



CCSF Learning Report

How the pandemic shaped volunteering: learning for the future

October 2021

The Learning Strand of the Coronavirus Community Support Fund (CCSF) evaluation was a new way for the National Lottery Community Fund (the Fund) to create, share and facilitate learning from a major programme of funding for voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations during a crisis. It was managed by Ipsos MORI and the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR).

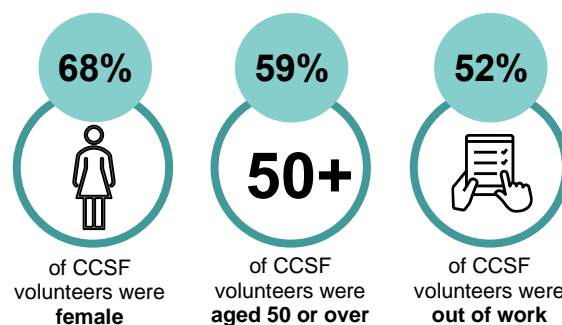
Centred around an online Learning Hub, the Learning Strand aimed to create opportunities for CCSF and National Lottery emergency grantholders (referred to in this report as ‘grantholders’) to build new connections and share learning about their experience of working through the COVID-19 crisis. Between October 2020 and July 2021, 3,244 members signed up, representing a fifth of eligible grantholder organisations (20%).

As part of the Learning Strand, TIHR and Ipsos MORI coordinated a range of activities and outputs. Many were developed with input from grantholders: online discussions, information and learning exchanges, as well as longer-term thematic groups.

This Learning Report shares what we learnt from grantholders about **how the pandemic changed the way people volunteer their time**, leading to new ways of recruiting and working with volunteers. The focus is on learning that is relevant for wider organisations in the future.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions put in place by the UK Government from late March 2020 led to **changes to the profile of volunteers and the way grantholder organisations worked with and supported volunteers.**

A survey of grantholders suggested that an estimated 183,200 volunteers were involved with CCSF funded activities, including an estimated 47,200 who were new to volunteering. Over a third of grantholders (39%) reported using their grant to recruit new volunteers, with a total of 38,780 recruited, while over half (60%) used their grant to increase volunteer hours.ⁱ A survey of CCSF volunteers showed that they 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**.ⁱⁱ



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

During Learning Strand activities, grantholders shared how **the number of volunteers fluctuated during the pandemic.** Some grantholders lost long-standing volunteers due to illness, shielding, or self-isolating. Other volunteers were unable to continue in their roles due to bereavement, childcare commitments, or the need to support self-isolating family members. Low digital literacy and digital exclusion meant that some people did not feel confident or able to continue volunteering. Some feared this was leading to social isolation and exclusion from normal support networks for volunteers. It also made it difficult for grantholders to retain the knowledge that experienced volunteers brought to their roles.

On the other hand, some grantholders experienced **sudden, large numbers of new people coming forward to volunteer.** This was a challenge to coordinate and manage. The new volunteers tended to differ from their usual volunteers and required different approaches to how grantholders worked with them. Grantholders suggested that their experience during the pandemic **challenged their understanding of volunteering and volunteer roles.**

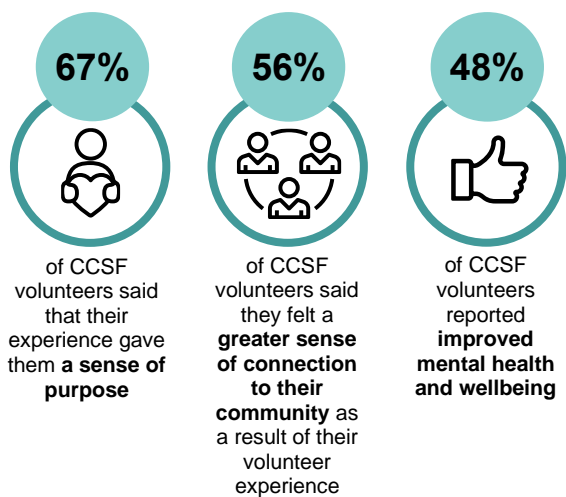
This led to **rethinking definitions of volunteering:** in this report we refer to ‘**formal volunteering**’ as people giving unpaid help through an organisation, often with an explicit agreement outlining role and responsibilities. By comparison, we use ‘**informal volunteering**’ to refer to where organisations have used informal support or networks to engage with their communities. Informal volunteering includes reciprocity, such as ‘neighbourliness’, and where informal networks of people come together to provide support to others (such as mutual aid).

