



Heritage volunteering in Scotland

Research detailed report

**Our Past
Our Future**

The Strategy for Scotland's
Historic Environment

1. Executive summary

Volunteer-involving heritage organisations¹ in Scotland are navigating a shifting landscape. Formal volunteering levels² are showing early signs of recovery following a decline in recent years, but widening inclusion gaps mean that not everyone has equal opportunity to participate. At the same time, reduced organisational budgets and increasing pressure on people's time and money continue to create barriers.

Despite these challenges, heritage volunteering is full of energy and commitment, with almost a quarter of surveyed organisations being volunteer-run. From grassroots groups to national institutions, volunteers give thousands of hours each year.

This report, commissioned by [Our Past, Our Future: The Strategy for Scotland's Historic Environment](#) and produced with [Make Your Mark](#) and [Volunteer Scotland](#), examines current pressures, highlights volunteers' dedication and underlines how heritage volunteering strengthens community pride and resilience.

This report is informed by online surveys conducted in summer 2025, which received responses from 53 volunteer-involving heritage organisations and 331 heritage volunteers.

Responding organisations ranged from volunteer-run (24%) to those with more than 250 staff (17%). The largest group (33%) were small to medium sized organisations with 1-10 staff. Respondents also covered built, cultural and natural heritage.

Responding volunteers were based across 30 of Scotland's 32 local authority areas, with 55% based within the Central Belt. They volunteer for a range of organisations, including historic sites and monuments (21%), nature or environment organisations (14%), museums and galleries (12%), historic landscape and gardens (12%), archives and libraries (10%) and more.

Key findings include:

1. Volunteers are critical to the heritage sector and heritage volunteering supports individual wellbeing and community development.
2. Heritage volunteering supports people to develop valuable skills, but not the skills most needed by the sector.
3. Volunteer engagement is underfunded and understaffed.
4. Most respondent volunteers' access needs are met, but more needs to be done to include marginalised people.

¹ "Heritage organisations" are organisations that look after and promote the built and natural environment as well as intangible cultural expressions.

² "Formal volunteering" is giving unpaid help to organisations or groups.

5. Organisations and volunteers are not fully aligned on motivations and needs.

These findings foreground the wide-ranging wellbeing, skills and placemaking benefits that heritage volunteering delivers for people, communities and sites across Scotland. However, more needs to be done to support everyone to participate in heritage volunteering, thereby ensuring its benefits are experienced equitably and equipping organisations with more skills and resources to care for and share Scotland's places, landscapes and stories.

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2. Research Methodology

This research draws on a mixed-methods approach designed to capture a comprehensive picture of heritage volunteering across Scotland. The aim was to understand both the organisational context in which volunteering takes place and the lived experiences, motivations and barriers reported by volunteers themselves. The study was jointly developed with Our Past, Our Future, Make Your Mark and Volunteer Scotland to ensure alignment with national priorities around community empowerment, inclusion, wellbeing and sector resilience.

2.1 Survey Design

Two national online surveys were developed:

1. A survey for volunteer-involving heritage organisations and
2. A survey for individual heritage volunteers.

Both surveys combined quantitative questions (multiple-choice, Likert scales, ranking) with qualitative open-ended questions to capture richer insights on motivations, challenges, aspirations and volunteer experiences.

Survey questions were designed collaboratively with subject experts across Historic Environment Scotland, Make Your Mark and Volunteer Scotland. They drew on recognised frameworks including the Scottish Household Survey, the National Volunteering Outcomes Framework and the Skills Investment Plan for the Historic Environment. This ensured both comparability and policy relevance.

2.2 Sampling and Participants

The surveys were promoted widely across the sector through:

- The Make Your Mark network
- Historic Environment Scotland through promotion via Our Past, Our Future
- Volunteer Scotland channels
- Social media amplification.

Responses were received from 53 heritage organisations and 331 individual volunteers. Together these represent a broad cross-section of the sector: third-sector groups, national bodies, local museums, historic sites, archives, environmental bodies, community trusts and volunteer-involving organisations. Volunteers came from across 30 of Scotland's 32 local authorities, with strong representation in the Central Belt and the Highlands.

2.3 Data Collection

The surveys ran between June and August 2025.

Data was collected through an online platform, with all responses anonymised and optional.

Organisational survey responses were typically completed by managers, volunteer coordinators, trustees or committee members.

Volunteers self-reported their experiences and demographic information, allowing for analysis of inclusion, barriers and representation.

2.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics to identify sector-wide patterns in:

- Volunteer demographics
- Motivations
- Hours contributed
- Skills developed
- Barriers to participation
- Organisational capacity
- Inclusivity practices
- Recruitment and retention challenges.

Cross-tabulation was used to explore associations between variables such as staff size and volunteer management arrangements and between organisational sector and geographical reach.

Qualitative responses were thematically coded to identify recurring themes, examples of good practice and emerging issues. These were integrated with quantitative findings to provide context, nuance and lived experience.

2.5 Limitations

This study reflects the voices of those who chose to respond. Three groups, in particular, may be underrepresented: smaller community groups without capacity to complete surveys, volunteers experiencing significant barriers to participation, and heritage groups that do not engage with Make Your Mark or Historic Environment Scotland.

Because multiple-response questions were used, percentages do not always total 100%. To avoid misinterpretation, results are presented as share of selections rather than share of respondents where appropriate. Additionally, respondents who did not answer and were not a material percentage were excluded from the grand total.

Despite these limitations, the dataset provides one of the most detailed and up-to-date pictures of heritage volunteering in Scotland and aligns closely with evidence from existing national datasets such as the Scottish Household Survey.

2.6 Ethics and Data Handling

All participants took part voluntarily.

No identifying personal data was collected beyond broad demographic categories.

Data was stored securely and used only for research and policy purposes in line with GDPR requirements.

3. Full Report Findings

3.1 Theme 1: Who Makes Up Scotland's Heritage Volunteering Landscape?

Heritage volunteering in Scotland is a community-driven enterprise, shaped by a vibrant but uneven mix of organisations and a dedicated volunteer base.

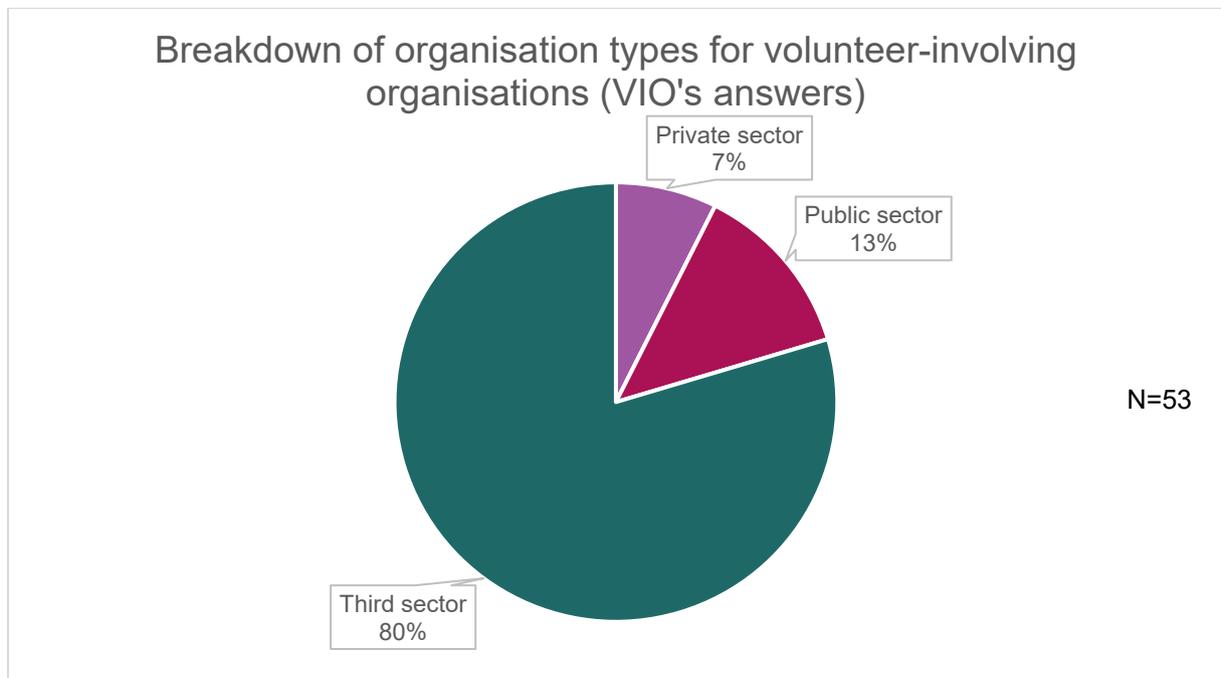
This section examines the demographic and organisational makeup of Scotland's heritage volunteering sector. It explores who participates, who leads and who is missing, setting the stage for understanding the sector's strengths and its challenges around representation and inclusion.

Responses indicate the sector is predominantly composed of mid-career or retired, highly educated, white women, with limited representation from younger people, ethnic minorities and other underrepresented groups, highlighting persistent barriers to inclusion and the need for targeted EDI efforts.

3.1.1 A predominantly third-sector landscape

Four out of five surveyed volunteer involving organisations' ('VIO') respondents (80%) are third-sector organisations including charities, voluntary groups and community trusts. Public bodies represent 13% and the private sector 7% (Figure 1).

