the most to gain are the least likely to participate in volunteering.<sup>ix</sup> Organisational approaches to diversity and inclusion have changed over time – with organisations focusing more now on how to create an inclusive environment for volunteers. Events from the past year such as global anti-racism movements and campaigns like #CharitySoWhite in the UK have additionally brought these issues to the fore.<sup>x</sup>

The impact of Covid-19 in relation to volunteer diversity and inclusion remains yet to be seen fully, however emerging research highlights a two-fold impact. There are indications that Covid-19 has brought new and more diverse people to volunteering, including black, Asian and minority ethnic people and young people<sup>xi</sup>. Some of this diversification may relate to the shift to more virtual volunteering roles which has helped reduce some of the practical barriers that might be associated with volunteering. There is also evidence that Covid-19 has amplified or created new barriers to volunteering. This includes emotional barriers such as fear and lack of confidence and structural barriers such as the digital divide<sup>xii</sup>.

In our research, diversity and inclusion is a recurring theme, and reflects some of the findings from wider research. Some respondents reported engaging with different volunteers as a result of the pandemic, particularly younger volunteers (including those who were furloughed) who stepped up when older and more vulnerable volunteers had to stand down. Organisations also highlighted that the adoption of more flexible ways of working during Covid-19 has, for some, reduced the bureaucracy of getting involved.

However, for some organisations, the pandemic has prompted concerns that it has amplified the inequalities in society and will have an impact on the diversity of their volunteer base going forward. Some of the issues they highlighted included:

- Certain volunteers being less likely to come back to volunteering, including disabled people and those with health conditions
- Having the capacity and resources to help those who have additional support needs
- Digital exclusion, given opportunities are more likely to blend online and offline engagement, and some are not able or do not want to engage online
- Ensuring volunteer roles and opportunities are accessible to a diverse range of people.

We are doing our best to support vulnerable communities to provide adequate help to access volunteering opportunities. Working with other organisations to deliver activities to benefit diverse groups of people, but it has been difficult since the majority of opportunities are online and it is not for everyone. Despite this, organisations have been brilliant in improvising and taking initiative changing rapidly the way they work with

volunteers, and prioritizing people's needs. I think these difficult times have provided us with a new approach and also have shown the inequalities we are facing in our diverse communities.” (Local infrastructure organisation)

### What are organisations doing?

Organisations are taking various actions to reduce barriers to volunteering across the volunteer journey and create more inclusive opportunities, including:

- Development of flexible and varied tasks for volunteers
- Simplified on-boarding processes
- Thinking about how to frame different aspects of volunteering to not intimidate or put off potential volunteers and making volunteering more friendly
- Mix of online and offline communications and activities
- Digital inclusion activities and projects, including training in digital skills
- Provision of additional support for those with extra support needs
- Ensuring training is accessible to all
- Building relationships with local community groups, e.g. local mosques (see case study below)
- Targeted activities to engage specific groups in volunteering (see case study below)
- Sharing best practice between organisations to apply learning.

### Case study: Healthwatch Rochdale

[Healthwatch Rochdale](#) is the independent champion for people who use health and social care services in the Rochdale borough. Volunteers play a vital role in the work of Healthwatch Rochdale in helping to make sure everyone has their say on health and care services. During Covid-19, Healthwatch Rochdale have engaged with existing volunteers and added new volunteers to the organisation.

Diversity of volunteers is important to Healthwatch Rochdale to ensure it represents the local community; a focus during the pandemic has been the recruitment of young people to their newly launched Youthwatch. After experiencing some initial challenges, a targeted recruitment campaign was run through a design a poster competition, this led to the addition of twelve new youth volunteers.

Healthwatch Rochdale have also been successful in recruiting volunteers to their Advisory Group. This is a group of people with lived experience of health services and conditions who advise Healthwatch Rochdale on emerging issues. The success of this recruitment is due to targeted social media posts, simplifying recruitment processes and working with other organisations including local hospitals. Finally, they have been developing relationships with different local voluntary groups to build trust with different communities. Looking ahead, Healthwatch Rochdale will continue to learn and develop to ensure their volunteering opportunities remain accessible to all.

### Case study: Spark Somerset

[Spark Somerset](#) is the local infrastructure charity, supporting the voluntary sector with advice, information, and training. They also run the county-wide volunteer service, [Spark a Change](#). Their aim is to inspire strong, sustainable and healthy communities through voluntary and community action.

