

Wellbeing in Voluntary Organisations

The Cost of Doing Good

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With thanks to Dr Juliet Wakefield, Ingrid Abreu Scherer, and Professor Daniel King

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Introduction

We often hear that people are an organisation's greatest asset, but for VCSE organisations, this is not just a saying. With limited physical infrastructure, the sector's strength lies in the knowledge and relationship-building skills of their people. Supporting the wellbeing of this workforce is not only vital for delivering services and campaigning effectively, but also central to upholding the very values that underpin the sector. Yet this can be a difficult balance to strike.

“ It is the dedication of staff and volunteers that keeps us going. ”

Small Registered Charity

Our Wave 9 report¹ highlighted the cumulative toll of rising costs, increasing demand, and ongoing operational uncertainty. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Observatory's research² showed that there is an emotional and practical cost on those expected to meet escalating needs while also caring for those relying on their services.

As organisations increasingly rely on existing personnel to fill recruitment gaps and maintain service delivery, this latest wave examines how these pressures are affecting the wellbeing of staff and volunteers. We asked organisations about their working culture and wellbeing strategy, the support they offer, and how the wellbeing of their people has changed over the past 12 months. What emerges is a sector that cares deeply about its workforce but doesn't always feel equipped to support them.

This report explores these challenges and concludes with reflections and practical resources to support organisations in strengthening wellbeing for those who give so much.

Thank you



Thanks to everyone who took part in Wave 10 of the VCSE Barometer Survey. We're working hard to make the Barometer more useful - through personalised reports, practical insights, and easier ways to take part. We're also developing tools to help amplify your voice and would love your feedback, especially if you're interested in testing these out.

Please do get in touch by emailing us at VCSEobservatory@ntu.ac.uk



Changes in Staff and Volunteer Wellbeing

Nearly four years into the cost of living crisis and its effects continue to be deeply felt across the sector. Wave 10 findings show that cost of living struggles were the most commonly reported wellbeing concern, with more than a third observing increases among both paid staff (37%) and volunteers (34%) over the past year.

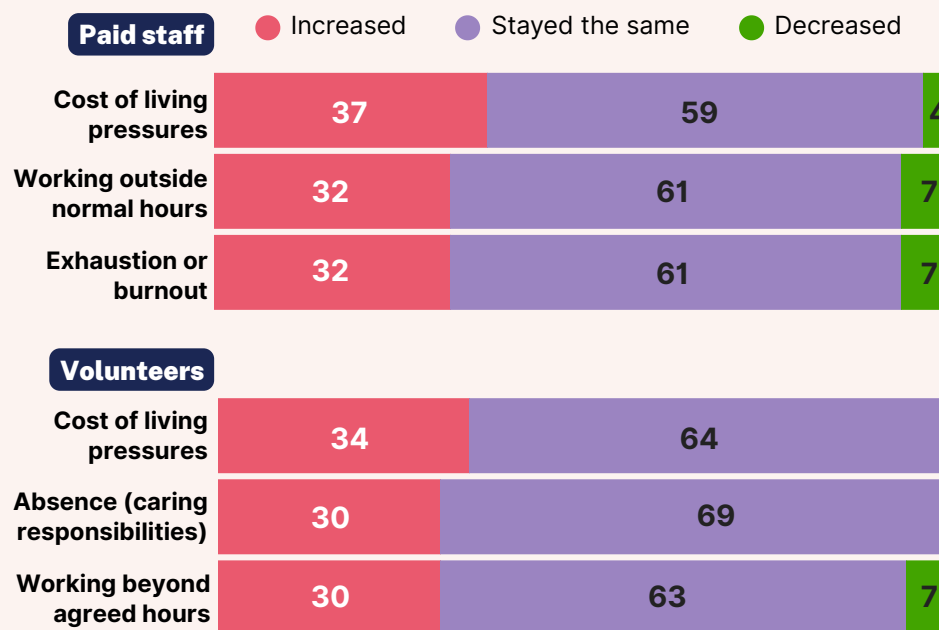
Around one in three also said staff (32%) and volunteers (30%) were working beyond or outside agreed hours, likely reflecting growing demand and resource constraints. Burnout and requests for adjustments have increased among staff (32%), while organisations also report increases in volunteer absence due to caring responsibilities (30%).

