



The impact of Covid-19 on heritage volunteering

Volunteering is of especially high value to the Heritage sector: the Centre for Economics and Business Research estimates the economic value of heritage volunteers to be approximately £520m year ([CEBR, 2018](#)). An estimated 5.5% of the adult population in England who volunteered did so in heritage in 2018 - an increase from the 5.1% reported the previous year. (DCMS, 2019-2018). Not only do volunteers play an important supporting role in the sector, but they also occupy important leadership positions; an estimated 60% of the organisations in our industrial heritage strategy are led and owned by volunteers.

Historic England ([2020](#)) and National Lottery Heritage Fund ([2020](#)) reported in April 2020 that 27% and 55% of the heritage sector organisations who responded to their respective surveys cited a lack of available volunteers. They identified this as one of the greatest threats posed by Covid-19 to heritage organisations, representing an acute risk for small charities and faith-based organisations.

Historic England's survey showed that 90% of third sector heritage organisations reported high or moderate risk to their long-term viability. Holding the least financial reserves in the sector, 35% of the third sector organisations surveyed stated they would not be able to survive beyond July 2020. To expand upon the findings obtained via the 'Heritage Sector Survey (Survey of COVID-19 Effects)' of April 2020 and better understand the impact of Covid-19 for the heritage sector, the Heritage Sector Intelligence Desk at Historic England designed a survey to look further into the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic upon volunteering in the heritage sector. The particular focus on volunteering was motivated by the vital role that volunteers play in supporting many aspects of the heritage sector. Focus was exclusively given to researching the impact of the pandemic on heritage volunteering operations and organisations employing volunteers as part of their core operations, rather than the experiences of volunteers themselves, which had been explored by the [Heritage Volunteering Group](#).

The data for this research was obtained via an online survey which was administered between 9 February – 10 March 2021. Responses were sought from heritage organisations of all types and sizes who make use of volunteers to support their work. It included organisations that were entirely volunteer-led to those that provided only a few volunteer roles. Invitations to take part in the research were emailed to 383 organisations who had completed Historic England's April 2020 survey and consented to participation in further research. The survey was also circulated to a wide variety of heritage organisations by Historic England staff, was included in Historic England's tweets, and featured in the newsletters of Historic England and other heritage organisations.

The survey covered five main areas, namely:

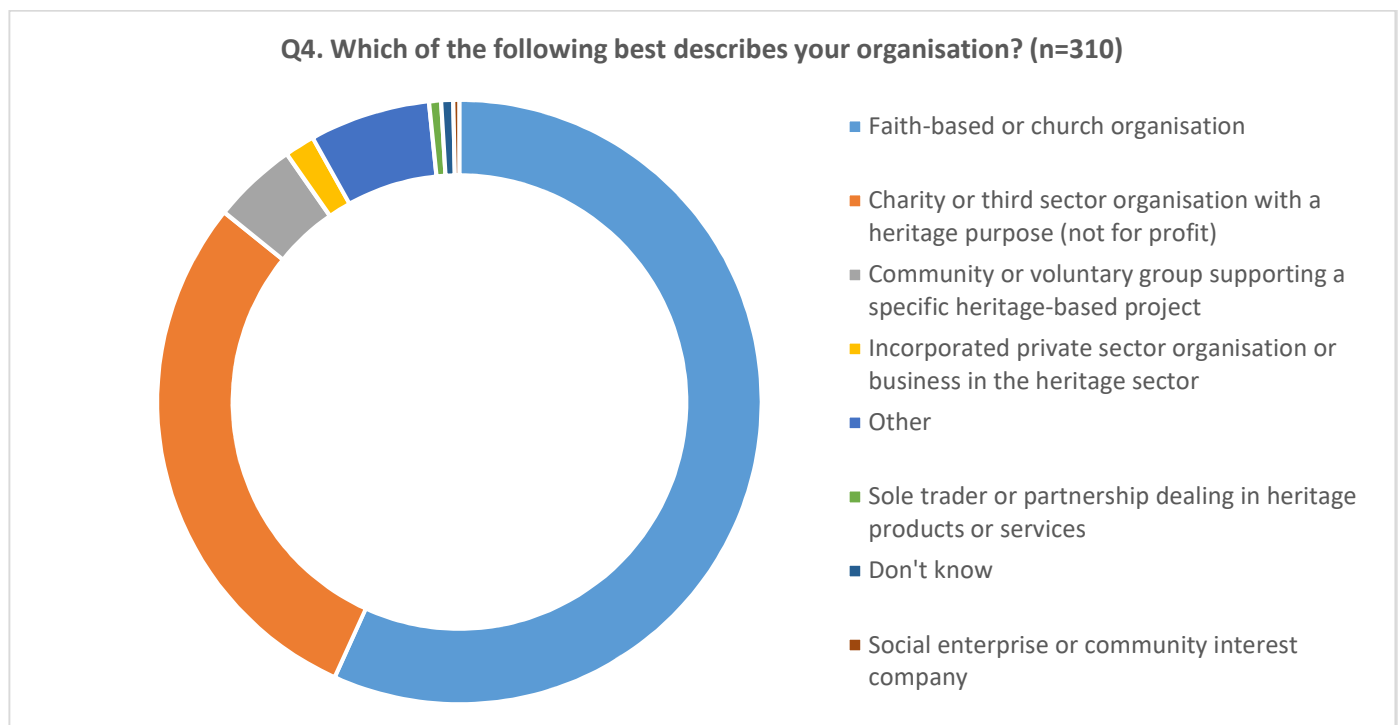
- The nature and background of the organisations (to develop a profile of the respondents),
- The composition of the organisations' volunteers (e.g. numbers, hours contributed, types of work undertaken),
- How Covid-19 has impacted the organisations and their volunteers,
- How volunteer operations are likely to proceed in 2021 and beyond, covering such areas as volunteer numbers and the main challenges that might lie ahead,
- Additional information regarding further research and subscription to Historic England's newsletter.

The respondents

310 responses were obtained via the survey, and the contributors represented a wide range of heritage fields such as museums, railways, and historic gardens and houses. Faith-based or church organisations were by far the most numerous, representing around 56% of the total responses. Whilst this does not mean that the findings are any less valid or less useful, it must be kept in mind that the figures and responses obtained are predominantly from a specific area of the heritage sector.

