‘THEOS’

Volunteering After the Pandemic: Lessons from the Homelessness Sector

Hannah Rich and George Lapshynov

‘THEOS’

Theos is the UK's leading religion and society think tank. It has a broad Christian basis and exists to enrich the conversation about the role of faith in society through research, events, and media commentary.

Volunteering After the Pandemic: Lessons from the Homelessness Sector

Hannah Rich and George Lapshynov

Acknowledgments

Executive summary

Volunteering has changed significantly over the last few years, both in its nature and in the patterns of engagement seen nationally. Many charities, faith groups and community projects report having lost a significant number of their previous volunteers since the pandemic, due to a combination of changed working patterns, retirement, economic pressures, and a difference in the 'offer' that volunteers are now looking for after the pandemic. Both recruitment and retention of volunteers are challenging for a majority of charities. The same changes and challenges are observed for local faith communities including churches, who are often also reliant on volunteers.

Drawing together existing data and new research, this report examines the trends and evidence around volunteering post-pandemic, exploring what has changed in volunteering on the ground and the factors that have contributed to this. It considers what strategies faith groups and charities might pursue to recruit new volunteers and sustain their activities amid the many pressures of the current climate. It focusses on the homelessness sector as a case study, with the support of Housing Justice, but the findings are applicable more widely to any voluntary organisation.

We find that there has been a marked decline in volunteering over recent years. The initial boom in informal volunteering at the beginning of the pandemic has not been sustained, nor has it translated into a significant increase in formal volunteering subsequently.

Volunteer recruitment is noticeably harder than pre-pandemic, as is retention of existing volunteers. Many regular volunteers who stopped volunteering because of lockdown

have not returned. The average age of volunteers, which skews older, has compounded this, with some choosing to retire.

Some of the changes to the ways in which voluntary services operate have profoundly altered the experience of volunteers. For some, the upheaval of recent years has prompted a refining and reassessment of volunteer roles and practices, which can be a positive thing. Whilst we observe that many of these have been beneficial to the clients or guests of a service, however, they have not always been seen positively by volunteers. In particular, we note that volunteers value the communal nature, the sense of ownership and belonging, and the relationships they build through volunteering.

In terms of improving volunteer recruitment and experience, we recommend that:

— The whole voluntary sector needs to find ways of broadening its volunteer demographic and in particular lowering the average age;

— This might mean introducing greater flexibility of volunteer placement, including short-term opportunities for younger people.

— A clearer delineation of roles and responsibilities would also help attract new volunteers as well as retaining existing ones;

— Investing resources in volunteer recruitment pays dividends in retention and increased organisational capacity and should therefore be prioritised;

— Local businesses and charities should seek to develop longer-term relationships leading to meaningful engagement and corporate volunteering opportunities.

— While conversations about the tension between volunteer and guest expectations may be uncomfortable, they are worthwhile;

— These conversations may lead to the development of a new paradigm for the voluntary sector, balancing volunteer and guest experiences.

— For some organisations, there is still a need to raise public awareness of their cause in order to continue attracting volunteers and charitable support.
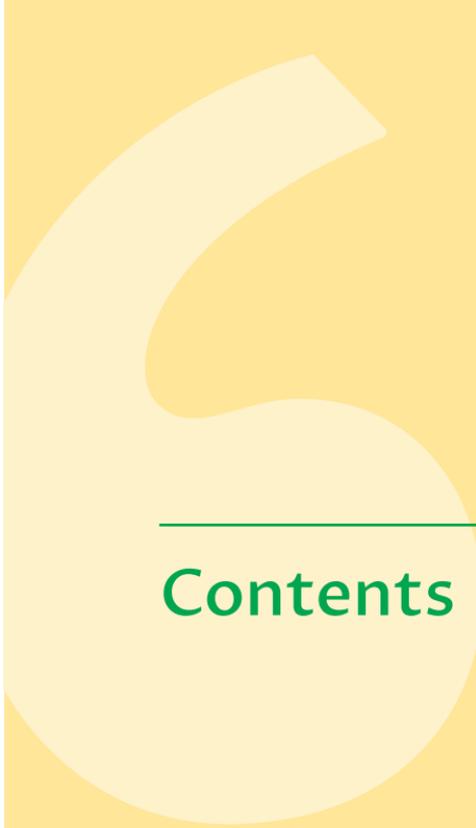
Contents
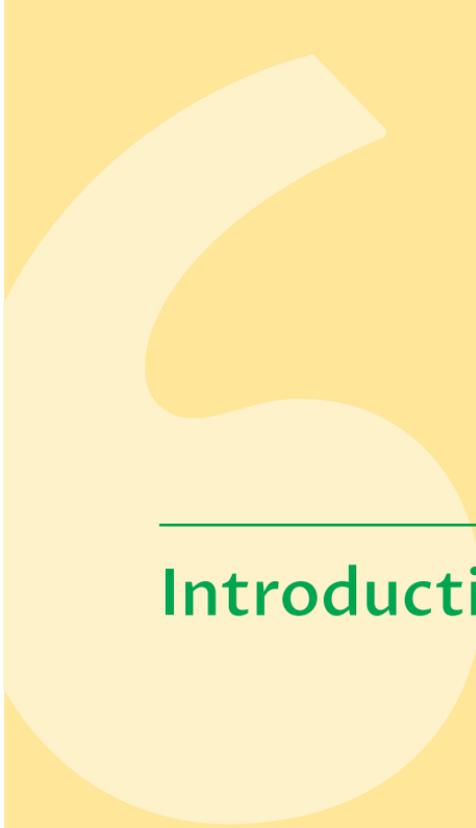
Introduction

There is barely an aspect of our lives that has been unaffected by events of the last few years. The Covid pandemic, followed swiftly by the current economic downturn, has affected working patterns, finances, social lives, spending habits and more. The voluntary and community sector has, unsurprisingly, not been immune to this upheaval. Both in terms of financial giving and volunteering, there have been significant changes in how people engage with and support charities, community groups and other social action initiatives.

Volunteering has changed significantly in that time, both in its nature and in the patterns of engagement seen nationally. Many charities, faith groups and community projects report having lost a significant number of their previous volunteers, due to a combination of changed working patterns, retirement, economic pressures, and a difference in the 'offer' that volunteers are now looking for after the pandemic. Both recruitment and retention of volunteers is a substantial challenge for a majority of charities at the moment.[1] This has been compounded by alterations in the way many voluntary organisations have operated during this period, brought about by lockdown restrictions and related public health concerns, which have in turn changed the role of volunteers.

These challenges have all been experienced acutely by charities and voluntary organisations active within the homelessness sector. In particular, churches and local faith groups have long been instrumental in the delivery of winter night shelters in hundreds of communities across the country, but these have been demonstrably affected by the pandemic, lockdown and ensuing economic crisis.[2]

This report is the culmination of research commissioned by the Christian homelessness charity Housing Justice and conducted by Theos to examine the trends and evidence around volunteering post-pandemic. It explores what has changed in volunteering on the ground and the factors that have contributed to this. It considers what strategies faith groups and charities might pursue to recruit new volunteers and sustain their activities amid the many pressures of the current climate.

It is a small-scale study, focussing primarily on homelessness-based interventions, such as winter night shelters, emergency accommodation, day services and homelessness prevention projects like the Citadel project operated by Housing Justice in Wales.

However, the findings and recommendations are intended to be of wider relevance to other voluntary sector organisations and faith-based social action projects, which are experiencing many of the same difficulties surrounding volunteering at present.

The research

The research was conducted in March-June 2023 and consisted of:

— A review of existing literature and data on volunteering in the UK;

— An online survey of volunteers and staff from the Housing Justice network;

— A series of qualitative interviews with individuals from across the Housing Justice network and the wider homelessness sector.

All three phases of the research are drawn on throughout this report, with data from existing sources referenced where relevant and our own original data highlighted accordingly.

