

# The Cessation of Volunteering Survey Briefing

## Executive Summary

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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<sup>1</sup>. 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

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term ‘staff’ as a shorthand for a wide range of people who, in practice, manage or supervise volunteers.

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.
- 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.

The full report is available from: <https://research.ncl.ac.uk/cessationofvolunteering/outputs/>.

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