Catalysts for Change

Understanding the motivations of volunteers in Scotland

INSPIRING SCOTLAND

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Foreword

Volunteers are the powerful engine of many Scottish voluntary organisations. Their contribution, big or small can make a huge difference to individual lives and the reach and impact of an organisation.

Volunteers each have their own unique qualities, and the opportunities for volunteering are just as varied.

At Inspiring Scotland, connecting professional volunteers through our Specialist Volunteer Network has been critical to our model and one of our unique offerings to the charities we support. Over 300 motivated individuals have committed to being part of our Specialist Volunteer Network and annually they deliver over 400 projects a year. This is one very specific type of volunteering that provides practical money saving support for charities and their leaders. Another critical group of volunteers are the national pool of mentors who are an integral part of our 'intandem mentoring programme' which builds the confidence and skills of care-experienced young people.

Volunteer mentors support young people in, or at risk of experiencing the 'care system' by meeting weekly with them and committing to do this for an average of 18 months per match. Since 2016, intandem has recruited and trained 1,000 volunteers, all of whom help their young person overcome challenging circumstances and become more confident, and crucially, feel heard and valued. **These volunteers are truly exceptional, and the young people say it's the mentors' genuine desire to spend time with them that makes all the difference.**

Given the importance of volunteers to Inspiring Scotland's vision and mission, we invested in this research to capture the latest insights on volunteering and to help us understand how our programmes, which are dependent on volunteers may need to evolve and develop.

We are sharing this research publicly in the hope this it is of use to others and as part of our collective effort to continue to support and nurture volunteering in Scotland.

Celia Tennant
Chief Executive, Inspiring Scotland

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Executive Summary

Volunteers play a vital role in supporting the work of charities across Scotland. Two of Inspiring Scotland's programmes would not exist without the support of volunteers - our Specialist Volunteer Network (SVN) and intandem - the national mentoring programme for care experienced children and young people.

This report was commissioned to help understand what makes people volunteer and how to attract, recruit and retain volunteers. This report considers the characteristics of people who are most likely to volunteer and the barriers to volunteering which will support those wishing to undertake a volunteering campaign.

Whilst there has been a notable reduction in volunteering rates since Covid, a sizeable amount of people would be willing to volunteer to support a cause or community close to them. This report also looks at the causal mechanisms that influence people's willingness to volunteer and the processes they follow in deciding whether to volunteer.
By understanding these we hope to facilitate better matching of opportunities with volunteers and aid targeted advertising of opportunities to those most likely to take them up.

The report highlights the key ingredients for a good volunteer campaign and the factors at play in recruiting, valuing and recognising volunteers.

Key takeaways

- **Decline in Volunteering Rates**: There has been a significant reduction in volunteering rates since the onset of Covid-19, rising costs of living have contributed to this.
- **Increased demand and Challenges**: Many volunteer projects are facing difficulties recruiting volunteers due to factors like increased demand for services, more complex needs and reduced resources.
- **Demographics of Volunteers**: Individuals over 65 are more likely to volunteer, with a slightly higher participation rate among females than males. Men tend to prefer volunteering in physical activities, sports, hobbies, and recreation, while women are more inclined towards roles supporting children/youth, education, and health and wellbeing.
- **Youth Volunteering**: Among young people aged 11 to 18, there appear to be no significant inequalities in volunteering but this may be due to national initiatives like Saltire Awards and Duke of Edinburgh.
- **Mechanisms of Volunteering**: Seven mechanisms drive volunteering: altruism, socialisation, material costs and benefits, reputation, psychological costs and benefits, values, and efficacy.
- **Motivations Across Life Stages**: Erik Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development provide insights into what motivates volunteers at different life stages.
- **Models of Volunteer Decision Making**: Researchers Neely, Lengnick-Hall, and Evans (2022) reviewed the literature and proposed a process model of volunteer motivation.
- **Volunteer Retention**: Retention of volunteers is largely dependent on ongoing alignment with their personal needs.
- **Volunteer Recognition**: Volunteers need to feel valued, be recognised for their contributions, and be informed of their impact.
- **Benefits of Online-Based Mentoring**: Researchers found positive impacts of online-based mentoring, including increased self-advocacy, self-confidence, social skills, and coping strategies.

Inspiring Scotland and Volunteering

Inspiring Scotland is a not-for-profit organisation and registered charity with a vision that **every person in Scotland can enjoy a happy, healthy life free from poverty or disadvantage.**

Over 16 years of delivery, we have developed our venture philanthropy approach to fund management, tackling Scotland's most challenging issues. We provide tailored development support alongside investing in portfolios of organisations based on robust evidence of need, bringing skills alongside funding to 'add value' and make the best use of resources.

Volunteers play a vital role across the Third Sector and feature in all our funded programmes, helping charities to improve the life chances of babies, children, young people and families. Two of Inspiring Scotland's programmes would not exist without the support of volunteers - our Specialist Volunteer Network and our intandem mentoring programme.

Specialist Volunteer Network

The Specialist Volunteer Network (SVN) – connecting over 300 professional volunteers with Scotland's charities to build capacity and strengthen the sector – is a key part of the Inspiring Scotland model.