This report brings together what grantholders told us about volunteering during the crisis and into the future. It covers **the changing ideas about what it means to volunteer** and outlines **ideas about new ways to attract, recruit and support volunteers.**

Changing ideas about what it means to be a volunteer

Grantholders shared how people who came forward to volunteer for their organisation during the pandemic differed from their usual volunteers. A survey of CCSF volunteers showed that

they were more likely to be **female, aged 50 and over**, and **identify as an ethnic minority** compared to the national picture before the pandemic. Among CCSF volunteers, those who said they were new to volunteering were more likely to be **younger**, from an **ethnic minority**, and on **furlough** than people who said they had volunteered before.ⁱⁱⁱ A common factor among CCSF volunteers was the desire to **contribute to their local community**. However, they also came with their own ideas about what they could contribute and grantholders were aware that **people wanted to help in different ways**.



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

Grantholders discussed the benefits of formal volunteer roles, including that they are clear, defined, **regulated, and volunteers were legally protected**. This provided a degree of security to volunteers and reduced the risk of organisations overburdening them. Grantholders also saw formal volunteering as more familiar to funders, which helped when making grant applications. However, grantholders also shared how **formal volunteering required more resources to administer and manage**. Grantholders felt that fixed times and responsibilities **deterred some potential volunteers**. Rather than replacing formal

arrangements, grantholders **expanded their range of volunteering opportunities and adapted existing roles to include more flexibility**. They also hoped this would bring a wider range of people into volunteering.

During the pandemic, many grantholders **collaborated with self-organising community networks** (such as groups linked through social media and collectives of neighbours) to support their communities. These collaborations led grantholders to reflect on **how formal roles could be adapted to better meet the expectations of new volunteers**. Grantholders saw that these community groups were **dynamic, enthusiastic, and had a strong community spirit**.

However, informal volunteering was not suitable for some roles, particularly those involving working with children and vulnerable people that required more formal recruitment and management processes. For grantholders, a broadened understanding of different types of volunteering did not replace safeguarding requirements.

Grantholders acknowledged a need to **continue to reflect on the nature of volunteering**. They hoped the **greater awareness about needs in the community** would mean **the number of people volunteering would also continue to increase**. While they expected numbers to fluctuate as people returned to work, they also hoped that people **working from home** would **volunteer more**, or continue to volunteer, where they lived. Grantholders also felt the nature of volunteering roles would change as they incorporated more virtual working and digital services in future.

Below we outline some ideas about building more flexibility into volunteer roles, adapting recruitment practices to attract more diverse volunteers, and supporting volunteers in their new roles.

Ideas about how to make volunteer roles more flexible

Many grantholders found that through reviewing volunteer policies, roles and contracts, they could introduce more flexibility and attract new and more diverse people to volunteering roles.

- **Create new volunteer roles** for people who have less time, or need to work flexibly, but who can still add value. Grantholders reconfigured roles so that they could be carried out from home, such as telephone befriending. One grantholder created a ‘friends of the organisation’ role for people to provide ad-hoc support without agreed time commitments.
- **Offer a volunteering ‘package’**. Grantholders developed processes where volunteers could move between different roles, instead of being assigned to a single area of work. For example, some shop volunteers moved to running online groups, returning to a mix of roles when shops reopened.
- **Introduce new ways to speak about volunteering**, to expand the definition beyond formal roles. Several organisations changed the language they use to enhance recruitment, such as talking about “joining”, “taking part” or “coming along” and “supporting your neighbours”. Grantholders felt this helped them to access more diverse communities.
- Instead of blanket policies (such as requiring every volunteer to have an enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) certificate) **consider adapting safeguarding approaches based on specific roles and responsibilities** and the risks involved with the role. This allowed grantholders to have different requirements for different roles, while still meeting regulatory and safeguarding standards.

“We have got way more people wanting to volunteer than we are able to recruit, manage or have roles for. [In response] we’re working on redeveloping services where we can have different levels of volunteering where a... lighter touch is required which I personally feel has been needed for some time.” - CCSF Grantholder

Ideas about how to adapt recruitment processes

Alongside introducing more flexibility into roles, grantholders adapted recruitment practices to attract a more diverse range of volunteers.

- Instead of just asking what they can offer, find out what **potential volunteers want to do and what they want to gain from volunteering**. This helped grantholders understand the best way to attract volunteers, as well as keeping them engaged.