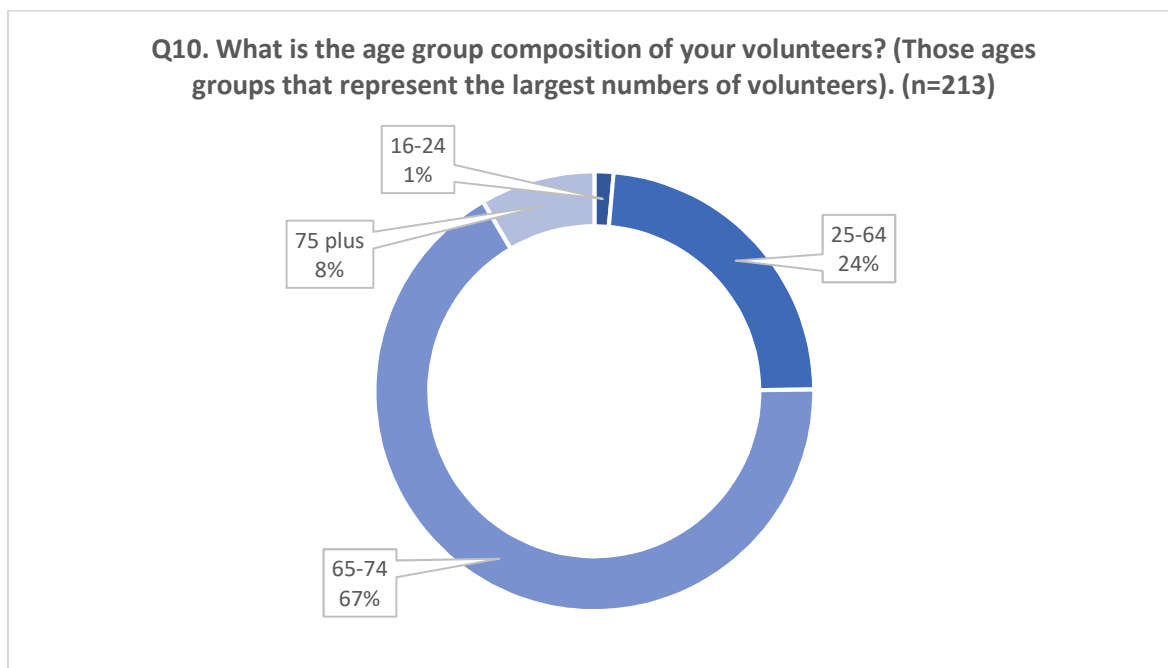
There was a general geographical spread of respondents across England with no one region dominating the dataset, although comparably fewer responses were obtained from organisations based in the North-East.

19% of the total respondents had participated in Historic England's April 2020 survey.



5% of respondents operate a historic place belonging to either the National Trust, Historic Houses or English Heritage, and 31% employed a volunteer manager or coordinator to manage their volunteer operations.

Older individuals represented the largest volunteer age group within the organisations that responded, with around 75% falling into the over 65 age bracket.



Analysis approach

Responses to the survey's questions were not mandatory, meaning respondents could skip a question if they were either unable to or unwilling to answer. On this basis all questions have been analysed independently with the number of responses expressed as 'n=x'.

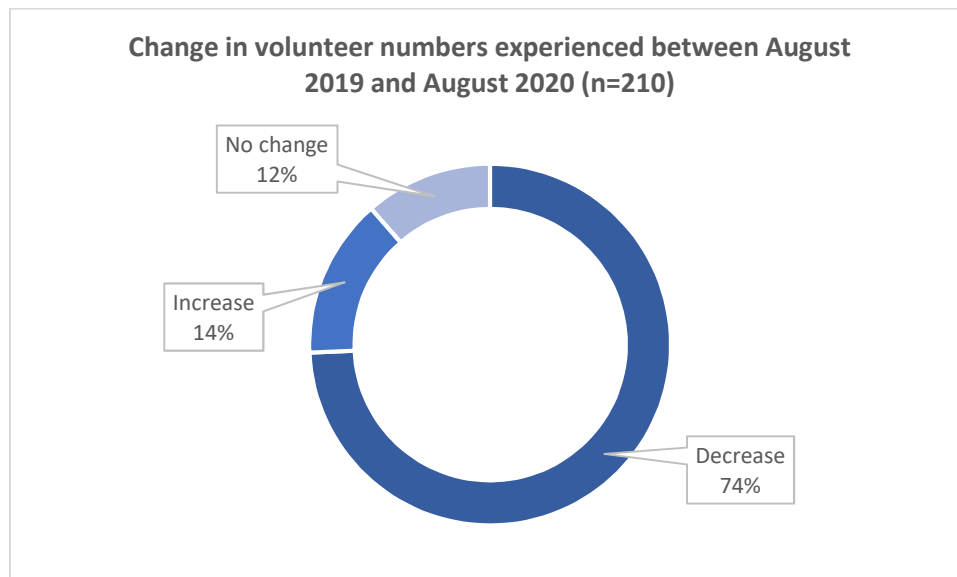
Most of the survey questions were closed-ended and their responses were quantified and expressed as percentages. Verbatim responses to open-ended questions were analysed to identify recurring themes, which were then quantified in order to be represented as a percent of the total number of responses provided for a given question. Specific responses made by the organisations have been quoted to act as examples and to support the statements made. Those themes that only occurred once were grouped into an 'Other' category.

The questions in this report have not been analysed in the sequential order of the survey and have instead been addressed in order of their relevance to the themes being discussed in this report.

Changes to the volunteering landscape – 2019 vs. 2020

Respondents were asked to indicate the number of individuals who had contributed volunteer hours to their organisations in August 2019 and August 2020, with the former date acting as a baseline against which changes could be measured. While this is not representative of fluctuations in volunteering numbers across the year, it provides an image of change across time to help us understand effects of the pandemic. The results demonstrated a substantial drop (-33%) in the number of individuals contributing volunteer hours between 2019 and 2020, and 74% of all organisations reported a drop in their volunteer numbers between the two dates.

Q8. Approximate number of individuals who contributed volunteer hours in August 2019 (n=210)	Q8. Approximate number of individuals who contributed volunteer hours in August 2020 (n=210)	Percent change (2019 vs. 2020)
134,838	90,882.75	-33%



Although other factors may have influenced this change in the number of volunteers, it may be safely asserted that the decline is largely due to the impact of Covid-19 and the risks and vulnerabilities faced by volunteers. This could be due to either a lack of available volunteer roles (e.g. due to sites closing, volunteer coordination not being possible due to social distancing placing restrictions on their numbers, furloughing or loss of coordinator posts), or due to the inability or reluctance of volunteers to offer their time. This will be explored further in this report.

Question 9 addressed change in the number of hours contributed by volunteers across various roles in order to identify the roles hit hardest by the pandemic. Covering the same periods of August 2019 and August 2020, the results indicated a similar downward trend in most volunteering areas, although each respondent experienced these changes to a different degree. The most negatively affected roles were 'on-site educational' and 'guiding' which experienced reductions of 80% and 79% of their respective hours. Such results are unsurprising given the roles' face-to-face nature and the restrictions placed upon these activities by the lockdown. Additional factors such as the volunteers' reluctance to undertake such roles due to health concerns, and the closing of sites, are also likely causes for this high decline, particularly due to the predominance of vulnerable age groups among heritage volunteers.

Other roles that were negatively affected included 'researcher' (-73%), 'off-site educational' (-60%) and 'safety and support' (-59%) (definitions for these roles are given in the following table). Whilst a lack of available volunteers undoubtedly affected the number of hours contributed, this may also be due to closure of these sites in general and the resultant loss of opportunities to undertake such roles, rather than the nature of these less face-to-face roles.

