The Cessation of Volunteering Survey Briefing

Bruce Davenport and Yang Wang

Cessation of Volunteering Project Report 1

June 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This briefing presents the key findings of a "Cessation of Volunteering Survey" which we conducted as part of a 2-year Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded study: Cessation of Volunteering.

The Cessation of Volunteering project was concerned with one aspect of older (65+) people's volunteering - **the point when they find they have to leave a volunteering role due to age-related conditions (e.g. ill-health or increased caring responsibilities for a partner)**.

We started off by interviewing people from 11 case studies of cultural heritage organisations, including older volunteers and staff who manage them[1]. We then used the findings from the staff interviews to design the Cessation of Volunteering Survey. While we were interested in finding out **whether what we have learned from our case studies of cultural heritage organisations applies to the wider voluntary sector**, we also hoped that the findings will provide a basis for the development of good practices around this topic.

The findings presented in this briefing were drawn from analyses of 153 complete responses to the survey.

Key Findings

Overall:

- What we have learned from our case studies of cultural heritage organisations largely applies to the wider voluntary sector.

Specifically:

- The leaving scenario - the central focus of the Cessation of Volunteering project - is commonly experienced, but it does not happen very often.

- Organisations tend to support older volunteers to continue their volunteering as long as the older volunteers are able to do so. The most frequently used approaches are allowing a volunteer to take periods of "leave" and making adaptations to the voluntary role, though this can take various forms.

- Organisations in different sectors (i.e. art, culture and heritage vs health), meanwhile, may have distinct resources to draw on to support their older volunteers.

- There are limits to the support that organisations/staff can offer, and supporting people to continue is, however, not always going to be the right choice.

- Most organisations also try out things to engage with their "retired" volunteers, both formally and informally. Staff also do things at their discretion.

---

[1] We use the term 'staff' as a shorthand for a wide range of people who, in practice, manage or supervise volunteers.

- For paid staff, managing older volunteers' leaving often sees them performing "caring work" or investing in "caring labour". They care about and for older volunteers regardless of their role positions and whether they line-manage volunteers or not - two variables we used as a proxy measure of closeness between staff and volunteers. In so doing, they gain meaning in their work.

- Women make up the majority of the volunteer management workforce, but gender does not affect the care that volunteer managers give to older volunteers.

- The depth of care that paid staff show to older volunteers does not significantly differ between the older and the younger staff.

- Managing older volunteers' leaving is challenging, particularly when the older volunteers are unaware of their changing capacity to carry out their normal volunteering activities or even refuse to recognise the changes and accept their limitations; a scenario more often seen among people experiencing forms of cognitive decline than physical difficulties.

Key Reflections

- Organisations in different sectors may draw on distinct resources to support their older volunteers. It is worthwhile to create spaces (e.g. a network or forum) for these experiences to be shared across sectors. To our knowledge, this has not yet been done.

- The care-demanding nature of volunteer management highlighted how volunteer management is a relational practice rather than a transactional one.

- Our data confirms that staff are caring for older volunteers and, in some cases, that this can create emotional burdens for the staff themselves. This suggests to us that staff themselves need support too, especially support that can effectively reduce the physical and emotional toll of caring labour.

1. INTRODUCTION

This briefing summarises the key findings of the "Cessation of Volunteering Survey" that we ran as the second phase of an ESRC-funded research project, Cessation of Volunteering.

The Cessation of Volunteering project was concerned with one aspect of older (65+) people's volunteering - the point when they find they have to **leave a volunteering role due to age-related conditions (e.g. ill-health or increased caring responsibilities for a partner)**. Such leaving can be a difficult experience for older volunteers themselves, but it can also be challenging for the staff who manage this process. The Cessation of Volunteering Survey was conducted as part of our efforts to explore how staff manage and experience older volunteers' leaving.

In the first phase of the project, we interviewed staff, volunteers and ex-volunteers from 11 case studies of cultural heritage organisations. They are either museums or heritage organisations/sites. The age distribution of volunteers in the cultural heritage sector is more strongly skewed towards older volunteers compared to other sectors. Staff in cultural heritage organisations are therefore more likely to have encountered the leaving scenarios.

Cultural volunteering, which encompasses museum or heritage volunteering, may be different from volunteering in other sectors. Orr (2006) proposed to understand museum volunteering as a way of practicing heritage as serious leisure. It seems unlikely that leisure would be a primary motivation for people engaged in social and health care volunteering. Wymer and Brudney (2000) drew on survey data from two Midwestern cities in the US and found that, compared to other volunteers, arts and culture volunteers were characterised by a significantly higher importance they placed on three personal values: a stimulating life, freedom, and a world of beauty. Such differences may well require staff in art and culture organisations to approach volunteer management differently from those in other domains, hence act and feel differently when dealing with older volunteers' leaving.

We therefore designed the Cessation of Volunteering Survey as the second phase of the project, aiming to explore **whether what we have learned from our case studies of cultural heritage organisations applies to the wider voluntary sector**.

The survey was opened on 29th September and closed on November 21st, 2025. We then reopened it for a short period of time in January 2026 for sports organisations specifically. Overall, we received 191 responses, with 153 complete responses. The findings and discussions we present in this briefing were drawn from analyses of the 153 complete responses. The full dataset for these 153 responses and the Cessation of Volunteering Survey questionnaire will be made available in due course[2].

All analyses were conducted using the statistical analysis software R.

In the following sections, we first outline a breakdown of the 153 responses by sector. We then present the findings through answering a series of questions, which were

[2] If you are interested in the dataset, you will be able to access it via the project website or you are welcome to email Bruce Davenport or Yang Wang about it.

mostly based on the preliminary analysis of our interview data[3]. We also included a question that we were asked about at a recent conference on work and employment studies, which we believed would be of some wider interest. We wrap up this briefing with a reflexive discussion of the findings blended with our learnings.

2. THE ANALYTICAL SAMPLE

While arts, culture and heritage staff made up the largest response group in the survey, taking up over half (52.94%) of overall responses, we received responses from people working in a range of other sectors. These included the health sector - which provided the **second** largest set of responses (18.30%), education, environment, religion and social service (see Table 1. and Table 1-1.). Despite the disproportionate attention from the cultural heritage sector, their dominance in the sample provided a baseline to compare "what we learned from cultural heritage organisations" with the other sectors and therefore served our central aim. In what follows, we present the survey findings with references to two sets of comparisons: a) the arts, culture and heritage sector vs the rest, b) the arts, culture and heritage sector vs the health sector.

Table 1. Responses by Sector

	Freq	**% Total**
Arts, culture and heritage	81	52.94
Health	28	18.30
Other (Please see a breakdown in Table 1-1)	44	28.76
Total	153	100

Table 1-1. "Other" Responses by Sector

Animal welfare	1
Education	3
Environment	9
Religion	4
Social service	13
Search and rescue	1
Sports	5
Transport	1
Umbrella bodies	3
Other	4

3. QUESTIONS, DATA, ANALYSES AND FINDINGS

We use 10 questions to structure this Findings section. Wherever we feel it is needed, we start with the origin of the questions and include both the data we

[3] At the time of writing, the interview data and analysis remain unpublished. We aim to publish them separately.

collected and the techniques we used for analysing the data. In so doing, we hope to walk you through our journey of discovery.

3.1. How often do people come across the leaving scenarios?

Almost all the staff we interviewed had experience of handling older volunteers' leaving. Yet, they also noted that it does not happen very often. The survey data revealed that it could be the same for the health and other sectors (Figure 1).

