

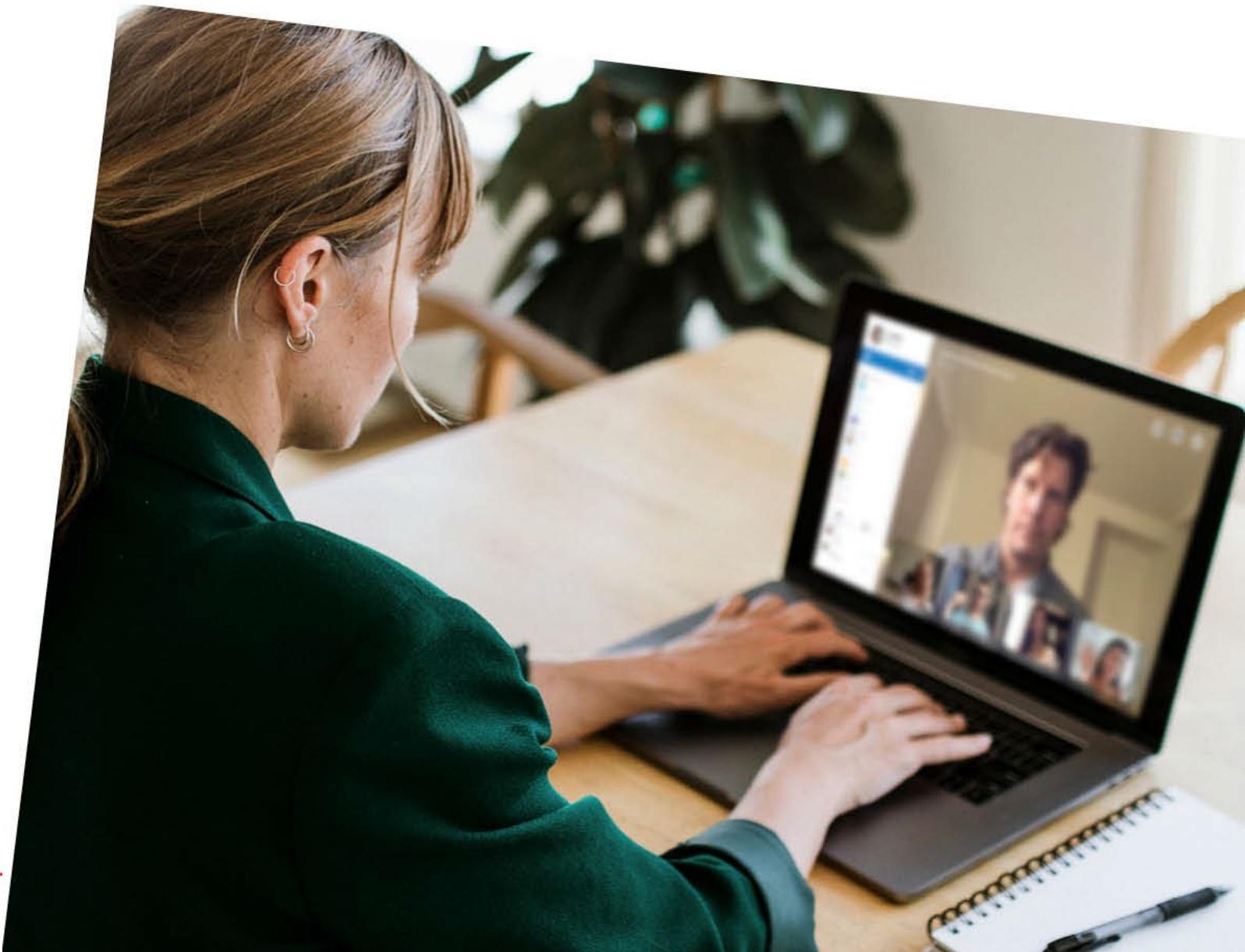
Section 4

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# During Covid-19

## The Volunteer Involving Organisations' Response

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## **Contents**

Key findings.....	3
4.1 Business impacts of COVID-19 on VIOs in Scotland .....	4
4.2 Impacts of COVID-19 on volunteer engagement by VIOs.....	7
4.3 Organisational challenges facing VIOs in the deployment of volunteers .....	14
4.4 VIOs’ responses to the challenges .....	16
4.5 Understanding societal needs during COVID-19 .....	22
4.6 Volunteering tasks undertaken by VIOs to meet societal challenges.....	25
4.7 VIOs’ ability to meet service user needs .....	27

## **Key findings**

**Business impacts of COVID-19 on VIOs** – projects/programmes for 81% of VIOs were adversely impacted over the period March 2020 – May 2021: either reduced in scale, paused temporarily or ceased permanently.<sup>3</sup> VIOs were also seriously constrained financially with lost income from fundraising, trading and other sources.<sup>1</sup>

**Impacts on volunteer engagement** – these business impacts combined with COVID-19 restrictions such as social distancing and shielding, resulted in a major contraction in the number of formal volunteers during the first lockdown and, to a lesser extent, the second lockdown. Over the period March 2020 – May 2021, 58% of VIOs reported a decrease in their number of volunteers, 27% an increase, and 15% reported no change.<sup>3</sup>

**Other organisational challenges** – VIOs also identified a series of other problems in the involvement of volunteers, the challenges being rated as either 'major' or 'some':<sup>3</sup>

- volunteers' lack of digital skills – 58% of VIOs
- challenge of making volunteering inclusive – 46%
- volunteers' fatigue/burnout and other wellbeing issues – 47%
- reduction in volunteers due to home schooling /caring responsibilities – 47%
- lack of staff support and equipment – 44%

**VIOs' response to these challenges** – in addition to curtailing volunteer services and making them COVID-safe, the most significant change was the adaptation of volunteer services and, specifically, the use of phone/digital platforms, with 56% of VIOs moving some or all of their activities online.<sup>3</sup>

However, the switch to digital was no universal panacea due to the lack of volunteers' digital skills; the exclusion of beneficiary groups such as older adults, disabled people and those excluded due to cost/lack of equipment; and that many services are not suited to online delivery. Face-to-face engagement is critical for many services.

**Understanding and meeting societal needs during COVID-19** - mental health (86% of TSOs) and loneliness (83% of TSOs) were the biggest immediate concerns identified by third sector organisations (TSOs) during the first lockdown.<sup>4</sup> COVID-19 has exacerbated these challenges, which were already major issues pre-pandemic. The second main category of society needs identified by TSOs related to financial hardship, unemployment, and poverty.

**VIOs' ability to meet their beneficiaries' needs** – in May 2021 62% of VIOs were able to meet 'all' or 'most' requests for support. However, a further 23% of VIOs were able to meet some requests for support, but significant needs were not being met; while 9% of VIOs were being faced with requests for support which were much higher than their response capacity, and many requests were not being met.<sup>3</sup>

This section of the report examines the impact of COVID-19 on VIOs and their response. The research evidence covers the 15-month period from the outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020 to May 2021. There is a rich evidence base to draw upon over this period including Volunteer Scotland's early research with Ipsos MORI during the first lockdown, the TSI Scotland Network's survey in June 2020, OSCR's charity surveys in May and November 2020, and the Scottish Government's survey in April – June 2021 – see the references for these evidence sources at the end of the section.

All of these sources focus on formal volunteering with the following caveat: the datasets for the TSI Scotland Network survey and the SG survey of VIOs are likely to have included a small proportion of mutual aid groups in their samples. However, the proportions will be so small that the aggregated data provides a robust interpretation of formal volunteering across Scotland.

The focus of this section is purposely on formal volunteering, excluding mutual aid and informal volunteering: see [Section 3](#) for the analysis of the mutual aid and informal volunteering response.

The section is structured under seven sub-sections:

- Section 4.1 – The business impacts of COVID-19 on VIOs including their business operations, financial impacts and service delivery.
- Section 4.2 – The effect these business impacts have had on formal volunteering and the number of volunteers engaged
- Section 4.3 – The organisational challenges facing VIOs in the involvement of volunteers
- Section 4.4 – VIOs' response to these organisational challenges
- Section 4.5 – Understanding societal needs during COVID-19
- Section 4.6 – Volunteering tasks undertaken by VIOs to meet these needs
- Section 4.7 – VIOs' ability to meet their beneficiaries' needs.

## **4.1 Business impacts of COVID-19 on VIOs in Scotland**

### **4.1.1 Operational impact of COVID-19 on VIOs**

The imposition of the first lockdown on 24 March 2020 resulted in a stay-at-home order, face-to-face services stopping, the furloughing of staff, shielding of vulnerable groups and charity retail operations being paused, all of which severely impacted on VIOs' business operations. OSCR's surveys in May and November 2020 provide hard-hitting evidence on how Scotland's charities were impacted, see Table 4.1.1.<sup>1</sup> Their survey data also provides a good litmus test for how other non-charitable VIOs involving volunteers were likely to have been affected in the third, public and private sectors.

