Hands in the Air Like You Just Do Care

An analysis of the VCSE Sector Barometer, in partnership with Nottingham Trent University VCSE Data and Insights Observatory

Jansev Jemal, Jack Larkham, Professor Daniel King, Dr Juliana Mainard-Sardon, Dr Hai Dang Nguyen, Associate Professor William Rossiter, Nicole Sykes, and Dr Juliet Wakefield

December 2022

PRO BONO ECONOMICS

NBS Nottingham Business School
Nottingham Trent University

Pro Bono Economics uses economics to empower the social sector and to increase wellbeing across the UK. We combine project work for individual charities and social enterprises with policy research that can drive systemic change. Working with 400 volunteer economists, we have supported over 500 charities since our inception in 2009.

Summary

Volunteering plays a critical role in UK society, and in the functioning of the charities, community groups, voluntary organisations and other non-profits which make up the UK's social sector.

While the early months of the pandemic resulted in a surge of people supporting their neighbours and helping out in their community, it also resulted in formal volunteering – the kind of structured volunteering that takes place within organisations like registered charities – falling. A large proportion of volunteers in the social sector are elderly, and had to withdraw from volunteering to shield. Many volunteers dropping out of their usual shifts to focus their time on other pressing activities like shopping for someone on their street, or on home schooling or care. Social distancing made many usual volunteering opportunities difficult to offer, and so recruitment to offset even usual levels of attrition was difficult.

As this volunteering within the social sector has been in stagnation for some time, there has been significant concern that volunteering levels will not recover – with anecdotal evidence suggesting that many volunteers who paused their activities during the pandemic were not returning. That concern has been particularly pronounced in small social sector organisations, which are far more heavily reliant on volunteers for their survival than larger ones which can afford to pay for staff teams.

However, there are encouraging signs that this decline may now be in reverse, with volunteering in the sector finally recovering from its pandemic decline. In every part of the social sector, organisations big and small are reporting a rise in volunteering numbers over the last three months.

And there are great expectations that this rise is set to continue. Over half of social sector organisations expect volunteer numbers to hold steady in the months ahead, but a net balance of 20% of social sector organisations anticipate that their volunteer numbers will grow over the winter.

Reassuringly, the expectations in the sector are matched by public opinion. Almost a quarter of adults in the UK intend to formally

volunteer in 2023, with young people particularly enthusiastic about the prospect of helping groups in the sector. If that intention to volunteer translated into actual volunteering, it would mean an additional 5.7 million people volunteering next year who are not volunteering today – including an additional 2.5 million younger people.

Such an influx of support would be an incredible boon for the social sector, at a time when demand and costs have risen worryingly high and financial resources are stretched.

Volunteers are by no means cost-free: some require training, many require due diligence, and all require good leadership and management to get the most out of them. All of this requires resource, which is in short supply in the sector at present – and creates challenges for seizing the opportunity that a rise in volunteer numbers presents. However, where social sector organisations do have the capacity and the means, they should look to grasp this exciting chance to turn 2023 into the 'Year of the Volunteer'.

Methodology

The new analysis in this paper comes primarily from two sources.

It describes selected results from the VCSE Sector Barometer which was conducted by Pro Bono Economics and Nottingham Trent University's VCSE Data and Insights Observatory, and backed by over 50 major social sector membership organisations and networks.

The survey was undertaken between 7 and 21 November 2022, and is the first in a quarterly barometer series. In total, there were 783 social sector organisation respondents after a process of data cleaning and de-duplication.

The results have been broken down into sub-sectors where there were a sufficient number of responses, and into organisation sizes. Small organisations are those with an income of less than £100,000 a year; medium organisations are those with an income of between £100,000 and £1 million a year; and large organisations are those with an income over £1 million a year.

It also describes results from an omnibus survey undertaken by Opinium between 29 November and 2 December 2022. There were 2,000 respondents and results are weighted to be representative of the adult population of the UK. The ONS National Population projections have been used to create estimates from this survey. Opinium provided these results without charge as part of their support for Giving Tuesday, and we are grateful to Opinium for their generosity in making this report possible. Particular thanks to Calum Weir.

Full data tables from both surveys are available upon request.

