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# The state of Scottish volunteering

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Insights from Volunteer Scotland's research

April 2025



## **Introduction**

We publish a range of research and analysis exploring the state of volunteering in Scotland. This includes analysis of national datasets and volunteering research by our partners (such as NCVO and SCVO) as well as research we commissioned. In 2024, we published analysis of the [\*\*2022 and 2023 Scottish Household Survey \(SHS\) data\*\*](#), doctoral research on [\*\*volunteering and associational life\*\*](#), three bulletins about [\*\*the impact of the cost of living crisis on the Third Sector\*\*](#), and research on the on [\*\*the social value of volunteering in Scotland\*\*](#).

This report draws together all this analysis and presents five headlines about the state of volunteering in Scotland today:

1. Volunteering is in crisis
2. The cost of living crisis is closing doors to volunteer participation
3. People are missing out on the wellbeing benefits of volunteering when they need it most
4. The deprivation gap is closing but it isn't all as it seems
5. The demographic profile of Scotland's volunteers is changing

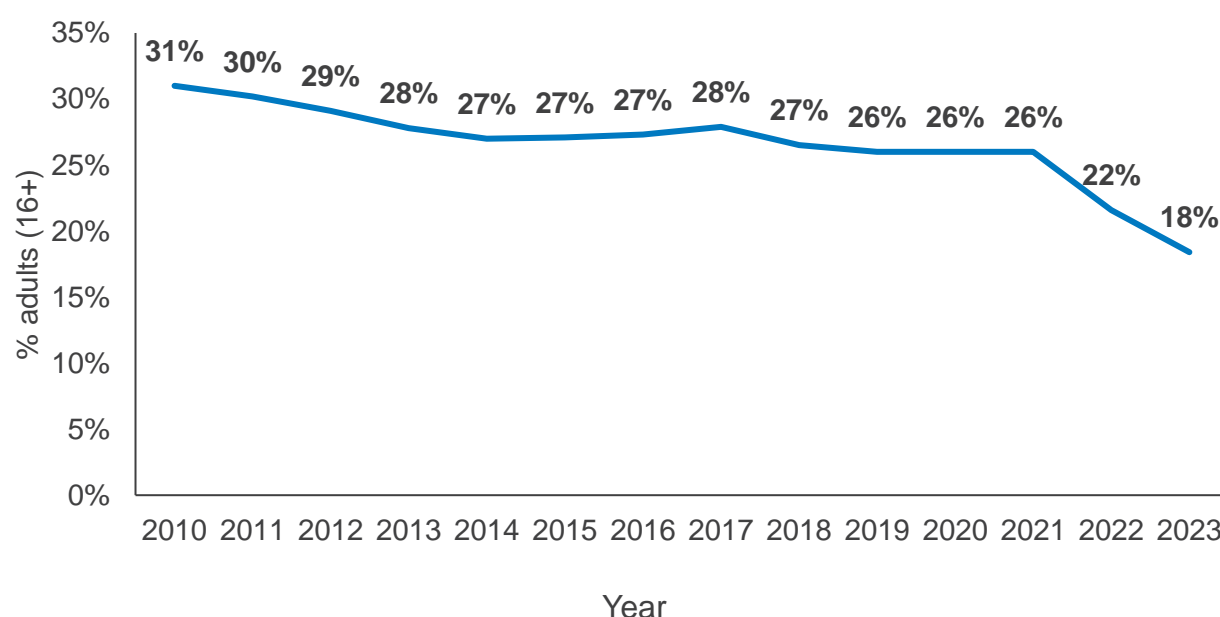
Supporting evidence for each headline finding is presented in this report. Please note that the research cited in this report covers 2022-2024, with the most up to date evidence included.

# Headlines from our research

## 1. Volunteering is in crisis

The Scottish Household Survey (SHS) data from 2022 and 2023 tells us that volunteering participation is in crisis. In 2023, only 18% percentage of Scottish adults volunteered with a group or organisation (formal volunteering) – the lowest rate recorded in the SHS dataset.

*Figure 1 - Formal volunteer participation rates 2010 to 2023*



Source: SHS 2007-2023

There is a trend of declining volunteer participation. Between 2022 and 2023 formal volunteer participation rates in Scotland fell four percentage points, the equivalent of a decline in 138,000 formal volunteers in a single year. This followed a four-percentage point decrease in formal volunteer participation between 2019 and 2022. Cumulatively, between 2019 and 2023 formal volunteer participation rates fell eight percentage points, the equivalent to a decline of over 335,000 formal volunteers in a four-year period. Not only does this have ramifications for the delivery of services by volunteer-involving organisations (VIOs), but it also means that 335,000 fewer Scottish adults are deriving the many varied benefits of volunteering.