They have the role of independent chair of the Open Mental Health Alliance and also run the [Open Mental Health Volunteer Buddy Scheme](#), supporting people to overcome their barriers so that volunteering can play an important part of their recovery journey.

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*The concept of peer support is woven in and we have established a buddy scheme where if people need a bit more help at the searching stage, to attend an interviews, maybe to have a bit of mentoring they can be matched with a volunteer (Spark Somerset staff)*

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It is anticipated that the demand for this support will grow in response to the mental health challenges exacerbated by Covid-19, the anxieties and concerns some individuals have about returning to their voluntary roles, and the growing recognition of the role volunteering can play in enhancing wellbeing.

## Collaboration and the importance of 'local'

Collaboration and partnership working between organisations and sectors during Covid-19 is a core theme in our research and has been similarly highlighted in other studies<sup>xiii</sup>. Research from the MoVE project, which explores how volunteers have been mobilised and co-ordinated during Covid-19, reports how new relationships have been forged, bringing together different local authority departments with local infrastructure organisations and the voluntary sector, representing 'a significant transition away from more traditional silo working towards a place-based response'. The extent of this collaborative working varied between areas and took on different forms and models<sup>xiv</sup>.

Consistent with these studies, many of the local infrastructure organisations and local authorities involved in our research highlighted the importance of cross agency and multi-agency working during the pandemic and a collective Covid-19 response (see case study below):

Working at a local level and in partnership across the system has been the key to our success. This needs to be acknowledged nationally - I don't feel it has been. (Local infrastructure organisation)

The collaborative, coordinated approach between public and VCS sectors has to be maintained. The pandemic allowed process, policy and usually

stifling 'red tape' to be 'parked' meaning actions could be taken swiftly and openly between partners to mobilise voluntary support within services and communities. It has to be recognised by central and local government the power and support volunteers and the VCS provided during the pandemic and therefore built upon. (Local authority)

Those involved in our research reported that pre-existing relationships, networks and partnerships helped with quick responses to the pandemic. However, experiences vary and some organisations reported a lack of joined up working and missed opportunities, and that the pandemic has brought more competition and less collaboration. Organisations highlighted some of the barriers and challenges to working collectively on the Covid-19 response, including poor communication and duplication of effort:

There was a distinct lack of communication between statutory and local organisations leading to (in many cases) duplication. Also, this was mainly a top-down response without considering the grass roots organisations who are in contact with many individuals and groups who were not reached by the other initiatives. Again, a lack of joined up working. (Local infrastructure organisation)

Those involved in our research also highlighted the importance of 'local' knowledge, local insights, local leadership and locally rooted responses to the pandemic. Wider research points to the key role of hyper local community led infrastructure (where organisation and decision-making is held by community members) in responding quickly to community needs and co-ordinating local responses to the pandemic<sup>xv</sup>. In our research, the importance of the 'local' was particularly raised in relation to national volunteer programmes which were criticised by some for not aligning with the mobilisation of volunteers locally or taking sufficient account of local volunteering arrangements already in place. Some felt this undermined and disrupted the work that was happening locally:

At policy level, there should have been better communication between the national level volunteering campaigns and the ones being directed at local authority level (Local Infrastructure Organisation)

Ongoing concerns and issues raised by organisations in relation to collaborative working and the importance of local include:

- Having the capacity, tools, systems and resources to continue or enable collaborative working between organisations and agencies, particularly given current financial pressures
- Ensuring collaborative ways of working and mindsets are maintained and that organisations do not 'withdraw into silos'

- Continuing disconnection between national volunteering programmes and local recruitment and co-ordination of volunteers.

### What are organisations doing?

Organisations shared how they are building or maintaining relationships and links with other organisations and agencies as we move towards recovery. This particularly focused on sustaining cross sector collaboration and partnership working. Action being taken include:

- Continuation of close working between local authorities, local infrastructure, voluntary organisations, community groups and other bodies on volunteering issues and priorities, including re-purposing existing partnership groups established during Covid-19 or setting up of new multi-agency working groups
- Creating a shared strategy for volunteering or shared vision of what recovery looks like
- New systems for sharing resources between organisations and sectors including volunteer training
- Sharing and bringing together learning between organisations and agencies on the Covid-19 volunteer response and co-ordination
- New ways of working to enable volunteers to move easily between volunteering opportunities and organisations
- Collaboration with local infrastructure and local authorities in other areas to explore how volunteering could be coordinated across a larger geography to develop greater economic of scale.