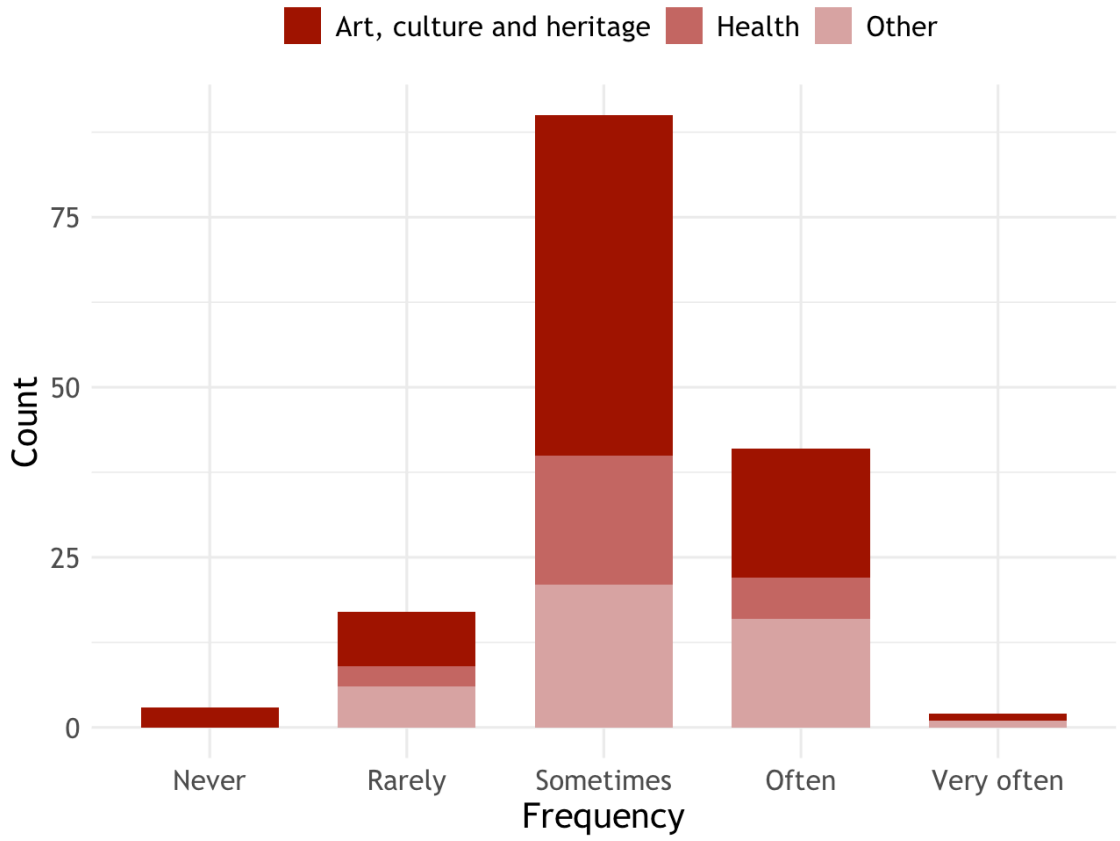


Figure 1. How Often Do People Come Across the Scenario Where an Older Volunteer Has Started to Struggle with Carrying Out Their Normal Volunteering Activities?

3.2. How do organisations organise their volunteer management?

One criterion we followed when choosing our case studies was the varied ways in which different organisations structure their volunteer management, which more or less corresponds with their size. For example, in large organisations, volunteer management is often a distributed task where a volunteer manager is appointed to oversee the volunteering programme while having other staff members, who may have different roles within their organisations, which we group together as volunteer supervisors, taking on the day-to-day management of individual volunteers. Whereas, in smaller organisations, the volunteer manager acts both at the strategic level and on a daily basis. We wanted to explore this difference in volunteer management because volunteer managers in large organisations may follow rationalities that are different from those held by volunteer managers in smaller organisations. They might handle and experience older volunteers' leavings differently. Even within a large organisation itself, the volunteer manager and

supervisors may take different approaches to the same cases and hence experience them differently, given that the former often does not carry out day-to-day management of volunteers.

With this awareness in mind, we explored whether the way in which volunteer management is organised in each organisation somehow affects how staff manage and experience older volunteers' leaving.

We identified four different ways that our case studies of cultural heritage organisations organise their volunteer management and coded them as "organisation sizes". They are:

a) the distributed management style usually seen in large organisations - coded as "large";
b) smaller organisations where the volunteer managers are responsible for all aspects of volunteer management - coded as "medium";
c) in small organisations where no volunteer managers are appointed, staff in other roles take on volunteer management tasks - coded as "small"
d) an organisation, usually a small one, often fully run by volunteers, where a subset of the volunteers take the lead in volunteer management matters - coded as "volunteer-run"[4].

In our survey data, these four management styles or organisation sizes were also reflected in the data from other sectors (Figure 2.), though it is worth noting the lack of volunteer-run organisations from the health sector. We also recognise that large organisations were perhaps over-represented, given the prevalence of smaller organisations in volunteer-involving sectors (according to various sources such as the latest statistics in the UK Civil Society Almanac 2024, Available at: https://www.ncvo.org.uk/news-and-insights/news-index/uk-civil-society-almanac-2024/) (Figure 3.).

Consequently, we designed questions in the survey asking people about their roles and whether they "line-manage" volunteers. Of the 153 survey respondents, over half (52.9%) carried the job title of volunteer managers (Figure 4.). More than two thirds (70.6%) had line-management duties (Figure 5.).

[4] We referred to the volunteers taking on managerial or supervisory roles as "lead volunteers". In some of our large case study organisations, we also encountered volunteers who were appointed from within a team of volunteers to carry out supervisory roles or management duties such as making the rota. We grouped these under the category of "lead volunteers" too.

Figure 2. Organisation Size by Sector

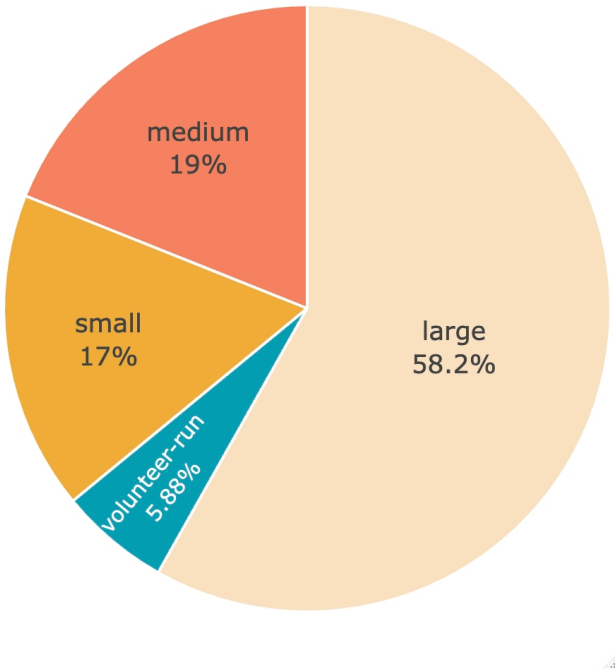


Figure 3. Responses by “Organisation Size”

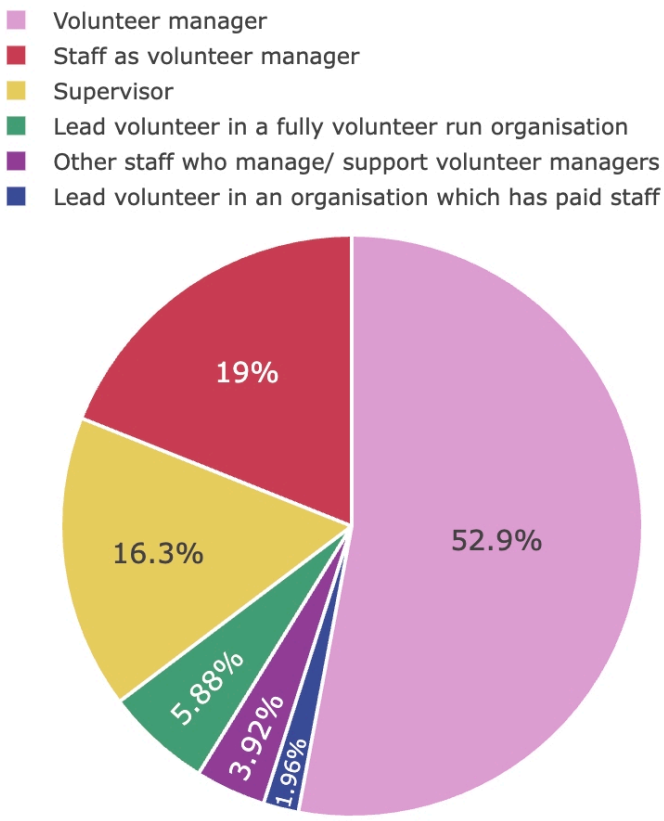


Figure 4. Responses by Role Position.