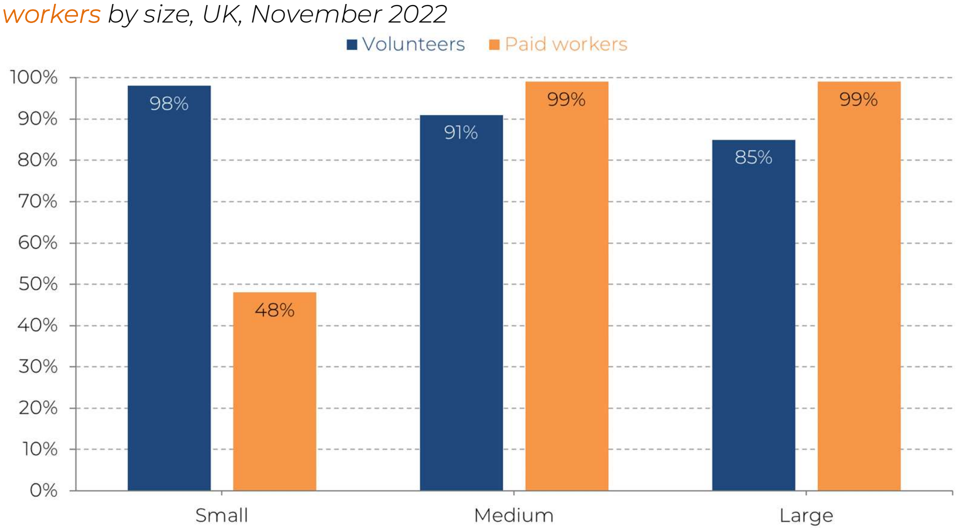
Volunteering: critical but challenged

Volunteering plays a critical role in UK society. It makes a major contribution to the economy, with formal volunteering – that which is organised through clubs, charities and other groups – worth an estimated £24 billion in 2018-19 and informal volunteering – that which people do to help others in their community – worth an estimated £17 billion in 2018-19.[1] It brings benefits to the millions of people who volunteer too; providing a boost to their health and wellbeing.[2] And volunteers make possible much of the work of the charities, community groups and other non-profit organisations which make up the social sector.

In the social sector, volunteering is particularly important for small organisations, which are half as likely as large organisations to have any paid staff in their employ and are therefore more heavily reliant on people giving up their time for free, as Figure 1 demonstrates. Almost all (98%) small organisations responding to the VCSE Sector Barometer reported having volunteers, but only half (48%) reported having paid workers. In stark contrast, almost all (99%) large organisations reported employing paid workers, and they were noticeably less likely than small organisations to report having volunteers.

Figure 1. Small social organisations are less likely to employ paid workers

Proportion of social sector organisations reporting having volunteers and paid workers by size, UK, November 2022



Note: Small <£100k income, n=242. Medium £100k-£1m income, n=304. Large >£1m income, n=192

Source: Pro Bono Economics and Nottingham Trent University VCSE Data and National Insights Observatory, VCSE Sector Barometer (7 - 21 November 2022)

---

[1] A Kenley, J Larkham, A Martin, M Whittaker & M Williams, Civil Action: Exploring civil society's potential in the 2020s, Law Family Commission on Civil Society, December 2020

[2] C Courtney, T Dooner, R James & W Lobo, How cost effective are employee volunteering schemes as a way of improving staff wellbeing?, Pro Bono Economics, March 2021

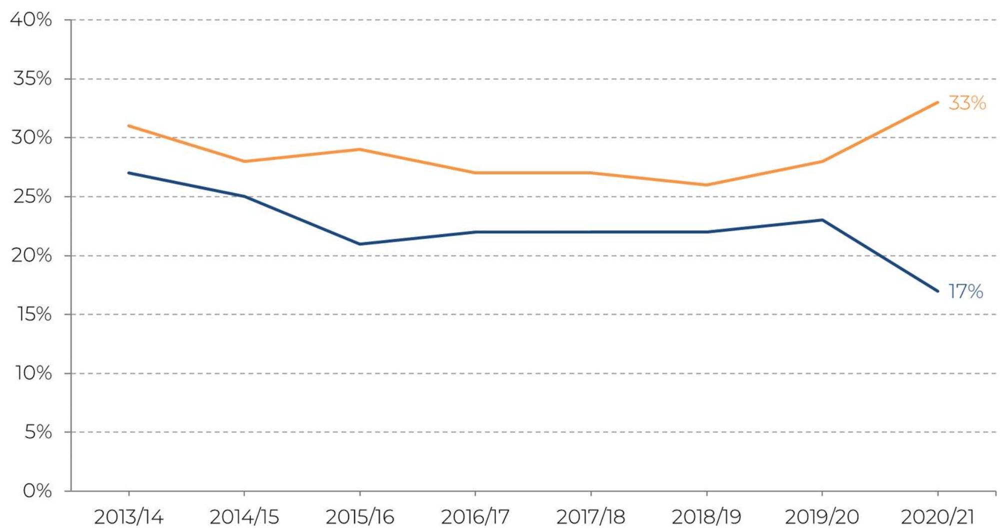
Stagnation and decline in formal volunteering creates problems