Online survey

We conducted a short survey of staff and volunteer coordinators across the Housing Justice network. The focus of this was on how the pandemic has changed the nature of homelessness support, and what the experience of voluntary organisations in the sector has been. It included both tick-box questions and opportunities for people to write in answers in their own words. The survey was circulated online with the help of the Housing Justice email newsletter and was open for responses for a four week period in spring 2023. We received a total of **39** responses to the survey, meaning that its results should be treated as indicative rather than representative.

Of the total responses, 16 (41%) were paid staff members of either Housing Justice or a local homelessness project. Over half (59%) were volunteers, of whom the plurality indicated that they held voluntary positions of responsibility. Nine (23%) were volunteer project coordinators. A further 14 (36%) ticked 'other' when asked about their role; of this group, six (15%) identified themselves as a trustee of either a local night shelter or a charity, and eight (21%) were volunteers delivering services. Responses therefore reflect a diverse range of roles and responsibilities within the delivery of homelessness support, both paid and voluntary and with varying degrees of formality.

The responses also covered a variety of different projects and models of homelessness intervention, including night shelters, day centres, emergency accommodation and other services, reflecting the breadth of projects Housing Justice

supports.[3] In total, 31 (79%) said they were responding on behalf of a project involved in providing accommodation in one form or another, of which 19 (49%) were night shelters hosted in churches or community buildings.[4] Eight (21%) were night shelters in owned or other commercial premises, three (8%) were delivering supported accommodation, and one was a permanent hostel facility. In addition, 11 (28%) offered a day centre service or drop-in facility, of which seven were also offering accommodation.

We did not collect demographic or geographic information about survey respondents.

Interviews

We also conducted a series of **16** in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Housing Justice volunteers and staff from across England and Wales.[5] These took place on Zoom and included questions about the current challenges of volunteering in each context and how the interviewee felt this had changed, if at all, since before the pandemic.

The interviewees included volunteers, volunteer coordinators (both paid and unpaid), trustees, charity CEOs and representatives of Housing Justice nationally. Five (31%) were volunteers, nine (56%) were paid staff members of local projects and two (13%) held nationwide paid roles. Interviewees covered a variety of geographic contexts: five were based in London, four in other parts of England, and five were based in Wales.

As with the survey respondents, the sample included a variety of models and services, including the Citadel homelessness prevention scheme piloted by Housing Justice in Wales as well as various forms of night shelter and day service.

1. Kenley, A. & Larkham, J. (2023). *Shifting out of reverse: An analysis of the VCSE Sector Barometer*. Pro Bono Economics in partnership with NTU VCSE Observator. Available at: www.probonoeconomics.com/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=e02585be-c7d7-48c4-9d10-83f1902cf8cc

2. Rich, H. (2022). *A Torn Safety Net: How the cost of living crisis threatens its own last line of defence*. Theos Think Tank. Available at: www.theosthinktank.co.uk/a-torn-safety-net-how-the-cost-of-living-crisis-threatens-its-own-last-line-of-defence

3. This is not intended to be statistically representative of the types of projects and roles across the Housing Justice network, but spans the range

4. This includes a number of projects which are no longer operating this model, but which were prior to the pandemic, as they acknowledge and as we will go on to explore.

5. We invited over 40 individuals from across the network to participate in these interviews, of whom 16 responded and agreed to be interviewed.
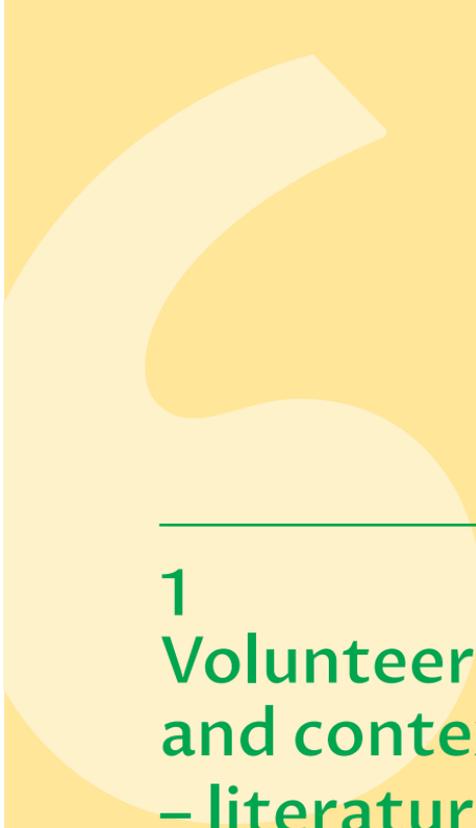
1
Volunteering trends and context
– literature review

Before we turn to the specific context of the homelessness sector, it is helpful to begin with a general overview of the volunteering landscape in the UK at present, exploring broader trends and challenges and in particular how the Covid pandemic has affected this.

Volunteering has taken on a greater importance in the UK in recent years, in the context of reduced government spending and a concerted policy effort to encourage community work. Even with the ostensible failure of the 'Big Society', charities and volunteers are explicitly still expected to play a bigger role in the provision of public services.[1] Since 2010, the policy infrastructure has been heavily reliant on the charity sector to fill gaps left by the state. This has not, however, led to the hoped-for increase in volunteering, nor has volunteering been sustained over the decade since.

The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) identify two categories of volunteering: formal and informal.[2] These are used throughout the quantitative data summarised here, and there are different trends related to each. Formal volunteering is defined as giving unpaid help through a group, club or organisation and informal volunteering is defined broadly as any unpaid help carried out individually outside of an organisational context.[3] Volunteering in a night shelter would be classed as formal, while helping a neighbour with shopping falls within the informal volunteering category.

The nature of homelessness as a social cause means volunteering in this area is almost entirely in the formal category, unlike other parts of the voluntary sector which are more adaptable to informal volunteering. This has particular implications for patterns of volunteering in the homelessness

sector, especially in light of the diverging trends between formal and informal during the pandemic.

There has been a marked decline in levels of both formal and informal volunteering in the UK since the NCVO data began in 2013,[4] although this appeared to have stabilised immediately prior to the pandemic.[5] This decline was more pronounced for formal forms of volunteering: the proportion of the adult population volunteering in a formal setting at least once a year fell from 45% to 37%, and the proportion volunteering in a formal setting at least monthly fell from 27% in 2013 to 23% in 2019.[6] Informal volunteering remained consistently higher than formal and fell less steeply. In 2019, 52% of the population volunteered informally at least once a year and 26% at least monthly.[7]

❝

There has been a marked decline in levels of both formal and informal volunteering in the UK since the NCVO data began in 2013.

Longer term, the sector had struggled to recover from the 2008 financial crisis, which saw a drop in numbers of both volunteers and income. The term 'social recession' was coined in the aftermath of 2008 to describe the parallel contraction in the voluntary sector alongside the economic recession.[8] It was not until 2013 that levels of income for charities matched their pre-crisis levels from 2007.[9]

In contrast to the falling numbers of volunteers, the period between 2013 and 2020 saw an expansion in the role of charities which was forecast to continue before the onset of the pandemic.

