Section 3

During Covid-19

The volunteer response

<u>Contents</u>

Key findings

Volunteer response during the first lockdown (March – June 2020) [1]
- Total volunteer participation increased from 45% to 74% during the first lockdown.
- Formal volunteer participation fell from 24% to 13%.
- In comparison, informal volunteer participation was 35% and mutual aid was 16% during the first lockdown, but both are believed to be significantly underestimated.
- Volunteers were mainly keeping in touch with people who were isolated, lonely and undertaking tasks in response to the immediate crisis.
- There was an increase in volunteer engagement by younger adults and new or lapsed volunteers during this period.

Volunteer response following first lockdown (July 2020 – May 2021) [4] (see Section 4 for formal volunteering). The trends in volunteer engagement after the first lockdown:
- Mutual aid volunteering decreased between lockdowns, before increasing during the second lockdown, but not to the same level as the first lockdown.
- Informal volunteering followed a similar trend to mutual aid volunteering, but the reduction in participation was less than mutual aid.

Assessment of the mutual aid response – mutual aid provided an important contribution, especially its crisis response during lockdowns. [4] [7] Key attributes included:
- Speed of response for crisis needs of food, transport, shopping and shelter
- Community connectivity, accessibility and local knowledge
- Ability to support both those shielding, and those vulnerable but not shielding
- Reaching those in need in areas of deprivation
- Large group membership providing ready access to volunteers

A significant proportion of the infrastructure organisations identified two main areas of concern (a high proportion agreed with the following two negative statements): [4] [7]
- Mutual aid groups did not have adequate safeguarding or confidentiality measures to ensure protection for people receiving support (60% agreed/strongly agreed).
- Mutual aid groups were not always able to provide volunteers with adequate training, guidance, and support for their role (56% agreed/strongly agreed).

Assessment of the informal volunteering response – qualitative data showed that informal volunteers were primarily involved in: [6]
- keeping in touch with neighbours who were at risk of being lonely; and
- helping to meet the immediate support needs of those in their local area.

The Scottish Government survey rated the contribution of informal volunteers highly: [4]
- 90% of infrastructure organisations agreed that informal volunteers had an important role in combatting social isolation in their local area during COVID-19
- 87% agreed that neighbours helping each other through informal volunteering had been an essential complement to formal volunteering; and 85% agreed that informal volunteering had strengthened community spirit and identity.

This section examines the volunteer response during COVID-19. The most robust evidence source in Scotland for the volunteer response is the Ipsos MORI survey commissioned by Volunteer Scotland. This survey is specific to the first lockdown and asked a representative sample of 1,014 Scottish adults whether they had given any unpaid help between March and June 2020.[1] The volunteering undertaken is broken down into formal, informal, and mutual aid. For all three types of volunteering the volunteer response during the first lockdown is presented in this section.

After the first lockdown no further surveys of Scottish adults were undertaken. As a consequence, to understand the 'volunteer voice' this report has had to rely on indirect evidence on volunteering from surveys and other evidence sources, which reflect the views of VIOs and infrastructure organisations rather than the volunteers themselves.

This section is therefore structured as follows:

- Section 3.1 – the overall volunteer response during the first lockdown: combining the formal, informal and mutual aid volunteering response (March – June 2020)
- Section 3.2 – analysis of the three types of volunteering response during the first lockdown – formal volunteering, mutual aid and informal volunteering – reflecting the variations in volunteering participation across these categories (March – June 2020)
- Section 3.3 – the mutual aid response throughout the pandemic (March 2020 – May 2021)
- Section 3.4 – the informal volunteering response throughout the pandemic (March 2020 – May 2021)

The whole of Section 4 is devoted to the VIO response, the great majority of which focuses on formal volunteering throughout the pandemic (March 2020 – May 2021). Focusing a whole section to the VIO perspective is due to the much more extensive data available from charity and VIO surveys, combined with the importance of formal volunteering before and during the pandemic.

3.1 Overall Volunteering Response – during the first lockdown (March – June 2020)

3.1.1 Total volunteering participation during the first lockdown

The Ipsos MORI survey found that almost three quarters of Scottish adults (74%) had given unpaid voluntary help between March and June 2020, which includes all volunteering categories: formal volunteering, mutual aid and informal volunteering: see Figure 3.1.1.[1] This represents an increase of 29% from the Ipsos MORI baseline of 45% [1] and a 26% increase from the SHS 2018 figure of 48%.[2] This uplift in volunteering participation is all the more remarkable because it reports engagement over a period of three months during the first lockdown, compared to the pre-COVID participation rates which were based on volunteering engagement over a 12-month period. The Scotland Cares campaign during the first lockdown demonstrated the appetite of Scottish adults to volunteer and help others during COVID-19, with 60,000 adults signing up.

Figure 3.1.1 Total volunteer participation in Scotland before and during the first lockdown (March – June 2020)

Sources: Ipsos-MORI omnibus survey - June 2020   n= 1,014
SHS 2018   n= 9,700
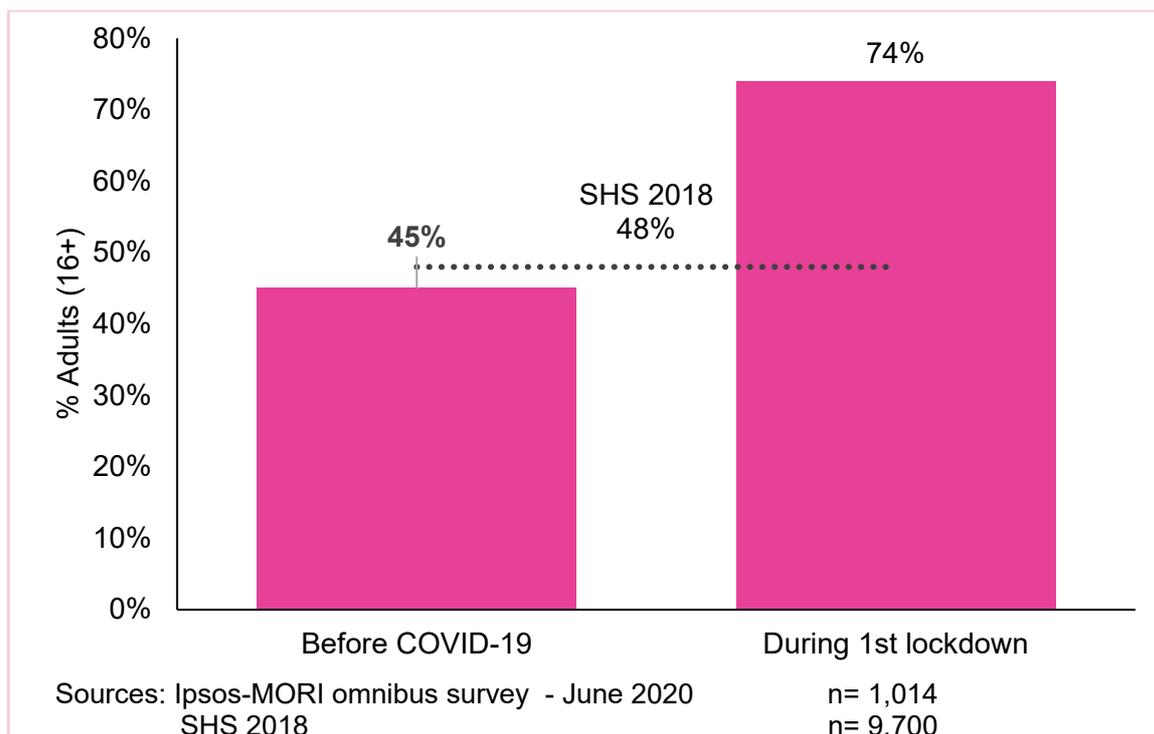
3.1.2 Characteristics of volunteers during the first lockdown

