**Early indications on state of volunteering in relation to the covid-19 pandemic – Draft**

**Scottish Government**

Contents

[1. The Breadth and Role of Volunteers in Response to Covid-19 2](#_Toc51315078)

[1.1 Overall Volunteering Rates 2](#_Toc51315079)

[1.2 Scotland Cares Campaign 2](#_Toc51315080)

[1.3 Key findings from SG’s analysis of Scotland Cares sign-ups via BRC and VS (June 2020): 3](#_Toc51315081)

[1.4 Other formal volunteering 3](#_Toc51315082)

[1.5 Informal volunteering (mutual aid groups) 4](#_Toc51315083)

[1.6 Informal Volunteering (outside of mutual aid groups) 5](#_Toc51315084)

[1.7 Covid-19 Volunteer Characteristics 6](#_Toc51315085)

[2. Impact of Covid-19 on Volunteering 7](#_Toc51315086)

[3. Challenges Faced by Volunteers and Organisations Working with Volunteers 7](#_Toc51315087)

[4. Challenges and Opportunities for the Volunteering Sector after Lockdown 8](#_Toc51315088)

**Introduction**

This paper gives a brief overview of the currently available evidence about volunteering in relation to the covid-19 pandemic in Scotland. It is split into four main sections:

1. Breadth and Role of Volunteers in Response to Covid-19

2. Impact of Covid-19 on Volunteering

3. Challenges Faced by Volunteers and Organisations Working with Volunteers

4. Challenges and Opportunities for the Volunteering Sector after Lockdown

Each section summarises the evidence that is currently available and highlights the main findings.

This document should be seen as a work-in-progress which will continue to be updated and developed as new evidence becomes available. At this early stage, it is important to note that many gaps in the evidence remain, and findings reported here should be taken as indicative rather than definitive.

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# The Breadth and Role of Volunteers in Response to Covid-19

**Summary/Key points:**

* While formal volunteering has decreased during the pandemic, informal volunteering and mutual aid participation have increased significantly, causing a rise in overall volunteering rates.
* The Scotland Cares campaign attracted a large response, although it appears that only a relatively low proportion of people who signed up have actually been deployed as a result of the campaign
* Volunteer sign-ups have tended to be least concentrated in areas where they are most likely to be needed – for example, they are lowest in areas of higher covid-19 vulnerability and higher deprivation, and in areas with larger populations over the age of 70

## Overall Volunteering Rates

A survey conducted in June 2020 by Volunteer Scotland/Ipsos Mori[[1]](#footnote-1) shows that there has been a significant increase in volunteering among the Scottish population during the Covid-19 pandemic, with participation increasing from 45% of the population to 74%. Based on responses to the survey, Volunteer Scotland anticipate that more people will be volunteering after the Covid-19 crisis than were before (59% vs 45%). However, this prediction is based on what survey respondents say about their future behaviour, which is a relatively unreliable tool.

## Scotland Cares Campaign

The Scotland Cares campaign was launched to encourage people across Scotland to offer their support during the pandemic volunteering to help with activities including delivering food parcels and essential supplies and medicines to those in need, and phoning those who needed assistance or companionship. Volunteers could either sign up to support charities and community groups via Volunteer Scotland, or to support public services via the British Red Cross (BRC).

The Scotland Cares campaign attracted a large response across Scotland, and at the point that sign-ups were paused (1 May), the campaign had gathered:

* 35,262 sign-ups via Volunteer Scotland
* 25,172 sign-ups via BRC[[2]](#footnote-2)
* As Volunteer Scotland (VS) point out, this is a relatively small fraction of the 1.2 million people who said that they had done formal volunteering at least once per year in the most recent Scottish Household Survey,[[3]](#footnote-3) however, it appears that many more people have volunteered during the pandemic outside of the Scotland Cares campaign, particularly in more informal ways (see sections below)
* VS polled their Scotland Cares volunteers on 23rd May. 45% said they had volunteered in some way since signing up. Of these, 50% had volunteered as an individual; 40% had volunteered with a group directly involved in the Covid-19 response; and 25% had volunteered with a group not directly involved in the Covid-19 response. 11% had given unpaid help organised by a local network.[[4]](#footnote-4)
* The most common categories of volunteer activities mentioned by VS volunteers (as categorised by VS) were: “food and essential supplies”, “mutual aid”, “TSI, council, formal hub”, and “health and social care related support”