### Case study: Community Action Network

[Community Action Network \(CAN\)](#) is a local umbrella infrastructure charity, providing support to organisations working within the voluntary and community sector and a volunteering hub in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole. During Covid-19, CAN has worked extensively with partners to support the volunteer response in their area, including recruiting, training and deploying 2,000 volunteer marshals at vaccination sites.

CAN identifies that their small organisation has been able to do 'big things' during Covid-19 because of effective collaboration, namely with the NHS in Dorset and the local Council:

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*The volunteering and community response in my area has been outstanding - it has been successful because we have worked in partnership with the NHS and the Council at a local level.... I can't say enough how much working at a local*

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*level and in partnership across the system has been the key to our success  
(CAN staff)*

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There are a number of practical examples of where CAN has collaborated with partners to support the mobilisation and deployment of volunteers in their area. This has included the joint development of an induction pack for staff and volunteers involved in the vaccination programme with Dorset HealthCare and the embedding of CAN volunteers into the vaccination operations team:

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*I think we are quite different here, so right from the get go, I said I wanted my volunteers to be embedded in the ops team. So they are part of the team.....actually that has really paid dividends because the NHS team, the pharmacy team, the vaccinators, my team, the volunteers, they're a team. That works really well. (CAN staff)*

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### **Case study: County Council**

The importance of local partnerships, local intelligence and investing in the 'local' were particularly highlighted in this case study with a County Council. As we move into the next phase of the pandemic, the County Council are looking at how best to 'build on the momentum we have seen' with volunteering and how to best support and develop the local infrastructure, seen as pivotal during the pandemic. Part of this work is about 'recognising the need for local but also recognising the need for some consistency of support' across their large geographic area. The Council are looking to set up a pilot project to explore developing a more sustainable and long-term model for local volunteering infrastructure.

Underlying this is the recognition that investment is needed to support volunteering and to build on the momentum we have seen during the pandemic:

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*We have seen all these people come forward and volunteer....but to do that well and to keep that interest requires investment both to support people to volunteer and organisations to recruit them. Volunteering is not a free resource, if you want to maintain that volunteering effort I think you need to invest in it at the local level (Council staff)*

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## Moving towards recovery

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The Covid-19 pandemic has, without doubt, shone a light on volunteering. People across the country, from those already involved in various forms of voluntary action to those who have never volunteered before, have stepped up to help others in need.

As the final restrictions ease, there will inevitably be many questions about what recovery will look like, and how to navigate it. Our emerging findings from this research highlight that while recognising the uncertainties and challenges that lie ahead, many organisations perceive the next stage as a 'moment of opportunity': a chance to build on some of the innovative approaches taken to volunteer roles during the pandemic, to review ways of working and processes to create a more frictionless volunteer journey, or an opportunity to work more collaboratively with other organisations. More widely, some feel hopeful that the pandemic has highlighted the value of volunteering and the role it can play in society, raising its profile not just in communities but also with the statutory sector and at a national level. This recognition for volunteering and volunteers, however, needs to be sustained beyond the pandemic.

In order to support volunteering efforts going forward in these ways, organisations were clear that support and investment will be needed, especially in the context of an increased demand for services and growing financial pressures. Furthermore, it was highlighted that it cannot be done alone – organisations need to work together.

To conclude this briefing, we outline below some of the key areas which organisations identified as being needed to support volunteering efforts as we move towards recovery:

- **Clear, timely and accurate information**, with guidance on how to navigate the new volunteering environment
- **Collaborative, communicative and flexible ways of working** that are responsive to the changes happening
- **Recognising and meeting volunteer needs through support**, particularly around mental health and wellbeing, transition to new roles and meeting additional support needs
- **Making the volunteer effort sustainable for the future through investment in volunteering**, by raising its profile and value and investing in its infrastructure, breaking down barriers to enable the involvement of new and diverse volunteers, and offering a range of flexible opportunities.

Furthermore, organisations made specific 'asks' in each of these areas from within their own organisations, from the voluntary sector and more widely from funders, policymakers and Government, in the table following (Table 1).