A network of lawyers, accountants, marketing and communications experts, HR professionals and more, all ready and waiting to support Inspiring Scotland-funded partners who need free professional support. We make sure the support, which could be otherwise out of reach financially, or would divert much-needed funding away from delivery, is provided at exactly the time our charity partners need it.

| 20% Strategy Planning | 17% Technology | 12% Legal | 11% Training | 11% Media & Comms | 8% Mentoring & Coaching | 8% Governance Support | 5% HR | 3% Fund Raising | 3% Finance |

Established in 2008 as 'Pro Bono Support' our specialist volunteers have become an integral part of how we add value to our funded programmes. In the last financial year, our volunteers supported 477 cases worth £400k in value of non-financial support. It is a personalised, relationship based matching service, benefitting both the volunteer and the charity. Strengthening charity governance is a key theme with 58 volunteers active on charity boards.

intandem mentoring

intandem is a national mentoring programme for children and young people with experience of the care system or at risk of entering care, many of whom live at home or in kinship care. Mentoring begins between ages 7–15 and continues for as long as needed, with trained volunteers providing consistent, trusting relationships that offer vital support.

Now in its 10th year, intandem has gained valuable insight into its volunteer base. Despite recruitment challenges due to the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis, the programme continues to attract committed mentors:

- 72% of volunteers are women
- 60% work full time, with the remainder split across part-time, not working (by choice), or retired (which has doubled to 14% since 2023)
- Volunteer age is broadly distributed, with only 4% over 65
- 28% have volunteered for over 3 years, and 38% for 1–3 years

Why volunteers mentor with us:

- Our volunteer mentors consistently describe their experience as deeply rewarding and meaningful. Many say mentoring makes them feel proud, happy, and gives them a sense of purpose. Several noted positive impacts on their mental health, including improved mood, structure, and routine.
- Mentors also value the opportunity to learn — with 98% reporting they've learnt new things from their mentee, and 97% saying they now have a better understanding of the challenges young people face.
- Mentoring has had a positive impact on work and learning too: 81% said it helped their career or job prospects, and 60% said it supported them in securing a new job or place in education. Some even changed careers as a result of their mentoring experience.
- Beyond personal growth, mentors feel they're making a meaningful contribution to their community. 90% said they've become more involved locally and met new people, and 86% said they've tried new things through their role.
- Above all, 100% would recommend mentoring to family or friends — a powerful reflection of the value they find in the experience.

"Volunteering has helped me positively by enhancing my communication, empathy and understanding of different perceptions."

- intandem mentor

Why do people volunteer?

Demographics

According to the 2023/24 Community Life Survey (England), 16% of adults had engaged in formal volunteering at least once a month, and 66% had taken part in any type of volunteering or civic engagement activity in the prior year.

Rates were similar in Scotland according to the 2024 Scottish Household Survey which showed that 18% of adults had engaged in volunteering in 2023. The Scottish report also mentioned a notable decrease in volunteering rates since COVID-19, as overall volunteering rates have steadily dropped from 30% since 2019.
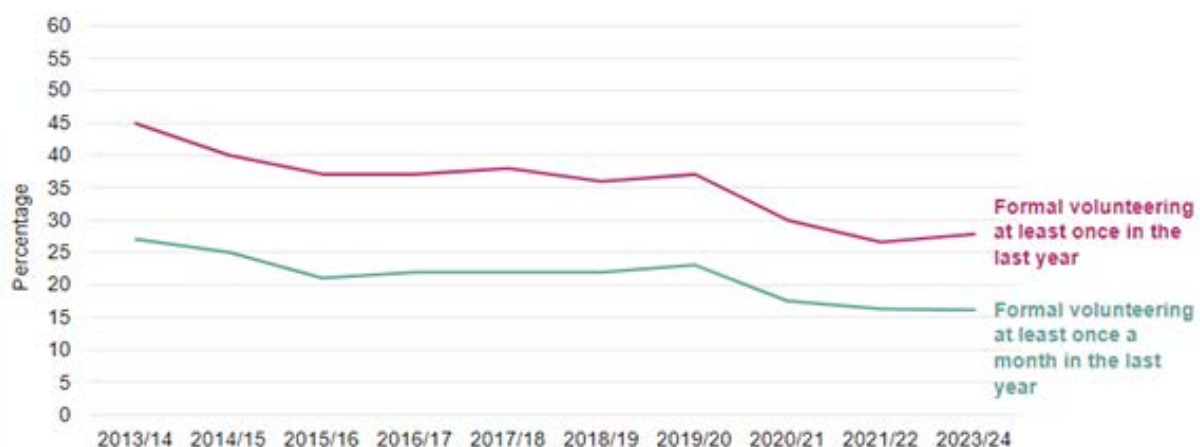
Changes in volunteering rates between 2013/14 and 2022/23
(Community Life Survey, HM Department for Culture, Media, and Sport)

