

## Mobilising Voluntary Action

Learning for today, prepared for tomorrow  
Analysis of the survey data



*“The pandemic has changed everyone's outlook on volunteer involvement. I feel this has advantages and disadvantages. Many will withdraw entirely from volunteer roles they previously were involved in and others who may have never considered volunteering will come forward to offer support.”*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Volunteer Now has been involved in a research project with the Mobilising Voluntary Action Research group. This 4-nation project focused on the volunteering response to the Covid-19 pandemic, while also investigating the impact of the pandemic on volunteering and the Voluntary and Community sector as a whole. The study aimed to compare and contrast Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England as the interface between government policies and citizen responses to the pandemic were heavily influenced by devolved policies and structures at play. In addition, the research team considered the need for Northern Ireland to act in tandem with its neighbours in the Republic of Ireland.

The research sought to identify and highlight the differences in approach and explore where there can be learning between the constituent parts of the UK. Adopting a mixed methods approach, and with dedicated teams in each of the four nations, the project examined voluntary action and volunteer responses to the COVID-19 pandemic by assessing changes in the patterns of volunteering as the pandemic progressed as well as government and organisational policies, planning and practice.

An initial literature review explored some of the key themes looking at more than 70 research papers and reports, representing a range of organisations across the UK including intermediaries and infrastructure organisations, volunteer involving organisations (VIO's) and local authorities. There were also two additional working papers, which investigated the 'voluntary action' policy contexts across the UK, and the volunteer matching platforms (Be Collective and Team Kinetic). This provided more detailed analysis on the timing and characteristics of the UK-wide desire to volunteer.

The final piece of the project incorporated an online survey and five follow-up interviews. The online survey in Northern Ireland was for organisations, both public and voluntary, that

were responsible for coordinating or encouraging the volunteering response. The interviews aimed to further explore the interface between government and emergency response protocols and the practice of mobilising the volunteer response as the pandemic developed.

### Main Findings:

The most recent and relevant document investigated by the policy context working paper (*Build a Better Future: A Volunteering Strategy and Action Plan*) does effectively identify the range of different citizens who contribute and proposes specific strands of strategy to engage with specific categories of volunteers, which is a marked difference to England. As elsewhere in the UK, the bulk of government funding for voluntary action is in the form of contracts awarded for delivering public services, and as elsewhere, this has created pressures around below cost funding, collaboration between organisations and the exercise of freedom of action for funded organisations.

Nevertheless, as the evidence from this research will show continuing government support for infrastructure and community development proved vital in mobilising the volunteering response in NI as the COVID emergency developed. Long-standing 'partnership' structures such as the Government Voluntary Sector Forum were never designed to be vehicles for collaboration of the kind needed but the relationships that they sustained enabled a rapid response when the emergency began.

The survey aimed to capture a clearer picture about what happened 'on-the-ground' during the pandemic and sampled 96 organisations (a mixture of local councils, HSC trust, and local and regional infrastructure organisations). A key finding was that the majority of respondents reported that volunteer numbers were higher than pre-pandemic levels, which put severe pressure on the capacity to channel this effort effectively. Much of this

volunteering appeared to be informal as respondents reported large increases in volunteering at a community level without the involvement of formal organisations. However, analysis of the “Be Collective” data shows that as time went on, the number of people offering to volunteer fell at the same time organisations became better at placing volunteers.

At the level of Northern Ireland’s 11 district councils, coordination varied, depending on the depth of pre-existing partnership working. A key problem identified was that the emergency response framework, built around council areas, had no formal role for volunteers. The consequence was particularly evident in the first wave of the pandemic where there was some difficulty in managing the spontaneous volunteer response and offers of help. The interview data clearly shows that the existing partnership arrangements between VIOs and state bodies were initially not fit for purpose. In the first few weeks of the first lockdown in February 2020, a completely new structure had to be established to provide the necessary coordination and information flows. There was recognition that this was effective due to the long-standing and close relationships between key government Departments and Agencies, and relevant voluntary sector infrastructure bodies, sustained by an appropriate policy context.

In terms of learning, the survey placed emphasis on determining the challenges and barriers facing the Voluntary and Community sector. Firstly, it is important to note that no form of volunteering seems to have escaped being at least paused to some degree, demonstrating the level of impact visible across the entire sector.

Challenges were consistent. Firstly, it was stated that it remained very difficult to plan for the future, due to a combination of factors including volunteer turnover and depletion, as well as changes to funding. Furthermore, there appeared to be a challenge for organisations

hoping to re-engage their previous volunteers as these ‘older, more experienced volunteers’ took a step back and might be reluctant to return. It was accepted and understood that the ‘new’ volunteers might not be able to offer the same level of commitment in the future. Respondents feared that volunteer burnout and mental ill health might leave a gap in resources. Volunteer recruitment and retention were viewed as a major issue, as Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) would require resources to create safe environments and offer training to give volunteers the confidence they needed.

Respondents expressed concern that while there was evidence suggesting some organisations had restructured, others did not have staff in place to support rebuilding. These issues suggest there is a varying set of support needs, underpinned by the clear evidence that there was a substantial need to rebuild volunteering in many organisations. This is evident from the analysis of the “Be Collective” data which indicates that the number of volunteer opportunities being posted has not recovered to anything like pre-pandemic levels. In summary, this research suggests that the pandemic has been an enormous challenge and it remains unclear what the long-term impact will be.

#### Recommendations

- ✓ **It is important that there is practical support for VIOs to rebuild.**

The evidence shows both creativity and adaptability among some VIOs, while others have struggled or even folded. The evidence suggests that adaptability depended in part on increased use of digital platforms and media, underlining a training gap that will require funding to fill.

- ✓ **It is imperative that a comprehensive plan for spontaneous volunteering is developed.**

Informal volunteering and volunteer numbers as a whole were higher due to the pressures on formal organisations to coordinate this influx. Without clear civil contingency structures linking to the voluntary and community sector, it was impossible to involve the huge numbers who came forward in a meaningful way.

- ✓ **There is a need for relevant and strong public policy which enables and supports volunteering.**

The UK wide policy analysis does show that Northern Ireland has a supportive and enabling policy framework for volunteering. However, this is outdated and in need of review. The pandemic experience has cast many assumptions about volunteering in doubt: the division between informal and formal volunteering; the retirement of long-term volunteers; inclusion of new people in volunteering; and the rise of episodic

volunteering. A new framework should build on the success of the past and learn from other jurisdictions to create an enabling environment for volunteering in the future. It should build on the new approaches to partnership forged during the pandemic, to allow a better balance between local and regional support and coordination for volunteering.

While there are trends, there is no single story of the pandemic; organisations and volunteers have been affected and have responded in different ways. This change is ongoing, and more research will be needed in the coming years to continue measuring impact. What is clear is the need to build on the learning and plan for the future to ensure that volunteering continues to play its vital role in our community life.

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## Introduction

The Mobilising Voluntary Action research project into the volunteering response to the COVID 19 pandemic across the UK seeks to generate comparative evidence on volunteer mobilisation in each of the UK's four jurisdictions. As it was a public health crisis, the COVID response focused largely on Government functions that were non-reserved and the responsibility of the devolved Assemblies and Governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with the UK government having lead responsibility for England only, other than for a national vaccine procurement exercise, public borrowing and major financial policy decisions such as furlough, universal credit uplift and Covid support funding.

This meant that the interface between government policies and citizen responses to the pandemic were heavily influenced by devolved policies and structures. In Northern Ireland, there was also influence on policy making resulting from being on an island and the need to act in tandem with neighbours in the South to respond to the virus.

The research has sought to identify and highlight the differences in approach where these exist, and to explore where there can be learning between the constituent parts of the UK.

Adopting a mixed methods approach, and with dedicated teams in each of the four nations, the project examined voluntary action and volunteer responses to the COVID-19 pandemic by assessing government and organisational policies, planning and practice.

An initial literature review explored some of the key themes from a thematic analysis of more than 70 research reports, representing a range of organisations across the UK including intermediaries and infrastructure organisations, volunteer involving organisations (VIO's) and local authorities. This review is available here- [What the existing research paper tells us?](#)

A second working paper summarises the analytical work in delineating the different policy frameworks across the four jurisdictions to gain an informed understanding of similarities and differences in the 'voluntary action' policy contexts across the UK. This paper is available here- [Preliminary analysis of policy differences across the four UK jurisdictions.](#)

A third workstream analysed administrative data from the volunteer matching platforms, 'Be Collective' and 'Team Kinetic', between 2019 and 2021 to help understand the scale, timing and characteristics of this UK wide desire to help. This paper is available here- [Volunteering in the pandemic.](#)

Finally, a similar research strategy was pursued in each jurisdiction focusing on a core set of research questions, supplemented by some questions specific to each jurisdiction geared to local conditions. This report summarises the findings for Northern Ireland. It reports the findings of the online survey and five follow up semi-structured interviews, drawing on the information from the other workstreams. The overall aim is to give an overview of the impact of the pandemic on volunteering in Northern Ireland. Unlike in other parts of the UK where volunteer involving organisations were also targeted, the online survey in Northern Ireland was restricted to organisations, both public and voluntary, that were responsible for coordinating or encouraging the volunteering response.

The survey aimed to identify organisational responses to the challenges and changing priorities the pandemic posed to volunteering and assess what was required to sustain and support it in the shift from crisis to gradual recovery. The follow-up interviews aimed to explore the interface between government emergency response protocols and the practice of mobilising the volunteer response as the pandemic developed. Three of the interviewees were in key government roles and two were in infrastructure organisations, one regional and the other local. After this brief introduction, the report is divided into 4 sections ([Policy Context](#), [Survey Results](#), [Analysis of Interview Data](#), and [Discussion and Conclusions](#)).

## **Policy context**

The research programme included analysis of relevant policy and guidance documentation of each of the other four nations of the UK. Difficulties in sustaining the NI Executive and Assembly has meant that long-standing policy on voluntary action has not been updated, despite an intention to do so. The 2012 *Build a Better Future: A Volunteering Strategy and Action Plan for Northern Ireland* produced by the then Department for Social Development remains the extant policy framework for supporting volunteering. It underpins continuing Department funding of volunteering infrastructure.