Figure 1 - Breakdown of organisation types for volunteer-involving organisations (VIO's answers)



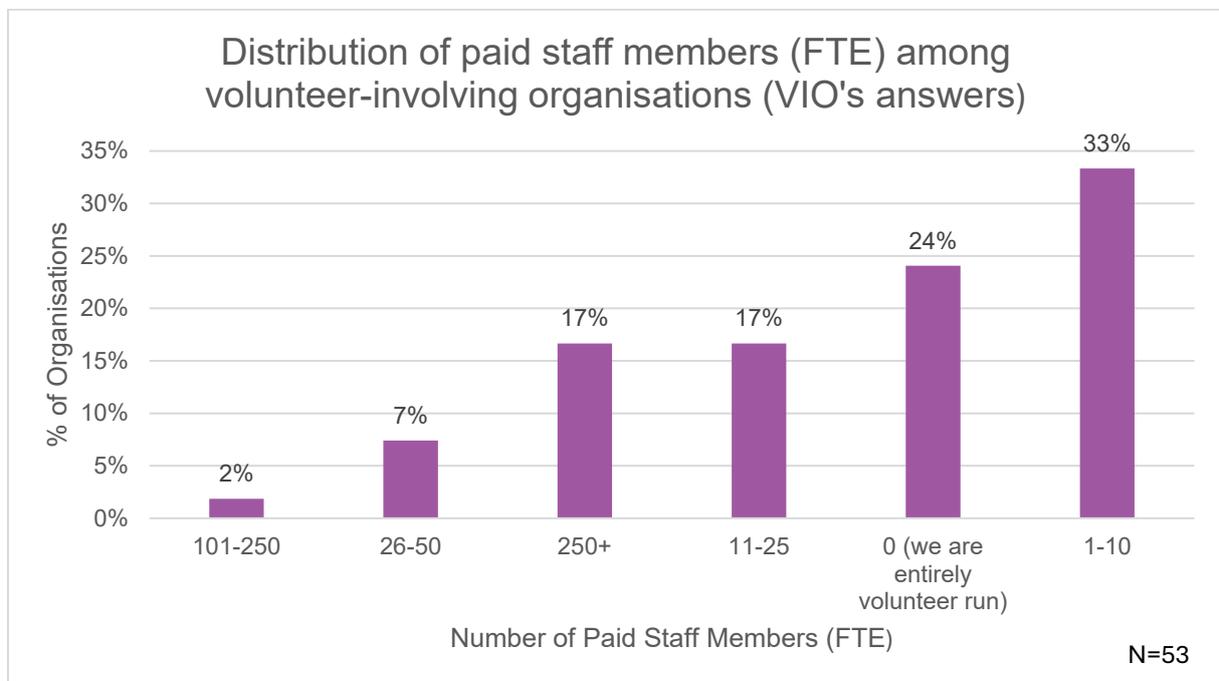
3.1.2 Mostly small, local, volunteer-dependent organisations

The majority of organisations surveyed operate with minimal staffing (Figure 2): 57% employ ten or fewer staff, while 24% have no paid staff at all, functioning entirely on volunteer labour.

These small organisations sit alongside a small cluster of very large public bodies (17% with 250+ staff), creating a dual ecosystem: community-led stewardship on one end and national cultural institutions on the other.

This small–large imbalance affects everything from volunteer management capacity to skills development and shapes how volunteers experience heritage activity across the country.

Figure 2 - Distribution of paid staff members (FTE) among volunteer-involving organisations (VIO's answers)



3.1.3 Heritage volunteering is geographically uneven

Most volunteer-involving organisations work at community-based (37%) or Scotland-wide (31%) scale (Figure 3). This mix of local and national organisational reach mirrors volunteer patterns: volunteers surveyed are active across 30 local authorities but are most concentrated in urban areas such as Edinburgh (23%) and Glasgow (11%), where opportunities and infrastructure are more accessible (Figure 4).

Rural areas, despite having rich heritage assets, appear underrepresented in this survey. This may be due to a combination of factors: there are fewer organisations, lower capacity and weaker connections to national support networks in these regions. This geographic imbalance is important because it affects who has realistic access to heritage volunteering opportunities.

Figure 3 - Percentage of organisations by geographical reach (community, local authority-wide, Scotland-wide, UK-wide) (VIO's answers)

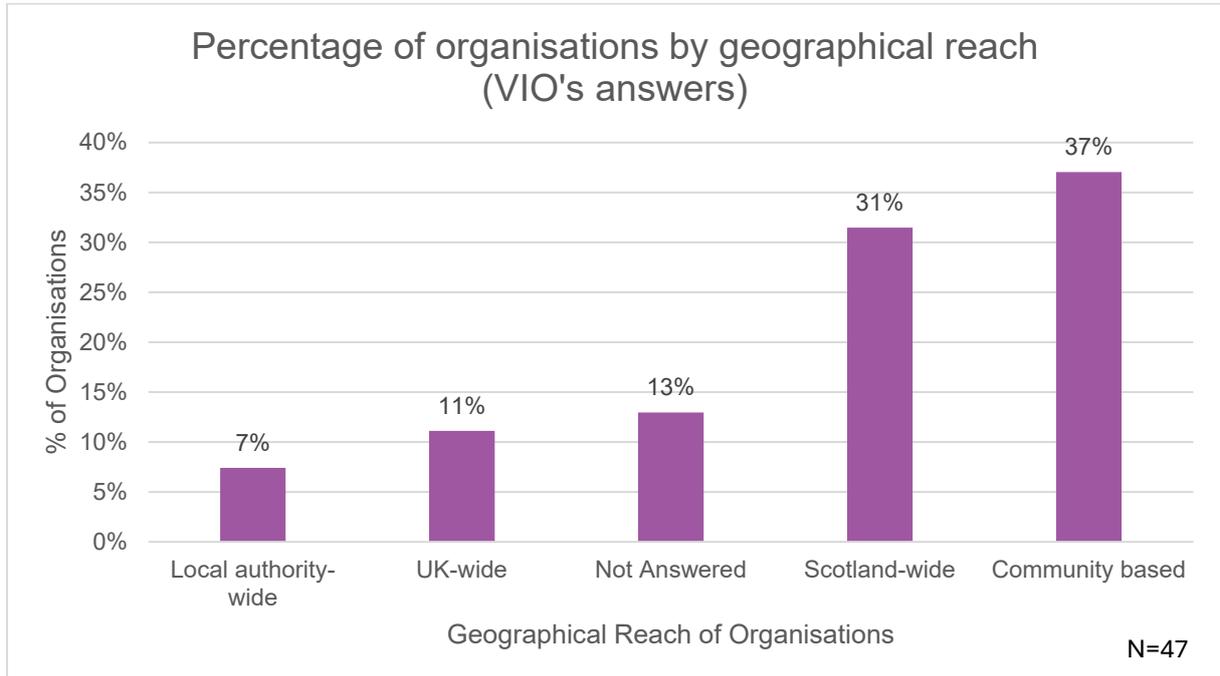
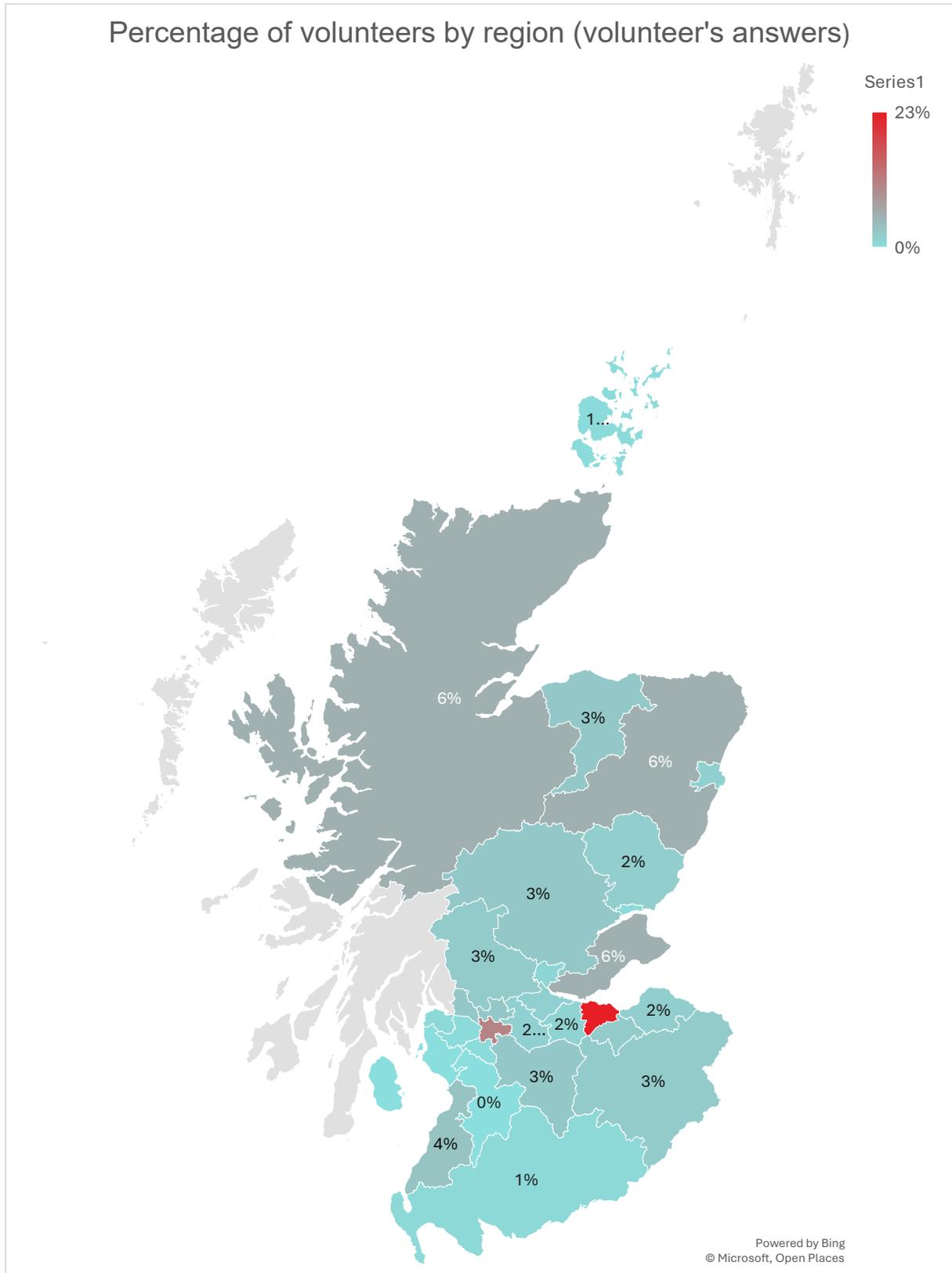


Figure 4 - Percentage of volunteers by region (volunteers' answers)



3.1.4 Volunteer demographics reveal who participates and who does not

Volunteer respondents reflect a narrow demographic profile which is mirrored by the VIO respondents' demographics. Comparing the demographic profiles of both VIO respondents and volunteers is essential for understanding the dynamics of inclusion and representation within the heritage sector. The data shows that both groups are predominantly mid-career or retired, highly educated, white and female, with very limited representation from younger people, ethnic minorities, trans volunteers and non-Christian faiths (Figure 5 to 12).

This matters because people are more likely to volunteer and feel comfortable doing so, when they see themselves reflected in the organisation's leadership and peer group. If volunteer teams and managers are largely homogenous, it can unintentionally signal to those from underrepresented groups that they do not belong or will not be fully understood or supported.