Volunteering sectors in Scotland (Total volunteer numbers in brackets)	
Children's activities within schools (311,000)	Environmental protection (95,000)
Children's/youth activities outside schools (310,000)	Education for adults (76,000)
Sport and exercise (287,000)	Safety, first aid (63,000)
Local community & neighbourhood groups (258,000)	Wildlife groups (58,000)
Hobbies, recreation, arts, social clubs (249,000)	Political groups (54,000)
Health, disability and social welfare (215,000)	Citizens groups (51,000)
Religious groups (200,000)	Domestic animal welfare (45,000)
Older people (155,000)	Justice and human rights (41,000)
Sources: Scottish Household Survey 2017 - Annual Report – Scottish Government; Sept 2018 Young People Volunteering in Scotland (YPiS) – Volunteer Scotland, 2016	

In Scotland, local community and neighbourhood volunteering was most popular (28%), followed by youth or children's activities outside of school (18%).

Ethnicity

White UK nationals were consistently among the most likely to volunteer.
In England, mixed White & Black African and African individuals also volunteered above the national average. Interestingly, in Scotland, those from the "White: Other British" group volunteered at the highest rates (24%), with "White: Scottish" following at the Scotland average of 18%.

Gender

The Community Life Survey found no effect of gender of volunteering rates in England, while the Scottish Household Survey found that women are slightly more likely to volunteer than men, with rates of 20% and 17%, respectively.

The latter survey also observed a difference in the types of volunteering each gender is more likely to participate in. Women tend to volunteer in roles supporting children/youth, education, and health and wellbeing, while men more typically get involved in physical activity, sports, hobbies, and recreation.

Age

In England, those over the age of 65 volunteered the most, while those between the age of 25 and 35 volunteered the least.

This is probably connected with the top motivators and barriers to volunteering. According to the Community Life Survey, having work commitments (51%), doing other things in spare time (33%), and having to care for children (22%) were the top barriers to volunteering, which aligns with the typical demands of those in their late 20s to early 30s, who are often starting to have children and focusing on building their careers.

The top motivators indicated by the survey were wanting to help people (46%) and having spare time (32%), characteristic of older adults who are likely retired, and who, according to the NCVO "Time Well Spent" report on volunteering, are most likely to volunteer as a response to need in their community or being asked to give help.

Socioeconomic status

The Community Life Survey found that adults from higher managerial, administrative, and professional occupations were more likely to volunteer (21%) than the national average of 16%. Meanwhile, those in manual operations, for example, only volunteered at a rate of 11%.

In both England and Scotland, surveys found that deprivation, or lack thereof, is a major indicator of volunteering. In England, those in the least deprived areas more often volunteered monthly (22%) than those in the most deprived areas, of which only 10% volunteered.

Similarly in Scotland, those in the least deprived areas (24%) or those with an income of over £30K a year (21%), volunteered at higher rates than those in the most deprived areas (12%).

Population density

In both England and Scotland, those in rural areas are more likely to volunteer (21% and 23%, respectively) than those in urban areas (17% and 15%, respectively). In both places, rates of volunteering among urban citizens is lower than their national average. This may be due to a higher sense of community and community obligation in rural areas.

Young people

In 2020, Volunteer Scotland produced a report on volunteering of over 1,700 young people between the ages of 11-18 in Scotland. For the young people in the sample who volunteered, demographics were nearly even split between boys and girls, white or other ethnic background, and coming from a rural or urban area. This suggests that inequities in volunteering opportunities are not prevalent in youth, possibly due to the role of schools and youth clubs in promoting volunteering for this age group.

intandem mentor

As of 2019, 49% of young people had participated in formal volunteering, 29% doing so at least once a month. Volunteering rates increased for each year from age 13, with 68% of those 17 or 18 years old participating in volunteering.

The number of young people who are volunteering may be distorted by national initiatives such as the Saltire Awards and Duke of Edinburgh.

Volunteering rates drop dramatically after age 18, with 26% of young people aged 16-24 engaging in formal volunteering.

Motivations and barriers

Motivations for volunteering have been explored through national statistics, as well as peer-reviewed literature and organisation-specific reports.

As mentioned, the Community Life Survey found that in England, wanting to improve things and/or help people was the top motivator to engage in formal volunteering. Other top motivators were the cause being important to the individual, building social networks, and utilising existing skills.

The full breakdown of motivators and barriers of the English sample is shown below. The national statistics from the Scottish Government did not give the same insight into motivators and barriers.