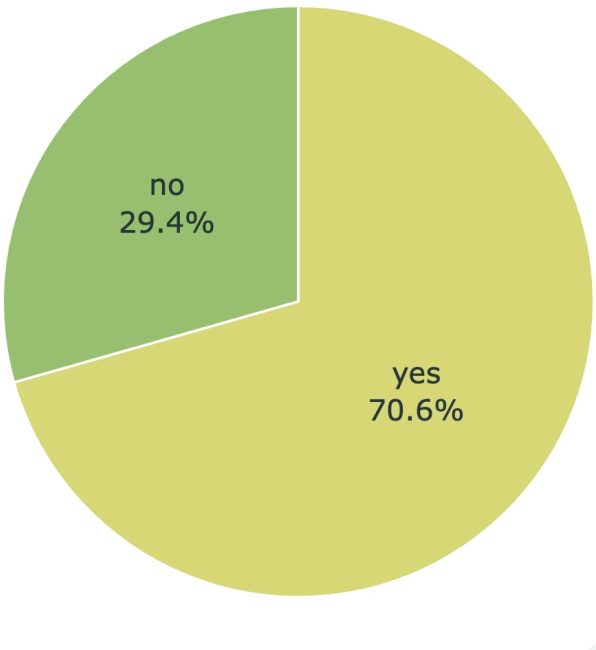


Figure 5. Whether People Carry Line-management Duty or Not.

3.3. What is the most common approach that staff and/or organisations take to manage older volunteers' leaving?

Our interviews revealed that most staff and/or organisations tended to support older volunteers to continue volunteering until circumstances mean that it is no longer feasible. It seemed quite common as well that a lot of times they did not need to take any actions because a few participants said that many older volunteers would opt out or "fade away".

We also observed in the interviews that people spoke of their own experiences, but quite often they used "we" - as opposed to "I" - in their narratives as if they had acted or would always be acting in line with their organisations' interests. The occasions when people used "I" more often than "we" were times when they tried to express a feeling of disappointment with what was permissible within the policy of their organisations, compared to what they wanted to do. We tried to reflect this subtlety in the survey through the dedicated use of "I", "We" and "I (or we)".

Of the 153 survey responses (see Table 2), the majority (nearly 80%) reported that they had supported their older volunteers to continue as long as it was feasible. This also included a few people who sensed a limit to the support due to either organisational constraints (1.96%) or, more commonly, personal capacity (6.54%). Up to nearly 16% had not done anything particular because older volunteers mostly opted out or "faded away". A plot of the responses by sector suggested that it was the same across all volunteer-involving sectors (Figure 6.).

Table 2. Approaches Staff and/or Organisations Take to Manage Older Volunteers' Leaving

	Freq	**% Total**
Support till no longer feasible	108	70.59
Support limited to organisational constraints	3	1.96
Support constrained by personal capacity	10	6.54
Follow protocol	6	3.92
No actions taken	24	15.69
Other	2	1.30
Total	153	100

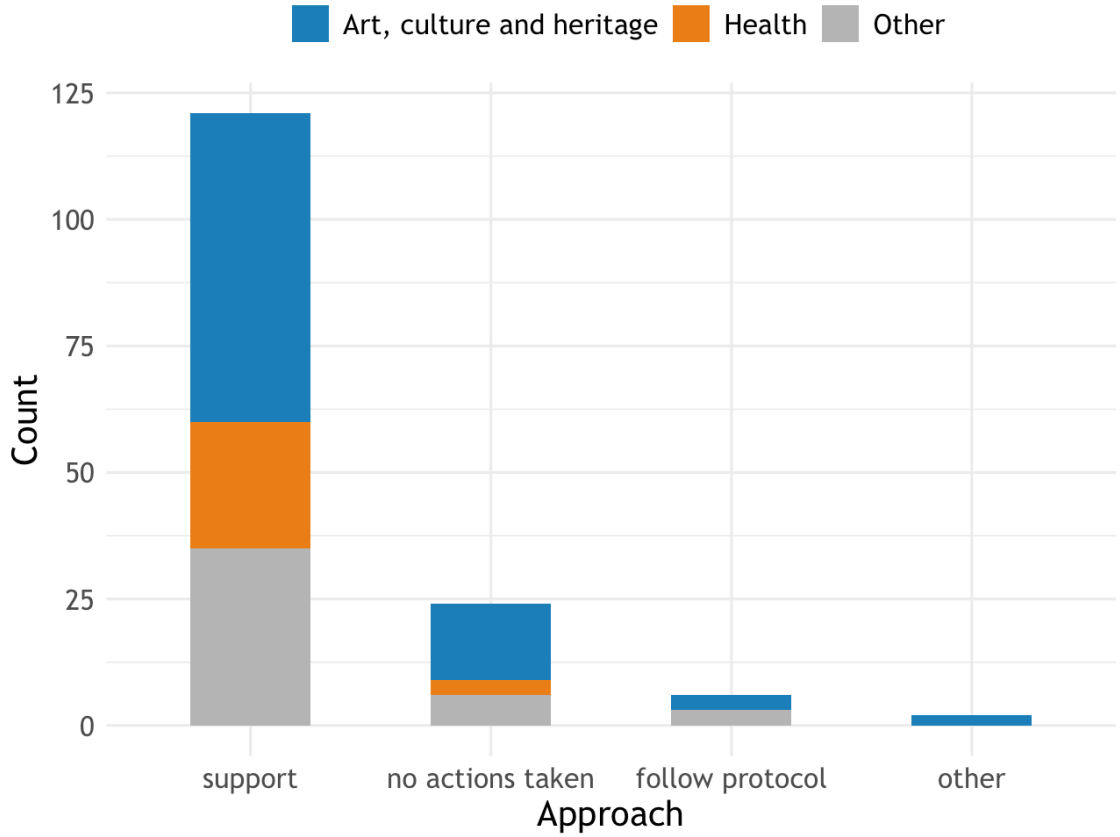


Figure 6. Approaches Staff and/or Organisations Take to Manage Older Volunteers' Leaving

3.4. How have organisations supported their older volunteers to continue volunteering?

Table 3 shows some specific ways in which organisations have supported their older volunteers to continue volunteering. The list was derived from our interview findings. The most frequently chosen in the survey was allowing a volunteer to take periods of "leave". Also widely used (>50%) were moving a volunteer to a different role, offering them an easier rota, "buddying" them up with another volunteer or staff member, and supporting them on accessibility issues.

Figure 7 shows that what has been tried out in the arts, culture and heritage sector was also used in the health sector. Yet, we also found that the types of support an organisation has been offered were significantly correlated with the sector it belongs to[5]. Figure 8 plots the percentage contribution of each type of support by sector to this correlation. Cells having a high percentage indicate strong correlations between the type of support and sector. They were responsible for the significance of the overall correlation results. On this occasion, it's the contribution for "bringing a health expert" used in the "health" sector.

Meanwhile, no associations were found between types of support and organisation size.

[5] For statistically minded readers, the statistical analysis we conducted was a chi-square test of independence. The results of the analysis were: χ^2 (18, N=632) = 33.472, p = .146.