New Philanthropy Capital found that immediately before the onset of the pandemic, the vast majority of charities had

increased their activities and planned to further increase them between 2020 and 2023.[10] Within this, the policy context has meant an increase in the number of charities delivering commissioned public services for local and national government.[11] Growth in activities already outstripped growth in income by a significant margin, meaning many charities would likely have experienced a period of financial instability and a volunteer shortage, irrespective of the effects of the pandemic.[12] Most charities surveyed in early 2020 were already worried about fundraising, although without the additional concerns about volunteering.[13]

The Covid pandemic and its effects

When the first UK lockdown period began in March 2020, a significant proportion of formal volunteering ceased overnight, because many of the settings where it takes place were forced to close. Conversely, informal volunteering proliferated in the form of 'hyper-local' assistance and neighbourhood support networks, providing support such as shopping or cooking meals for others.[14] In addition to requiring less formal commitment on the part of volunteers, neighbourhood mutual aid and volunteering was seen to facilitate bonding between neighbours and combat loneliness at a time of enforced social isolation. The increase in this form of volunteering was demonstrable; in the first month of the March 2020 lockdown, an estimated 3 million people in the UK were involved in informal mutual aid groups, and 750,000 signed up to assist the NHS in various tasks.[15] This uptake in volunteering in the immediate crisis period

> **In March 2020, a significant proportion of formal volunteering ceased overnight; conversely, informal volunteering proliferated.**

is in line with the mass mobilisation expected in response to natural disasters or public health crises, particularly in the UK context.[16]

Many of these were new to volunteering and as such, the average age of volunteers dropped during the pandemic.[17] Immediately prior to the pandemic, people aged 65-74 were twice as likely to volunteer as those aged 25-34.[18] However, the pandemic opened the way for a new younger cohort of volunteers to emerge, who had previously not engaged because of practical constraints rather than a lack of willing. In some cases, this was facilitated by the furlough scheme.

The speed with which mutual aid groups and similar hyper-local community initiatives were established was noted as "one of the most remarkable features during the first lockdown."[19] However, their longevity was less noteworthy. While informal groups were particularly good at attracting volunteers in the first weeks of the pandemic, they likely did not have the necessary structures and safeguards in place to assure their retention.[20] Mutual aid groups started fading away and reducing their activities as soon as the first wave of the pandemic passed, between June and September 2020, and interest in volunteering generally started declining.[21]

Furthermore, this did not necessarily translate into a growth in formal volunteering, even once lockdown eased and opportunities to engage opened up again. The data on volunteering during the pandemic points to an increase in engagement in crisis response and volunteering directly related to Covid, without a similar boost for other, more entrenched social issues e.g., homelessness. The established charitable sector was "very badly hit... suffering a 'triple

whammy' of reduced fundraising/income, reduced levels of volunteering, and increased demand for services."[22]

Nor was the early boom in neighbourliness and informal volunteering sustained as the pandemic lasted longer than initial expectations and subsequent waves of lockdown ensued. The November 2020 lockdown coincided with a further contraction in formal volunteering, but this time without the corresponding increase in informal volunteering. Across the whole of the pandemic, previous volunteer experience remained by far the best predictor of formal volunteering. The number of people who began formally volunteering for the first time in 2021 was 57% lower than in 2019, having fallen by only 26% in 2020,[23] providing little evidence of any rush to take advantage of volunteering opportunities once public health restrictions on their settings were lifted.

Notably, the drive for volunteers to support the national vaccination rollout in winter 2020 did not mobilise people as strongly as the initial crisis response. 200,000 people signed up to help the vaccination effort, compared to three quarters of a million who signed up to be NHS responders.[24] While 200,000 is still a significant number, it is striking that even something as nationally transformative and important as vaccination didn't have the same draw as any volunteering opportunity in the 'crisis response' phase of the pandemic. Interest had demonstrably waned.

DCMS data back this up, suggesting that participation rates in formal volunteering in 2022 were the lowest recorded for a decade. In 2021/22, 7 million people in England took part in formal volunteering at least once a month, compared to 11 million in 2019/20. This represents a loss of 4 million individuals at least monthly, with data also showing a loss

of 6 million individuals volunteering at least annually.[25] The timeframe for this data is October-September, and the 2021/22 period thus extends into the beginning of the economic crisis in late 2022. This indicates that, while the reasons people may have stopped volunteering were initially related to the pandemic, there may be economic contributory factors in their not restarting.

The most recent Community Life Survey, conducted in late 2022, found that the proportion of the population volunteering at least once a month had fallen again, down to 16% from 23% in 2019.[26] Volunteer participation has not fully recovered since the pandemic.

> **"**
>
> **Volunteer participation has not fully recovered since the pandemic.**

Current challenges for the sector

The headline data demonstrate that the pandemic and ensuing economic crisis have made for a difficult context for the voluntary and community sector as a whole. This is evident not only in metrics of falling volunteering levels and financial giving, but also in attitudinal data. The difficulties reflected in the statistics are also being felt keenly by charity leaders and staff.

The VCSE Sector Barometer has been conducted regularly since the beginning of the pandemic and provides a comprehensive picture of where we are at now in terms of volunteering and the concerns of UK charities. The most recent quarterly release of this dataset was published in early June 2023. It found that six in ten (63%) small charities cite volunteer recruitment as a major organisational concern, with the majority of charities of all sizes describing it as 'difficult'.[27] Fewer than one in ten (8%) charities said it had been easy in the past year.

Retention is also seen to be a sector-wide problem, with one in ten (11%) of large charities saying it is a main concern for them, rising to over four in ten (42%) of small charities. This has risen significantly since autumn 2022.

> ❝
>
> **A third of charities (34%) cite the cost of living crisis as a specific issue for volunteering retention.**

A third of charities (34%) cite the cost of living crisis as a specific issue for volunteering retention, underlining the economic as well as Covid-related factors at play. Four in ten (40%) charities say that a lack of volunteers over the last twelve months has stopped them meeting key objectives. Further, there appears to be a vicious circle in operation, whereby just over a quarter of charities (27%) cite a lack of organisational capacity as a key issue preventing volunteer recruitment and retention.

For example, factors like not having sufficient paid staff to actively recruit and train new volunteers might restrict an organisation's activities, which in turn reduces their capacity to pay staff to engage in recruitment, and the cycle goes on. There is also evidence that people drop off from volunteering if they are not accompanied throughout the process, but that requires a level of organisational capacity which is not universally possible at present.

While volunteer numbers are down, NCVO data from 2022-23 indicates that the vast majority of current volunteers still say they have a positive experience of volunteering and report positive impacts on their lives.[28] 89% of volunteers surveyed said they were very or fairly satisfied, although this has fallen from 96% in 2018. Contributory factors include the feeling that their volunteering group or organisation had unreasonable

expectations of volunteers, and the sense that volunteering had become too much like paid work. Public sector volunteers, a growing proportion of the overall cohort, are also less likely to be satisfied than third sector volunteers.

Crucially, the NCVO data also shows an increase in the practical barriers to volunteering, particular around the cost of living crisis and changing time patterns. The cost involved in the volunteering, and varying understandings of whether expenses might be reimbursed was seen to be significant. Among those who had considered volunteering in the last 12 months, the most common perceived barriers were that it involved more time than they could commit (21%); that it wasn't flexible (14%); and that the opportunities didn't match their skills, interests or experience (14%).[29]

> **The vast majority of current volunteers still say they have a positive experience of volunteering.**

All these barriers, together with the wider social and economic challenges, are important for charities and voluntary organisations to be aware of if they are to continue effectively recruiting and retaining volunteers and provide a fulfilling and attractive offer to volunteers.

1. Sharman, A. (2015). 'Big Society has failed, concludes Civil Exchange.' *Civil Society News*. Available at: www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/big-society-has-failed--concludes-civil-exchange.html

2. NCVO (2023). *UK Civil Society Almanac 2022*. Available at: www.ncvo.org.uk/news-and-insights/news-index/uk-civil-society-almanac-2022/volunteering/

3. Ibid.

4. Department for Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) (2023) *Community Life Survey 2021/22*. Published 28 February 2023. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202122/community-life-survey-202122-volunteering-and-charitable-giving.

5. Hornung, L. (2020) 'What can the UK Civil Society Almanac tell us about charities' challenges now and in the future?' *NCVO Blogs*. Available at: https://blogs.ncvo.org.uk/2020/07/08/what-can-the-uk-civil-society-almanac-tell-us-about-charities-challenges-now-and-in-the-future/.

6. NCVO (2021). *UK Civil Society Almanac 2021*. Available at: www.ncvo.org.uk/news-and-insights/news-index/uk-civil-society-almanac-2021/#/.

7. Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (2019) *Community Life Survey, England 2018-2019*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/820610/Community_Life_Survey_2018-19_report.pdf.