Volunteers and staff stepping Up

Among organisations facing recruitment difficulties, almost half (45%) say volunteers and a third (34%) say staff are working extra hours to fill the gaps.



Top three changes in staff and volunteer wellbeing, past 12 months (%)



Notes:

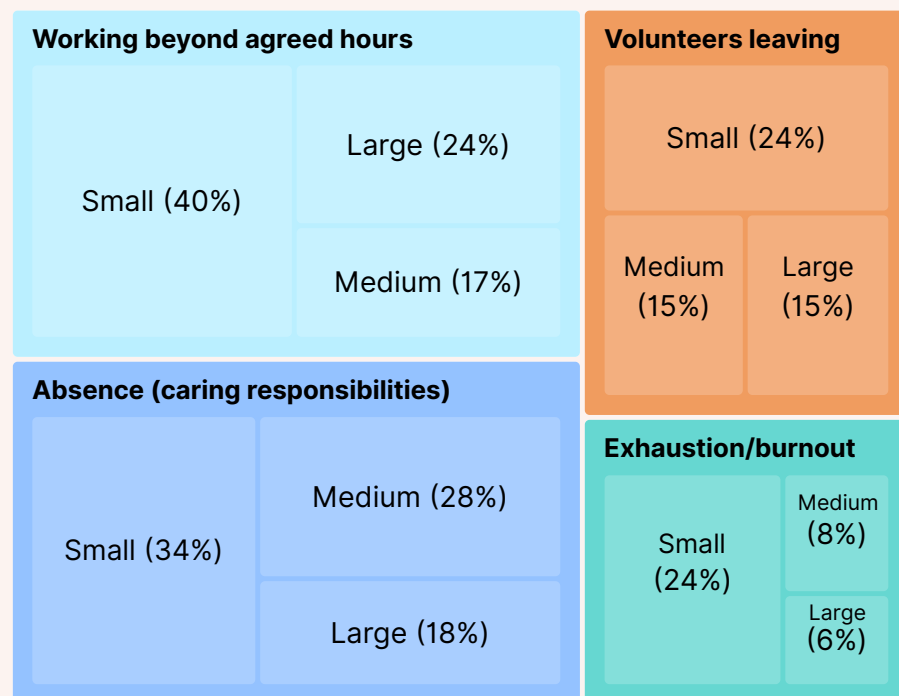
Wellbeing changes, paid staff: Cost of living pressures N = 269. Working outside normal hours N = 301. Exhaustion or burnout N = 255.

Wellbeing changes, volunteers: Cost of living pressures N = 265. Exhaustion or burnout N = 218. Working outside normal hours N = 289.

Source: VCSE National Data & Insights Observatory, VCSE Barometer, Wave 10

Wellbeing Changes by Organisation Size

Volunteer wellbeing challenges: Increases by organisation size (last 12 months)



Notes: N reflects organisations with valid responses. Percentages show the proportion in each size group reporting an increase over the past 12 months.

Volunteers leaving: Small (N = 97); Medium (N = 82); Large (N = 34)

Exhaustion or burnout: Small (N = 96); Medium (N = 79); Large (N = 32)

Working beyond agreed hours: Small (N = 140); Medium (N = 100); Large (N = 33)

Absence due to caring responsibilities: Small (N = 160); Medium (N = 113); Large (N = 39)

Source: VCSE National Data & Insights Observatory, VCSE Barometer, Wave 10

While wellbeing challenges are evident across the sector, our findings indicate that pressures on volunteer wellbeing are particularly acute in smaller organisations. In contrast, larger organisations more commonly report challenges related to staff wellbeing.

40% of small organisations saw a rise in volunteers working beyond agreed hours in the past year

Small organisations were more likely to report increases in volunteers working beyond agreed hours (40%), absence due to caring responsibilities (34%), experiencing burnout (24%), or leaving the organisation (24%).

In contrast, large organisations reported higher levels of staff struggling with the cost of living (45%), requesting adjustments or support (40%), referrals to wellbeing services (34%), and reporting low wellbeing (29%).