Figure 5 - Demographics – What is your age? Responses from volunteers and VIOs

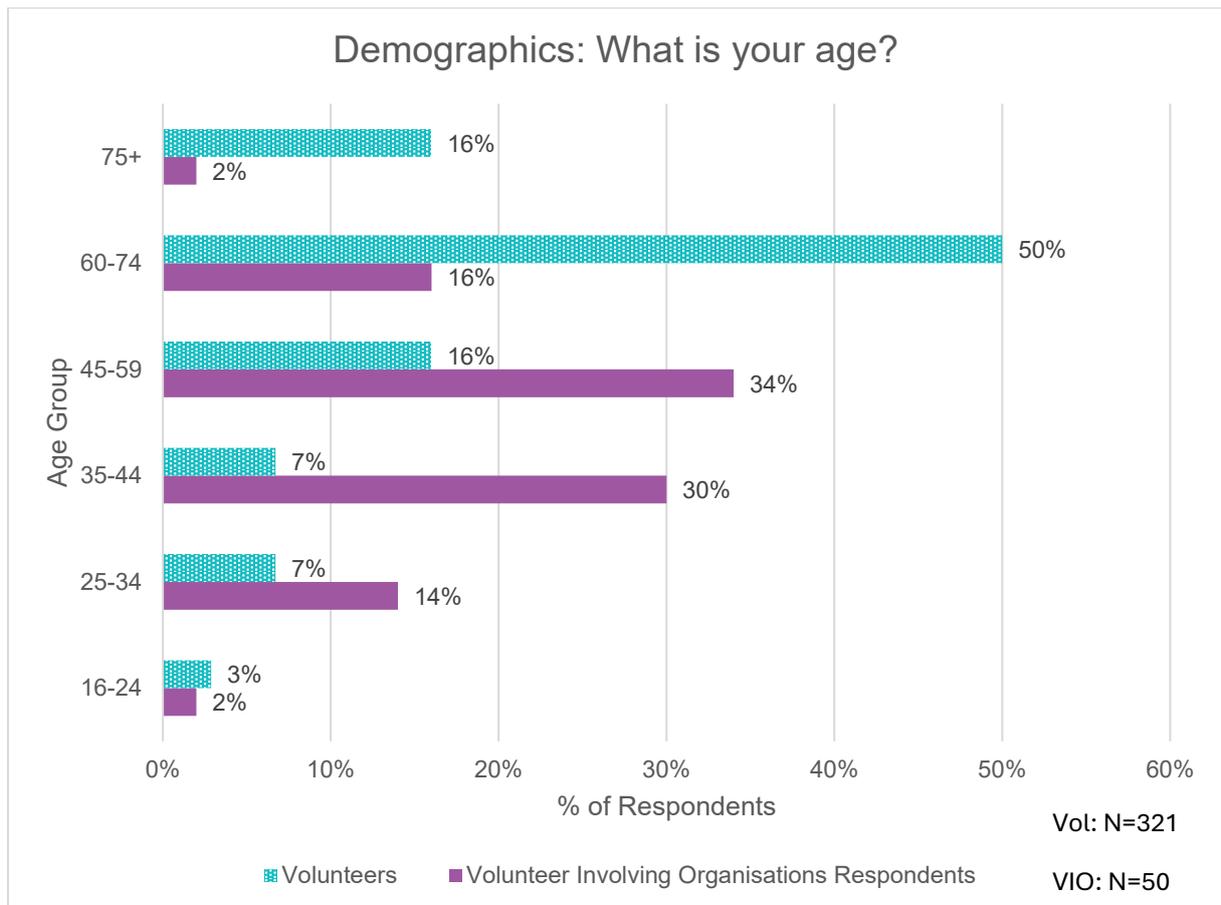


Figure 6 - Demographics: What is your current working pattern? Responses from volunteers and VIOs

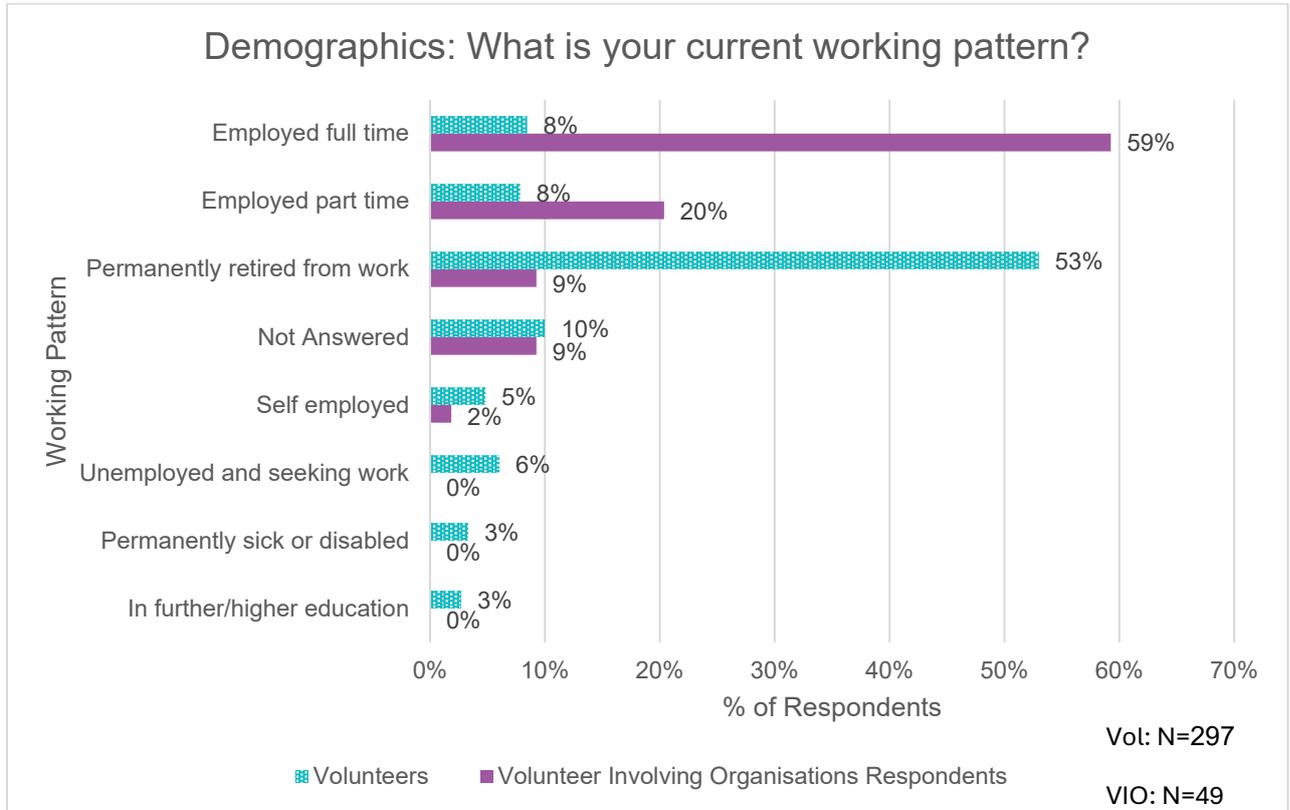


Figure 7 - Demographics: What is the highest level of educational qualification you have received? Responses from volunteers and VIOs