8. Laurence, J. (2015). "The UK experienced a sharp drop in volunteering behaviour following the Great Recession", *LSE Politics and Policy*. Available at: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/drop-in-volunteering-post-recession/

9. Hornung (2020).

10. Clay, T., Collinge, T., Davis, L. & Piazza, R. (2020a) "State of the Sector 2020. The condition of charities before the COVID-19 crisis." *New Philanthropy Capital*. Available at: www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/state-of-the-sector-2020/.

11. Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (2022) *The role of Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisations in public procurement*. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-role-of-voluntary-community-and-social-enterprise-vcse-organisations-in-public-procurement.

12. Ibid.

13. Clay, T., Collinge, T., Piazza, R., Noble, J., Corry, D. & Davis, L. (2020b) "State of the sector 2020. Where we stood as the crisis hit." *New Philanthropy Capital*. Available at: www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/stots2020/

14. Butler P. (2020) 'A million volunteer to help NHS and others during Covid-19 outbreak.' *The Guardian*. 13th April.

Available at: www.theguardian.com/society/2020/
apr/13/a-million-volunteer-to-help-nhs-and-others-during-covid-19-lockdown.

15. Mao, G., Fernandes-Jesus, M., Ntontis, E., & Drury, J. (2021) 'What have we
    learned about COVID-19 volunteering in the UK? A rapid review of the
    literature'. *BMC Public Health*, vol 21.

16. Dederichs, K. (2022). 'Volunteering in the United Kingdom During the COVID-19
    Pandemic: Who Started and Who Quit?' *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly.*

17. McCabe A., Wilson M., & Macmillan R. (2020) 'Stronger than
    anyone thought: communities responding to COVID-19.' *Local
    Trust.* Available at: https://localtrust.org.uk/insights/research/
    stronger-than-anyone-thought-communitiesresponding-to-covid-19/.

18. NCVO (2021).

19. Crawford, L. (2021) 'Working paper 2: What the existing research tells us.'
    Mobilising Voluntary Action. Available at: www.mvain4.uk/resource-details/
    working-paper-2-what-the-existing-research-tells-us/.

20. Power, A. and Benton, E. (2021) 'Where next for Britain's 4,300 mutual aid
    groups?' *LSE Blogs.* Available at: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/covid19/2021/05/06/
    where-next-for-britains-4300-mutual-aid-groups/

21. NTU, NCVO, Sheffield Hallam (2021a) "Respond, Recover, Reset: the
    voluntary sector and COVID-19. February 2021." *Centre of People, Work and
    Organisational Practice.* Available at: http://cpwop.org.uk/what-we-do/
    projects-and-publications/covid-19-vcse-organisation-responses/.

22. O'Leary, C. & Chadha, R. (2023) 'Volunteering and small charities' in Bonner,
    A. (ed) *COVID-19 and Social Determinants of Health: Wicked Issues and Relationalism.*
    United Kingdom: Policy Press, pp. 258–267.

23. Dederichs (2022).

24. Department of Health and Social Care (2021) *UK COVID-19 vaccines delivery
    plan.* Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/
    uk-covid-19-vaccines-delivery-plan

25. DCMS (2019).

26. NCVO (2023). *Key Findings from Time Well Spent 2023.* Available at: www.ncvo.org.
    uk/news-and-insights/news-index/key-findings-from-time-well-spent-2023

27. Kenley, A. & Larkham, J. (2023). *Shifting out of reverse: An analysis of the
    VCSE Sector Barometer.* Pro Bono Economics in partnership with NTU VCSE
    Observator. Available at: www.probonoeconomics.com/Handlers/Download.
    ashx?IDMF=e02585be-c7d7-48c4-9d10-83f1902cf8cc

28. NCVO (2023).

29. Ibid.

2
Homelessness sector – quantitative insights

The data outlined in the previous chapter demonstrate that volunteering, and the voluntary sector overall, has yet to bounce back fully from the effects of the pandemic. Volunteering levels are down and there are lasting challenges across the board. However, there is limited disaggregation of this data by the type of organisation represented or the particular social issue it works to address.

In the survey phase of this research, we asked respondents working in the homelessness sector specifically to answer questions about their experience of volunteer engagement pre and post pandemic, as well as how their work has changed in the last few years. The sample of 39 respondents is not large enough to draw any conclusive insights, nor can it be understood as nationally or demographically representative of the whole sector.

However, it provides a helpful snapshot of the particular challenges and experiences of individuals from a range of different homelessness interventions within the Housing Justice network, and how this resonates and contrasts with wider data on volunteering.

Compared to before the pandemic, how would you describe the following?
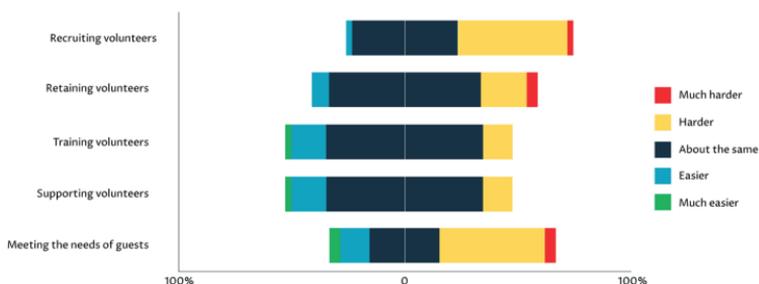
We asked respondents how they would describe various aspects of volunteer management in their organisation, compared to before the pandemic, on a scale of much easier, easier, about the same, harder or much harder. (As was qualified by participants in later questions and interviews, 'about the same' as before the pandemic does not necessarily mean that things have remained static for that whole period, but perhaps also that it has settled down again.)

> **Over half (51%) said recruiting volunteers was harder now than before the pandemic and a quarter (26%) felt that retention was harder.**

Over half (51%) said recruiting volunteers was harder now than before the pandemic and a quarter (26%) felt that retention was harder. Only one respondent thought recruitment was easier, and two thought that retention was easier. One in five respondents (21%) felt that both recruitment and retention of volunteers were harder now.

A majority (54%) gave the same response with respect to recruiting and retaining volunteers. Of those whose answers diverged, over three quarters indicated that recruitment had got more difficult compared to the pandemic than retention had. This corresponds with the wider findings of the VCSE barometer that a greater proportion of charities are concerned about volunteer recruitment than volunteer retention, although both are significant concerns.[1]

While the pandemic has clearly had a negative impact on recruitment and retention of volunteers, our survey showed that it had had little or no impact on supporting and training volunteers. A large majority (69%) said that both were about the same as before the pandemic. Further, of those who felt

it had changed, more thought supporting and training were easier (18%) than felt these aspects had got harder (13%). When we interrogated this further in open-text questions and interviews, it emerged that the greater flexibility afforded by the pandemic had aided supporting and training volunteers, through things like being able to conduct sessions on Zoom. The greater centralisation of volunteers due to changing models, as we explore in more detail later, also contributed.

The distribution of responses to the statements about supporting and training volunteers were identical, which suggests that the same factors influence both. It might also be interpreted as people bracketing initial training and ongoing support for volunteers within the same activity or responsibility, as opposed to seeing them as discrete parts of the volunteering process.

Lastly, respondents were asked about how they found meeting the needs of guests/service users now compared to before the pandemic. Again, just over half (51%) said it was harder and a further 31% thought it was about the same. However, despite the acknowledged difficulties with volunteer capacity and finances, almost one in five (18%) said this was easier than pre-pandemic, including 6% who thought it was much easier – the highest percentage across all five categories. While this is still a minority, the comparative aspect is interesting and suggests that for all the challenges and changes effected or enforced in the last three years, some of this has led to better support for guests.

We also asked participants what the main challenges facing them at present were with respect to volunteering; they were allowed to pick up to three from a list of options, or select 'other'.