Not only does the strategy identify the range of different citizens contributing to voluntary action, it also proposes specific strands of strategy to engage with specific categories of volunteers. This is a marked difference to England. Furthermore, much of this strategy is not about retracting the state, but rather, in seeking to identify ways in which the state can work in partnership with a diverse range of voluntary action actors. The strategy identifies and embeds a supportive state role in ongoing development of voluntary action in Northern Ireland.

As elsewhere in the UK, the bulk of government funding for voluntary action is in the form of contracts awarded for delivering public services. As elsewhere, this has created pressures around below cost funding, collaboration between organisations and the exercise of freedom of action for funded organisations. Nevertheless, as the evidence from this research will show continuing government support for infrastructure and community development and the relationships thereby fostered were to prove vital in mobilising the volunteering response in NI as the COVID emergency developed. Long-standing ‘partnership’ structures such as the Government Voluntary Sector Forum were never designed to be vehicles for collaboration of the kind needed but the relationships that they sustained enabled a rapid response when the emergency began.

Analysis of guidance documentation released by NI Government Departments to help manage the COVID response, demonstrates the bias in policy towards supporting volunteers and volunteering through existing partnerships and relationships. There is a clearly identified voluntary action sector within Northern Irish policy and it is this sector, coupled to wider community groupings, which the voluntary action policies seek to engage and work with. We now turn to examine the results of the Northern Ireland survey.

## Survey results

Volunteer Now identified 163 organisations across the region that were involved in coordinating the pandemic response. These consisted of local and regional infrastructure organisations, local government and Health and Social Care Trusts. The sample was broken down as follows:

- 11 Council areas
- 5 Health and Social Care Trusts
- 60 local infrastructure organisations (including Volunteer Centres)
- 87 Northern Ireland-wide infrastructure organisations

A nominated person in each organisation received an email from the Chief Executive Officer of Volunteer Now providing details of the project and a link to the online survey. Fieldwork took place between 1 April and 1 July 2021 and overall, ninety-six people responded, a response rate of 59%. Given the small numbers within each organisation type, any analysis presented by organisation type is shown in absolute numbers rather than percentage terms. The survey is divided into four parts and results are presented accordingly:

[Part One: About your organisation](#)

[Part Two: The Volunteering Response](#)

[Part Three: Challenges and Barriers](#)

[Part Four: The Future](#)

### Part One: About your organisation

The survey opened by asking respondents to select the type of organisation they worked in and the council area(s) in which their organisation was represented. As detailed in Table 1, of the organisations initially contacted (detailed above), responses were received from one person in each of the 11 Council areas; 6 people from Health and Social Care Trusts (one more than initially contacted); 36 from local organisations (64%) and 40 from regional organisations (46%). Distribution across the council areas was relatively even, with nearly one third of respondents' organisations working across all council areas (Table 2).

**Table 1. Response rate**

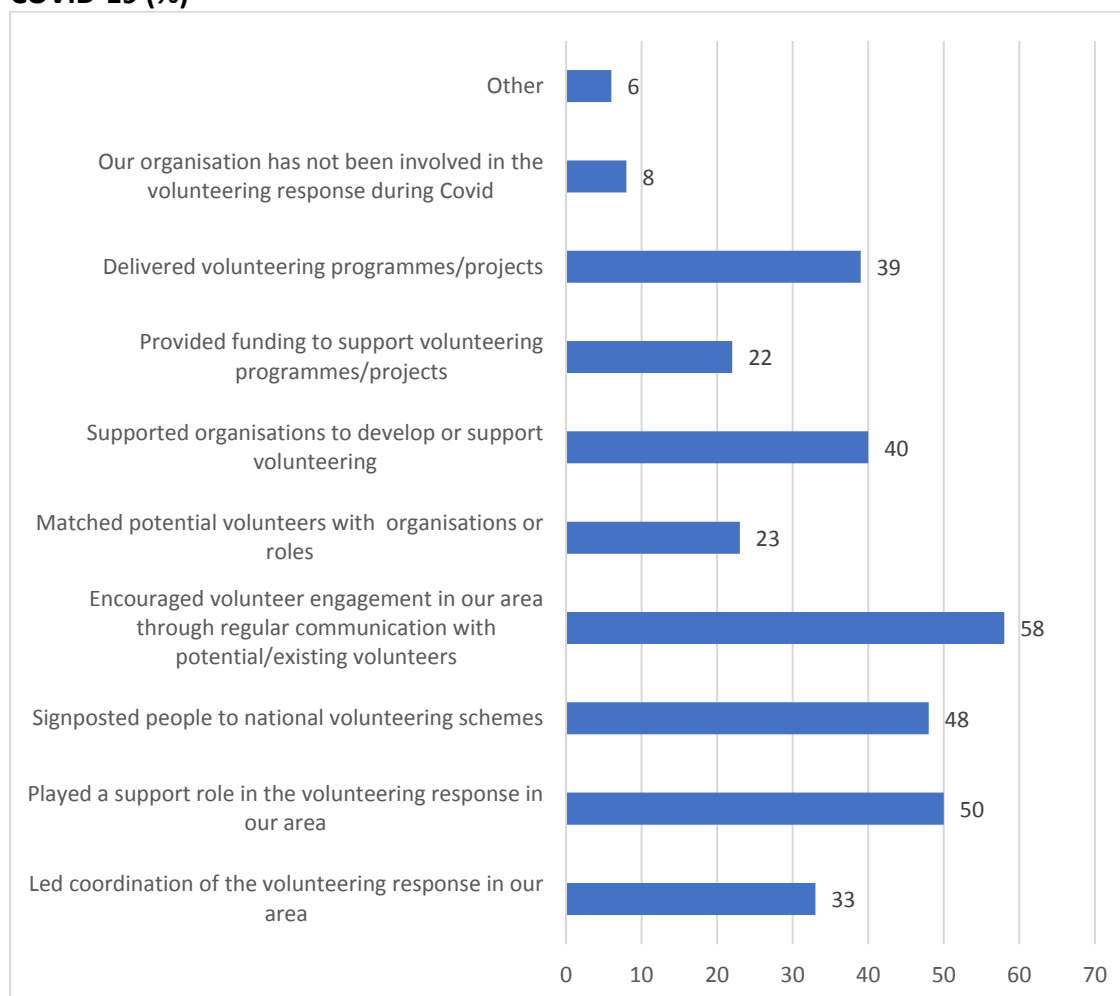
Organisation Type	%
Local council	12
Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT)	7
Local infrastructure organisation (e.g. Volunteer Centre)	39
Northern Ireland wide infrastructure organisation (e.g. Rural Community Network, Disability Action, NICVA)	43



**Table 2: Which Council area(s) does your organisation work in? (Multiple response table)**

Council Area	%
Antrim and Newtownabbey	38
Ards and North Down	36
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	45
Belfast City Council	38
Causeway Coast and Glens	41
Derry City and Strabane	36
Fermanagh and Omagh	37
Lisburn and Castlereagh	38
Mid and East Antrim	36
Mid Ulster	40
Newry Mourne and Down	45
All Council Areas	31

**Figure 1. How respondents' organisations were involved in the volunteering response to COVID-19 (%)**



Respondents were then asked to indicate the ways in which their organisation was involved in the volunteering response to COVID-19. As detailed in Figure 1 (see below), only 8 per cent of respondents worked in organisations that had not been involved in the volunteering response. Nearly six in ten respondents said they were involved in encouraging volunteer engagement through regular communication, while the proportions of respondents providing a support role (50%) and signposting to national volunteering schemes (48%) were similar. Respondents were least likely to be involved in organisations providing funding (22%) or matching potential volunteers with organisations/roles (23%).

Table 3 provides these volunteering responses by organisation. As can be seen, a majority of respondents from local councils reported that their organisations were involved in supporting, coordinating and funding roles and were much less likely to be involved directly in leading or delivering projects/programmes, although they had some involvement. Five out of the six respondents from HSCTs felt that their organisation's key role was supporting the coordination of their local volunteering response, followed by encouraging volunteer engagement through regular communication, with half being involved in signposting and delivering volunteering programmes/projects. A majority of respondents from local infrastructure organisations said that their organisations were involved in leading and supporting the coordination of volunteering in their local areas and encouraging volunteer engagement through regular communication and were least likely to be involved in matching potential volunteers with organisations or roles, and providing funding. While a majority of respondents from regional organisations also felt their workplaces were involved in encouraging volunteer engagement through regular communication, this was closely followed by signposting people to national volunteer schemes. Similar to respondents from local organisations, those from regional organisations were least likely to say that their organisations were involved in matching potential volunteers with organisations or roles, or providing funding. The seven respondents who said their organisations were not involved in the volunteering response during COVID-19 were from two local and five regional infrastructure organisations.

**Table 3: How respondents' organisations were involved in the volunteering response to COVID-19 by organisation type (absolute numbers)**

Organisation Volunteering Response	Local Council (11)	HSCT (6)	Local Organisation (36)	Regional Organisation (40)
	N			
Led coordination of the volunteering response in our area during Covid	3	1	17	10
Played a support role in coordinating the volunteering response in our area during Covid	7	5	21	14
Signposted people to national volunteering schemes, e.g. Volunteer Now	8	3	13	22
Encouraged volunteer engagement in our local area through regular communications with potential/existing volunteers	8	4	20	24
Matched potential volunteers with organisations or roles	4	1	10	7
Supported organisations to develop or support volunteering during Covid	8	1	14	15
Provided funding to support volunteering programmes/projects	8	0	7	6
Delivered volunteering programmes/projects	2	3	15	17
Our organisation has not been involved in the volunteering response during Covid	0	0	2	5
Other please specify	1	0	1	4

### Part Two: The Volunteering Response

In this section of the survey questions focused on how volunteering in respondents' areas had/had not changed at different points during the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic; the importance given to a specified range of volunteering roles during the pandemic; the coordination and supply of volunteers during the pandemic; and the effect of the pandemic on the ability of specified volunteering activities to function. After each set of closed questions, respondents were encouraged to explain their answers. The section finished with two open questions asking respondents to identify volunteering programmes/projects that

had become inactive during the pandemic and were expected to recommence or remain inactive.