In addition to considering the decline in the number of adults formally volunteering, the decrease in the number of hours should be considered. Between 2018 and 2022, 28 million fewer hours were volunteered with a group or organisation. This equates to 79,000 fewer volunteer weeks (35 hours a week) or 18,000 fewer full time equivalent jobs annually, in terms of time spent volunteering.

The decline in volunteer participation coincides with a time of increased demand for Third Sector Organisations (TSOs). Wave 8 of SCVO's [Third Sector Tracker](#) (from Spring 2024) found that 58% of TSOs were experiencing an increase in demand for

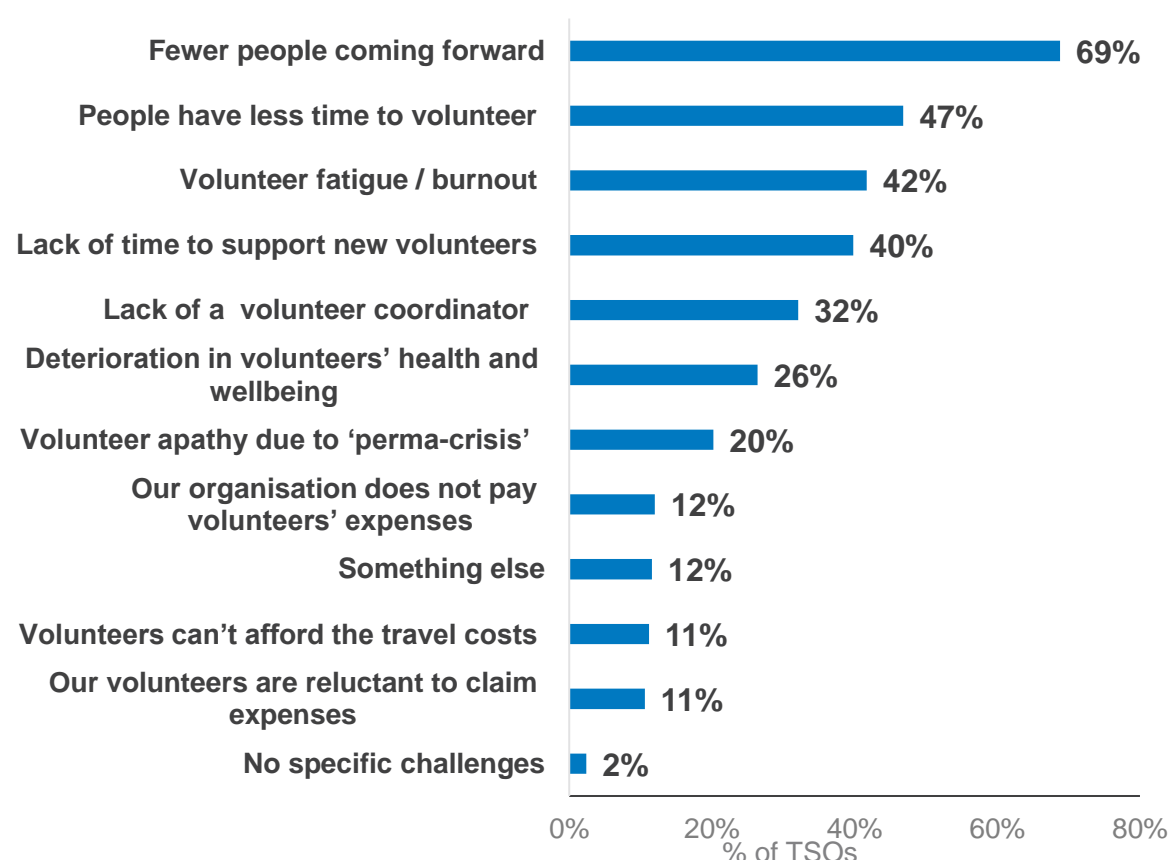
their core services. With 335,000 fewer volunteers since 2019 to draw upon to meet this demand, many TSOs are struggling to maintain vital services.

Therefore, our research shows that volunteer participation in Scotland is in crisis.