However, volunteering is not without its challenges. Over the course of the half-decade prior to the pandemic, formal volunteering in England stagnated. The pandemic itself pushed levels into a sharp decline.

A range of reasons have been put forward to explain the long-term flatlining of formal volunteering, including changes to how people spend their time, the presence of more women in work, retirement coming later in life for many, and a lack of innovation in the social sector. The restrictions on normal life which the pandemic precipitated then pushed volunteering further outside of formal groups, clubs and charities and into greater community action – with people instead helping their neighbours as need and time increased.

Figure 2. The proportion of people formally volunteering regularly has fallen

Rates of regular (at least once per month) formal volunteering and informal volunteering



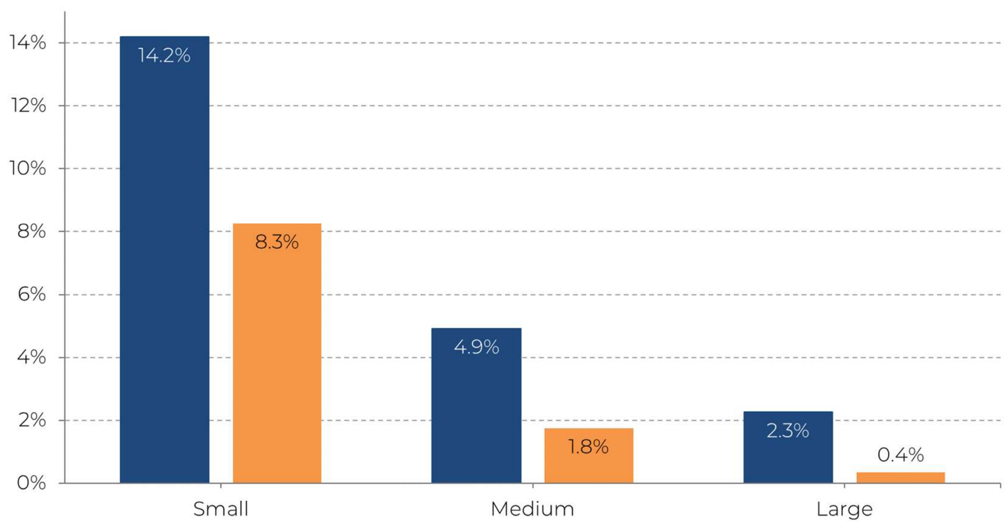
Source: Pro Bono Economics analysis of Community Life Survey 2021

For the small social sector organisations which rely most heavily on unpaid helpers, this historical stagnation and pandemic-related decline in formal volunteering has some particularly acute potential impacts. Without paid staff to provide more guaranteed continuity, the departure of just one or two key volunteers can have a dramatic impact on the ability of a small charity or community group to deliver its objectives, as a substantial proportion of capacity and institutional knowledge can be lost at once. Limited budgets also prevent small organisations from buying in support in the way larger organisations can, and if a small organisation struggles to bring in volunteers with the skills it needs, it can be a real constraint. For example, a lack of volunteers with digital skills can prevent an organisation from establishing a website or social media presence, severely hampering its reach and public awareness of its work, cutting it off from a route to fundraising.

Indeed, levels of formal volunteering are now a leading concern for small and community-based social sector organisations, with volunteer recruitment ranking as the second-most important concern for social sector organisations with income of less than £10,000 a year. Only worries about income ranked higher as a concern for this group of organisations. As Figure 3 shows, small social organisations were six times more likely than large organisations to rank volunteer recruitment as a top concern and 29 times more likely than large organisations to rank volunteer retention as a top concern.

