



Exploring Post-Pandemic Trends in Volunteer Participation and Wellbeing

Policy Briefing Paper for Volunteer Now

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	5
Methodology	6
The Policy Context	9
Literature Review	11
Findings	17
Conclusion	25
Recommendations	27
References	29
Appendix 1:	32
Additional Tables and Figures with Titles	
Appendix 2:	35
Presentation Slides	

Executive Summary

Title: Exploring Post-Pandemic Trends in Volunteer Participation and Wellbeing in Northern Ireland

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Commissioning Organisation: Volunteer Now

This policy briefing paper was commissioned by Volunteer Now, Northern Ireland's leading organisation for promotion and support of volunteer work, to examine volunteering trends in Northern Ireland in the past four years, using data from the Continuous Household Survey (CHS). The organisations working with Volunteer Now had reported some changes in the numbers and demographic make-up of their volunteer force since 2020, and this paper was commissioned to concretely assess what changes had taken place. Following initial discussions with Volunteer Now, it was also requested that the paper cover and assess the links between volunteering and personal wellbeing.

Methodology

We analysed available data from the CHS by demographic group, such as gender, marital status, religious background, areas of deprivation, and so on to assess trends in both volunteer engagement and wellbeing as it relates to volunteering between 2019 and 2023. The 2020-21 CHS, however, did not include a question on volunteer engagement, which made it difficult to gain a concrete insight as to what occurred during the pandemic, and to compare with other years. We also carried out a review of relevant literature to establish the current policy context and theoretical background, and to explore the various factors affecting volunteer engagement in Northern Ireland at present.

Policy Context & Literature Review

In modern social policy, volunteering and the voluntary sector are seen as part of the welfare mix by helping to fill the gaps when the welfare state is struggling. At present, the Northern Ireland Department for Communities is redeveloping its policy framework and infrastructure to support the voluntary sector. The consultation process for this framework,

as well as the previous Volunteering Strategy and Action Plan revealed issues of volunteer recruitment, retention, and recognition, as well as issues relating to accessibility and funding cuts.

Volunteering offers numerous benefits not only to society, but also to volunteers themselves, such as: Enhancing individuals' wellbeing, boosting self-confidence, combating loneliness, and providing a sense of purpose. Several factors have impacted the volunteer sector in Northern Ireland since 2019. Naturally, the biggest factor was the COVID-19 pandemic, but others included the cost of living crisis and changes in volunteering or working patterns.

Findings

Since 2019, there has been a significant overall drop in the proportion of CHS respondents who have engaged in volunteering. There was some recovery between 2021/22 and 2022/23, but most demographic groups have not yet returned to a pre-pandemic proportion of engagement, or have seen no recovery at all. We therefore refer to this pattern as a *drop-low recovery* trend. There is an overall incidence of better wellbeing markers for those that volunteer compared to those that do not, and lower levels of loneliness among demographic groups with higher rates of volunteer engagement when observing statistics from the last four years. However, these differences may not all be significant, and there are other contributing factors influencing these markers as well.

In light of our analysis and findings, we have come up with the following recommendations for Volunteer Now and volunteer-involving organisations in Northern Ireland:

Recommendations

1. Promote social benefits of volunteering
2. Create or adopt a platform to recognise volunteers
3. Adopt and promote measures to foster a more diverse & inclusive volunteer force
4. Lobby for more expansive questions in surveys that cover volunteering
5. Lobby for continuous monitoring and evaluation of volunteer-related policies

Introduction

This policy briefing paper has been written by a group of final year students at Queen's University Belfast studying Social Policy. As part of our Policy Briefing Paper module, we have been asked to work alongside Volunteer Now in order to produce a briefing paper following their guidelines for the project.

Volunteer Now is an organisation which seeks to encourage and support volunteering throughout Northern Ireland. Their mission statement is to "enable people to offer their skills and time to build stronger, more active communities," and their vision statement is "building strong communities through volunteering." Volunteer Now helps Northern Ireland's volunteer sector to prosper, in addition to enabling individuals to get involved in a wide variety of opportunities such as volunteering, community projects, youth work, events, and work with different organisations. Furthermore, Volunteer Now promotes and celebrates the contribution of volunteers across Northern Ireland, working with a diverse range of organisations within both the public and private sectors, as well as the voluntary and community sectors (Volunteer Now, 2024).

After meeting with Volunteer Now, it became clear that they intended for us to carry out a demographic investigation into who is volunteering. This was based on reports from the organisations that Volunteer Now cooperates with, who had noticed a shift in volunteer demographics in recent years. Furthermore, Volunteer Now wanted us to focus on trends that emerged after the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than just the trends seen during it. They had identified and commissioned a broad scope of research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic on trends in volunteering, but noted a gap in the amount of data gathered post-pandemic, which they therefore considered an area of interest. Following further discussion, Volunteer Now also requested that we link our findings to data on wellbeing, to explore its links with volunteer engagement in Northern Ireland. As a result, this briefing paper aims to investigate some of the trends that have emerged post pandemic, by analysing data on volunteering trends and wellbeing collected from 2019 to 2023.

Methodology

Information for this briefing paper was gathered from existing secondary data, mostly from academic journals, government and organisational policies and websites, as well as databases. Since the data to be used for this research was made available on specific government websites and by our partner organisation, there was no need for 'crawlers' to gather this information (Bar-Ilan, 2001). That is to say, all data and pieces of information collected came from data that had been produced by national surveys within specific years, rather than from individual data.

To establish the Policy Context, we first searched for mentions of volunteering in social policy textbooks, to understand perspectives on volunteering within the discipline. Given the focus of much of social policy on state provision, volunteering is not widely mentioned or considered in any great depth in social policy texts. Given that we have been tasked to examine trends on a national level, we initially read and analysed policy papers on volunteering published by the Northern Irish Executive. One issue we encountered at this stage, however, is a lack of follow-up or evaluation of policies after they had been published or put into effect, which significantly limited our capacity to assess the impact of the policies.

Academic research for the Literature Review centred mainly on definitions, patterns, benefits, and factors affecting volunteering, as well as wellbeing – particularly focusing on loneliness and personal wellbeing and how they relate to volunteering – in Northern Ireland. Given the breadth of topics and available resources, headings were assigned to every member of the research team to pull from different academic sources to put forward the final Literature Review, which increased the efficiency of time spent accessing them.

