
Policy Briefing: Decline in Volunteer Participation

Summary

- The percentage of adults in Scotland volunteering for an organisation or community group has dropped from 26% in 2019 to 22% in 2022.
- The number of adults¹ in Scotland volunteering for an organisation or community group has fallen below 1 million for the first time in 15 years².
- Individuals are showing an increasing preference for volunteering roles that support their local community or neighbourhood.
- Volunteer participation faces an ongoing diversity challenge, with disabled people and people from more deprived communities less likely to volunteer.
- These changes in volunteer participation will have major implications for Scotland's economy, public services and communities.

Introduction

The latest Scottish Household Survey results for 2022 revealed a worrying decline in volunteer participation among Scotland's adults. The seismic societal events of recent years have taken their toll on volunteers and the organisations that involve them. Given the contribution of volunteers to a range of essential services, this should be a significant concern for policymakers.

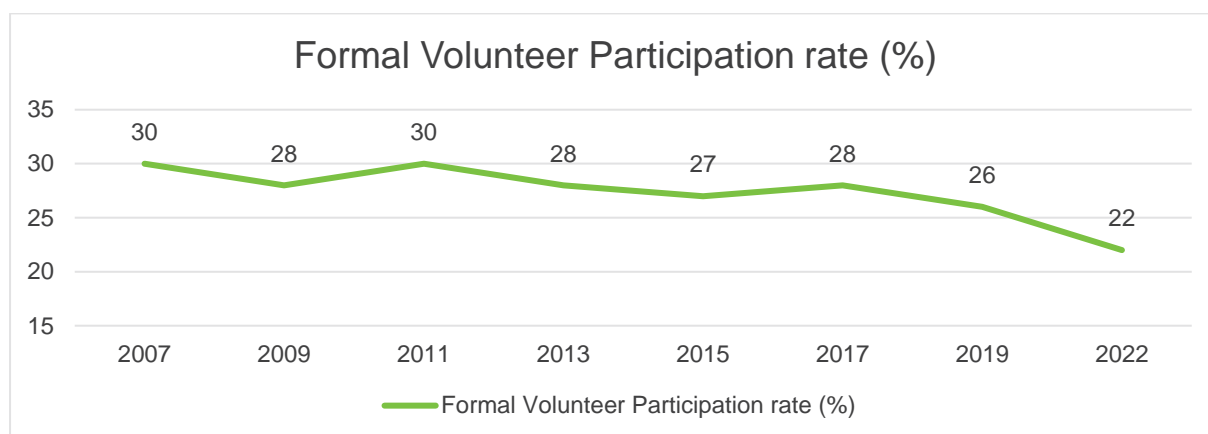
This briefing has been produced by Volunteer Scotland in their role as the secretariat of the Cross Party Group on Volunteering. It provides a summary of the 2022 Scottish Household Survey volunteering figures, published in December 2023. It then explores the reasons and implications behind these findings, before sharing some important recommendations.

¹ The Scottish Household Survey methodology is to survey over 10,000 households, with some questions – including those related to volunteering – asked of a 'random adult' in the household over the age of 16. Further details on methodology can be found [here](#).

² In 2007 the format of the volunteering question in the Scottish Household Survey was changed and is therefore the first year that we can compare subsequent SHS data.

Key Findings

- **The headline finding from the Scottish Household survey is that the adult formal³ volunteer participation rate has fallen to 22%**, a significant difference to the rate of 26% in 2019. This also represents a 9-percentage point fall from the 30% high in 2011, and the first time since at least 2007 that the number of adult volunteers has fallen below 1 million in Scotland.



- **‘Local community/neighbourhood’ volunteering is now the most popular type of volunteering** with 27% undertaking this activity type in 2022, compared to 22% of volunteers in 2019.
- **Volunteering in ‘youth and children’s activities’ outside school is the second most popular type of volunteering** at 21% of adult volunteers in 2022, slightly lower than the pre-pandemic level of 23% in 2019.
- Volunteering in **‘Environmental protection’** has also increased from 5% in 2019 to 8% in 2022.
- **Disabled adults were less likely to volunteer than non-disabled adults** (17% vs. 23%), which maintains a long-term disparity in participation between these two groups.
- **There is a significant variance in volunteering participation rates according to level of deprivation**, with 14% of adults in the most deprived communities (quintile 1) and 27% of adults in the least deprived communities (quintile 5) volunteering – a 13 percentage-point difference.
- **The volunteering participation rate for those living in rural areas is significantly higher (29%) than the rest of Scotland (20%)**. There is also much higher engagement of volunteers in rural areas supporting their ‘Local community/ neighbourhood’ (34%), compared to volunteers in urban areas (25%).