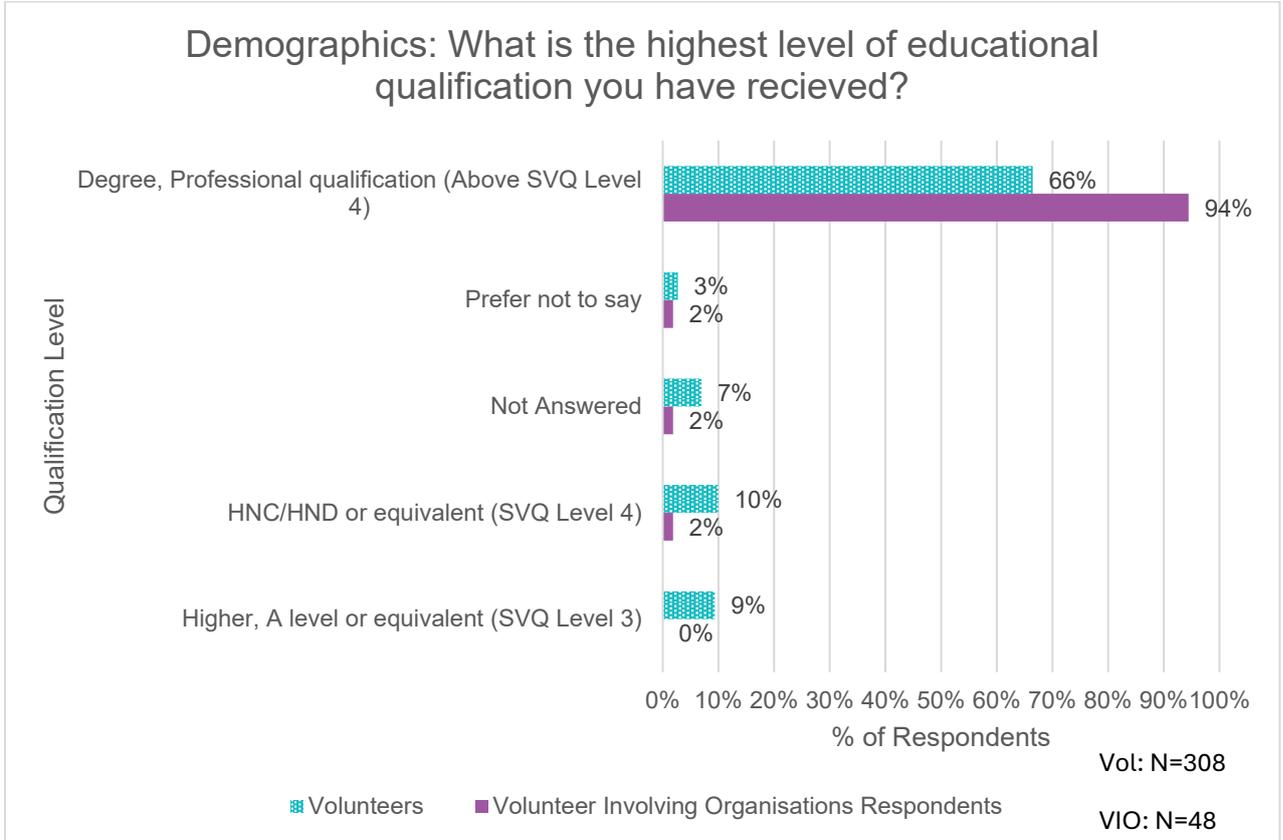


Figure 8 - Demographics: What is your gender? Responses from volunteers and VIOs

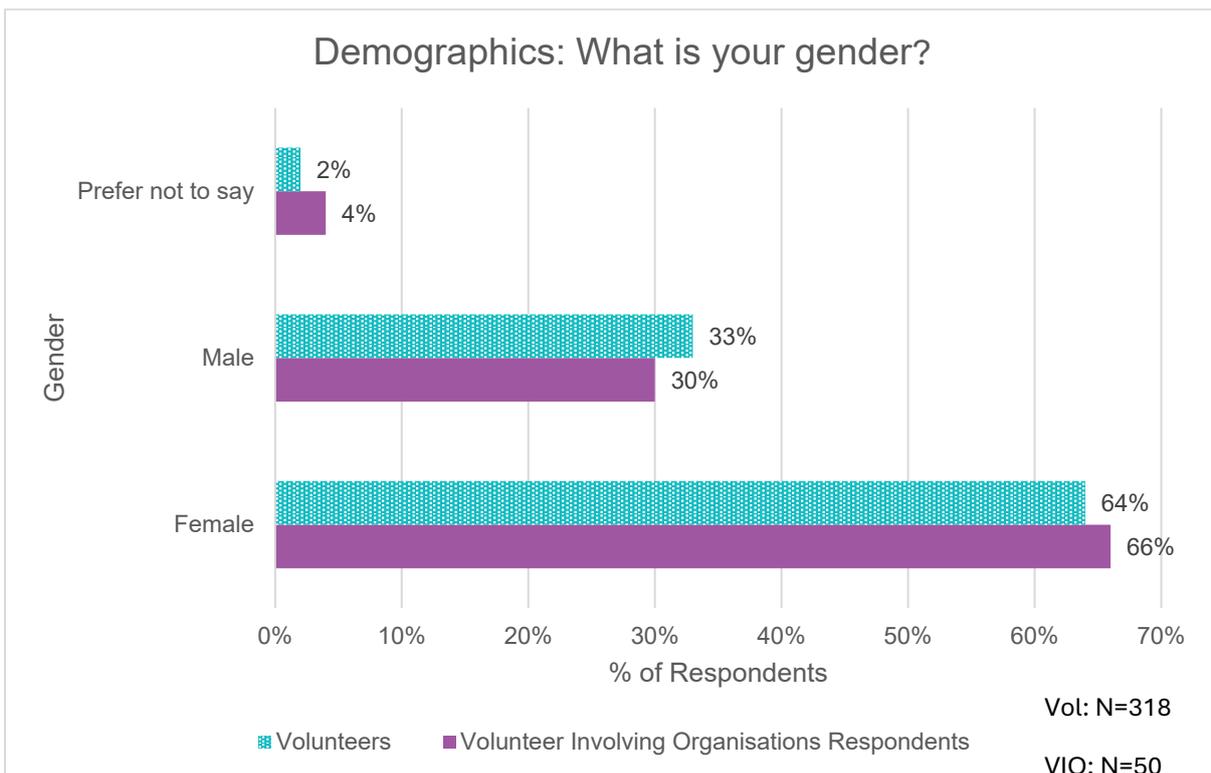


Figure 9 - Demographics: What is your ethnic group? Responses from volunteers and VIOs

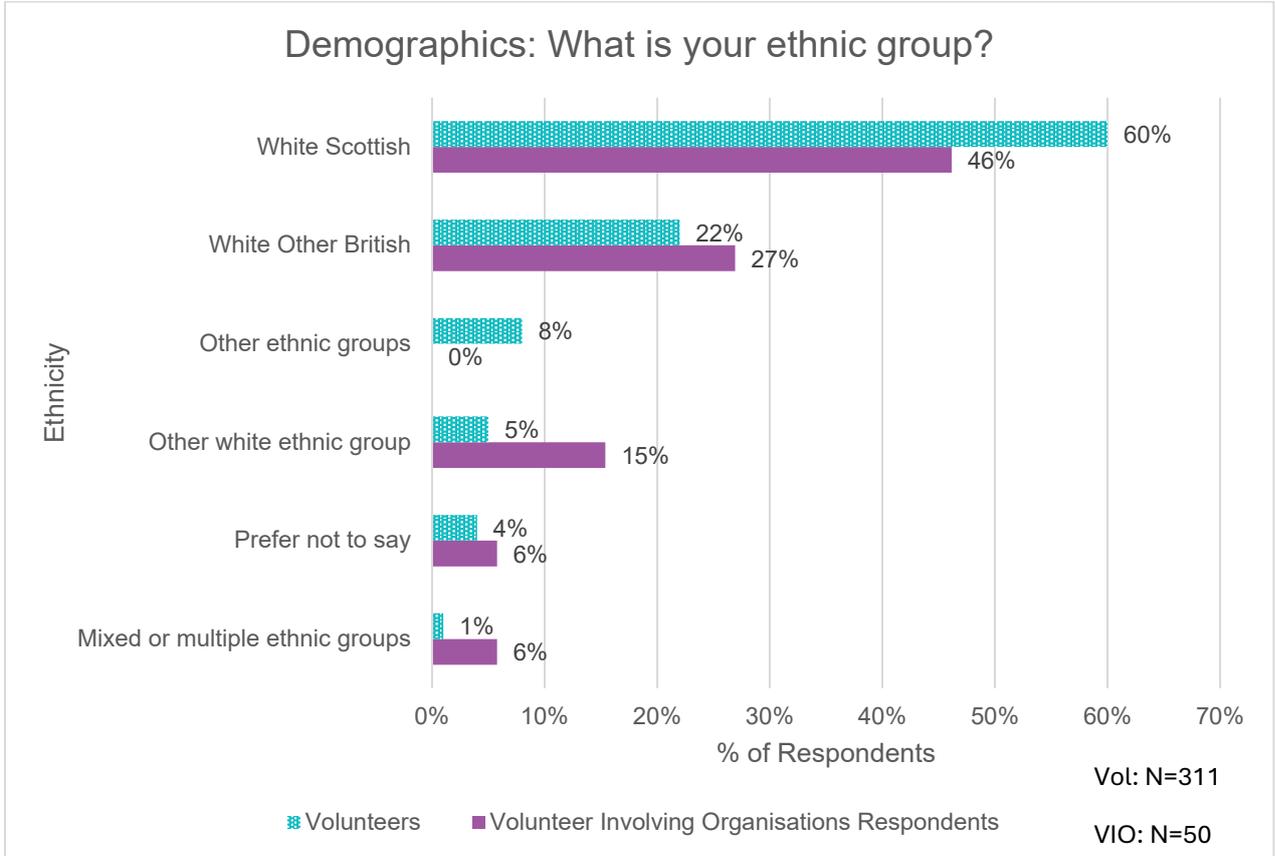
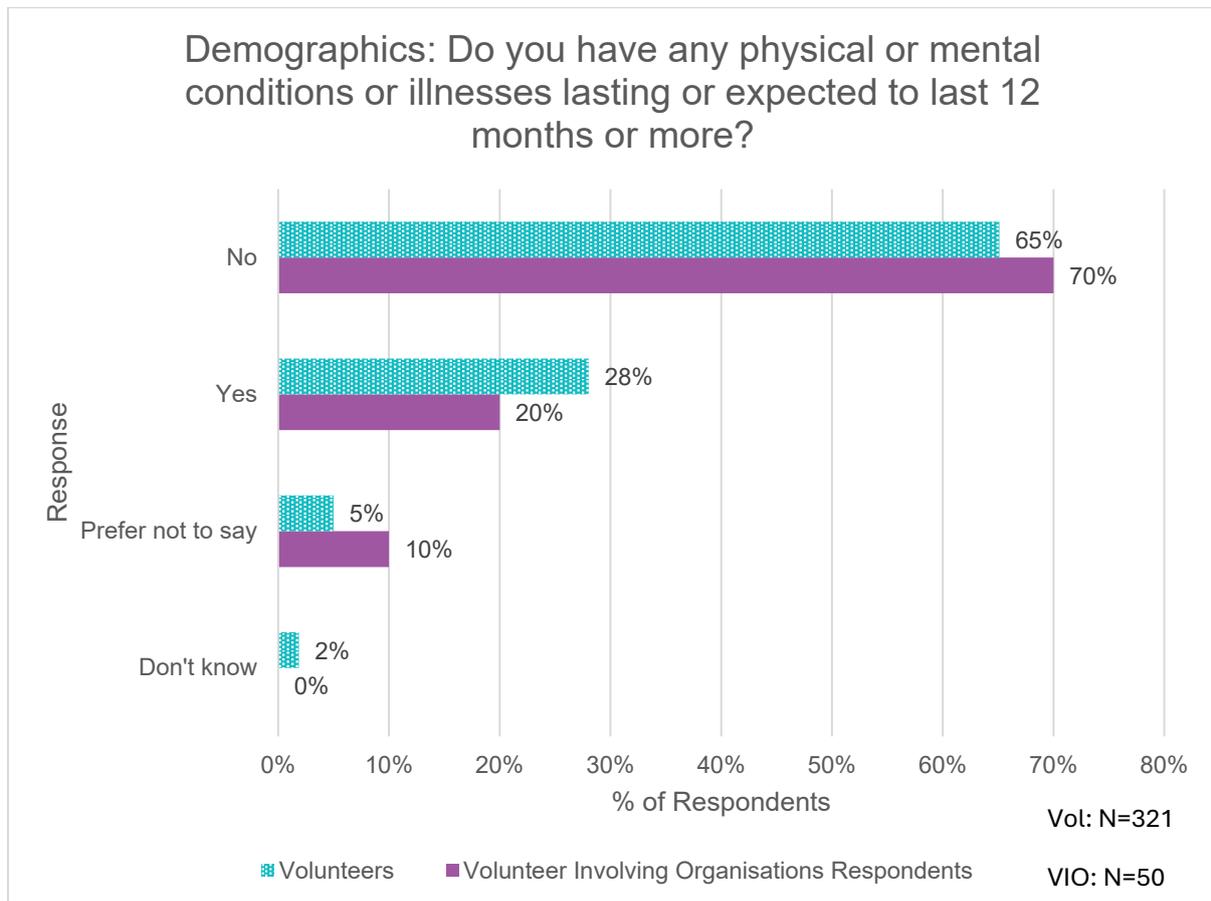


Figure 10 - Demographics: Do you have any physical or mental conditions or illnesses lasting or expected to last 12 months or more? Responses from volunteers and VIOs



While demographic homogeneity shapes who feels welcome and represented in heritage volunteering, the lived realities of those who do participate reveal further layers of complexity. Many volunteers are not only navigating questions of identity and belonging, but are also balancing significant personal responsibilities and challenges.

