

## **A qualitative study investigating the impact of the cost-of-living crisis**



Volunteer Now has been undertaking a piece of qualitative research over the past 9 months, aiming to discover how organisations adapted and found their experience of the cost-of-living crisis. Organisations selected were from a range of backgrounds and supported a range of causes. Representatives from 12 organisations conducted three interviews over a 9-month period, hoping to capture the main challenges, support needs, opportunities, and their overall experience.

This blog attempts to provide a summary of what was discussed and reflects on a number of common themes. Firstly, we will provide information on the key challenges discussed, and how these progressed and developed over the research period. After discussing challenges at each interview, organisations were asked about what support was particularly useful. Key mechanisms of support were consistently training and networking opportunities as well as volunteer management support. With staff resource being so stretched, assistance with promotion of opportunities, designing of policies and procedures and simply talking to other organisations proved very useful for organisations involved. Finally, this blog moves on to summarise a list of actions/recommendations which would be positive for the sector in what has undoubtedly been a very challenging time.

### **Challenges**

- **Volunteers**

#### **Recruitment and Retention**

In October, there were very strong concerns about volunteer recruitment. Only some very small community-based organisations were not feeling the pinch, and there were fears that organisations would struggle or be completely unable to meet the increased demand over the winter months. Lots of volunteers weren't giving as much time or had withdrawn completely due to a range of factors, e.g., the reflective period that the pandemic provided. In particular, burnout and exhaustion were reasons being cited at the time, and these continue to be on the agenda today.

By February, the conversation was beginning to change. Many of our interviewees mentioned the increased competition between organisations when recruiting volunteers but were feeling a little more optimistic and had witnessed a slight increase in general enquiries. It is important to caveat this finding and put it into context. Firstly, it is quite common for a spike after Christmas because of the 'New Years resolution volunteer' trend. Furthermore, this is a small sample, and it is not representative of what all other organisations found. Other research continues to highlight a strong decline in volunteer numbers, so perhaps the responses we were getting did not tell the whole story.

Fast forwarding to April, the conversations were quite similar, which can be taken as a positive. The increase in enquiries remained, suggesting people were continuing to come forward to volunteer, despite the immense challenges being faced. However, there were a

couple of additional issues raised around recruitment and dropout. Many organisations were having issues recruiting for more regular, time-bound roles, e.g., Trustees or Board Members, when compared with one-off, more sporadic opportunities. There were suggestions that organisations could improve when it comes to succession planning, to ensure they were never left in a position where certain roles weren't being filled. The other emerging theme was around the number of volunteer enquiries that did not result in successful recruitment. Perhaps organisations need to implement ways to facilitate a quicker and softer integration to volunteering (to be discussed later).

Interestingly, after Christmas retention clearly became a focus for organisations. Before Christmas, organisations were primarily focusing on day-to-day operations given the immense environmental and societal pressures at play, but after Christmas, there was more emphasis placed on retaining existing volunteers. As the sector is so competitive and volunteer expectations increased following the pandemic (and subsequent informality of volunteering at that time), organisations were more aware of the need to provide a holistic positive experience and ensure that sufficient support is given to volunteers. Providing this level of support doesn't happen without challenges (which will be discussed later).

### **Volunteer Involvement**

It is fair to say that volunteer engagement is different now, when compared to the traditional view of volunteering. The Cost-of-Living crisis had severe impacts on volunteer involvement. Volunteers were stepping back or being forced to reduce their hours for a range of factors such as cost of travel, cost of childcare, or the fact they had to return to work to increase their income. This trend persisted throughout the research period, with the pandemic and cost-of-living crises appearing to have significant longer-term impacts on volunteering. In October, organisations were very fearful that volunteers were going to have to step back more, further impacting the organisation's ability to meet what was likely to be an increased demand within communities. When speaking in February and again in April, this may have been the reason why organisations placed a new-found emphasis on retaining volunteers.

By April, conversations were still happening about the need to 'rebuild' and even change current volunteer management completely. There were quite a few notable trends and situations which caught volunteer managers by surprise, because of the change in volunteer demographic. The stalwart, long-term volunteer is no longer as prominent, meaning the majority of volunteer pools will be made up of people who commit as and when available. This has complicated the task for volunteer managers to meet demands and manage projects and programmes. Volunteers are not made up of retirees and this gradual shift to younger individuals causes some more complications which must be fully considered. For example, interviewees mentioned that volunteers were going off on Maternity Leave, reducing their hours due to childcare availability or cost, and even restricting availability as they were working full time (only available in the evening). These are all issues more directly correlated to a younger volunteering 'work' force.