## Key findings from SG’s analysis of Scotland Cares sign-ups via BRC and VS (June 2020):**[[5]](#footnote-5)**

* Scottish Government analysts conducted an analysis of the Scotland Cares sign-ups via VS and BRC in June 2020.
* In general, sign-up rates were lower in remote rural areas and in areas with high levels of deprivation
* Sign-up rates were highest in large cities, and lowest in remote rural areas
* In general, where the proportion of over 70s in the local population is higher, volunteer sign-ups tended to be lower. Similarly, where Covid-19 vulnerability is rated as higher, volunteer sign-ups have tended to be lower, suggesting that formal volunteers recruited through the campaign have not been concentrated where they might be most needed
* Volunteering sign-up rates were lowest in areas of high deprivation (SIMD) and highest in areas of low deprivation

## Other formal volunteering

Data from a survey of Scottish Charities conducted by OSCR in May 2020[[6]](#footnote-6) suggests that other forms of formal volunteering have reduced during the lockdown with:

* 37% of charities saying that volunteers were no longer able to work as a result of lockdown and 32% saying they had reduced or ceased using volunteers
* While 5% of charities have seen an increase in volunteers, 29% have seen a reduction in volunteers. 37% say it has had no effect on their number of volunteers.
* 13% of charities said they did not have the capacity to use the volunteers available to them
* The Volunteer Scotland/Ipsos Mori national telephone survey conducted in June 2020[[7]](#footnote-7) shows that rates of formal volunteering were lower than usual (when compared with Scottish Household Survey (SHS) data) – during the pandemic, only 13% of people were volunteering formally, compared with the 26% reported in the 2018 SHS

Although we have no clear evidence to demonstrate the cause of the apparent reduction in formal volunteering, it is likely that it will have reduced during lockdown because of the need for many people to self-isolate and/or shield, because a number of charities responded to the lockdown by ceasing operations, and because organisations that continued operating may have had difficulty co-ordinating volunteers due to lack of capacity.

## Informal volunteering (mutual aid groups)

As has been widely reported in the media and elsewhere, a large number of mutual aid groups sprang up in response to the pandemic. While there is no agreed definition of mutual aid, it can loosely be defined as the voluntary reciprocal exchange of resources and services for mutual benefit – in effect, people from a local community form groups with varying degrees of informality in which they offer support to those in need within the group.

Scottish Government analysts provided a briefing on mutual aid. The key findings were:[[8]](#footnote-8)

* There were at least 220 Covid-19-specific mutual aid groups in Scotland. The total number is unknown, as not all groups self-define as mutual aid, or have registered themselves as such. Mutual aid takes many forms, and these groups range from very small, new informal local groups based primarily on Whatsapp, to groups with several thousand members and strong support from pre-existing community groups or local authorities.
* According to the Volunteer Scotland/Ipsos Mori survey conducted in June 2020, 16% of people were volunteering in mutual aid groups (there are no comparable figures for “ordinary times” as this data is not usually collected)[[9]](#footnote-9)
* The majority of registered mutual aid groups are in the central belt, but groups are spread across the country
* They are predominantly focused on helping those who need practical assistance connect with those who can provide help within specific geographical areas
* SG polling from Yougov shows that during April, around 4%-5% of respondents to a nationally representative survey said that they had signed up to volunteer via community groups
* It is difficult to accurately assess the activity levels or impact of mutual aid groups because although many have a central public form (e.g. a Facebook group), anecdotal evidence suggests that most activity takes place more privately via other platforms, such as Whatsapp

Key findings from a UK-wide report by the New Local Government Network[[10]](#footnote-10):

* Mutual aid appears to have flourished most in areas where people tend to be younger, wealthier and better educated – NLGN suggest that this is due to furloughed workers having time and willingness to volunteer in this way, as this is a different demographic to typical volunteers (usually older and/or retired)
* Many groups started out providing basic essentials (food shopping, medication) and evolved as time went on (e.g. to cook meals or partner with supermarkets/foodbanks to deliver food to those struggling financially, to provide entertainment, or to tackle loneliness)
* MA groups’ success has lain in their informality – better able to adapt quickly to the changing situation than LAs and traditional TSOs
* This informal nature of MA groups makes them more agile and responsive, but also brings challenges including: lack of leadership or over-bearing leadership; difficulty sustaining enthusiasm of members after the initial crisis period; internal tensions, especially relating to the politicisation of some groups (e.g. it was noted that some groups found tensions between those posting left-wing content in group pages where others wanted the groups to remain apolitical); some councils not being willing to work with groups lacking a centralised, professionalised structure
* Variation in relationships with LAs: While some MA groups found local councils to be indifferent to their work and unwilling to support them, others found local councils overbearing and too prescriptive – e.g. expecting too much in terms of centralised systems, safe-guarding activities, and fitting MA groups into council’s overall corporate objectives
* Positive relationships with councils were reported where the council was supportive without being overbearing, for example in places where councils had historically done good work to build this type of social fabric and were willing to support and facilitate without “crowding-out” community voices and groups
* Examples of positive council collaboration included: councils reorganising their structures to accommodate MA groups; helping MA groups connect with those with long-term service needs; helping connect people with resources, networks and other local groups; providing space and digital infrastructure for groups ot organise themselves; giving practical help to new groups who might struggle with organisation – e.g. providing a float to cover gap between income and outgoings when groups are buying food/medication, then being paid back on delivery

## Informal Volunteering (outside of mutual aid groups)

The Volunteer Scotland/Ipsos Mori survey (conducted in June 2020), shows that 35% of the population say they have been volunteering informally during the pandemic. This is roughly the same percentage of the population that said they volunteered informally in the last SHS (36%).