The evidence shows that in the first lockdown over three-quarters of charities had to postpone or cancel planned work, with over a third having to suspend their operations altogether. This evidence is corroborated by the TSI Scotland Network survey which showed that 30% of third sector organisations had stopped ‘meaningful delivery’ by June 2020<sup>2</sup>

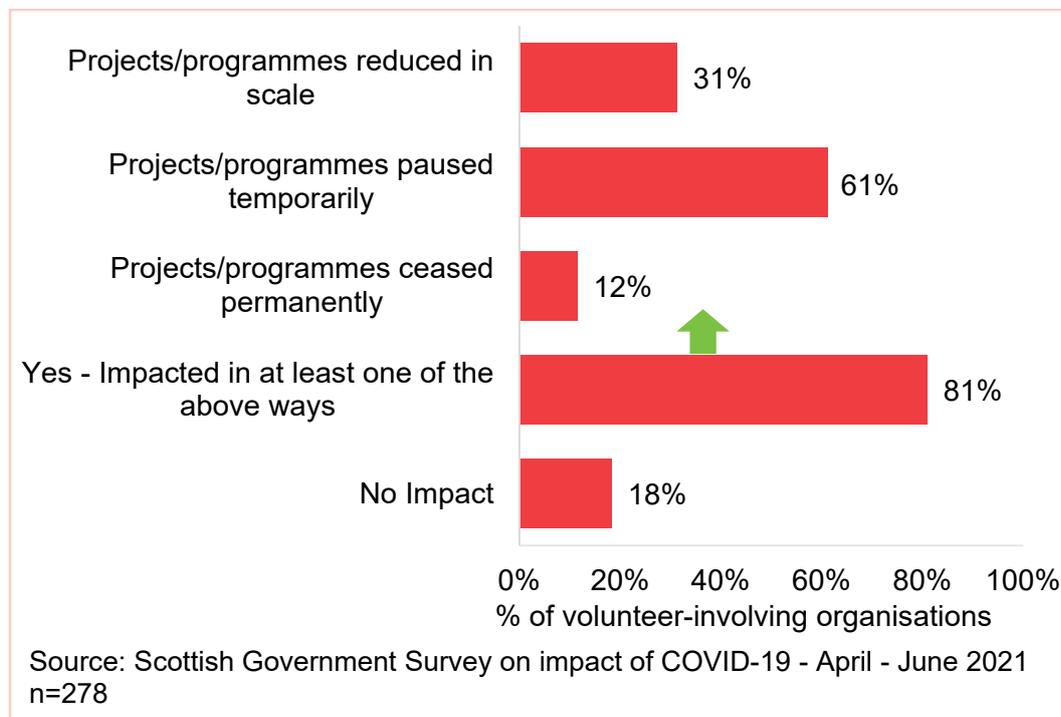
**Table 4.1.1 – Impact of COVID-19 and its restrictions on Scottish charities’ operations**

Impacts on business operations	May 2020 (n=4,827)	Nov 2020 (n=2,524)	Change: May to Nov
Planned work / events postponed or cancelled	78%	66%	-14%
Disruption of support or services to beneficiaries	42%	33%	-9%
All charity operations suspended	39%	18%	-21%

Source: OSCR’s surveys May & Nov 2020 – Impact of COVID-19 on Scotland’s charities

Furthermore, although there was a measurable improvement between May and November 2020, a very significant proportion of charities were still being adversely affected, despite the fact that restrictions at this time were much reduced and Government’s support funding was starting to come onstream. The seriousness of COVID-19’s impact on business operations was further evidenced by the Scottish Government survey, which showed that for 81% of VIOs their projects/programmes were adversely impacted over the period March 2020 – May 2021: either reduced in scale, paused temporarily or ceased permanently: see Figure 4.1.1.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 4.1.1– Impact of COVID-19 on VIOs projects or programmes in Scotland (March 2020 – May 2021)**



Research on the Third Sector Interfaces by Evaluation Support Scotland also identified the adverse impacts of COVID-19 on business sustainability. While some TSOs (Third Sector Organisations) kept going and adapted their services, others had to close part or all their services.”<sup>4</sup>

Finally, the Third Sector Tracker (June – August 2021) provided further corroborating evidence on the adverse impact of COVID-19 on business operations, with 73% of third sector organisations’ surveyed being unable to fully deliver their planned work and services since March 2020.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4.1.2 Financial impact of COVID-19 on VIOs

Directly linked to the impact of COVID-19 on VIOs’ business operations is the impact on their finances. Table 4.1.2 shows that just over a half of charities had lost income from fundraising, but that this had actually deteriorated between May and November 2020, from 51% of charities adversely affected to 56%. There were also adverse financial impacts from lost trading/other income and short-term risks to charity reserves.<sup>1</sup>

**Table 4.1.2 - Impact of COVID-19 on Scottish charities’ finances**

Impact on finance	May 2020 (n=4,827)	Nov 2020 (n=2,524)	Change: May to Nov
Lost income from fundraising	51%	56%	5%
Lost income from trading and other sources	42%	38%	-4%
Short-term risk to charity reserves	30%	23%	-7%

Source: OSCR’s surveys May & Nov 2020 – Impact of COVID-19 on Scotland’s charities

Again, the TSI network survey findings mirror those of OSCR for the third sector as a whole.<sup>2</sup> As at June 2020:

- Two-thirds of organisations thought they were likely to experience a deteriorating financial position (68%)
- For 36% of organisations this would give them challenges
- Only 3% thought they were likely to experience an improving financial position.

Clearly, if VIOs have to curtail their operations or cease them altogether then this is likely to have a significant adverse impact on their finances; but vice-versa, reduced income can compromise VIOs’ ability to finance their ongoing business operations – a vicious circle.

Furthermore, these impacts were not considered short-term. In November 2020, 62% of charities considered there to be at least ‘some’ threat to their financial viability over the next 12 months, with 9% assessing this threat to be ‘critical’.<sup>1</sup>

Also, the Third Sector Tracker (1<sup>st</sup> wave June-August 2021) revealed that nearly half of third sector organisations (48%) had experienced a decrease in turnover compared to pre-pandemic levels.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, 32% considered fundraising to be one of the biggest challenges they’ve faced since March 2020.

Finally, as discussed in [Section 6](#), the Scottish Government survey identified 'funding' as the top priority for VIOs in helping to support volunteering – both at the time of the survey (May 2021) and during the longer-term recovery period over the next two years.<sup>3</sup>

## **4.2 Impacts of COVID-19 on volunteer engagement by VIOs**

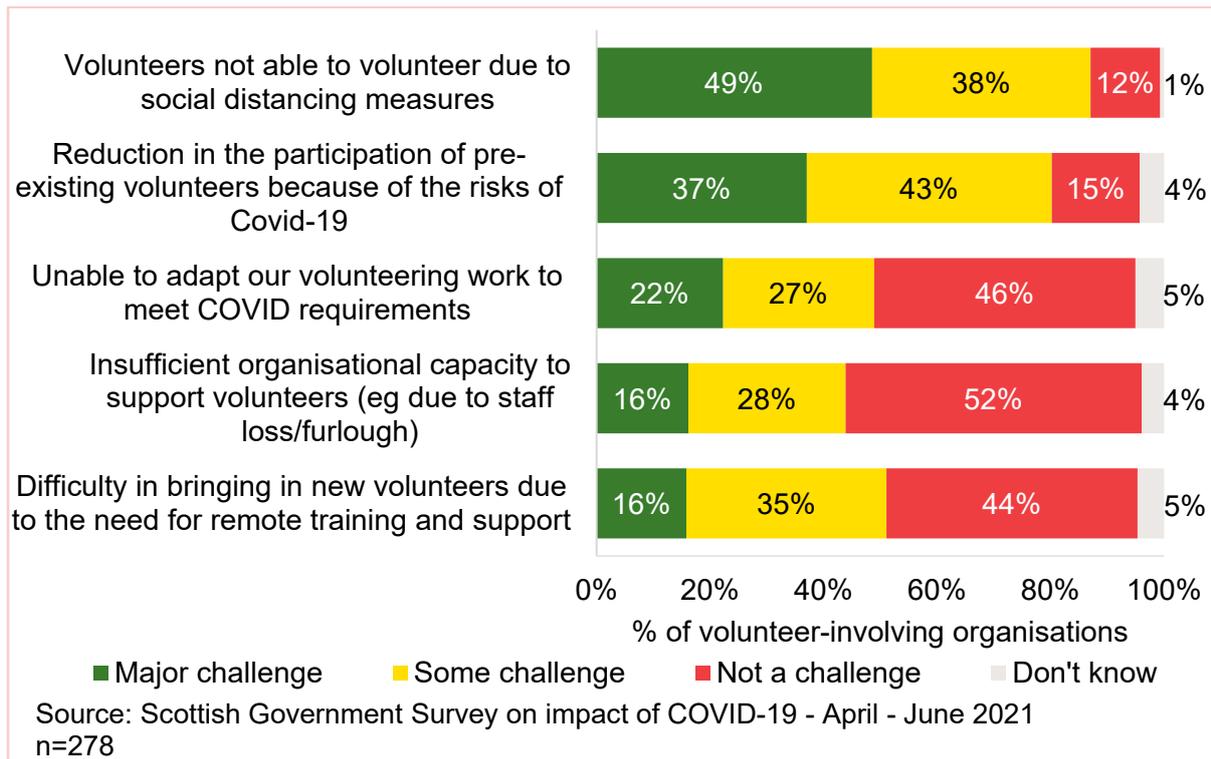
### **4.2.1 Factors impacting volunteer engagement**

COVID-19 has had a major impact on the retention, engagement and deployment of volunteers by VIOs. This is attributable to two main factors:

- The adverse impacts of the pandemic on business operations and financial viability, with organisations having to postpone or cancel services and, in some instances, having to cease operations altogether – see discussion in section 4.1.
- There is also the linked factor of COVID-19 restrictions on the deployment of volunteers, including the adverse impacts of social distancing, furloughing of staff (for example, salaried volunteer coordinators) and those who had to shield.

According to the Scottish Government survey in May 2021, the two biggest organisational challenges faced by VIOs in their deployment of volunteers during COVID-19 were social distancing and COVID-19 health risks – see Figure 4.2.1.<sup>3</sup> Eighty-seven percent of VIOs thought that social distancing represented a 'major' or 'some' challenge in their deployment of volunteers; and 80% thought the risks of COVID-19 presented a 'major' or 'some' challenge. Adapting volunteering to meet COVID requirements, lack of organisational capacity and problems of onboarding new volunteers were also challenges.

**Figure 4.2.1 - Impact of COVID-19 on VIOs' deployment of volunteers**



This evidence was corroborated by OSCR’s research in May and November 2020, which showed that approximately a third of Scotland’s charities either ceased the involvement of volunteers altogether or reduced their involvement of volunteers.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, there was no substantial change between May and November 2020.

**Table 4.2.1 Impact of COVID-19 on Scottish charities involvement of volunteers**

Volunteer utilisation impacts	May 2020 (% of charities)	Nov 2020 (% of charities)
‘Volunteers are unable to work’	37%	34%
Charities have ‘reduced or ceased use of volunteers.’	32%	32%

Source: OSCR’s surveys May & Nov 2020 – Impact of COVID-19 on Scotland’s charities

Qualitative evidence from the Scottish Government survey illustrates the practical challenges VIOs have faced in the engagement and deployment of volunteers:<sup>3</sup>

### Practical challenges in the deployment of volunteers

“We had difficulty recruiting new volunteers as we did not have the capacity to adapt our training to online. We want to physically meet new volunteers who will have a role with vulnerable children and young people.”