Figure 4.1: Reasons for taking part in formal volunteering, England: 2023/24 (Base: All adults engaged in formal volunteering)
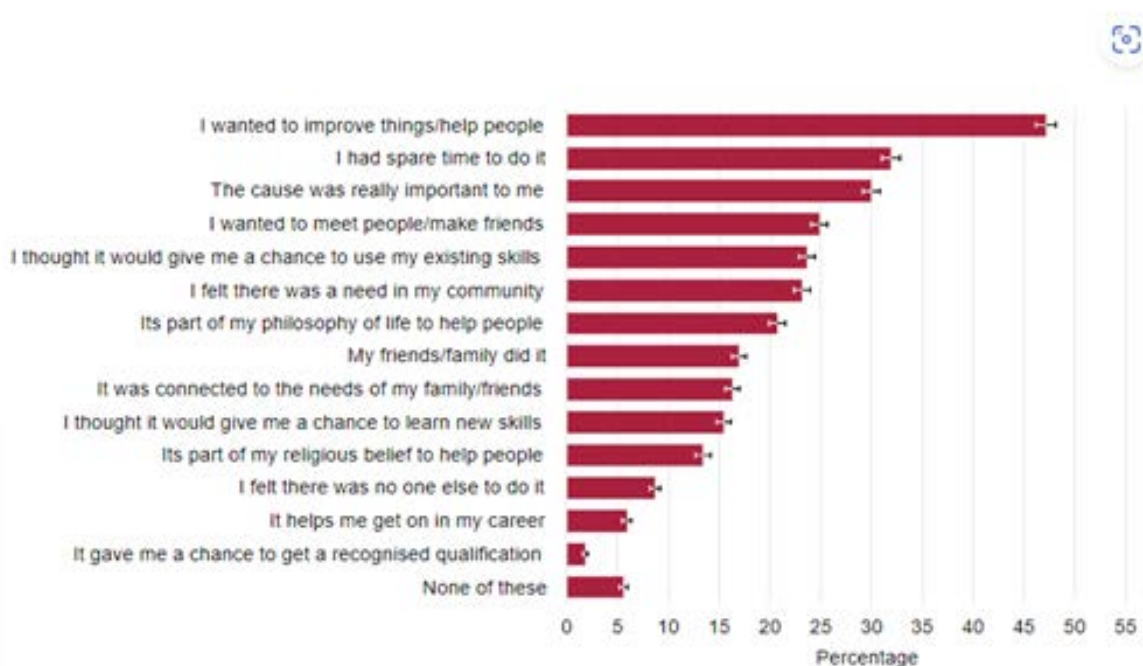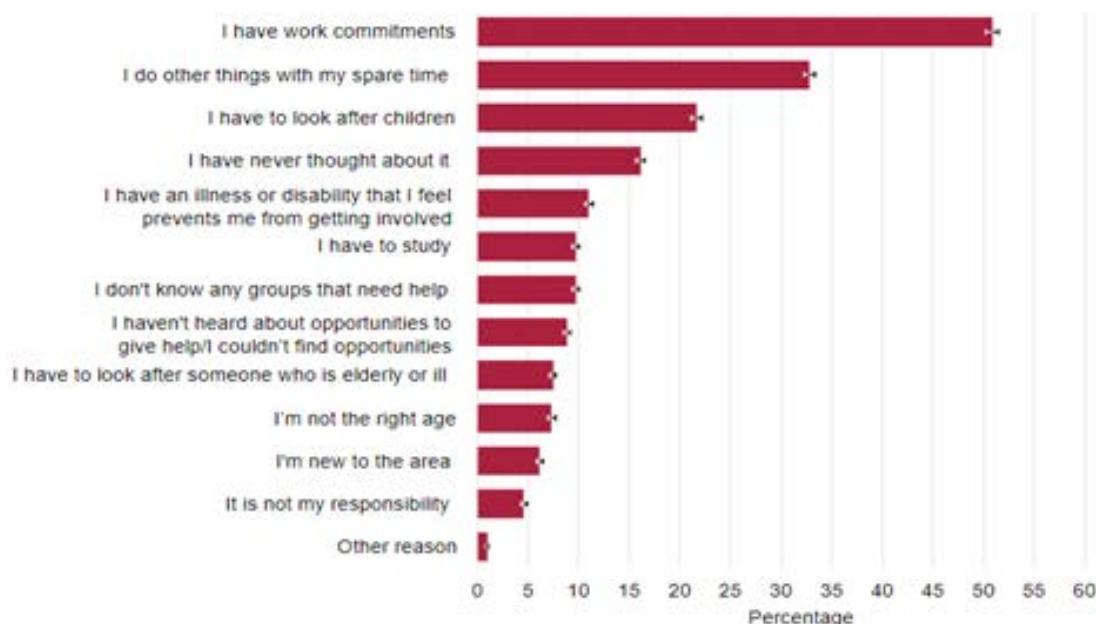
Figure 4.2: Reasons for not taking part in formal volunteering at all/not taking part frequently, England: 2023/24 (Base: All adults not engaged in formal volunteering at all/not engaged frequently)

Reason	Percentage
I have work commitments	~51
I do other things with my spare time	~32
I have to look after children	~21
I have never thought about it	~16
I have an illness or disability that I feel prevents me from getting involved	~11
I have to study	~10
I don't know any groups that need help	~10
I haven't heard about opportunities to give help/I couldn't find opportunities	~9
I have to look after someone who is elderly or ill	~7
I'm not the right age	~7
I'm new to the area	~6
It is not my responsibility	~5
Other reason	~1

The most common barriers, or reasons to not want to participate in volunteering, was having work commitments, other responsibilities, or looking after children. Interestingly, another common reason for not volunteering was "I have never thought about it," perhaps indicating a **lack of public awareness** around volunteering.