Table 3. Diverse Ways that Organisations Have Supported Their Older Volunteers to Continue Volunteering

	Freq	% Total
Allowing a volunteer to take periods of “leave”	120	78.43
Moving a volunteer to a different role	102	66.67
Offering a volunteer an easier rota	85	55.56
Teaming a volunteer up with another volunteer or staff	77	50.33
Supporting a volunteer through improved accessibility, for example, disabled parking	77	50.33
Allowing a volunteer to come to the organisation but not assigning any tasks for them	54	35.29
Signposting a volunteer health and social care services	43	28.10
Offering a volunteer voluntary activities that can be done at home	42	27.45
Signposting a volunteer to other voluntary organisations	32	20.92
Bringing in a health expert to assess a volunteer's needs, for example, an occupational therapist	13	8.50
Nothing particular has been done	0	0.00
Others	12	7.84

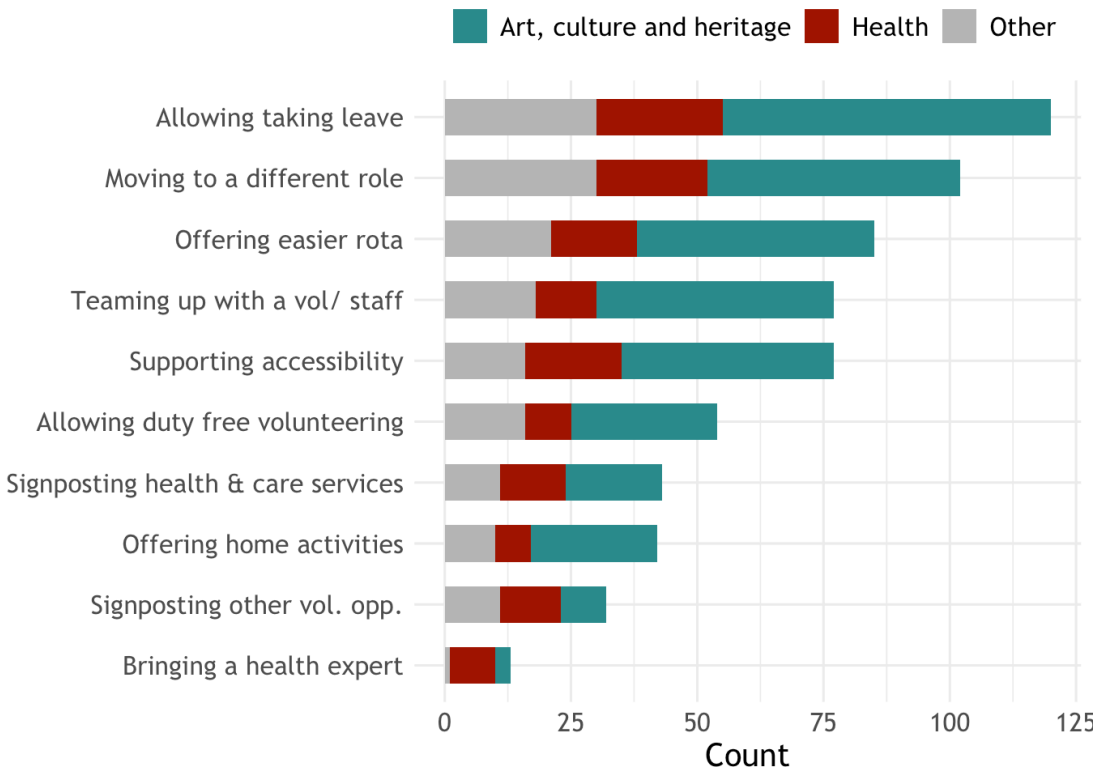


Figure 7. Diverse Ways that Organisations Have Supported Their Older Volunteers to Continue Volunteering

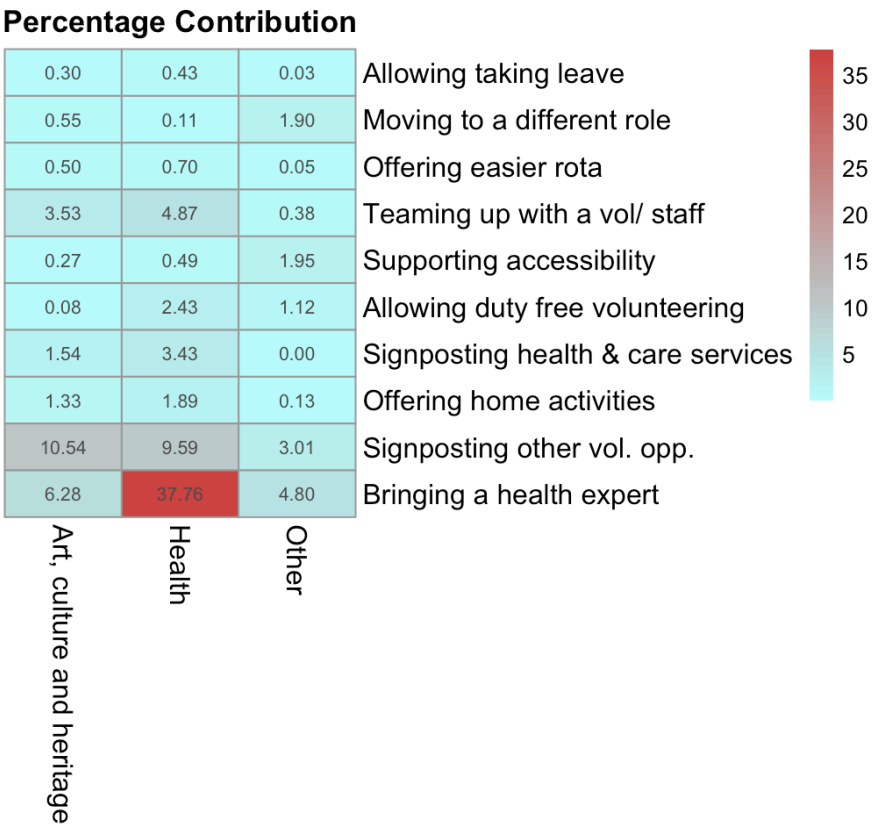


Figure 8. Percentage Contribution to the Correlation Statistics of Types of Support and Sector

A number of survey respondents (nearly 8%) also shared with us “other” forms of support that were not on the list. A repeatedly mentioned one was that, instead of moving a volunteer to a different role, organisations made adjustments to the role's tasks or responsibilities they had to meet volunteers’ changing needs. A couple of them also specified that they involved volunteers themselves in reviewing the tasks and agreeing on how to adjust the roles and what was feasible to continue with. The rest included creating new roles, involving volunteers’ families in decision making, and encouraging mutual support among volunteers themselves - one volunteer supervisor in an organisation from the arts, culture and heritage sector wrote that they offered training for volunteers on spotting dementia signs and needs so that they can look out for and support each other.

We also received a response which serves perfectly as an example of how some forms of support would be sector-specific. For example, one volunteer manager from a heritage organisation wrote about how they gave mental stimulation to their older volunteers.

> *We encourage volunteers to regularly participate in the quizzes and challenges around the [the organisation’s site]. Originally, these were designed for children; however, we have adapted them for adult use.*

Please see Appendix A for a full list of how organisations have supported older volunteers.

3.5. What have staff/organisations done with and for their "retired" volunteers?

We found in our interviews that, in many cases, leaving did not always imply a complete cut-off of a volunteer's association with the organisation where they volunteered. Organisations often took actions to ensure that their "retired" volunteers did not feel excluded from the volunteer family and that they, and the contributions they made, would not be "forgotten". Some staff even did so in their personal capacity, which they considered as a mundane aspect of their job, but a desirable aspect of being a person.

Table 4 is a list of actions that staff/organisations have taken with and for volunteers who have left, firstly identified at the interview stage. Survey findings saw funeral attendance topping the list, followed by inviting retired volunteers to return informally for free coffee or tea, with uptake of formal engagement - things like setting up an alumni club or newsletter subscription - being relatively lower (just over a third). A notable 10% or so had not done anything particular. Figure 9 is a plot of these actions by sector.

No associations were found between types of actions taken by an organisation and its "size" or sector.