Survey data shows that nearly a third of volunteers (31%) (Figure 11) provide regular care or support to family or friends due to long-term health, disability, or related issues. Similarly, over a quarter (28%) (Figure 10) live with a physical or mental health condition expected to last at least 12 months. For many, these circumstances directly affect their ability to participate: almost seven in ten volunteers with a long-term condition report that it reduces their capacity to carry out day-to-day activities, whether “a little” or “a lot” (Figure 12).

These findings highlight that, even among a relatively narrow demographic, volunteers bring a wide range of lived experiences and needs. The prevalence of caring responsibilities and health-related challenges underscores the importance of designing volunteering opportunities that are flexible and adaptable. Without flexibility, such as roles with adjustable hours, remote options, or tasks that can be

scaled to individual capacity; organisations risk excluding not only those from underrepresented backgrounds, but also those whose circumstances require additional support.

In short, fostering a truly inclusive volunteering environment means recognising and responding to both visible and less visible barriers. By offering flexible, lower-intensity opportunities, heritage organisations can ensure that volunteering remains accessible, meaningful, and welcoming for all who wish to contribute, regardless of background or personal circumstance.

Figure 11 - Demographics: Do you provide regular help or support to family, friends, or others due to long-term physical or mental ill-health, disability, or problems (outside paid employment)? Responses from volunteers and VIOs

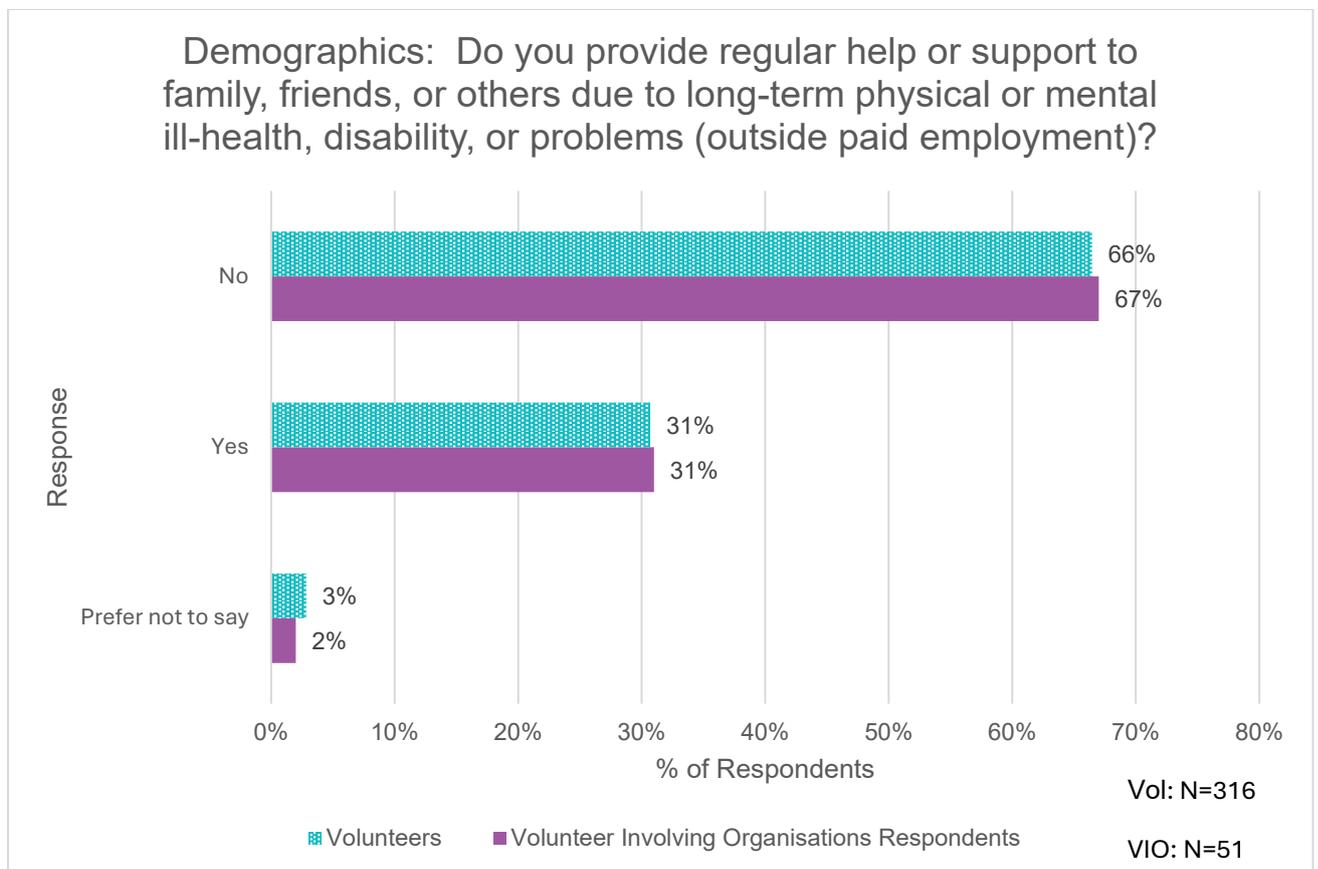
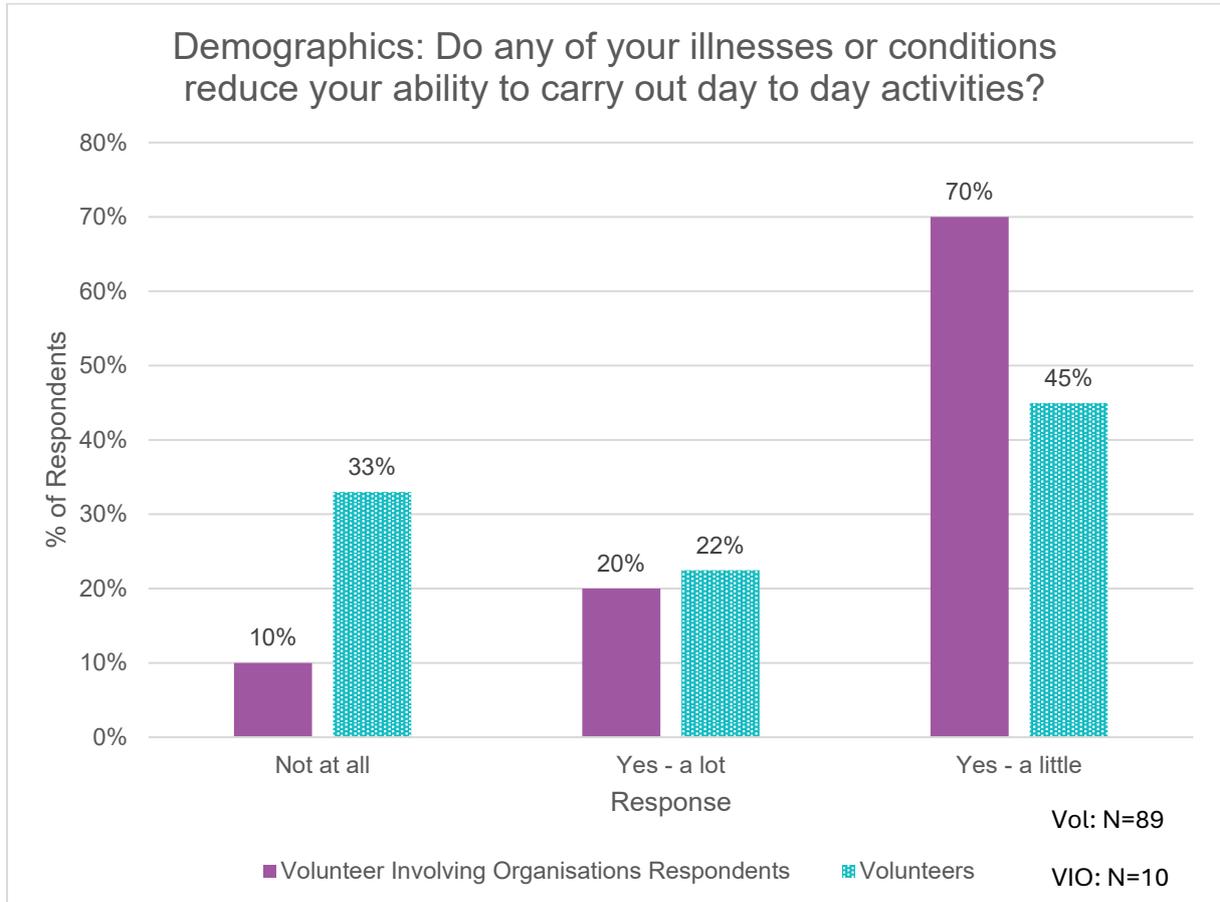


Figure 12 - Demographics: Do any of your illnesses or conditions reduce your ability to carry out day to day activities? Responses from volunteers and VIOs



3.1.5 Volunteers’ motivations reflect community engagement and personal meaning

While organisations often assume heritage interest drives engagement, volunteers say otherwise. The top motivations are (Figure 13):

- To make a difference (21%)
- A passion for heritage (16%)
- To give back to my community (11%)
- To be part of a community (11%).