Figure 3. Small social organisations are worrying about volunteering

Proportion of social sector organisations reporting that volunteer recruitment and volunteer retention is one of their top three most important concerns by size, UK, November 2022



Note: Small <£100k income, n=242. Medium £100k-£1m income, n=305. Large >£1m income, n=192.
Source: Pro Bono Economics and Nottingham Trent University VCSE Data and National Insights Observatory, VCSE Sector Barometer (7 - 21 November 2022)

Meanwhile, recreation and community organisations, such as village halls and community and youth centres, ranked volunteer recruitment as their fourth most important concern – far higher than any other sub-sector in the survey. This reflects a similarly significant reliance on volunteers, as only two-thirds (67%) of this part of the social sector have paid staff, compared with almost nine out of ten poverty and disability organisations (87% and 88%) and 95% of the non-profit health sector.

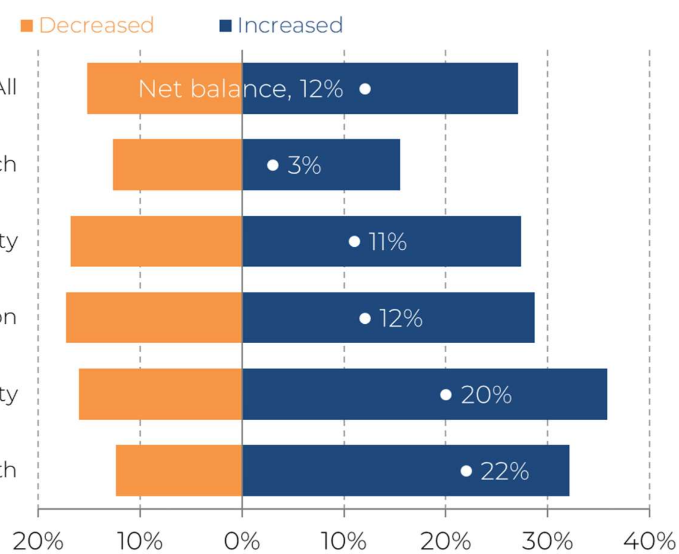
Glimmers of a change in volunteering trends

The post-pandemic fall in volunteering may now be in reverse according to the new data produced for this analysis. Approximately half (51%) of the social sector organisations surveyed reported that their volunteer numbers have remained steady over the three months to November 2022, while a net balance of 12% of organisations reported an increase in volunteers.

This pattern played out across every size of organisation and every sub-sector – albeit with some variation, as shown by Figure 4. Organisations in the health and poverty sub-sectors reported the largest net increases in volunteering over the period. The sub-sector reporting the smallest net balance (3%) was the education, training and research sub-sector. Volunteer retention appears to be quite strong in this sub-sector, with two-thirds (65%) reporting no change in volunteer numbers – higher than any other sub-sector – and volunteer retention ranking as the sub-sector's second-to-last most important concern. This may mean that it has reached a sufficiently steady state at present.

Figure 4. Every part of the social sector reported that volunteer numbers have increased over the past three months

Proportion of social sector organisations reporting changes in volunteer numbers over the past three months by sub-sector, UK, November 2022



Note: All, n=799, residual is 'Not applicable/don't know' – 6.8%, 'Stayed the same' – 50.7%. Poverty, n=106, residual is 'Not applicable/don't know' – 1.9%, 'Stayed the same' – 46.2%. Health, n=81, residual is 'Not applicable/don't know' – 8.6%, 'Stayed the same' – 44.4%. Disability, n=95, residual is 'Not applicable/don't know' – 6.3%, 'Stayed the same' – 49.5%. Education, training & research, n=71, residual is 'Not applicable/don't know' – 7%, 'Stayed the same' – 64.79%. Community, n=87, residual is 'Not applicable/don't know' – 3.5%, 'Stayed the same' – 50.6%.

Source: Pro Bono Economics and Nottingham Trent University VCSE Data and National Insights Observatory, VCSE Sector Barometer (7 - 21 November 2022)