Table 4. Actions That Staff/Organisations Have Taken with And for Their Older Volunteers Who Have Left

	Freq	**% Total**
Attending funerals when they passed away	109	71.24
Inviting them to return informally for free coffee or tea	92	60.13
Organising leaving dos for them when they were about to leave	56	36.60
Carrying out formal engagement with them such as setting up alumni club, newsletter subscription, inviting them for events	52	33.99
Nothing particular have been done	18	11.76
Others	20	13.07

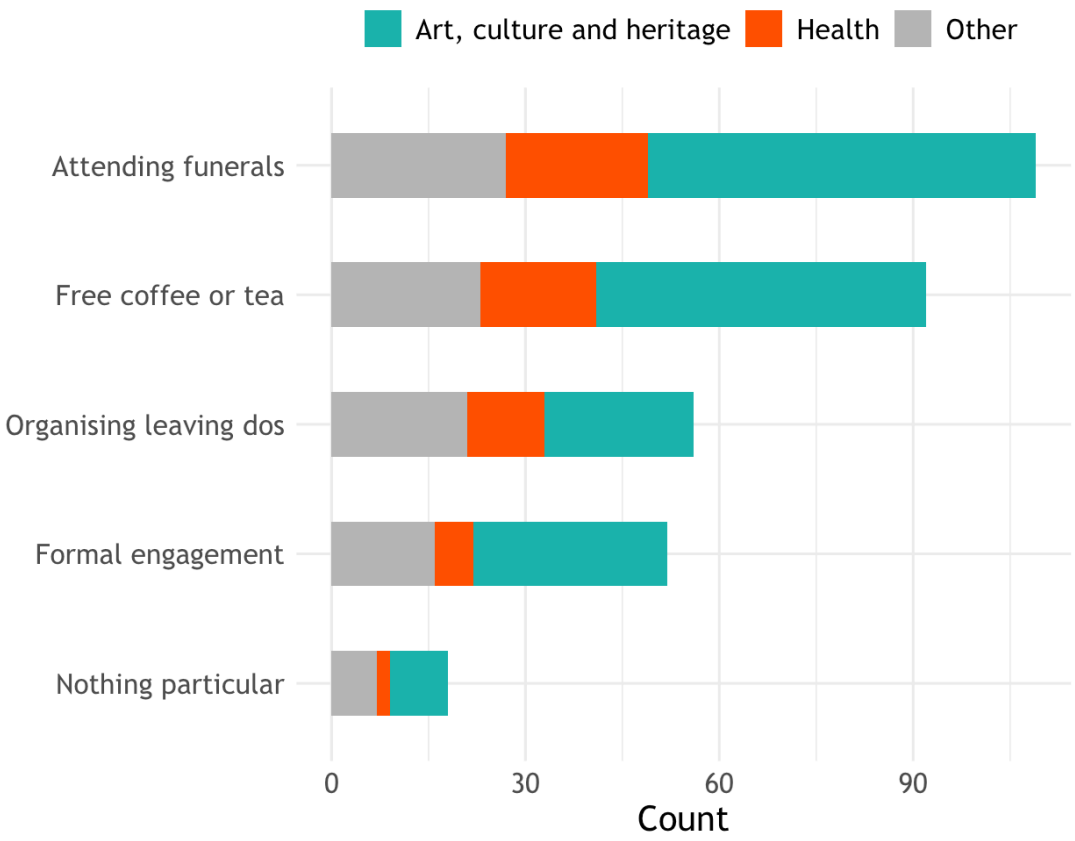


Figure 9. Actions that Staff/Organisations Have Taken with and for Older Volunteers Who Have Left

Meanwhile, we received a rich array of responses in the "other" category. First, several people wrote about things they did when volunteers passed away, along with attending funerals, such as sending cards and/or flowers to the volunteers' families, keeping in contact with their families or widows, and for those with no family, helping with their funeral planning. One organisation manages a memorial board of volunteers who have passed away, which is displayed at celebration events. Second, people shared multiple forms of contact they made with retired volunteers, such as carrying out home visits, sending Christmas cards, or making phone calls. A WhatsApp group is used at one organisation to connect the retired and on-service volunteers. At another organisation, they would share volunteers with news about "*what is going on in the organisation and updates on staff they know, like they've had a baby, got engaged, etc.*" It is hard to tell whether staff would be making these contacts on behalf of the organisations or in a personal capacity, but some responses clearly indicated that people were doing things at their discretion. For example, one respondent wrote that they sent cards and flowers to the retired volunteers when they were in the hospital or recovering from illness and specifically added that: "*This is not organisation policy!*" Third, organisations issued formal acknowledgements of volunteers' service when they leave in the form of leaving cards, gifts, certificates of recognition, awards, souvenirs, thank you letters or emails from the CEO, or mention of their leaving in newsletters or emails.

There was also a comment made by a volunteer manager that stood out.

> *We prefer they announce their departure and say their goodbyes so young people they're supporting don't feel abandoned.*

This reminded us of a concern raised by a volunteer manager in our interview with her when talking about the instance of an older volunteer passing away, that "*it was far more about support for the team that, that was left behind.*" Although not mentioned by other people, such concern is worthwhile to bring up because it reveals that in some leaving scenarios, volunteer management turned from a two-party relationship to a three-party one. Moreover, the repercussions of someone leaving volunteering are not limited to other volunteers who are left behind or feel abandoned. Volunteer managers could also be affected and need to be cared for as well.

Please see Appendix B for a full list of actions that staff/organisations have taken with and for older volunteers who have left.

3.6. How do staff experience older volunteers' leaving?

We not only asked people about how they (or their organisations) have managed older volunteers' leaving, but also how they have *experienced* it. In our interviews, stark differences were found between paid staff and lead volunteers in terms of the ways in which they perceived their relationship with volunteers. Specifically, for paid staff, their relationship with volunteers was primarily a professional working relationship, whilst lead volunteers perceived their fellow volunteers as friends or, on a few occasions, "*extended family*" (a lead volunteer in a large organisation). Unfortunately, however, we were not able to further examine the differences in the survey due to a relatively small number of responses from lead volunteers. **Therefore, in this section, we turn to paid staff responses only**.

3.6.1. Caring about and for older volunteers and doing meaningful work

We found, from our interviews, that the task of managing older volunteers' leaving often saw paid staff performing "caring work" or investing in what Himmelweit (1999) defined as "caring labour" in that they viewed it as "a desirable aspect of their employment" (p.29).

Himmelweit (1999) distinguishes between "caring for" another person (which is the actual caring activities) and "caring about" another person (which is the desire for the person's welfare that motivates the caring activities). Both were featured in our interview data. People talked about undertaking additional discretionary activities beyond what they normally did to support older volunteers. They also expressed a desire for older volunteers' needs, feelings and/or wellbeing, particularly the impact of leaving on older volunteers' wellbeing.

Caring, at the same time, became a source of meaning of work. This was revealed in the positive internal feelings that people associated with the work they have done with and for older volunteers, such as reward, pride and worth. Narratives also extended to their reflections on the overall meaningfulness of what they do.

Caring, however, could take an emotional toll on people sometimes. A volunteer supervisor reflected on going for a stressful conversation with a struggling volunteer to deliver the leaving suggestions: "*I lost a lot of sleep over it because I wanted to do it nicely. …. I was scared it would go wrong and that she would be offended or hurt or upset in a way that I really didn't want her to be*". In this sense, caring labour became emotional labour where staff found themselves enacting feeling rules and being

exposed to emotional pain (Hochschild, 1979; 1983/2012). This partly made the management of older volunteers' leaving a challenging task.

3.6.2. Measuring staff's experiences of care and meaningfulness in their work

To capture staff's experiences of care (reflecting both the actual care and the desire for care) and the meaningfulness they ascribed to their work, we designed Likert-type measurement items. We designed multi-item Likert scales because both have various facets.

We phrased each item based on our interview findings (sometimes words used by people in the interviews) and the literature. For example, one item we used to measure staff experience of care, "*I feel the desire to support older volunteers to keep going because I understand how important volunteering is to their lives*", was drawn from a few volunteer manager's observations on how volunteering could be "*the only normal*" part of older people's lives at a time when other changes or challenges hit hard, such as illness, death of family members or close friends, and loneliness - situations that are more frequently seen in late age and can spark the impulse to care. The item, "*The fact that leaving implies the end to their volunteering evokes a caring response in me*", was built on people's sentimental response to the very topic of leaving and the subjects that we often touched on in the interview conversations, such as death, loss, and relapse, where ending seemed to have "[brought] out the best quality of people", where "kindness becomes a more prominent feature" (Carstenson, Isaacowitz & Charles, 1999, p.169). We then run a reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha[6]) to examine how well they had measured what we intended to measure. We retained a 6-item scale measuring care and a 5-item scale measuring meaningfulness in work.