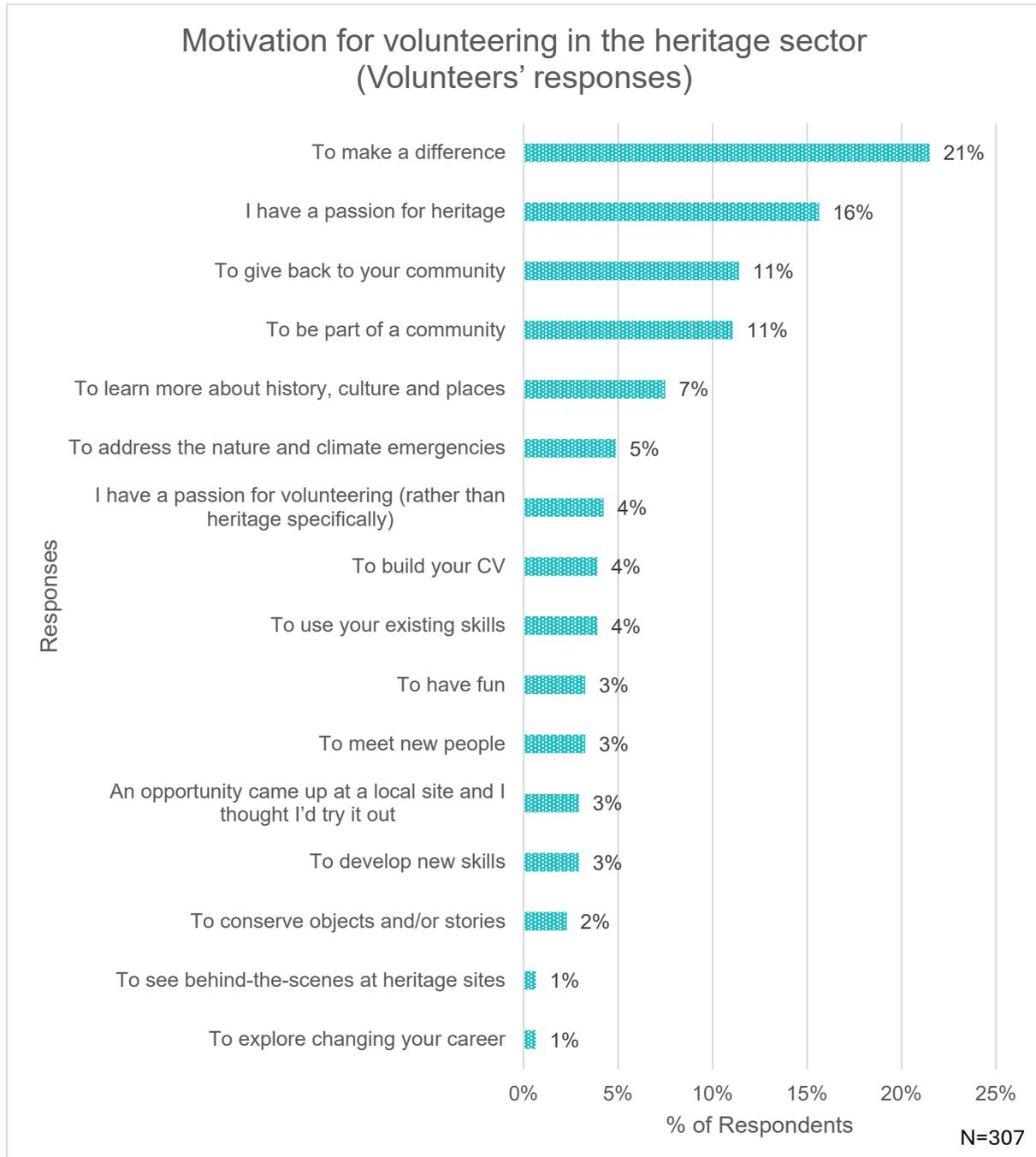
This distribution illustrates a sector held up largely by community pride rather than commercial or statutory structures. Respondents confirm this pattern; for many, volunteering is a way to reconnect with passions and people. As one volunteer shared, “I love gardening and I volunteer in a garden I have loved as a visitor for many years”. Another found purpose after a difficult time: “ had been out of a job for a prolonged period due to illness and I thought volunteering was a good way to get back into working”.

Others are driven by a love of heritage: “I have a great interest in Scottish history and local history”, while some see volunteering as a bridge to new opportunities: “Stay involved with libraries, make sure I don’t have gaps in my CV”.

The diversity of motivations is clear: from “sharing my passion for nature” to “encouraging deaf people to come to BSL guided tours” volunteers bring their whole selves to the sector.

Heritage volunteering, therefore, is not only about the past; it is profoundly about people, connection and belonging today.

Figure 13 -Motivation for volunteering in the heritage sector (Volunteers' responses)



The predominance of community-led and volunteer-run organisations not only shapes who participates in heritage volunteering but also strengthens local identity and engagement. Nearly a quarter of organisations are entirely volunteer-led, keeping stories, spaces and skills alive, often in areas where other services have been withdrawn. This community stewardship is a key driver of resilience and intergenerational connection, as volunteers contribute to sustaining the places and narratives that define Scotland's heritage.

3.2 Theme 2: How Heritage Volunteering Functions in Practice

Volunteers are at the heart of Scotland’s heritage sector, making its history and culture accessible and engaging for everyone. As one guide described, “Hopefully bringing Scottish history to life for everyone on my tours.” Others see their volunteering as a way to pass on hard-won knowledge: “My volunteering will have little effect on the development of the heritage sector, but my knowledge will be passed on as it is from hands-on experience of deep-sea fishing”.

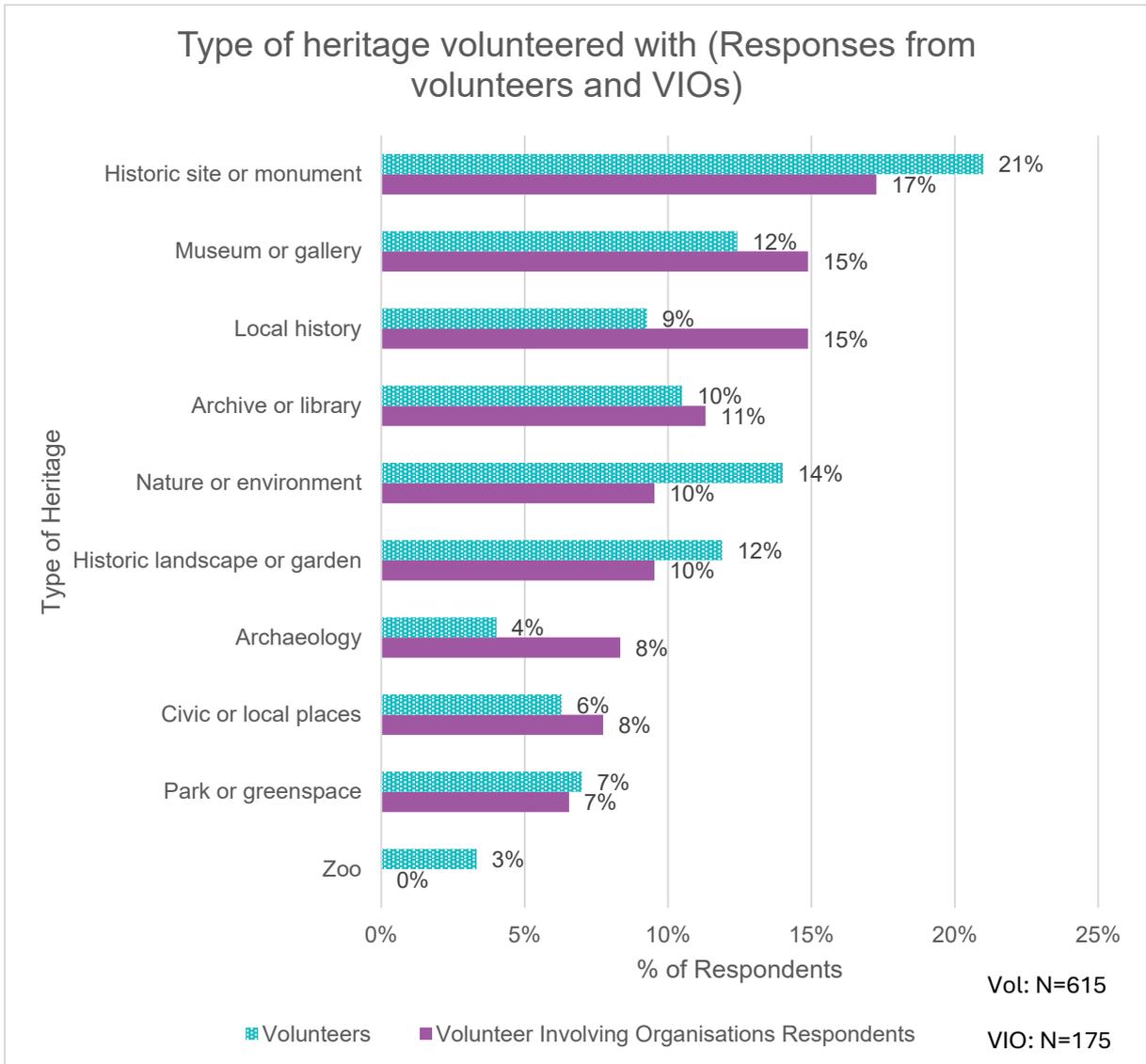
This section explores the diverse roles, contributions and experiences of volunteers within heritage organisations, as well as the operational challenges these organisations face. By examining these aspects, we gain insight into how volunteering is structured and sustained across the sector.

Volunteers are essential to the functioning of the heritage sector, yet their contributions are often shaped by limited resources, informal management structures and a mismatch between the skills developed and those most needed by the sector. Volunteers themselves recognize these challenges; as one puts it, “I think it devalues the work of professionals and keeps up the delusion that people work in heritage out of love and don't need to be paid adequately for their work”.

3.2.1 What organisations do and what volunteers contribute to

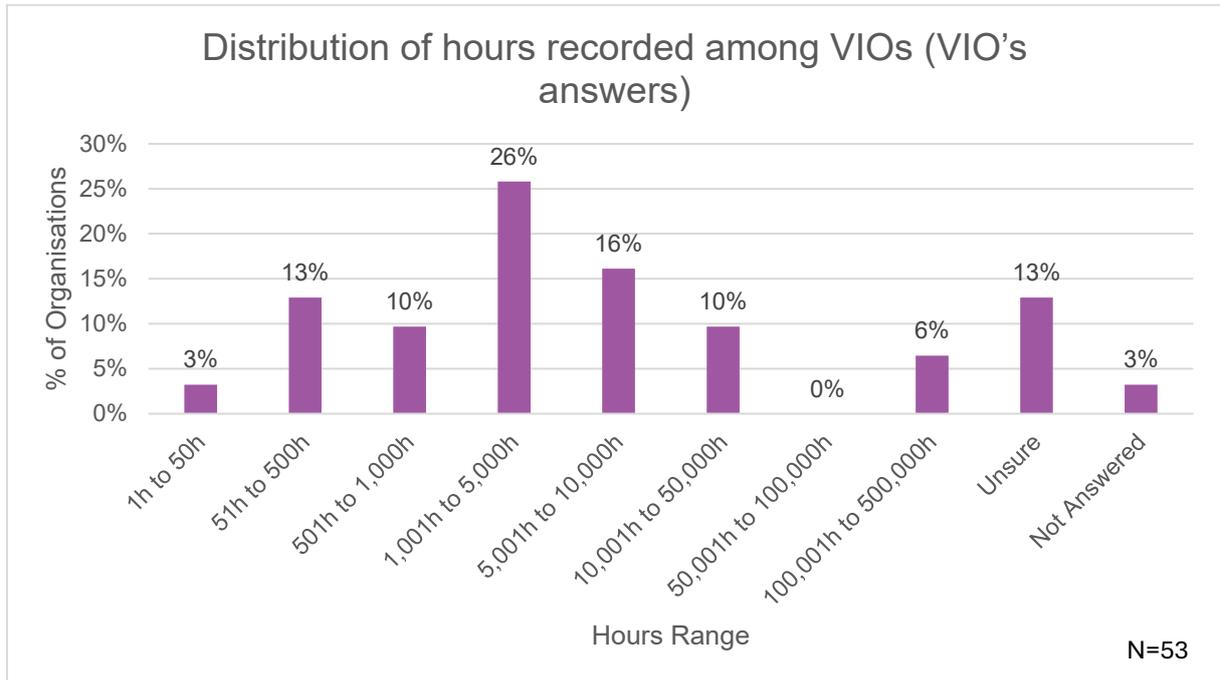
Organisational responses cover a wide mix of heritage types, with historic sites and monuments (17%), museums/galleries (15%), local history (15%) and archives/libraries (11%) being the most common (Figure 14). This tangible, place-based focus is mirrored in volunteer activity.