Polling for SG by YouGov during April**[[11]](#footnote-11)** and May**[[12]](#footnote-12)** showed that a large proportion of society have volunteered informally during these months, with:

**April**

* 69% having phoned, skyped or face-timed a neighbour, friend or family member in a particular week
* 26% doing shopping for others, 13% collecting prescriptions for others, and around 7% taking a meal to someone else in a particular week
* Each week of April, around 4%-5% of people said they had signed up to volunteer through a community organisation

**May**

* Between 63% and 66% of respondents having phoned, skyped or face-timed a neighbour, friend or family member each week in May
* Between 18%-21% of respondents having done shopping for others, 8%-11% having collected a prescription for others, and between 5%-6% taking a meal to others during each week in May
* Each week in May, around 2%-3% of people said that they had signed up to volunteer for a community organisation

These figures suggest that informal volunteering reduced slightly between April and May, although it is likely that this can be explained to some extent by the decreasing numbers of people becoming infected and therefore needing to self-isolate

## Covid-19 Volunteer Characteristics

UK-wide research from UCL (not peer-reviewed)[[13]](#footnote-13) examines the characteristics of those who have volunteered during the Covid-19 pandemic in comparison with those who were volunteers in “ordinary times” before the pandemic began. The findings suggest that:

* Older adults, those with higher educational qualifications and people with more social support were more likely to volunteer more frequently during the pandemic than previously
* Many of the predictors of Covid-19 volunteering were similar to those of non-Covid-19 volunteering (e.g. female, living with children, living in remote/rural areas, higher household income, higher educational qualifications, and personality traits including agreeableness and extraversion)
* The personality trait of “openness” (people who are creative and open to new ideas) was more closely linked to volunteering during Covid-19 than in normal times. The researchers suggest this may be related to people scoring highly for openness being more inclined to volunteer in a challenging project such as the Covid-19 response than to undertake more traditional volunteering roles
* Those with the “neuroticism” personality trait have been less likely to volunteer during the pandemic, possibly because of greater fears about contracting/passing on the virus
* Older people were found to be more likely to have volunteered and/or increased their volunteering in response to Covid-19, although they were more likely to participate in more informal neighbourhood volunteering than formal volunteering . This contradicts against the general assumption that older people would reduce their volunteering as a result of a greater need to shield/self-isolate

These early findings suggest that Covid-19 has increased the likelihood of volunteering among certain groups of people (e.g. those with high openness), findings which potentially hold clues to retaining the new volunteer force that emerged as a result of the pandemic

# Impact of Covid-19 on Volunteering

**Key findings:**

Thus far, the impact of Covid-19 has been mixed. Many normal forms of formal volunteering have reduced, with some organisations ceasing operations and others seeing a reduction in volunteer numbers. However, it also appears that some organisations have seen an increase in people looking to volunteer, and others reporting not having the capacity to use the number of volunteers available to them. More information is needed to be able to understand the dynamics of the impact in more detail.

**Short term impact**

* According to data from the TSI Survey,[[14]](#footnote-14) almost half (45%) of organisations surveyed said that they had noticed an increase in the number of people looking to volunteer as a result of the crisis, and 13% of organisations said that they had recruited more volunteers in response to the crisis
* When asked about the impact of Covid-19 on volunteering in the OSCR survey, 37% said that it had had no effect on their number of volunteers. 5% had seen increases in their volunteer numbers, and 29% had seen decreases in volunteer numbers (29% said “don’t know” or “not applicable”).
* Data from the OSCR survey also suggests that many forms of formal volunteering have reduced during the lockdown with:
* 37% of charities saying that volunteers are no longer able to do their volunteer work as a result of lockdown and 32% saying they have reduced or ceased using volunteers
* While 5% of charities have seen an increase in volunteers, 29% have seen a reduction in volunteers. 37% say it has had no effect on their number of volunteers.
* 13% of charities say they do not have the capacity to use the volunteers available to them

# Challenges Faced by Volunteers and Organisations Working with Volunteers

Based on the limited data currently available, in general, organisations appear to be coping relatively well with the management of volunteers through the crisis.