“Many of our volunteers were older men and women and a significant number of them have decided not to return to their volunteering roles. We have been able to recruit a few new volunteers, but we are still not at full capacity. We are planning to run a recruitment campaign over the next few months.”

“We had a huge pool of volunteers that we could not use due to these restrictions and concerns about insurance, and the burden fell heavily on our small staff team to try and help as many families as we could.”

“As we organised actual face to face events, the pandemic has meant that we simply were not able to hold them. We have been encouraging, educating, informing, and inspiring volunteers online to get active individually.”

“Our main difficulty was that volunteers were advised not to car share and therefore most of our volunteer drivers were not happy to volunteer. We provided PPE and advice on precautions to be taken which encouraged some of our volunteers to be deployed for essential journeys.”

#### 4.2.2 Impact of COVID-19 on volunteer numbers

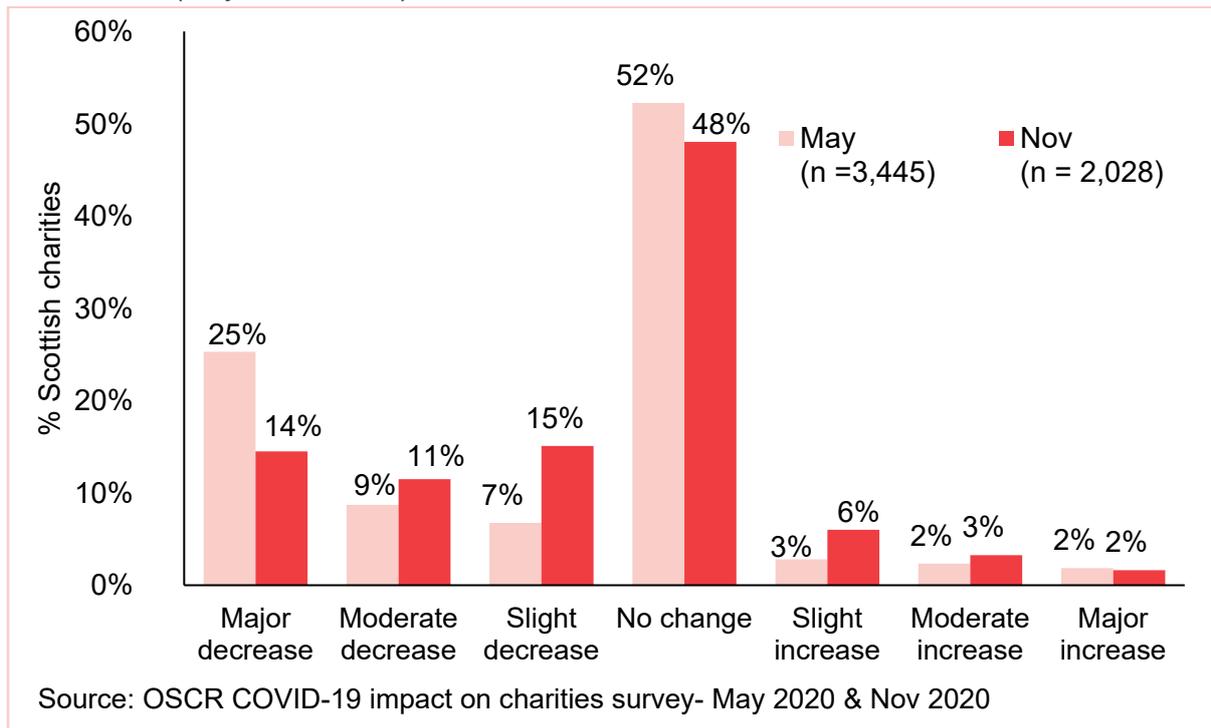
Given the fact that volunteer deployment was so significantly constrained during COVID-19, it is unsurprising that a much higher proportion of VIOs reduced their volunteer numbers compared to those which increased their numbers: see Figure 4.2.2. OSCR's charities' surveys on the impact of COVID-19 show that:

- In May 2020 only 7% of charities had increased volunteer numbers compared to pre-pandemic levels, in contrast to the 41% which had decreased volunteer numbers (a net decrease figure of 34%)
- In Nov 2020 only 11% of charities had increased volunteer numbers compared to the pre-pandemic levels, in contrast to the 40% which had decreased volunteer numbers (a net decrease figure of 29%).<sup>1</sup>

This data shows a modest improvement in the proportion of charities increasing vs. decreasing their volunteer numbers between May and November 2020 of 5%. However, a more detailed analysis of the data in Figure 4.2.2 reveals a more significant improvement than the headline figures suggest:

- The proportion of charities experiencing a 'major decrease' in volunteer numbers reduced from 25% in May 2020 to 14% in Nov 2020, an 11% improvement.
- In contrast those experiencing a 'slight/moderate' decrease in volunteer numbers increased from 16% in May 2020 to 26% in Nov 2020, a 10% deterioration.

**Figure 4.2.2 – Impact of COVID-19 on the number of volunteers engaged by charities in Scotland (May & Nov 2020)**



From this data a working hypothesis is that the easing of lockdown in Scotland led to a gradual increase in formal volunteer numbers engaged in the charity sector during this period.

The Scottish Government survey undertaken in April – June 2021 provides additional evidence to help validate this hypothesis as it examined the extent to which the overall number of volunteers that VIOs worked with changed over the course of the pandemic to May 2021. Their survey asked VIOs to estimate the number of volunteers they engaged with at three points in time: before COVID-19 (April 2019-March 2020); during the first lockdown (Mar-Jun 2020); and at the time of the survey in May 2021. Table 4.2.2 shows the total number of volunteers engaged during these three periods along with the percentage movement in the number of volunteers between these periods.

To contextualise this data, in 2018 1.2 million adults formally volunteered in Scotland.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the 137,236 volunteers engaged by the 267 VIOs pre-COVID-19 accounted for 12% of total formal volunteers in Scotland. This represents a very significant proportion, especially when one considers that the 267 VIOs represent less than 1% of the c. 40,000 voluntary organisations in Scotland’s third sector.<sup>8</sup> However, as expected in a survey of this nature there has been a proportionately higher response from larger VIOs, as a consequence of which the ‘voice’ of the smaller VIOs, the majority of which have no paid staff, will be under-represented.

**Table 4.2.2 Impact of COVID-19 on total volunteer numbers (267 VIO respondents) <sup>3</sup>**

	Before COVID-19 (April 2019-March 2020)	During 1st lockdown (Mar-Jun 2020)	At time of survey (May 2021)	Overall change
<b>Number of volunteers*</b>	137,236	97,199	118,572	
<b>Change in volunteer numbers</b>		-40,037	+ 21,373	-18,664
<b>% Change in volunteer numbers</b>		-29%	+ 22%	-14%

\* Note: any VIO that answered don't know in any of the three time periods was excluded from the data in Table 4.2.2 to ensure the analysis of VIO data was consistent over all time periods. This only involved 11 out of the 278 VIO respondents being excluded.

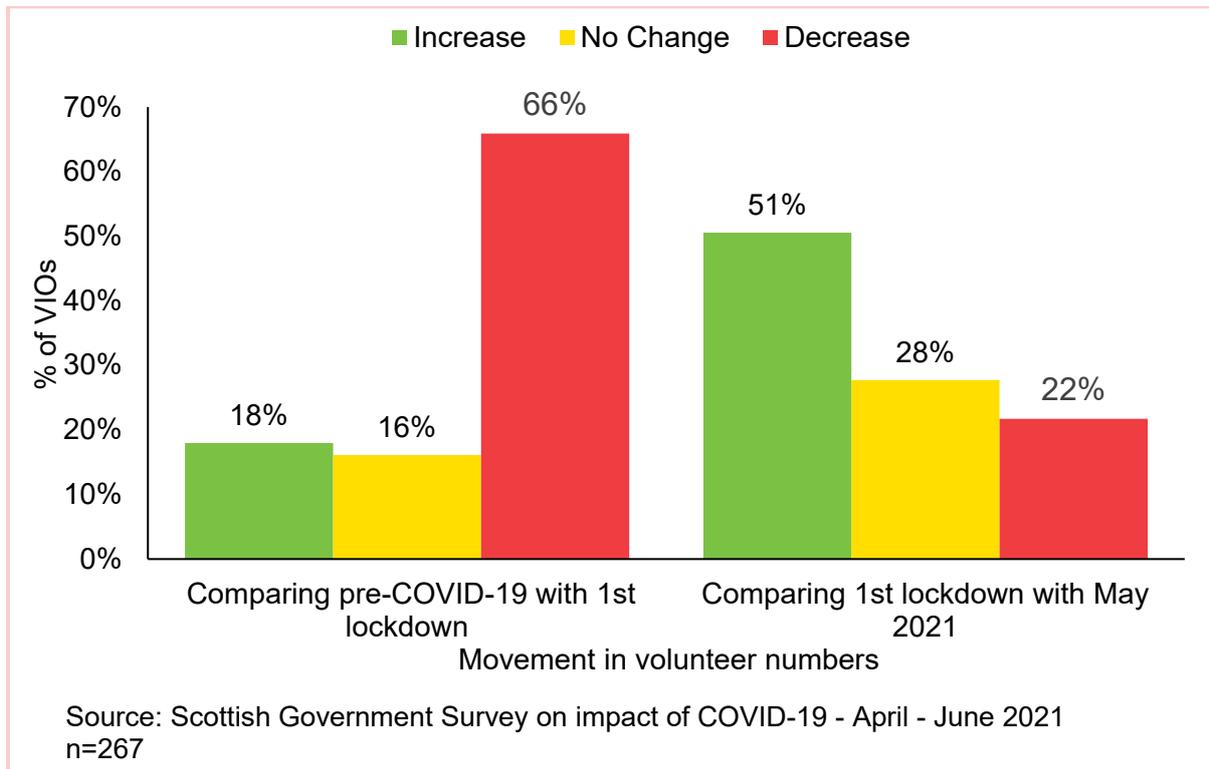
Source: Scottish Government Survey on impact of COVID-19 - May 2021 (n=267)

Table 4.2.2 shows that during the first lockdown formal volunteer numbers decreased by 29% for the sample of VIOs surveyed. However, between the first lockdown and May 2021 formal volunteer numbers started to recover and increased by 22%. However, this was still 14% lower than pre COVID-19 volunteer numbers.