The most common answers in order of popularity were:

1. Difficulty recruiting volunteers (49%)

2. Volunteers not returning after lockdown (44%)

3. Not enough volunteers (38%)

4. Regular volunteers retiring (31%)

5. Volunteers struggling to adapt to new models (26%)

6. Short term volunteers (18%)

7. Other (15%)

What are the main challenges you experience with respect to volunteering? (Pick up to 3)
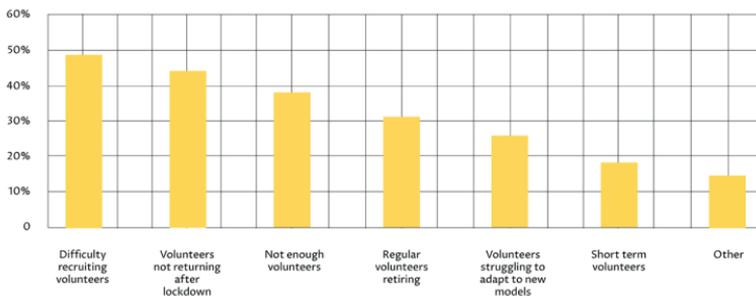
These responses indicate the general lack of volunteer capacity post-pandemic, coupled with the difficulty in restoring the volunteer pool through recruitment, as already established. The proportion who highlighted volunteer retirement as a separate option from 'not coming back after lockdown' is indicative of the age profile of the existing volunteer pool.

A quarter of respondents (26%) said that volunteers struggled to adapt to new models, of whom all were

representatives of winter night shelters or other accommodation providers. Additionally, a small number of respondents specified in their written answers that they had had difficulties with volunteers not understanding or appreciating newly implemented health and safety measures. This tallies with the findings of the interview data, which will be explored in the next chapter.

Among those who selected the 'other' option, factors highlighted included seasonal variation in volunteering (e.g. struggling to get volunteers in school holidays); reduced opportunities for volunteers to get involved; changing shift patterns in the service (e.g. not operating overnight anymore, or conversely opening more days of the week); a mismatch between opening times and volunteer availability; and an ageing volunteer pool.

"

A quarter of respondents (26%) said that volunteers struggling to adapt to new models.

1. Kenley, A. & Larkham, J. (2023). *Shifting out of reverse: An analysis of the VCSE Sector Barometer*. Pro Bono Economics in partnership with NTU VCSE Observator. Available at: www.probonoeconomics.com/Handlers/Download. ashx?IDMF=e02585be-c7d7-48c4-9d10-83f1902cf8cc

3
Homelessness sector qualitative insights

While the whole voluntary and charity sector has undergone acute pressures and challenges in the last few years, there are some particular characteristics to the experience of organisations and individuals working in the homelessness sector, as our research shows. There has been a significant degree of change to the way emergency night accommodation in particular is provided, catalysed by the pandemic, with lasting implications for volunteer involvement and engagement. In the interviews, as well as analysis of qualitative survey data, we were able to dig deeper into this.

"Absolutely everything about how we ran changed overnight." (Night shelter manager)

Prior to the pandemic, a large proportion of voluntary homelessness provision was delivered by emergency night shelters, and the majority of respondents in our research were involved in this. The prevalent model for these, particularly within the Housing Justice network, was a rotating night shelter model, hosted by seven churches or community spaces in a borough, each taking one night a week throughout the winter season. These were typically communal shelters, consisting of airbeds on a church hall floor, with a hot evening meal provided by volunteers as well as breakfast in the morning. They were served by a network of volunteers drawn from each particular church community. When the pandemic emerged, this model evidently had to close because of public health concerns and the communal nature of the space.

Alongside this, there was a concerted government effort to move rough sleepers and homeless people into secure accommodation to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. The 'Everyone In' initiative saw 37,000 people identified as

homeless and moved into semi-permanent accommodation.[1] There was a short window at the beginning of the pandemic in which national government was open to embedding and funding a profoundly different model for homelessness alleviation. This has been termed "the surprising 'good news' story of the pandemic," and was the result of a rapid, concerted and unprecedented government intervention to find accommodation.[2] One interviewee from the sector described it as the "nationalisation of homelessness provision".

Rough sleeping was effectively cut by half in a year and there was a demonstrable success in settling people into hotel rooms. The initial priority was getting people out of communal shelters, and into individual rooms, followed by housing rough sleepers not engaged by existing shelters. Much of this provision was delivered in partnership with existing night shelter operators, who pivoted their service to a static shelter model. This meant guests were housed in hotels, hostels or redundant student accommodation, and had their own bedroom and permanent base rather than rotating around seven different locations.

> **In the majority of boroughs, homelessness provision transitioned away from night shelter circuits towards static shelters.**

In the majority of boroughs, homelessness provision transitioned away from night shelter circuits towards static shelters, with varying degrees of longevity beyond the pandemic.

Within the Housing Justice network, the transition to the static model is starkly shown in the numbers of projects operating each model in recent years. In 2019/20, all 71 (100%)

shelters in the network were operating under the communal model. In 2020/21, by necessity, 63 (97%) were operating a single room format, with the remainder still using a communal model but with reduced numbers of guests. In 2021/22, the total number of shelters had increased again, with 64 (84%) running a static model and 13 (16%) communal shelters. In the most recent winter season, 2022/23, slightly more (27%) had moved back to a communal setting, but the majority (61%) were still running a single-room model and a further 11% operated a 'low ratio' model.

There have been statutory ramifications from 'Everyone In' for the relationship between homeless charities and local/national government, but also wide ranging implications for the organisations that run or ran these shelters, and their volunteers. The vast majority of respondents in our survey of the Housing Justice network indicated that there had been changes to how their project operates since the Covid pandemic, with only two respondents saying their work had been entirely unchanged.

Many of the findings of our research centred on changes to volunteering as a result of the changing model, directly or indirectly, and we explore those first here before turning to other insights.

Practical changes in roles

For projects moving from a rotational/communal model to a static model of night shelters, there were implications for the role of volunteers. The previous model required a high level of practical input from volunteers, in tasks such as blowing up airbeds for guests or setting up tables and chairs for shared meals in a church hall facility. These tasks were effectively repeated seven times a week, by a different team of volunteers

each night, which inflated the number of volunteers required across a night shelter circuit. In the static model, these roles are not needed.

This was seen to have contributed to the numerical decline in volunteers in two ways. Firstly, volunteers who enjoyed the practical aspects of volunteering dropped out or were less likely to return to volunteering. There was also a sense of resistance to change or reluctance to accept some of the practical restrictions of the pandemic on volunteering; for example, volunteers being frustrated by the smaller number of guests they were able to welcome.

Secondly, there was a more streamlined need for volunteers and so some of the reduction in numbers was organic, by virtue of fewer volunteers being needed. One interviewee acknowledged that, on the face of it, this looked like a negative thing but was not necessarily the case in reality. Another noted that it did not *sound* encouraging to tell trustees, for example, that their volunteer pool was now 40% of what it was pre-pandemic, but that it actually meant that the volunteers were all contributing in a more meaningful way.

"What we want is the same volunteer team every week who understand the service. If they're doing it every week, it really elevates the quality and consistency of the service. I'd rather have 500 people who do it all winter and know what they're doing than 1600 people who do it twice a year and aren't that confident talking to guests." (Volunteer coordinator)

66

For some, therefore, the upheaval of recent years has prompted a refining and reassessment of volunteer roles and practices, which can be a positive thing.

Pre-pandemic, the number of volunteers in a project was often determined by the generosity of the particular church congregation, rather than by a strategic assessment of how many were needed and what particular roles they might fulfil. The same phenomenon was acknowledged by a volunteer coordinator in a charity which had stopped providing supper club meals because of the pandemic, but felt this had led to the reassessment of whether they were the best thing to be doing anymore:

> *"With Covid, we've been able to rethink why we do things and develop things accordingly, to be better delivered and more appropriate. The supper clubs don't exist anymore and one way of looking at that is sad and negative, but another way is positive because they weren't fit for purpose. It's almost a silver lining."*

For some, therefore, the upheaval of recent years has prompted a refining and reassessment of volunteer roles and practices, which can be a positive thing.