In October, there were real concerns with how frequently volunteers were engaging with training and face-to-face get-togethers. The logical conclusion to be drawn from this is that volunteers are even more careful about how they spend their time. This came as a result of the reflective period that the covid-19 pandemic became for many. However, by April, there was more optimism and volunteers appeared to be engaging more. There was acceptance that the covid lockdowns had a long-lasting (and maybe even underappreciated) impact on

people. Perhaps, this increase in confidence occurred as we begin to step forward and move on as a society.

On the other hand, a concerning finding, particularly evident after Christmas was that this increase in confidence among volunteers did not translate to service users. In fact, the trend was quite the opposite, as many interviewees suggested that their service users were even more difficult to engage with and they were isolating themselves from others.

- **Staffing/People**

- **Staff resource and ‘Meeting the volunteer gap’**

In October, there were many interviewees who were struggling with staff time and capacity. While the majority of interviewees confirmed that service demand had already increased, there were fears that this would become unmanageable over the Winter. In addition, these staff were often stepping in to offset the reduction in volunteer numbers, which took even more time and resource. As time passed and volunteer numbers became of less concern, staff resource continued to be highlighted as a big challenge. As emphasis changed to retention and the cost-of-living crisis really began to take a hold on people’s lives, volunteer managers had to put a lot more focus into supporting their volunteers fully and comprehensively. From February, there were lots of conversations around the cost of fuel, energy, food and in some situations, these conversations became much more serious. Therefore, a lot has gone into monitoring volunteers’ mental health and wellbeing, and in general, this is a lot higher on organisations’ radars.

Another alarming trend is that this has been even more evident amongst service users over the 9-month research period.

Overall, the challenging environment has meant that volunteers and organisations have had to be much more aware and much more comfortable in approaching mental health and wellbeing. The result of this is the time implication involved in what is already a very stretched resource. Training on boundaries remains ever important and it is crucial that volunteer managers know who to go to when extra support is needed, e.g. financial, counselling, etc.

One interviewee reported that *‘many people coming forward to volunteer with [organisation] have more complex needs...and higher expectations which requires additional resource from ourselves.’*

- **Organisational**

- **Funding**

The main organisational challenge in the last 9 months has undoubtedly been the uncertainty and changing landscape, particularly with regards to funding. Initially, conversations were more general, discussing how it inhibits the Voluntary and Community sector from maximising its potential, but after Christmas, there was a lot of concern and fear about future funding, sustainability and in some cases, long-term survival.

During the research period, the level of fundraising income appeared to decrease while general running costs increased (and often soared, particularly for sports groups). Therefore, organisations were under pressure and weren’t able to sufficiently recognise and support volunteers. Any spare funds generally went towards day-to-day operations.

The loss of several pots of European and local funding meant that the shrinking resource posed obvious challenges and concern. The lack of long-term funding was highlighted as a challenge in October but was mentioned consistently during all interview periods. The lack of a long-term approach means organisations cannot form meaningful partnerships and ‘get on with the job’, as there are always distractions and worries relating to funding. Another remark made at different times during the interview period by leaders in the sector was the difficulty they have retaining staff. This is due to the uncertainty amongst the sector and the fact that salaries and terms are much lower in the Voluntary and Community sector. In a sector hoping to rebuild, consistency is key, and a high staff turnover rate continues to cause difficulties.

### **Communication Channels**

Whilst we will be covering communication as a recommendation in next steps, it is also considered a challenge for many organisations at present. Communication channels within communities and across the voluntary sector as a whole are crucial. We are stronger together and there was a real consensus of this with everyone spoken to during the research. However, organisations reported difficulties understanding what services and opportunities are available, particularly for service users, and even where roles and opportunities could be promoted in the best way possible. If organisations looking for this sort of information cannot find it, how can truly isolated people be expected to find it?

- **Support Needs**

In this section, we will summarise the useful support received by organisations during the research period. These were consistent throughout and should be priorities moving forward if we are to help the Voluntary and Community sector flourish.

### **Training and Networking Opportunities**

Interviewees highlighted the benefits of timely, relevant volunteer management training, as well as the benefits associated with attending dedicated networking sessions. Combined, these allow organisations the opportunity to stop and reflect on where they are, and how they can make small or in some instances, large changes to make improvements. To reiterate a previous point, organisations feel stronger together, and providing the infrastructure for networking will always be important.