The Scottish Government survey provides further corroborating evidence on the movement in volunteer numbers during the pandemic through its analysis of the proportion of VIOs increasing versus decreasing their volunteer numbers: see Figure 4.2.3.<sup>3</sup> This shows the percentage change in the number of VIOs' increasing vs. decreasing their number of volunteers for two time periods: from before COVID-19 to the first lockdown; and from the first lockdown to May 2021. The key findings are:

- Only 18% of VIOs increased volunteer numbers from before COVID-19 to during the first lockdown, while two thirds (66%) decreased volunteer numbers during the same period.
- Between the first lockdown and May 2021, over half (51%) of VIOs increased volunteer numbers, while only 22% decreased volunteer numbers.

**Figure 4.2.2 Proportion of VIOs increasing vs. decreasing volunteer numbers during COVID-19**

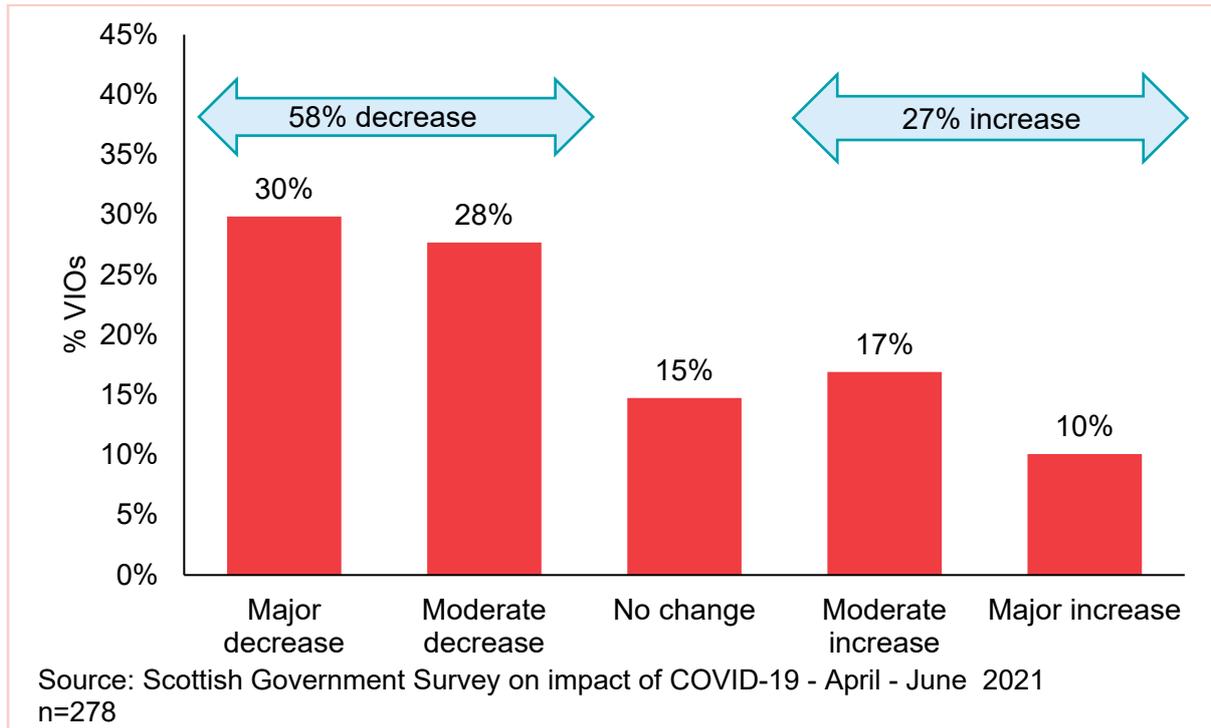


The Scottish Government survey also asked VIOs to provide an overall assessment of the extent of change in overall volunteer numbers from before COVID-19 to May 2021. See Figure 4.2.4.<sup>3</sup> Fifty-eight percent of organisations reported a decrease in the overall number of volunteers they work with, while 27% reported an increase and 15% reported no change.

The working hypothesis from the OSCR and Scottish Government data is that the reintroduction of lockdown in Scotland led to a second period of contraction in formal volunteering. By May 2021 there had been a gradual resumption of formal volunteering, but below the pre-pandemic levels. However, it is quite likely that the COVID-19 vaccine programme has accelerated the return to higher levels of volunteering in the period January to May 2021. Additional VIO survey data presented in section 4.4 provides further supporting evidence of these trends.

This evidence on fluctuating volunteering engagement during the pandemic is supported by MVA Working Paper 4: “Volunteering in the Pandemic - Evidence from Two UK Volunteer Matching Services” that found that all four nations had large peaks in formal volunteering registrations immediately following the first and second lockdowns.<sup>5</sup> However, during the first lockdown most volunteers that registered did not go on to record formal volunteering activity. In contrast, volunteers were more likely to become active, and were active faster, in the second lockdown than the first.

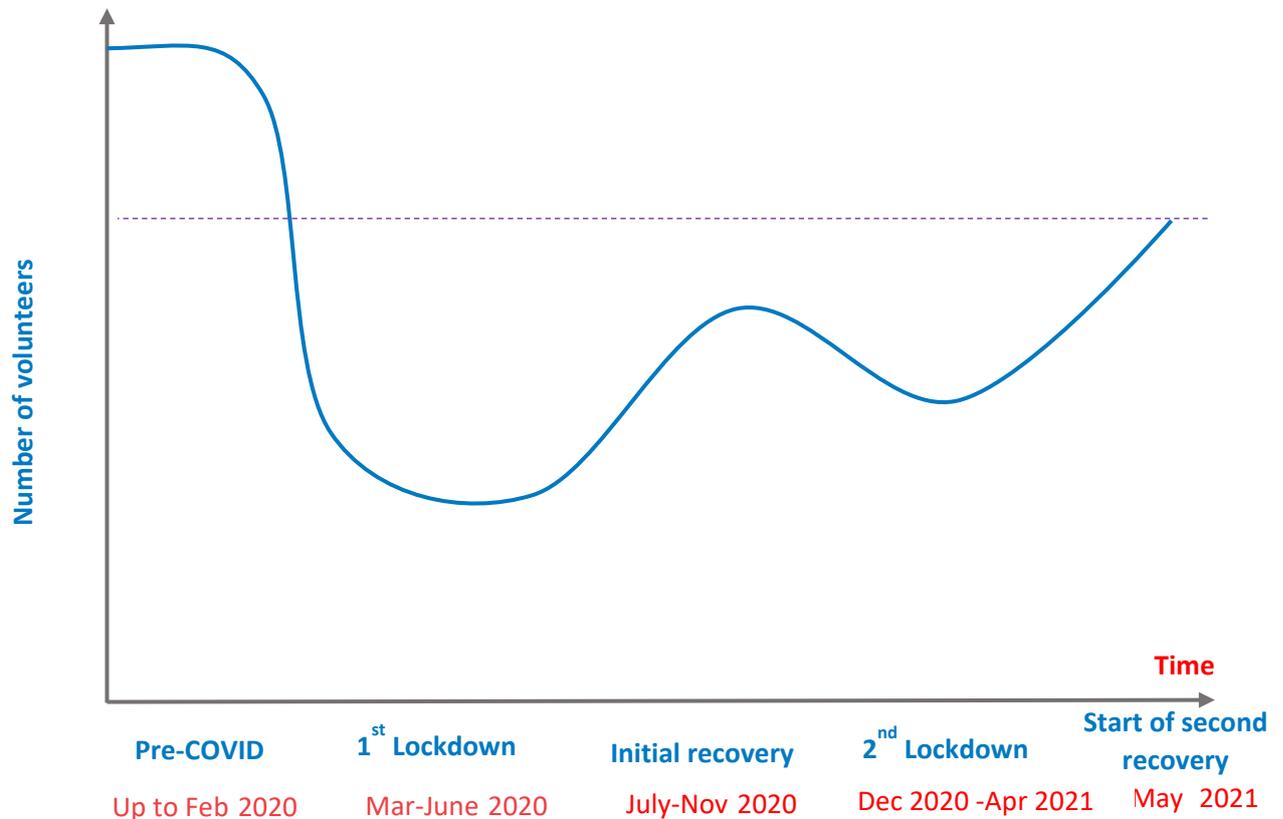
**Figure 4.2.4 Extent of change in overall number of volunteers during COVID-19 (March 2020 - May 2021)**



**In summary**, all of the evidence sources reviewed in section 4.2 support a trend in formal volunteer numbers similar to that shown below in figure 4.2.5:

- Significant decrease in formal volunteer numbers in the first lockdown .
- Gradual increase in volunteer numbers between the first and second lockdowns.
- Decrease in volunteer numbers in the second lockdown, but not as much as the first lockdown.
- Increase in volunteer numbers between the second lockdown and May 2021 but not to pre COVID-19 numbers.

