Volunteer Scotland

No Volunteers, No Community

Creating a Nation of Volunteers

2026 Scottish Parliament Election Manifesto

October 2025

Photo by Andy Jamieson for Volunteer Scotland

No Volunteers, No Community

The time gifted by volunteers is vital for the resilience and strength of Scotland's communities.

In 2022, **46% of Scottish adults** volunteered in some capacity (**up to 48% in 2024**), giving over **300 million hours** of their time. We estimate that this incredible contribution is worth **£5.3 billion** to Scotland's economy.

Volunteers support a range of vital activities across Scotland every single day. They provide companionship and emotional support to people who are isolated or lonely. They help us to understand and act against the many impacts of climate change and biodiversity loss. They ensure that some of the most vulnerable people in society receive crucial advice and support. They provide culture, heritage and arts activities which promote creativity and connection. They lead clubs and groups which enrich the lives of our children and young people. They also support the delivery of vital public services, including responding to emergencies at sea or in our great mountain ranges.

Without volunteers, Scotland's communities would struggle to thrive.

A Nation of Volunteers

There is clear evidence that volunteering is good for our health and wellbeing, both physically and mentally.

In **research published by Volunteer Scotland in March 2025,** it was found that volunteering on a weekly basis with a club, group or organisation can bring **wellbeing benefits worth up to £1000 per person each year**. These benefits are felt more strongly by certain groups of people; the effect of volunteering on mental wellbeing for people with a disability or long-term health condition was seven times larger than for people without.

When combined with the time Scottish volunteers contribute weekly, this is a contribution of **£2.3 billion** in terms of economic and social value to the Scottish economy which is generated through formal volunteering.

Volunteering has numerous other important benefits, including developing new skills, broadening our life experiences and prospects, and widening our social circles.

There is also evidence that volunteering makes us more engaged and responsible citizens and has a mutually positive impact on both **the volunteer** and **the community.**

For the volunteer…

In 2023, volunteers across Scotland were surveyed about their experience in the Time Well Spent survey, which found that:

- 94% are satisfied with their volunteering experience.
- 89% agreed that volunteering had introduced them to new people, demonstrating that volunteering is one of the most effective ways of creating new social interaction and connections.
- 79% agreed that volunteering gave them more confidence.
- 75% said their volunteering made them feel less isolated.
- 30% of volunteers have reported increased employment prospects because of their volunteering - this rises to 46% for volunteers under the age of 55.

For the community…

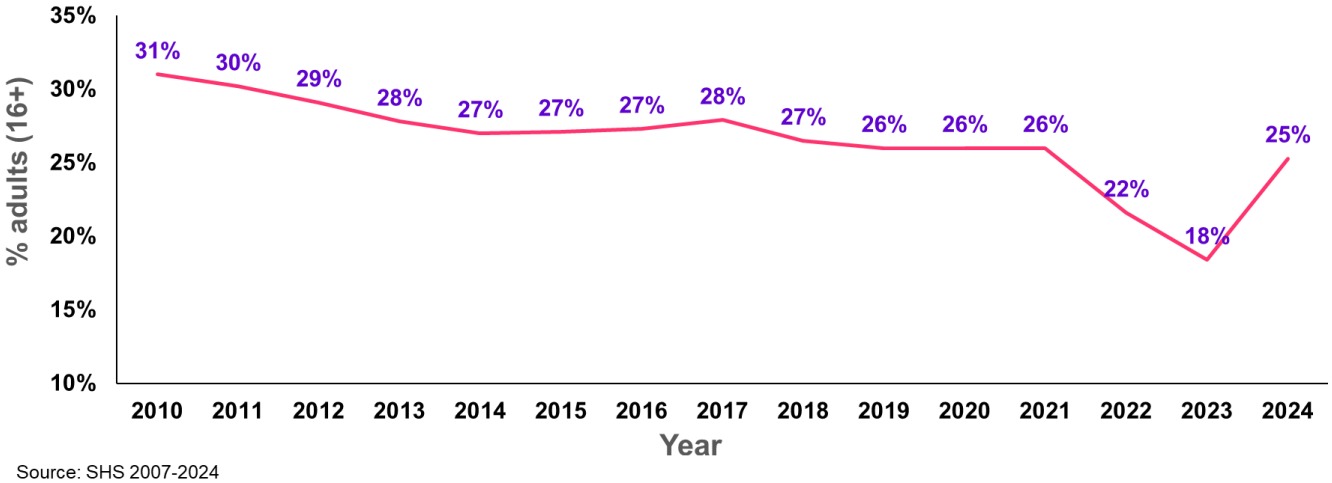
As well as strengthening social connections between people, volunteering is crucial to the civic institutions, heritage sector, and both natural and built environments that are essential to our society:

- Volunteering gives people personal investment in their community, with **participation in volunteering during childhood increasing the likelihood of young adults voting in elections.**
- Volunteering connects communities to their environment. **Volunteering in nature for 6 weeks can increase 'pro-environment behaviour' by over 50%**.
- Scotland's world-class natural environment and heritage sites are reliant on **over 1,400 environmental voluntary organisations**. The National Trust for Scotland alone is sustained by **around 4,000 volunteers**.
- **Jobseekers are known to favour companies** that offer their staff 'social good' benefits such as Employer Supported Volunteering (ESV). Rolling out ESV to all employees that do not currently have access to it **could deliver net productivity gains of up to £2.8 billion to the UK economy.**

The urgent challenges facing volunteering

The wide-ranging benefits that volunteering brings to Scottish society are well recognised, yet volunteer participation remains a prominent challenge for the voluntary sector. Volunteer Scotland are cautiously optimistic that volunteer participation in Scotland is showing early signs of recovery following the Covid-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis.

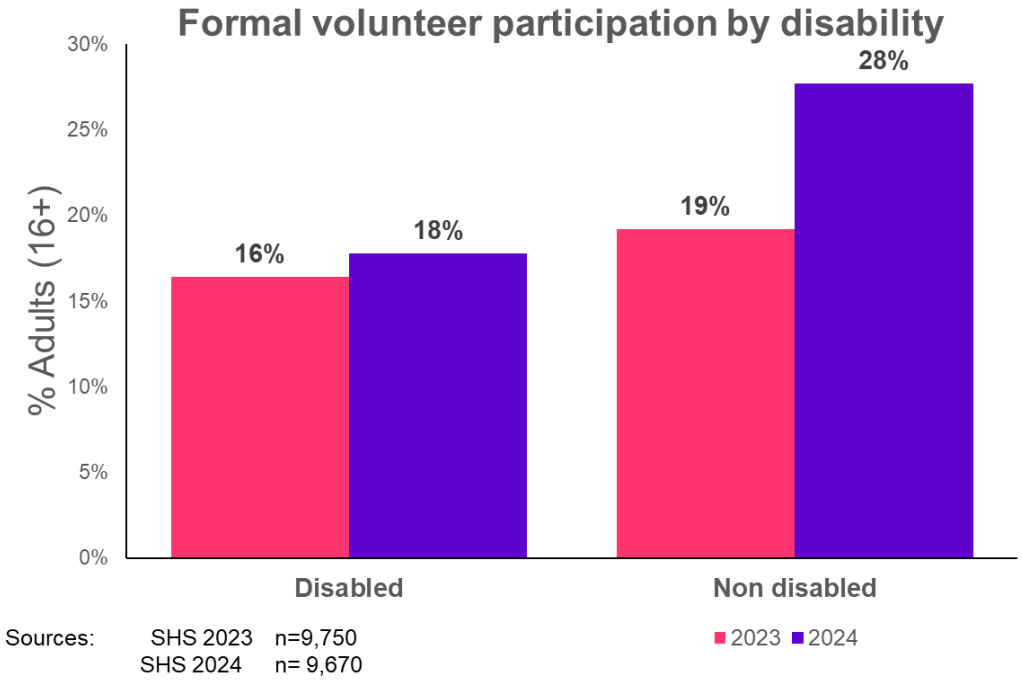
Between 2010 and 2024 the adult formal volunteering participation rate has fallen from 31% to 25%, recovering from a record low of 18% in 2023. This includes a drop in the number of hours volunteers are contributing. Between 2018 and 2022, **28 million fewer hours** were volunteered with a group or organisation.