Table 1: Reflections from organisations on key areas needed to support volunteering for recovery (suggestions made in bold were commonly noted by respondents)

SUPPORT NEEDED	From their own organisations	From the voluntary sector	From funders/policy makers/government
<p><b>1. INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE</b> Clear, timely and accurate information, with guidance on how to navigate the new volunteering environment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear guidelines and processes for staff and volunteers – clarity on expectations and safe volunteering</li> <li>• <b>Updated training and volunteer briefings, reflecting changes to systems, processes, policies and roles</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Materials, guidance and advice, eg on how best to reintroduce volunteers</li> <li>• Development of new approaches to engage and motivate volunteers</li> <li>• Shared examples of good practice</li> <li>• Accessible training opportunities, including digital</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Clear and comprehensive guidance and information - clarity on what can and can't be done, lifting of restrictions, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)</b></li> <li>• <b>Communicating changes to restrictions and rules in a timely manner</b></li> </ul>
<p><b>2. WAYS OF WORKING</b> Collaborative, communicative and flexible ways of working that are responsive to the changes happening</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review of resources and capacity to manage increased demand for volunteers</li> <li>• Review of volunteer roles and creation of new roles to enable existing volunteers to continue</li> <li>• Support for volunteer digital inclusion</li> <li>• Inclusion of volunteers in decision making</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborative (rather than competitive) ways of working within and between voluntary organisations, local authorities and central government</li> <li>• Facilitate links to improve co-ordination between national and local organisations</li> <li>• Shared examples of good practice</li> <li>• Collaboration between organisations to bring in new volunteers</li> <li>• Support with access to suitable premises and meeting places</li> <li>• Training opportunities that are accessible to all</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Investment in local infrastructure</b></li> <li>• Actions to facilitate collaboration not competition – between voluntary organisations, local authorities and central government with consistency across geographic areas</li> <li>• Funder flexibility - understanding that things may need to be delivered differently</li> <li>• Investment to support development of remote volunteering opportunities and use of digital more widely</li> <li>• Explore whether a national volunteer passporting system would be feasible and effective</li> </ul>

SUPPORT NEEDED	From their own organisations	From the voluntary sector	From funders/policy makers/government
<p><b>3.MEETING VOLUNTEER NEEDS</b> Recognition of volunteer needs and providing support to meet them, particularly around mental health and wellbeing, transition to new roles and meeting additional support needs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provision of individual risk assessments</li> <li>• Review and rethinking of roles, including creation of new roles</li> <li>• <b>Extra capacity to support and reassure volunteers</b></li> <li>• Training to support transition to new roles or ways of working</li> <li>• Support for those with additional needs</li> <li>• <b>Wellbeing and mental health support for volunteers</b></li> <li>• Opportunities for peer support</li> <li>• Recognition of the value of volunteers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support to tackle digital divide (incl. bringing support of corporate partners)</li> <li>• Materials, advice and training on how to help volunteers come back to volunteering</li> <li>• Resources to support volunteer wellbeing</li> <li>• ‘Core’ training that enables volunteers to move between organisations</li> <li>• Recognition of the value of volunteers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funding to support the added costs of volunteer involvement – training, support, PPE</li> <li>• Investment in equipment to enable remote volunteering</li> <li>• Funding to support volunteers with additional needs</li> <li>• Investment in local infrastructure to help voluntary organisations meet the needs of volunteers</li> </ul>
<p><b>4.MAKING THE VOLUNTEER EFFORT SUSTAINABLE FOR THE FUTURE THROUGH INVESTMENT IN VOLUNTEERING</b> Raising the profile and value of volunteering, and investing in its infrastructure, bringing in new (and diverse) volunteers and sustaining involvement, including through a range of flexible opportunities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding volunteering not as a transactional activity but a shared experience</li> <li>• Celebrating the achievements of volunteers</li> <li>• Increased resources for recruitment to promote diversity and inclusion</li> <li>• Creative thinking around flexible, diverse and sustainable volunteering opportunities (especially remote)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating a better shared vision of volunteering and what it means</li> <li>• Maintaining dialogue with decision makers at local, regional and national level to promote a better understanding of volunteering</li> <li>• Coordinated recruitment initiatives to attract new volunteers</li> <li>• Collaborative working to enable volunteers to move between organisations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Promoting a better understanding and recognition of volunteering among senior leaders, public and private sector stakeholders</b></li> <li>• <b>Funding for local infrastructure to sustain the involvement of volunteers and support volunteer management and the wider voluntary and community sector</b></li> <li>• Investment in marketing campaigns to increase awareness of new opportunities / attract new volunteers.</li> </ul>

## Our research: next steps

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This research briefing forms part of a UK wide project – emerging findings from the other nations can be found on the [project website](#). The final report for this research project will be published in autumn and will include a full analysis of the policy responses during the pandemic across the different nations.