## 2. The cost of living crisis is closing doors to volunteer participation

The cost of living crisis is continuing to impact on TSOs and volunteers, which we explore in our [Cost of Living Bulletins](#). In autumn 2024, 79% of TSOs faced issues with volunteer recruitment and 69% of TSOs faced issues with volunteer retention ([Quarterly Bulletin Number 6](#)). The two biggest challenges identified by TSOs in recruiting new volunteers are 'Fewer people coming forward to volunteer' (69%) and 'People have less time to volunteer' (47%) ([Quarterly Bulletin Number 5](#)). Volunteer fatigue and burnout (42%) and volunteer apathy due to a 'perma-crisis' are also highlighted by TSOs as challenges in volunteer retention and recruitment.

Figure 2 - Issues faced by TSO's in volunteer recruitment and retention ([Quarterly Bulletin Number 5](#))



Mental health and wellbeing are also highlighted as ongoing issues among Scottish adults as a result of the cost of living crisis, as explored by [Diffley Partnership's Understanding Scotland Economy Tracker](#). Concerns about money matters have

caused 29% of Scottish adults to lose sleep, the same proportion report adverse impacts to their mental health and 16% an impact on their physical health. We argue that these issues increase the demand for third sector services while also reducing individuals' resilience and capacity to volunteer. This is contributing to the crisis in volunteer participation.

In addition to the negative impacts on wellbeing, spending cutbacks by Scottish adults in response to the cost of living crisis is an issue for volunteer participation. Of particular concern is whether the reduction in spending on leisure activities, including sport and cultural activities, could impact on volunteer participation. Our [cross-sectional analysis](#) of the 2022 SHS data found strong correlations between adults' participation in sports and culture and formal volunteer participation. We found that formal volunteer participation rates for adults taking part in cultural activities (excluding reading) is 17 percentage points higher than adults who do not (30% vs 13%). For adults participating in sports (excluding walking) formal volunteer participation rates are 28%, compared to 14% for adults who do not participate in sports (excluding walking).

*Figure 3 - Cultural activities excluding reading and formal volunteer participation*

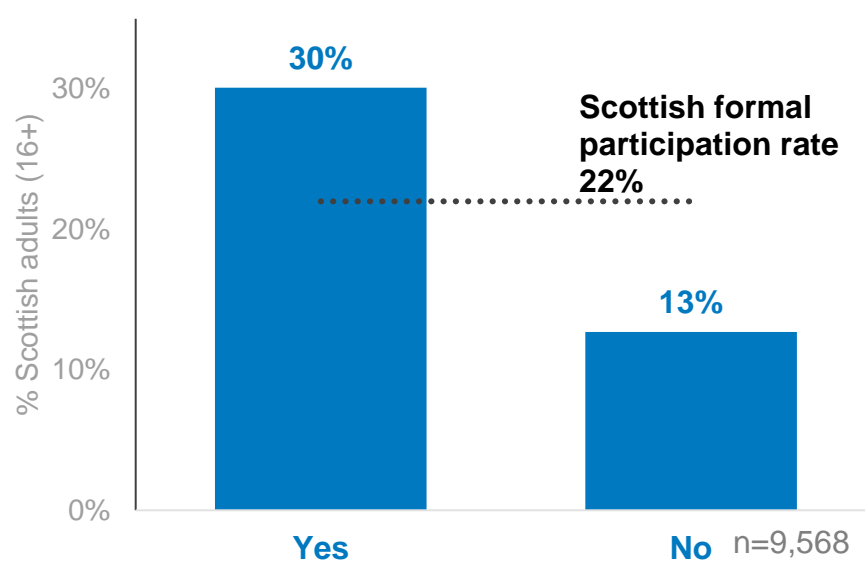
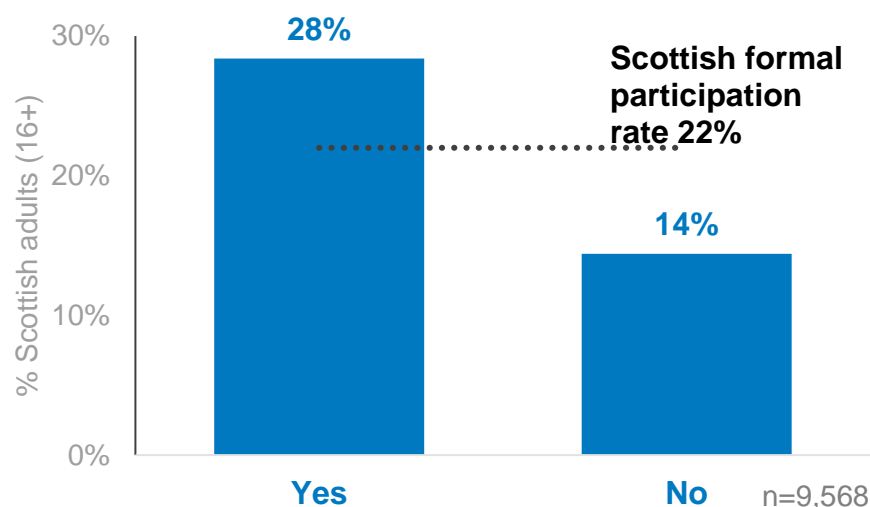


