

# Spotlight Findings Paper 2

# Experiences of volunteers during the pandemic

Evaluation of the Coronavirus Community Support Fund

September 2021

The Coronavirus Community Support Fund (CCSF) is a funding programme supported by a grant of £187 million from Government, distributed by The National Lottery Community Fund, to help Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisations in England respond to the COVID-19 crisis and increase community support to people affected by the pandemic. Ipsos MORI and partners have evaluated the programme. This is one of a series of papers which focus in depth on themes that have emerged from the evaluation.

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions changed the way in which Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise Sector (VCSE) organisations operated overnight. For some, service delivery moved online, with staff and volunteers undertaking activities from home. Others needed to adapt to continue to deliver activities within social distancing guidelines, acquiring Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and updating working practices to ensure activities could be carried out safely. At the same time, many experienced an increase in demand for existing services or for new types of support from people and communities experiencing the

physical, emotional, and financial impact of the pandemic.

This paper explores the experiences of those who gave unpaid time to help others during the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>1</sup>. It draws on evidence collected as a part of the evaluation of the Coronavirus Community Support Fund (CCSF). This includes a survey of almost 9,500 people who volunteered for grantholder organisations during the pandemic, as well as depth interviews with volunteers and grantholders at CCSF-funded organisations. It also draws on insights from the CCSF Learning Hub, an online platform set up to enable grantholders to build connections and share learning during COVID-19.

## What motivated people to volunteer during the pandemic?

Volunteers reported a range of motivations. For most, a **sense of connection to the cause (62%)** or **organisation (55%)** were important reasons to volunteer. Half (49%) had **prior experience with the grantholder organisation**, and the opportunity was therefore a continuation of the unpaid help they had given previously. Many had relevant background experience,

<sup>1</sup> This includes both informal and formal volunteering (using international definitions). The experiences of informal volunteers are harder to capture because these volunteers may not provide their contact details to organisations or they may not self-identify as a

volunteer, for example, viewing the unpaid help they give as 'neighbourliness'. The scope of this paper is therefore likely to be limited to the experiences of formal volunteers.

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Independently evaluated by



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typically from the workplace, which attracted them to the role and made them feel as if they could make a valuable contribution.

The experience of lockdown also motivated some people to volunteer. Forced to stay indoors and isolate from others, many acknowledged that they felt lonely and lacked purpose. Volunteering provided structure to their day and offered the chance to get outdoors and meet new people. Two thirds (67%) of those surveyed said that volunteering gave them a **sense of purpose and / or personal achievement**, while a third (32%) said it helped to **reduce loneliness and isolation**. Over half (55%) said they had chosen to volunteer because they **wanted to do something useful during the pandemic**.



I'd given up work and it's very easy to feel very isolated unless you're a motivated person...I had some background that might be useful, so I offered my services.

Volunteer



A desire to **give back to their local community** was another common motivator. Two in five (39%) said they chose to volunteer because they **wanted to feel a sense of connection to their community**, and a similar proportion (38%) that they had **wanted to take part in their community's response to the pandemic**. Many of those who volunteered were aware that the pandemic had put additional pressure on vulnerable people in their local area and they were keen to offer their support to help.

#### Who volunteered during the pandemic?

Volunteers were typically **female** (68%) and **aged 50 or over** (the median age of a volunteer for a CCSF-funded organisation was **55**). Half (52%) were **out of work**, of which three quarters (77%) were **retired**.



Base: All CCSF volunteer survey respondents (9,466)

Comparisons with the Community Life Survey 2019/20 show that those who volunteered through CCSF were more likely to be from an **ethnic minority background** (17% against 9% amongst those who volunteered prior to the pandemic), **female** (68% relative to 56%) and **aged 50 or over** (59% relative to 53%).

#### How were new volunteers different?

Those new to volunteering (12%) were typically **younger** (the median age of a new volunteer was **48**) and **in work** (52%). They were more likely to **identify as an ethnic minority** (24%) and to have **been on furlough** during the pandemic (22%, compared to 12% of returning volunteers).

New volunteers shared many of the same motivations to volunteer as those who had volunteered before. Over two thirds (69%) said they chose to volunteer because they **wanted to do something useful during the pandemic**, while half (54%) said that the **cause was important to them**. They were less likely to report a **sense of connection to the organisation** (36% compared to 58% of returning volunteers) and more likely to say that they chose to volunteer to **improve their mental health and wellbeing** (25% versus 20%) or to **meet new people and make new friends** (17% versus 11%).

In the qualitative interviews, grantholders described being able to recruit **new younger volunteers** during the pandemic. Many younger people had found themselves with time because they were no longer able to work and on furlough. Similarly, university students were at home and had more free time. This was particularly helpful for many grantholders because older volunteers were sometimes unable or unwilling to continue to provide help due to pandemic restrictions or concerns about COVID-19. A greater reliance on communicating using technology also enabled grantholders to reach new people locally.