Organisational Culture

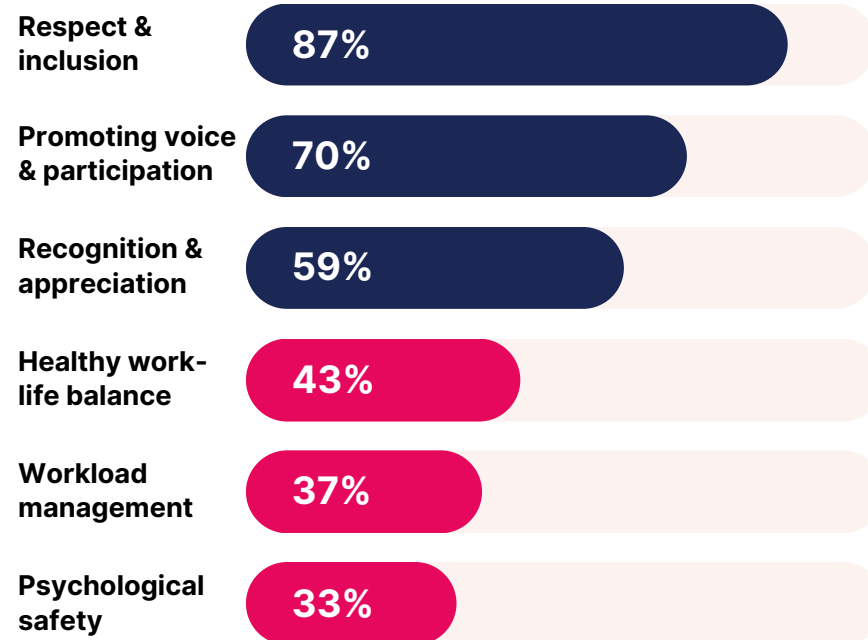
Creating a workplace culture where people feel safe, respected, and listened to is essential for wellbeing. Most organisations report fostering a culture of respect and inclusion (87%), with many also encouraging voice and shared decision making (70%). Just under two thirds (59%) say they recognise and celebrate the achievements of staff and volunteers.

However, with ongoing financial pressures combined with increasing demand, fewer organisations said they actively support work-life balance (43%), and only around a third monitor workloads (37%) or promote psychological safety, where individuals feel able to raise concerns openly and honestly (33%).

“ As much as we want to do more, I cannot afford to reduce the workload and cannot take on more staff as funding is too uncertain. ”

Medium Registered Charity

Aspects of working culture

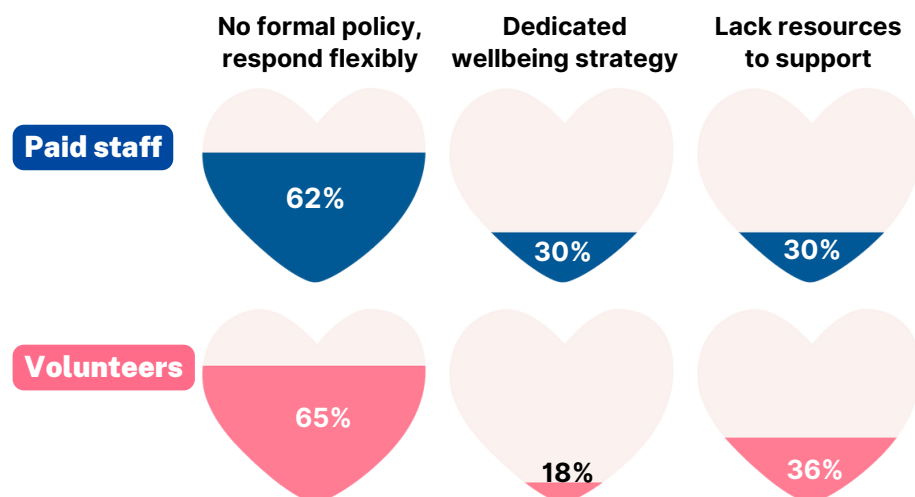


Notes: N = 590. Chart shows the three most and least selected aspects of working culture.

Source: VCSE National Data & Insights Observatory, VCSE Barometer, Wave 10

Wellbeing Approach

Wellbeing approach for personnel



Notes: Paid staff N = 381. Volunteers N = 572. Figures in blue refer to paid staff; figures in pink refer to volunteers.