Figure 4 - Sports participation (excluding walking) and formal volunteer participation



This data shows a clear correlation between participating in cultural activities and sports with volunteer participation, but it does not shed light on why this correlation exists and whether participating in these activities led directly to volunteering opportunities. However, the link between recreational activities and volunteer participation was explored as a central part of Dr David Bomark's PhD project that we co-supervised with the University of Strathclyde: [What We Do Together: Exploring Volunteering Using the Concept of Associational Life](#). The research uses the concept of 'associational life' which is defined as 'people doing an activity together with others that has some semblance of continuity to it and is discretionary.' The research asked respondents if participation in associational life activities like sport, religion and hobbies led directly to volunteering, both within the original organisation they participate in associational life activities with as well as other organisations.

The results show that associational life activities lead to volunteering both within the original organisation and with other organisations. The research provided particularly insightful findings on the link between hobbies and volunteering: while hobbies might be thought of as more informal leisure time activities, the research found that participating in hobbies led to volunteering within the original hobby organisation as well as other organisations. Interestingly, participation in hobbies was linked with volunteering in other organisations even more so than the original hobby organisation, suggesting that hobbies are an important pathway into volunteering. Therefore, we can conclude from both sources of evidence, that recreational and leisure activities are important entry-points and motivators for volunteer participation.

However, the latest research from [Understanding Scotland Economy Tracker – February 2025](#) shows that 53% of Scottish adults are reducing spending on leisure



activities. As such, we are concerned that the cutting back of leisure activities caused by the cost of living crisis may have a negative impact on volunteer participation. Evidence from SHS 2023 shows that the proportion of adults volunteering with groups, clubs or organisations in hobbies fell six percentage points between 2022 and 2023, the biggest decrease in all areas.

Therefore, the evidence points to the cost of living crisis making it harder for people in Scotland to volunteer and threatening crucial pathways into volunteering, particularly around leisure activities. As such, the cost of living crisis is closing doors to volunteer participation and is further contributing to the crisis in volunteering.

### **3. People are missing out on the wellbeing benefits of volunteering when they need it most**

Our [groundbreaking research](#) with [State of Life](#) has put a monetary value on volunteering in Scotland for the first time. The results are consistent and clear: volunteering is good for your wellbeing, and it is estimated to be worth £1000 per volunteer, per year for people who volunteer with a group or organisation at least once a week. For Scotland, that means an estimated £2.3 billion of social and economic value being contributed to society (note that this does not account for the costs involved in volunteering).

With the decline in volunteer participation, we know that more and more people are missing out on this wellbeing uplift through volunteering – and that it is often the people who benefit most from volunteering who are missing out. For example, our research found that the effect of volunteering on mental wellbeing for people with a disability or long-term health condition was seven times larger than for people without. Yet, the SHS 2023 results show that disabled adults were less likely to volunteer than non-disabled adults (16% vs. 19%), which maintains a long-term disparity in engagement.