The section began with three questions asking respondents how much they agreed or disagreed with eight statements in relation to how the volunteering response in their area had changed during the first lockdown (March-June 2020), during the summer/autumn easing of restrictions (July-November 2020) and during the most recent lockdown until completion of the survey (December 2020-April/June 2021), in comparison to before the pandemic.

**Figure 2: Changes in volunteering responses during first lockdown (March-June 2020); summer/autumn easing (July-Nov 2020) and second lockdown/survey completion (December 2020-April/June 2021) in comparison to before the pandemic. Respondents who strongly agreed/agreed with each statement (%)**

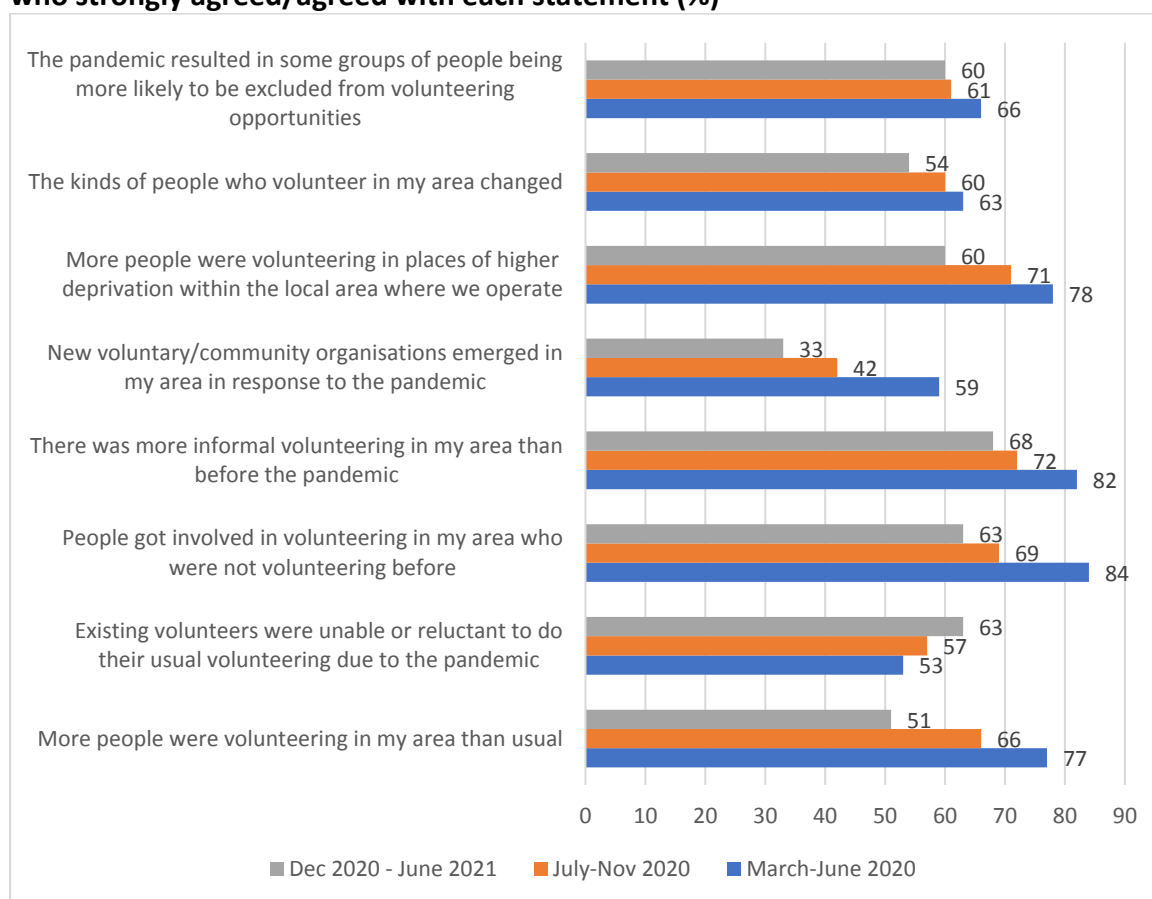


Figure 2 shows the proportion of respondents who, when comparing the volunteering responses in their areas before the pandemic with the first lockdown, the summer/autumn easing and the period beginning with the second lockdown in December 2020, agreed with each statement. In seven out of the eight statements, agreement was highest in respect of the situation during the first lockdown with the proportions falling in the subsequent time periods.

Just over eight in ten respondents felt that during the first lockdown people got involved in volunteering in their area who had not volunteered before (84%), and that there was an increase in informal volunteering (82%). However, with the arrival of the second lockdown these assessments had decreased by twenty-one and fourteen percentage points respectively (63% and 68%). Similarly, while over three quarters of respondents felt that more people than usual were volunteering in their area in March – June (77%), this had decreased to just over one half (51%) during the period beginning December, with a decrease of fifteen percentage points between easement and the second lockdown. Only six out of ten respondents felt that in the period from December 2020 onwards that there was more volunteering in areas of higher deprivation compared with eighty-two per cent who felt this had been the case in the first lockdown. Nonetheless, despite these decreases as the pandemic progressed, in comparison to the situation pre-pandemic, a majority of respondents still agreed with each statement.

During the first lockdown nearly six in ten respondents felt that new voluntary/community groups emerged in their areas; by the third period being assessed this had fallen to one-third. There was little change over time in respondents' opinions on the exclusion of certain groups from volunteering (66% to 60%), or that the kind of people who volunteered in their area changed (63% to 54%). However, importantly, when asked to consider if existing volunteers were unable or reluctant to do their usual volunteering during the pandemic, the trend of decreasing levels of agreement was reversed. In this instance, sixty-three per cent of respondents felt that during the period starting with the second lockdown in December existing volunteers were unable or reluctant to do their usual volunteering compared to fifty-three per cent during the first lockdown.

The trends evident in Figure 2 are, arguably, not overly surprising. The scale of the volunteering response at the outset of the pandemic was quite remarkable, so it would, in most instances, have been difficult to increase engagement further. Moreover, sustaining this commitment of time and energy of both individuals and organisations undoubtedly proved challenging given the duration of the pandemic; reinstatement of more normal working patterns which, for newer, often younger, volunteers, curtailed the time available for volunteering; and the age profile of pre-pandemic volunteers which, initially, excluded many from volunteering due to shielding, and then, as the pandemic lingered, made them hesitant to return due to ongoing concerns and uncertainty about their safety. The comments of respondents below highlight a number of these factors:

*As an organisation who are volunteer led, a lot of our volunteers are either retired or semi-retired and this put many in the shielding category, so our volunteers went from 68 to about 30 overnight, but our calls for volunteers were answered almost immediately, from male/female, young/old, professional/semi-professional, all walks of life. (Local infrastructure organisation: 39)*

*People on furlough were able to volunteer who couldn't previously because of work commitments. People who usually volunteered, who had health issues, could no longer continue to volunteer as they were shielding. (Local infrastructure organisation: 61)*

*You have to factor in [that] a lot of the normal community and voluntary sector activity was significantly impacted by the pandemic but at the same time the voluntary/community response to assisting vulnerable/isolated people was significant. (Local council: 138)*

*We found that after the first lockdown many active volunteers during that period were exhausted and glad to step back for a while. (Local infrastructure organisation: 46)*

*Some people were confused about what was and wasn't permissible under the guidance from the Executive so weren't sure if they could or should volunteer. Also, with easing of the lockdown restrictions people perhaps felt there was less need to be involved in volunteering. (Local council: 135)*

*Some groups availed of funding and developed and delivered community projects to address covid issues, but many more groups were unable to deliver projects as their volunteers were shielding. Generally speaking, community groups are managed by older volunteers 50+. (Local infrastructure organisation: 46)*

*A combination of people being worried about the rise in Covid rates and also a sense of there not being the same needs impacted on the volunteering landscape. There was also the sense of things not getting better and the impact of the change in seasons. (Local council: 135)*

Respondents then assessed the importance of a range of volunteering activities in their area during the pandemic. Unsurprisingly, as shown in Table 3, a majority of respondents felt all of the activities were very important/important, but particular importance was attached to befriending (98%); delivery or supply of food (92%); collecting and delivering prescriptions (96%); and helping organisations and charities supporting physical and mental health (94%) or homelessness, poverty or disability (92%). While, overall, still regarded as important, just over one quarter of respondents felt that providing administrative or IT support to organisations, charities and individuals (28%), and making PPE (26%) was not at all/not important; followed by providing educational support (18%) helping with gardening/household chores (16%) and volunteering to support the vaccination programme (18%).

In terms of the importance of volunteering to the overall COVID-19 response in their area, seventy-one percent of respondents felt it was very important, twenty-eight percent felt it was important, and ninety-three percent felt that the coordination of volunteers was very good/good.

Just over half of respondents (55%) felt that there had been an adequate supply of volunteers to meet the demands of organisations in their areas, with nearly one quarter saying there was rather more supply than needed and fifteen per cent that there was significantly more supply than needed.