In looking at what would motivate non-volunteers to consider volunteering, a 2022 YouGov survey found that 63% of people would consider volunteering to support a cause that is important to them, followed by 57% of respondents who would consider volunteering to contribute to their local community. 22% said that a personal connection with the cause would make them consider volunteering.

A systematic review by Bekkers et al. (2016) aimed to determine the causal mechanisms that explain why people volunteer, as opposed to social, demographic, or economic patterns. In other words, looking at the **internal drivers to pursue volunteering**.

The researchers found the following seven mechanisms that lead to volunteering:

1. **Altruism**

2. **Socialisation**

3. **Material costs & benefits**
(lower financial/time costs and small incentives)

4. **Reputation**
(gaining social status, acknowledgement from organisation)

5. **Psychological costs & benefits**

6. **Values**
(alignment with prosocial beliefs or important social causes)

7. **Efficacy**
(the volunteer feeling they have skills to offer and are making an impact)

This list also captures the motivations explored by several other studies and reports reviewed.

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Motivations and barriers by social group

What is more important than understanding the broad motivators and barriers to volunteering generally, is to understand what the motivators are of specific groups, in order to better match opportunities with volunteers and better target advertising of opportunities to those most likely to take them up.

For one, motivators understandably change depending on what the key motivators of that age group are.

For **young people**, the main motivators to consider volunteering were being able to do it with friends (socialisation), volunteering something of interest or importance (connection with the cause), knowing it would make a difference (impact), and being able to improve career prospects and/or skills (employability) (Volunteer Scotland, 2020).

On the contrary, **older people** may be more likely to value volunteering roles that allow them to find purpose after ending their career, utilise their knowledge and life experience, and avoid isolation.

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Barriers to volunteering similarly change depending on what group is being considered.

A study of young people aged 12-18 from urban areas of Glasgow explored the barriers to taking up volunteering in this population (Davies, 2018).

A major barrier that the researcher discovered, particularly among boys, was the perceived low social status of volunteering ("teachers' pets" being the ones who volunteer) and stereotypical ideas around what kind of people volunteer ("grans," as the participants described).

This contrasts the experience of college or university students who have been found to engage in volunteering due to circumstance and influence of their peers.

This also contrasts the driver of "reputation" that was identified in Bekkers' research, which reinforces the need to look into the circumstances and motivators of the group(s) of volunteers you are most wanting to engage, rather than relying on motivators of the general population.

Recommendation

Consider Erik Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development when understanding what might motivate volunteers in different life stages. It is a widely acknowledged psychological theory that outlines the main "problem" of eight developmental stages.

For teenagers, this is identity versus role confusion (which supports the need for volunteering to align with social status and social identity).

The focus for middle-age, on the other hand, is generativity versus stagnation, which could mean that volunteering has the potential for this age group to break away from monotony/routine and find a new way to share and develop skill sets.

Young people attending Who Cares?
Love Rally in Glasgow, intandem

However, other barriers were identified that are not related to the young people themselves, but rather the adults and systems around them.

A lack of shared information on volunteering is a key barrier for young people, particularly those facing social exclusion, lack of capacity means youth workers are often not able to provide 1:1 support to enable disadvantaged young people to volunteer, and there is a perceived bias from schools where only students who are performing well are put forward for volunteering, which typically excludes marginalised students from participating.

Finally, it is important to be mindful of the associations that those from **different cultural backgrounds** might have with volunteering.

For example, in Eastern European / ex-communist countries rates of volunteerism is much lower, partially because of the negative associations it has with government-forced "volunteer" work (Mateiu-Vescan, Ionescu, & Opre, 2021).

Research into the cultural perceptions of volunteering is scarce and therefore this warrants further attention. One example is an Australian study that looked at the multicultural makeup of the country and what perceptions of volunteering are held by members of the different ethnic groups present.

Volunteer decision-making

What processes lead to someone making the decision to volunteer is complex and of course unique to each person, their past experiences, and their present circumstances. Nonetheless, some researchers have provided models for what underpins volunteer decision making.

Neely, Lengnick-Hall, and Evans (2022) undertook a review of the literature and proposed a **process model of volunteer motivation.**

They aimed to capture how volunteers:
- decide whether to volunteer or not;
- choose from volunteering options;
- decide how much effort to give; and
- decide whether to continue volunteering over time.

The researchers suggest, in the context of "image theory," that each decision is made by **comparing different plans of actions against three sets of internal criteria**, these being:
- one's values,
- existing goals, and
- ongoing plans.

Regarding the process, the first step is of "initiation," which is either a **shock** (something that moves someone out of a state of complacency) or a **general work satisfaction/dissatisfaction.**

A good example of a shock is a natural disaster, while the work-related initiation may look like someone who is not happy in their work, so aims to find work-style fulfillment elsewhere through volunteering.


"The work they do sounded really interesting and community-focused, and its location is not far from me so it was an ideal opportunity. I got an immense sense of satisfaction from being able to support them."