As requested by Volunteer Now, the data within our Findings is drawn from the Continuous Household Survey (CHS) from the years 2019 to 2023. The CHS is a continuous social survey, which is carried out throughout Northern Ireland every year, covering various social topics. Given our topic, we primarily looked at engagement in volunteering, collating data and

analysing trends across the four years among most of the demographic groups covered by the CHS, such as: age groups, gender, marital status, disability, religious background, deprived and non-deprived areas, among others.

There are some demographic categories that reports from the CHS do not account for, however. Such groups include those from minority ethnic groups, those with refugee status, and those from the LGBTQ+ community. From our own personal experiences and understanding, we find that these groups play a meaningful part in the voluntary sector and would therefore be worth investigating in relation to volunteer engagement. However, due to the scope of the CHS, it would not be possible to extract a significant sample size to account for the behaviours of minority groups from this source alone. Further research on these demographic categories to account for this gap could be beneficial to better understand patterns within these marginalised groups, and to more effectively allocate resources to ensure adequate integration and inclusion.

As Volunteer Now had requested we look at wellbeing statistics and consider potential links between wellbeing and volunteering, we collectively examined statistics on loneliness for the respective demographic categories that we had covered. To do so, we collated data from NISRA's Northern Ireland Wellbeing Dashboard (Northern Ireland Research and Statistics Agency, 2024), which is also based on CHS findings.

A newly published report from NISRA and the Department for Communities (Official Statistics, 2024) explores comparative wellbeing statistics for those engaged in 'culture, arts, heritage, and sports' activities against those not partaking in these activities. Although only looking at one year of data, this report gave us a clearer picture of differences in wellbeing between those who do and do not volunteer. The report is noted to be statistically significant at the 95% confidence level, and we therefore consider it to be a concrete basis for developing our conclusions.

Barriers To Research

The most significant issue we encountered in our analysis was the absence of any questions related to volunteering in the 2020/21 CHS. Despite volunteer-involving organisations reporting an exceptional spike in volunteer numbers, as well as changes in volunteer demographics in response to the Covid-19 pandemic (Mobilising Voluntary Action UK, 2022), those taking part in the 2020/21 CHS were not asked if they had volunteered in the last year. Therefore, a comparison could not be made between that year and the other years, which had an impact on our ability to comparatively analyse trends.

An additional issue was in regards to changes made in the CHS questionnaires after 2019. From 2021/22 onwards, there was a significant drop in the number of questions asked about volunteering. Where there had previously been a dedicated qualitative report on the 'Experience of Volunteering by Adults in Northern Ireland' (Department for Communities, 2020), the only question asked in 2021/22 and 2022/23 was whether respondents had volunteered in the last year. As such, volunteer numbers are now included in 'engagement in culture, arts, heritage, and sports' reports, resulting in the splitting of data across two different sections of the Department for Communities website and, arguably, increasing the importance of our research as a means to coordinate said data. The decrease in questions also meant that we could not carry out a comprehensive qualitative analysis of the changes in volunteering trends, and we have therefore had to draw on other relevant literature and data to form our conclusions and recommendations.

Throughout the research process, discussions were held, and second checks and consultations were done within the team and with our course convenor to prevent bias and to ensure authenticity and validity of sources. This was done to ensure that personal theories and values do not affect the interpretation of information from the research and data sourced from the main survey findings and analysis. During the process as well, we received effective communication from our course convenor, as well as from Volunteer Now. This communication was invaluable, as our contact at Volunteer Now identified and pointed us towards the key sources for our research and helped us to better focus the attention of the project.

Policy Context

Volunteering in Social Policy

In *Social Policy*, Dean (2012) noted that providing unpaid assistance to others in one's community is a primordial human activity, and that volunteering, as we now call it, will likely always play a role in the maintenance of a society. The degree to which a society relies on volunteers, however, is dependent on the extent of the welfare state and government provision of social rights within that society. As such, in the contemporary context of Social Policy, volunteering and the voluntary sector is regarded as an important part of the 'welfare mix' - branches of society that step in to provide services to meet social needs and ensure wellbeing in the case of a partial, struggling, or failed welfare state (Dean, 2012).

Policy in Northern Ireland

The NI Department for Communities is currently in the process of redeveloping the policy frameworks and infrastructure that support the voluntary sector (Department for Communities, 2024a). At the time of writing, the framework is in the 'design and commissioning' phase of development, having completed a consultation process throughout 2023. The consultation and engagement process, which involved a mix of roundtables, meetings, and surveys, allowed those directly involved in the sector to communicate with policymakers about the challenges they were facing. During this process, stakeholders highlighted "deep-rooted and systemic issues," in relation to funding and regulation that create considerable difficulties for staff retention, which leads to greater reliance on volunteers (Department for Communities, 2024b p.9).

Regarding volunteering specifically, the consultation process identified many of the same problems seen with staff replicated with volunteers, including difficulties in recruitment and retention. This issue was "compounded by the lack of coordination, training, support, skills development, recognition and reward," (Department for Communities, 2024b, p. 14). The result of the process was therefore identification of the need for "a tiered structure of support across both the regional and local level," for volunteers that would incorporate supports like skill development, coordination, and training, among others (Department for Communities, 2024b, p. 14).

Prior to this, the Department for Social Development (2012) had developed a Volunteering Strategy and Action Plan that was to be carried out between 2012 and 2017. The Strategy and Action Plan outlines objectives to address some of the primary issues relating to volunteering in Northern Ireland, including increasing recognition of volunteers and volunteer recruitment, enhancing accessibility and diversity, and strengthening the supporting infrastructure. The documents are very comprehensive, with clear actions that can be taken to improve the sector. The Strategy and Action Plan further backs this up with Key Performance Indicators that can be measured to ensure objectives are met, such as increased numbers of young volunteers, increased participation in programmes, and diversity in volunteers that reflects the wider population. However, despite how useful the policy may have been as guidance for government and volunteer-involving organisations, there does not appear to have been any follow-up or publicly available monitoring of its effects or implementation. Indeed, as our findings will show, many of the issues that the policy intended to address prevail more than a decade on.

Literature Review

Definitions and Background

Volunteering has been defined as “any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group, or cause” (Wilson, 2000, p.215). It requires proactive and committed involvement, either informally or formally, with the latter involving participation in some sort of organisation to best direct efforts. Formal volunteering can be further divided into “active participation in a voluntary association,” and simply “volunteering” to work with said association from time to time or on a one-off basis (Wilson, 2000, p.216), thus signalling different degrees of involvement. Both these roles are critical to the effective functioning of a voluntary association.