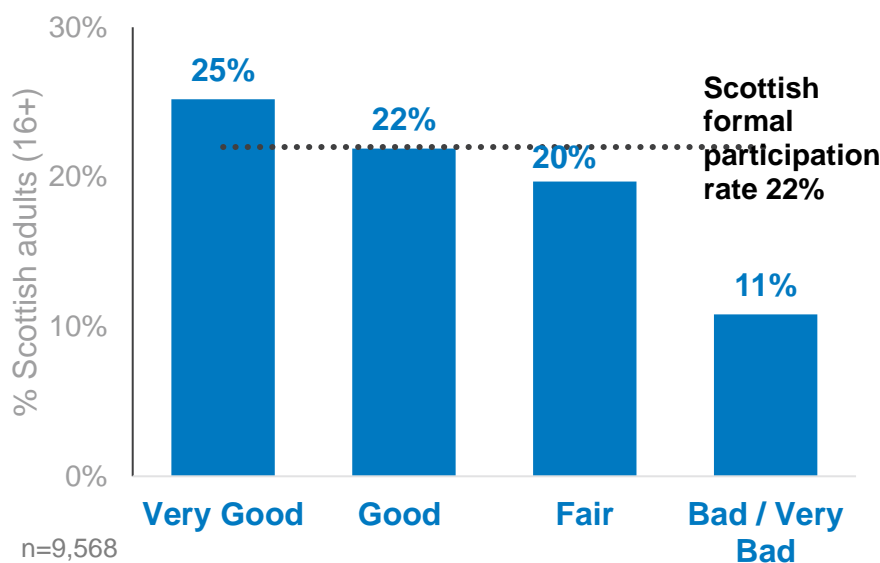
[Time Well Spent 2023](#) showed that not only are people missing the benefits of volunteering but that a lower proportion of recent Scottish volunteers are reporting health benefits of volunteering in 2023 than in 2019. The proportion of volunteers reporting improved mental health decreased seven percentage points (81% in 2019 compared to 74% in 2023) and improved physical health decreased four percentage points (53% in 2019 compared to 49% in 2023). This research also highlighted a range of other benefits that a smaller proportion of volunteers cited experiencing:

- Being brought into contact with people from different backgrounds or culture: 11 percentage point decrease from 83% in 2019 compared to 72% in 2023
- Broadened experience of life: three percentage point decrease from 87% in 2019 to 84% in 2023

- Gaining a sense of personal achievement: two percentage point decrease from 89% in 2019 to 88% in 2023
- Overall enjoyment of volunteering: one percentage point decrease from 95% in 2019 to 94% in 2023.

The evidence from [Understanding Scotland Economy Tracker – February 2025](#), highlights the adverse impacts to Scottish adults’ mental health due to the cost of living crisis which is having an ongoing impact on volunteer participation, as detailed above. Our [cross-sectional analysis](#) of SHS 2022 data explores the correlation between both general and mental health with volunteering in more detail. For general health, formal volunteer participation rates are three percentage points higher than the average rate for adults who report having very good health and 11 percentage points lower for adults who report having bad or very bad health. For mental health, formal volunteer participation rates are eight percentage points lower than the average rate for Scottish adults with a low mental health score<sup>1</sup> and one percentage point higher for adults with an average mental health score.

*Figure 5 – General health and formal volunteer participation*



This analysis raises the pressing question: as the health of Scottish adults’ declines, what will be the impact on formal volunteer participation rates? This evidence demonstrates that volunteering can have a positive impact on wellbeing, but this is being undermined by the crisis in volunteer participation.

<sup>1</sup> The ‘mental health score’ is calculated from seven question included in the SHS questionnaire. These questions are known as ‘SWEMWBS’ and are a widely used approach to monitor mental wellbeing in the general population. For the analysis conducted individuals are assigned to 3 categories: low (7-20), average (20.01 - 28.99) and high (29-35).