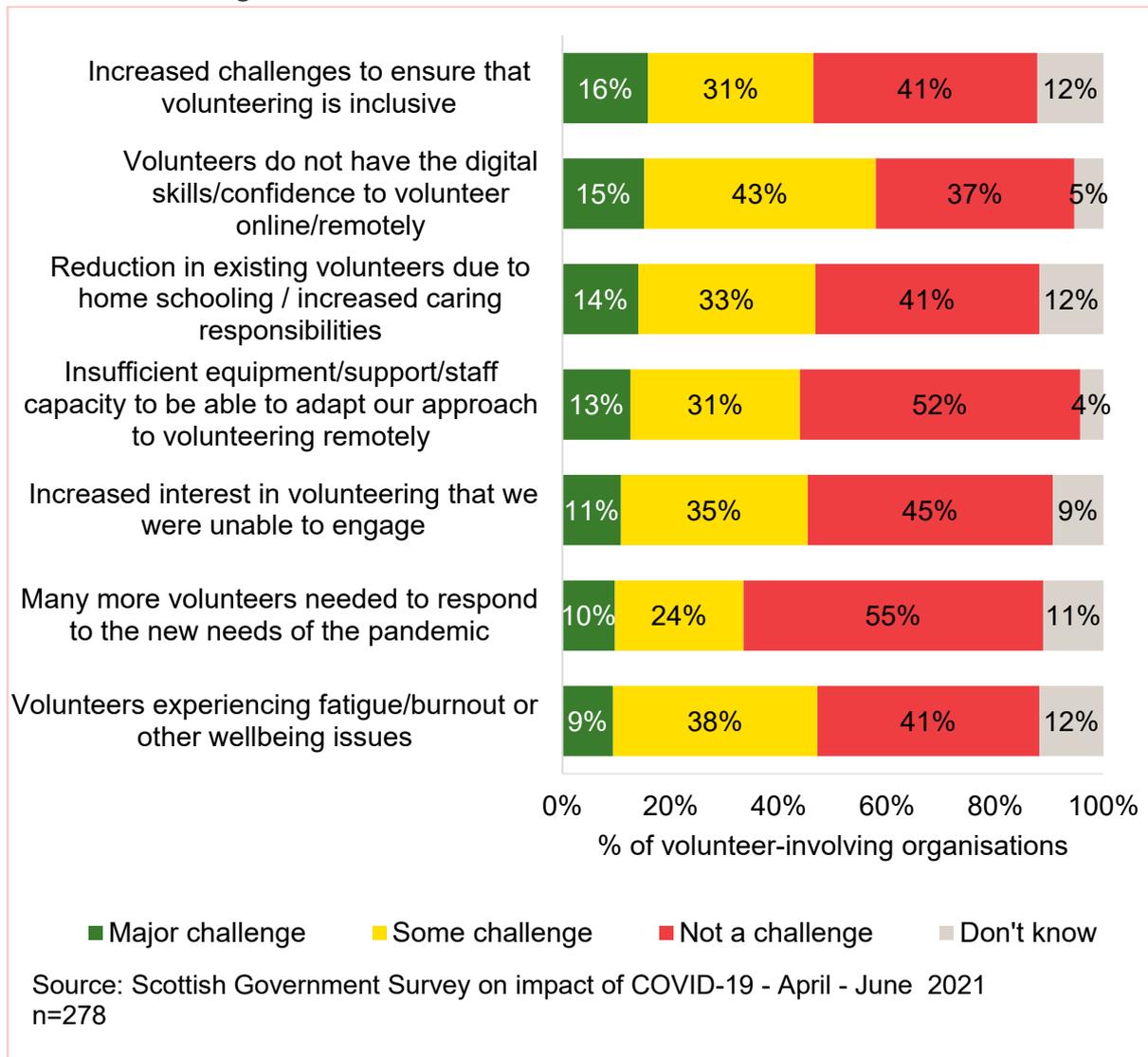
**Figure 4.2.5 Illustrative trend in formal volunteer numbers in Scotland:**  
(March 2020 – May 2021)



### 4.3 Organisational challenges facing VIOs in the deployment of volunteers

The Scottish Government survey in May 2021 identified a range of other factors which presented challenges to VIOs in their deployment of volunteers at that time. This included the problems of inclusivity, digital engagement, additional demands on existing volunteers, lack of staff support/equipment and fatigue/burnout of volunteers: see Figure 4.3.1.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 4.3.1 Other organisational challenges faced by VIOs deploying volunteers in Scotland during COVID-19**



In response to an open question on the challenges they are facing VIOs provided detailed feedback on the following themes.

**Volunteers' health and wellbeing** – ensuring the health and wellbeing of volunteers was a major challenge – especially their mental health. The restrictions resulting from COVID-19 made it difficult to be as effective in the engagement and support of volunteers compared to the level of support provided pre-pandemic. Health and wellbeing issues such as fatigue and burnout were perceived by VIOs as particularly problematic for volunteers; and also for those volunteers engaged in distressing and emotionally challenging roles. The consequence of these factors was that volunteers' morale and motivation was seen to sometimes suffer, with knock-on consequences for volunteer turnover.

**Challenges of digital engagement** – although adapting and moving to remote working and digital engagement was a lifeline for many organisations, key challenges were identified with the shift to digital (see a more detailed discussion on digital uptake and its limitations in section 4.4). These included

- *Digital infrastructure and service provision*: “Inequality in access to digital devices and data was a major barrier to volunteering in the pandemic for our volunteers.” – with reference also to this being more acute in rural areas. Also, the problem of affordability and lack of IT equipment amongst volunteers subject to poverty and disadvantage were also cited.
- *Lack of volunteers’ digital skills* – not all volunteers had the skills and confidence to embrace digital communications in new virtual service delivery models. This was perceived to be more problematic for older aged volunteers and some disabled volunteers.
- *Difficulty in supporting volunteers digitally* – the induction, training and support of volunteers online can be more difficult and can take longer, as the trainer is not working alongside volunteers directly.

**Lack of information and consistent communication** – a further problem that several VIOs encountered whilst trying to deploy volunteers was a lack of information and consistent communication regarding COVID-19 regulations and what these meant in practice. VIOs cited difficulties in the interpretation of regulations to the specific circumstances their organisation or sector faced: “One of the biggest challenges was finding rules and guidelines [regarding] COVID that related specifically to community groups and community buildings”.

## 4.4 VIOs’ responses to the challenges

### 4.4.1 The types of VIO responses

A high proportion of Scotland’s charities had to adapt their delivery model to try and mitigate the challenges presented by COVID-19: see Table 4.4.1.<sup>1</sup> The most frequently cited response was the new or increased application of digital technology, with 47% of charities identifying this response in May 2020. The VIO digital response had a major role to play in the delivery of services and engagement with, and support of, volunteers – see the detailed discussion later in this section.

This evidence is supported by the TSI Scotland Network survey findings from June 2020, with 36% of third sector organisations modifying their delivery model (e.g. using digital/ telephone) and 16% of organisations completely changing their delivery model to support their community and service users.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 4.4.1 Adaptation of services by charities in Scotland**

Adaptation of services by charities in Scotland			
May 2020 - % of charities		Nov 2020 - % of charities	
Provided support remotely over the phone or digital	47%	Adapted current services to respond to restrictions	43%
Adapted current services to meet needs	28%	Adapted current services to meet beneficiaries' and/or communities' needs	30%
Changed the support provided to a different type	22%	Changed the support provided to a different type or operating model	20%

**Source:** OSCR's surveys May & Nov 2020 – Impact of COVID-19 on Scotland's charities (Note: the OSCR questions asked in the May and November 2020 surveys varied, so care must be interpreted in comparing time periods. For example, there was no question on the use of phone /digital in November 2020.)

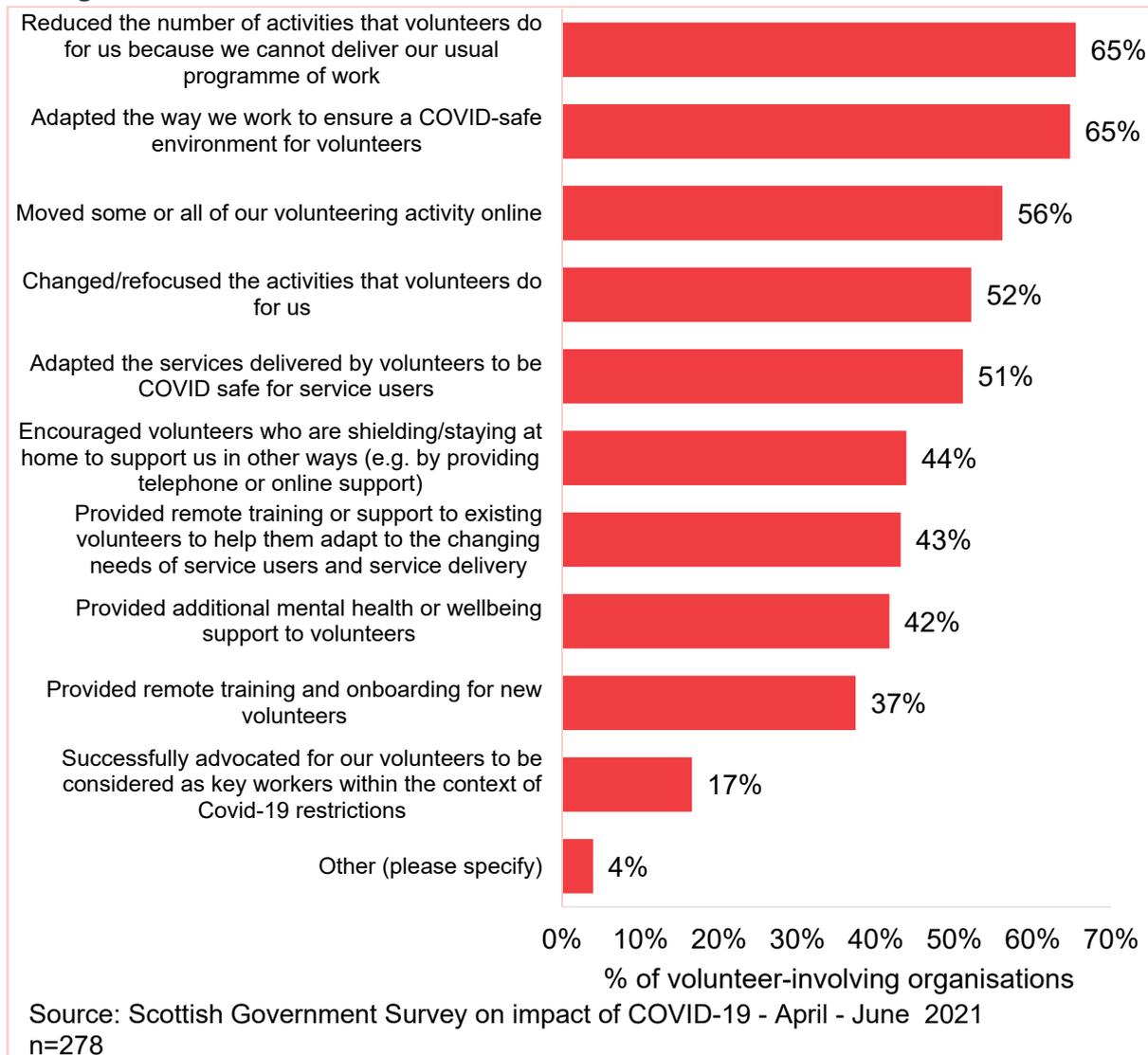
The Scottish Government survey asked a wider range of questions targeted directly at VIOs' response to the challenges of deploying volunteers: see Figure 4.4.1.<sup>3</sup> Over and above the most frequently cited responses of reducing volunteer activities and adaptation of service delivery to ensure COVID-safe compliance, the most frequently cited responses were:

- Moving some or all of volunteering activity online – 56% of VIOs
- Changing or refocusing the activities that volunteers do – 52% of VIOs

VIOs also provided training support to existing volunteers to help them adapt to the new/changed service delivery (43% of VIOs); provided remote training and onboarding support for new volunteers (37% of VIOs); and provided additional mental health and wellbeing support for their volunteers (42% of volunteers).