Table 3.1.1 shows that during the first lockdown the main demographic change related to the age of volunteers. Younger adults aged 16-24 had the highest total participation rate during the first lockdown [1] compared to those aged 35 – 44 who had the highest rate pre-pandemic.[2] There is a lack of evidence to explain this change, but possible explanatory factors include:

- Younger adults aged 16-24 stepping in to help during a crisis when many older people were having to shield and self-isolate. The Scottish Government report, Shielding a way forward show that the number of adults shielding increases from adults aged 16-24 years old up to adults aged 55-64.[9]
- Younger adults aged 16-24 having more time to volunteer due to furlough (for those in work) and as secondary and tertiary education paused before moving online. UK evidence from HM Revenue and Customs on the uptake of employment furlough was highest for those aged 17 – 23 as at 1 July 2020.[13]
- In contrast those aged 35-44 were more likely to have caring responsibilities; for example, home schooling, looking after children, etc., which reduced their capacity to volunteer.

While rural participation rates were still the highest during the pandemic, the difference in participation rates between rural and urban areas was much smaller than pre-COVID-19.

Table 3.1.1 Demographic groups with the highest total participation rates in Scotland

Total Volunteering	Age	Deprivation (SIMD Q)	Urban / Rural
Pre COVID-19	35-44	Least Deprived SIMDQ 5	Rural
During first lockdown	16-24	Least Deprived SIMDQ 5	Rural

Sources: Ipsos-MORI omnibus survey - June 2020, SHS 2018

New analysis of the Ipsos MORI survey data from March – June 2020 (not yet published by Volunteer Scotland) shows that 55% of adults who volunteered during COVID-19 had not volunteered in the previous 12 months.[1] This high percentage of lapsed /new volunteers not only evidences the willingness of adults to step forward and offer help during the crisis, but it also highlights the potential for this new pool of volunteers to be engaged post-COVID-19. The Scottish Government survey of infrastructure organisations provides further evidence of the increase in new volunteers with 73% agreeing to a large extent that 'people started volunteering who were not volunteering before'.[4]

Qualitative evidence from the infrastructure organisations in the Scottish Government survey provides several explanations for the increase in new volunteers and changing demographics. The main factors relate to furlough and adults working from home, both of which provided additional time to volunteer. There was also a desire from people to help their local communities, especially as now they were located there full-time (as opposed to travelling to work outside their local communities for large periods of time pre COVID-19).[4]

"Our experience is that local communities have organised COVID-19 response groups, bringing new volunteers with them."

"We saw more people showing an interest in volunteering from working age populations and those who had no history of volunteering, this was in part due to the number on furlough and partly because of a sense of a need to respond to the emergency. This also assisted with the withdrawal of the older populations who were more likely to shield or stop volunteering due to health/confidence/opportunity issues."

"We placed an early open call for volunteers (in advance of Scotland Cares) and found a number of new volunteers come forward - largely furloughed community members and people normally outwith the area working during the day, able to participate while working from home. We also had a percentage of people estranged from family and friends due to distance seeking ways to keep active."

'We saw that in small rural communities' people had knowledge about individuals and families and were able to offer the right support to different households quickly and without judgement.'

3.1.3 Volunteering roles during the first lockdown

Figure 3.1.2 shows the tasks undertaken by volunteers during the first lockdown. Befriending or keeping in touch with someone who is at risk of being lonely was the task most frequently undertaken by volunteers (68%), followed by tasks aimed at meeting immediate needs such as: doing food shopping (57%); helping with household tasks (30%); collecting and delivering prescriptions (23%) and providing food support other than shopping (23%). Figure 3.1.2 shows the breadth of volunteering tasks undertaken by adults in Scotland during the first lockdown.[1]