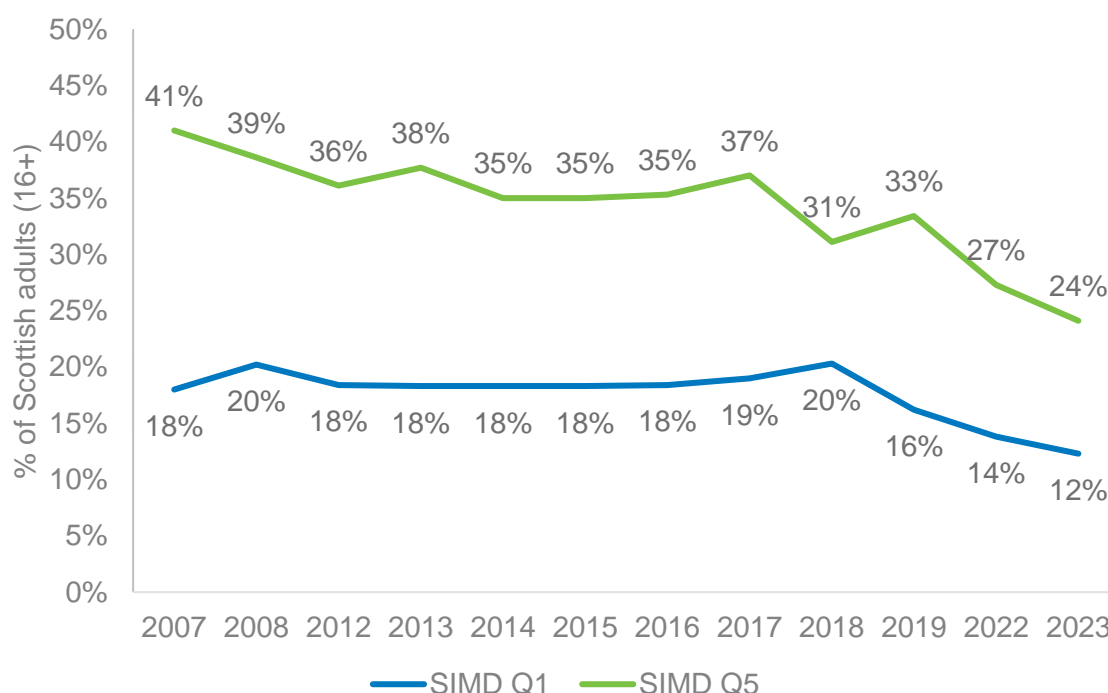


## 4. The deprivation gap is closing, but it isn't all as it seems

In Scotland, deprivation is measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD), and the SHS data uses SIMD Quintiles (SIMD Q) for analysis. SIMD quintiles split Scotland into five groups, with SIMD Q1 representing adults living in the 20% most deprived areas, through to SIMD Q5 representing the 20% of adults living in the least deprived areas. There is a well-established trend in Scotland of the most deprived areas having the lowest formal volunteer participation rates and SIMD Q5 the highest, and a straight line of increasing participation rates as deprivation decreases between quintiles.

However, considering only the highest and lowest participation rates is hiding interesting insights. While participation rates remain highest in SIMD Q5 and lowest in Q1, the gap is closing. In 2007 there was a 23-percentage point difference in formal volunteer participation rates between SIMD Q1 and SIMD Q5 (18% vs 41%). In 2023 the gap has decreased to 12-percentage points (12% vs 24%) respectively. This is mainly driven by a greater decrease in participation rates in SIMD Q5 compared to SIMD Q1 in recent years.

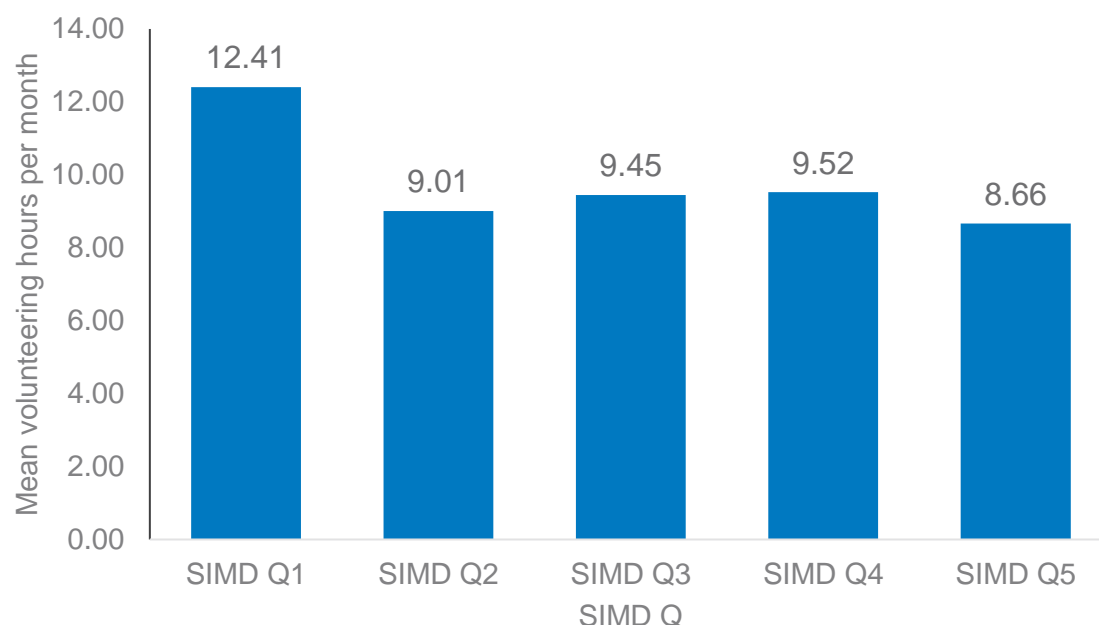
*Figure 6 – Formal volunteer participation rates by SIMD Q1 and Q5 2007-23*