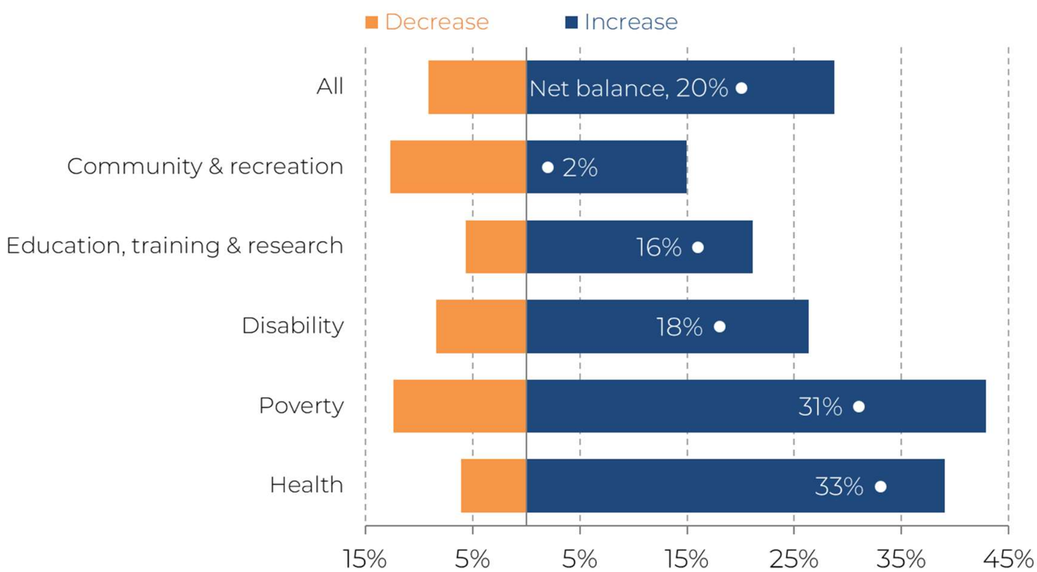
Meanwhile, although more community and recreation organisations reported increases in volunteers than decreases, this sub-sector had a lot of variation, with 12% of organisations reporting that volunteer numbers had decreased a little and 6% reporting that they had decreased a lot. Small organisations were also similarly more likely to report decreases than their larger counterparts (18% compared to 12% respectively), though more small organisations reported increases than decreases overall.

Expectations are that a change is coming

Importantly, every part of the social sector also expects that volunteer numbers will continue to increase over the next three months. This view is quite widespread. A net balance of 20% of social sector organisations overall anticipate a growth in volunteers over the three months from November 2022.

Figure 5. Volunteer numbers are expected to continue growing

Proportion of social sector organisations expecting changes in volunteer numbers in the next three months by sub-sector, UK, November 2022



Note: All, n=799, residual is 'Not applicable/don't know' – 7.8%, 'Stay the same' – 54.3%. Poverty, n=105, residual is 'Not applicable/don't know' – 2.9%, 'Stay the same' – 41.9%. Health, n=82, residual is 'Not applicable/don't know' – 8.5%, 'Stay the same' – 46.3%. Disability, n=95, residual is 'Not applicable/don't know' – 4.2%, 'Stay the same' – 61.1%. Education, training & research, n=71, residual is 'Not applicable/don't know' – 11.3%, 'Stay the same' – 62%. Community, n=87, residual is 'Not applicable/don't know' – 4.6%, 'Stay the same' – 67.8%.

Source: Pro Bono Economics and Nottingham Trent University VCSE Data and National Insights Observatory, VCSE Sector Barometer (7 - 21 November 2022)

With positive net balances of 33% and 31% respectively, social sector organisations focused on health and poverty are most likely to expect increases. This optimism may be as a result of their positive experiences in recruiting volunteers over the past three months, but it may also be reflecting seasonal effects. For example, many health and social care charities, such as hospices, hold special Christmas events which include volunteering opportunities, while the poverty sub-sector includes homelessness organisations and food banks, some of which undertake specific appeals for voluntary support over the Christmas period.

The part of the social sector with the lowest expectations for growth in volunteering numbers is the community and recreation sub-sector, which broadly anticipated stability: two-thirds (68%) of community and recreation organisations reported that they expected volunteering numbers to remain the same over the next three months.

However, these organisations may find themselves pleasantly surprised.