— Neil, volunteering for a charity through the Inspiring Scotland Specialist Volunteer Network

The **decision paths** following this initiation thus can include:

a script-driven decision in which an event triggers an automatic response (ex. someone who has volunteered in the past experiencing a shock that automatically drives them to volunteer again); a push decision that involves no "pre-existing script" and in which a conscious decision is made to help; a pull decision, where someone considers multiple options before making a choice; and a gradual decision, where a person reassess their life, values, and goals and ultimately may decide to volunteer.
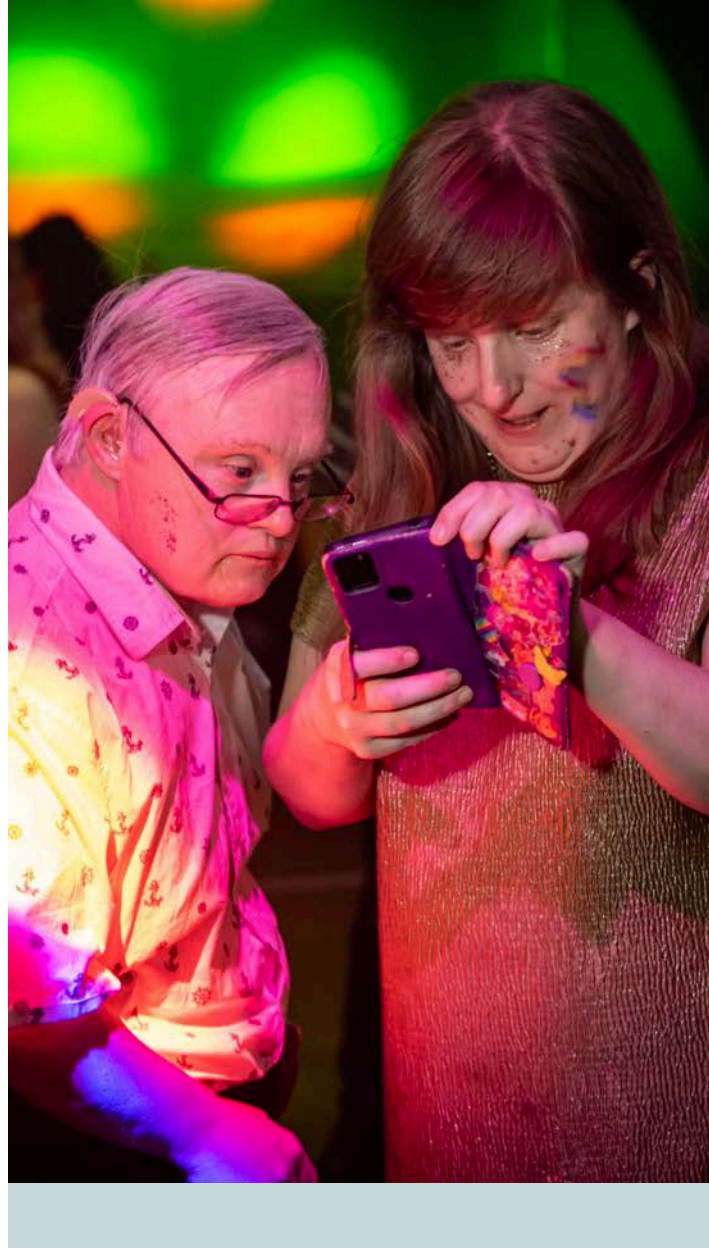
They then need to decide what volunteering opportunities align with personal values, what will help them achieve personal goals, and what can fit into their lifestyle.

Mullan et al. (2021) similarly looked at the predictors of volunteering, and what accounts for the translation of intention into action. They found, unsurprisingly, that **planning ability and habit strength** were significant predictors of volunteering engagement.

They argue that habit most strongly influences behaviour, and that as a behaviour is repeated more and more, intention becomes less important. **In the context of volunteering, this suggests a need to build a culture of volunteering and find ways to make it a habitual practice for more people.**

This explains why one of the priorities outlined in the London Vision and Action Plan for Volunteering (2025) is to engage more young people in volunteering, positing that this can lead to a life of volunteering.

One way to do this is through using principles of behaviour change theory. For example, releasing promotional information about the benefits of volunteering (attitude), the accessibility and ease of volunteering (perceived behavioural control), and the importance of volunteering to one's wider community (norms).

Recommendation

Use the Theoretical Domains Framework / COM-B model of behaviour change to guide volunteer recruitment strategies.

This takes into account the processes that occur at the individual, psychological, and environmental level that can be modified in order to bring about a desired behaviour.

Section (2)

Good practice in a volunteer recruitment campaign

Some empirical research has examined what leads to better recruitment and retention of volunteers. Of course, a big part of this is appealing to the motivations described above, and removing barriers for those who are not presently volunteering. As for retention specifically, this mostly depends on an **ongoing alignment with one's personal needs** (Neely, Lengnick-Hall, & Evans, 2022).

Therefore, organisations using volunteers need to continuously work with volunteers to ensure that what they are doing is aligning with their goals and lifestyle, and if it is not, work to modify the opportunity so that the volunteer continues to get something out of it (especially considering they are giving time for free).