What the data does not tell us is what is causing this change. We have identified two competing hypotheses to the causes of the trend. The first hypothesis suggests that due to decreases in statutory services to deal with increased needs, more third sector resource is being utilised in SIMD Q1, with adults in SIMD Q1 volunteering to help deliver services and, as such, being less likely to stop volunteering. The second hypothesis is that initiatives to reduce the barriers to volunteering for the most

deprived areas, for example through local community action plans, is encouraging more adults in SIMD Q1 to volunteer and to continue to volunteer. It is also possible that these trends could be caused by a combination of both hypotheses.

*Figure 7 - Formal mean monthly volunteering hours by SIMD Q (2022)*



Another aspect to consider is the intensity of volunteering, which we explored in the [Who Contributes The Most to Scottish Volunteering](#) report. When considering average hours volunteered in a four-week period as a measure of volunteer participation (using SHS 2022 data) we found that the trend is reversed. Adults in SIMD Q1 are on average volunteering more hours in a four-week period than adults in SIMD Q5. In SIMD Q1 adults volunteer on average 12.41 hours (in a four-week period) compared to adults in SIMD Q5 who volunteer 8.66 hours on average, a statistically significant difference. This shows that when adults in SIMD Q1 volunteer, they give more time and highlights the importance of considering more than just annual formal volunteer participation rates.

This evidence should be considered in light of the increased burden that some volunteers are experiencing. Our [Cost of Living Bulletin Number 6](#) found that, in response to increased demand and decreasing volunteer numbers, 19% of TSOs have asked volunteers to work more hours. As the [Who Contributes The Most to Scottish Volunteering](#) report shows that the average hours contributed by volunteers in SIMD Q1 are higher, there is a concern that increasing the demand on volunteers may impact more on volunteers in SIMD Q1 areas. This could have a damaging impact on their volunteer experience and lead to volunteers leaving their roles.

This evidence shows us that the relationship between deprivation and volunteering is complex, and while the participation gap is closing there are more questions to consider to ensure that volunteering is a positive experience for people across all of Scotland's communities.

## 5. The demographic profile of Scotland's volunteers is changing

When considering the demographic profile of volunteers in Scotland it is important to consider not only the demographic groups with the highest participation rates<sup>2</sup> but also the demographic groups with the biggest (and smallest) changes in participation rates. If only the groups with the highest formal volunteer participation rates are considered, underlying changing demographic trends may be overlooked.

Between 2022 and 2023 the demographic groups with the biggest changes in participation rates compared to the demographic groups with the smallest changes are shown in Table 1 below:

*Table 1 - Demographic groups with the smallest and biggest changes between 2022 and 2023*

| Demographic group                 | Biggest change (2022 - 23)                            | Smallest change (2022 - 23)                      |
|-----------------------------------|---|--|
| Age                               | 16 - 34<br>4 percentage point decrease                | 60 or over<br>2 percentage point decrease        |
| Gender                            | Male<br>4 percentage point decrease                   | Female<br>2 percentage point decrease            |
| Ethnicity                         | Minority Ethnic groups<br>5 percentage point decrease | White: Other<br>2 percentage point decrease      |
| Disability                        | Non disabled<br>4 percentage point decrease           | Disabled<br>1 percentage point decrease          |
| Deprivation<br>SIMD Q             | SIMD Q3 and Q4<br>4 percentage point decrease         | SIMD Q1 and Q2<br>2 percentage point decrease    |
| Economic status                   | In employment<br>5 percentage point decrease          | 'Other'<br>No change                             |
| Urban / Rural                     | Remote small towns<br>7 percentage point decrease     | Large urban areas<br>1 percentage point decrease |
| Net annual<br>household<br>income | £30,001 or more<br>7 percentage point decrease        | Up to £15,000<br>1 percentage point increase     |

<sup>2</sup> A detailed demographic analysis of SHS 2023 headline data is contained in the [VS SHS 2023 report](#). Further analysis will be complete on release of the raw data.

These demographic changes raise some important questions for VIOs to consider, particularly when considering how to ensure that volunteering remains inclusive in a cost of living crisis.