**Table 3: How important or unimportant were the following volunteer roles during the pandemic, in your geographical area? (%)**

<b>Volunteer Roles</b>	<b>Very important</b>	<b>Important</b>	<b>Not important</b>	<b>Not at all important</b>
Doing shopping	64	28	8	
Providing support (other than shopping), such as helping at foodbanks or community food larders, or delivering food parcels/hot meals	69	23	8	
Collecting and delivering prescriptions	68	28	4	
Providing transport to medical appointments or hospital	40	49	12	
Providing other support to people who need help such as collecting/delivering benefits, household tasks (cleaning, gardening, pets)	25	59	16	
Making personal protective equipment such as face masks or hospital gowns	32	43	23	3
Providing educational support for children or adults	34	49	15	3
Befriending or keeping in touch with people who are at risk of being lonely	72	26	1	
Helping organisations or charities which support people's physical and mental health	61	32	5	3
Helping organisations or charities supporting people who face challenges such as poverty, disability or homelessness	58	34	5	3
Helping to staff telephone or online support services	44	44	9	3
Providing administrative or IT support to organisations, charities or individuals	28	44	24	4
Volunteering to support the Covid-19 vaccination programme	39	43	15	3

At the end of this section respondents were again asked to explain their answers to the preceding questions. In many cases the points highlighted were similar to those raised in

response to earlier questions and noted above. However, some, as can be seen below, are a little more nuanced:

*The Volunteer Response was amazing and very humbling. (Regional infrastructure organisation: 73)*

*In the initial stages of the pandemic there was a flood of people wanting to volunteer. In terms of matching this pool with the roles that needed to be covered, I think it took time and some people probably felt that their offer of help wasn't being accepted in the way they expected. I think mutual aid came into its own during this time. I think the everchanging nature of the landscape and the length of time that lockdowns went on for also had an impact on people - the stop start nature of things as services opened and closed. (Local council: 135)*

*During the various Covid phases, volunteers dropped off considerably and only some came back. A number of regular, dependable volunteers have been identified. (Local infrastructure organisation: 55)*

*I think that like before the pandemic, some volunteers take on significantly more than others and make themselves available when required especially in an emergency. (Local infrastructure organisation: 46)*

*Adequate supply of volunteers because those who got involved were often willing to 'go the extra mile'...more volunteers would have helped spread the load and/or maybe helped more people or provided more support to those who needed it. (Regional infrastructure organisation: 66)*

For many organisations, responding to the pandemic necessitated changes in procedures, provision and delivery. Yet, despite a willingness to adapt to the new volunteering landscape, not all organisations and volunteering services were equipped to do this, perhaps, due to a lack of resources in funding, people or equipment, or, given the nature of their services or government directives, an inability to operate within the safety boundaries stipulated for COVID-19. The disruptive effect of the pandemic on volunteering can be clearly seen in Figure 3, albeit that this played out somewhat differently, not only between, but also within volunteering activities/sectors. While, overall, provision was negatively impacted, in some instances other channels of delivery were found and activity increased, most notably, in line with support for people who would have been shielding/isolating. The ability to maintain or increase activities/services may have been facilitated through an increase in volunteer numbers, the ability of some elements of delivery to adopt/adapt ways of working to meet pre-existing or new demands and a greater availability of focused internal/external funding.

Respondents were most likely to say that all volunteering activities paused, decreased or ceased during the pandemic leading to widespread disruption across all sectors. However, this trend was most noticeable in youth and children's activities outside school (93%);



religion (91%) and charity shops (90%), and least evident in politics (69%), health, disability and social welfare (68%) and older people's services (66%). Moreover, it is interesting to note that in terms of the three activities seen to be less impacted between one-fifth and one quarter of respondents felt that activity levels had actually increased during the pandemic (20%, 23% and 25% respectively). Nearly one quarter of respondents also felt that volunteering activity levels had increased children's education/school (24%), Trade Union activities (23%).

Respondents were then asked to identify any volunteer programmes/projects that had become inactive in their area during the pandemic and which they felt would restart, and, also those programmes/projects that had become inactive and they felt would not recommence and, in the latter instance, why they felt this to be the case. Given the findings in Figure 3 it is, unsurprising, that the volunteering programmes/projects that respondents listed covered a wide spectrum of volunteering activities. While a number of respondents indicated in their comments that they were unaware of any specific projects that might not return, others made reference to how their return might be 'cautious' and/or 'gradual' as some groups were 'uncertain how to re-establish their operations' or 'may struggle to obtain renewed volunteers' as some may have relied on 'groups of informal volunteers people who were on furlough [but had] returned to work and don't have the same time', or were reliant ... our HSC Trust funders continuing the service post lockdown'.

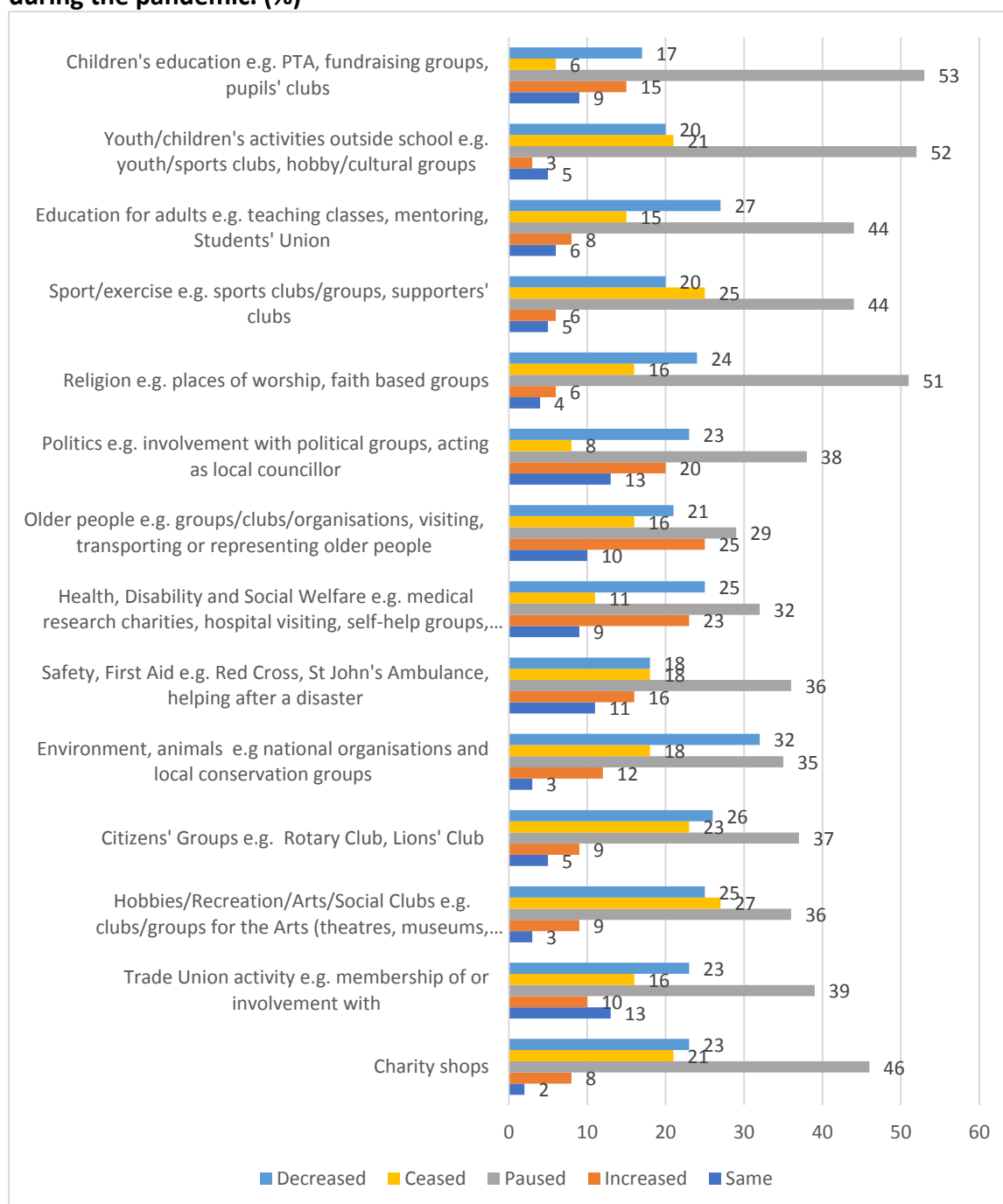
Other activities mentioned included baby clubs, women's clubs, sporting clubs and activities, befriending groups, food banks, shopping assistance, food and medical deliveries and older people's programmes. Some of the reasons respondents gave were:

*Physical activity - aerobics classes may be difficult to start indoors in community venues - well ventilated spaces needed. (Local infrastructure organisation: 14)*

*Older People programmes/projects which relied on older Volunteers who will have retired, deceased, or health declined due to COVID programmes/projects with facilitators who do not have the digital skills to host online sessions. (Local infrastructure organisation: 20)*

*Much of our core fund-raising is done face-to-face (raffle tickets, events, etc): it is hard to see all that returning to what it used to be. (Local infrastructure organisation: 59)*