This evidence illustrates how significant the impact of COVID-19 was on Scotland's VIOs and how wide-ranging and substantive the changes they had to implement were, to try and maintain service delivery. It also highlights how complex the situation was, with changes having to be implemented to meet the needs of both service users and volunteers.

**Figure 4.4.1 VIOs' responses to the challenges of deploying volunteers in Scotland during COVID-19**



The OSCR surveys provide qualitative evidence which illustrates the ways in which VIOs have responded proactively and creatively to the challenges of the pandemic.<sup>6</sup>

### Examples of adaptation by Scotland's charities

“All our members are elderly and many of them were shielded during the lockdown. We have adapted the way we operate to ensure that our members have felt included and less socially isolated. Once it became impossible for our members to meet regularly at the lunch club and social activity sessions because of Covid restrictions we took the club to them instead! We have delivered meals to them all each week, we have delivered shopping for them, developed a newsletter, shared photos, challenges like quizzes, etc We have visited them each week for a (outside and socially distanced/masked) chat to check on their wellbeing. The Committee has worked hard to help members still feel that their club is there for them even though we cannot meet in person at the moment.”

“Our main charity activity is the hire of the town hall for events, but we also run three community clubs each week. At the start of lockdown we ran a very small meals on wheels service. We have now run shopping and prescriptions services, meals on wheels, befriending, gift parcels to those in isolation and food parcels in a 40 mile radius.”

“Connectivity and togetherness has been our key purpose. We started a Befrienders scheme phoning people at home and took our other services online. We've populated our Facebook page every day since March to inform, to entertain and to promote health and wellbeing. We took our youngsters' gaming club online. One of our volunteers started 3D production of face shields and we distribute them to third sector and charities for free. We also deliver digital support to other organisations with whom we recently made connections. Looking to January 2021, we are planning to reignite an online version of some of the clubs and classes we provided in real time. We keep in touch with our volunteers via Whereby. Our board meet on Zoom once every two weeks instead of once a month. These have been very challenging times for us all - collectively we can help and support each other - sharing challenges, but also laughing together.” (Extract from full response)

#### 4.4.2 The digital response by VIOs

**Widespread uptake of the digital response.** The May 2020 OSCR survey included a specific response category: 'providing support remotely over the phone or digital', which applied to 47% of Scotland's charities (see Table 4.4.1).<sup>1</sup> The November 2020 OSCR survey category of 'adapting current service to respond to restrictions' is more general; however, the survey includes two separate questions on the use of digital services that found:

- Almost half (47%) of charities have improved the use of digital technology among staff and volunteers.
- Over a quarter (28%) of charities have improved the use of digital technology among beneficiaries.

The Third Sector Tracker (1<sup>st</sup> Wave June – August 2021) found that 79% of third sector organisations adapted their operations by providing support remotely.<sup>9</sup>

OSCR's November 2020 analysis of qualitative data for 'Volunteers and Trustees' highlighted that the adaptation of digital service is the single biggest change that COVID-19 has caused in the charity sector.<sup>6</sup> The evidence identified that the digital adaption by many charities fell into two main categories: to ensure the future and survival of charities and as an essential component of supporting the mental health and wellbeing of beneficiaries, staff, trustees, volunteers and the wider public. OSCR's qualitative evidence on the application of digital technology and its limitations is presented below.<sup>6</sup>

**Different ways digital technology has been applied.** The use of digital technology was wide ranging with Zoom, Teams and WhatsApp being most frequently mentioned by Scotland's charities, as well as email, websites, and other social media. The qualitative responses highlight the wide range of ways in which digital technology was utilised.<sup>6</sup>

### The different applications of digital technology – evidence from OSCR

"Our charity deals with face to face teaching of students and hands on training. We have adapted to on-line courses."

"Our charity provides counselling and support services for individuals who suffer from alcohol and/or drugs addictions. It also provides services to those that are alone and isolated. We have had to move to delivering these services in a different way through telephone engagement and on line digital platforms like zoom and Microsoft teams."

"We are better able to use digital technology, both within the charity and with our partners overseas. Our overseas partners have had to become more resilient and independent as we have been unable to visit them in person."

"We are a church and quickly moved to providing online services and reflections which reached a much wider audience and helped connect with people on their own and those needing additional support."

"Working in the field of complex trauma, we continued to provide services remotely, but increased need for IT equipment resulted in higher support costs, and with equipment off-site we have also incurred higher insurance costs, and the majority of funding does not cover these types of items. We have seen a dramatic increase in risk and had to adapt to provide additional support in order to help. We are struggling to recruit new staff during the pandemic, and demand for our services is increasing."

**Limitations of digital technology** – OSCR's evidence also shows that while charities have had a positive experience in the application of digital technology there are areas of the charity sector where the use of digital has brought challenges, whether through a lack of skills and equipment within the charities themselves, the exclusion of certain beneficiaries (e.g. older adults, those digitally excluded due to the costs or disability), and some services being more difficult and less suited to online delivery. The qualitative responses provide additional insights into these important issues.

### **Limitations on the application of digital technology – evidence from OSCR**

“While moving to digital delivery has been effective, we are concerned that this often excludes beneficiaries who are unable to use this through age or disability.”

“Although digital technology is great and has enabled us to continue to operate, it's not the same as face to face meeting and you lose something in meeting virtually.”

“Much of our charity's work involves organising events and activities that have traditionally happened in-person. Obviously the COVID restrictions have forced us to try and move much of this work online. Clearly this works better for some types of activities (a seminar on local history, say) than for others (e.g. a guided walk). Also, the move online means that certain sections of the target audience/beneficiaries might end up being excluded due to lack of IT skills/connectivity.”

“We moved from a face-to-face environment to a digital one in one week. We are still delivering our services remotely (language classes for school-age children) because we still don't have access to classrooms. There are trade-offs, however, and we have lost quite a few pupils. Adaption has to be continuous, trying new online learning tools, being creative.”

“As we run an art class for mainly elderly members we have had to close completely. We run a Facebook class free led by our paid tutor but only a few members can join in.”

“Our charity provides a range of learning opportunities for older people, through monthly talks and smaller special interest group meetings. While it has been possible to move some of these to an online format, a number of people are, from personal circumstances, excluded.”

“We are a charity supporting veterans and their families. As face-to-face contact has been stopped we have had to adapt completely to providing support via phone, email and video links, this has largely been successful but we lose the opportunity to ensure that the full needs of the individual beneficiaries are met.”

“Our library has been closed; we cannot do our Study Club. We have been unable to offer our cooking workshops, although we hope to do this soon. Our digital support for families was not successful and there was low take up. People prefer face to face sessions.”

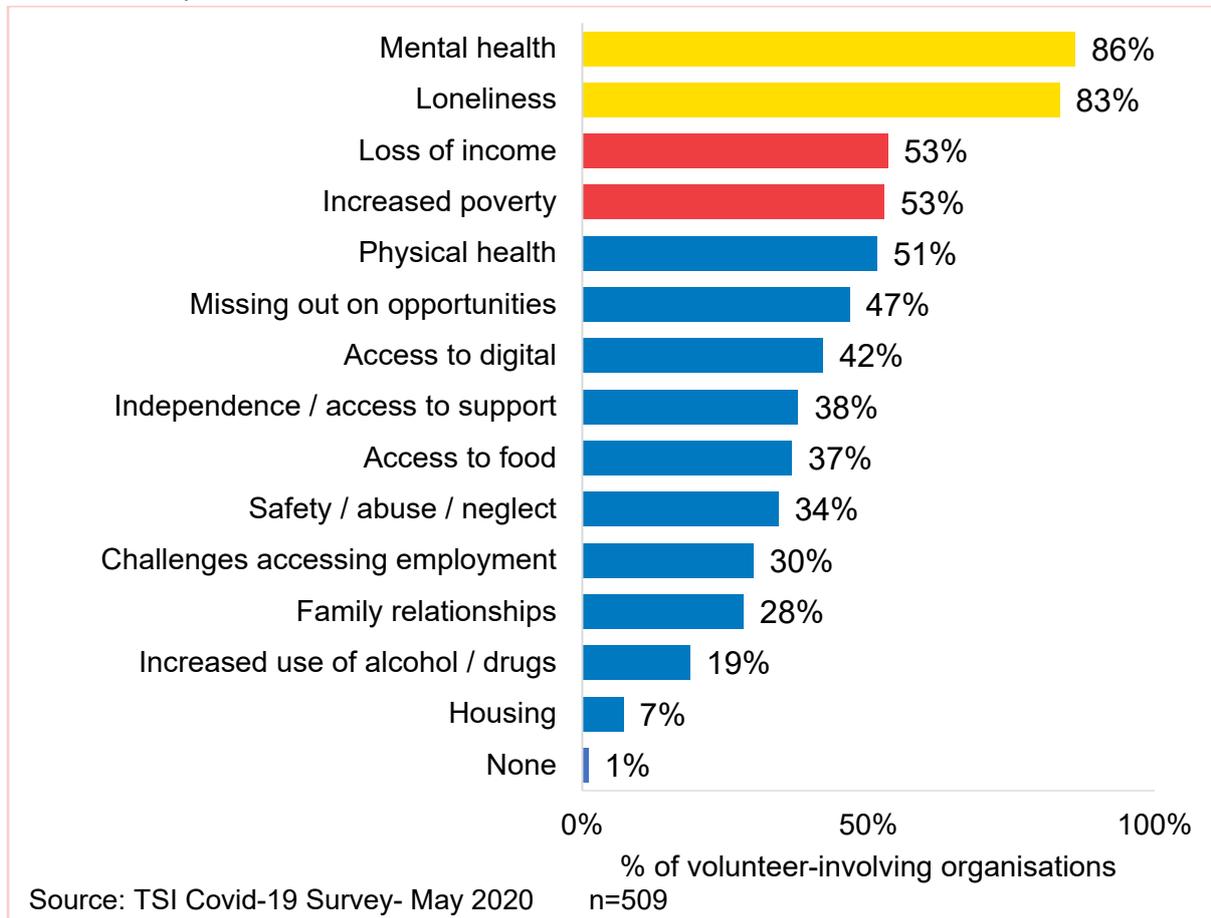
“Needed to adapt to technology to do church services online. Big problem for older folk, and those without the necessary technology.”