Source: VCSE National Data & Insights Observatory, VCSE Barometer, Wave 10

Less than a third of organisations said they had a dedicated wellbeing strategy for paid staff (30%), and fewer than one in five had one in place for volunteers (18%), with around one in three saying they lacked the resources to give dedicated support.

Just over half of organisations (54%) said senior leaders considered staff wellbeing a priority, compared to two in five (42%) for volunteers. Despite recognising its importance, many highlighted the difficulty of developing wellbeing in an environment of rising demand, financial uncertainty, and recruitment challenges.

“**We all know the temperature is gradually rising for all of us... but there are no structural solutions in reach, only tactical ones.**”

Medium Registered Charity

Two thirds of organisations reported having no formal wellbeing strategy and instead responded flexibly to the needs of staff (62%) and volunteers (65%). This flexible approach was reflected in the limited use of formal practices, such as regular wellbeing measurement (25% staff, 15% volunteers) and training line managers to support wellbeing (36% staff, 26% volunteers).

Health and Wellbeing Initiatives

Health and wellbeing initiatives are the supports and benefits organisations put in place to promote the physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing of their people. Our findings highlight gaps in service provision, driven by capacity problems and limited funding.

Gaps in provision

Access to mental health support was the most commonly offered initiative. While over half of organisations (60%) provided this support to paid staff, only one in three (33%) did so for volunteers.

Few organisations offered free eye tests (36%), free flu vaccinations (21%), and women's health support (21%) to staff - and fewer than one in ten organisations provided these for volunteers (6%, 6%, and 8% respectively). The gap was smaller for healthy lifestyle advice, provided by 27% for staff and 19% for volunteers.



“ We wish we could do more... but finances and staff time do not allow it. ”

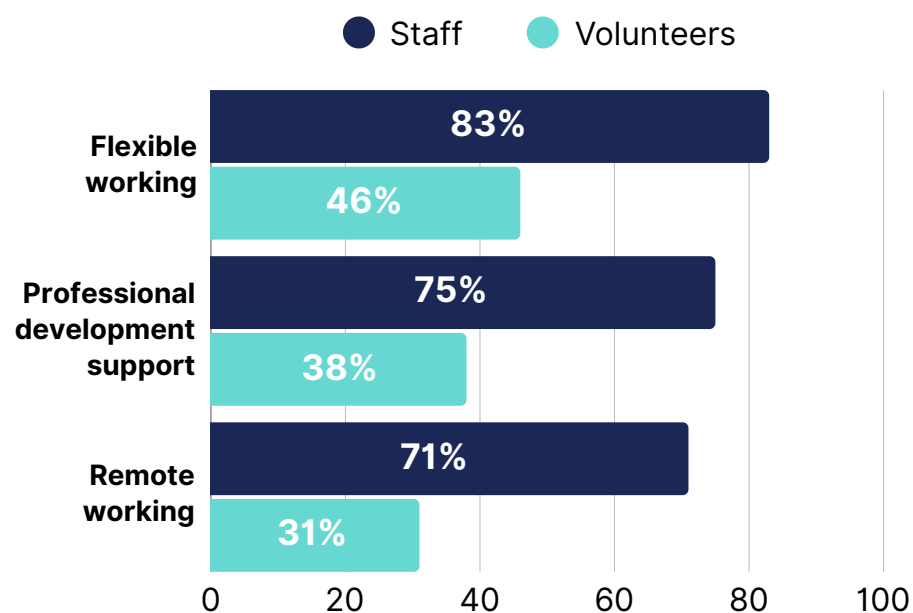
Medium Registered Charity

Support offering higher in large organisations

Large organisations were four times more likely than small organisations to offer access to mental health support for staff (91% vs 22%) and three times more likely to offer access to volunteers (52% vs 17%). Overall, substantially fewer small organisations offered health and wellbeing initiatives compared to medium and large organisations, with provision ranging from just 2% to 13% for both staff and volunteers.

Working Conditions and Recognition Opportunities

Top three disparities in working conditions between staff and volunteers, past 12 months



Notes: Paid staff N = 370. Volunteers N = 517. Figures in navy blue refer to paid staff; figures in turquoise refer to volunteers.