Professionalisation

Another repeated theme was the greater professionalisation of roles. A number of projects had fewer people involved in the running of them, and in particular fewer volunteers, who were often replaced by paid staff during the pandemic because of social distancing concerns. Some projects had expanded their opening hours to allow for distancing, but had had to change staffing models to accommodate this. This meant an increase in the number of paid staff and multi-agency staff and a decrease in volunteers, alongside an overall decrease in the number of individuals

> **Another repeated theme was the greater professionalisation of roles.**

onsite at any given time. The combined impact of this was that a higher proportion of individuals providing support were professionals compared to volunteers.

> *"The only way we could stay open was that, rather than close, we had to be open more than even before. We had seven days a week rather than five to enable social distancing... But with that, we saw almost all our volunteers drop out because of age and being vulnerable. We just haven't been able to utilise volunteers the way we did."* (Volunteer coordinator)

Like many of the changes, this was not all negative and had in many cases led to innovation in the way projects were resourced, albeit at the expense of volunteer involvement. For example, the management of one night shelter had looked at who was out of work because of the pandemic and identified a pool of night club bouncers and hospitality staff. By virtue of their job, these individuals were well equipped to support homelessness intervention. They were trained in first aid and in dealing with substance misuse and, as the charity's manager put it, had "all the things you'd look for in a good homelessness support worker." The charity recruited from this group to provide round-the-clock security presence and support when the static shelter was established.

The perceived professionalisation of homelessness provision is also intertwined with the negative effects of the pandemic. The static model does not inherently have to be delivered by professionals or paid staff, any more than the rotational model. However, its introduction has for the most part coincided with the greater involvement of paid professionals because of Covid restrictions. This may have contributed to the sense among volunteers that the model was more professional. The sector has evolved as a result

of the pandemic, leading to a permanent shift in modes of operation in many cases. Even where volunteers acknowledge the complexity of this and do not necessarily feel the pandemic is wholly to 'blame', it is held responsible for much of the professionalisation noted.

This resonated with the finding of the NCVO data that a growing percentage of volunteers (26%, up from 19% in 2018) felt that their role was becoming too much like paid work.[3]

Changing relationships

For some, the professionalisation of homelessness provision referred literally to the greater involvement of professionals/paid staff in the work. However, for many volunteers, it also captures some of the qualitative ways they felt that their night shelter had become less personal or social as a result of the move away from communal provision. Some felt that the warmth and relational nature of the project had been lost or diminished in the transition to a static model.

"

Some felt that the warmth and relational nature of the project had been lost or diminished in the transition to a static model.

As with the degree of professionalisation, some of this may stem from a resistance to change among existing volunteers as opposed to an inherent fact of the model.

"You had people who had done winters in the single venue and found it different because it's not communal and they didn't enjoy it as much... We definitely lost some people who missed the good old days." (Night shelter manager)

"What we've got now is just not the same. The night shelter was dearly loved. The guests liked it and the volunteers loved it. It

was such a nice volunteering opportunity. It fitted with people's lives. There were proper friendships made there." (Volunteer)

This sense of the 'good old days' was echoed by a number of interviewees to describe the strong attachment felt by existing volunteers. It was noticeable that much of the language used to describe this was not dissimilar from the language used about the benefits of the 'warm spaces' that have proliferated due to the energy crisis and the cost of living. We heard how volunteers liked the communal nature of the previous model, its warmth, the sense of belonging, the idea of seeing friends, the relationships built and the feeling of doing something together. Conversely, they felt this was lacking in the static model where guests have their own bedrooms and don't necessarily engage in socialising and shared meals to the same extent.

"Usually guests and volunteers would sit and share the meal together and chat, and it'd be very community based rather than transactional. It wouldn't be so clear who was who. With the pandemic... we lost a lot of the warm, welcoming, friendly atmosphere the services used to have." (Volunteer coordinator)

A number of the volunteer coordinators and managers interviewed talked about the disjunction between volunteer experience and that of the guests, and the difficulty balancing these. Volunteers who volunteered in church-based night shelters often did so intentionally because of the nature of the offer, not just because it was a volunteering opportunity. Night shelters were described as a "rare" opportunity in which you interact directly with guests and can see vividly first-hand the impact that your contribution makes for them, which isn't the case in every voluntary activity.

"I think, dare I say it, that one of the attractions of volunteering in the homelessness sector is the opportunity to really interact with beneficiaries. I think that was a massive driver for people, especially the evening meals and overnight sleeping. To sit round a table and have a conversation, a one-on-one opportunity to be alongside people and be a listening ear." (Shelter manager)

Volunteers were also seen to have been motivated by the sense of ownership engendered by the previous model. The sense of place and localness was seen to be important to volunteers, who typically belonged to the church community whose building hosted the shelter on a particular night. They valued the fact that their church hosted in this way, could claim ownership of it and could demonstrate their impact. Some of this was about practicality and proximity to home, but there was also an evident emotional connection. One project lead estimated they had lost up to a dozen volunteers, or around 5% of their total pool, because of this.

The decentralisation of volunteering was another factor in this. Whereas volunteers had previously been coordinated by seven individual coordinators linked to each host church, the static model pooled this together. In some cases, this required volunteers to sign up for shifts through a new system and again, some were reluctant to embrace this change.

"We lost maybe four or five volunteers because they didn't want to volunteer somewhere that wasn't their church. We lost slightly more than that because people didn't want to take responsibility for organising their own shifts. Some of those, we agreed to help over the phone and book them in. Some we won back that way but it was a lot of hard work." (Project manager)

Something as simple as being required to provide a character reference when volunteer management became

standardised or centralised was also seen to have put a few individuals off. While this is good safeguarding procedure, particularly when people were no longer known by the volunteer coordinator within their own congregation, some were upset by the request.

Power dynamics

One of the striking narratives throughout the research was that where the static model had been introduced, this was overwhelmingly beneficial for guests but equally unpopular with volunteers. This stems not only from the resistance to change, but from a deeper difference in understanding of volunteer expectations and the power dynamics of providing accommodation.

> *"I have yet to hear a single person who has experienced rough sleeping and has stayed in a night shelter who says they much prefer a church hall of 12 people... than sleeping in their own room. There's a clear preference from the people using the accommodation, who the project is set up to support, and a clear non-preference from the volunteers who staff it."* (Charity manager)

There is a profound change in the power dynamic in the move from church hall to static shelter, which can be difficult for long-standing volunteers to come to terms with.

We heard stories of volunteers feeling uncomfortable about things like guests knowing more about where coffee or saucepans or washing up liquid are kept in the building. There was a security that came with the familiarity of knowing their own church hall kitchen, for example, which fed into the reasons people "dearly loved" that mode of being, as outlined earlier. Similarly, we heard of projects where there was a live

discussion about whether it is appropriate for vegetarian or vegan volunteers to refuse to cook meat, when hearty meals including meat are what guests prefer. This may seem a minor detail, but is indicative of a much more profound emphasis on belonging and ownership of the space, described by some interviewees in terms of who is considered to be 'at home'.

> *"We talk about how welcoming people into your church was like inviting people into your own home for dinner – you make the rules, decide what to serve, whether to sit at the table or in front of the TV and whether you say grace – but when we cook at the hostel, the guests are in their home and you're coming into their own home. We operate to give them the choices because they're in their home... but we've had to do a bit of educating volunteers about that."* (Shelter manager).

This highlights how the culture of a project – and who is empowered – needs to be embedded within volunteering recruitment and training, as well as modelled in practice.

Volunteer journey

Some of the difficulties experienced by volunteers in night shelters and beyond stem from the suddenness of the changes wrought by the pandemic, almost overnight in many cases. Whilst it is to be hoped that this is a one-off occurrence, there are things to be learned from it about the volunteer journey more broadly, namely the importance of bringing volunteers along with the change process as comprehensively as is possible outside of crisis situations.