### **Under-represented groups**

There are groups of people keen to volunteer who just need that bit of additional support and resource. The most prolific example mentioned through the interviews was asylum seekers and refugees, who have arrived in Northern Ireland and been encouraged to volunteer while settling in and awaiting work. Despite an openness from organisations, they have felt ill-prepared. The same can be said about volunteers with sight or hearing loss. Generally, these people will end up volunteering with groups who aim to support people with sight/hearing loss (as they have the resources to facilitate), but this narrows the scope of opportunities available. Having more resources available to involve these people is incredibly important. There were a couple of occasions where small budgets became available to facilitate under-represented group involvement. However, if funding is reduced or removed, this will have a direct and tangible impact on participation. Another practical suggestion noted was to implement an equivalent to the ‘access to work scheme’ for volunteering.

This effectively allows organisations to recruit volunteers but also allows volunteers choice when selecting a volunteering opportunity, thus enhancing their eventual experience.

### **Timely Funding**

When asked about useful support, interviewees often responded thinking about what had made things that little bit easier despite the hardship. One thing mentioned at all time points was the support that came from targeted funds, with the energy relief scheme a common talking point.

## **Next Steps: What do the interviewees need moving forward?**

### **1. Update the research base**

There is a need for more current research assessing the post-pandemic volunteering landscape, focusing on elements such as attitudes, barriers and motivations to volunteering. This would help arm the sector with answers on latest preferences and would be able to help guide training to allow the sector re-build effectively. One interviewee also highlighted the benefit of seeing success stories and what has worked well for others.

### **2. Funding/Investment**

As with anything, to thrive and grow, investment will be required. This investment must be long-term with a strategic approach, allowing organisations to prepare and plan for the future.

### **3. Upskill and prioritise volunteer management**

As mentioned above, training materials will need to be overhauled and re-designed to reflect the latest environment in order to help organisations adapt and thrive. Furthermore, allocated funding should be used to train staff and provide them with useful resources to signpost to if they encounter a difficult situation which is out of their comfort zone.

### **4. Adapt to the current environment**

#### **i. Gen-Z and younger volunteers**

Evidence suggests the demographic of volunteers is changing, i.e. more young people stepping forward, and there are significant challenges that this can cause (Maternity Leave, reduced availability, etc.). Organisations must learn from the strengths of informal volunteering, ensuring a more rapid response, as well as limiting (where possible) any unnecessary bureaucracy which could deter people from volunteering. This generation are accustomed to instant responses, so volunteering must be fluid and ready.

#### **ii. Ethical considerations:**

In addition to the previous point, organisations will have to consider their ethics, approach to the environment and to diversity, among other things. Young people are more likely to select a volunteering opportunity because of the impact it has on the environment and may choose not to volunteer if a particular organisation does not have good values or ethics. Furthermore, we see more funders requesting information on how you are working to reduce climate change or protect the environment nowadays.

This will become an unavoidable and crucial factor which all organisations must begin to consider moving forward.

In order for organisations to fully implement and introduce steps to tackle climate change, it would be beneficial to see a range of environmental schemes and grants rolled out, e.g., tree planting or solar panel installation, as a couple of suggestions made by interviewees.

### **iii. Turn Up & Try and corporate volunteering opportunities**

Several interviewees reported the successes they were having with Turn Up & Try, and with less regular activities, as an introduction to volunteering. This is something all organisations should consider where applicable.

Secondly, there were a lot of conversations in April about the levels of corporate volunteering and whether this had increased. The feeling was that businesses had started to look at corporate volunteering once again, given the associated health and wellbeing benefits to be gained. Organisations should be preparing themselves for these requests and have opportunities ready for groups to complete.

The implementation of a scheme where skilled 'experts' in particular fields could be matched with groups or organisations to provide support on a voluntary basis, e.g. software professional to help a community group with their website creation, was another suggestion of a progressive step to support the sector rebuilding.

What remained clear and consistent through all conversations over the past 9 months was, that despite the difficulties, communities and organisations are extremely resilient and will continue to make huge impacts in society. The satisfaction from staff and volunteers is tangible and must be supported. Given the emphasis which had to be placed on survival and managing day-to-day activities, we are now at a point in time where longer-term planning is required in order to maximise the impact that can be made. National recognition of volunteering by Government would help to galvanise volunteers who put in selfless and tireless work to support their communities. This would also act as a profile raiser for volunteering and encourage others to step forward with confidence.

Organisations should continue to help each other and as a collective, the health benefits should remain at the forefront of promotion. It is important that volunteering should be designed to do what it is supposed to do- improve the health, wellbeing and quality of life of volunteers, and of course, those who they are inspired to help!