Figure 3.1.2 Tasks undertaken by Scottish volunteers during the first lockdown

Source: Ipsos-MORI omnibus survey - June 2020   n=1,014
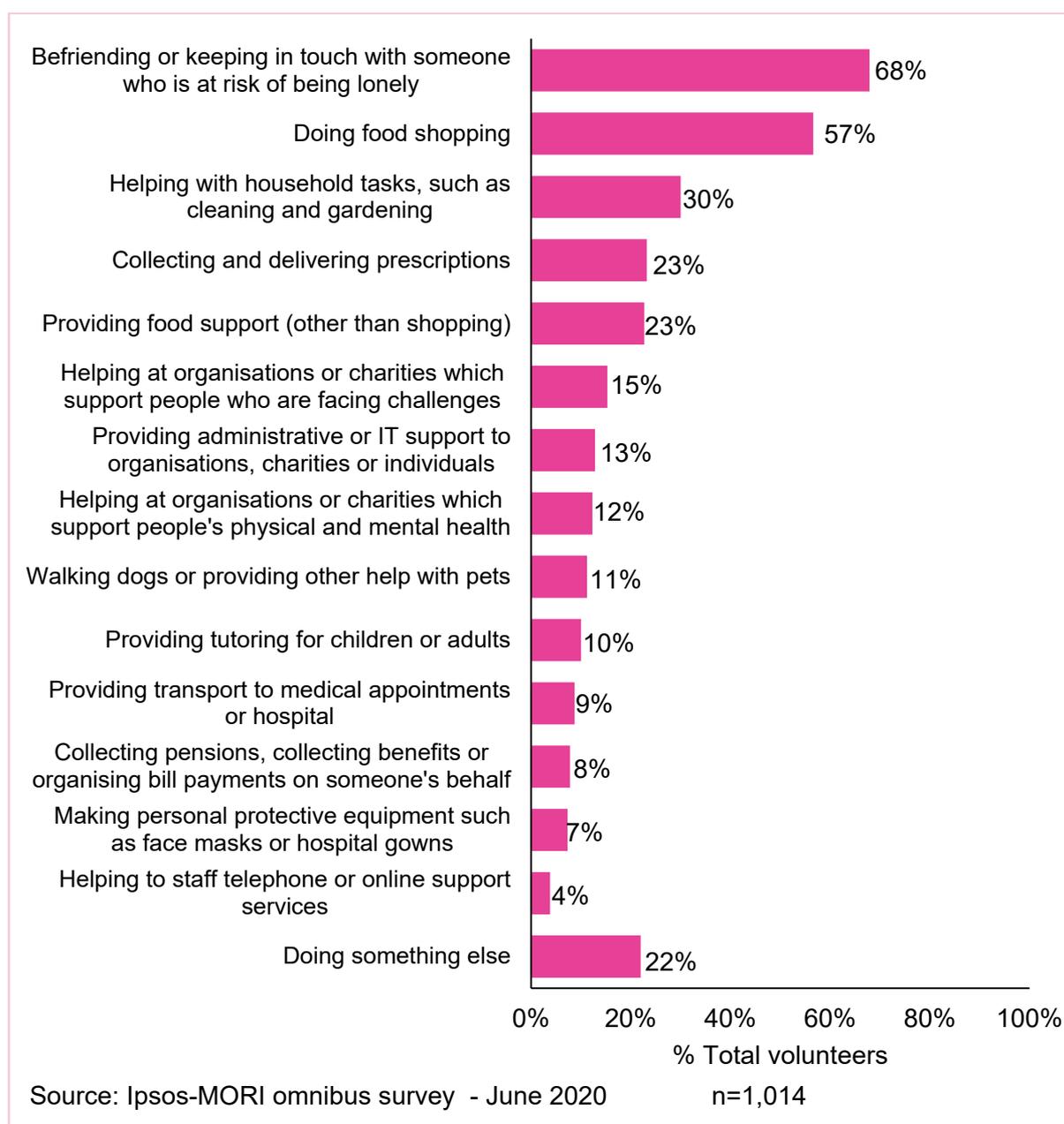
3.2 Types of volunteering response – during first lockdown

3.2.1 Changes by volunteering type

While overall adult volunteering participation in Scotland increased significantly from 45% to 74% during the first lockdown, the increase was not consistent across all types of volunteering: see Figure 3.2.1.[1]

Figure 3.2.1 Adult volunteering participation rates in Scotland by type of volunteering – before and during first lockdown

Source: Ipsos-MORI omnibus survey - June 2020   n=1,014
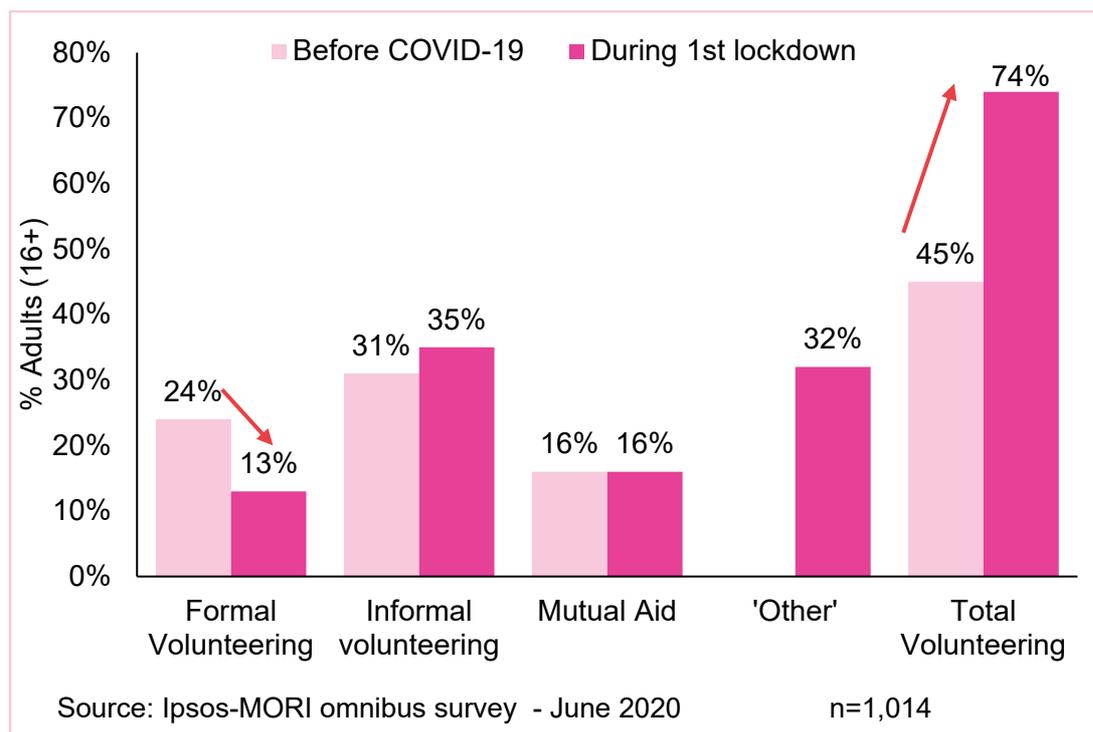
(Note: respondents were able to select any of the three categories of volunteering they had participated in. Hence, the percentages for formal, informal and mutual aid volunteering do not sum to the total volunteering participation rates.)

Formal volunteering was the most adversely impacted, with a decrease in participation from 24% down to 13%.[1] Social distancing, the stay-at-home order, and the closing of charities' premises and retail shops were the main reasons for the decrease in formal volunteering. The initial decline and subsequent changes in formal volunteering participation rates are discussed in more detail in Section 4.

In contrast to the decline in formal volunteering participation, the informal volunteering participation rate increased to 35% from 31% and for mutual aid the figure remained constant at 16%. **However, the reported volunteering participation rates for both informal volunteering and mutual aid are likely to be significantly under-represented during the first lockdown.** This is due to the 'other volunteering' category of 32%, which captures those who undertook at least one volunteering activity but didn't identify as a volunteer. The data shows that these 'other' volunteers undertook activities more aligned to mutual aid and informal volunteering, which means that the participation rates for these volunteering types are likely to be understated in Figure 3.2.1.[1]

In comparing the before and during COVID-19 volunteering participation rates in Figure 3.2.1 it is important to note that the Ipsos MORI volunteering participation rates during COVID-19 are over a three month period (March – June 2020), compared to the 2018 Scottish Household Survey participation rates which are measured over a 12 month period. This means that the participation rates for all volunteering types during COVID-19 are likely to be understated.