The larger decrease in formal volunteer participation rates for males compared to females continues a well-established trend of higher female volunteer participation rates. With females reporting [higher negative impacts from the cost of living crisis](#) but male volunteer participation rates impacted more, is the link between associational life and volunteers stronger for men? How can more males be encouraged into volunteering? This is particularly important as our [recent research](#) on the social value of volunteering shows that weekly formal volunteering appears to have a stronger and more consistent impact on wellbeing for males compared to females.

The five percentage point decrease in volunteering among Scotland's ethnic minority populations may be linked to the cost of living crisis, with the most recent [Understanding Scotland Economy Tracker](#) showing that the impact of the cost of living crisis is higher among ethnic minority groups. Our [research](#) on Scotland's volunteering response to Covid-19 found that, coming out of the pandemic (Jan 2022) 81% of infrastructure organisations reported that tackling exclusion was a priority and 37% of VIOs reported currently prioritising making volunteering more inclusive. However, the strain of the cost of living crisis is impacting on these efforts to promote inclusion in volunteering. This evidence suggests that VIOs need to work with ethnic minority communities to ensure volunteering is inclusive and that organisations take an active approach to inclusive practices. This will help to ensure the sector meets the Volunteering Action Plan aims of creating a Scotland where everyone can volunteer, more often, and throughout their lives.

Adults who are permanently retired from work have the highest volunteering participation rates by economic status for the first time. The decline in formal volunteer participation rates for adults in employment may, at least in part, be explained by the pressures of the cost of living crisis, as explored above. While the cost of living crisis may ease in the coming years, the potential impact on volunteer participation is unknown – we could see this trend solidified or an uptick in volunteering for working age adults. It is also worth considering what the decline in volunteering among working age adults might mean for the transition between employment and retirement, and whether volunteering will remain a popular activity for retired adults if they do not have an existing habit of volunteering during their working lives.

One way we are looking at tackling the decline in volunteering among working age adults is through developing a national approach to Employer Supported Volunteering. We analysed 56 pieces of literature and [published the findings of](#)

[our literature review](#), which will inform this work on this Volunteering Action Plan action going forward.

Ultimately, this evidence shows us that analysis of volunteer participation by demographics is vital to navigate the changing landscape of volunteer participation, and to prepare for future possible changes now instead of in real-time. VIOs can benefit from this insight as they create volunteer recruitment and management strategies.

## **Conclusion**

This is a pivotal time for volunteering in Scotland. The challenges facing volunteers and third sector organisations are many and complex. There is also opportunity to change, innovate and turn the tide of declining volunteer participation. It is our hope that this analysis provides insight for the sector to develop strategies that tackle the decline the volunteering participation.

This research review sheds light on both the challenges and opportunities the voluntary sector faces around volunteering. It reveals that volunteering participation is crisis and that the cost of living crisis is having far-reaching consequences for volunteering. Yet, beneath these headlines more detailed analysis raises questions and exposes trends for the sector to consider. The decline in volunteer participation is not even across all demographic groups, and change is needed to ensure everyone in Scotland can volunteer, more often, and throughout their lives.

Several actionable insights have emerged from this research review, including:

- **Leisure activities, including culture, sport and hobbies, are important pathways into volunteering.** We encourage the sector to consider what can be done to protect these pathways in light of the impact of the cost of living crisis?
- Volunteering can play a role in improving the health and wellbeing of Scottish adults, but it cannot only be for people who are already have good physical and mental health. **What opportunities are there to broaden volunteer participation among those with poor physical and mental health** so that they can access the wellbeing benefits of volunteering? How can the sector encourage decision-makers to recognise the wellbeing benefits of volunteering when introducing or reviewing relevant policy or legislation, including around social prescribing, community health, and employability?
- The need to **better understand volunteering motivations, behaviours and patterns in SIMD Q1 and Q2 areas** in order to ensure that volunteers are having a positive experience and are not being exploited to fill service gaps. We are exploring research opportunities in this area.
- The need to address the **barriers for working age adults** to participate in volunteering and how volunteering can be part of people's transition from working to retirement.
- VIOs need to consider how to adapt their recruitment and retention strategies to ensure volunteering remains inclusive, especially in light of the uneven impacts of the cost of living crisis on different demographic groups.

We encourage colleagues in the Scottish voluntary sector to grapple with these findings. All our analysis is available for you to explore and use as evidence in your work. This [matrix](#) can be used to search for our research publications across a range of themes.

Please contact [research@volunteerscotland.org.uk](mailto:research@volunteerscotland.org.uk) with any questions, comments or research opportunities.





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