It was reported by the Department for Communities (2023) that in 2022/23, 21% of the adult population of Northern Ireland participated in voluntary activity. These efforts are spread across some 7,486 registered charities in the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector (Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, 2022). Volunteering is clearly seen to be of significant benefit to Northern Ireland, though it is important to ask just what benefits it provides.

Benefits of Volunteering

Volunteers and volunteering initiatives are, by their very nature, huge contributors to social good and improvement. Volunteers provide essential assistance to individuals and communities that need their services but would not otherwise receive them, due to the under-funding of charitable organisations (The Wellhub Team, 2024). But volunteering is also known to be of great value to the volunteers themselves. Only 1% of respondents to the 2019/20 ‘Experience of Volunteering by Adults in Northern Ireland’ survey said that they found no personal benefit in volunteering, with most respondents saying that they felt better about themselves (67%), liked making a positive contribution to society (65%), had fun (63%), or made new friends (60%), among other benefits (Department for Communities, 2020). Other research has found that volunteering can contribute to improved mental and physical health, can improve one’s confidence and self-esteem, combat loneliness, and give people a sense of purpose (The Wellhub Team, 2024).

Recent studies have outlined the benefits of volunteering for minority and marginalised groups. Matre (2024), for example, noted that lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) youth that volunteer do so to expand their social networks and increase confidence, and highlighted the importance of including LGB youth in voluntary organisations that rely on young volunteers. A study by Care-Connect and Age UK (2018) also found that cultural differences can increase loneliness levels among Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic groups. As our findings will show, there are clear links between volunteering and reduced levels of loneliness and as such, inclusion of minority ethnic groups in voluntary organisations could act as an important preventative factor.

However, despite the numerous benefits derived from volunteering, many struggle to get - or stay - involved. There are several policy-related, social, and economic factors that influence people's capacity to volunteer, and we have outlined those that have been most prevalent in Northern Ireland in recent years below.

Factors Affecting Volunteering in Northern Ireland

Covid-19

Rather predictably, the biggest factor affecting volunteers between 2019 and 2023 was the Covid-19 pandemic. Data collected by Hayward et al (2022) revealed that there was a substantial impact on volunteering in NI due to the pandemic.

One of the main impacts was a considerable change in the number of people volunteering where numbers had previously remained steady. At a community level, there was a marked increase in the number of people who volunteered, and many people got involved in volunteering who had not done so before. Mak and Fancourt (2022) outlined some reasons for this increase: People who may not have previously volunteered found themselves with time to do so, if they were out of work or on a Furlough scheme. They also noted a significant aspiration to help others in a time of national crisis.

However, the research by Hayward et al (2022) found that some areas saw a drop in volunteer numbers during the pandemic, and many existing volunteers were unable or reluctant to do their usual volunteering. Some individuals may have been excluded, even if they had volunteered previously, due to restrictions and health policies that would not permit them to leave their house or interact with others. Mak and Fancourt (2022) explained that those over the age of 50 are more likely to volunteer than young people, and this could explain this decrease in certain areas.

There was also a noteworthy effect on the voluntary organisations themselves, as there was a need to alter their activities and services. Hayward et al's (2022) research revealed that, during the pandemic:

- Over 75% of respondents' organisations had refocused their activities
- 67% had moved volunteering online
- 61% said that volunteers had changed their skills and adapted to the new services

These changes in the means of volunteering and voluntary activities are likely to have impacted the numbers and demographics of those who volunteer. Different people may have been attracted to new forms of volunteering, whereas others may not have felt confident adapting to new means, such as older volunteers whose usual activities had moved online.

Cost of Living Crisis

The rising cost of living also presents challenges for voluntary organisations and volunteers. Voluntary organisations that rely on fundraising are experiencing a marked downturn in the effectiveness of their events, and there has been a significant drop in government or public funding for the voluntary sector. This has resulted in the shutdown or scaling back of services by some organisations, while others are struggling to stay afloat amidst the dual pressure of the pandemic and economic pressures (Wilson, 2024).

Research by Hanna (2022) for Volunteer Now states that the main issue amongst voluntary organisations in this regard is the struggle to retain staff, as keeping salaries competitive

with inflation proves difficult. As well as this, Volunteer Now's (2023) report for the Community Transport Association found that the rise in fuel costs resulting from inflation has impacted both the capacity of individual volunteers to travel to and from their activities, and the work of volunteer transport organisations. Voluntary transport services are important for the mobility of the elderly, disabled people, and those requiring access to healthcare facilities like hospital appointments, GP practices, or vaccination centres, so any decrease in their capacity is a significant loss to communities.

Most notably, the cost of living discourages volunteer participation, resulting in reduced volunteer numbers and engagement. The voluntary organisations and volunteers are facing a challenging climate that hinders volunteer recruitment and involvement. Therefore, effective financial management is said to be crucial for voluntary organisations and volunteers when navigating the economic strain exacerbated by the cost of living crisis (Hanna, 2022).

Changes in Means of Volunteering & Working Patterns

Remote and Flexible Work:

The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of remote work, and this style of work is likely to continue being popular as time progresses. Dederich (2023) observed that many organisations were embracing flexible work arrangements, allowing employees to work from home or choose flexible hours. Because of these phenomena, this shift could also impact volunteering, with virtual volunteering opportunities becoming more prevalent.

Skill-Based Volunteering:

Instead of traditional time-based volunteering, there has been a growing emphasis on skill-based volunteering. Evers and von Essen (2019) identified that organisations recognized the value of volunteers contributing their specific skills and expertise to projects, leading to more tailored and impactful contributions. This was evidently shown during the Covid-19 pandemic, when retired health and social care workers returned to work to support the sector (Black, 2021).

Digital Platforms:

The rise of digital platforms and social media made it easier for volunteers to find opportunities and for organisations to connect with potential contributors (Seller et al, 2023). Online platforms also facilitated remote collaboration and allowed volunteers to engage with causes globally, helping volunteers with the flexibility of work across different organisations and allowing them to multi-task (Aslan and Tuncay, 2023).

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR):

Companies are increasingly integrating corporate social responsibility into their business models. This not only involves financial contributions, but also employee volunteer schemes, allowing staff to engage in community service during work hours (Aslan and Tuncay, 2023).

Gig Economy and Short-Term Commitments:

The gig economy trend, characterised by short-term, project-based work, has influenced the voluntary sector, as some individuals preferred short-term volunteering commitments that aligned with their specific interests and availability, while some could no longer commit to consistent, long-term voluntary activities due to the unpredictable nature of their work (Seller et al., 2023).