**Figure 3: How respondents felt different types of volunteering activities were impacted during the pandemic. (%)**



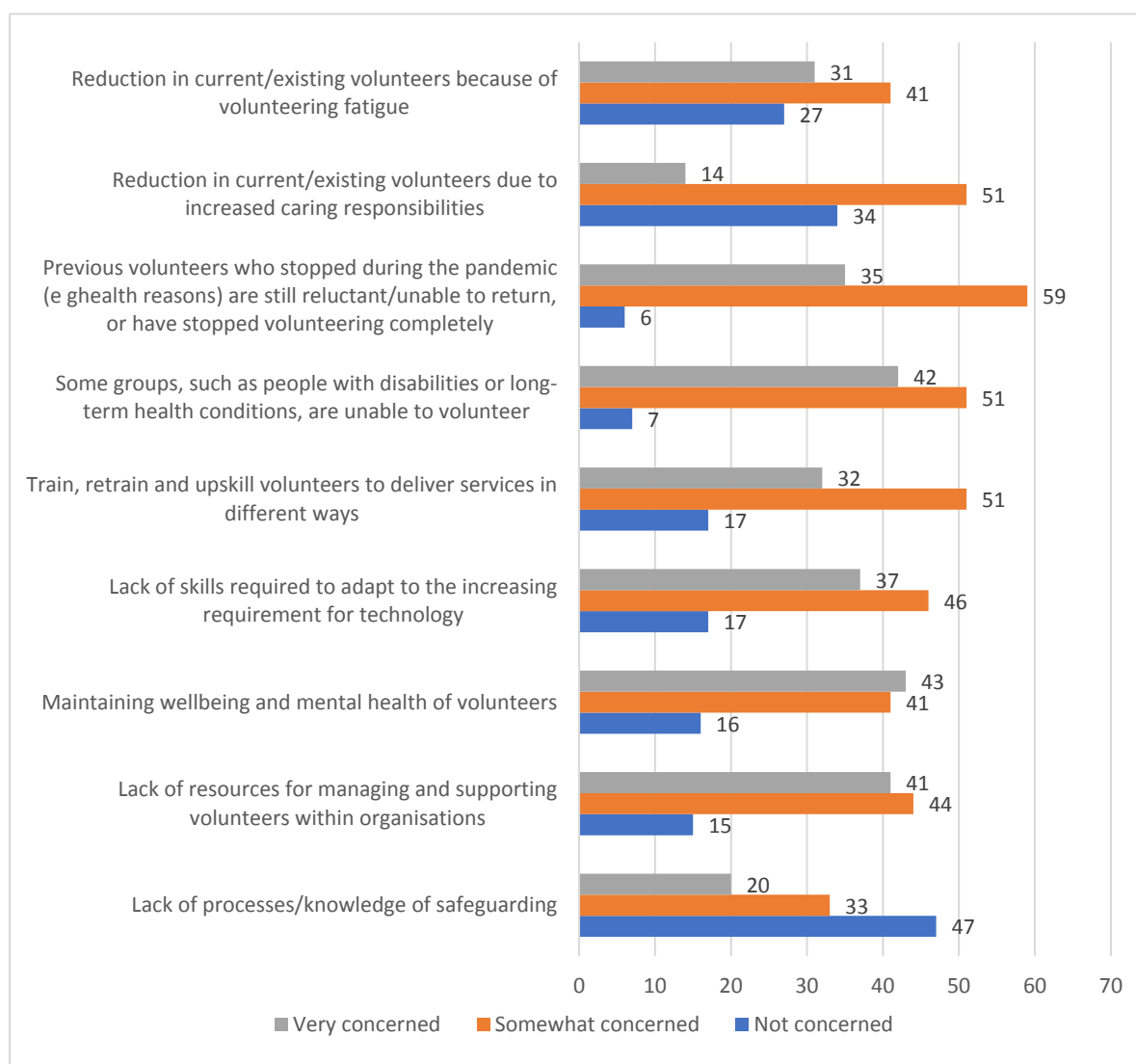
**Part Three: Challenges and Barriers**

Part three of the survey focused on challenges and barriers, and began by presenting respondents with four options on how the pandemic might/might not have changed the way organisations in their area, or which they worked with, involve volunteers. The responses show the resilience and adaptability that has been the hallmark of volunteering throughout the pandemic. Just over three quarters of respondents said that organisations had changed/refocused the kinds of activities they do (76%); around two-thirds felt they had

provided additional mental health or wellbeing support to volunteers or had moved volunteering activity online (69% and 67% respectively); while sixty-one percent felt that volunteers had been retrained or upskilled to adapt to changing needs of service users and/or to deliver services differently.

Attention then focused on how concerned, or not, respondents were about challenges to volunteering that their organisations might face in the future. As is clearly evident in Figure 4, the uncertainty produced by the pandemic has left respondents with high levels of concern across all areas. Most concerning to them was the inability or reluctance of previous volunteers to return (94%), and the exclusion of particular groups from volunteering (93%); two points that might well be linked. Interestingly, while both these challenges would result in a reduction of volunteer numbers, respondents were not as concerned that numbers might be reduced due to fatigue (72%), or caring responsibilities (65%). The area that was of least concern to respondents was lack of processes/knowledge of safeguarding with forty-seven percent saying they were not concerned about this.

**Figure 4: Looking forward, how concerned would you be about the following challenges around volunteering in your area? (%)**



Respondents were then presented with three open question concerning the future support that volunteering in their area might need. Firstly, they were asked to identify any specific support they felt would be needed to enable volunteering in their area/organisation during the eventual recovery phase. A number of key, often overlapping, themes emerged:

**Recruitment and retention:** A point already noted in the report, and one that respondents returned to often, was their concerns about the likelihood that older volunteers may be reluctant or unable to return to activities that previously relied on them, while newer volunteers might no longer have the time to commit to volunteering as society returned to greater normality. As such, they felt that there was a need to both encourage the return of pre-pandemic volunteers, initiate recruitment campaigns, ensure that existing volunteers knew they were appreciated, and that health and wellbeing was monitored and supported.

*Help to recruit, train, enthuse and coordinate new volunteers. (Local infrastructure organisation: 5)*

*Mental health support, future planning for volunteering, safeguarding (Unknown: 12)*

*It is hard to say at this stage. We won't really know how many volunteers will continue until we ask for help on specific programmes. (Local infrastructure organisation: 55)*

*Ability to entice older volunteers (perhaps with health issues) back to volunteer. (Local infrastructure organisation: 56)*

*Attracting new volunteers; supporting volunteers return post fatigue; assisting informal volunteers to be involved with regulated volunteer activity. (Local council: 116)*

*I think volunteers will need to feel valued and supported, including appropriate training to ensure safe practices during a return to 'normality'. Volunteers may be afraid to go back to previous roles, organisations need to ensure volunteers needs are met, be that PPE, training, mental health and wellbeing etc. (Health and Social Care Trust: 74)*

*Organisations need to take into account that many volunteers will have had significant changes in personal lives, perhaps loss of a loved one, illness themselves, loss of employment etc. As such organisations need to adapt their support processes to take into account the changes that have occurred over the last year and how life as a whole has changed. (Health and Social Care Trust: 74)*

**Safe environments:** Linked to the first point, respondents felt that organisations and groups would need to have health and safety guidelines in place, and clearly demonstrate that volunteering environments were safe and COVID-19 risks had been addressed and, as far as possible, been limited. While relevant to all volunteers and users, the latter point was seen

as particularly important in enticing back older/vulnerable volunteers by allaying their fears/concerns.

*Support when returning to office regarding keeping everyone safe and need refresher sessions on procedures.* (Regional infrastructure organisation: 101)

*Building confidence plus Health and Safety systems.* (Health and Social Care Trust: 113)

*Information on how to safely resume activities.* (Local council: 123)

**Training:** Respondents were keenly aware that the volunteering landscape had been forced to change in response to the pandemic which brought with it new protocols and operating procedures which volunteers would need to be trained in. Respondents referred to the necessity of continuing/expanding the online provision that had been a feature of the response to COVID-19. However, while training for this would be available within some organisations, for others this might require external support in delivery and/or funding.

*Groups will need support with digital skills and health and safety.* (Local council: 137)

*Co-ordination of volunteer supply and support with systems/processes/compliance.* (Local council: 118)

**Funding:** While often articulated directly, funding also ran as a subtext in many of the comments. It was regarded as essential in enabling organisations/groups to move forward effectively and, in many ways, was critical to addressing the issues raised above.

*Support from funders for exit strategy.* (Local infrastructure organisation: 124)

*The major support intervention for volunteering in the area is financial assistance to the local sector to enable recovery and revitalisation of activity.* Local council: 138)

*Funding and training for volunteer involving organisations.* (Regional infrastructure organisation: 74)

Reflecting on their own organisations, respondents were asked about anything specific they were doing, or planning to do, to support the recovery. Again, a number of themes emerged, some of which echoed those highlighted above, while, also, drawing attention to the breadth of planning and provision that organisations and groups are engaged in. Funding was seen as key in terms of both organisations applying for funding, and *funders reviewing their offerings to provide increased and streamlined financial support for the local sector*. Building collaboration and communication between organisations, groups, clubs and volunteers to provide support, streamline provision and work towards a coherent approach was also noted. Respondents referred to how their organisations were working to *get services up and running again as/when feasible*; continuing to deliver and expand provision; *including more online*

*options while face to face/indoor activities remain limited. Similarly, they highlighted upskilling, capacity building, retraining and refreshing organisational knowledge and skills. Unsurprisingly, given the new challenges faced by groups and organisations, providing support and offering advice, guidance and support to volunteers, users and groups were features of the work being undertaken to support the recovery. Finally, given safety concerns, which affect not only person to person interactions but also the layout of buildings, and the need to implement and adhere to new guidelines and protocols, organisations were initiating risk assessments to ensure they would remain compliant and could respond effectively.*

*We are currently looking at how we can strengthen our volunteer pathway and support offering for our local .....’s (Regional infrastructure organisation: 15)-*

*Collaborate – signpost. (Regional infrastructure organisation: 4)*

*Put procedures in place to enable us to get back to normal. (Local infrastructure organisation: 19)*

*Upskilling Older Person groups, supporting groups to apply for funding. (Local infrastructure organisation: 20)*

*Speaking to organisations that utilise a volunteer workforce to start thinking about offering them necessary training to return. (Regional infrastructure organisation: 33)*

*We have substantially retrained staff and moved our focus to recovery planning (Local infrastructure organisation: 34)*

*Enhanced risk assessments, online training, creating better support to help people with their digital skills, PPE. (Regional infrastructure organisation: 36)*

*We provide training to volunteers to prepare them for returning to their normal activities/facilities etc. We provide support with developing projects to meet identified needs in their communities. We provide resources such as IT equipment/support. (Local infrastructure organisation: 46)*

*Get back to our core business as the biggest deliverer of social capital ('The glue that holds society together') in our very rural community. (Local infrastructure organisation: 59)*

*We are reviewing needs and ways to service that need on an ongoing basis. This includes reviewing government advice and listening to client concerns. (Regional infrastructure organisation: 68)*

*We are ensuring all processes are in place prior to any re-introduction of volunteers. This includes risk assessments, role descriptions, training; all of which have been adapted and updated. We are in regular contact with our volunteer team who have been postponed for over a year. (Health and Social Care Trust: 74)*

*Supporting community organisations with appropriate advice and guidance along with funding to support volunteers and volunteer activity. (Local council: 117)*

*Increased and streamlined financial resourcing to the local sector, facilitated increased networking and through Community Planning coordinated increased statutory support provision. (Local council: 138)*

Thinking beyond their own organisations, respondents were asked what support they felt would be needed from other stakeholders. To a large extent the comments reiterate points referred to previously. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, as the focus is on other stakeholders, external funding was seen as very important as organisations/groups endeavour to accommodate pre-pandemic and new needs. Recognising individual and/or organisational limitations, respondents highlighted the importance of accessing external expertise for (re)training and upskilling new and existing volunteers, which in itself might require financial support. The pandemic had also brought to the fore the importance of collaboration, coordination and partnership working, which meant engaging with other stakeholders would be essential in facilitating the continuance and extension of future work.