Volunteering Role (as stated in Q9)	2019 Total Number of Hours Contributed	2020 Total Number of Hours Contributed	Percent Change (2019-2020)	Responses (n=)
On-site educational (e.g. leading activities with young people/ demonstrating skills or crafts)	20,012	3,907	- 80%	95
Guiding (e.g. tour guide/ walk leader/ room guide)	172,742	37,015	- 79%	106
Researcher (e.g. oral history researcher/ cataloguer/ photographic researcher/ crowdsourced transcriber)	14,964	4,093	- 73%	84

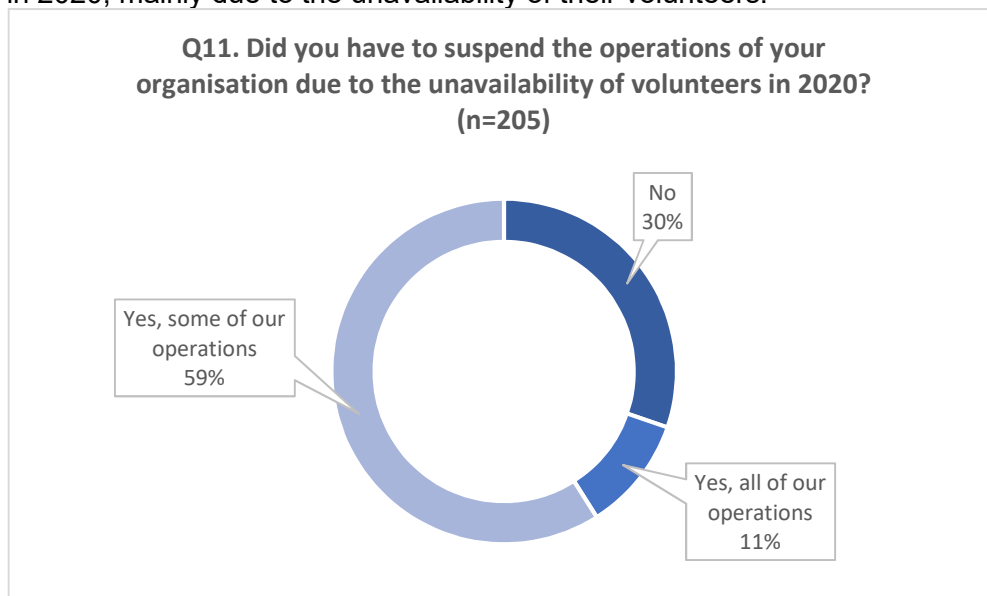
Volunteering Role (as stated in Q9)	2019 Total Number of Hours Contributed	2020 Total Number of Hours Contributed	Percent Change (2019-2020)	Responses (n=)
Off-site educational (e.g. leading activities at schools or other local educational institutions)	2,656	1,074	- 60%	76
Safety and Support (e.g. site security, events marshalling, paramedic / first aider)	24,459	10,147	- 59%	98
Upkeep and maintenance (e.g. cleaner/ custodian/ gardener/ engineer)	100,461	42,967	- 57%	130
Fundraising (e.g. Fundraiser)	4,288	1,907	- 56%	99
Conservation (e.g. dry-stone walling/ paper conservation/ artefact preservation)	20,464	9,567	- 53%	72
Administration (e.g. coordinating volunteer programmes/ editing volunteer publications/ events planner or runner)	52,703	37,377	- 29%	111
Leadership (e.g. trustee/ bursar/ treasurer)	59,460	55,538	- 7%	167
Wellbeing and inclusion (e.g. planning and leading wellbeing-related activities)	7,884	7,676	- 3%	84
Digital (e.g. social media coordinator/ blogger/ video production)	2,854	6,648	+ 133%	97
Total	482,947	217,916	- 55%	

'Wellbeing and inclusion' roles were the least affected and registered a drop of only 3%, albeit from a fairly low 2019 baseline (when compared with most other roles). Digital (e.g. social media coordinator/ blogger/ video production) roles increased by 133%, a sign indicating that there has been a notable shift towards more remote and online roles, evidencing the sector's flexible response to Covid-19.

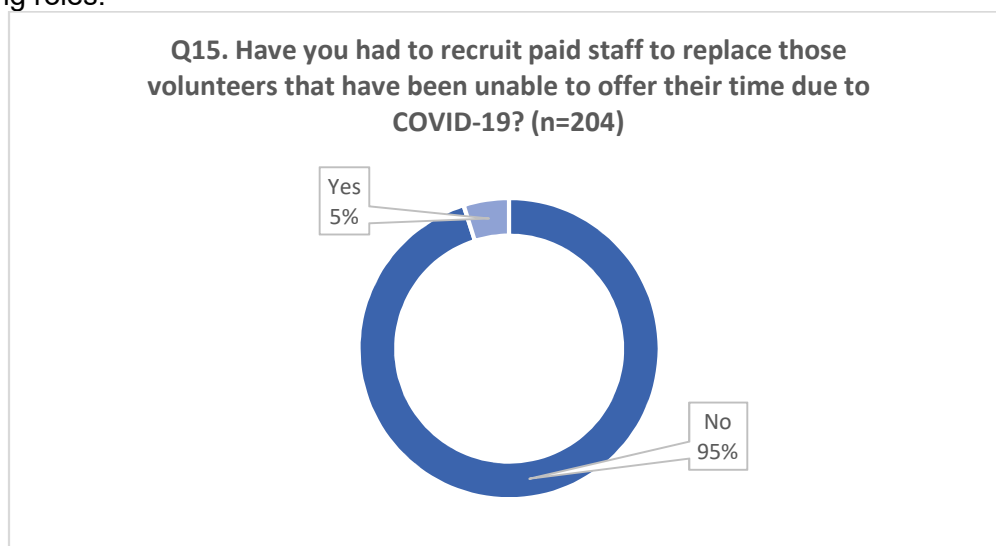
When the changes in volunteering hours across all roles are contrasted, the results suggest an overall drop of 55% in the number of volunteering hours contributed between August 2019 and August 2020.

The impacts of the pandemic

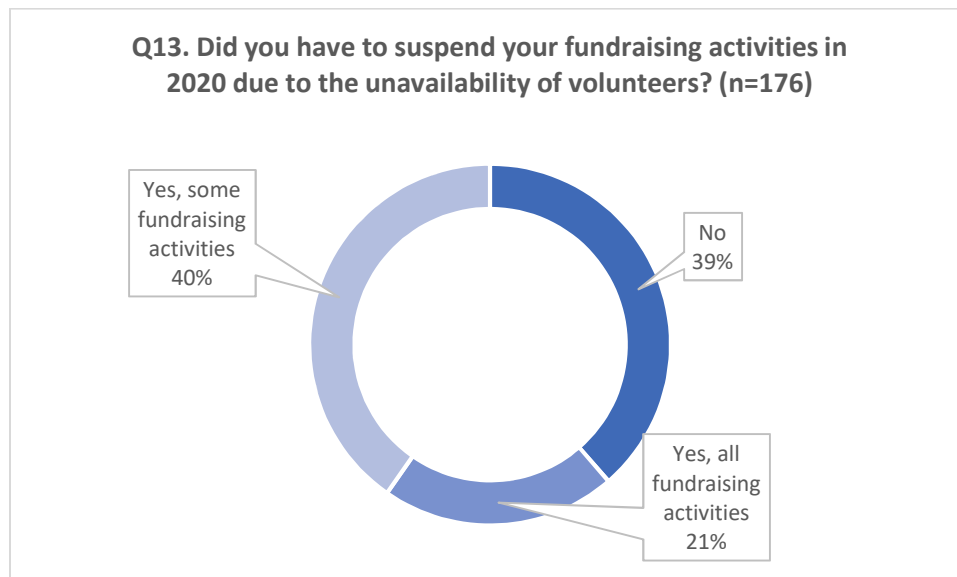
The survey results indicated that 70% of organisations had to suspend either some or all of their operations in 2020, mainly due to the unavailability of their volunteers.