Emphasis on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion:

There has been a growing recognition of the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion in both the workplace and volunteer organisations (Thomson et al, 2023). Efforts are being made to ensure that volunteering opportunities are accessible to a broader range of individuals.

Increased Use of Technology:

Technology, including artificial intelligence and automation, is being leveraged to streamline volunteer management processes, making it easier for organisations to coordinate and communicate with volunteers (Dederichs, 2023).

Youth Engagement:

There has been a noticeable increase in youth engagement in volunteer work. Younger generations were actively seeking opportunities to make a difference, often leveraging social media and technology to organise and participate in various initiatives (Dederichs, 2023).

These factors will have affected the engagement of different demographics of volunteers to varying degrees. In the following section, therefore, we will explore the trends of volunteer engagement across different demographic categories over the last four years, and look at wellbeing statistics for these demographics. In considering these findings in the context of the affecting factors outlined above, we hope to gain a more concrete understanding of who, precisely, is and is not volunteering, and some insight as to why these numbers have changed.

Findings

Overview

Below, we have outlined some of the most significant trends and changes in volunteering among different demographic groups between 2019 and 2023. We have also included some notable trends in wellbeing and loneliness in these demographics and, considering the new publication of 'Wellbeing and engagement in culture, arts, heritage and sport by adults in Northern Ireland 2022/23' statistics from the CHS (NISRA, 2024), considered the potential effects of volunteering on wellbeing.

Unfortunately, a question on engagement in volunteering was not asked in the 2020/21 CHS. This would have been a statistic of particular interest, as it would have allowed us to see how different demographic groups responded to the pandemic; whether they had taken on volunteer roles when they typically would not, or whether they felt the need to cease regular volunteering. Research carried out by Volunteer Now with Mobilising Voluntary Action UK (2022) has shown, however, that many volunteer organisations saw a rise in volunteer numbers during the pandemic, to the point that organisations struggled to effectively channel the influx. Despite this initial rise, organisations reported that as the pandemic went on into the middle of 2021, existing volunteers became more reluctant to carry out their usual activities.

Key Findings

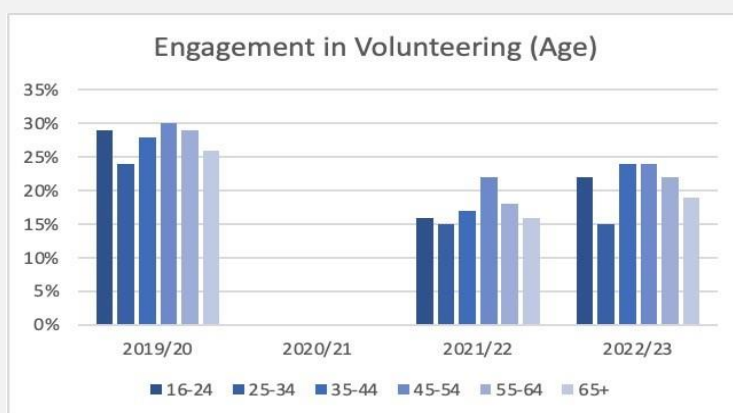
- Since 2019, there has been a **significant overall drop** in the proportion of CHS respondents that have engaged in volunteering (see Appendix 1, Table 1). There was some recovery between 2021/22 and 2022/23, but it has not yet returned to a pre-pandemic proportion of engagement.
- **This trend can be seen across all demographic groups** and will henceforth be referred to as a '**drop – low recovery**' trend.
 - Some demographic groups, however, have had consistently low levels of engagement in volunteering, and have either seen a continued drop or minimal/no recovery since 2022, such as disabled people, those aged 25-34, and those living in rural areas.

- We do see an overall incidence of **better wellbeing markers for those that volunteer** compared to those that do not, and **lower levels of loneliness among demographic groups with higher rates of volunteer engagement** when observing statistics from the last four years.
 - However, these differences may not all be significant, and there are other contributing factors influencing these markers as well.

Engagement in Volunteering – Demographic Trends

Age

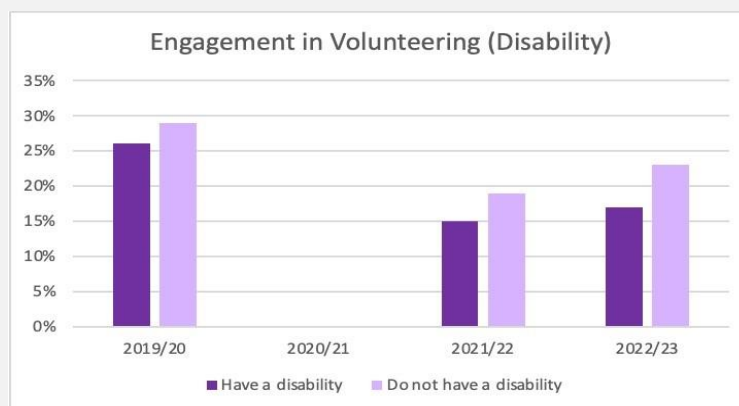
- The drop – low recovery pattern is evident in all age groups, with some age groups recovering better than others.
- Adults aged 35-44 have seen the biggest uptake from 2021/22 to 2022/23, with a 7-point increase from 17% to 24%, while those aged 16-24 saw a 6-point increase from 16% to 22%.
- Adults aged 25-34 have not seen any recovery between 2021/22 and 2022/23, however, with 15% of respondents reporting having volunteered in both years.



Engagement in volunteering by age group – see Appendix 1: Table 2

Disability Status

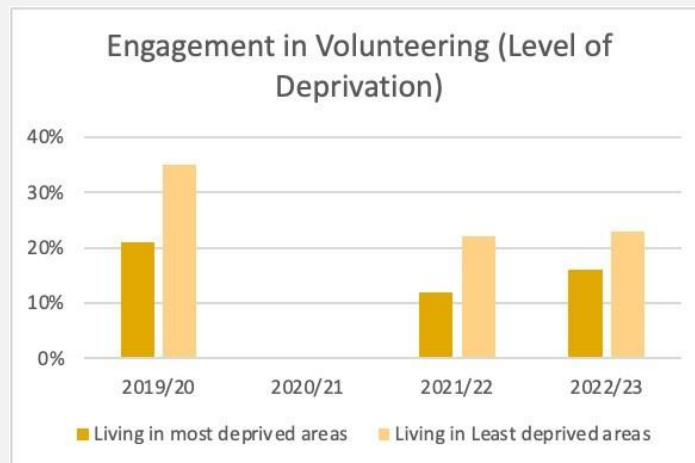
- Disabled people have consistently volunteered at lower rates than non-disabled people.
- Otherwise, the *drop – low recovery* pattern has occurred similarly for both disabled and non-disabled people.