This also encompasses the recommendation to offer continuous professional development opportunities to volunteers, not only so that they can feel more confident in their volunteer role, but so that they have gained skills and possibly qualifications that can serve them elsewhere.

"Through all of our skills-based volunteering, we are learning and becoming more effective in meeting the needs of our charity sector clients. By sharing the learning in our team, there is a real sense of cross-pollination."

— Elena, volunteering through the
Inspiring Scotland Specialist Volunteer Network

Sometimes a volunteer role will no longer fit with a person's value, lifestyle, or goals any longer, and this is why many UK-based volunteer strategies advocate for finding ways that volunteers can move flexibly between organisations, in order to support ongoing volunteer participation.

Another key theme across the literature was that **volunteers need to feel valued, be recognised for their work, and be informed of their impact**. Some suggestions for achieving this, and therefore increasing the likelihood of retaining volunteers, includes gamification (ex. Leaderboards, badges, and challenges on an online platform) and frequently communicating with volunteers about the progress of the organisation and their contributions to it (instant feedback / real-time data visualisation can be a good tool - for example, a live count of how many mentoring sessions have been held).

Finally, **creating a sense of community** has been identified as a priority for engaging and retaining volunteers across peer-reviewed studies, organisational reports, and volunteering programmes. Considering many volunteers take up volunteering to build their social networks and engage meaningfully with their communities (whether these be local or online communities), it is important to ensure that volunteers have ample opportunity to connect with each other, as these social bonds will likely encourage them to continue volunteering long-term.

In looking at **recruitment** specifically, there is a lot of similarity in the critical success factors of some of the most impactful volunteer recruitment campaigns.

The main ones were as follows:

1 Reputation

This can be either the reputation of the organisation itself or of those who endorse it. For example, Samaritans is successful in recruiting volunteers because they have a long-standing reputation with the public, which also facilitates an increased awareness of Samaritans and makes this one of the first places people will look if they are looking for a volunteer opportunity in mental health.

The Big Help Out also relies heavily on reputation, considering it is endorsed by the Royal Family and advertised by well-known businesses, charities, and news outlets.

2 Low barrier to entry

What many of the volunteer campaigns that recruit a large number of volunteers have in common is a low barrier to entry. Many of these require a one-day commitment (The Big Help Out, Macmillan World's Biggest Coffee Morning), or flexible volunteering options where volunteers can take a task as and when they are available (NHS Volunteer Responders).

This also includes having an easy and straightforward sign-up method. Campaigns with a low barrier to entry and low commitment do so with the hopes that after someone volunteers once, this will lead to more volunteering (see section below).

3 Responding to a crisis

A great example of this is the NHS Volunteer Responders campaign that recruited over 750,000 volunteers in four days. The collective sense of going through an unprecedented time of need enabled people to want to "jump in" and do what they could to help.

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④ Appealing to emotions

Many successful volunteering campaigns appeal to the emotions of potential volunteers by sharing moving stories that elicit sympathy, while simultaneously empowering potential volunteers to recognise that they can make things better.

The Macmillan Coffee Morning marketing includes personal stories of cancer patients, something that many people will have a personal connection to. Meanwhile Samaritans marketing involves videos that illustrate the emotional experiences of the majority of their callers.

⑤ Invests in volunteers' development

This is particularly evident in successful campaigns that target young people, such as the #iwill movement, the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, and Prince's Trust programmes.

These aim to target youth who could personally benefit from volunteering and for whom volunteering could improve their outcomes in life. The #iwill movement is an especially good example of this, as its promotion wholly centres around the people who will be volunteering, advertising how it will prepare young people to be leaders.

This approach is also evident in campaigns that target adults, such as those of the National Trust Volunteers in Parks and Heritage, where one of the main draws for volunteers is gaining specialised skills training in conservation and history.

"The support I've received as a volunteer has been second to none. I've done loads of other voluntary jobs and this one is unique."
— volunteer mentor, intandem

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Converting short-term volunteers to long-term volunteers

A nation-wide YouGov survey explored what would best enable people to consider volunteering. They found that 55% of respondents would consider volunteering on an **as and when basis** versus 26% who would consider a regular basis. This shows the potential of recruiting people as short-term volunteers to start. However, while there is limited data on it, it is likely that many short-term volunteers will not go on to volunteer long-term.

Young people attending Who Cares? Love Rally in Glasgow, intandem

One study examined the differences between those who attend one-off volunteer events who go on to be repeat volunteers, and those who do not volunteer again. It was found that one-off volunteers are actually more likely to be driven by altruistic motivations, but have less positive experiences.

Those who did not want to volunteer again after an episodic event were also more likely to have gone alone (47% compared to 34% of repeat volunteers), and for it to have been their first time volunteering (55% compared to 31% of repeat volunteers).

Other indicators of those who were unlikely to become repeat volunteers included having low utilitarian and social motives (i.e. the volunteering not providing use in their lives or social ties), being of a younger age, having lower levels of education, and among single people.