Figure 14 - Type of heritage volunteered with (Responses from volunteers and VIOs)



Volunteers contribute thousands of hours to Scotland’s heritage each year. Organisations surveyed reported at least 76,548 volunteer hours in 2024, but this is an underestimate, given that 43% of organisations do not record hours at all and small rural groups are often missing from formal data (Figure 15).

Figure 15 - Distribution of hours recorded among VIOs (VIO's answers)

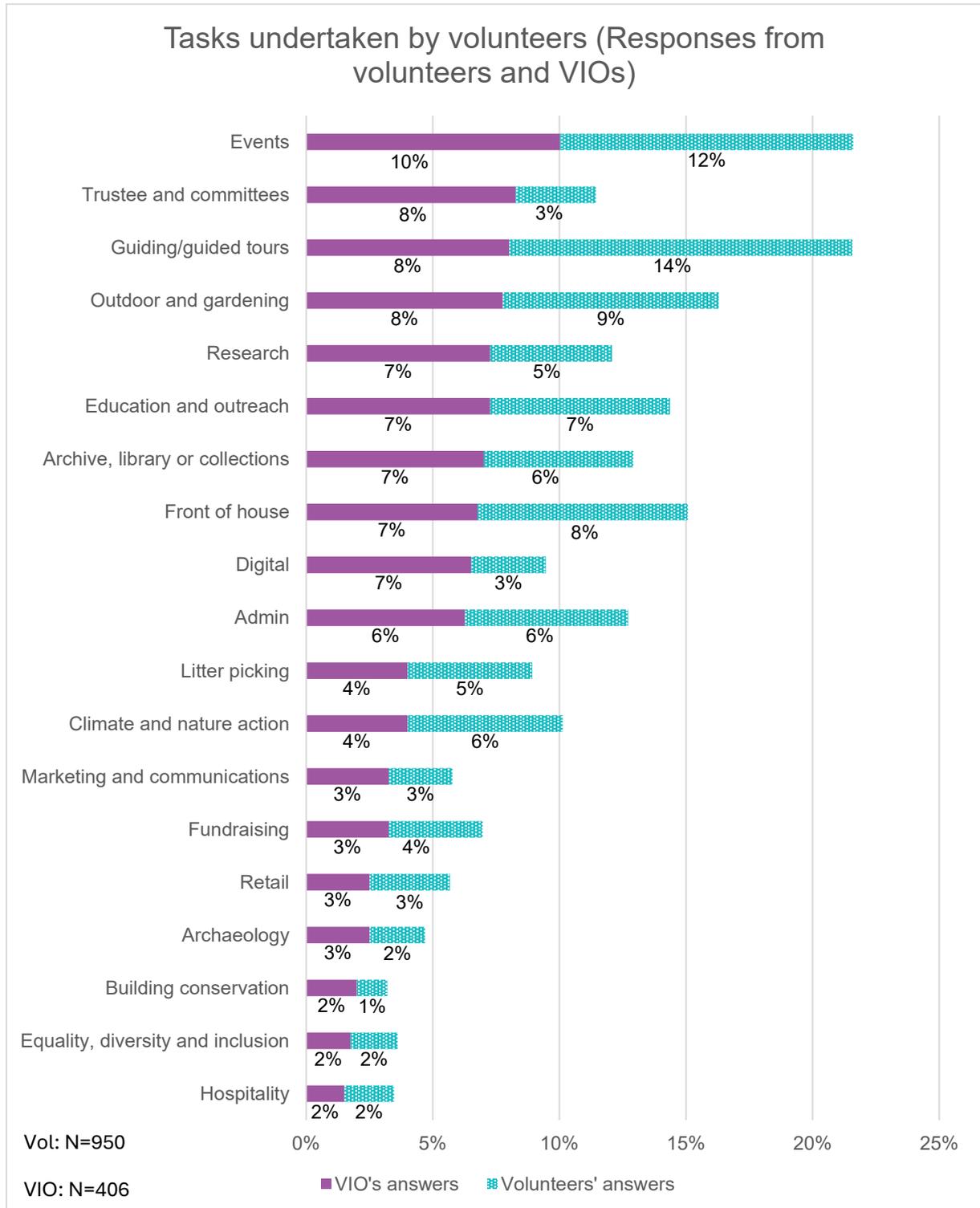


3.2.2 Volunteer roles combine hands-on heritage care with community engagement

Volunteer respondents engage in a wide variety of tasks, including events, guided tours, gardening, research, education, collections care, and governance (Figure 16). Notably, tours and guiding are significantly more common among volunteers, with 14% reporting involvement in these activities compared to just 8% reported by organisations.

In contrast, governance and trustee work appears more frequently in organisational reporting (8%) than in volunteers' self-identification (3%), suggesting that volunteers may not always view governance as a form of volunteering. Additionally, digital roles are under-identified by volunteers, with only 3% acknowledging participation in these tasks, whereas organisational data indicates a higher involvement at 7%.

Figure 16 - Tasks undertaken by volunteers (Responses from volunteers and VIOs)



These gaps highlight the need for clearer role framing and recognition within heritage organisations. The differences between how volunteers and organisations report certain tasks suggest that there may be misunderstandings or a lack of shared language around what constitutes volunteering. For example, volunteers are much more likely to identify with roles such as guiding and tours, while organisations more

frequently report governance and digital roles. This could indicate that some volunteers do not see activities like serving on committees or working with digital tools as “volunteering”, even though these contributions are vital to organisational success.

Such discrepancies can lead to important work being undervalued or overlooked, both by volunteers themselves and by the organisations that rely on their efforts. When roles are not clearly defined or recognised, volunteers may miss out on opportunities for development, support, or acknowledgment. Likewise, organisations may struggle to recruit for, or sustain, less visible but essential roles.

By developing clearer descriptions of volunteer roles and ensuring that all forms of contribution are recognised and celebrated, heritage organisations can help volunteers better understand the full range of ways they can get involved. This, in turn, can support recruitment, retention, and satisfaction, while also ensuring that critical organisational needs are met.

3.2.3 Staff predominance in specialist and leadership roles

While volunteers play a significant role in advisory, consultancy and governance positions, survey data indicates that their presence is much less pronounced in specialist fields such as archaeology, building conservation, and senior management. The most commonly reported volunteer roles include manager (28%), coordinator (17%), director (13%), and officer (11%). Notably, some roles such as consultant, adviser, and volunteer are filled entirely by volunteers, while positions like trustee, officer and coordinator also show a high level of volunteer involvement (25%, 67%, and 67% respectively). In contrast, roles such as archaeologist, committee member, steering group member, director, chair, secretary, head of department, and even manager were not represented in volunteer responses. However, it is important to acknowledge that survey limitations may mean some volunteer contributions, particularly in areas like community archaeology, are underrepresented.

This pattern suggests a possible structural divide between professionalised heritage work and volunteer engagement. Specialist and leadership roles tend to be dominated by paid staff, while volunteers are more often found in advisory or support capacities. This may reflect how roles are defined and recognised within organisations but may also indicate a lack of clear pathways for volunteers to progress into specialist, often paid, roles.

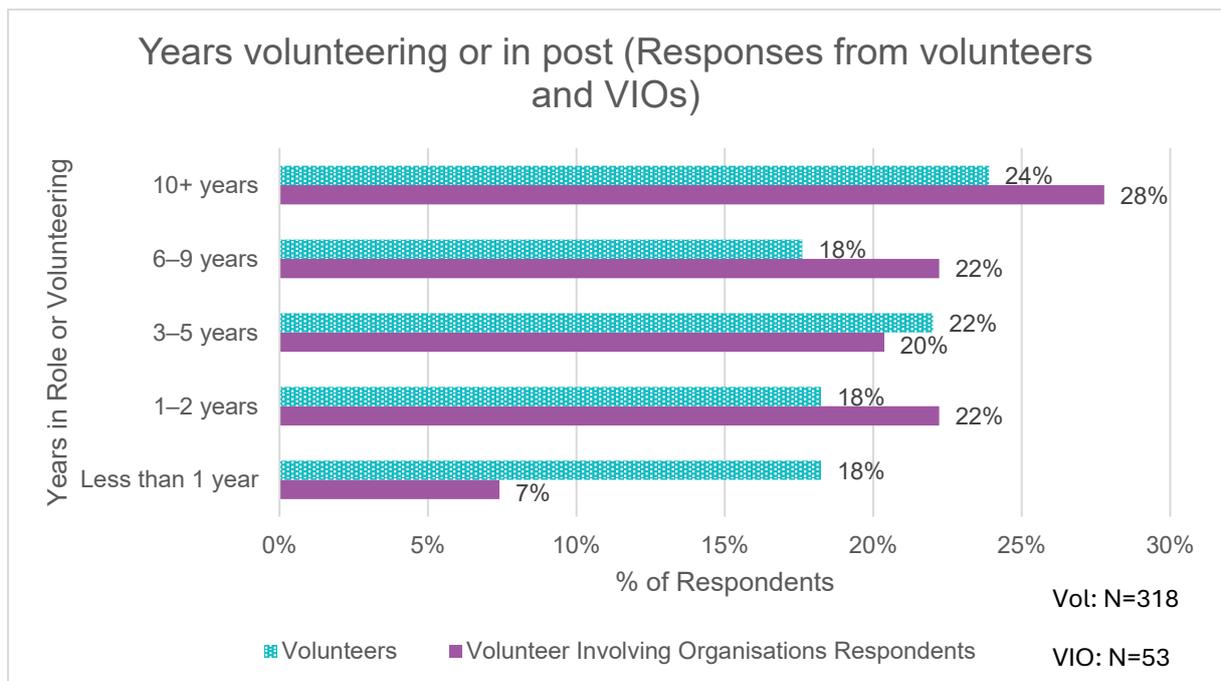
Addressing these gaps presents an opportunity for heritage organisations to strengthen skills pathways and make volunteer engagement more inclusive. By developing more transparent and supportive routes into specialist and leadership positions, and by ensuring that all forms of volunteer contribution are properly recognised and valued, organisations can better harness the full potential of their volunteers. More inclusive data collection and clearer role design will also help to

ensure that the diversity and breadth of volunteer involvement is accurately captured and celebrated.