³ Formal volunteering is the unpaid voluntary giving of time through a group, club or organisation for the benefit of other people, the environment or wider society.

Commentary

The reasons behind the sharp decline in volunteering in Scotland are multi-faceted. The Covid-19 pandemic caused many volunteers to step down because they were shielding, and those who remained reported feelings of stress and fatigue. This strain experienced by volunteers was likely exacerbated by demands presented by the subsequent cost of living crisis, as well as other world events including the climate emergency and the war in Ukraine. The many challenges that have contributed to the decline in volunteer participation include:

- Individuals experiencing practical barriers to volunteering, including having less time to volunteer due to other competing commitments.
- Individuals having less mental capacity to volunteer because of anxiety, apathy and fatigue caused by personal and societal challenges.
- A decline in the quality of volunteer experiences, likely as a result of financial challenges and increasing demand for services facing the public and third sectors in recent years.

Despite these challenges, the past four years have also contributed to a shift in volunteer motivations and behaviours. Volunteering has become more local or hyperlocal in nature, with many volunteers preferring to help organisations focused on their community or neighbourhood. This is likely a result of the focus on community that emerged during the pandemic, with people spending more time in their homes and neighbourhoods.

Some volunteering activities have declined in popularity, particularly those related to children and to health, disability and wellbeing. This could reflect the increasing preference for volunteer roles that are less like 'paid work' or less bureaucratic in nature. Volunteer roles with children or vulnerable adults tend to have additional requirements around safeguarding and increased overall responsibility.

Policy Implications

Economy

The implications of this decline in volunteer participation are significant, particularly given the current strain on Scotland's economy. We calculated that the financial contribution of formal volunteers to the Scottish economy in 2018 was £2.3 billion based on the SHS results for that year. Similar analysis of the 2022 SHS figures suggests that the financial contribution of formal volunteers to the Scottish economy has fallen by approximately £400 million.⁴

⁴ The Volunteer Scotland research team have calculated the economic value of volunteering based on the 2022 headline SHS results, taking the impact of inflation into account. The mean hours used in the economic value calculation are based on 2018 mean hours, this will be updated once the 2022 raw data is available for analysis.

Public Services

Volunteers are often at the frontline of essential service delivery, giving their time to support activity that is typically community-based and preventative in nature. Volunteers often help the most vulnerable in society, delivering person-centred services which stop people from reaching crisis point. The reduction in volunteer participation could have a considerable impact on the prevalence of preventative services, and consequently increase demand for more acute public services.

Communities

Volunteers are the lifeblood of Scotland's voluntary and community sector. A decline in individuals giving their time in governance or operational roles could lead to a corresponding decline in community-based activity. This includes grassroots sport, culture, children's clubs, environmental activities, emergency response activities and practical support for those in need. It could also lead to the decline in participation in local democracy and community empowerment activity.

Recommendations

Given the potential implications of a decline in volunteer participation, it is vital that action is taken now to reverse this trend. There are a number of ways that you can use your influence to support volunteering in Scotland:

- Join the [Cross Party Group on Volunteering](#) to hear more about the strategic contribution of volunteering to Scotland and hear from organisations that involve volunteers about issues affecting them.
- Join your colleagues Foysol Choudhury MSP, Joe Fitzpatrick MSP and Miles Briggs MSP and commit to promote and uphold the [Volunteer Charter](#) by becoming a Charter Champion. The Charter details 10 principles for the meaningful and legitimate engagement of volunteers.
- Regularly ask the Scottish Government how it is continuing to prioritise resource for the ten year [Volunteering Action Plan](#), launched in June 2022.
- Publicly support and promote the national volunteer recruitment campaign launching in early 2024 – more information to follow.
- Acknowledge the contribution of volunteers during Volunteers' Week in early June by showcasing volunteers in your constituency/region and by attending our special CPG reception. This year we will be celebrating 40 years of Volunteers' Week.

Further Information

If you require further information or clarification on the issues raised in this briefing our Policy Officer, Sarah Latto, would be happy to support any requests.

Sarah can be reached by emailing sarah.latto@volunteerscotland.org.uk.

About Us

Volunteer Scotland is Scotland's national centre for volunteering. We believe that volunteering should be an enjoyable, rewarding and fulfilling experience for the volunteer; that volunteers have the right to be safe and protected in delivering their volunteering roles; and that to derive health and well-being benefits from volunteering requires regular and meaningful contributions of time.



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