66

We talk about how welcoming people into your church was like inviting people into your own home but when we cook at the hostel, the guests are in their home.

Only two of the projects in the research had planned to make the change to a static model without the impetus of the pandemic, and it was notable that these had benefitted from the chance to prepare their volunteers. There had still been some 'teething problems' here, but there was a stronger core of volunteers who had 'stuck with' the project on the other side of huge transition. For the majority, this had not been the case and it was experienced by existing volunteers as a rupture or sudden loss of security almost akin to an unexpected loss or bereavement.

In a number of cases, interviewees spoke about the difference between the expectations of volunteers familiar with the 'old' model and the reality of the new way of working.

"It's important to set expectations before the project begins. We've had to talk to volunteers about how it might feel like a failure to them not having everyone sit down to dinner together, but actually we're reaching people. If you're only expecting half a dozen for dinner, you're less likely to be disappointed and if you get ten, that's a bonus. It's about making sure the volunteers realise they're still making a difference to guests' lives, even if it looks different than before." (Shelter manager)

It was also acknowledged that while volunteer experience should not be prioritised above that of the guests, realistically, volunteers do need to feel satisfaction and value in what they do if they are to continue volunteering. It is therefore important to hold this tension carefully.

"You get a core few people who are just so servant-hearted they'll do whatever's needed without seeing the end result. But like it or not, when we're volunteering, there has to be something that keeps us coming back." (Volunteer)

It is easier for new volunteers to integrate into this without the preconceptions or engrained ideas from the previous way of working. It is in effect an entirely different project, which requires entirely different recruitment strategies, but this need not be a negative thing.

Competition for volunteers

Another issue identified as having impacted volunteer recruitment specifically around homelessness is increased competition with other causes, particularly in light of the cost of living crisis and the war in Ukraine. This was particularly acute for initiatives running hosting schemes, but there were also examples of volunteers being 'lost' to food banks and warm space initiatives. These causes have been prominent in the media this year; the public are clearly aware of the need surrounding Ukrainian refugees, energy bills and rising food poverty. By contrast, it was suggested that homelessness had slipped down the agenda of public consciousness and that there was a misconception that 'Everyone In' had resolved rough sleeping and homelessness permanently.

> "
>
> **Another issue identified as having impacted volunteer recruitment specifically around homelessness is increased competition with other causes.**

'Homes for Ukraine' is a very particular case. Hosting is a specific and intensive form of volunteering, described by one volunteer manager as "the most intense kind of volunteering ask anywhere, to welcome someone into your spare room and live with them". One interviewee estimated that hosting had declined by 20% on pre-pandemic levels. Several interviewees

had lost volunteers explicitly to the 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme, with the suggestion that the remuneration offered by the government made it more attractive or achievable than hosting a homeless person through a less well-funded scheme. This was heightened by the rising cost of energy and household bills. There were also concerns that well-publicised examples of 'Homes for Ukraine' placements failing might dissuade potential hosts, although this only accounts for a small minority of homeless provision.

However, there is a wider sense that for people looking to engage or reengage with formal volunteering after the pandemic, homelessness is not necessarily the first issue they consider. The wider data shows a reduction in formal volunteering overall, which indicates that charities and community groups are 'competing' for a reduced number of volunteers. Throughout the pandemic, previous volunteering experience was the strongest predictor of sustained volunteering, and this appears to be true for reengagement post-pandemic too. People volunteering at food banks and warm spaces, for example, are more likely to have transferred from other volunteering opportunities rather than engaging in volunteering for the first time. This was highlighted in the number of interviewees who talked about volunteers having "found something else to do" when night shelters closed or evolved, rather than ceasing volunteering altogether.

For some, this also represented the chance to recreate something of what they perceived to have to been lost in the static model. Volunteering at a warm space in a church building, for example, embodies the sense of belonging and ownership which people may miss about night shelters.

Against this backdrop, it is important that organisations in the homelessness sector continue to communicate to the public the need for engagement and volunteering.

Non-accommodation based services.

The majority of interviewees and respondents in our research were involved in the delivery of accommodation-based interventions, and the significant part of our findings thus pertain to that too. However, a counter example was provided by volunteers and staff from the Citadel homelessness prevention project run by Housing Justice in Wales. This has been developed in place of the night shelter circuits previously operated by Housing Justice. It involves volunteers being paired in one-to-one partnerships with individuals at risk of homelessness in order to support them practically into permanent accommodation in the community. It is a comparatively new model with respect to the established night shelter provision, but is a useful contrast in exploring post-pandemic volunteering.

Volunteers spoke about the paradox of how this model is more intensely relational than night shelters in an individual sense, but without the communal nature of relationship. For longer term volunteers who had valued the camaraderie of the night shelter, this represented less interaction with friends due to not sharing shifts, but a majority of those who had continued volunteering recognised the deeper relationships that were built through it. For some, this was an additional benefit and a reason they had chosen to carry on volunteering.

"It's about relationship really. That's the word I would use. It's trying to gain someone's trust so that you can support them through the process of moving out of homelessness into their own accommodation." (Volunteer)

This highlights the difficulty of creating community in a more diffuse model of support. Efforts to do this intentionally, like bringing volunteers together for social events or training sessions, received a mixed response. Some volunteers valued this and felt they were worthwhile, while others felt they lacked the spontaneity or organic nature of connecting while volunteering together and others still, who were new to volunteering, didn't see the need for them all. This mirrors some of the wider changes to working life and patterns since the pandemic; the rise of remote working has been beneficial for many, but some have expressed concern that the loss of physical presence also means the loss of the spontaneity of 'water cooler moments' which are hard to recreate artificially.[4]

Similarly, the open-ended nature of the volunteering relationship, and the fact that it wasn't attached to regular 'shifts' or a weekly commitment divided opinion. Some found it more enriching while others expressed that they missed the regularity of the commitment to a night shelter. The individual relationship necessitates greater flexibility, particularly given the complex lives of those supported, but this needs to be matched by a greater availability of volunteers. Supporting someone to a job centre appointment, for example, requires being available during working hours which rules out many of those in paid work who had previously volunteered in the evening after work.

Some talked about the greater sense of personal responsibility for the perceived success or failure of relationships, compared to the night shelter where this was shared. Housing Justice staff were supportive of volunteers and provided supervision and pastoral care, but there was still a greater responsibility on individuals. One volunteer had

had what they described as a "failed" partnership with an individual whose move into accommodation had been difficult.

> *"I'm the sort of person who invests too much of myself into people and that's what hard about doing something far more relational. I have to say it's been chequered in terms of its success. I won't give up on it, but it is tough going in the sense of people not receiving what's on offer."* (Volunteer)

> *"It's something I'm committed to, but it's hard work. I've been involved with about eight or nine people now. All those relationships have failed in the end and that's not because I haven't tried to put the effort in. Sometimes you do lose heart a little bit."* (Volunteer)

In terms of volunteer recruitment, the Citadel project is a helpful example of having built an almost entirely new volunteer base since the pandemic. While some volunteers had previously been involved in night shelters, those who still engaged had done so intentionally and were mindful that they were essentially signing up to an entirely different commitment. Perhaps because it was such a distinctly different project, as opposed to the subtler difference between static and rotating accommodation, expectations seemed to have been set clearly.

In one area of Citadel, a number of volunteers had been recruited from the local university, and were able to connect their volunteering with courses in subjects like social care and criminology. Some undertook placements which counted towards their degree programmes. These were mostly mature students, but were still much younger than the average night shelter volunteer and represented the successful broadening of the volunteer base to great effect.

1. Homelessness Impact (2022). *Homelessness: What Can We Learn <u>From</u> Pandemic's Surprising Success Story?* Available at: www.homelessnessimpact.org/post/ homelessness-what-can-we-learn-from-pandemics-surprising-success-story

2. Ibid.

3. NCVO (2023).

4. See also Perfect, S. (2020). *Relationships, Presence and Hope: University Chaplaincy during the COVID–19 Pandemic*, pp. 68-69. Theos Think Tank. Available at: www. theosthinktank.co.uk/research/2021/02/12/relationships-presence-and-hope-university-chaplaincy-during-the-covid19-pandemic

Recommendations

As is apparent throughout this report, the current circumstances of reduced volunteering, post-pandemic recovery and economic crisis make for a difficult operating environment for voluntary organisations and faith groups relying on volunteers.