We got quite a few new volunteers when people were furloughed...so we did have an increase. When furlough stopped, some of them went back to their jobs, but some of them have stayed, and the profile of our volunteers is now younger.

Grantholder



Grantholders who took part in Learning Hub activities<sup>2</sup> also **spoke positively about the changing profile of volunteers during the pandemic**. For many, an increase in the diversity of the types of people that volunteered at their organisation **enabled them to continue to deliver throughout lockdown**. Having a wider variety of volunteers available to grantholders meant that they could **allocate tasks based on risk associated with contracting COVID-19** and therefore continue to offer activities and support to beneficiaries in line with government guidance.

However, during the Learning Hub discussions, grantholders also noted that new volunteers often came to the role with **a different set of expectations** to those who had volunteered before, for example, wanting the opportunity to

work flexible hours so they could fit the opportunity alongside childcare. Grantholders reacted by **adapting volunteer opportunities**, with some offering a volunteering 'package' so volunteers could move between roles and areas of support, and others looking at ways to pool or share volunteers between organisations, offering greater diversity in the types of activities volunteers could undertake.

Many grantholders in the Learning Hub and the case studies reported a decrease in volunteer numbers as people returned to work or studying. However, there were also those who remained involved, and grantholders felt that **they would stay in the long term**. Indeed, a majority (92%) of volunteers surveyed said they **were likely to volunteer again**, including **eight in ten (83%)** of those new to volunteering. Those who said they were unlikely to continue tended to say they were no longer able to dedicate enough time to the project.

#### What benefits did volunteers experience?

Almost all (99%) of those who volunteered for an organisation funded by the CCSF reported **at least one positive benefit** to themselves as a result of their experience. The benefits identified often reflected motivations for taking part.

Most commonly volunteers reported that their experience had given them a **sense of purpose** (66%) or **personal achievement** (67%). At a basic level it gave them something to do or somewhere to go during lockdown, which helped to provide them with a healthy routine. Half (48%) of those surveyed reported that volunteering had resulted in **improved mental health and wellbeing**, and a third (32%) said that their experience had made them **feel less isolated**. For the minority of those volunteers that were shielding during the pandemic, and therefore unable to take part in face-to-face

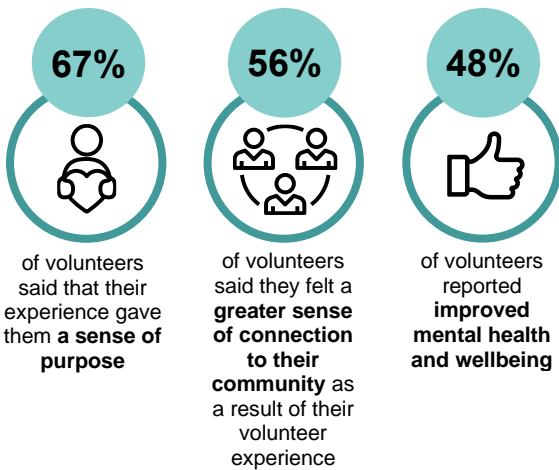
<sup>2</sup> Learning Hub discussions provide rich insights into the experience of some grantholders. However, the evidence was not collected in

a systematic way as it was for other aspects of the evaluation and it is from a smaller, self-selecting group of grantholders.

service delivery, this connection to the outside world was particularly important.

Volunteers also reported a **greater sense of community connection** as a result of their experience. More than half (56%) said that offering unpaid help during the pandemic had given them a **stronger sense of connection to their local community**, enabling them to **meet new people** (47%) and build relationships. This further contributed to **good mental health** and reduced the likelihood of **increased loneliness and isolation**.

These social and community connections are an important benefit of volunteering. During the pandemic, in-person contact was limited so volunteers reporting this sense of connection is particularly interesting within the context that volunteers were operating in.



Base: All CCSF volunteer survey respondents (9,466)

A small minority (10%) of volunteers reported a **negative outcome** as a result of their experience. The most common was feeling at **higher risk of contracting COVID-19** (mentioned by 4%), while 2% said they **felt unappreciated** or **out of pocket** (also 2%). This said, it is important to note that **nine in ten (90%)** volunteers said they felt that grantholder organisations had managed well the risks of volunteers contracting COVID-19.

Grantholders were conscious that volunteering during a time of uncertainty could cause

additional stress for volunteers. In the case study interviews many reported having **reviewed the support they had in place for volunteers** as a result of the pandemic, and **introducing new measures**, such as offering more one-to-one support online, to ensure they remained connected to volunteers throughout their time working with the organisation. A **large majority (95%)** of volunteers reported that they felt that grantholders had **organised them well** throughout the pandemic, **communicating with them regularly (97%)** and **offering them the chance to influence decisions (86%)**.