The 'other' volunteering data also gives an interesting insight into volunteering during COVID-19 with almost a third of Scottish adults undertaking tasks to help others but not viewing the help and time they gave as volunteering.[1]

3.2.2 Demographic changes during the first lockdown

Table 3.2.1 shows that during the first lockdown the participation rate was highest for younger adults aged 16-24 for all types of volunteering except informal, where the highest participation was amongst those aged 45-54. This contrasts with the pre-pandemic volunteering where for both formal and informal volunteering participation was highest for those aged 35-44 (see comparative SHS statistics in Figure 2.1.3, Section 2).[1]

Table 3.2.1 Demographic groups with the highest volunteering participation rates by type of volunteering during the first lockdown in Scotland

Volunteering type	Age	Deprivation (SIMD Q)	Urban / Rural
Formal volunteering	16-24	Least Deprived SIMD Q5	Rural
Mutual Aid	16-24	Least Deprived SIMD Q5	Rural
Informal volunteering	45-54	Least deprived SIMD Q5	Urban
'Other' category (the type of volunteering not specified)	16-24	Most deprived SIMD Q1	Rural

Source: Ipsos MORI Survey, June 2020

The higher participation rates of younger adults across formal volunteering and mutual aid groups are a positive change, which may encourage more volunteer participation in the younger age groups going forward and, in some cases, will hopefully support lifelong engagement.

However, the decline in volunteering amongst the older age groups is a trend that will require longer term monitoring and analysis. Those aged over 70 and those at high risk due to underlying health conditions were strongly advised to stay at home as much as possible and significantly reduce unnecessary social contact.[8] Also, as at 1 June 2020, 73% of those shielding in Scotland were aged 55 or over.[9] The combination of these two factors resulted in a major decline in volunteering participation by older people during the first lockdown. Now that shielding has been lifted and more of the roles that were undertaken by older volunteers, for example working in charity shops, have resumed there remains a question as to whether older adults will return to volunteering to the same levels as pre-pandemic. Research has shown the importance of the health and wellbeing benefits of volunteering to older adults, including a reduction in social isolation and loneliness.[10] Hence, if older adults do not return to volunteering, their health and wellbeing, already exacerbated by COVID-19, may become an even more substantial long-term problem.

For deprivation a similar pattern emerges for volunteering during the first lockdown compared to pre-pandemic, with the highest participation rates being in SIMD Q5 (the 20% least deprived areas in Scotland) for all types of volunteering except the 'other' category (see comparative SHS statistics in Figure 2.1.5, Section 2).[1]

Similar to the pre-pandemic SHS data, all types of volunteering participation during the first lockdown were higher in rural areas compared to urban areas with the exception of informal volunteering. However, there was a decrease in the difference between rural and urban areas during the first lockdown (see comparative SHS statistics in Figure 2.1.4, Section 2).[1]

Analysis from VFA Working Paper 4: "Volunteering in the Pandemic: Evidence from Two UK Volunteer Matching Services" provides additional demographic trend data for formal volunteering that extends beyond the first lockdown.[3] The key demographic findings for Scotland which spans analysis of data from January 2020 to August 2021 include:

- The increased participation of young people in formal volunteering in Scotland, where the average age of volunteers remained low through the autumn and winter of 2020, and into the spring of 2021. This provides supplementary and complementary evidence to the Ipsos MORI data.
- Women are more likely to formally volunteer than men and that this did not fluctuate significantly during the pandemic. (Gender was not included in the Ipsos MORI research)
- Formal volunteering by people with disabilities was proportionally lower in both lockdowns and seemed to recover somewhat between lockdowns. In the final easing phase (March 2021 onwards) registration of disabled volunteers recovered to pre-pandemic levels, but activities undertaken by disabled volunteers did not. (Disability was not included in the Ipsos MORI research)
- Regarding deprivation, the middle 60% (SIMD Quintiles 2-4) were most likely to register to formally volunteer. This finding diverges from the Ipsos Mori finding for Scotland where adults in the least deprived areas had the highest participation rates.

3.2.3 Lapsed and new volunteers [1]

Analysis of the Ipsos MORI data has highlighted that a relatively high proportion of volunteers during the first lockdown had not volunteered in the last 12 months. This engagement of either lapsed or new volunteers varied by type of volunteering:[1]

- Formal – 22%
- Mutual aid – 27%
- Informal – 31%
- 'Other' – 62%
- Total – 55%

We don't know the split between 'lapsed' (having volunteered at some point over 12 months ago) and 'new' (having never volunteered), but our assessment is that a significant proportion will have been new volunteers. This is due to two factors:

- The supporting qualitative evidence from the Scottish Government survey (see Section 3.1); and
- The fact that the 'other' category is so high. This cohort comprises individuals who did not self-identify as volunteers in the Ipsos MORI survey, and this may reflect the fact that they had not volunteered before.[1]

At a wider UK level there is also supporting evidence from the '/together' study which revealed that during the first year of the pandemic 12.4 million adults volunteered formally, of which 4.6 million were first time volunteers.[11]

3.3 Mutual Aid

3.3.1 Number of mutual aid groups during first lockdown

The total number of mutual aid groups operating in Scotland is difficult to measure. Volunteer Scotland's analysis of 'COVID-19 Mutual Aid UK' data revealed that in April 2020 over 220 mutual aid groups based in Scotland had registered with them, operating via a Facebook platform.[5] However, registration was voluntary and not all mutual aid groups will have signed up with them. Therefore, the total number of mutual aid groups operating in Scotland during the first lockdown is likely to have been significantly greater than 220.

Furthermore, it also excludes the large number of social groups based on very small geographies via WhatsApp groups for residents in a block of flats or street. Such groups tend to be focused on helping each other as opposed to providing services to help others. This study has excluded such groups and concentrates on mutual aid groups that have a clear focus on supporting others through one or more services.