Engagement in volunteering by disability status – see Appendix 1: Table 3

Level of Deprivation

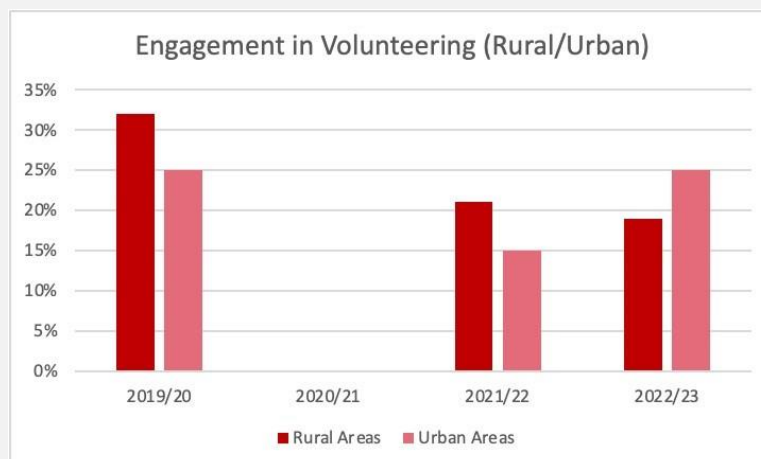
- Those living in the least deprived areas consistently volunteer more than those living in the most deprived areas.
- However, the least deprived areas also saw a larger drop in the proportion of people volunteering (13-point drop vs 9-point drop) and a worse post-pandemic recovery (1-point increase vs 4-point increase) than the most deprived areas.



Engagement in volunteering by level of deprivation – See Appendix 1: Table 4

Rural/Urban Areas

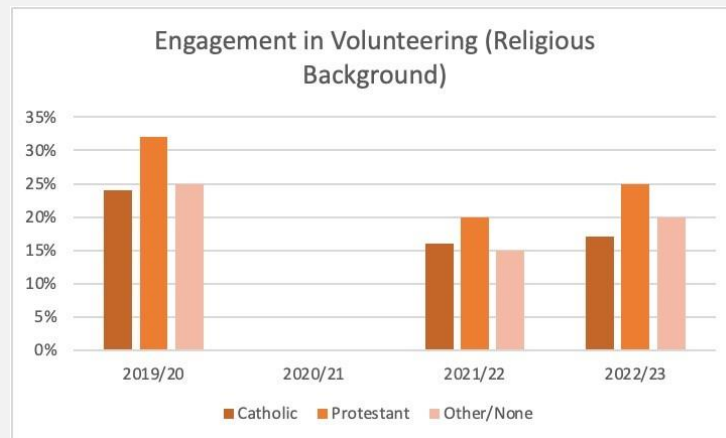
- The *drop – low recovery* trend is evident in urban areas, but not in rural areas.
- In fact, rural areas saw a continued drop in volunteer numbers from 2021/22 to 2022/23, dropping from 32% - 21% - 19% over the 4 years.



Engagement in volunteering by rural or urban areas – see Appendix 1: Table 5

Religious Background

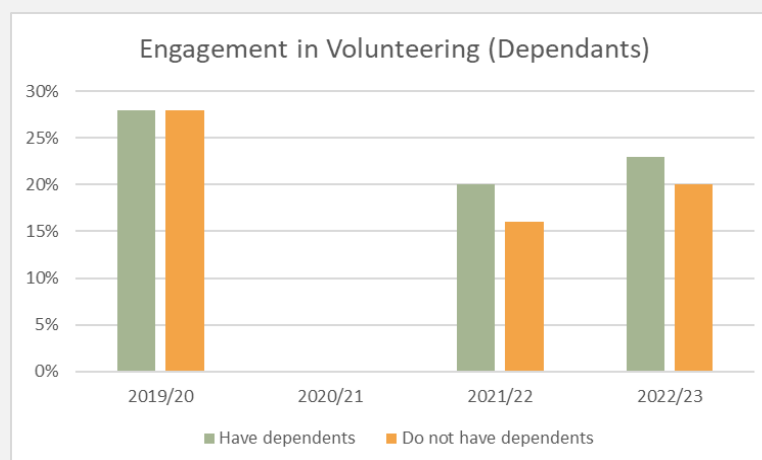
- Protestants have consistently had a higher proportion of people who volunteer over the years, and this has not changed.
- Those of Other/No religion saw the most significant drop in the proportion of people volunteering but have seen the same increase from 2021/22 to 2022/23 as Protestants, where the proportion of Catholics volunteering has barely risen in that time.



Engagement in volunteering by religious background – see Appendix: Table 6

Dependants

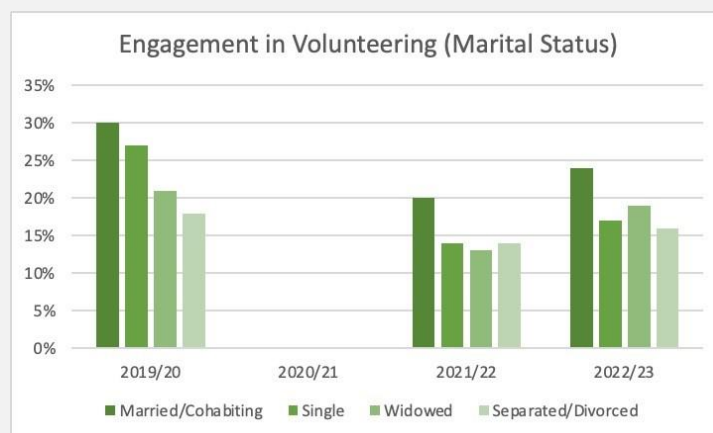
- Those with and without dependants had identical levels of volunteering pre-pandemic, but post-pandemic they have diverged. Neither has fully recovered but, post-pandemic, more people with dependants are volunteering than those without.