“ We couldn’t bring people in, so our volunteer support had to be one-to-one, because of the restrictions, but it has made us think about how we induct, train and support volunteers longer term. ”

Grantholder

Those who took part in activities as a part of the Learning Hub also discussed volunteer well-being. They shared examples of a variety of wellbeing measures that had worked well. This included **leading by example** by ensuring they took time out of work and encouraging others to do the same. Similarly, they said it was important to be **open and honest** about organisational decisions or changes in communications with volunteers, outlining in a clear and concise way why a decision had been taken and the impact it would have on the volunteer role. Grantholders also encouraged **regular check-ins between staff and volunteers**, including **wellbeing walks** that could take place outside and at a distance. Moving away from online platforms such as Zoom enabled staff and volunteers to **build a deeper sense of connection** and helped to **reduce the sense of loneliness and**

**isolation** that often came with working from home.



One of the regular things I do with our volunteers is write to them weekly with updates and information followed by a genuine thank you, and I do get responses from the team who appreciate the words.

Grantholder



### How did grantholders manage volunteers during the pandemic?

Although volunteers were generally positive about their experiences volunteering during the pandemic, many grantholders experienced challenges, and had to adapt the way in which they managed volunteers. With an increasing focus on **telephone** (68%) and **online** (65%) service delivery, some grantholders found it **difficult to keep volunteers engaged**. At the same time, some volunteers were **increasingly isolated**: some were working from home and had limited interaction outside of their immediate family; while others were shielding from COVID-19 and unable to go outdoors.

Grantholders who took part in the case study interviews described **the importance of supporting good mental health and wellbeing among their volunteers during the pandemic**. As well as the examples mentioned earlier, grantholders described **setting up peer support groups** or **moving existing groups** online to ensure volunteers had somewhere to socialise, discuss issues and share practice.

Some grantholders, particularly smaller organisations, found it challenging **to manage the increase in new volunteers during the pandemic**. This included scaling up induction, training, management and coordination processes, but also ensuring that such changes enhanced rather than hindered the experience of volunteers. There were several examples of

grantholders who hired staff during the pandemic to manage and co-ordinate their volunteers.

For those volunteers who were comfortable with technology and had access to devices and data, the move online **helped to maintain connections and increase the types of activities that they could engage in and support**. However, in some cases, existing **volunteers did not have the skills** required to support people online. Grantholders reacted by offering training to both new and existing volunteers – **half (46%)** reported using the grant received from the CCSF to provide training in subjects such as IT and project management, enabling volunteers to continue to deliver activities and support throughout the pandemic.

This said, a small group of grantholders reported that they had lost some volunteers who were motivated by the opportunity to develop personal, face-to-face relationships and **did not feel comfortable with online delivery**. Grantholders noted that it was important to maintain **some elements of face-to-face contact to help mitigate future losses**. Grantholders encouraged volunteers to organise socially distanced walks with those they supported and offered outdoor activities such as picnics once restrictions allowed.



There are a couple of things really. It's something where I get to speak to new people [and]...from a selfish point of view, knowing that you're making a difference gives you a bit of a buzz.

Volunteer



## Key takeaways

1. The context for VCSE organisations shifted drastically as a result of the pandemic, leading to changes in the nature of volunteering and the ways in which grantholders recruited and managed volunteers.
2. While transitioning activities and support online may have caused some attrition, with some volunteers feeling unable to adapt to deliver new activities, it also attracted new people to volunteering, who spoke positively about their experience.
3. Grantholders reflected that the pandemic had highlighted the importance of volunteers to their organisation, and several had made changes to their induction, training, and management and coordination practices as a result. This included activities to support volunteer wellbeing, and to help volunteers transition online.
4. Volunteers valued the additional support provided by grantholders and spoke positively about their relationship with grantholder organisations.
5. Whether volunteers were new or existing, a large majority of those surveyed were positive about their experiences and the difference it made to themselves and others.

### Evidence sources:

Grantholder survey: Ipsos MORI conducted an online survey with grantholders that received funding from the CCSF. Fieldwork was conducted between November 2020 and April 2021 and a total of 6,712 grantholders responded.

Findings from the grantholder survey were extrapolated to estimate the overall figures among all grantholders. This assumes that the findings among those who did not respond to the survey would have been replicated proportionally among those grantholders that did respond to the survey. Numeric data presented in this paper represents the extrapolated data.

Qualitative interviews: Ipsos MORI, NPC and TIHR conducted a total of 266 depth interviews with grantholders, and a further 33 case studies, including interviews with 72 staff members, 25 deliver partners, 28 volunteers, and 49 beneficiaries.

The CCSF Learning Hub: The Learning Hub aimed to create opportunities for grantholders to build new connections and share learnings on the ways in which their organisations had addressed the challenges of working through the COVID-19 pandemic. From October 2020 to the end of July 2021, TIHR and Ipsos MORI coordinated a range of activities and outputs. 3,242 members signed up representing 2,713 organisations.

**You can read more evaluation findings at the following weblink:**

<https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/insights/covid-19-resources/responding-to-covid-19/ccsf-grantholder-evaluation>