The Scottish Government survey of infrastructure organisations provides further evidence of the growth in mutual aid and local community groups during the first lockdown with 65% agreeing 'to a large extent' that 'New voluntary / community organisations emerged and were / are active in my area, such as mutual aid groups'.[4]

3.3.2 Crisis response by mutual aid

While it is not possible to give a breakdown of the Ipsos MORI data on the tasks undertaken by volunteers during the first lockdown by the type of volunteering, qualitative data gathered by Volunteer Scotland shows that mutual aid groups were primarily involved in the immediate crisis needs of their local communities.[6] Mutual aid groups were able to act at pace, had hyper local knowledge, knowing both those that needed support and local services that were available. The help from mutual aid groups was also easy to access in an informal way and was specific to the needs of the individual beneficiaries.

A report by Glasgow Caledonian University commissioned by the Chief Scientist Office in Scotland provides further evidence on the tasks undertaken and the characteristics of the mutual aid response to the immediate crisis needs.[7]

Glasgow Caledonian University Report – key attributes of Mutual Aid

Quick delivery services (food, prescriptions): Mutual aid groups provided these services to individuals from the very beginning of the national lockdown, with formal services only becoming available after 1-2 weeks.

Provision for those non-shielding, yet still vulnerable individuals: Those not on shielding lists, yet still vulnerable to the effects of the lockdown, or those who did receive shielding parcels that did not meet their needs, often relied upon the continued support of mutual aid groups. Although this additional support from mutual aid groups was not a positive experience for all, mutual aid group members received feedback that their services more effectively addressed specific and individualised needs of those who needed support.

Organisational characteristics: The groups were **approachable** for 'low-level' requests such as requests for small quantities of food, fixing lightbulbs, taking the bins out, and other requests of this nature. They were **flexible** and able to provide bespoke services quickly without any bureaucratic administration. They were also **accessible** to many in the community through social media or other 'everyday' platforms instead of unfamiliar request systems. Finally, many perceived the groups as **private**, providing relative levels of anonymity. Although, there were some concerns that a lack of confidentiality that binds (say) local councillors and formal service providers, but not mutual aid 'volunteers', had the potential to expose the privacy of recipients of mutual aid groups' support. All these characteristics allowed mutual aid groups to assist others with needs that formal service providers potentially could have helped with; but the mutual aid groups often assisted faster and with fewer barriers to access.

Information signposting: Mutual aid groups brought together information from a variety of formal and informal sources within and across communities.

Large group membership: Mutual aid groups also had access to a relatively large number of members or 'volunteers' compared to many constituted organisations, whose capacity-related challenges may have been exacerbated by furloughed staff members.

> **Local knowledge:** Mutual aid group volunteers had hyper-local knowledge about buildings in their area, or the collection process of prescriptions at the local pharmacy, for example. They were also in-tune with the needs of community members requesting help from the mutual aid group and were able to adjust service delivery accordingly. In some cases, the mutual aid groups did not have knowledge about existing formal service provision.
>
> **Source**: 'Solidarity in a time of crisis: The role of mutual aid to the COVID-19 pandemic' Yunus Centre for Social Business and Health, Glasgow Caledonian University [7]

Due to the lack of further surveys on adult participation rates and the informality of mutual aid groups there is less direct data on how the mutual aid response changed from the first lockdown. Using indirect data and a triangulation of data the working hypothesis is that the easing of the first lockdown restriction from July 2020 reduced the crisis response role of mutual aid and therefore mutual aid volunteering. As highlighted in the Glasgow Caledonian University report, formal volunteering services were often not available until weeks after mutual aid groups were able to offer help. However, once these formal services were in place and the crisis needs during the first lockdown abated, the need for mutual aid support lessened.[7]

3.3.3 Effectiveness of the mutual aid response

The Scottish Government Survey provides important feedback on the mutual aid response throughout the pandemic – both what worked well and also areas for improvement. Figure 3.3.1 shows that TSIs, local authorities and other infrastructure partners thought that mutual aid was a key component of the COVID-19 response, which complemented formal volunteering activities. Eighty-five percent agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Other attributes were the ability of mutual aid groups to engage new volunteers (75% agreed/strongly agreed), their ability to respond quickly to local needs (71% agreed/strongly agreed) and the sharing of information and coordination between mutual aid groups and formal organisations (50% agreed/strongly agreed).[4]

Regarding areas which did not work so well, a significant proportion of the infrastructure organisations agreed with the following two negative statements.[4]
- Mutual aid groups did not have adequate safeguarding or confidentiality measures to ensure protection for people receiving support (60% agreed/strongly agreed); and
- Mutual aid groups were not always able to provide volunteers with adequate training, guidance, and support for their role (56% agreed/strongly agreed)

Figure 3.3.1 Mutual aid groups: positive feedback from Scottish infrastructure organisations

Source: Scottish Government Survey on impact of COVID-19 - April - June 2021
n=52
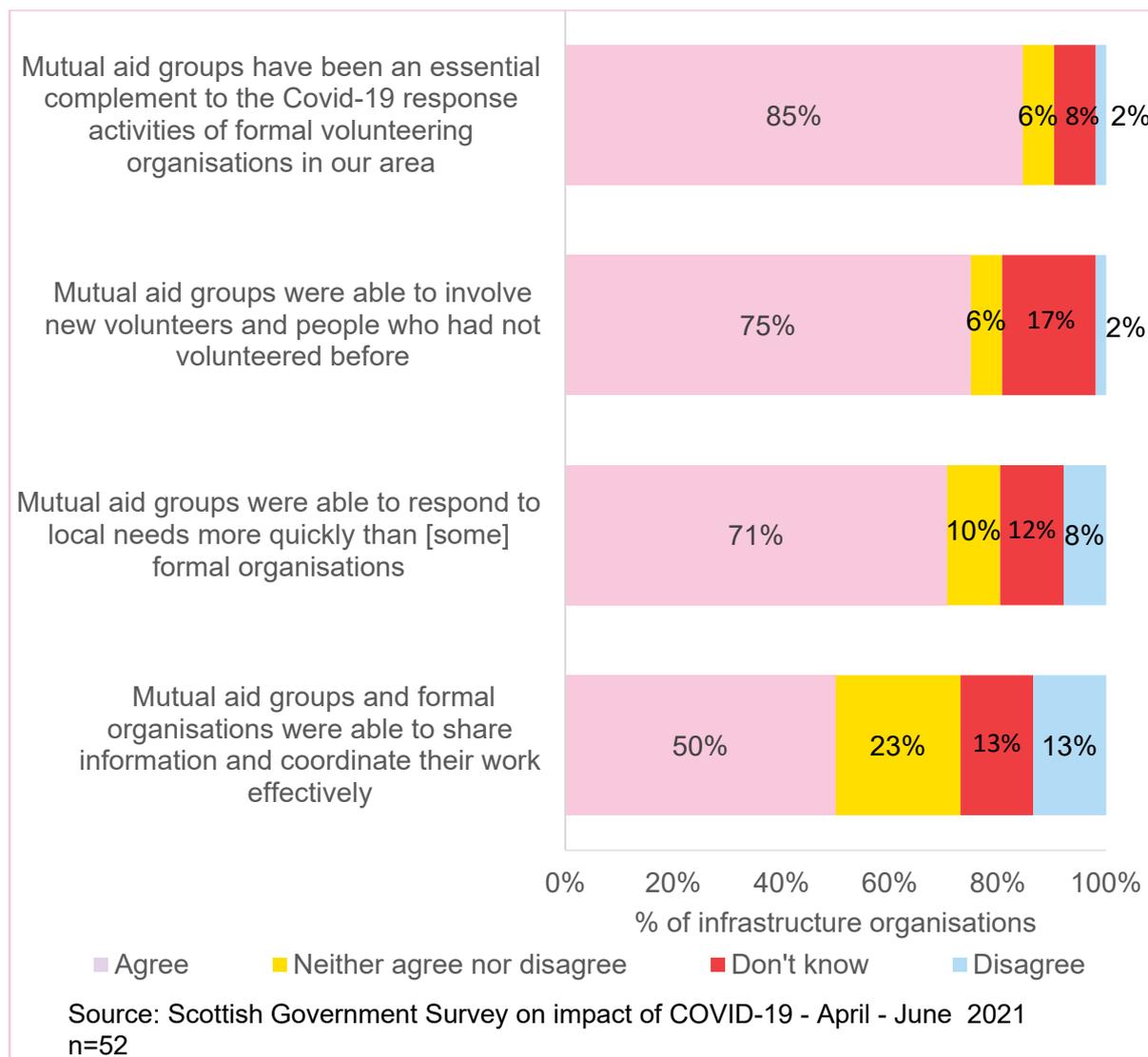
The Glasgow Caledonian University report commissioned by the Chief Scientist Office provides evidence on what didn't work so well with mutual aid groups in Scotland and what could be improved in future crises.[7]