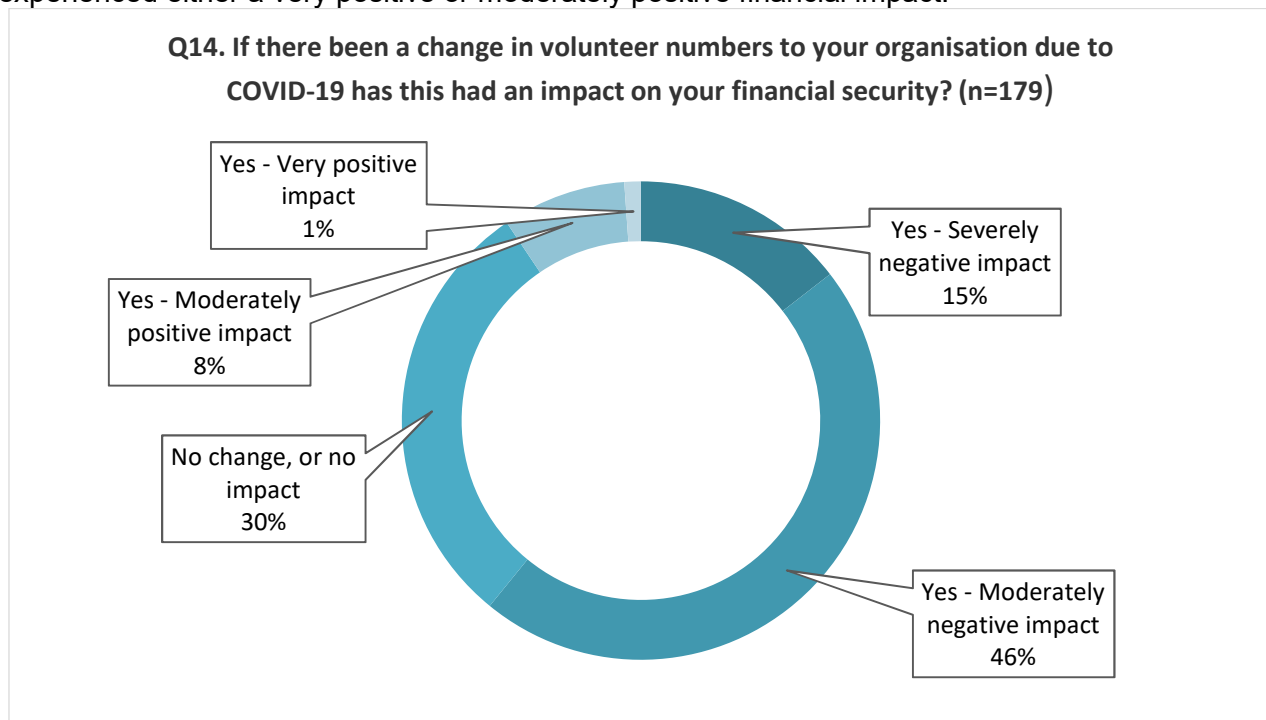
Despite this figure, only 5% of organisations recruited new paid staff as replacements to cover volunteering roles.



Focusing specifically upon the financial implications of the pandemic, 61% of those organisations who relied on volunteers for fundraising had to either suspend all or some of their fundraising activities in 2020. Such a situation has resulted in the loss of much-needed income when other Covid-19 impacts, such as low visitors numbers (and thus reduced revenue) and the increased expenses associated to the pandemic (e.g. purchasing PPE and deeper cleaning of sites), have compounded to increase the financial demands placed upon heritage organisations. Encouragingly, 39% of respondents reported that they didn't have to suspend any fundraising activities due to the unavailability of volunteers, limiting any impacts upon their fundraising activities.



Those organisations that reported a change in their volunteer numbers due to Covid-19 experienced a largely negative impact on their financial situation. Grouped together, 61% of such organisations experienced either a moderately negative or severely negative impact on their financial security. Only 30% expressed either no change or no impact. Interestingly, 9% experienced either a very positive or moderately positive financial impact.



Q12 asked respondents the open-ended question 'How has volunteering in your organisation changed due to Covid-19?'. 201 responses were received from which 11 key themes were identified. 'Fewer volunteering roles available' and 'fewer volunteers' were jointly the highest occurring themes (23%). The former theme indicates that the pandemic has restricted the opportunities that these organisations can offer to their volunteers and suggests the existence of an unmet appetite for opportunities among former volunteers. The verbatim predominantly indicated that because sites closed, there were fewer available volunteering positions, or that only a small number of specific roles were able to continue, and others were suspended due to pandemic restrictions.

“Almost all on-site activity has ceased due to successive lockdowns. Offsite activity continues, but much reduced”

a community or voluntary group supporting a specific heritage-based project

“Most activities have been suspended so there are very limited opportunities for volunteering”

a faith-based or church organisation

“Most operational and support volunteering roles became impossible to do because we were obliged to close our premises and cease most of the activities that are dependent on volunteer input”

a charity or third sector organisation with a heritage purpose (not for profit)

The prevalence of the ‘fewer volunteers available’ theme contradicts the assumption of an ‘untapped reserve’ of people looking to volunteer, implying that although roles existed, there were no volunteers to fill them which may be reflecting the temporary effect of the pandemic, especially on vulnerable communities. The relevant government call for NHS volunteers was at that time oversubscribed, suggesting a potential move of volunteers to the public health sector in response to the health emergency. Such a move may have restricted supply to other volunteer-dependent sectors such as heritage. However, the situations are not mutually exclusive, and the same organisation could conceivably find that it has fewer volunteering places to offer and also a lack of volunteers to fill them, particularly if the positions are less desirable or those that require experience or technical skills to undertake (that the available volunteers might not have). Moreover, some organisations may have lacked the capacity to change the nature of their volunteering model away from primarily visitor services roles towards more direct operational volunteering opportunities or digital/remote volunteering. Nevertheless, the key motivations behind this theme were volunteers’ reluctance offer their time due to health concerns, adherence to official guidance to remain at home, or a loss of commitment given the time that has elapsed since they last volunteered.

“People are more cautious”

a faith-based or church organisation

“We have lost a significant number of volunteers (due to their demographics) who have been shielding through 2020”

a charity or third sector organisation with a heritage purpose (not for profit)

“Lack of interest, social distancing, very few events, loss of commitment”