There is a clear need to pursue new strategies and means in order to recruit volunteers more widely, in addition to retaining and supporting existing volunteers. Retention is valuable, but it is also essential to think about new ways of drawing in other volunteers.

Pre-pandemic, many such organisations and churches were reliant on long-term volunteers from within the congregation, to the point of having stopped actively recruiting beyond their existing pool because there was not an obvious need. To a large extent, volunteer recruitment has been circular, with the same volunteers moving between opportunities or volunteering at multiple different organisations as opposed to the emergence of brand-new volunteers. Active recruitment requires looking beyond the 'usual suspects' of the existing volunteer pool. This is particularly important in light of the move to a centralised model of night shelter provision, under which there are no longer seven identified congregations from which to draw volunteers.

This reliance on existing volunteer sources also led to an ageing pool, particularly outside of larger cities, which in turn led to greater difficulty when this group were more severely affected by the pandemic. We suggest this has highlighted the need for the whole voluntary sector to find ways of **broadening its volunteer demographic and in particular lowering the average age.** Means of doing this could include

partnering with universities and student groups (for example student unions, volunteering services, or socially minded student societies like Just Love) or developing the offer of placements for students which enhance their studies as well as serving the community.

Younger volunteers might also be more likely to engage with **flexible opportunities or shorter term commitments**. For example, one volunteer coordinator told us they had had a bigger number of younger volunteers recently, volunteering for on average six months at a time as a stepping stone towards employment. This had introduced a whole new cohort of engaged and capable volunteers but had also meant a greater turnover of volunteers compared to the stalwart older population who had typically volunteered for years or even decades. This might mean an adjustment in structures and mindsets but is something that more organisations ought to embrace.

A **clearer delineation of roles and responsibilities** would also help attract new volunteers as well as retaining existing ones. A 'one size fits all' approach to volunteering where all volunteers are required to interact with guests risks losing those who are less comfortable with that. More practically inclined volunteers who enjoyed tasks like preparing beds in the old night shelter might have their energy and skills directed towards maintenance of the building in a permanent structure. One volunteer who was reluctant to sign up to the Citadel programme because of the demands of a one-to-one relationship was instead adopted as an 'odd job man' across the whole scheme and was able to make use of his skills as a joiner.

A number of charities report an increase in interest in corporate volunteering since the pandemic but note that this is often in the form of one-off opportunities e.g., a corporate volunteering day spent renovating or decorating bedrooms in a shelter. This is helpful to a point but can inadvertently create extra work for charity staff in finding appropriate jobs to do. One solution here might be to **develop longer-term relationships between local businesses and charities**, in order to cultivate opportunities for sustained volunteering. For example, it might be more beneficial to the charity for corporate employees to be released by their managers for one hour a week to invest in a mentoring relationship or regular volunteer commitment over a 6-8 week period than to give eight hours in one day as a one-off. This requires some flexibility and creativity in the relationship between charity and business but might prove more fruitful for both in the longer term. This might simultaneously enable charities to retain the cohort of volunteers who were facilitated by the furlough scheme but have largely dropped off as they returned to work after the lockdown.

Investing resources in volunteer recruitment pays dividends in retention and increased organisational capacity. As noted in the literature review, there is a sector wide issue at present with organisations not having capacity to recruit and experiencing a reduced capacity for activity as a result, in a vicious cycle. While it can be hard to find resource for advertising and recruitment, there is a clear benefit to doing so and we suggest this should be a priority.

Specifically within the homelessness sector, we also recommend organisations should recognise the **need to raise public awareness of the cause**. This is not easy in the context of many competing social causes and a general climate

of greater need for charitable support, but it is imperative that potential volunteers are encouraged to think about homelessness as a natural outlet for their contribution in the same way that they might consider food poverty or refugee charities.

Lastly, we note that conversations about the tension between volunteer expectations and what is best for guests are often uncomfortable or even painful. They require **close examination of why people volunteer** and and whether, at times, this can even be unhelpful for those being supported. In homelessness particularly, this has been thrown into relief by the disjunction between volunteer attachment to rotational shelters and the benefits to guests of a static shelter.

However, these conversations might be the beginning of a **new paradigm for the voluntary sector**. The recognition that volunteers benefit from the relationships they develop through engagement begs the question of what might replace this if night shelters, or indeed food banks, ceased to exist. This might lead to developing spaces like the warm welcome spaces of this winter, which meet both material and relational needs without perpetuating models that don't help guests.

Theos – enriching conversations

Theos exists to enrich the conversation about the role of faith in society.

Religion and faith have become key public issues in this century, nationally and globally. As our society grows more religiously diverse, we must grapple with religion as a significant force in public life. All too often, though, opinions in this area are reactionary or ill informed.

We exist to change this

We want to help people move beyond common misconceptions about faith and religion, behind the headlines and beneath the surface. Our rigorous approach gives us the ability to express informed views with confidence and clarity.

As the UK's leading religion and society think tank, we reach millions of people with our ideas. Through our reports, events and media commentary, we influence today's influencers and decision makers. According to *The Economist*, we're "an organisation that demands attention". We believe Christianity can contribute to the common good and that faith, given space in the public square, will help the UK to flourish.

Will you partner with us?

Theos receives no government, corporate or denominational funding. We rely on donations from individuals and organisations to continue our vital work. Please consider signing up as a Theos Friend or Associate or making a one off donation today.

Theos Friends and Students

— Stay up to date with our monthly newsletter

— Receive (free) printed copies of our reports

— Get free tickets to all our events

£75/ year
for Friends

£40/ year
for Students

Theos Associates

— Stay up to date with our monthly newsletter

— Receive (free) printed copies of our reports

— Get free tickets to all our events

— Get invites to private events with the Theos team and other Theos Associates

£375/ year

Sign up on our website:
www.theosthinktank.co.uk/about/support-us

6

Recent Theos publications include:

The Nones: Who are they and what do they believe?

Hannah Waite

A Torn Safety Net: How the cost of living crisis threatens its own last line of defence

Hannah Rich

'Science and Religion': Moving away from the shallow end

Nick Spencer and Hannah Waite

Valuing Women: Making women visible

Kathryn Hodges

Beyond Left and Right: Finding Consensus on Economic Inequality

Hannah Rich

Just Work: Humanising the Labour Market in a Changing World

Paul Bickley

Relationships, Presence and Hope: University Chaplaincy during the COVID–19 Pandemic

Simon Perfect

The Church and Social Cohesion: Connecting Communities and Serving People

Madeleine Pennington

Volunteering After the Pandemic: Lessons from the Homelessness Sector

Volunteering has changed significantly over the last few years, both in its nature and in the patterns of engagement seen nationally. Many charities, faith groups and community projects report having lost a significant number of their previous volunteers since the pandemic, due to a combination of changed working patterns, retirement, economic pressures, and a difference in the 'offer' that volunteers are now looking for after the pandemic. Both recruitment and retention of volunteers are challenging for a majority of charities.

Volunteering after the Pandemic explores the changes and challenges facing the voluntary sector today, looking particularly at the homelessness sector. It draws on existing data and original research conducted in partnership with Housing Justice, a national homelessness charity. The findings and recommendations are applicable to the wider voluntary and faith sector.

"

Hannah Rich is a Senior Researcher at Theos. She is the author of several Theos reports including *A Torn Safety Net* (2022), *Beyond Left and Right* (2021) and Growing Good (2020). Hannah holds an MSc in Inequalities and Social Science from LSE.

George Lapshynov is a Research Assistant at Theos. His background is in History and Politics, and he holds an MRes in International Relations from the University of Glasgow.