Engagement in volunteering by those with/without dependants – see Appendix 1: Table 7

Marital Status

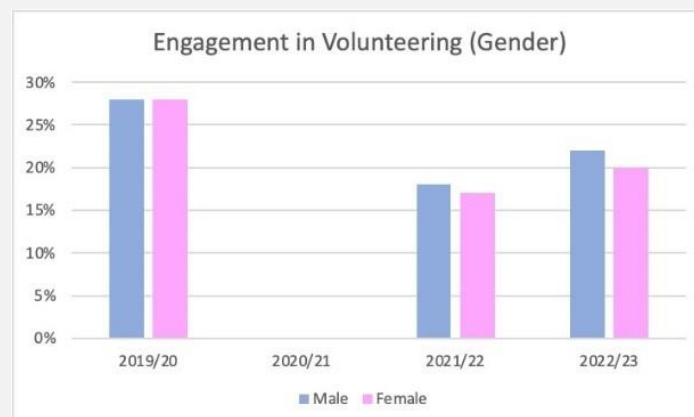
- The *drop – low recovery* trend can be seen in all marital status groups.
- The largest drop occurred amongst single people, with the percentage of people volunteering falling almost by half between 2019/20 and 2021/22.
- Married/Cohabiting has consistently been the group with the highest percentage of volunteers, both pre and post pandemic.
- By contrast, Separated/Divorced are the group with the lowest percentage volunteering, although this group did experience the smallest drop between 2019-20 and 2021-22.



Engagement in volunteering by marital status – see Appendix 1: Table 8

Gender

- There are no significant trends in volunteering by gender in the last 4 years, aside from the *drop – low recovery* pattern.
- Since 2021/22, however, men have volunteered slightly more than women, where the proportion had previously been close to equal.



Engagement in volunteering by gender – see Appendix 1: Table 9

Wellbeing, Loneliness, and Volunteering

In 2024, NISRA and the Department for Communities released a publication exploring the links between wellbeing and engagement in culture, arts, heritage, and sport (and most importantly, volunteering) based on the results of the 2022/23 CHS (Official Statistics, 2024). The combined statistics show clear positive links between engagement in volunteering and all wellbeing metrics, though it is likely that not all these links are causal. The most notable statistics related to:

- **Self-efficacy** – Described in the report as “the extent or strength of an individual’s belief in their own ability to complete tasks and reach goals,” the average self-efficacy score (between 0 and 25) of those who volunteered was 20.1, compared to an average of 19.3 for those who did not volunteer and a national average of 19.4.
- **General Health** – 79% of those who volunteered marked their general health as ‘good’ or ‘very good,’ compared to 69% of those who did not volunteer.
 - However, given our findings on engagement in volunteering and the issues highlighted in the policies we have reviewed, this is most likely due to the lower volunteering engagement rates of disabled people compared to non-disabled people.
- **Loneliness** – 18% of those who volunteered reported feeling lonely ‘at least some of the time,’ compared to 20% of those who did not volunteer, and 19.4% overall in Northern Ireland.

To take a more longitudinal approach within our assigned timeframe, and in an attempt to draw a more comparative analysis across the demographic groups we have covered, we collated data on loneliness from 2019-2023 for each demographic group from the Northern Ireland Wellbeing Dashboard (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2024), which is also based on findings from the CHS.

Many of the trends in loneliness mirror an **inverse of the drop – low recovery pattern**, where many demographic groups saw a considerable rise in those reporting

feeling lonely 'at least some of the time' in 2020/21 and 2021/22 and a drop thereafter, but not yet returning to pre-pandemic rates.

The statistics here don't follow as consistent of a trend, and there are a wide range of mitigating factors that have affected the loneliness levels of these demographic groups in the last four years. That said, although these statistics can't necessarily provide a direct insight into the effects of volunteering, there were some trends that would **indicate lower loneliness levels in demographic groups where volunteering engagement is higher, and vice versa** (See Appendix 1.2 for collated tables).

- **Disabled people**, for example, have seen a continued rise in loneliness levels from 2019-2023, and around twice as many **people living in the most deprived areas** consistently report feeling lonely at least some of the time than those in the least deprived areas, a fact that has not been very significantly affected by the pandemic. These are both groups with low levels of volunteer engagement, and their levels of loneliness would indicate a need for greater social engagement opportunities for both groups.
- **Those without dependents** also have higher levels of loneliness and lower volunteer engagement rates, which is surprising considering the expectation that not having dependents would result in more free time and socialisation outside of the home.

Conclusions

Given our findings from the Continuous Household Survey databases and literature on volunteering in Northern Ireland, the dual benefit of volunteering to society and the volunteers themselves is without question. The voluntary sector provides invaluable services to communities in Northern Ireland and our research shows a clear link - albeit to varying degrees of strength - between participation in volunteering and personal wellbeing.

Despite the evident benefits, however, our research also shows that many are hesitant to return to volunteering in light of the pandemic, cost of living crisis, and changes in working and lifestyle patterns, among other factors. Moreover, for those that are currently engaged in volunteering, organisations are reporting issues of retention and keeping volunteers engaged long-term. Some of the underlying issues that have led to poor retention relate to accessibility, recognition of volunteers, diversity equity and inclusion, and limitations of time or finances.

It was suspected, and anecdotally reported from volunteer-involving organisations, that the pandemic would have most significantly affected volunteer numbers in older age groups. Given the reliance of many voluntary organisations on older volunteers for regular engagement, this point was of considerable concern. However, within the overall *drop - low recovery* trend that we uncovered, older age groups have acted no differently to other demographic groups. That said, the reported surge in young people volunteering since 2020 is very promising, and efforts should be made to encourage young volunteers to stay engaged on a long-term basis, both in response to and anticipation of those who will cease volunteering as they get older.

There are effective policies and frameworks of investigation in place in Northern Ireland to analyse these trends and tackle arising issues more comprehensively in the voluntary sector. Unfortunately, some of these tools, such as the 'experience of volunteering' survey questions, have not been utilised in recent years - at a time when volunteering became most crucial and saw changes in trends of engagement that had been steady for decades

prior (Rochester, 2018). Furthermore, Departments in the Executive, from which relevant policies have been published, seem to lack a mechanism or routine process through which the impact of their policies can be assessed.

In light of the information we have gathered and analysed, and our resulting conclusions, we have developed a series of recommendations, in order to best respond to the challenges identified within this report.

Recommendations

1. Promote social benefits of volunteering

In order to build up volunteer numbers and attract new participants, voluntary organisations should promote the various benefits of volunteering. Focusing on the social benefits of volunteering would be a particularly useful example, as our analysis indicates that there is some correlation within demographic groups between high levels of volunteering and lower levels of loneliness, as well as a correlation on the individual level between volunteering and lower levels of loneliness. Therefore, promoting this could prove a useful means of attracting those who are at risk of experiencing loneliness.

2. Create or adopt a platform to recognise volunteers

At present, Northern Ireland does not have a dedicated awards or recognition platform for volunteers. Such platforms and awards events not only highlight the social good done by volunteers to those who may be interested in volunteering, but also act as encouragement to existing volunteers to continue with their work.