## 4.5 Understanding societal needs during COVID-19

This section examines the significant issues facing society during the COVID-19 pandemic, drawing upon evidence from the TSI Network Survey, OSCR Charities survey, and the Scottish Government survey. This facilitates a longitudinal analysis of these issues, identifying those which emerged early in the pandemic and were consistent up to the time of the last survey.

The TSI Scotland Network survey asked third sector organisations what negative effects on their communities they were most concerned about at the time of the TSI survey (June 2020).<sup>2</sup> Mental health (86%) and loneliness (83%) were the biggest immediate concerns during the first lockdown: see Figure 4.5.1. The next most significant negative impacts related to loss of income and increased poverty.

**Figure 4.5.1 Negative effects of COVID-19 on Scotland’s communities (at June 2020, first lockdown)**



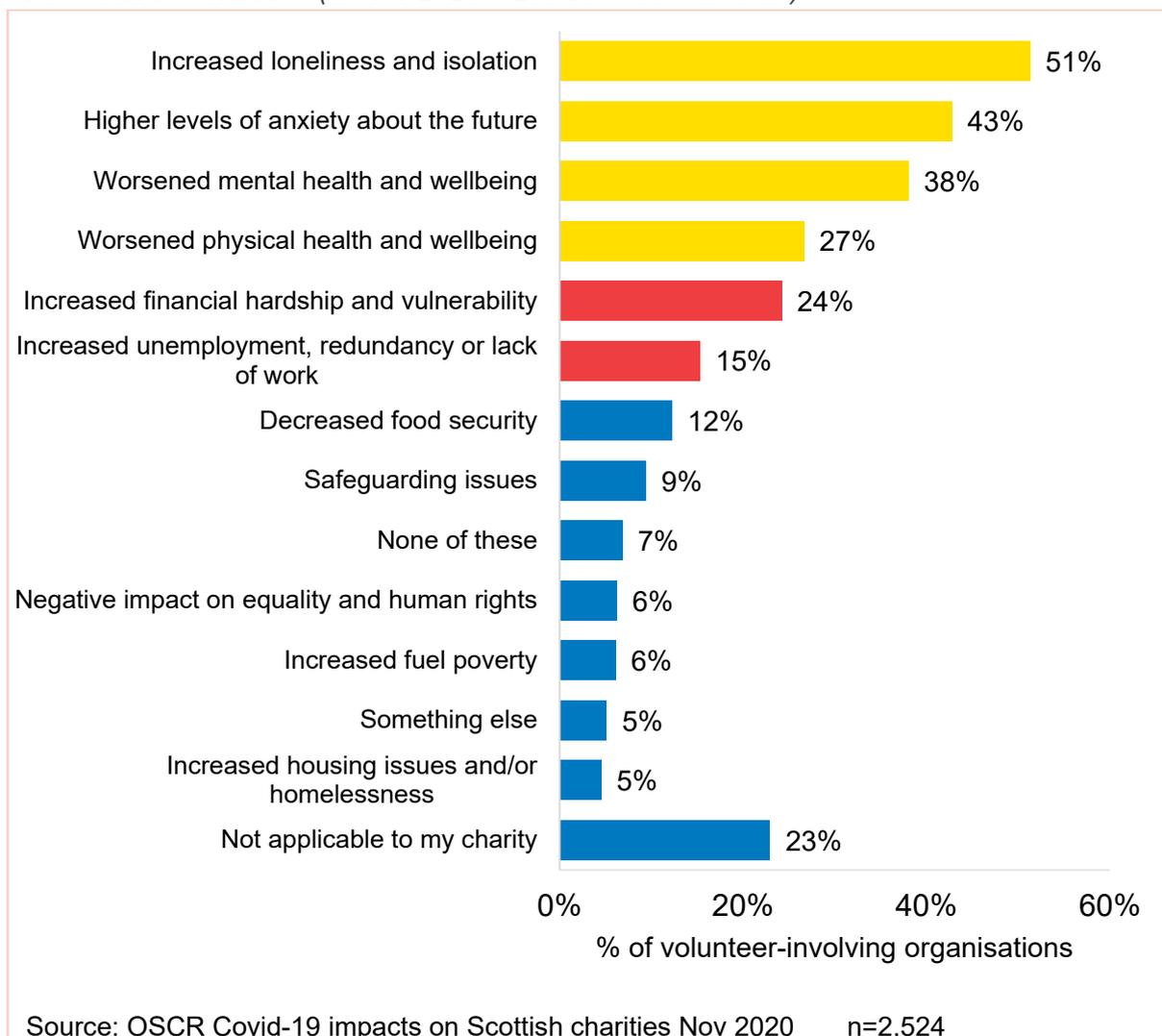
The second OSCR survey included a similar question to the TSI Scotland Network survey on the negative impacts of COVID-19 and restrictions on charities' beneficiaries and services users.<sup>1</sup> As in the TSI survey the main concerns were around social isolation, loneliness, anxiety, and mental health and wellbeing: see Figure 4.5.2. Again, it was financial hardship and loss of employment/income that were the next most prevalent negative impacts.

The Third Sector Tracker (1<sup>st</sup> Wave June – August 2021) reported that the most significant 'emerging societal needs' since March 2020 were:<sup>2</sup>

- Mental health and wellbeing (90% of third sector organisations surveyed)
- Loneliness or isolation (89% of third sector organisations surveyed)
- Financial hardship or vulnerability (74% of third sector organisations surveyed).

These adverse impacts have put additional pressures on the third sector to not only support existing beneficiaries with their pre-pandemic needs, but also in supporting the additional needs of existing and new beneficiaries caused by COVID-19.

**Figure 4.5.2 Negative impacts of COVID-19 on the beneficiaries or service users of Scotland's charities (at Nov 2020 – Local level restrictions)**



The Scottish Government survey also asked VIOs what the emerging societal needs will be over the next 12 months (June 2021 – May 2022).<sup>3</sup> Unsurprisingly, given the long-term nature of these societal challenges, the top two priorities were mental health and wellbeing (84% of VIO respondents) and loneliness and isolation (72% of VIO respondents).

The evidence therefore highlights that these problems have been consistently the highest priorities during the COVID-19 lockdowns and also into the recovery period, and that they are projected to remain the priorities post-recovery.

These conditions represent the next most prevalent needs in society: see Figures 4.5.1 and 4.5.2.<sup>3</sup> The TSI Scotland Network survey also revealed that 53% of third sector organisations during the first lockdown thought that 'loss of income' and 'poverty' were of most concern for their communities.<sup>2</sup> For OSCR's November 2020 survey it was 'increased financial hardship and vulnerability' (24% of charities) and 'increased unemployment, redundancy or lack of work' (15% of charities).<sup>1</sup>

#### 4.5.3 High need groups excluded from volunteering

There was an increased interest in volunteering formally, especially during the first lockdown and furlough period (ref. the c.60,000 Scotland Cares volunteer sign-ups in April/May 2020), combined with a willingness and adaptability of volunteers to undertake different tasks at different points in the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the Scottish Government survey highlights several 'high need' groups that due to the nature of the pandemic were perceived by VIOs to be excluded from volunteering, which exacerbate some of the emerging societal needs.<sup>3</sup> These groups included:

- Older people, especially those having to shield, and feeling vulnerable
- Young people in volunteering placements
- People who volunteer as part of an 'employability journey'
- Those with learning disabilities
- Those with communication challenges or sensory impairments
- People without internet access
- Those recently retired without social networks

#### High need groups excluded from volunteering

(perspective of infrastructure organisations)

"People with a learning disability. People who volunteer with a support worker's support. People who volunteer as part of an employability journey. Young people in formal volunteering placements. Older people and people who were shielding."

"I think the COVID-19 pandemic was such an instant event that any person who may require additional support at times felt that they would struggle to keep up with the pace and did not want to contact organisations who were under stress. Also, with some formal volunteering organisations not recruiting volunteers this left some potential volunteers with limited opportunities. It is hard to define exact ages but here in (area X) we tend to place

a lot of young people with learning difficulties into volunteering opportunities and this has been increasingly difficult.”

“Due to Befriending being delivered by distance/telephone this had benefits and draw backs. Some people such as those with limited mobility were able to volunteer when before for face to face this wouldn't have been possible. But others such as those with communication challenges or sensory impairments this may not have been possible. Also due to speed those requiring large amounts of additional support to volunteer often couldn't be accommodated due to capacity issues.”

“Older, vulnerable members of the community were excluded primarily due to Covid restrictions. Those people or communities which did not have digital connectivity - either through poor broadband reception, lack of equipment or skills were also excluded.”

“Individuals who didn't have internet access or were retired and felt vulnerable and recently retired adults who had not established new networks to move into volunteering.”