Glasgow Caledonian University Report – issues identified with mutual aid

Sustainability: Mutual aid groups lacked long-term security that might have left individuals who were vulnerable exposed to similar risks they faced prior to lockdown unless the mutual aid group transitioned them to a formal organisation that was still consistently providing services like food deliveries.

Risk management: Each of the mutual aid groups in this study indicated they took risks to 'get things done' including bypassing PVG (Protecting Vulnerable Groups) checks for 'volunteers'. This fear of the risks associated with mutual aid group operations was often cited as a reason why councils and other formal organisations were reluctant to support the work of mutual aid groups directly.

Health and safety: Other risks included the transmission of the virus itself as safe delivery protocols and PPE use evolved. The management and distribution of information such as prescription details, names, and addresses also may have posed a risk to individuals and formal organisations. Handling very complex care situations, particularly those related to mental health, were also of concern. Mutual aid groups often had protocols for signposting to organisations with specialist expertise. However, pre-existing formal organisations that were best equipped to deal with many of these challenges were constrained in their ability to help due to COVID-19. This left some mutual aid groups with limited options for response.

Source: 'Solidarity in a time of crisis: The role of mutual aid to the COVID-19 pandemic' Yunus Centre for Social Business and Health, Glasgow Caledonian University [7]

Also, the proportion of infrastructure organisations which assessed the mutual aid response as effective ('very' or 'somewhat') declined between the first lockdown (March – June 2020) and second lockdown (December 2020 – April 2021): see the Scottish Government survey data in Table 3.3.1.[4] This may be indicative of the reduced role for mutual aid during the second lockdown.

Table 3.3.1 Scottish infrastructure organisations' assessment on the effectiveness of the mutual aid response – comparison between the first and second lockdowns

Infrastructure organisations' assessment	First lockdown Effective (Very / Somewhat)	Second lockdown Effective (Very / Somewhat)
Coverage of the volunteer response in areas of deprivation	71%	58%
Ability to support people who were shielding	65%	56%
Ability to support people who were vulnerable but non-shielding	73%	56%
Ability to meet immediate crisis needs – e.g., for food, transport, shopping, shelter	81%	67%

Source: Scottish Government Survey on impact of COVID-19 – April – June 2021

However, this feedback does highlight the important role which mutual aid has played in helping to reach those most in need during the pandemic: those living in areas of deprivation, those shielding, and the vulnerable who did not have to shield. All of these groups in society were likely to have had higher levels of crisis need during the lockdowns than mainstream society.

3.3.4 Evolution of mutual aid groups

As described above, the major contribution of mutual aid was in meeting the crisis needs of the pandemic in areas such as food supply, shopping and mitigating social isolation and loneliness. However, once the first wave of the crisis started to abate and the COVID-19 restrictions were relaxed in the summer and autumn of 2020 the demands on mutual aid groups eased.

It was not until the escalation of infections during November and December 2020 and the reintroduction of lockdown in Scotland in January 2021 that once more there was an increased role for mutual aid volunteering, but to a lesser extent, as some of the crisis response needs were lessened during the second lockdown. By the time of the second lockdown more formal services were in place, policy changes such as the extended household had been made, and the capacity of the private sector, for example in food delivery, had increased.

By May 2021 the evidence from a random sample of mutual aid Facebook groups in Scotland revealed a very significant decrease in activity between April 2020 and May 2021: see Table 3.3.2. The data shows that while the average membership size had increased modestly since the first lockdown, the average number of daily posts had decreased very significantly, from an average of 35 per day in April 2020 to only 2 per day in May 2021. The right hand column – 'total number of posts in May 2021' – is presented to give a wider context to the very low daily post figures – so zero daily posts does not mean there were no posts over the period of a whole month.

Table 3.3.2 Changes in Scottish Mutual Aid group activity between April 2020 and May 2021

Name of mutual aid group	April 2020		May 2021		
	No. of Members	Av. No. of daily Posts	No. of Members	Av. No. of Daily posts	No. of posts in past month
Edinburgh Coronavirus Support	9,230	60	9,200	0	13
Fife COVID-19 Mutual Aid Group	4,300	16	4,600	0	15
Stirling Pulling Together	3700	120	5,300	7	383
Glasgow Mutual Aid	2800	50	3,300	0	22

Community Aid St. Andrews (CASA)	2767	27	3,200	7	136
Scottish Mutual Aid	1,300	4	1,300	0	1
COVID-19 Help and Support in Carnoustie	1,184	8	1,200	0	12
Dundee COVID-19 Mutual Aid Group	900	6	855	1	3
Mutual-Aid Perth	858	20	850	2	36
Average per organisation	**3,004**	**35**	**3,312**	**2**	

Source: Volunteer Scotland analysis of Facebook data (April 2020 and May 2021)

The infrastructure organisations which took part in the Scottish Government Survey provide further evidence to support the contraction in mutual aid support. [4]

Infrastructure organisations' perspective on contraction in mutual aid

"The first lockdown brought a significant increase in the number of volunteers and volunteering in our local communities; the second lockdown didn't bring about an increase as communities knew what to expect and the infrastructure was still in place to support what was needing done?"