Source: VCSE National Data & Insights Observatory, VCSE Barometer, Wave 10

Around three-quarters of organisations reported offering flexible working (83%), remote work options (71%), and professional development support (75%) to paid staff. In contrast, fewer than half reported offering these to volunteers (46%, 31%, and 38%, respectively).

“ Volunteer wellbeing is linked to the role and the time commitment and should not be managed with the same tools as for full time staff. ”

Large Registered Charity

Reimbursement of expenses was the most commonly reported working condition for volunteers (59%), a similar proportion to staff (66%). A greater proportion of organisations reported offering formal recognition to volunteers (42%) than to staff (33%). Paid-for social activities were reported by fewer than half for staff (45%) and even fewer for volunteers (36%). Support for career progression was least common, reported by 31% for staff and 13% for volunteers.

Guest Expert Commentary: Ingrid Abreu Scherer

People working or volunteering in the VCSE sector are often driven by a deep sense of purpose. Working alongside others in shared meaningful activity is great for our wellbeing, but it's also important that people feel they're making a difference, achieving goals, and feeling valued. As the sector faces growing pressure to do more with less, it can become harder for individuals to experience that sense of impact.

Ingrid Abreu Scherer

Ingrid works with charities, funders, researchers and policymakers to explore their impact on wellbeing and support learning. She has developed a range of resources for the voluntary sector, including [A Practical Guide to Measuring Wellbeing Impact](#), [A Brief Guide to Measuring Loneliness](#), and [A Guide to Effective Case Studies](#).

Reflections

The sector is under pressure, but voluntary organisations are uniquely positioned to foster and support the wellbeing of their staff and volunteers. Below are three reflections on the opportunities and challenges that organisations report in the Barometer data, with ideas for action.

1 Volunteering supports wellbeing, but pressures are growing.

Volunteering is great for wellbeing, especially for those facing disadvantage (e.g. low income, poor health, unemployment, older age). But increasing pressure may limit these benefits, particularly in small organisations where volunteer wellbeing struggles are more prominent.



Volunteers who could benefit the most often face the biggest barriers. Think about offering supported volunteering, flexible or remote options, and reimbursing expenses.



A positive experience matters. Wellbeing improves when people build positive social connections, feel like they're making a difference, and feel appreciated.



Guest Expert Commentary: Ingrid Abreu Scherer

2 Organisations care about wellbeing, but support is inconsistent.

A dedicated wellbeing strategy helps organisations define their values and goals around wellbeing and clearly communicate the support they offer. However, two-thirds of organisations lack a formal wellbeing strategy, and when one exists, it's often just for paid staff. Instead, most organisations take a flexible, case-by-case approach, which can lead to inconsistency and gaps in support.



Flexibility is useful but can lead to unequal support. Responding on a case-by-case basis can make wellbeing support a lottery. Volunteers are most likely to be left out when they aren't part of a formal plan.



A wellbeing strategy doesn't have to be complicated. Writing a strategy or policy can seem daunting, but it can start with small, simple steps. Have open conversations with your team about what matters and what support you can realistically offer.

3 Measuring wellbeing helps you support your people.

Understanding staff and volunteer wellbeing is just as important as measuring your organisation's impact or operations. Yet, our findings show that only around one in four organisation's measure staff wellbeing, and just one in seven do so for volunteers.



Wellbeing is personal and subjective, so we can't know how someone is doing without asking them.



Measuring staff wellbeing can help you identify emerging challenges in the workplace and tailor support to improve employee experience and retention.



Measuring volunteer wellbeing enables you to demonstrate the positive impact your organisation has on volunteers' lives, in addition to the contributions they make to your mission.

Points for Reflection and Resources

Make Wellbeing a Priority



A clear wellbeing strategy can help express your organisation's values and show commitment to supporting your people. We know it can be difficult to give it the attention it deserves, but it doesn't need to be perfect - start small and grow it over time.

Where to begin

- Outline what matters to your organisation, what support you can offer, and how you plan to improve.
- Build gradually and involve your team in shaping it.