## **4.6 Volunteering tasks undertaken by VIOs to meet societal challenges**

### **4.6.1 The focus of VIO support during COVID-19**

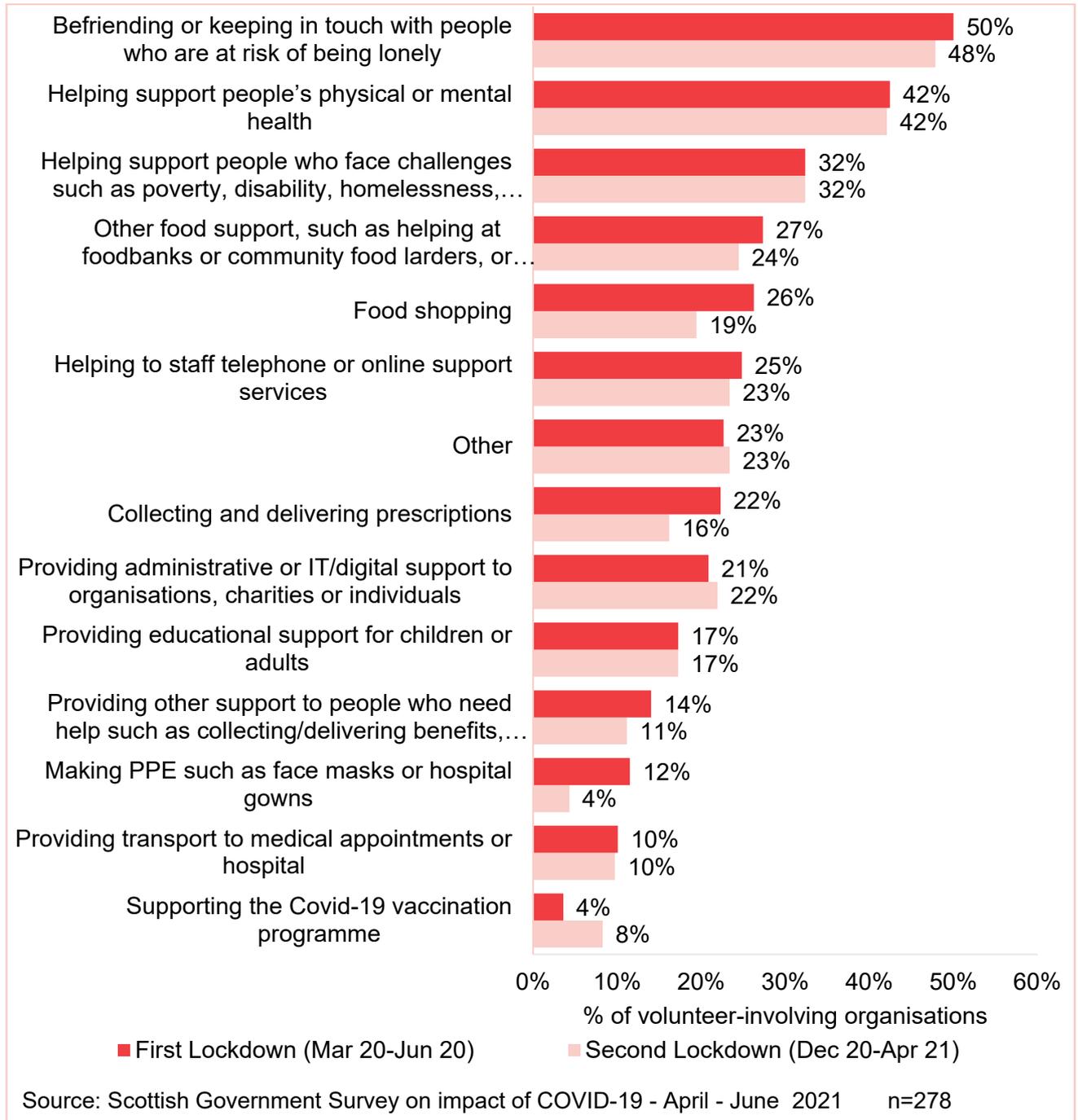
Given the societal needs articulated in section 4.5, Figure 4.6.1 identifies the VIO volunteering support that has been provided in Scotland during COVID-19 to help address these needs.<sup>3</sup>

What stands out from this evidence is the widespread engagement of Scotland's VIOs in helping to address the major and long-term societal needs identified in section 4.5 – not just in the first lockdown, but throughout the pandemic:

- 50% of the VIOs surveyed had deployed volunteers to undertake befriending, or to keep in touch with people who were at risk of being lonely, during the first lockdown. This only decreased to 48% during the second lockdown.
- 42% of VIOs had deployed volunteers to support people's physical or mental health during both the first and second lockdowns.

In contrast, VIOs' engagement in helping to address the immediate needs of food shopping, collecting, and delivering prescriptions, other food support and other general tasks all fell between the first and second lockdowns, as did the making of PPE.

**Figure 4.6.1 VIOs' services delivered by Scottish volunteers during the first and second lockdowns**



**The changing volunteering response during COVID-19.** The Scottish Government survey also provides insightful qualitative feedback on the change in the volunteering response during the pandemic.<sup>3</sup> The example below gives the perspective from an infrastructure organisation, which illustrates how volunteering transitioned from an emergency resilience response to a more structured engagement by VIOs focused on the longer-term societal challenges discussed above.

#### **The changing volunteer response (perspective of an infrastructure organisation)**

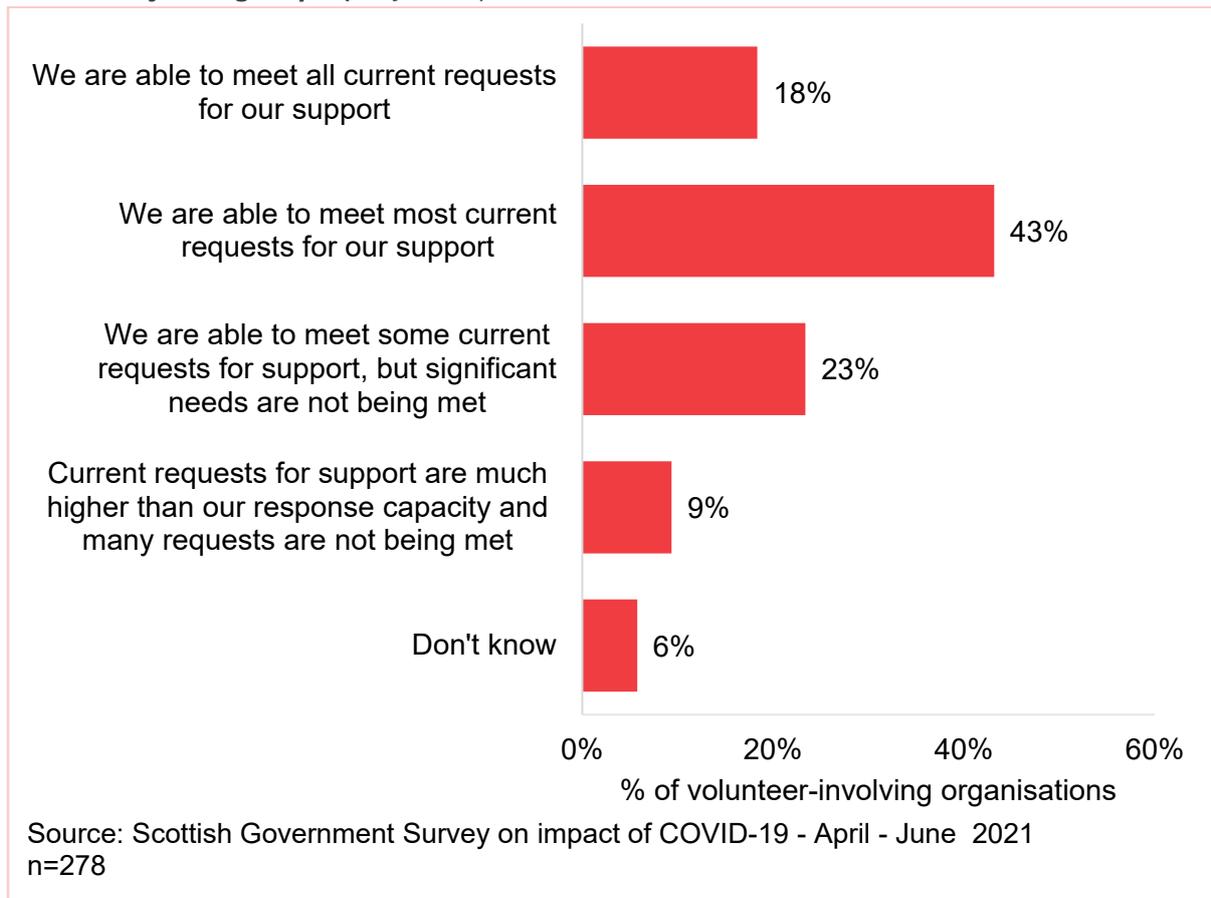
“During the first lockdown and early part of the pandemic there was very much an 'emergency response' from individual communities and organisations with people just trying to organise themselves to act as quickly as possible to help and protect those in need and vulnerable and the demand in the first lockdown was around getting basic supplies and supports to people and to preserve life and reduce harm. As things progressed beyond the initial few weeks there was greater consideration given to joint planning, making best use of volunteer resource, and ensuring volunteers themselves were protected and able to work as safely as possible. This meant that by the end of first full lockdown and into second lockdown certain services and activities were better organised across the voluntary and public sector and less 'reactive' and with clearer support processes and procedures in place for individuals and organisations the demand balanced out. As the impact of the pandemic continued throughout first and second lockdown and as the initial basic needs were largely being met it was apparent that services like mental health and wellbeing and longer-term work to support people out of poverty and inequality was required (loss of jobs, confidence, digital inclusion, depression) and volunteering activity increasingly adapted to reflect this need”

### **4.7 VIOs' ability to meet service user needs**

The Scottish Government survey asked VIOs to assess the extent to which they were able to meet the needs of the communities and groups they served as at May 2021: see Figure 4.7.1. <sup>3</sup> Sixty-two percent of VIOs were able to meet 'all' or 'most' requests for support. However, a significant proportion of VIOs experienced problems in meeting service demand:

- 23% of VIOs were able to meet some requests for support, but significant needs were not being met
- 9% of VIOs were being faced with requests for support which were much higher than their response capacity, and many requests were not being met.

**Figure 4.7.1 Impact of COVID-19 on VIOs' ability to meet the needs of their Scottish community and groups (May 2021)**



**VIOs highlighted capacity issues as the main problem** they were experiencing in trying to meet the needs of the groups and communities that they wished to serve. Capacity issues were linked to the following factors:

- Not having the staff and /or volunteer resources to meet the increased demands placed on their services.

“Demand for our services, already very heavy, has doubled during the COVID lockdown. In Glasgow between December 2020 and end February 2021 we had the same number of referrals as in the whole of 2017.”

- Lack of funding to support increased service demands and the cost of adapting service delivery – for example, to online support.

“Due to funding, we can’t run enough programmes (particularly in Glasgow) to meet the emerging mental health crisis in young people.”

- Not being able to properly restart services and activities due to COVID-19 restrictions – for example, restricted or no face-to-face delivery; combined with the limitations of digitally based delivery which affects many services.

“No face-to-face contact which is difficult for our client group who experience sight loss.”

“Many of our services supporting clients F2F have had to cease during covid and have to become virtual which provides some support but significantly less than needed.”

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