The six items measuring care (Cronbach's alpha = .64) with the first four denoting desire for care and the last two reflecting actual care:

1. I always want to manage their leaving well because they've contributed a lot to the organisation
2. Older volunteers' health and wellbeing matter a lot in my work
3. I feel the desire to support older volunteers to keep going because I understand how important volunteering is to their lives
4. The fact that leaving implies the end to their volunteering evokes a caring response in me
5. I think consciously about how I can minimise the negative effects that leaving could have on their lives
6. I go beyond the formal requirements of my role to support the volunteers I work with

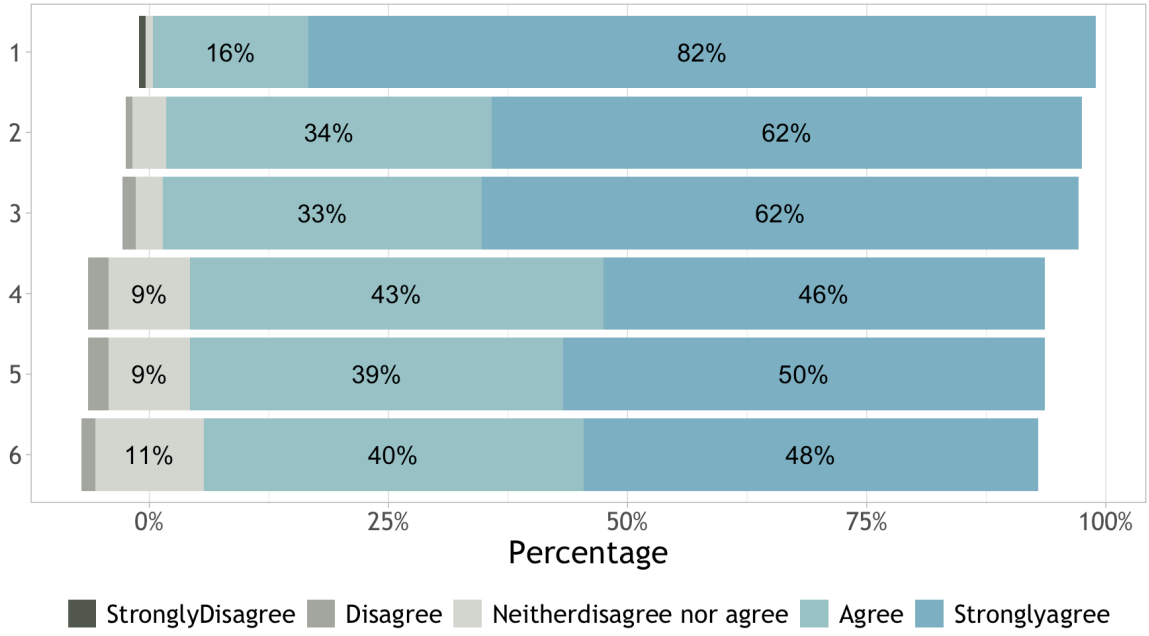
The five items measuring the meaningfulness of work (Cronbach's alpha = .81):

1. I am enthusiastic about what I do in my work
2. I am proud of what I do in my work
3. What I do is worthwhile
4. I have real enjoyment working with volunteers

[6] For anyone unfamiliar with it, Cronbach's alpha measures the reliability or internal consistency of multi-item Likert scales. A good value of Cronbach's alpha generally falls between .7 and .9, but a value between .6 and .7 is also acceptable for exploratory studies like our measurement of care.

5. Knowing that I make a difference that matters to volunteers reminds me what I am doing is incredibly important

Figures 10 and 11, in turn, plot, in turn, the percentages of the survey responses to care and meaningfulness measurement items. Both showed a pattern of agreement, which confirmed our observations in the interviews.



Figures 10. Percentages of Responses to Care Measurement Items among Paid Staff

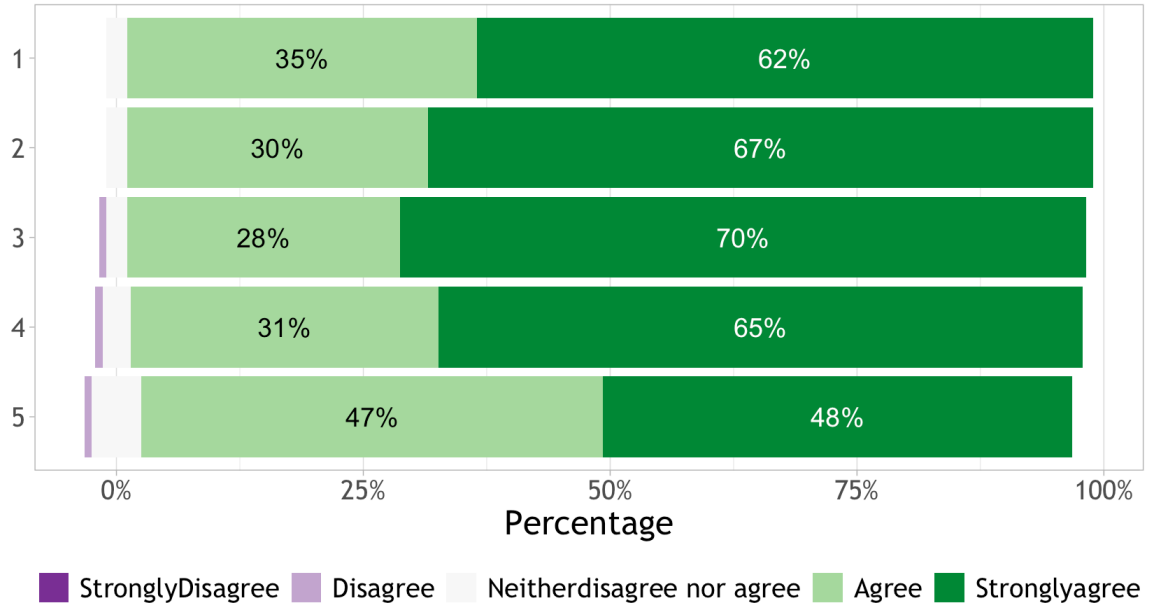


Figure 11. Percentage of Responses to Meaningfulness in Work Measurement Items among Paid Staff

We also tried to measure the emotional toll of care using a single item: "*Sometimes, the experience of dealing with their leaving is a quite stressful one for me*". Table 5 lists the percentages of responses to this item.

Table 5. Percentage of Responses to Measurement Item: *Sometimes, the experience of dealing with their leaving is a quite stressful one for me*" among Paid Staff

	Freq	**% Total**
Strongly disagree	3	2.13
Disagree	19	13.48
Neither disagree or agree	34	24.11
Agree	56	39.72
Strongly agree	29	20.57
Total	141	100

The relatively neutral response pattern indicated that not all leaving cases are stressful to manage.

3.7. Organisation size, line-management duty and staff role position: do they matter?

From the interview data, we came to conclude that how staff would approach to, and hence experience, older volunteers' leaving was very much dependent on the individuals (as persons) and less on the external work conditions, such as sector, "organisation size", and their role positions, which we mentioned earlier.

To further examine this conclusion, we used a series of statistical tests to assess whether there were significant differences or associations between organisation size and staff role position, on the one hand, and staff experiences of care and meaningfulness in their work, on the other[7].

What have we found then?