“Sometimes it’s difficult to know how best to match volunteers with certain roles. Some people naturally fall into a certain role, like making the tea. We find we are like matchmakers... It is really important for each organisation to understand what is working and why.” CCSF Grantholder

- **Clearly communicate** the range of potential activities, responsibilities and requirements and the ways these would support the community.
- **Use volunteer “pools” and coordinators to identify and recruit people into volunteering roles.** Grantholders worked with coordinators who managed a group of volunteers that could be shared amongst multiple organisations. This can also help keep existing volunteers engaged, by providing them with new opportunities.

Ideas about how to keep volunteers engaged and supported

Some grantholders were concerned that **volunteers could be treated as free labour** without being valued for the contributions they make. The pandemic had also broadened awareness among grantholders that many volunteers also had support needs and vulnerabilities. Grantholders often found that volunteers needed new and different support - for example, for those who were shielding, who had experienced bereavement, or who had little contact with other people. This blurred the boundaries between volunteers and beneficiaries and spurred new ways of thinking about how to engage and support volunteers in their roles.

- **View volunteers as people who could also benefit from support and volunteering as a reciprocal relationship.** Many grantholders explored how best to offer support, for example through volunteer get-togethers.
- **Provide clear guidance and support from volunteer managers,** to ensure volunteers are aware of their responsibilities and have someone to turn to for support and advice.
- **Offer training and development opportunities** for volunteers, particularly those moving to new roles.
- **Provide the necessary equipment** (such as laptops or phones) to enable volunteers to undertake their role.
- **Considering the wellbeing of volunteers.** Grantholders stressed the importance of social activities and peer support. These are described further in the Learning Report on supporting staff and volunteer wellbeing.^{iv}
- **Showing volunteers appreciation in their role,** through written or verbal messages of thanks or small gifts. Grantholders found that this helped to motivate volunteers in their role and keep them engaged.^v

“There is a strong interdependence between small charities and volunteers. Volunteers are also our beneficiaries.” CCSF Grantholder

Key takeaways

The unprecedented numbers of people who came forward to offer their time and skills formed an integral part of the pandemic response in communities across the UK. At the same

time, this reshaped how organisations and the public sector see volunteers. Some of these new ways of working will remain relevant for the future.

Now that these reciprocal relationships are better understood, VCS organisations, funders and public sector organisations can build on this for the future. Below we explore our key takeaways for each group.

For VCS organisations

- VCS organisations can capitalise on the enthusiasm and commitment shown during the pandemic by continuing to review the range and type of volunteer roles they have and making sure they suit the profile of people who want to offer their time and skills VCS organisations should reflect on the language they use when talking about volunteering, particularly in recruitment, and how this could be made more inclusive.
- While volunteers make an important contribution to services and beneficiaries, they should not be seen as a low-cost solution to filling gaps in provision. Instead, volunteering should be seen as a reciprocal relationship. To keep volunteers engaged and supported, organisations should prioritise their development and wellbeing (rather than seeing volunteers simply as a resource).

For funders

- Conversations between funders and grantholders about volunteering (from how best to support volunteers, to how to resource organisations) need to continue. This will give funders insight into the role of volunteers and help them to understand the financial needs of VCS organisations.
- Funders can support effective approaches to volunteering (that meet the needs of both organisations and volunteers) by providing grants that cover volunteer recruitment and management.
- Funders can also support the sector by sharing the good practice established and tested during the pandemic among VCS organisations.

Further information

Other learning reports in this series include:

- Building connections and trust in a crisis
- Creating a culture of wellbeing to support staff and volunteers
- Building organisational resilience for the future

You can find more information about the CCSF evaluation on [The National Lottery Community Fund's website](#).^{vi}

Endnotes

ⁱ Survey conducted by Ipsos MORI in 2020/2021 of 8,177 eligible grantholders invited to take part in the survey in the sixth month of their grant with a response from 82% (6,712). Please note that this figure may include some double counting, as it is based on an extrapolation of the findings reported by individual organisations in the grantholder survey, and volunteers may have worked with more than one grantholder. Full results are outlined in the *Evaluation of the Coronavirus Community Support Fund Impact Report July 2021*, available at:

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

ⁱⁱ Survey of 9,466 volunteers conducted by Ipsos MORI by telephone 2021. Full results are outlined in the *Evaluation of the Coronavirus Community Support Fund Impact Report July 2021* and *Spotlight Findings Paper 2 Experiences of volunteers during the pandemic September 2021*, available at:

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

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Activities to support staff and volunteer wellbeing are explored further in the Learning Report ‘Creating a culture of wellbeing to support staff and volunteers’

^v Ways to show appreciation to staff and volunteers are explored further in the Learning Report ‘Creating a culture of wellbeing to support staff and volunteers’

^{vi} Wider learning from the CCSF evaluation is available at:

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