Resources

- **St John Ambulance Policy Template**: A guide and template for writing a Workplace Wellbeing Policy.
- **NHS Health and Wellbeing at Work**: Step-by-step support and **guidance on wellbeing conversations**.
- **What Works Centre for Wellbeing - Volunteer Wellbeing**: Evidence and tools, including a theory of change and implementation tips.

Measure What Matters



You may have a general sense of how your people are doing, but the only way to really know is by measuring it.

Practical steps

- Include wellbeing questions in your personnel surveys and report results to trustees, staff and volunteers.
- Use appraisals, feedback opportunities, and check-ins to see how people are feeling and how this may be changing over time.

Resources

- Our online **Guide to Measuring Your Wellbeing Impact** helps you select and use the right measure to assess your organisation's impact on the wellbeing of staff, volunteers, and beneficiaries.
- The **VCSE Barometer Dashboard** allows you to see how you compare with other similar charities and can help you track changes over time.

Points for Reflection and Resources

Build it Together

Wellbeing works best when it's everyone's responsibility. Involving people across your organisation in shaping strategy and policy ensures your approach reflects shared values and priorities.



Ideas to try

- Bring trustees, staff and volunteers together in a Wellbeing Taskforce to cocreate wellbeing aims, develop and test ideas, and champion efforts.
- Involve this group in developing your Wellbeing Strategy and in measuring progress.
- Consider giving them a small budget to test out ideas and encourage participation in wellbeing activities.

Resources

- **CIPD:** Practical resources, including a [factsheet](#) and a [quiz to assess your wellbeing support offer](#).

Measuring your Wellbeing Impact

Our online [Guide to Measuring your Wellbeing Impact](#) is aimed at busy people working in charities who want to understand their impact on the wellbeing of beneficiaries, staff and volunteers. It's designed for you to dip in and out of and learn at your own pace.

The guide covers how to plan and carry out a wellbeing evaluation and making sense of your results. It includes a Wellbeing Measures Bank where you can find tested and validated measures you can use in your surveys.

Get Involved

We're working on a new workplace and volunteer survey that measures wellbeing and other aspects of working in voluntary organisations. If you want to be part of this project please [click here](#) or scan the QR code.



Methods and References

Methods

The findings in this report are based on an analysis of Wave 10 of the VCSE Barometer, a quarterly survey of VCSE organisations designed and administered by Nottingham Trent University's VCSE National Data and Insights Observatory. The VCSE Barometer offers a snapshot into real-time trends, changes, and challenges in the UK voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector. It is supported by over 50 major social sector membership organisations and networks, and findings are shared every quarter with national policy and decision-makers, local infrastructure organisations and the VCSE sector.

Wave 10 of the VCSE Barometer was conducted between 30 April - 21 May 2025 and comprises the views of 635 VCSE organisations. Data were prepared and analysed using Microsoft Excel and R Studio. Data tables are available upon request.

Cite this report

VCSE National Data & Insights Observatory (2025). *Wellbeing in Voluntary Organisations: The Cost of Doing Good*. Nottingham Trent University.

References

1. VCSE National Data & Insights Observatory (2025). *Paying the Price: Difficult Decisions in an Uncertain Financial Landscape*. Nottingham Trent University.
2. Smith, S., Coule, T.M. & King, D. (2022). *Paying the price of 'doing good' in the face of crisis*. In Rees, J. et al. (Eds.), *COVID-19 and the Voluntary and Community Sector in the UK*. Policy Press.

Resources

- St John Ambulance: [Workplace wellbeing policy guide and template](#)
- NHS: [Guide on looking after your teams health and wellbeing](#)
- NHS: [Guidance on wellbeing conversations](#)
- What Works Centre for Wellbeing: [Online guide to measuring your wellbeing impact](#)
- What Works Centre for Wellbeing: [Volunteer wellbeing: what works and who benefits?](#)
- National Academy for Social Prescribing: [7 steps to wellbeing through volunteering](#)
- CIPD: [Health and wellbeing resources](#)
- CIPD: [Quiz to assess your wellbeing programme to make the most of an effective wellbeing offering](#)





Nottingham Trent University's Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise Sector (VCSE) National Data and Insights Observatory develops innovative methods to collect, uncover and unify existing and new data so that a clearer, more accurate picture of the nature and value of UK VCSE can be painted for policymakers, practitioners and stakeholders.

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