#### Part Four: The Future

The final part of the survey addressed the future, and respondents were presented with four open questions. Firstly, they were asked to reflect on what they had learnt from the volunteering response in their area or organisation. Perhaps the overarching theme to emerge was the willingness of people to step in and volunteer in times of crisis. However, points of caution were also noted, and many of these have already been referred to in the report. Given the changing dynamics of COVID-19, it was felt that an individual's engagement in volunteering could be short-lived due to changing personal circumstances, and, that there could be a danger of ignoring the efforts of pre-COVID volunteers in the focus on newer recruits; countering this, others commented on the potential risks inherent in the older age profile of pre-pandemic volunteers. Attention was drawn to the different reasons that people volunteer, while certainly altruism was important for many individuals, for others volunteering acted a form of self-help both mentally and physically in the face of the pressures of the pandemic. Respondents highlighted the importance of the community/voluntary sector and the need for a dialogue to exist between communities and government/statutory bodies, and, also, between volunteer organisation and volunteers to ensure that what is deemed important in government/policy matches community priorities. Technology had played a major role in volunteering in the pandemic and respondents understood the need to embed this in their activities going forward.

*I have learnt that when there is an emergency people are incredibly flexible, resourceful and good at providing support. There is a need to get all people digitally included and to provide a safe internet experience for all people. (Regional infrastructure organisation: 68)*

*There remains an untapped willingness among people to help others within their community - an innate human kindness. The volunteering response over the last 12 months suggests that perhaps we need to reframe our 'ask' of volunteers in the years ahead; perhaps we have been asking volunteers to focus on things that are important to 'government/policy makers' rather than the things that matter within communities - helping those most vulnerable. This may be a presentational issue. (Regional infrastructure organisation: 66)*

*People will answer the call when it goes out, but it's important to be able to respond in a timely and co-ordinated way. Establish good communication with volunteers, non-volunteers and the volunteer infrastructure organisations, as well as other volunteer involving groups. We are stronger together than apart, but we need to be able to communicate this message and co-ordinate better in the voluntary and community sector. (Local council: 135)*

*Volunteering is at the heart of our service offering and it's essential that it continues to be fully supported. The issue is making sure funders equally recognise the changing volunteering landscape and adapt their approach in line with the organisation. (Regional infrastructure organisation: 15)*

Respondents were then asked how they felt policymakers had responded. There was appreciation that, given the scale of the problem, the response was in many ways good, particularly given the adaptability of the volunteers. Nonetheless, there were things that respondents felt could be improved. A key theme was providing a more joined-up approach through better communication and coordination. This was seen as important to quicker identification of need and was often tied to a greater appreciation of the role of local organisations and to the role of the voluntary/community sector in identifying and meeting local need.

*Probably nothing as the situation developed so rapidly during first lockdown. Improved planning with a focus on identifying those in genuine need of support would be the main thing to work on. (Local infrastructure organisation: 21)*

*I do think that government lagged behind community response significantly. I think there is a need to establish better trust between the sectors so resource can get to the point of need quicker. (Regional infrastructure organisation: 68)*

*The pandemic was an unprecedented occurrence that no one could never have predicted or prepared for. Overall, I feel that local organisations rallied together and offered amazing support within their communities. Informal volunteering came to the fore and made a massive impact within their own local areas. Individuals saw what was needed and ensured that was met. As time went on this became more structured and relevant support was sought. As such I cannot say what I feel should have been done differently, we are in unprecedented times and across the UK have adapted and embraced a new unprecedented way of volunteering. (Health and Social Care Trust: 74)*



*Been quicker to establish connections and communication between groups on the ground. There are lots of voluntary, community and charitable organisations within XXXX, but collaboration and co-operation aren't always as good as they should be. I think Covid highlighted the importance of building robust structures to connect and support organisations to come together and share resources, knowledge and expertise. (Local council: 135)*

When asked to share any examples of case studies that they felt might provide illustrations of volunteering throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, considering those communities or organisations that are effectively sustaining volunteer involvement, or those who have become inactive as a result of the pandemic, respondents provided a number of examples, a flavour of which are shown below:

*Five of us three from nationalist community and two from unionist community formed a new steering committee and met alternatively in church hall and Gaelic club. New experiences for all. Each knew the weakest in their community and reached out. We had a massive response across the divide we each put our names and contact number on leaflets distributed to 3000 homes in our area delivered free by local postmen. We did this 3 times requesting everyone to contact their neighbour, reach out, deliver a Xmas dinner to your neighbour, or to donate or ring for help with deliveries unheard of in this community. (Local infrastructure organisation: 13)*

*Local community association contributed significantly to the development of PPE bringing many new volunteers; Group used our bank account to lodge grants and buy materials etc.; distribution of food vouchers; support for Vulnerable Persons Scheme; support for connectivity projects; support for local pharmacy. (Local council: 17)*

*The pandemic created new burdens on some volunteers, mainly added caring duties within families. These resulted in volunteers reducing or stopping their contributions to the wider community.*

*We have lost a lot this last year in regular weekly volunteering opportunities, which were the type of volunteering we offered before the pandemic. Parents and Toddlers was a strong volunteering organisation and met every Monday morning until half term in 2020. By then we were hearing about this new infection and the volunteers were really concerned about hygiene, with over 40 at Parents and Toddlers every week. That was the last session, we still have all the toys, chairs and toddler sized tables. It is difficult to see at the moment how this group will open again this year with continued restrictions on numbers meeting indoors. The other side is the large number of volunteer opportunities there have been for people to practically support older and vulnerable members of the local community. We have linked 2 volunteers to the local Meals on Wheels service, and they are still actively volunteering 3 days per week. Volunteers have collected shopping and medication*

*for over a year now and are still happy to help, although the demand has decreased now- in April. (Local infrastructure organisation: 14)*

*Making PPE, making and delivering meals for single older people who are at home on a regular basis. Producing regular community magazines. Recognise that a large number of older people do not use the internet (58% of over 65s in the Council area) Making quilts etc. to help older people keep warm - Warm Well Connected Scheme Promotion of IT for older people. (Local infrastructure organisation: 18)*

*I love the fact that some of our befriending volunteers were originally people who were using our services (meds/food) to help themselves to maintain shielding and as a sort of payback asked if they could help out with our telephone befriending service, they now phone people that are very isolated and make sure they are not totally alone (Local infrastructure organisation: 39)*

*Probably the news would all be good on balance. As an organisation we have identified the more vulnerable in our area and can target our support more. It has also led to increased community spirit and sense of caring. (Local infrastructure organisation: 21)*

The survey finished by asking respondents to comment on volunteering during the pandemic. As can be seen below, many took this opportunity to reiterate points that had been made earlier, and, particularly, to highlight the benefits of volunteering at societal, community and individual levels and the tremendous swell in volunteering responses that the pandemic produced. Nonetheless, there were lessons to be learnt:

*... Most volunteers are retired, and fresh blood is essential for voluntary groups to survive, especially as the bureaucratic burdens on community groups just grow and grow. (Local infrastructure organisation: 5)*

*I am very happy to be volunteering and help out in our community, it has been great meeting the elderly and becoming friends with them and other members of community who I otherwise wud never meet, and will keep our friendships going in the future (Local infrastructure organisation: 19)*

*People are capable of so many wonderful things, and overcoming difficulties is by far one of them, of how when the going gets tough, a community can come together and look after each other, how when faced with a pandemic that is taking lives you get a few who are willing to step into harm's way to protect the many, I have always felt I have been where I should have been, I have a job to be there for the elderly and I get paid for it, but these volunteers stepped into the line to help and without regard for their own safety, they knew the risks and were still putting themselves at harm so the little Mrs Jones's didn't have to stand in shop queues and could stay at home and stay safe. The volunteers are the true heroes in all of this, the communities that came together and made a difference, they are the real heroes. (Unknown: 39)*

*I think a lot of resources were wasted. While grass roots organisations were well placed to identify those in need, money was being thrown at groups who in turn were sending things like food packages to people who were not in need at all. And organisations were delivering food when grocery shops were willing to do this anyway. Pharmacies who were already funded to deliver prescriptions were having volunteers doing the deliveries and being paid by the C&V sector. I sound negative but I appreciate that a volunteer effort was needed, and many people responded admirably, I just think that in some cases it went overboard. And it was new and who knew how it was going to pan out, so well done to all involved. (Local infrastructure organisation: 54)*

*Coordination was difficult but there have been valuable lessons learned. Volunteer Now were a great help in trying to put a framework around the management of volunteers and addressing concerns around regulated activity etc. This made the job on the groups much easier. (Local council: 117)*

*Volunteering was the critical cog in the wheel of support to people at the grass roots level demonstrating the pivotal role civic society plays in responding to crisis situations. (Local council 138)*

### **Analysis of Interview data:**

As we noted in the introduction the survey was accompanied by a series of in-depth interviews to explore in greater depth the emerging findings from the study. As in the other UK jurisdictions in Northern Ireland five semi-structured interviews were conducted on Zoom or Microsoft Teams between August 23<sup>rd</sup> and September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021. The topic guide focused on three themes: the learning from the experience of volunteer mobilisation during the pandemic; how could the voluntary sector infrastructure be improved; and how the voluntary sector might be better integrated into formal emergency planning in the future. The interviewees were all in roles central to the management of the response to Covid 19 in Northern Ireland. Three were in government roles and two were in community and voluntary infrastructure organisations, one regional and the other local. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were subject to manual content analysis.

Reflecting their roles, the interviewees focused on two main areas of interest. First was how the Covid 19 response was structured, both horizontally between different government departments and functions, regionally and vertically between regional and local government, and how well the mobilisation and management of volunteers fitted in to this. The second major theme concerned the roles either assigned to or undertaken by voluntary organisations in mobilising the volunteer response.