Knowing the typical differences in repeat and non-repeat volunteers who are brought in through episodic volunteering events can be useful to adjust volunteering strategies to better support short-term volunteers to participate more regularly.

Section ③

Volunteer mentoring online

A selection of empirically-evaluated, digital mentoring programmes for young people were examined to gain insight into what works best within a mentoring scheme. One was a study of a cross-age peer mentoring programme in which a high school student mentored a younger student and was mentored by a university or college student (Patel et al., 2022). This was done online over video conferencing during COVID-19. The rationale for this programme was supported by a 2022 meta-analysis that found that near-peer mentoring programmes have a larger effect than those with adult mentors and youth mentees, and the idea that near-peer mentors are seen as attainable role models for mentees.

This was reflected by the study's outcomes, which showed participants were able to develop strong social relationships with their mentors and/or mentees, recognised their ability to make a difference, felt a sense of purpose, and developed new or existing skills.

One systematic review analysed the impact of online mentoring for children and youth with disabilities, reviewing 25 studies internationally (Lindsay et al., 2018).
A large portion of included studies that tested for significance found positive impacts of online-based mentoring, including increased self-advocacy, self-confidence, social skills, and coping strategies.

Further, the review did not find evidence that any one type of online delivery was better than the other regarding outcomes (considering email-based support, mobile apps, and video or phone calls). However, they did find that text-based interventions alone increased the risk of mentees disengaging as this created a lack of personal connection and emotional depth.

Similar to the previously mentioned study, this review found evidence that matching mentees with mentors who had the same disability was most effective in increasing self-advocacy and confidence, suggesting the importance of lived experience in mentors.

Despite this population being different from care-experienced young people, both groups of young people are at a higher risk of social isolation, poor self-esteem, and poor educational and/or vocational outcomes, implying the effects found in this review may be similar for care-experienced young people engaging in mentoring.

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Despite the potential of near-peer and/or shared experience mentors, there are some caveats to this that must be considered. A systematic review of mentoring programmes for care-experienced young people (not solely online-based) identified **seven important features of mentoring relationships** (2023).

These included shared experiences and power and participation, both of which demonstrate the importance of a mentoring relationship in which there was equality between mentor and mentee.

However, the researchers also noted that having mentors and mentees of a similar age and experience can be tricky to navigate, as this may reinforce negative behaviours or create a situation in which both mentee and mentor are relying on each other for emotional support, possibly detracting from the mentoring relationship that is meant to serve the mentee.

Young people on a residential with InVoice, intandem's youth forum

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"It's a good way to see the world through a young person's eyes. It's rewarding but it's also a chance to take yourself right back to the challenges and the things that affect young people."

— Michael, volunteer mentor to a young person experiencing the care system, intandem

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Finally, one study that interviewed multicultural youth and their mentors in order to inform the design of a digital mentoring platform provided insight into what mentors look for in an online mentoring programme (Radlick et al., 2020).

Suggestions from mentors included having a secure messaging platform and avoiding use of social media for interactions, having a peer discussion form to build connections with other mentors and get support in their role, and to have an event calendar to find local, in-person activities for those who wanted to meet up with each other or with their mentees offline. Participants also expressed concerns about having to be available at all times, or whenever their mentee messages, which is an important consideration when designing any type of online, potentially on-demand support.

A number of online mentoring or support-based volunteer programmes in the UK were found through search. Some organisations offered one-to-one support on a textline (Shout, GamCare) or as needed through an app (TalkLife).

In some programmes, volunteers could also work as moderators to supervise forums and respond to questions when necessary (GamCare, TalkLife). These tended to be quite flexible but did ask volunteers for a minimum hourly and/or monthly commitment (ex. a few hours per week for 6 months). Others were more structured, such as Been There, a peer support programme for people with body image issues, and Brightside, an online mentoring platform for young people aged 13-18.

Both have dedicated apps for communications, which are only text-based and no phone or video communication is advised. Volunteers are asked to commit 1-3 hours per week for a minimum of three (Brightside) or six months (Been There), and mentees can establish how much they would like to engage with their mentor.

Section 4

Conclusion

In conclusion, volunteers are the lifeblood of many charitable programmes in Scotland, including Inspiring Scotland's Specialist Volunteer Network (SVN) and intandem mentoring programme.

This report highlights the urgent need to better understand the motivations, challenges, and demographics of volunteers in a post-Covid landscape. Despite falling volunteering rates, there remains a strong willingness among many to contribute their time and skills to causes they care about. By identifying key motivational drivers and addressing common barriers, organisations can more effectively attract, retain, and support volunteers.

Programmes like SVN and intandem showcase the profound personal and societal benefits of volunteering, from strengthening charities to empowering care-experienced children. Moving forward, a targeted, values-driven approach will be essential to ensure volunteering continues to thrive as a cornerstone of Scotland's third sector.

If you or someone you know would like to find out more about our Specialist Volunteer Network or intandem mentoring, please do get in touch.

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If you would like to learn more about Inspiring Scotland and our volunteering opportunities, please visit our website at inspiringscotland.org.uk.

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