"Many of the mutual aid groups started up during the 1st lockdown do not appear to have started up again during 2nd lockdown: however, some established themselves as constituted organisations in their own right or had established connections and partnerships since 1st lockdown, volunteering for constituted groups that were better able to work with statutory partners during 2nd lockdown."

"The mutual aid groups had either started to formalise towards the second lockdown or had started to reduce operations - there was an issue with getting them to consider taking 'new' volunteers on the basis that they didn't know them and would rather continue on, though this meant the rate of burnout is still an ongoing issue."

Post second lockdown from May 2021 many mutual aid groups remained active and some moved to community support pages on Facebook, for example 'Stirling Pulling Together'. [12] The move to the community support page model was reflective of the changing community needs. During the lockdown periods the page provided a space for community groups and individuals to ask for and offer support, as well as providing information on COVID-19 support available in the local area; for example, the location and operating hours of food banks / community food hubs, along with important updates from the local authority and health boards.

Post lockdown the page continued to provide updates from the local authority and health board, for example of the location of vaccination centres, provided community news and events and offered a space for people new to the area to ask about meet-up groups or other groups within the area. The page also promotes businesses in the community that offered community support during the lockdowns.

The infrastructure organisations also provided support to help mutual aid groups transition into constituted groups which would allow them to offer support to their communities in a more structured way with at least a minimum level of governance, such as through becoming an unincorporated association.[4]

Infrastructure organisations' support for mutual aid groups to constitute formally

"Helping to constitute the groups to become effective local anchor organisations"

"As a result of the support received from the TSI and others the mutual aid groups I have now formed into 3 Community Response Teams covering post code areas. Two are constituted organisations and one is a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO). They also have their own funding and we have assisted them to become established organisations over the past year"

"Like many areas in Scotland there was significant numbers of mutual aid groups in (our area). Some started as Facebook groups, but moved quickly to become constituted organisations, with the TSI's help. In our opinion it was important that this development work happened to support the groups to access funding and operate safely. Other groups stayed as Facebook groups and have since disbanded or morphed into community information sites."

A key finding in the report by Glasgow Caledonian University further supports this:

"At the end of 2020 many mutual aid groups were still operating, although very few still resembled their original form. Where groups were successful in their continued solidarity, they found ways to partner and connect with existing formal organisations, while they retained unique community-based 'assets' that positioned them to respond to community needs rapidly and effectively." [7]

3.4 Informal volunteering

As discussed in Section 3.2, the Ipsos MORI survey highlighted an increase in informal volunteering during the first lockdown, from 31% pre-COVID-19 to 35% during the first lockdown. However, this is believed to be a significant underestimate due to the 'other' volunteers, many of which are understood to have engaged in both informal volunteering and mutual aid.[1]

While it is not possible to break down the Ipsos MORI data on the tasks undertaken by volunteers during the first lockdown by the type of volunteering, qualitative data gathered by Volunteer Scotland during the first lockdown showed that informal volunteers were primarily involved in: [6]

- keeping in touch with neighbours who were at risk of being lonely; and
- helping to meet the immediate support needs of those in their local area and communities.

Like mutual aid groups, much less is known about changes to the informal volunteering response after the first lockdown. The working hypothesis is similar to that of mutual aid whereby the lifting of lockdown in July 2020 reduced informal volunteering; and in response to the increased COVID-19 restrictions during November and December 2020, and the subsequent lockdown in Scotland in January 2021, the level of informal volunteering increased. However, the informal response in the second lockdown may not have been reduced by as much as mutual aid due to the ongoing problem of social isolation and loneliness that informal volunteering is so well positioned to address.

The SHS 2018 showed that the task most frequently undertaken by informal volunteers was befriending or keeping in touch with someone at risk of being lonely, involving 18% of informal volunteers. [2] As discussed in [section 4.6](#), while some crisis response needs reduced between the first and second lockdowns, the need for befriending and keeping in touch did not lesson.

The Scottish Government survey provides additional evidence on the contribution of informal volunteering by showing that (see Figure 3.4.1):[4]

- 90% of infrastructure organisations agreed that informal volunteers had an important role in combatting social isolation in their local area during COVID-19
- 87% agreed that neighbours helping each other through informal volunteering had been an essential complement to formal volunteering; and
- 85% agreed that informal volunteering had strengthened community spirit and identity.

Figure 3.4.1 Scottish Infrastructure organisations' assessment of informal volunteering support during COVID-19