### **Structures:**

At the start of the pandemic community and voluntary organisations were poorly integrated into existing emergency planning groups set up to deal with civil contingencies. Although multi-agency, these operate at the level of each of the 11 District Council areas and relations

with volunteer mobilising organisations tend to operate at Council level. The extent and effectiveness of these relations vary depending on the Council. Coordinated regionally, these arrangements are overseen by the Executive Office in the Northern Ireland Government, reporting to the Cabinet Office in London.

There was widespread recognition that the absence of a formal relationship between these civil contingency arrangements with community and voluntary organisations capable of mobilising and managing what was often a very spontaneous volunteer response, was a serious omission. Consequently, as the Covid 19 emergency got underway a structure had to be invented but, crucially, this was not invented from scratch.

According to MVANI4,

*at the beginning, our voluntary community sector in Northern Ireland doesn't have a formalised role within our Civil Contingencies Framework. So, unlike, I know, other parts of the UK, you know, there wasn't a kind of standing committee with emergency partnership for voluntary and community bodies.*

*As a result, the Department for Communities sought to plug that gap and established an ad-hoc "emergencies leadership group very early on which had a combination of grassroots and regional community leaders and third sector leaders. You know, early days were chaotic for everybody. To be honest, I think there was a scramble between local government, between different departments, you know, between those in charge and those with more support roles".*

This group was chaired by Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) and proved very effective in channelling communication between government departments and regional and local voluntary organisations. But it also created problems of coordination:

*Whilst we had the Emergency Leadership Group, and it worked very well, it didn't tie in or it wasn't interwoven into the emergency planning arrangements for Northern Ireland, which was unfortunate because it would just ensure that anything that needed to be escalated or any flows of information would have been done far more seamlessly than it did happen. MVANI2*

The value of an effective community and voluntary sector infrastructure with strong pre-existing relations with government was recognised by all the interviewees.

*I think having structures. If you didn't have structures, you'd be in real trouble, I think. Well, I think with everything, it is hard to set up in an emergency. I know that you have to scale up and all that sort of stuff, you know, but if you don't have the existing apparatus, you're in a bad spot to begin with. MVANI3*

*I think the proof of the bureaucratic stuff is that it pays huge dividends when you want to get things organised, and you want people to pull together. So, that's what creates the, as I say, I think the cohesion, then, across the sector. That's why, if you think about*

*it, we worked so well with the government machine, again, in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. It was much more chaotic in England right across the board. MVANI3*

This view was echoed at local level.

*We had structures in place which helped. The community and voluntary sector have a forum where we came together four or five years ago, when the two councils merged... we formed a Strategic Stakeholders Forum. So, we had that up and running. We had ... a very good level of trust and confidence and communication between the umbrella bodies in ... council area. When Covid hit, the council turned directly to us. Then, we were dragged into every initiative that happened as a result of that. We're still heavily involved. That strategic stakeholder forum is still the sounding board for council, certainly. We've been listened to and heard at central government, as well. MVANI5*

However, this interviewee emphasised that this was the result of years of work and depended on a Council that was prepared to engage. Working across two council areas, he was able to contrast this experience with the relative lack of organisation and more distant relations with council officials in the other council. This was notwithstanding a regional programme run by the Department for Communities (DfC) to support councils to engage in community development. During Covid, the DfC was able to use this programme to channel additional funds to councils to support local volunteering responses.

Reflecting the central role played by volunteers in the Covid response, all the interviewees recognised the importance of having community and voluntary organisations closely involved in emergency planning and delivery, and that some of the confusion in the early stages of the pandemic flowed directly from their absence and the consequent need to create ad hoc arrangements. As MVANI2 put it:

*we have now a new Building Resilience Together strategy for Northern Ireland that has been produced, and it's actually just formally adopted now in August of this year. That does have the community and voluntary sector completely embedded in that. The practical implementation of actually how that works is a conversation that we need to have....*

### **Mobilising volunteers**

The lack of formal coordination with community and voluntary organisations at both local and regional levels created problems particularly at the start of the first lockdown in March 2020. But it was especially problematic given the nature of the volunteering response. As MVANI2, whose role included responsibility for managing the emergency, remarked:

*But for volunteering, there were so many different organisations it was hard just to capture and ensure that we were making the best use of all resources that were there. People that probably would never have stepped forward before and maybe weren't part of, you know, what would be a traditionally organised organisation. You know, and maybe went off and did things which were very valid and very useful, but then maybe set outside the normal or the way that we were trying to organise it. It was great to have*

*that, but then maybe trying to coordinate that and to pull it all together and making sure that everyone is getting the same type of things at the same time was difficult.*

From the point of view of a local infrastructure organisation, this spontaneity was to be welcomed:

*(It was) very positive in terms of, first of all, the initial speedy response and the way that most organisations - even very small organisations - reacted quickly and, in some cases, might have been ahead of government and policy. MVANI5*

Perceived problems of coordination of this upswelling of volunteer engagement were made more difficult by the mobilising of volunteers from unexpected places. MVANI3 remarked that the habit of thinking that certain organisations did certain kinds of things and that others might be focused elsewhere had to be abandoned. He raised the role played by the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), a sporting body largely run by volunteers, from players, managers and administrators, involving hundreds if not thousands of people. The GAA was able to, and did, redirect that volunteer resource from sport to emergency response very quickly. Later in the pandemic, it was one of the three organisations providing volunteers for the mass vaccination centres. Yet, as a sporting organisation, planners might have overlooked them:

*We need to plan for an emergency. They go, "Absolutely, because that's our business." You can do that with a handful of voluntary organisations, but not actually the ones that really will help you in the emergency. Go back to those GAA clubs and all those outfits, because they're going, "It's nothing to do with me," but they will be there when you need them. So, I think what we should be really focusing on, then, is the structure of access and being prepared.*

Looking for where the volunteers already are, no matter what they might normally have been doing, and not just those organisations whose job it was to respond to emergencies, would be an essential part of planning in the future.

Such an approach might presuppose an army of volunteers just waiting in the wings to be mobilised when a need might arise. But our survey evidence has already demonstrated that after the initial surge in volunteering, Covid 19 has had a severe impact on many areas of activity traditionally very dependent on volunteers, such as youth work and charity shops, the latter being particularly vulnerable because of the older age profile of their volunteers. Many of these people may not come back. Such impacts are likely to impose considerable challenges for organisations in volunteer recruitment and retention.

*I think there are ways there for organisations that rely on volunteers. It's very much about how you ask people, how you use people, how you maintain their interest. Otherwise, they go off to other things. Sometimes, it requires some reflection on the organisation itself in terms of how it's doing its ask. Sometimes, the tendency is you blame it on the people. "They're not like they used to be," you know that kind of thing? Rather than going, "What is it we need to do, maybe, that engages them more?" MVANI3*

Mostly the respondents were interested in the implications for emergency planning in the future in the light of their experience of the nature of the volunteer response and how it was or was not coordinated. The desire to change the way things were done in the light of this experience was widespread. As one put it:

*The kind of overwhelming power of – or necessity of – joint working, of collaboration. A lot of things that were understood rhetorically... have really proven their worth. The notion of kind of ivory tower, closed-door policymaking kind of just feels like an absolute relic. The question of co-design and joint working is just the starting point now, and the only question is how to get better at it and how to make it work well. I think we have a much broader, richer conception of things like volunteering than we did. It doesn't sit in a narrow lane that is separate from community development, that is separate from even sports and culture and arts. I think the idea of the 'everything connects' model is more understood. MVANI4*

But one respondent noted another issue that seems often overlooked. He pointed to evidence that both vulnerability to illness and death from Covid 19 and the response, including the mass vaccination campaign, was heavily influenced by poverty and membership of marginal groups. He pointed out an almost exact match between levels of vaccine take up and indices of relative deprivation. The wealthier the area a person lived in, the more likely they were to be vaccinated. He acknowledged that this was partly the result of poor planning and that the response varied from one locality to another. He questioned what more could have been done to target these groups and areas earlier.

*We should have been starting earlier. We should have had that, you know, known formal call to the sector, to identify what actions could take place either around transport, around overcoming language barriers, overcoming issues around (for example) a very low level of uptake among some disabled people because of access issues, and so on. MVANI1.*

His frustration was thus as much about the lack of targeting in the emergency response of what he saw as predictable problems around vulnerability and access. For example, he pointed to problems of data sharing between health authorities and response teams in other agencies, especially local councils, that made it impossible to target actions to areas experiencing high infection rates. His role involved working on measures to address inequalities in health outcomes more generally, and he implied that he would have welcomed more pressure from community and voluntary sector advocates along with practical suggestions on how to better address these issues.

The evidence from the interviews suggests that in the initial stages the response to Covid 19 in Northern Ireland was hampered by inadequate emergency response structures that had failed to take into account the demands of volunteer mobilisation and the need to manage that successfully in a way that was properly integrated with state bodies. Secondly, it was clear that planning would require a much more holistic understanding of volunteering, breaking down traditional ways of thinking around voluntary and community organisations,

their formal roles and formal and informal volunteering. New ways of planning using co-production models of engagement would be required. Better ways of integrating the specialist knowledge of voluntary organisations, both to bring problems of inequity to the table, and to suggest practical solutions were also needed. The experience of the pandemic raised difficult issues around volunteer recruitment and retention, challenging organisations using volunteers to fulfil their missions to think creatively about how they were recruiting volunteers and what they were asking them to do.

## Discussion

The evidence reported here reveals the profound ways that the pattern of volunteering has been changed by the COVID 19 pandemic. In this section, we summarise these findings and suggest some implications for the future.

The data is limited by the survey's focus on the views of infrastructure organisations in both the voluntary and statutory sectors with responsibility for managing the volunteer response, and its timing – after the end of the second lockdown and while the mass vaccination programme was still in progress. Although we asked respondents to reflect on three separate time points in the past, their responses record what they thought at the time they completed the questionnaire. This was, however, an important moment.

We have also drawn on analysis by Professor Alasdair Rutherford of Stirling University of administrative data provided by the online volunteering opportunity platform used in Northern Ireland, “Be Collective” at three separate time points. This has enhanced our understanding of how the management of the volunteering response changed as the pandemic progressed.