a faith-based or church organisation

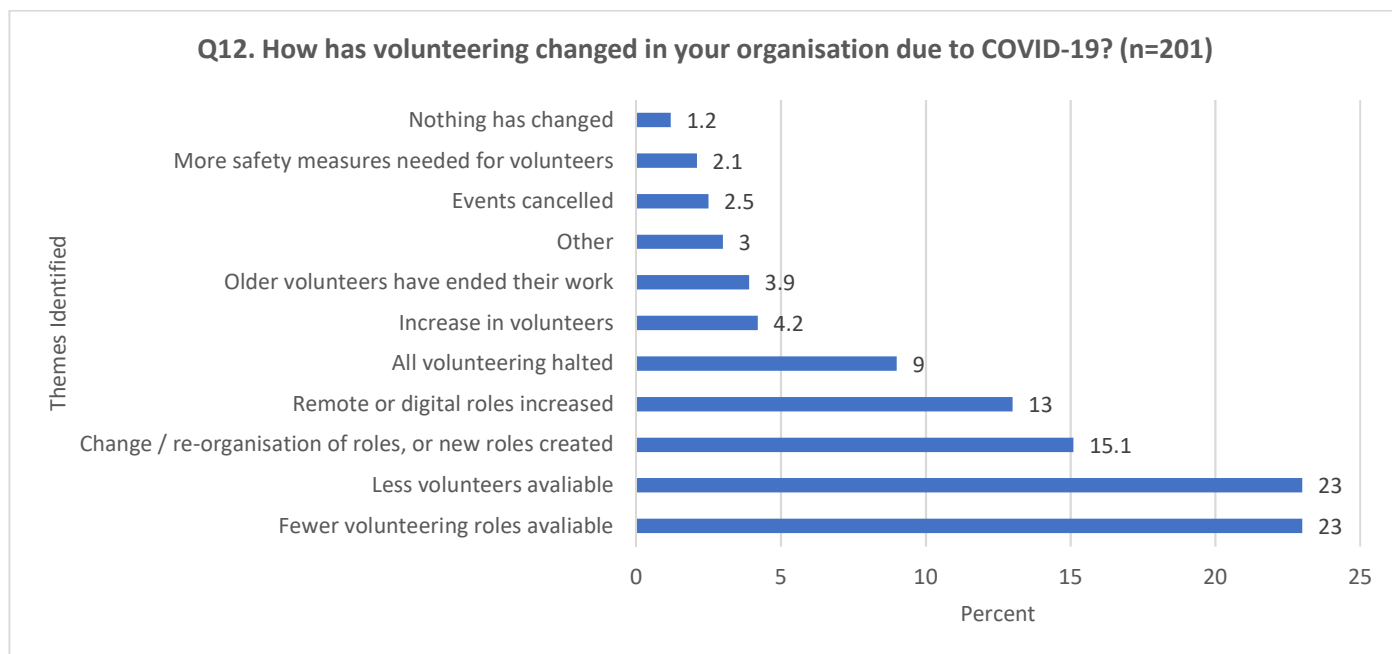
The third most commonly mentioned theme was a ‘change/reorganisation of roles, or new roles created’ (15.1%). This theme describes the adaptation of roles offered by organisations (in terms of how they are undertaken), or situations wherein some roles are cut back and others increased. In terms of new roles created, these were predominantly digital positions. Although circumstance forced these operational changes upon organisations, they demonstrated the flexibility and adaptability of the heritage sector when it comes to volunteer operations, insofar as organisations were able to continue to work but in innovative and dynamic ways.

“Huge increase in media management - livestreaming, preparing recorded talks, services etc. Decrease in cleaning, serving refreshments, marshalling”

a faith-based or church organisation

“Our ongoing project has been affected by Covid, but some work is continuing by individuals working alone”

a faith-based or church organisation



2020 vs. 2021 – More of the same?

Taking a retrospective view on the past year, respondents were asked to provide their unprompted feedback to the question ‘Looking back what were the main issues(s) that affected your volunteer operation/work in 2020?’ (Question 18). The results indicated a spread of views and opinions that could broadly be refined into 12 themes drawn out from the 175 responses.

The most commonly occurring theme was that there were fewer volunteers available (20%), a point that mirrors the (joint) most frequently mentioned theme in Question 12. The comments again highlight that this was generally due to volunteers either being prevented from working due to public health restrictions, or through anxiety and health concerns which caused individuals to remain at home.

“Many volunteers unable to attend site during lock downs - even when access possible, many continue to stay away with fears of infection”

a faith-based or church organisation

“Fear of catching Covid-19”

a faith-based or church organisation

“Lockdown and shielding have prevented volunteers physically coming to the building”

a faith-based or church organisation

Given that older volunteers make up such a large and important part of heritage volunteering, it was decided to separate these answers from the more general ‘less volunteers available’ theme. When both are combined, the results indicate that 33% of organisations experienced this situation, making it by far the most frequently experienced issue of 2020.

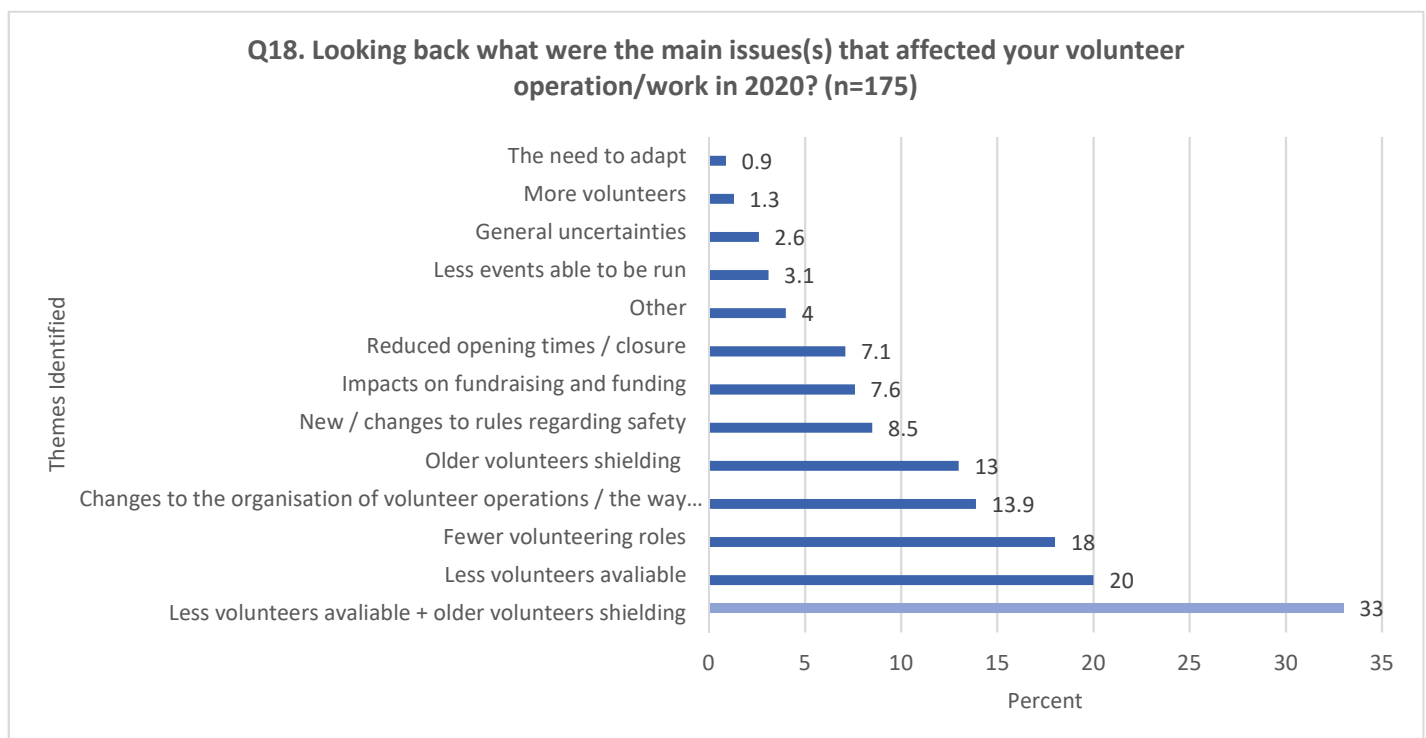
‘Fewer volunteering roles available’ was the second most stated theme at 18%, reinforcing the point highlighted in relation to Question 12 that the pandemic has restricted volunteering opportunities. Again, it indicates there were willing potential volunteers, but a lack of suitable positions for them to fill. The responses reveal that this was due predominantly due to sites closing or the effect of public health restrictions on the types of role that were available.

*“The museum has remained closed so the help of volunteers has not been required”
a charity or third sector organisation with a heritage purpose (not for profit)*

*“Volunteers unable to access site while museum closed”
a local authority museum*

*“We had lots of people offering to volunteer, but with little opportunity to make use of them”
a charity or third sector organisation with a heritage purpose (not for profit)*

The third most frequently identified theme covered changes to the organisation of volunteer operations (13.9%) and the practicalities of coordinating volunteers' work under pandemic conditions. Often, volunteers and their coordinators had to work remotely and it was thus impossible to be on-site or to meet face-to-face to manage the volunteer effort, carry out the work itself, or address the challenges that arise through such work.