According to the TSI survey[[15]](#footnote-15):

* Only 7% of organisations said that they were struggling to recruit volunteers and only 2% said they were struggling to access advice on how to manage volunteers
* 37% said that they were “doing really well” at supporting their volunteers, with a further 42% saying that they were “coping” with managing their volunteers. Only 6% said they were struggling with managing volunteers (15% said the question was not relevant).
* A report by Glasgow Caledonian University and the Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit (GCU/SPIRU)[[16]](#footnote-16) surveyed community organisations working on the frontline to deliver emergency food to those who needed it in May 2020. This survey highlighted that:
* 96% had enough volunteers for the work
* 84% were NOT concerned about access to PPE for volunteers
* 71% of organisations were NOT concerned about the physical welfare of their volunteers
* 57% were NOT concerned about the mental wellbeing of their volunteers

Taken together, this data tentatively suggests that volunteer numbers have generally been high enough for the work required, and while many organisations appear to feel that their volunteers are well supported, there is clearly room for improvement in supporting their mental and physical wellbeing.

# Challenges and Opportunities for the Volunteering Sector after Lockdown

Based on the current evidence outlined above and what we know about the volunteering population in Scotland, a number of potential challenges include:

**Potential challenges**

* Reduced number of available volunteers due to ongoing concerns about the risks of social interaction for older people, sickness/self-isolation of volunteers
* Ensuring higher volunteering rates among populations where volunteers are most needed (e.g. areas of higher deprivation and areas with higher proportions of vulnerable people)
* Maintaining volunteer levels as the furlough scheme ends – The GCU/SPIRU report suggests that some organisations are expecting an increase in demand when the furlough scheme ends (e.g. more demand for foodbanks) if many furloughed employees are not able to return to their jobs. Added to this, while it is not clear what proportion of active volunteers are furloughed workers who may need to cease volunteering if/when they return to work, GCU/SPIRU and NLGN also highlight this as a potential problem for organisations dependent on furloughed workers
* Coping with volunteer burnout/fatigue – the GCU/SPIRU report highlights that organisations working with volunteers in food insecurity note that the work takes both a mental and physical toll on volunteers, as volunteers are often working long hours in physically demanding roles while coping with the stress of their beneficiaries’ situations as well as the wider stresses brought on by the context of the pandemic
* The NLGN report on mutual aid suggests that some mutual aid groups have struggled with either indifferent or overbearing attitudes from local councils – tensions building up in these relationships may hinder the long-term maintenance of new mutual aid groups

**Potential opportunities**

* There is potentially an opportunity to harness momentum of the Scotland Cares campaign and the spirit of goodwill and mutual support that has developed over the period of the pandemic. In particular, this may be an opportunity to keep providing volunteering opportunities in the longer term for those who may have begun volunteering for the first time, or who are not regular volunteers before the pandemic
* NLGN suggest that one important factor in this is adjusting government policy to ensure that younger workers who have shown an enthusiasm for volunteering can continue to do so as they return to work, e.g. through more flexible working that allows them more volunteering opportunities
* UCL research into the characteristics of those who have taken up volunteering during the pandemic potentially provides an opportunity to specifically tailor efforts to retain new volunteers
* With expectations of raised unemployment in the coming months, there may be an opportunity to encourage short-term volunteering among those who find themselves un- or underemployed. If volunteering opportunities can be created that give individuals meaningful opportunities to develop skills and take part in training that might help them in the job market, this could benefit both individual job-seekers and their local communities

1. <https://www.volunteerscotland.net/for-organisations/research-and-evaluation/publications/covid-19-research/impact-of-covid-19-on-volunteering-participation-in-scotland/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.gov.scot/news/number-of-volunteer-sign-ups-passes-75-000/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3.  [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4.  [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5.  [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6.  [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.volunteerscotland.net/for-organisations/research-and-evaluation/publications/covid-19-research/impact-of-covid-19-on-volunteering-participation-in-scotland/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8.  [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://www.volunteerscotland.net/for-organisations/research-and-evaluation/publications/covid-19-research/impact-of-covid-19-on-volunteering-participation-in-scotland/> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <http://www.nlgn.org.uk/public/wp-content/uploads/Communities-Vs-Corona-Virus-The-Rise-of-Mutual-Aid.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/public-attitudes-coronavirus-april-summary/> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/public-attitudes-coronavirus-summary/pages/9/> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/er8xd/> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. <http://www.gcvs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/TSI-Covid-Survey.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. <http://www.gcvs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/TSI-Covid-Survey.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. <https://povertyinequality.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Food-insecurity-SPIRU-final-report-June.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)