### **Acknowledgements**

We would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has been involved in our research. Thank you to those who completed the online survey, participated in the interviews and to all who got involved in the workshop. We are grateful to you for sharing your experiences and ideas with us.

## Useful additional resources

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This section includes some additional resources under each of the themes explored in this research as well as some general networks that may be of interest.

### **Bringing back volunteers**

Guidance on involving, engaging and supporting volunteers during Covid-19 (NCVO): [Involving volunteers – NCVO Knowhow](#)

### **Sustaining volunteering**

[Active Neighbours Field Guide](#) (Relationships Project): explores how communities and organisations can sustain volunteering

[Kit for Councils](#) (Relationships Project): principles and practical resources for local authorities

[Coronavirus support](#) (MyCommunity): resources to support charities and community groups during Covid-19, including engaging your community and volunteers

[Investing in Volunteers Essentials](#) (NCVO): online tool to undertake a basic health check on your volunteer practice

[Vision for Volunteering](#): a collaboration across the voluntary and community sector, led by NAVCA, NCVO, Volunteering Matters and the Association of Volunteer Managers that aims to set out the ambition for volunteering over the next decade

## Diversity and inclusion

[Time Well Spent, Diversity and Inclusion \(Concluding reflections and implications\)](#) (NCVO, 2020): research on diversity and volunteering, including lessons for practice

[Helping out: Taking an inclusive approach to engaging older volunteers](#) (Centre for Ageing Better, 2020): guide for age-friendly and inclusive volunteering

[Covid-19 and the digital divide: supporting digital inclusion and skills during the pandemic](#) (Centre for Ageing Better, 2021): good practice and recommendations to help digitally excluded people with skills training

## Working collaboratively

[The Bridge Builder's Handbook](#) (The Relationships Project, 2021): a guide for building connections and strengthening relationships

[Building Back With: a handbook for involving communities in the Covid-19 response and recovery](#) (Involve, 2020): a handbook for local government on involving communities in recovery

[Shifting the Balance: local adaptation, innovation and collaboration during the pandemic and beyond](#) (New Local, 2021): research and recommendations for collaboration during Covid-19 and beyond

[Rebalancing the Relationship](#) (NCVO, Acevo, Lloyds Bank Foundation, 2021): practical recommendations to encourage organisations to work in a more collaborative way.

[Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership](#): partnership to bring together local and national organisations to deliver a more coordinated response to emergencies.

## Other networks and organisations

- [Volunteers' week](#): a week (1-7 June) each year which recognises the contribution of volunteers
- [Voluntary Voice](#): a space for voluntary sector people to support each other
- [Association of Volunteer Managers](#): independent membership body that supports, represents and champions people in volunteer management in the UK
- [NAVSM UK - National Association of Voluntary Services Managers](#): membership organisation that exists to support and develop best practice in volunteer management in the NHS and Healthcare
- [Helpforce](#): independent not-for-profit innovator, focused on co-creation with NHS Trusts and systems, and sharing insights and best practice.

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- <sup>iii</sup> DCMS (2020) [Community Life COVID-19 Re-contact Survey 2020- Main Report](#) (accessed July 2021)
- <sup>iv</sup> Together Initiative (2021), [Our chance to reconnect: final report for the Talk Together project](#) (accessed July 2021)
- <sup>v</sup> McCabe, A., Wilson, M., Ellis Paine, A. (2020) [Briefing 6 Rapid Research COVID-19: Stepping up and helping out: grassroots volunteering in response to COVID-19](#). (accessed July 2021); Coutts, P. (2020). [COVID-19 and Communities Listening Project: a shared response](#), Carnegie UK Trust (accessed July 2021)
- <sup>vi</sup> See also Ellis Paine, A. (2020). [Briefing 5 Rapid Research COVID-19. Volunteering through crisis and beyond: Starting, stopping and shifting](#) (accessed July 2021)
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- <sup>x</sup> Donahue K., McGarvey A., Rooney K., and Jochum V. (2020), [Time Well Spent : Diversity and Volunteering, What does volunteer participation look like](#),
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- <sup>a</sup> See also Tiratelli and Kaye. (2020) [Communities vs Coronavirus. The Rise of Mutual Aid](#), New Local Government Network, (accessed July 2021) ; DCMS (2020) [Community Life COVID-19 Re-contact Survey 2020- Main Report](#) (accessed July 2021)
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