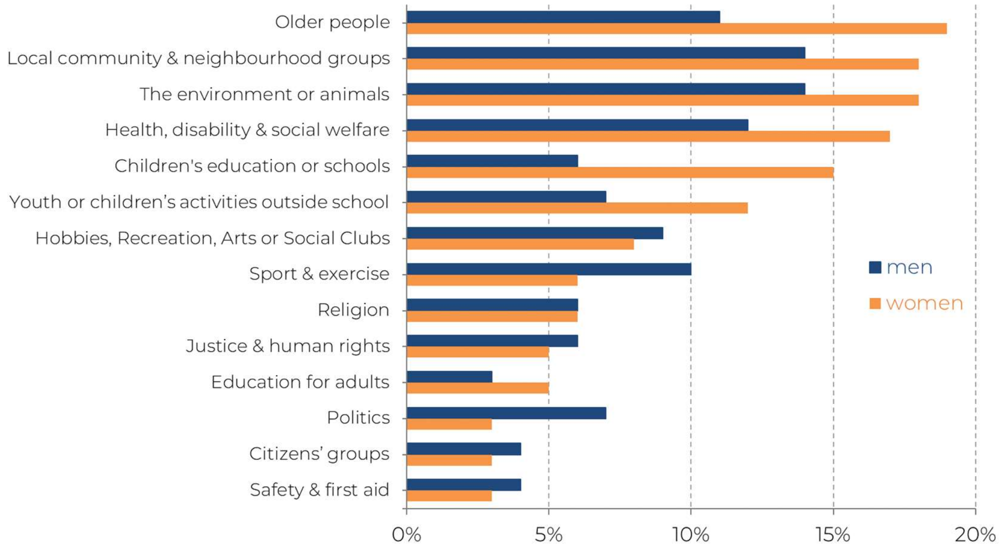
The public is open to volunteering more

When asked which groups, clubs or organisations they were most likely to volunteer with in 2023, 17% of people selected local community and neighbourhood groups – including those groups which are less confident about growth in volunteering numbers, and for whom volunteering recruitment and retention is a top priority. Alongside organisations focused on the environment or animals, this was the cause people said they were most likely to support with their time.

As Figure 6 shows, women were more likely to be inclined to provide voluntary support to local community and neighbourhood groups (18% vs 14% for men), as well as to organisations focused on the environment or animals (18% vs 14%), older people (19% vs 11%), health, disability and social welfare organisations (17% vs 12%), children's education and schools (15% vs 6%), as well as children's activities outside of school (12% vs 7%). Men were only more inclined than women to donate their time to political (7% vs 3% for women), and sports and exercise organisations (10% vs 6%).

Figure 6. There are clear gender differences in volunteering intentions

The groups, clubs or organisations that men and women say they are most likely to give unpaid help to in 2023, UK, November 2022



Note: Responses to 'What kind of group, club or organisation would you be most likely to give unpaid help to in 2023? Please select up to three options.' Residual 'don't know' 24%.

Source: Pro Bono Economics analysis of Opinium survey, 2000 UK adults (29 November - 2 December 2022)

Older people were also more likely to be inclined to volunteer for local community and neighbourhood groups than younger people, with 20% of over-55s saying that they'd be most likely to give unpaid help to these organisations, compared with 13% of 18-34-year-olds.

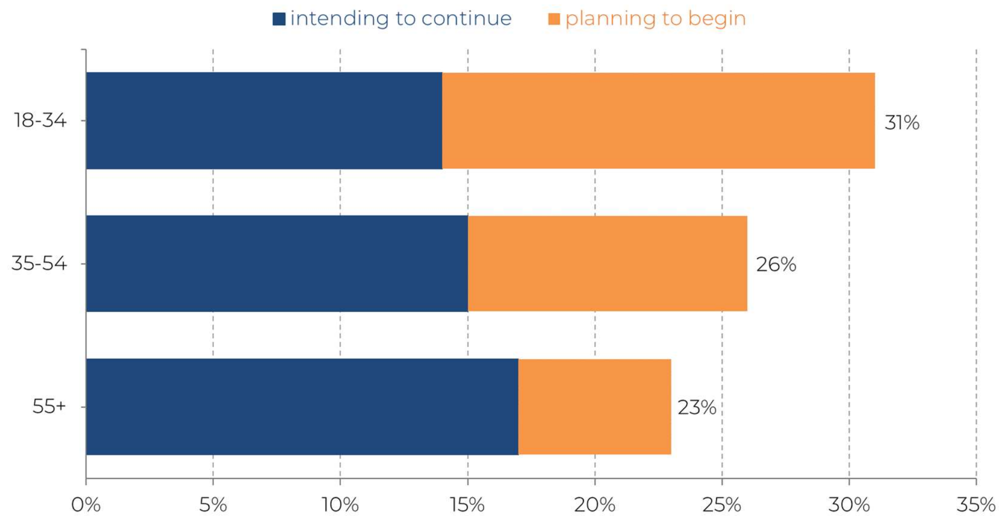
It is well-established that older people are more likely to be volunteers, particularly regular volunteers, and this survey supports that norm. In total, 17% of over-55s said that they already volunteer, compared with 15% of 35-54-year-olds and 14% of 18-34-year-olds.[3] This makes approximately four in ten of all current volunteers over 55, compared with 18-34 years making up a quarter of all volunteers.