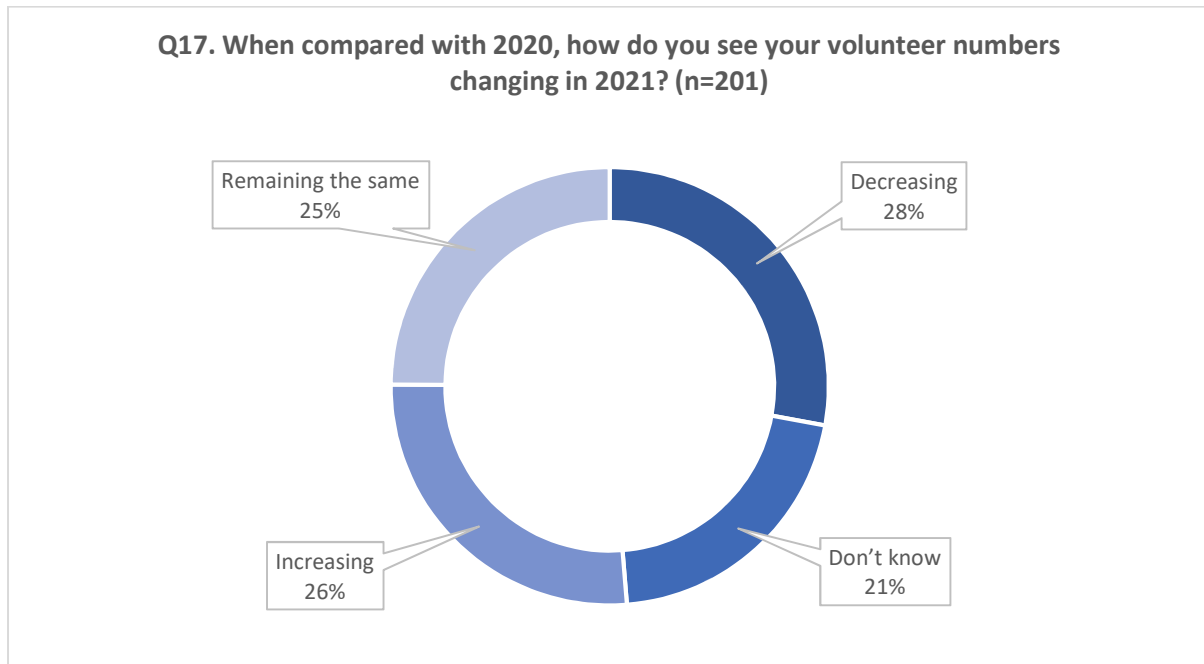


*“Closing our office meant we lost the opportunity for a regular weekly volunteer meeting”
a charity or third sector organisation with a heritage purpose (not for profit)*

*“Lack of being able to physically meet in order to pick up difficulties and problems”
a faith-based or church organisation*

*“Volunteering remotely rather than in-person was the biggest change for us”
a charity or third sector organisation with a heritage purpose (not for profit)*

Organisations' expectations of changes in their volunteer numbers for 2021 were mixed. 51% of respondents believed volunteer numbers would not get worse in 2021 ('Remaining the same' or 'Increasing'). Worryingly however, over a quarter (28%) of respondents expected to see their volunteer numbers decrease in 2021 when compared with 2020, a point made all the more concerning given that in 2020 organisations were already very concerned about the lack of available volunteers (see Question 18), let alone any future reduction in volunteer numbers.



Question 19 asked about the main issue(s) that organisations thought would most likely affect their volunteer operations in 2021. 169 respondents answered this open-ended question, and their answers were grouped into 14 themes.

The most common theme concerned the 'confidence that organisations had in volunteers returning' (15.1%), due predominantly to the health concerns and more general fears that volunteers had towards returning to their roles.

"Extreme caution of volunteers until it is clear that vaccination has reached a point where COVID infection is extremely limited"
a faith-based or church organisation

"Confidence to resume social and community interaction after a prolonged period of inaction and inaccessibility"
a faith-based or church organisation

The 'lack of volunteers' was the second most common theme, representing 14.2% of all responses. This was also the highest-ranking concern for 2020 (Q18), suggesting that it will remain a current issue for the immediate future. Volunteers' ongoing health concerns were a primary motivator of this response (as was the case in 2020). Unlike 2020's results there was also concern regarding the ability to recruit younger volunteers. This pre-existing concern within the heritage sector has been brought to the forefront, given the high numbers of older heritage volunteers, their heightened vulnerability to Covid-19 and that many have chosen to permanently stop their volunteering (even after the pandemic has passed). This point was the fourth most commonly mentioned theme in responses to Question 19, which asked about potential future challenges. Unlike responses to the question about challenges in 2020, evident were the issues of individuals losing interest, given the time passed since they were last able to volunteer, and the threat of furloughed individuals returning to their paid roles as public health restrictions were lifted.

"People are currently wary, due to the pandemic, of putting themselves in what they perceive to be dangerous situations, meeting and greeting visitors, either at the shop, cafe, Abbey or letting business"
a faith-based or church organisation

"Ability to recruit new, younger volunteers"
a faith-based or church organisation

*“As and if we come out of lockdowns will volunteers drift away particularly in the summer”
a faith-based or church organisation*

*“We will lose some volunteers as they will return to a paid job when un-furloughed”
a local authority*

It is important to note that the two most common themes in responses to Question 19 concern a lack of volunteers (in one form or another), and that three out of the top four themes in participants' responses all relate to a lack of volunteers. This trend further underlines the importance of this issue that was observed during the pandemic (Questions 12/13), is expected to persist into the future (Questions 17/19).

‘Implementing and adhering to the new rules (health and safety)’ was the third most commonly mentioned theme (11.8%). The verbatim generally concerned the anticipated difficulties of applying and following the new and often changing rules governing the re-opening of their locations, in order to ensure that volunteers and facilities were as ‘Covid Safe’ as possible.

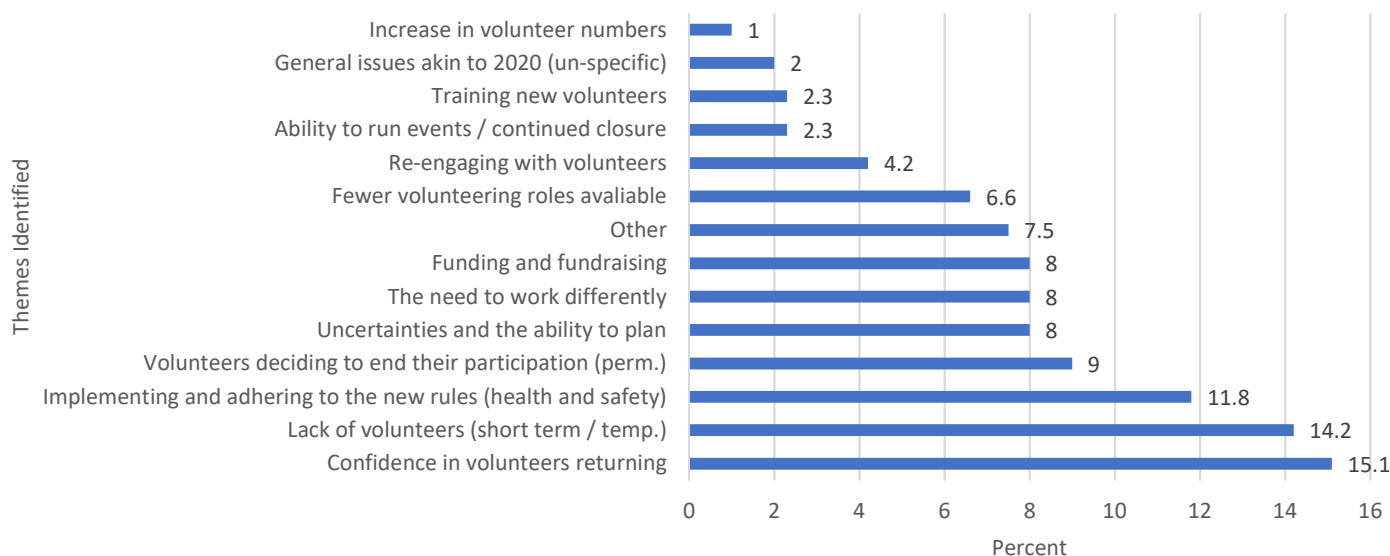
*“Ability to operate satisfying activities in a Covid-safe manner and protect volunteers, staff and visitors”
a faith-based or church organisation*