The data from the interviews was designed to fill in some of the organisational background to the pandemic response and elicit some views on how well this worked.

With these provisos in mind, the data nevertheless present a stark picture of disruption and change, a clear indication of some of the strengths and weaknesses of how the response to the pandemic was managed, and an indication of the emerging challenges respondents identified. The data also reveal the kinds of volunteering that may take the longest time to recover, if they recover at all in the form they were in before the pandemic struck.

## Key Findings

### 1. The changing nature of the volunteering response:

Figure 2 (page 8) summarises respondents' perceptions of how the volunteering response changed through time. In the initial phase of the pandemic, and as the first lockdown took hold, there was an outpouring of offers of help. A majority of the respondents reported that informal volunteering and volunteer numbers were higher than pre-pandemic levels. Many offers to volunteer were from people who had never



done so in the past. This put severe pressure on the capacity to channel this volunteering effort effectively. Forty per cent of respondents felt that **initially they had significantly/rather more volunteers than needed to meet the demand in their areas.**

Much of this volunteering was informal. Respondents reported large increases in volunteering at community level without the involvement of formal organisations. Analysis of the “Be Collective” data shows that as time went on, the numbers of people offering to volunteer fell while at the same time **organisations became better at placing those who did use the online platform to offer their time.** Although there are no data to measure volunteering response by local area and this research did not attempt to do so, survey respondents reported that the fall-off in volunteering was uneven. In areas of higher deprivation, it was more difficult to maintain the levels of volunteering. This suggests the influence of factors such as the daily pressures on people who might otherwise volunteer and a lack of organisational capacity locally to support volunteering. However, there was also evidence of **improved cross community engagement during the volunteering response** which may warrant further study.

By the time of the survey, April to June 2021, respondents reported **evidence that many people who had been regular volunteers before the pandemic had stopped,** either because they were unable to because they were shielding, or because they were unwilling to put themselves at risk of infection in the settings where volunteering typically took place, such as pensioner lunch clubs and charity shops.

While it is difficult to be clear about exactly how long lasting this effect was, 94% of respondents expressed a concern on this issue and the next section discusses evidence of its impact. These findings echo those in the report published by Volunteer Now and Queens University Belfast in March 2021.<sup>1</sup> This showed that while overall volunteering had increased during the pandemic, volunteering with organisations had declined compared to pre-pandemic levels.

## 2. Disruption to volunteer dependent activities and services.

Figure 3 (page 14) summarises evidence of how respondents felt different kinds of volunteering activity had been impacted. It reveals a stark picture. **No form of volunteering seems to have escaped being at least paused to some degree.** These findings are unpicked further in the report, where we highlight areas where respondents felt that volunteering had actually increased. There was no area judged to be not at risk of ceasing altogether. We draw attention to three salient findings.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.volunteernow.co.uk/app/uploads/2021/04/QUB-COVID-Volunteering-Report-Mar2021-2.pdf>

Firstly, the three types of activity that more than 50% of respondents thought had been paused were volunteering related to children's education, youth and children's activities outside school and religious or faith-based activities. These three were followed closely by charity shops, adult education and sport.

Secondly, while there was clear overlap between these and the areas also judged most vulnerable to ceasing altogether, there was a wide variation in respondents' judgement as to how likely this would be. Of the six areas most likely to be paused, the least vulnerable to ceasing altogether were activities associated with children's education, the most vulnerable was sports and exercise groups, followed closely by charity shops and youth or children's activities outside school. It is likely that these findings reflect the extent to which volunteers are needed for the activity to function at all. For example, schools are probably well-placed to reinstitute groups such as parent teacher associations. In the case of charity shops, vulnerability is more likely associated with the older demographic of those who volunteer in such settings.

Thirdly, there was not an exact match between the likelihood of pausing and ceasing altogether. **The area of volunteering judged most likely to cease altogether were hobby and recreation activities.** While somewhat fewer of these had been paused, the evidence suggests that a greater proportion would never restart. These activities (men's sheds, choirs, book reading groups, walking groups, arts clubs) are usually self-sustaining. In many areas, they are the core of community life and this evidence of their vulnerability raises acute questions about the long-term negative impact of the pandemic on the social fabric of society and the quasi-formal support that people derive from it.

More research is needed to unpack this. In particular, we do not know how these impacts vary between richer or poorer, or urban and rural areas for example. Nor do we know how different groups of people are affected – women rather than men, disabled people, or ethnic minorities. It may also be possible that the impact of technology on these groups has supported engagement to continue in some areas. In the absence of more fine-grained data, it is difficult to judge what the policy or organisational response should be.

### **3. Volunteering and the overall pandemic response in Northern Ireland**

The interview data clearly shows that the existing partnership arrangements between volunteer mobilising organisations and state bodies were initially not fit for purpose. In the first few weeks of the first lockdown in February 2020 a completely new structure had to be established at a regional level to provide the necessary coordination and information flows. This was achieved quickly and successfully, and was recognised as **the result of long-standing and close relationships between key government Departments and Agencies and relevant voluntary sector infrastructure bodies, sustained by an appropriate policy context.**

At the level of Northern Ireland's 11 district councils, coordination varied between councils, depending on the depth of pre-existing partnership working. **A key problem identified was that the emergency response framework, built around council areas, had no formal role for volunteers.** The consequence was particularly evident in the first wave of the pandemic, where there was some difficulty in managing the spontaneous volunteer response. How this developed depended on how well pre-existing relations between council officials and local organisations were developed.

#### 4. Challenges for Volunteer Involving Organisations

##### Planning

Given the evidence of the levels of uncertainty and turnover in volunteers and the impact that has had on different kinds of volunteer activity, it is not surprising that respondents identified **planning for the future as the major challenge.** This was particularly true for organisations that depended on volunteers to deliver their services.

##### Return of Pre-pandemic Volunteers

Key to these concerns was the **uncertainty around the return of pre-pandemic volunteers.** Respondents expressed concern that the large number of older, experienced volunteers, who had to step back due to COVID-19, might be reluctant to return and because of this volunteer groups would struggle. While welcoming new volunteers, respondents were aware the time commitment that might be expected from this, often younger, group could be more limited than that given by older volunteers.

##### Resources

As a result, **retention and recruitment of volunteers** was seen as a major issue for the future, **requiring resources for both training and the creation of safe environments.** Respondents identified the associated problem of volunteer burnout and mental ill health. In the face of these challenges, there were concerns over the current lack of resources needed and the consequent capacity of many organisations to respond adequately.

##### Support to Rebuild

Organisations varied in their readiness to welcome volunteers back. The evidence shows that while some have been very active during the pandemic, involving volunteers to support the most vulnerable and changing services to run in new ways with new volunteer roles, others have struggled, involving volunteers as and when

restrictions permitted. Another group of organisations has been unable to involve volunteers since the pandemic began, their activities suspended and in some cases in danger of not returning. Respondents expressed concern that while there is evidence that some organisations have restructured, others do not have staff in place to support rebuilding volunteering.

These issues suggest there is a varying set of support needs, underpinned by the clear evidence that there is substantial need to rebuild volunteering in many organisations. This is borne out in the analysis of the “Be Collective” data which indicates that the number of volunteer opportunities being posted has not recovered to anything like pre-pandemic levels.

## Conclusions

The pandemic has been an enormous challenge which in many respects has turned volunteering upside down. It remains unclear what the long-term impact will be. Our evidence tracks the immediate impact which has overturned some of the previously held certainties about who volunteers and what those volunteers do.

The evidence reported here shows both creativity and adaptability among some volunteer-involving organisations, while others struggled or have folded. The evidence suggests that adaptability depended in part on increased use of digital platforms and media. This suggests a training gap that will require funding to fill. Rebuilding will clearly take time and resources.

Three issues in particular stand out as needing specific attention:

### Managing the Spontaneous Volunteering Response

First is the evident need to plan more effectively for spontaneous volunteering. It is clear from the survey and the analysis of the data from the UK matching platforms that **co-ordination of the huge response in the early stages of the pandemic was challenging**. Without clear civil contingency structures linking to the voluntary and community sector, it was impossible to involve the huge numbers of people who came forward in a meaningful way. However, it improved during the second lockdown as organisations were better prepared for the involvement of new volunteers. This points to the importance of planning for the engagement of spontaneous volunteers and having clear pathways in place for these people. This leads to the conclusion that there needs to be a clearer mechanism to link spontaneous volunteers to organisations and opportunities within the emergency planning structures in future.

### Practical Support for Organisations to Rebuild Volunteering

Second is the need for **practical support for organisations to rebuild their** volunteering following the pandemic. The level of disruption is stark across all areas. Organisations have identified the need for support with recruitment and retention of volunteers, creation of safe

environments, partnership and collaboration, and funding to support these activities. The survey highlighted the importance of accessing external expertise for training and upskilling staff and volunteers to recruit and involve new volunteers in ways which are appropriate to the new environment, including increased levels of digital activity.

### **Effective Public Policy for Volunteering**

Third is the need for an **effective policy structure for volunteering**. The UK wide policy analysis shows that Northern Ireland has had a policy framework in place which supports and enables volunteering. Over evidence shows that this framework and the partnerships which flow from it were key to supporting the response during the pandemic. However, serious gaps were also evident. The pandemic experience has thrown many assumptions about volunteering in doubt, especially: the division between informal and formal volunteering; the retirement of long term volunteers; inclusion of new people in volunteering; and the rise of episodic volunteering. The policy framework is out of date and there has been so much change as a result of the pandemic that a new public policy framework for volunteering is needed. This framework should build on the success of the past and learn from the best in other jurisdictions to create an enabling environment for volunteering into the future. It should build on the new approaches to partnership forged during the pandemic, to allow a better balance between local and regional support and coordination for volunteering.

It is clear that volunteering, while fundamental to the pandemic response, has been significantly impacted as a result of the pandemic. While there are trends, there is no single story of the pandemic; organisations and volunteers have both been affected and have responded in different ways. This change is still ongoing, and more research will be needed in the coming years to continue to measure impact. There is a clear need to build on the learning and plan for the future in order to ensure that volunteering continues to play its vital role in our community life.