However, as Figure 7 demonstrates, young people portrayed a surprising enthusiasm for volunteering. Almost a fifth of 18-34-yearolds (17%) said that they do not currently volunteer, but plan to in 2023, compared to just 6% of over-55s who intend to volunteer next year.

[3] It is important to note that these figures are not comparable to the official figures on current *regular* volunteering, as tracked by the Community Life Survey, due to a difference in question wording and sample geographies.

Figure 7. While young people are less likely to be currently volunteering than older people, they are more likely to say they have an intention to volunteer in 2023

Proportion of UK adults intending to continue and planning to begin giving unpaid help to any groups, clubs or organisations in 2023



Note: Responses to 'Are you planning to give any unpaid help to any groups, clubs or organisations in 2023? For example, volunteering with a charity, or helping with a community group or residents' association, a sports or youth club, religious organisation or school.'

Source: Pro Bono Economics analysis of Opinium survey, 2000 UK adults (29 November - 2 December 2022)

An exciting opportunity to grasp

Overall, one in ten people (11%) said that they plan to begin giving unpaid help to a group, club or organisation in 2023, and 15% of people said that they currently volunteer and plan to continue doing so. That means that a quarter (26%) of adults in the UK intend to formally volunteer in 2023.

If that intention to volunteer translated fully into actual volunteering, it would mean an additional 5.7 million people who do not currently volunteer doing so next year – including an additional 2.5 million younger people.

The survey figures suggest some 8.4 million people are currently volunteering, comprising of 2.1 million 18-34 year olds, 2.6 million 35-54 year olds and 3.7 million aged 55 and over. If all those who say they intend to volunteer in 2023 step forward, numbers will swell by 1.3 million among those aged 55 and over, 1.9 million among those aged 35-54, and by an incredible 2.5 million among those aged 18-34.

Such a resurgence of formal volunteering would be a major boost to the social sector at a time of particular stress, with demand and costs rising, and finances under severe pressure. Indeed, almost half of all social sector organisations (46%) believe that they will be unable to completely meet demand for their services over the next three months, while 44% expect their financial position to deteriorate over the period.

Volunteers are by no means a free resource. Some require training, many require due diligence, and all require good leadership and management to get the most out of them. All of this requires resource, which is in short supply in the sector at present. Yet, if formal volunteering is making a comeback, that could make a major difference to the sector's capacity to support people who need it. The combination of reporting by social sector organisations that their experience of volunteering is on the rise overall, and by people that there is a willingness to get involved, are strong indicators that it might be doing so.

This willingness of people to put their hands up to help is an exciting opportunity to grasp. For social sector organisations which utilise the skills of volunteers, 2023 could be the 'Year of the Volunteer'.

Conclusion

After years of stagnation and some decline during the pandemic, formal volunteering may now be on the rise. Social sector organisations overall report recent growth in the number of volunteers, and even more anticipate further growth in volunteer numbers over the next three months. A substantial proportion of the population are also planning to continue, or begin volunteering.

Capturing this energy and enthusiasm is essential. Social sector organisations are under significant pressure - with costs rising, levels of demand becoming unsustainable, and finances under stress. Volunteers cannot meet all of this demand, or solve all of these challenges. Nor should they be expected to. But they can make a real difference to the capacity of organisations when managed well and listened to closely.

2023 has the potential to be the 'Year of the Volunteer'. The social sector should work to seize this exciting opportunity, while government and businesses should look to remove the barriers to volunteering which exist and support organisations to invest in volunteer management, so that the social sector can unlock this potential.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the work of the charitable membership organisations and networks which shared the survey and encouraged their networks to complete it. Particular thanks to the teams at ACEVO, CAF, Charity Finance Group, the Chartered Institute of Fundraising, DCMS, the Directory of Social Change, Lloyds Bank Foundation, NAVCA, NCVO, NPC, the Red Cross and WCVA who helped with survey design.

PRO BONO ECONOMICS

Nottingham Business School
Nottingham Trent University

@ProBonoEcon

www.probonoeconomics.com

020 3632 2668