Source: Scottish Government Survey on impact of COVID-19 - April - June 2021
n=52
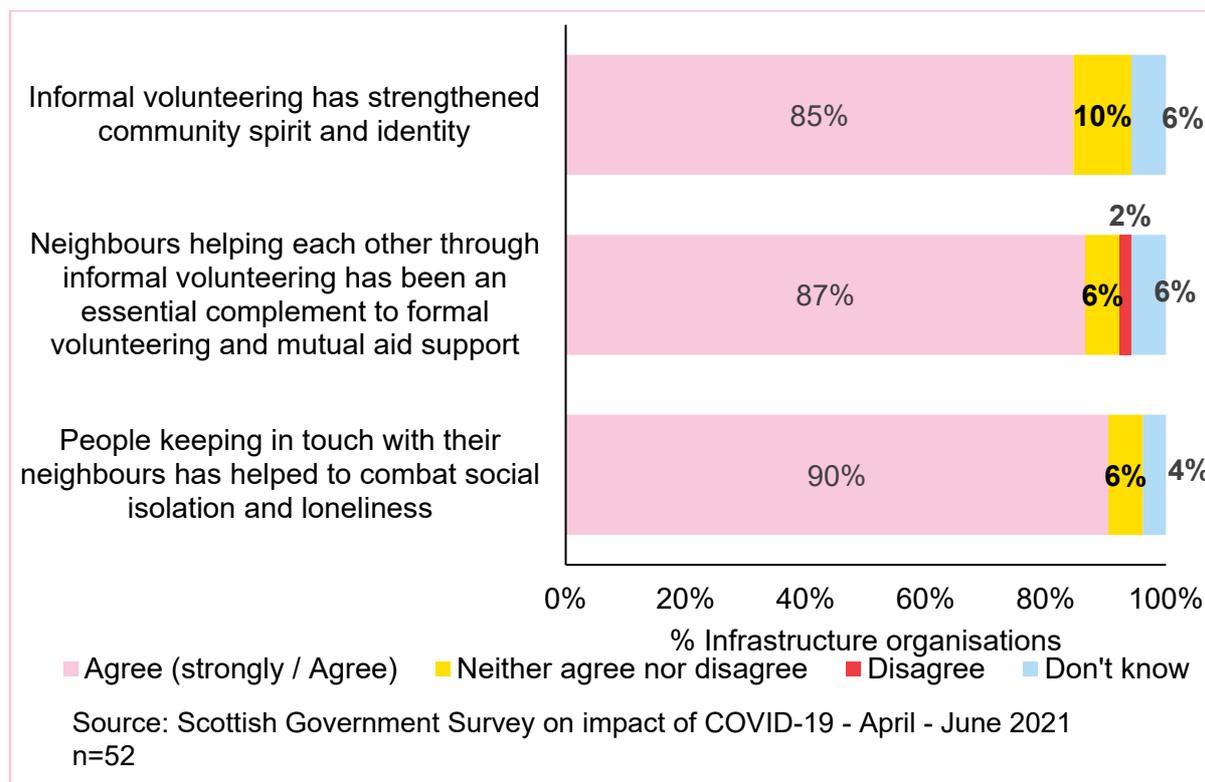
Infrastructure organisations also provided additional information on the importance of the informal volunteering role, and its evolving contribution over the course of the pandemic.[4]

Infrastructure organisations' views on informal volunteering

"A vital response to the pandemic, especially in the early days. Without doubt people probably became more involved and aware of their neighbours and their neighbourhood."

"During the first lockdown informal volunteering increased as majority of communities recognised the needs of their communities and pulled together to support those in need. This continued somewhat during the 2nd lockdown. Another factor for this increase was that many were people who would not normally have the time due to working and people who were on furlough or working from home had more time to offer to help support their communities."

"People have carried on helping their neighbours with e.g., prescription pick up months after the initial lockdown. They have developed relationships with these people which would not have been possible prior to the pandemic. These relationships have led to better conversation which have led to new needs being established."

The recently published Scottish Household Survey 2020 provides further corroborating evidence on the levels of informal volunteering participation during COVID-19.[14] The survey was undertaken in October 2020 and January to March 2021 and asks participants about any volunteering activity in the previous 12 months. Therefore, a very high proportion of the data relates to volunteering activity during the pandemic and helps to provide important overall trend data. In particular, it identifies the major increase in informal volunteer participation, which increased from 36% in 2018 to 56% in 2020. The survey also shows that informal volunteers devoted their inputs to supporting those crisis needs which were particularly acute during the first lockdown:

- Keeping in touch with someone who is at risk of being lonely: up from 18% in 2018 to 69% in 2020
- Doing shopping, collection pension, collecting benefits or paying bills: up from 12% to 51%
- Providing transport or accompanying someone away from home: up from 9% to 20%
- Routine household chores: up from 11% to 19%
- Providing advice or support with letters of forms or speaking with others on someone else's behalf: up from 6% to 16%.

Note: Scottish Government has posted a notice advising against comparison of SHS 2020 with previous years, due to changes in the research methodology adopted by Ipsos MORI during COVID-19. However, as explained in Volunteer Scotland's news article sharing the headline results, there is a strong case for comparing the informal volunteering results due to the magnitude of the changes, and the corroboration with the June 2020 Ipsos MORI survey results.[15]

References

1. Impact of COVID-19 on volunteering participation in Scotland: Volunteer Scotland and Ipsos MORI; June 2020 https://www.volunteerscotland.net/for-organisations/research-and-evaluation/publications/covid-19-research/impact-of-covid-19-on-volunteering-participation-in-scotland/
2. Scottish Household Survey 2018 (https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-people-annual-report-results-2018-scottish-household-survey/)
3. Rutherford, A and Spart, R (2021) Working Paper 4: Volunteering in the Pandemic Evidence from Two UK Volunteer Matching Services. (https://www.mvain4.uk/resource-details/working-paper-4-volunteering-in-the-pandemic-evidence-from-two-uk-volunteer-matching-services/)
4. Scottish third sector perspectives on volunteering during COVID-19: survey report – Scottish Government; January 2022 - https://www.gov.scot/isbn/9781802018554
5. Research on Mutual Aid Groups in Scotland, April 2020 https://www.volunteerscotland.net/media/1625197/research_on_mutual_aid_groups_v.2.pdf
6. Mapping of Press and Social Media Coverage, September 2021 https://www.volunteerscotland.net/for-organisations/research-and-evaluation/publications/covid-19-research/
7. Curtin, M., Rendall, J.S., Roy, M.J. and Teasdale, S. (2021) Solidarity in a time of crisis: The role of mutual aid to the COVID-19 pandemic. Yunus Centre for Social Business and Health/Glasgow Caledonian University https://www.gcu.ac.uk/media/gcalwebv2/ycsbh/yunuscentre/newycwebsite/The-role-of-mutual-aid-COVID-19_YunusCentreReport.pdf
8. Scottish Government guidance on limiting social contact: 16 March 2020: https://www.gov.scot/news/people-advised-to-limit-social-contact/
9. 'Shielding: a way forward for Scotland': Scottish Government 8 June 2020: https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-shielding-way-forward-scotland/pages/4/
10. 'Volunteering, health and wellbeing: what does the evidence tell us?' Volunteer Scotland; December 2018: https://www.volunteerscotland.net/for-organisations/research-and-evaluation/publications/volunteering-health-wellbeing/
11. 'Our chance to reconnect: Final Report of the talk/together project': Executive Summary /together; March 2021 https://together.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Executive-Summary.TalkTogether-1.pdf
12. 'Stirling Pulling Together': https://en-gb.facebook.com/groups/2549927025254514/
13. Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme Statistics: HMRC; July 2020: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme-statistics-july-2020/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme-statistics-july-2020#fig-5
14. Scottish Household Survey 2020 – telephone survey: key findings – Scottish Government, January 2022: https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-household-survey-2020-telephone-survey-key-findings/pages/9/
15. Scottish Household Survey – 2020 Results – News article by Volunteer Scotland 28 January, 2022: https://www.volunteerscotland.net/about-us/news-blog/news/scottish-household-survey-2020-results/