*“Getting everyone back up to speed and ensuring they can operate safely”
a faith-based or church organisation*

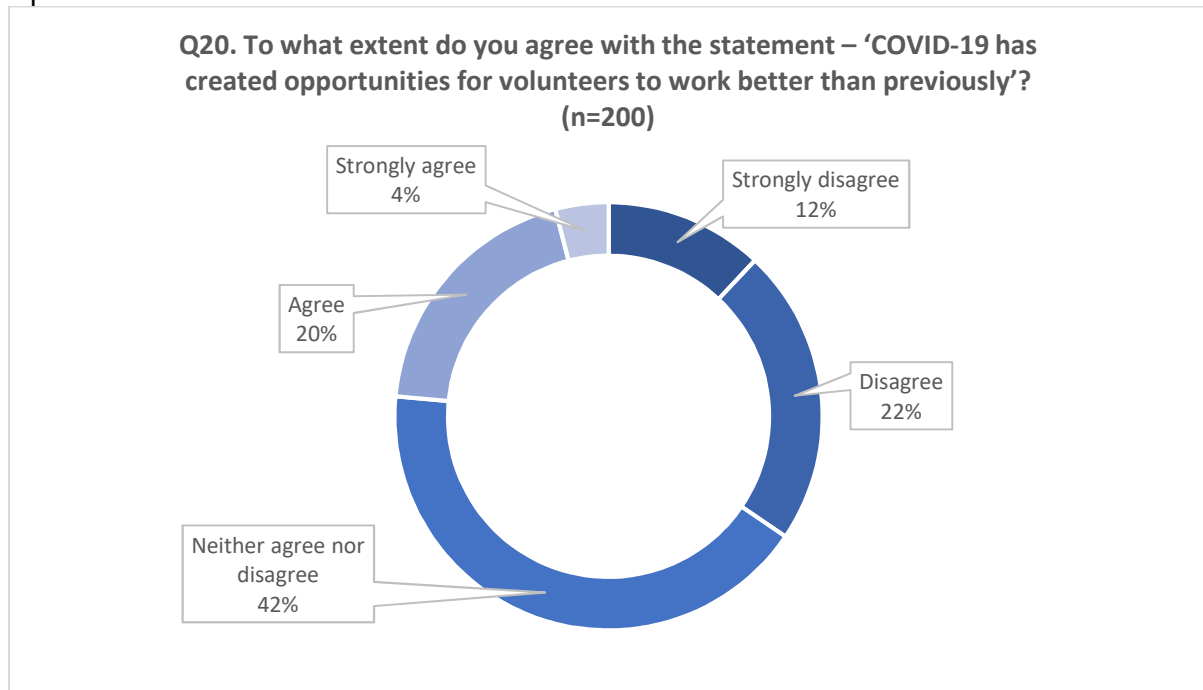
*“Covid restraints, and ‘the new normal’”
a faith-based or church organisation*

*“Keeping everyone safe as they return to volunteer”
a charity or third sector organisation with a heritage purpose (not for profit)*

Q19. Looking ahead what are the main issue(s) that you think are most likely affect your volunteer operation/work in 2021? (n=169)

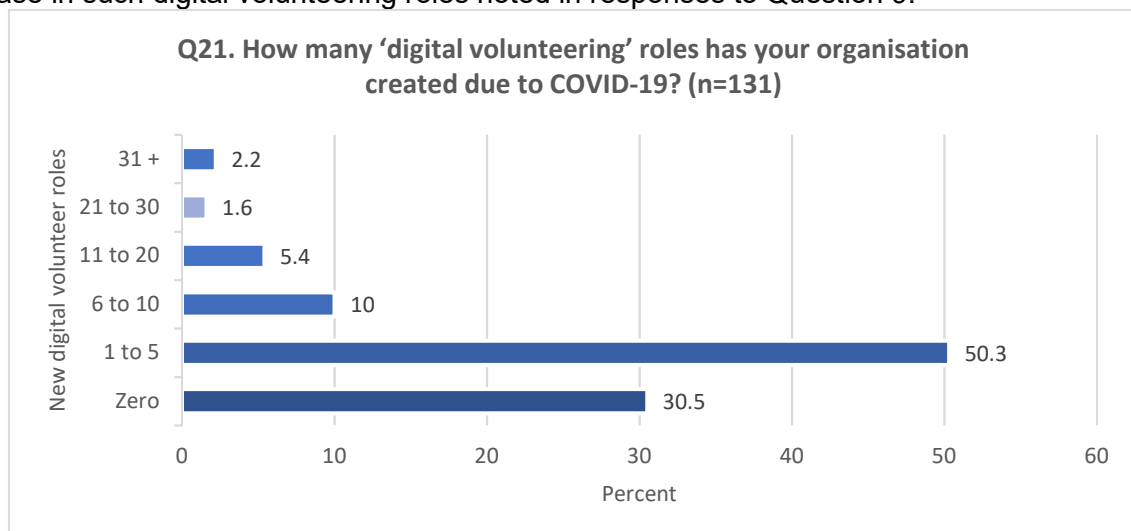


Despite the impact of Covid-19 on their volunteering operations, most respondents were unsure as to whether the pandemic 'has created opportunities for volunteers to work better than previously', with 42% neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the statement. For those respondents who held more polarised views, most felt that the pandemic had not created opportunities in which to work better (34% ('Strongly disagree' or 'Disagree')), with only 24% ('Strongly agree' or 'Agree') feeling that it had. This may suggest that any work-related strategies adopted towards overcome the pandemic (e.g. remote working, digital meetings etc.) might not necessarily be continued into the post pandemic world.