3. Adopt and promote measures to foster a more diverse & inclusive volunteer force.

Recruitment efforts must be targeted at demographics with larger drop-offs, to encourage expanded diversity of volunteers. To do this, specific measures should be put in place to address concerns potential volunteers may have.

3.1 Accessibility of volunteering activities

Fears over the safety and accessibility of public volunteer work, particularly given the after-effects of Covid-19, are partly responsible for lower engagement in volunteering among older generations, and those with disabilities or health concerns. Therefore, volunteer-involving organisations should ensure that adequate safety and accessibility measures are put in place and details of these measures made readily available.

3.2 Inclusion of those in rural areas

Rural areas are a category of particular concern, as they have continued to drop in volunteer numbers since the pandemic. Voluntary organisations must consider means to help include rural participants, such as accounting for potential difficulties accessing transport.

Where these measures have already been considered or implemented, they must also be effectively communicated, such that potential volunteers are aware of them.

4. Lobby for more expansive questions in surveys that cover volunteering

One difficulty in assessing trends noted by our analysis is that questions asked in the CHS are not as expansive as they could be, since qualitative questions on the experience of volunteering that had previously been included in the CHS have been removed.

Furthermore, the scope of the CHS cannot account for minority demographic groups, whose engagement in the voluntary sector is an important factor worth investigation. Voluntary organisations may need to participate in lobbying efforts to see more expansive questioning put in place, although it is recognised there is only so much that can be accomplished by said organisations in affecting the format of such a wide-ranging survey.

5. Lobby for continuous monitoring and evaluation of volunteer-related policies

A significant issue we encountered when carrying out our research was a lack of follow-up and evaluation of policies published by Departments in the Northern Ireland Executive that target the voluntary sector. Continued assessment of the actions and KPIs outlined by these policies would provide relevant stakeholders with a clearer understanding of the policies' effectiveness, and a solid basis for deciding on further action.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Additional Tables and Figures with Titles

1.1 Engagement in Volunteering Tables

The figures in the below tables were compiled from answers to a question regarding engagement in volunteering in the CHS. The demographic breakdown of the answer for each year can be found in the ‘Experience of volunteering by adults’ publication for 2019/20 (Department for Communities, 2020) and the ‘Engagement in culture, arts, heritage and sport by adults in Northern Ireland’ publications for 2021/22 and 2022/23 (Department for Communities, 2022, 2023).

Table 1 – Total Engagement in Volunteering, 2019-2023

Engagement in Volunteering	<u>2019/20</u>	<u>2020/21</u>	<u>2021/22</u>	<u>2022/23</u>
<u>All</u>	28%	N/A	17%	21%

Table 2 – Engagement in Volunteering by Age, 2019-2023

Engagement in Volunteering	<u>2019/20</u>	<u>2020/21</u>	<u>2021/22</u>	<u>2022/23</u>
<u>16-24</u>	29%	N/A	16%	22%
<u>25-34</u>	24%	N/A	15%	15%
<u>35-44</u>	28%	N/A	17%	24%
<u>45-54</u>	30%	N/A	22%	24%
<u>55-64</u>	29%	N/A	18%	22%
<u>65+</u>	26%	N/A	16%	19%

Table 3 – Engagement in Volunteering by Disability Status, 2019-2023

Engagement in Volunteering	<u>2019/20</u>	<u>2020/21</u>	<u>2021/22</u>	<u>2022/23</u>
<u>Have a disability</u>	26%	N/A	15%	17%
<u>Do not have a disability</u>	29%	N/A	19%	23%

Table 4 – Engagement in Volunteering by Level of Deprivation, 2019-2023

Engagement in Volunteering	<u>2019/20</u>	<u>2020/21</u>	<u>2021/22</u>	<u>2022/23</u>
<u>Living in most deprived areas</u>	21%	N/A	12%	16%
<u>Living in Least deprived areas</u>	35%	N/A	22%	23%

Table 5 – Engagement in Volunteering by Rural or Urban Area, 2019-2023

Engagement in Volunteering	<u>2019/20</u>	<u>2020/21</u>	<u>2021/22</u>	<u>2022/23</u>
<u>Rural Areas</u>	32%	N/A	21%	19%
<u>Urban Areas</u>	25%	NA	15%	25%

Table 6 – Engagement in Volunteering by Religious Background, 2019-2023

Engagement in Volunteering	<u>2019/20</u>	<u>2020/21</u>	<u>2021/22</u>	<u>2022/23</u>
<u>Catholic</u>	24%	N/A	16%	17%
<u>Protestant</u>	32%	N/A	20%	25%
<u>Other/None</u>	25%	N/A	15%	20%

Table 7 – Engagement in Volunteering by Dependents, 2019-2023

Engagement in Volunteering	<u>2019/20</u>	<u>2020/21</u>	<u>2021/22</u>	<u>2022/23</u>
<u>Have dependents</u>	28%	N/A	20%	23%
<u>Do not have dependents</u>	28%	N/A	16%	20%

Table 8 – Engagement in Volunteering by Marital Status, 2019-2023

Engagement in Volunteering	<u>2019/20</u>	<u>2020/21</u>	<u>2021/22</u>	<u>2022/23</u>
<u>Married/Cohabiting</u>	30%	N/A	20%	24%
<u>Single</u>	27%	N/A	14%	17%
<u>Widowed</u>	21%	N/A	13%	19%
<u>Separated/Divorced</u>	18%	N/A	14%	16%

Table 9 – Engagement in Volunteering by Gender, 2019-2023

Engagement in Volunteering	<u>2019/20</u>	<u>2020/21</u>	<u>2021/22</u>	<u>2022/23</u>
<u>Male</u>	28%	N/A	18%	22%
<u>Female</u>	28%	N/A	17%	20%

1.2 Loneliness by Demographic Tables

The figures in the below tables were gathered from NISRA's Wellbeing Dashboard (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2024). The tables display the percentage of those in our selected demographic categories that reported feeling lonely 'at least some of the time' between 2019 and 2023.

