

Shona Robison MSP
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

30th November 2022

Dear Ms Robison,

We, the undersigned, are writing to express our concern at the impact of the current cost of living crisis on volunteering and the potential implications of this for the Scottish economy and its communities. We also present four potential measures for the Scottish Government to consider that would help to mitigate the impact of the crisis on volunteering. We appreciate that the Scottish Government is facing significant financial pressure as demonstrated in the Deputy First Minister's recent Emergency Budget Review. However, we want to reinforce the vital role of volunteering in Scottish society, particularly during times of crisis, and ask that steps are taken to protect volunteers and the organisations that involve them. **We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these concerns in person.**

Volunteer Scotland published a [research report](#) in September this year which detailed a number of challenges facing volunteers and volunteer involving organisations as a result of the cost of living crisis. Whilst the full impact remains unclear, and the situation remains fluid, a number of conclusions were reached:

Reduction in volunteer participation

The Volunteer Scotland research report identified a potential reduction in the number of people volunteering formally. The [Scottish Third Sector Tracker](#) appears to reinforce this finding, with 35% of organisations reporting volunteer shortages as one of their top three challenges in the most recent wave in summer 2022, an increase of 6% on findings from the previous wave in spring 2022. Feedback from a series of 'evidence sessions' across Scotland and England have highlighted practical barriers to volunteering, including rising travel costs and reduced time for volunteering due to the need to increase paid working hours. However, volunteering shortages are also likely to reflect the cumulative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on personal resilience, and the proliferation of negative news - or a sense of 'permacrisis' - in recent years. Many volunteers are fatigued coming out of the pandemic and there is a significant risk of apathy and disenfranchisement.

Many services on the frontline of the crisis - including those that provide advice and guidance on financial issues or emergency support such as food banks and homelessness support – will engage volunteers in the delivery of services. Volunteers also have a key role in responding to wider societal health and wellbeing

issues exacerbated by the cost of living crisis, providing services like befriending and community transport as well as supporting a multitude of health and social care services in both community and statutory settings.

Individuals who volunteer on a more informal basis, often in their local communities, will also have an important role in responding to the current crisis. Indeed, the vital role of informal volunteers in responding to crises was highlighted in a recent Scottish Government review of the response to Storm Arwen. We also expect informal volunteering participation to decline as more individuals are required to safeguard their own needs due to the crisis, and this could have serious consequences for ongoing community resilience.

Challenges for volunteer involving organisations

The Volunteer Scotland research report also highlighted that many organisations who rely on volunteers to support their work are facing a 'perfect storm' of increased demand for services, rising operational costs and, for some, stagnating or decreasing income. Again, the Scottish Third Sector Tracker found that 93% of organisations have seen rising costs since April 2022, with 43% of these organisations reporting that this was affecting their ability to deliver core services. 62% of organisations reported financial challenges, and 64% considered that demand for their services had increased. We are concerned that organisations in both the public and voluntary sectors will have to make difficult decisions about their resource to support volunteers, subsequently affecting the quality of volunteer experiences.

Impact of reduction in volunteering

It is clear that volunteering is under considerable threat from the current cost of living crisis and the implications of this cannot be understated. In 2018, volunteering was worth [£5.5 billion](#) to Scotland's economy. This is almost five times the amount that the Scottish Government has cut from this year's budget. Even a 5% decline in volunteering would equate to a £275 million loss to the economy.

Beyond the economic impact, a decline in volunteering would be devastating for Scotland's community resilience, particularly in a time of crisis. It would also have a significant impact on the delivery of health and social care services, threatening ambitions for a National Care Service and for Scotland to become a Wellbeing Economy. It is vital that we are able to realise the ambitions set out in the [Volunteering Action Plan](#), published by the Scottish Government earlier this year, to develop and deliver volunteering that is truly for all.

Appropriate roles for volunteers

Another potential outcome of the crisis is that organisations will face increasing pressure to engage volunteers in roles and tasks that were previously completed by paid staff to reduce costs. Some health and social care settings are already experiencing significant staff shortages entering the winter months, compounded by proposed industrial action across many public services. The Emergency Budget Review will also likely bring further strain to many public sector bodies, as services are reprioritised or reduced.

The engagement of volunteers in roles or tasks that were previously completed by paid staff carries the risk of undermining the sustainability of paid roles on a long term basis, as well as exploiting the kindness of individuals who give their time. There are very limited scenarios in the short term response to emergencies where it is acceptable for volunteers to temporarily undertake roles normally done by paid staff where there is deemed to be a threat to public safety, as part of wider community resilience measures.

Volunteer Scotland and the STUC developed the [Volunteer Charter](#) to set out the key principles for assuring legitimacy and preventing exploitation of workers and volunteers. These principles include that volunteers should not carry out duties formerly carried out by paid workers nor should they be used to disguise the effects of non-filled vacancies or cuts in services. It also states that volunteers should not be used instead of paid workers or undertake the work of paid workers during industrial disputes. It is vital for the long-term protection of paid roles in our public and third sectors, and for the future participation of volunteers in our communities, that these principles are respected.

Key asks

To mitigate the impacts of the cost of living crisis on volunteers and the organisations who need them to provide vital support, we are asking for the following:

- Commitment to Fair Funding for the wider voluntary sector, where funding is uplifted in line with inflation and more sustainable multi-year funding arrangements are delivered. This is critical for protecting frontline volunteer services and would help to ensure that third sector organisations are able to sustainably engage volunteers throughout the current crisis.
- Work with cabinet colleagues to ensure that relevant public bodies are allocating sufficient resource to sustainably engage volunteers, thus ensuring that a diverse group of volunteers can continue to support the delivery of vital public services.

- Circulate the Volunteer Charter across Scottish Government departments and public sector bodies, with a clear commitment to ensuring that volunteers are not carrying out duties formerly carried out by paid workers, undertaking the work of paid workers during industrial disputes, or being used to reduce contract costs when considering solutions to staff and funding shortages.
- Consider appropriate opportunities for centralised messaging about the benefits of volunteering for individuals and communities to address the issue of volunteer shortages, including the potential for a national campaign in partnership with Volunteer Scotland and the TSI Network.

Signed:

Alan Stevenson, Chief Executive, Volunteer Scotland

Anna Fowlie, Chief Executive, Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO)

David Kelly, Director for Scotland, Community Transport Association

Sara Redmond, Chief Officer of Development, Health and Social Care, Alliance Scotland (the ALLIANCE)

Tricia Macfarlane, Chief Executive, Impact Funding Partners

On behalf of the TSI Network:

Dan Shaw, Chief Executive Officer, Aberdeenshire Voluntary Action

David Maxwell, Chief Executive, Volunteer Glasgow

Fiona Fawdry, Chief Executive Officer, CVO East Ayrshire

Steven Sweeney, Chief Executive Officer, VASLan