Our analysis indicated that only "organisation size" mattered and only when it came to meaningfulness in work. Line-management duty and staff role position did not. Nonetheless, organisation size mattered in a surprising way - staff from medium organisations gained a greater meaningfulness in their volunteer management work than those from small organisations, and this was the only statistically significant difference. No statistically significant differences were found between staff from medium and large organisations, nor between small and large organisations (Table 6.). The significance, nevertheless, needs to be read with caution. This is because most staff from medium organisations were volunteer managers, whilst those from small organisations only carried volunteer management duties as part of their jobs (Table 7.).

[7] For statistically minded readers, we used one-way ANOVA (for variables with three or more categories: organisation size and staff role position), unpaired-sample *t*-tests (for dichotomous categorical variables: having line-management duty or not) and Pearson's correlation (for continuous variables: age) to examine their associations with staff experience of care and meaningfulness in their work. We used the summed scores of the measurement items in these tests.

Table 6. Mean Differences of Meaningfulness Gained in Work between Paid Staff from Organisations in Different Sizes in the One-way ANOVA (Tukey Test) ($N = 141$)[8]

Variable	**Meaningfulness in work**	
Organisation Size	**95% CI for Mean Difference**	***p* value**
Medium-Large	0.77 (-0.29, 1.84)	.20
Small-Large	-0.58 (-1.69, 0.53)	.04
Small-Medium	-1.35 (-2.69, -0.01)	.05

Table 7. Contingency Table of Organisation Size and Staff Role Position

Organisation Size	**Staff Role Position**			
	Volunteer Manager	Staff work as volunteer manager	Supervisor	Other staff
Large	55	6	21	4
Medium	24	2	3	0
Small	2	21	1	2

3.8. Do women take up the majority of the volunteer management workforce?

Of the 31 paid staff we interviewed, 25 were females. Only six were male. 13 of the 25 female staff held job titles as volunteer manager or volunteer coordinator, or volunteer assistant, compared to only one among the six men. This disproportionate representation of women and the emotional and caring labour invested in supporting older volunteers (given the usual, stereotypical associations of care with female productivity) brought us two questions: 1) Do females make up the majority of the volunteer management workforce?; 2) Do they tend to demonstrate a greater depth of care compared to their male counterparts when it comes to managing older volunteers leaving? We thus included a question in the survey asking people about their gender identification.

The survey results suggested that females do make up the majority of the volunteer management workforce across all volunteer-involving sectors, with over four fifth (82.7%) of the 81 volunteer managers identifying themselves as female and insignificant correlations between gender and sector. Meanwhile, unpaired *t*-test showed that there was no significant difference in the depth of care between the women and men volunteer managers, which, for our respondents at least, challenges the association of care with female productivity.

3.9. Do younger and older staff approach the job differently?

When we presented our interview findings at the British Sociological Association Work, Employment and Society 2025 Conference, we were asked an interesting question: “Do you find that younger volunteer managers experience and manage older people’s leaving differently from the older ones?” We did not have an answer to

[8] We carried out the assumption of normality test to confirm the suitability for conducting parametric statistical analysis, *t*-test, and the homogeneity of variance test for basic one-way ANOVA. All returned satisfying results (see Appendix C.).

it because we had not been attentive to any possible age effects. One volunteer manager we interviewed did reflect on her growth as both a profession and a person (grown older) over the years, saying she would have done it differently, but such reflection was much more about the difference between “now and the past” rather than “older and younger”. Looking retrospectively then, we felt that the age question was worth exploring, hence asked about people’s age in the survey.

The median age of the 141 paid staff was 44 years old, with the youngest aged 24 and the oldest reaching 69. We then ran Pearson’s correlation test to explore whether there was an age effect on staff’s experience of care and meaningfulness in work. A weak, though statistically significant, positive age effect was returned by the Pearson test ($r = .19$, $p = .03$), which suggested that the depth of care was less likely to vary between older and younger staff.

3.10. What Other Experiences Have People Shared With Us?

At the end of our survey, we asked people what else they would like to share with us. The responses we received were overwhelmingly rich.

A lot of these made complementary qualitative evidence that further supported and, in many cases, enriched our quantitative findings. For example, a lot of people wrote passionately about their commitment to offering older volunteers support so they could continue their volunteering as long as they could, which corroborates the findings that we presented in section 3.3. Some also shared specific actions that they undertook to support older volunteers in greater detail. Alongside these passionate responses were a few critical reflections in which the respondents held the view that there are limits to the extent to which organisations/staff can support an older volunteer to continue, and supporting them to continue is, after all, not always going to be the right choice. Consider the circumstance described in the following response from a volunteer manager, which highlighted that sometimes managing leaving is a difficult balancing act.

> *“While I want to support older volunteers and make their tasks as accessible as possible, I'm also aware that I have my own work to get on with and their quality and pace of work may not meet my (and my organisation's) expectations and deadlines. I often end up creating new tasks for them which are not essential simply to keep them occupied. Volunteering should be a mutually beneficial relationship, but it can end up feeling very one-sided.”*

Quite a number of responses (including the response above) pointed to the challenges in managing older volunteers’ leaving, particularly in dealing with older volunteers who have started to struggle with carrying out their normal volunteering activities for health reasons, but are not self-aware of it or even refuse to recognise the changes within themselves and accepting their limitations. Some often specifically referred to their experiences of managing volunteers undergoing cognitive declines. The care-demanding nature of the task and the associative emotions were made explicit as people reflected on the stress they felt when having to broach the leaving conversations with the volunteers. For example, a volunteer manager put it in these terms:

> *“As a volunteer manager, the most difficult aspect is when a volunteer can no longer participate due to physical or mental health but is not able to realise that for themselves. The emotional consequences of having to deliver that news, and the*

months of worry which precede making that decision, have a huge negative impact on self-esteem and confidence in my abilities. Often it means delivering very hurtful news to someone who you have built a long relationship with and having to do that is isolating and painful."

This experience resonated highly with our interview findings, like the quote from the volunteer supervisor that we presented in section 3.6.1.

We also saw recurring emotional responses provoked by recalling the loss of volunteers, wherein feelings of sadness and even distress were articulated. These responses sent a message that while it was delightful to see that older volunteers have been cared for, we need to be attentive to staff needs and wellbeing too, especially support that can effectively reduce the labour and emotional toll that is incurred in caring work.

A few respondents brought up the issue of lacking dedicated guidance and the need for relevant staff training - which we also observed in our case studies. Some called for supporting volunteers to leave in good terms; we have embraced the idea in our forthcoming Toolkit.

The topic of leaving also sparked people to reflect more widely on issues of the older volunteer population and their management, from the trickiness of "*an 85-year-old climbing ladders rather than asking someone for help*" (which we feel is as challenging as managing volunteers who are displaying symptoms of cognitive decline) to how the rising cost of living and pension age are hitting the older volunteer population hard.

Last but not least, we also received some very positive feedback on our work, which has given us more confidence in the meaning of, and meaningfulness in, our work.

4. CONCLUSION

We have written about the key findings from the survey with the overarching question we set out to explore in inquiry: Does what we have learned from cultural heritage organisations apply to the wider voluntary sector? Through the analysis, we have found out that, overall, yes, it largely does. As has been revealed, organisations tend to support older volunteers to continue volunteering. Many have also tried out different strategies to engage with their "retired" volunteers. For paid staff, managing older volunteers' leaving involved undertaking caring work, which is a source of meaning of their work. Managing older volunteers' leaving could be particularly challenging if the older volunteers were unaware of or refused to admit that they were struggling to continue their normal volunteering activities. While "organisation size" might matter in some ways, staff role position and whether they have line management duty or not did not condition the depth of care and meaningfulness in work. Women made up the vast majority of the volunteer management workforce, but gender did not appear to affect how much volunteer managers care about and for older volunteers. Neither did staff age significantly matter. The only difference evidenced in our data was that organisations in different sectors may draw on distinct resources to support their older volunteers.