Table 10 - Loneliness and Age, 2019-2023

Loneliness	<u>2019/20</u>	<u>2020/21</u>	<u>2021/22</u>	<u>2022/23</u>
<u>16-24</u>	22.2%	26.8%	22.4%	18.4%
<u>25-34</u>	14.9%	17.3%	21.1%	20.7%
<u>35-44</u>	14.2%	17.7%	16.8%	17.0%
<u>45-54</u>	18.8%	18.3%	17.4%	17.8%
<u>55-64</u>	15.8%	23.3%	22.6%	20.9%
<u>65-74</u>	16.6%	14.3%	19.9%	18.7%
<u>75+</u>	22.2%	21.4%	22.6%	22.6%

Table 11 - Loneliness and Disability, 2019-2023

Loneliness	<u>2019/20</u>	<u>2020/21</u>	<u>2021/22</u>	<u>2022/23</u>
<u>Have a disability</u>	31.3%	N/A	34.8%	35.1%
<u>Do not have a disability</u>	11.95	N/A	14.2%	12.9%

Table 12 – Loneliness and Level of Deprivation, 2019-2023

Loneliness	<u>2019/20</u>	<u>2020/21</u>	<u>2021/22</u>	<u>2022/23</u>
<u>Living in most deprived areas</u>	26.1%	25.3%	27.6%	27.7%
<u>Living in least deprived areas</u>	13.9%	13.5%	17.2%	14.4%

Table 13 - Loneliness and Rural/Urban Areas, 2019-2023

Loneliness	<u>2019/20</u>	<u>2020/21</u>	<u>2021/22</u>	<u>2022/23</u>
<u>Urban Areas</u>	20.8%	20.1%	22.2%	22.7%
<u>Rural Areas</u>	12.0%	19.4%	17.0%	14.1%

Table 14 - Loneliness and Dependents, 2019-2023

Loneliness	<u>2019/20</u>	<u>2020/21</u>	<u>2021/22</u>	<u>2022/23</u>
<u>Have dependents</u>	N/A	14.5%	17.5%	16.9%
<u>Do not have dependents</u>	N/A	27.9%	22.2%	21.2%

Data is not combined on the website

Appendix 2: Presentation Slides

Policy Briefing Paper for Volunteer Now

Exploring Post-Pandemic Trends
in Volunteer Participation and
Wellbeing

Catherine Bailey, Maria Grant, Debra Phiri,
Conor Rathbone, Simon Sam

Introduction



Organisation: Volunteer Now

- Volunteer Now help individuals get involved with:
 - Volunteering
 - Community projects and events
 - Working alongside organisations
- Need to investigate: Who is Volunteering?
 - Focus on post Covid-19
 - Volunteering and Wellbeing
- Aim: To gather data, and examine trends in volunteering that emerge throughout the past 4 years.

Literature Review

Benefits of Volunteering

- Social good and improvement
- Provides essential assistance to individuals and communities
- Personal benefits

Factors Affecting Volunteering in Northern Ireland

- Covid-19 pandemic
 - Crisis - initial spike in people wanting to volunteer and help out
 - But those concerned about their health were hesitant to return
- Cost of living crisis
 - Funding cuts and rising costs to organisations
 - Individual cost to volunteers e.g. fuel
- Changes in means of volunteering & working patterns
 - Remote work, Gig economy and short-term commitments
 - Skill-based volunteering
 - Corporate Social Responsibility

Policy Context

NI Department for Communities currently redeveloping the policy frameworks and infrastructure that support the voluntary sector

- "Deep-rooted and systemic issues" in funding and regulation
- Clear reliance of organisations on volunteers
 - Issues of recruitment and retention
- Need for "a tiered structure of support"

Previous Volunteering Strategy and Action Plan from 2012

- Saw recruitment and retention as key issues, planned to increase recognition of volunteers, enhance accessibility, and strengthen infrastructure.
- But, no evidence of successful monitoring of this plan's implementation, and the issues continue to be seen in the sector.

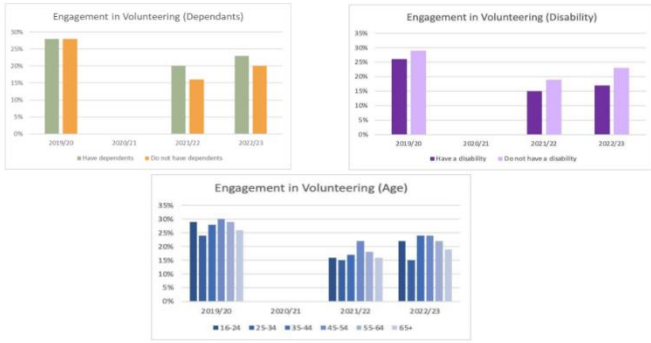
Methodology

- **Secondary data** and literature used throughout.
 - Social policy texts, academic journals, government and organisational policies and websites.
- Every individual in the group was assigned specific task and topics to collate our findings and literature reviews as well as data analysis.
- Data used to analyse findings on volunteering and wellbeing was from the **Continuous Household Survey (CHS)** from 2019-2023.
 - However, a **question on volunteering engagement was not asked in the 2020/21 CHS**, which would have been valuable for understanding the initial pandemic response.
 - We relied instead on external literature to assess the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on volunteering
 - Multiple sources for CHS data - NISRA, Dept for Communities, Dept for Social Development

Findings - Volunteer Engagement

Volunteering trends and wellbeing statistics in NI from 2019-2023.

- Significant drop in volunteering engagement since 2019, with a modest recovery from 2021-2023. Drop is evident in all demographic groups, but some groups have seen little to no recovery
 - **Drop - low recovery trend**



Some examples of our findings - volunteer engagement by demographic group

Findings - Volunteering & Wellbeing

- 2023 NISRA publication exploring the links between wellbeing and engagement in culture, arts, heritage and sport
 - Combined statistics show clear positive links between engagement in volunteering and all wellbeing metrics
 - But: not all statistically significant & likely not all causal
- Collated data on loneliness across our studied demographic groups
 - Again, clear link: lower loneliness rates in demographic groups with higher volunteer engagement
 - Still, other factors likely at play

Conclusions

- Undeniable dual benefits of volunteering on society and volunteers themselves
- Hesitant return to volunteering since 2020
 - Variety of contributing factors
- Need to attract and encourage new volunteers
 - Encouraging rise in young people volunteering, for example
- Effective policies and methods of investigation already in place in NI, but need to be revived and utilised to develop a clear picture & tackle issues

Recommendations

1. Promote social benefits of volunteering
2. Create or adopt a platform to recognise volunteers
3. Adopt and promote measures to foster a more diverse & inclusive volunteer force
 - a. Accessibility of volunteering activities
 - b. Inclusion of those in rural areas
4. Lobby for more expansive questions in surveys that cover volunteering
5. Lobby for continuous monitoring and evaluation of volunteer-related policies

Thank you for listening!

Any questions?