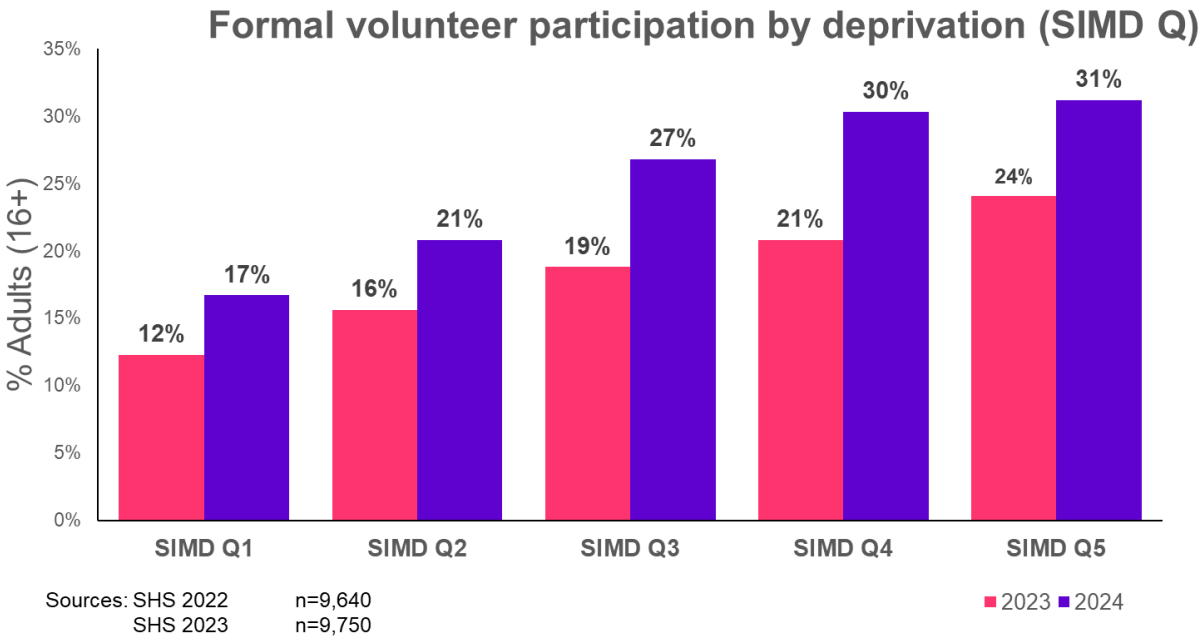
Source: SHS 2007-2024

Beyond the overall participation rate, Volunteer Scotland has growing concerns regarding the inclusivity of Scotland's population of volunteers, particularly regarding the inclusion of people living with a disability and those from our most deprived communities.

The disparity in participation between disabled and non-disabled people, and between Scotland's most and least deprived areas (measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation), have both grown significantly in the last year to 10 percentage points and 15 percentage points respectively.



Sources: SHS 2023 n=9,750
SHS 2024 n= 9,670



Sources: SHS 2022 n=9,640
SHS 2023 n=9,750

These changing trends in volunteer participation can be explained through four interrelated challenges which stem from a range of national and global events including the Covid-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, the dual nature and climate crises, and global unrest.

The next Scottish Government must ensure that the recovery in volunteering participation is sustained, and that marginalised groups are fully enabled to engage in volunteering.

Volunteers and the organisations that they support **must not** be taken for granted.

Policy Asks for Accelerating the Recovery and Closing Inclusion Gaps in Volunteering

A sustainable and inclusive future for Scotland's voluntary sector is possible; however, we believe that urgent action is required.

Together with the **Volunteering Action Plan Policy Champions Network**, we have identified ten policy asks for political parties to consider ahead of the 2026 Scottish Parliament election.

Our Manifesto Asks

1. **Commit to fair and sustainable funding for third sector organisations**, in line with **SCVO Fair Funding asks**, thus ensuring that volunteers have supported, meaningful and appropriate volunteering experiences.

2. **Commit to retaining the Protection of Vulnerable Groups Scheme fee waiver for volunteers in qualifying voluntary organisations** to safeguard the vital role of volunteers in supporting some of Scotland's most vulnerable people.

3. **Sustain local and national investment in the implementation of the Volunteering Action Plan**, the ten-year plan co-produced with over 100 stakeholders and published in 2022 to create a Scotland where everyone can volunteer, more often, and throughout their lives.

4. **Commit to embedding the principles of the Volunteer Charter in relevant policy**, ensuring that all volunteering is fair, sustainable, and free from exploitation.

5. **Invest in the development of supported volunteering projects across Scotland** to help people with additional barriers, including those with physical and mental health issues and new Scots, to access and sustain meaningful volunteering.

6. **Invest in the development of a national approach to Employer Supported Volunteering**, working with employers to ensure that all working adults can pursue meaningful volunteering roles.

7. **Build the promotion of volunteering and opportunities to volunteer into the school curriculum from the earliest age**, ensuring that all young people understand the benefits of volunteering for themselves, their communities and Scottish society.

8. **Promote the health and wellbeing benefits of volunteering with people affected by or at risk of poor physical or mental health**, including through greater investment in social prescribing models.

9. **Ensure that legislation and policy related to community empowerment and local democracy recognises the central contribution of volunteers** and promotes sustainable, community-led activity that is not driven by public sector cost-cutting measures.

10. **Commit to an independent review of charity regulation**, with a focus on ensuring that volunteering as a charity trustee is inclusive, proportionate and sustainable.

The next Scottish Government has an invaluable opportunity to invest in Scotland's communities by prioritising volunteers and voluntary organisations.

Volunteer Scotland will engage with candidates from all political parties to build consensus for these policy asks and ensure that an inclusive and sustainable future for volunteering is at the top of the agenda for the upcoming Scottish Parliament election.

Acknowledgements
We give thanks to the **Volunteering Action Plan Policy Champions Network** for their considerable input to the development of this Manifesto.

Should any queries arise from this briefing, please contact our policy team by emailing **policy@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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