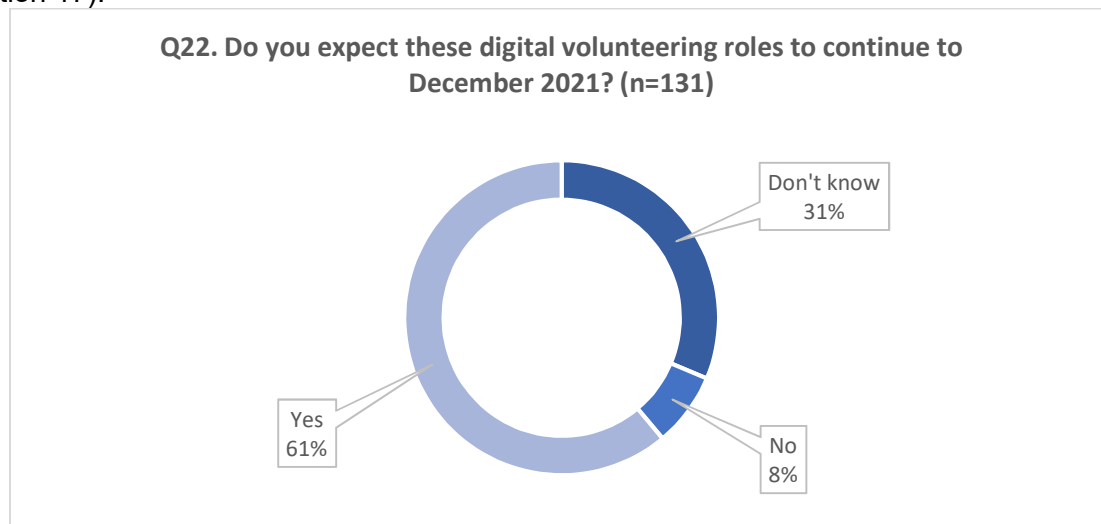


The rise of digital volunteering?

'Digital volunteering' describes voluntary activities that are either wholly or partially completed off-site (e.g. at home) with the aid of a device like a computer, tablet or smartphone – normally involving the internet. These activities have prospered during lockdown, enabling volunteers to do vital off-site work and thus remain involved in the work of their organisations. However, such an arrangement requires time, effort and expertise to organise, and it might not necessarily fit the requirements of the volunteers in terms of their technical abilities and/or interests. Nevertheless, the grouped result indicated that although 30.5% of organisation did not create any digital volunteering roles, 69.5% created at least one position, a point also supported via the 133% increase in such digital volunteering roles noted in responses to Question 9.

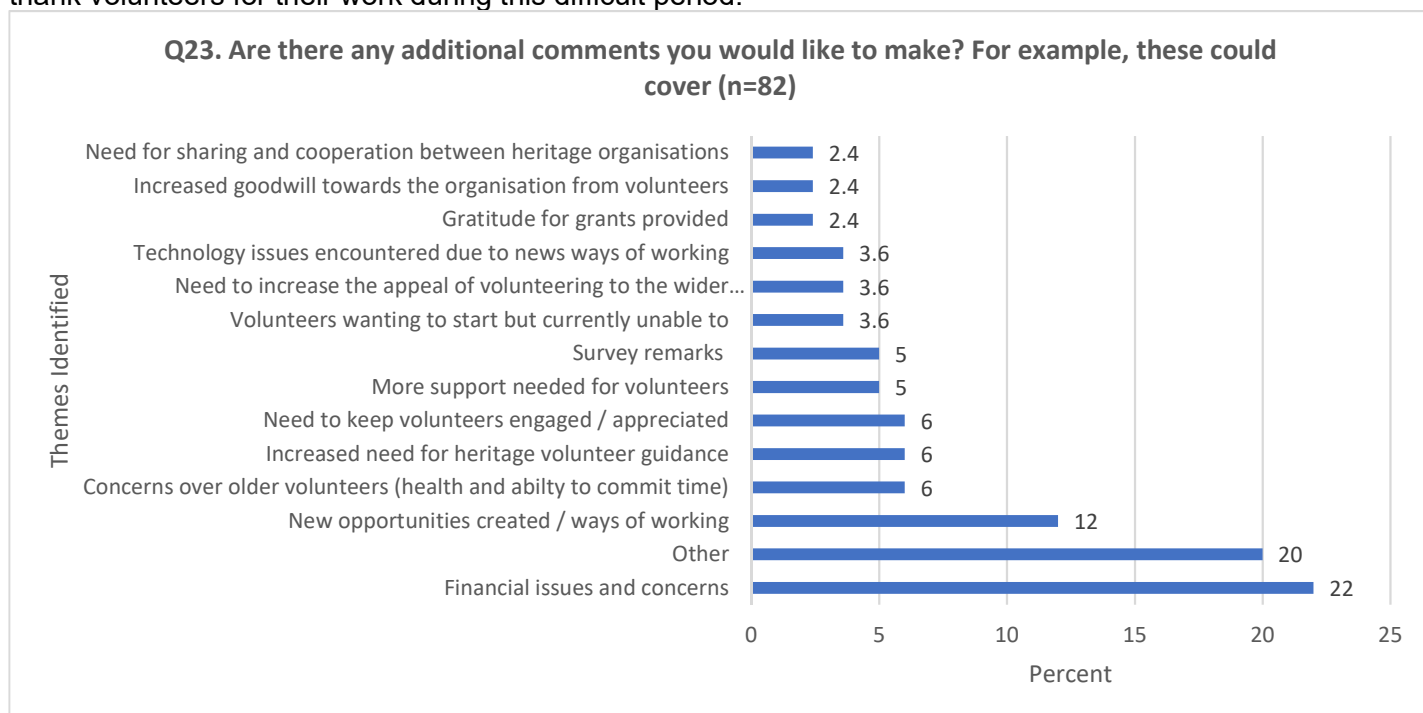


In terms of the longevity of these digital volunteering roles, responses to Question 22 indicated that 61% of respondents feel that these digital volunteering roles will continue to December 2021. This indicates the value attached to these new roles and the benefits they have brought to their respective organisations. However, it may also be the case that organisations expect these roles to continue into late 2021 given the possibility of future lockdowns and the uncertain prospect of returning to more 'traditional' volunteer roles. Such a point is supported by the 21% of respondents who didn't know whether to expect their digital volunteering roles to continue to December 2021 (Question 17).



Final thoughts

Respondents were given the opportunity to provide any additional comments that they wished to make concerning any topic relevant to the survey. Given the open nature of the question it prompted a wide variety of points, of which many were unique to the respondent. However, some common themes included the financial concerns created by the pandemic and site closures, as well as 'new ways of working' opened up by the pandemic. Less frequent themes detailed concerns over older volunteers returning to their roles and being safe, and the increased need for specific heritage volunteering guidance. Also mentioned was the importance of keeping volunteers engaged to ensure their participation after the pandemic, as well as the need to acknowledge and thank volunteers for their work during this difficult period.



Main conclusions

The results indicate that:

- There has been a **drop of 33%** in the approximate **number of individuals who contributed volunteer hours** between August 2019 and August 2020,
- An overall **drop of 55%** in **volunteer hours contributed** between August 2019 and August 2020,
- The roles that have experienced the **greatest fall in volunteer numbers** are **on-site education (-80%), guiding (-79%), and researcher (-73%)**,
- **70%** of organisations have had to **suspend either some or all of their operations** due to the unavailability of volunteers,
- **61%** have had to **suspend their fundraising activities** due to an unavailability of volunteers,
- **61%** have **had their financial security negatively impacted** due to a decline in volunteers, although **only 5%** have **recruited paid staff** as replacements,
- **28%** feel that **volunteer number will decrease further in 2021**,
- **69.5%** of organisation have **created at least one digital volunteering role**, with **61%** feeling that these **roles will continue to December 2021**,
- The top three **most frequently mentioned issue that organisations experienced in 2020** were a **lack of volunteers, fewer volunteering roles being available, and changes to the organisation of volunteering operations**,
- For 2021, themes relating to a **lack of volunteers** continued to be the most frequently mentioned, along with **the implementation and adherence to new health and safety rules**.

Prepared by Marcus Ward for the Heritage Sector Intelligence Desk, Historic England, March 2021.