Academic literature on volunteer management rarely discusses older volunteers' leaving. Two pieces of work that we want to note here are the pilot study (Davenport, Newman & Moffatt, 2021) which underpinned this Cessation of Volunteering project, and Russel, Storti & Handy's (2019) work carried out in the North American context which adopted a different terminology: volunteer retirement. The pilot study was also conducted with cultural heritage organisations, but on a smaller scale (three case studies in the North East of England). Russel and her colleagues' work reported a cross-sector survey finding of 69 complete responses (also small in scale), with the majority (74%) coming from healthcare or health services, but explored the topic from a practitioner's perspective. Perhaps, the only other mention was in Bussell and Forbes's (2007) single case study of volunteer management in an English theatre - again, art, culture and heritage sector (and nearly 20 years ago!); they quoted the Front of House Manager: "*one of our problems is trying to address how we can persuade people they are too old to carry on*". This briefing, therefore, is a contribution to the literature with up-to-date, cross-sector evidence in the UK context and new insights at the theoretical level, specifically, we extended the discussions on "managing" older volunteers' leaving to "experiencing" such managing processes, bringing the empirical evidence into dialogue with concepts of caring labour, emotional labour and feeling rules, current research on meaning and meaningfulness in work, as well as the social gerontology literature on ageing (we will extend these discussions in our forthcoming publications). We have, therefore, in many ways, broadened our vision to the leaving topic.

We mentioned earlier that we not only interviewed staff but also volunteers and ex-volunteers. While our survey data (also the findings from our staff interviews) showed that staff can feel stressed by seeing or having to make an older volunteer leave, our interviews with ex-volunteers revealed that many accommodated the leaving and adjusted to the life after volunteering fairly well. We therefore recommend interested readers look to the rich literature on transitions in the lives of ageing individuals.

Nevertheless, our analysis generated insights into how organisations and staff manage older volunteers' leaving and how they experience the process. We hope that this briefing will encourage you to think about what you could do differently with volunteers who may be approaching the end of their volunteering. One of our next steps will be to talk with people about the implications of these findings for practice around this topic. If you would like to be involved in such a conversation, please get in touch.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We feel extremely grateful to all survey respondents for their time, generosity and honesty. We are touched by the level of engagement this survey has received.

We would also like to thank the following individuals and organisations for their generous support in helping us with circulating the survey within their networks.

Association of Independent Museums
Association Of Volunteer Managers
Cathedral Volunteer Coordinators' Forum
Charity Retail Association
Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland

County Durham Volunteering
English Heritage
Group for Education in Museums
Heritage Volunteering Group
Make Your Mark
Muslim Charities Forum
National Association for Voluntary and Community Action
National Council for Voluntary Organisations
National Trust & National Trust for Scotland
NHS Volunteering
Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action
Science Museum Group
Social History Curators Group
Sports England
Volunteering Matters
Volunteer Scotland
Voluntary Sector Studies Network
Wales Council for Voluntary Action / Cyngor Gweithredu Gwirfoddol Cymru

We would like to extend a warm thanks to the many individuals we met at three conferences we attended in 2025, with whom we have held encouraging conversations around the “cessation of volunteering” topic.

Special thanks also go to David Hedges at the National Trust, who generously shared with us a yet to be published research project they did on volunteer managers working with volunteers living with dementia. The findings of the work and the informal discussions we had have been inspiring for our analysis.

AUTHORSHIP

Cite this publication as: Davenport, B., & Wang, Y. (2026). Cessation of Volunteering Survey briefing, Cessation of Volunteering Project Report 1. Newcastle University. DOI: https://doi.org/10.57711/ggsn-kx17

All views and any errors contained in this report are solely the responsibility of the authors.

Publication date: June 16th, 2026
ESRC Project Reference: ES/X013847/1

REFERENCES

Bussell, H., & Forbes, D. (2007). Volunteer Management in Arts Organizations: A Case Study and Managerial Implications. *International Journal of Arts Management*, *9*(2), 16–28. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41064916

Carstenson, L. I., Isaacowitz, D. M., & Charles, S. T. (1999). Taking time seriously, A theory of socioemotional selectivity. *American Psychologist*, 54(3), 165-181. doi: 10.1037//0003-066x.54.3.165. PMID: 10199217.

Davenport, B., Newman, A., & Moffatt, S. (2021). The Impact on older people's wellbeing of leaving heritage volunteering and the challenges of managing this process. *The Qualitative Report*, *26*(2), 334-351. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.4499

Himmelweit, S. (1999). Caring labour. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 561(1), 27-38. https://doi.org/10.1177/000271629956100102

Hochschild, A. R. (1979). Emotion work, feeling rules, and social structure. *American Journal of Sociology*, *85*(3), 551–575. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2778583

Hochschild, A. R. (1983/2012). *The managed heart: Commercialisation of human feeling* (1st ed.). University of California Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pn9bk

Orr, N. (2006). Museum volunteering: Heritage as 'serious leisure'. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, *12*(2), 194–210. https://doi.org/10.1080/13527250500496169

Russell, A. R., Heinlein Storti, M. A., & Handy, F. (2019). Managing volunteer retirement among older adults: Perspectives of volunteer administrators. *Journal of Public and Nonprofit Affairs*, 5(1), 95-109. https://doi.org/10.20899/jpna.5.1.95-109

Wymer, W. W., & Brudney, J. L. (2000). Marketing management in arts organisations: Differentiating arts and culture volunteers from other volunteers. *International Journal of Arts Management*, 2(3), 40-52. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41064700

Appendix A. Ways That Organisations Have Supported Their Older Volunteers to Continue Volunteering

Adjusting the role a volunteer has been working on to meet their developing needs
Allowing a volunteer to take periods of “leave”
Allowing a volunteer to come to the organisation but not assigning any tasks for them
Bringing in a health expert to assess a volunteer's needs, for example, an occupational therapist
Encouraging a volunteer to regularly participate in mentally stimulating quizzes on themes like site history
Encouraging mutual support among volunteers themselves, such as car sharing and training volunteers on spotting dementia signs and needs so that they can look out for and support each other.
Having staff to support a volunteer who is unable to complete manual handling tasks
Moving a volunteer to a different role; sometimes a new role is created for this purpose
Offering a volunteer an easier rota
Offering a volunteer voluntary activities that can be done at home
Signposting a volunteer health and social care services
Signposting a volunteer other voluntary organisations
Supporting a volunteer through improved accessibility, for example, disabled parking
Teaming a volunteer up with another volunteer or staff
Work with a volunteer’s family members to understand and hence mitigate ageing effects
Training staff with videos, Lunch n’ Learns events, workshops on how to communicating older volunteers that the organisation is fine with scaling back its work to meet their needs
Offering emotional support and helping a volunteer to understand that they have reached their limit

Appendix B. Actions That Staff/Organisations Have Taken with And for Their Older Volunteers Who Have Left

Attending funerals when ex-volunteers passed away
Being part of funeral planning for those with no family
Carrying out formal engagement with ex-volunteers, such as setting up an alumni club, newsletter subscription, and inviting them to events
Issuing formal acknowledgements of volunteers' service when they leave through leaving cards, gifts, certificates of recognition, thank you letters or emails from the CEO, mention of their leaving in newsletters or emails, awards
Inviting ex-volunteers to return informally for free coffee or tea
Keeping in contact with family or widows of volunteers after they passed away
Maintaining contact with retired volunteers through carrying out home visits, sending Christmas cards, making phone calls, WhatsApp group
Managing a memorial board with volunteers who have passed away, which is display at celebration events
Organising leaving dos for an older volunteer when they were about to leave
Referring an older volunteer who was about to leave to the organisation's Friends group if it had one
Not revoking volunteers' status as a result of age or ill health
Reablement - Assisting a volunteer after hospital discharge to stay independent in their homes; helping a volunteer with shopping, socialising, self-caring (e.g. clean), gardening, dog walking, etc.
Sending cards and/or flowers if they were in hospital or recovering from illness
Sending cards and/or flowers to families of ex-volunteers when they passed away
Sharing retired volunteers with news about what is going on in the organisation and updates on staff they know, like they have had a baby or got engaged, etc.

Appendix C. Normality Test Results of

	Skewness	Kurtosis
Care	-0.82 (SE = -2.02)	0.08 (SE = 0.10)
Meaningfulness in work	-0.95 (SE = -2.33)	0.37(SE = 0.45)