3.2.4 Time in role shows strong continuity and warns of succession risks

Respondents from volunteer-involving organisations indicate that those engaged in heritage volunteer roles often remain in their positions for extended periods. 28% of staff have held their roles for over ten years, while 24% of volunteers have been volunteering for more than a decade; making these the largest groups among those surveyed (Figure 17). Additionally, 22% of staff and 18% of volunteers have been in their roles between three and nine years. At the same time, there is evidence of healthy renewal within the sector: 29% of volunteer-involving staff are new to their posts (having served for zero to two years), and 36% of volunteers fall within this same bracket.

Figure 17 - Years volunteering or in post (Responses from volunteers and VIOs)



However, with 69% of organisations surveyed lacking a succession plan, there is a risk that long-term expertise will be lost (Figures 18 & 19).

Figure 18 - Succession planning for volunteer roles among VIOs (VIO's answers)

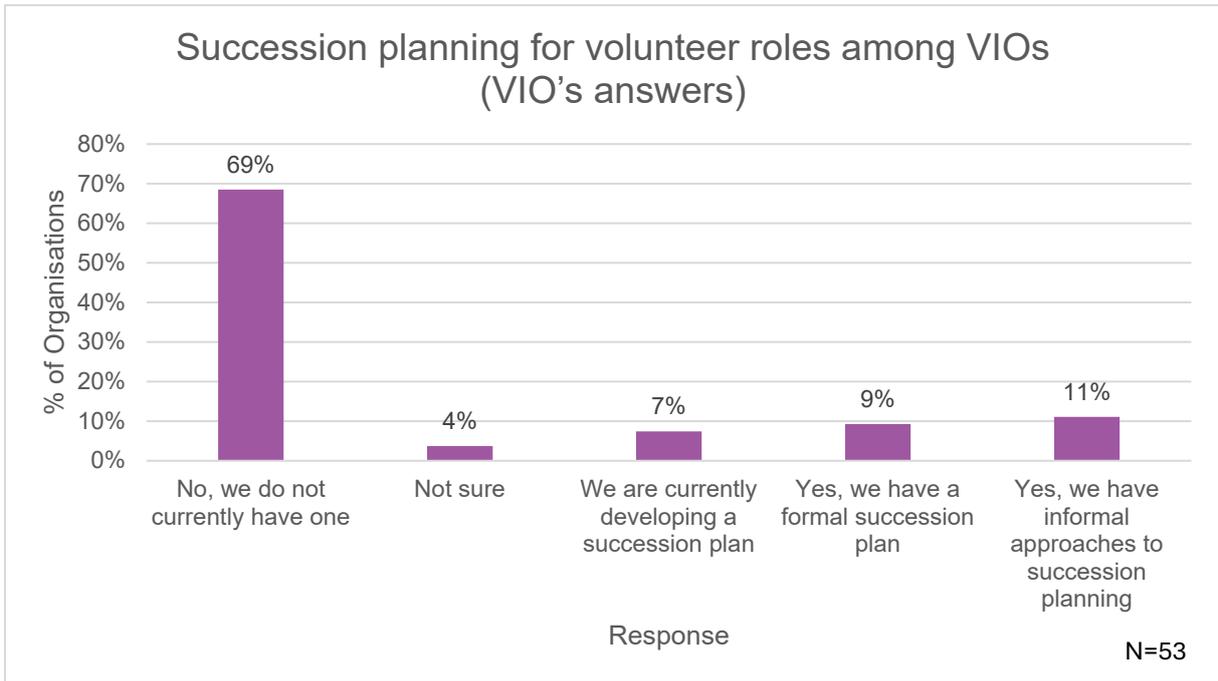
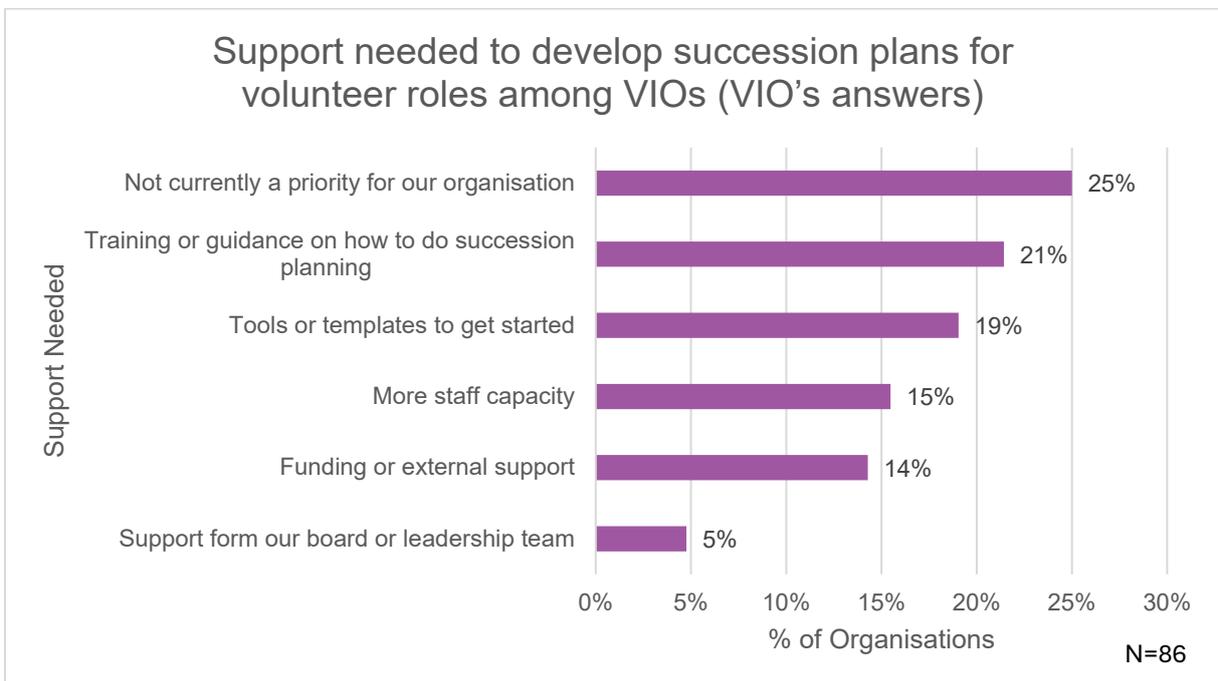


Figure 19 - Support needed to develop succession plans for volunteer roles among VIOs (VIO's answers)



Succession planning is vital for continuity. Some volunteers feel assured: “I am part of a large team and they would be able to fill a gap left behind if I were to step away”.

Others worry about the future: “All fellow volunteers are aged over 60, with no one new joining us in several years”.

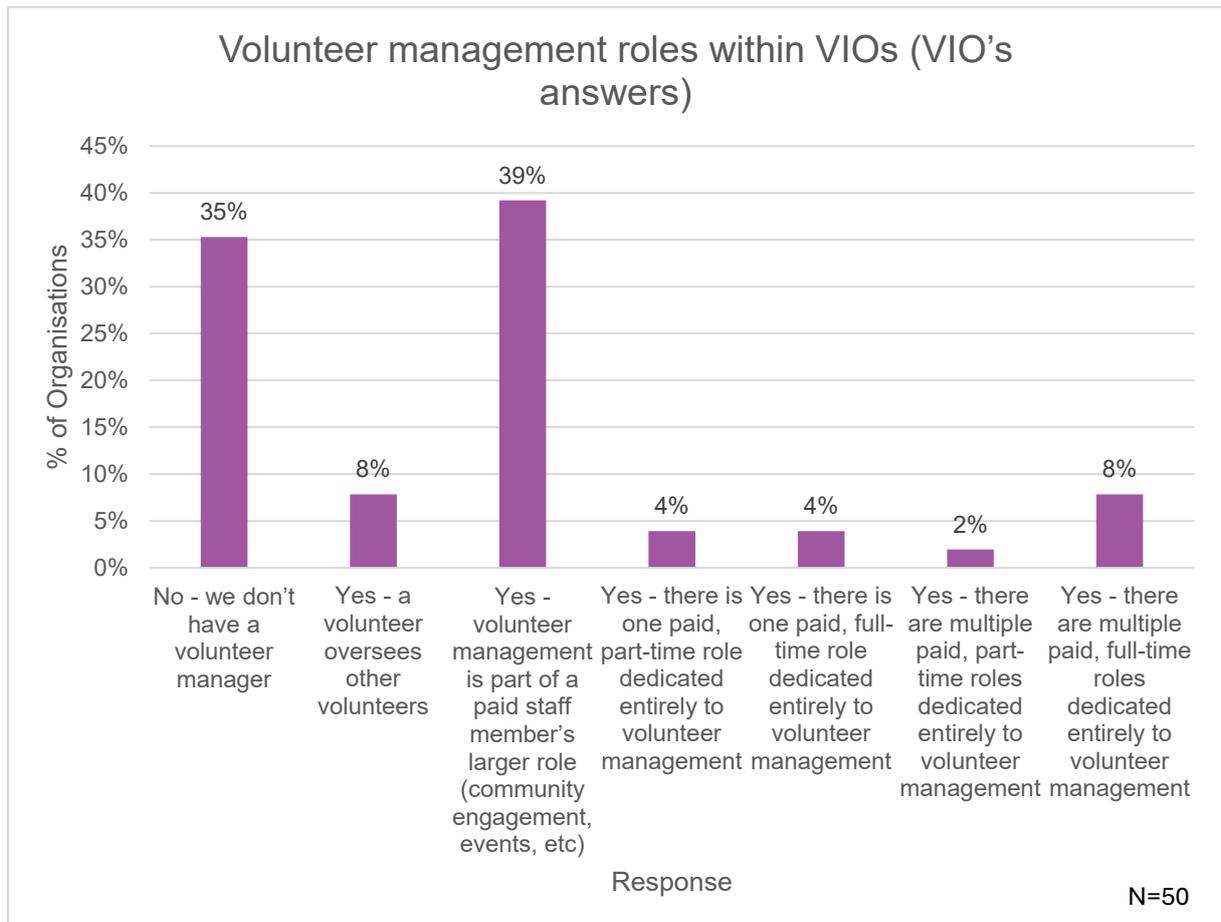
The importance of documentation and teamwork is clear: “I feel very confident because I know there are clear procedures and documentation in place to ensure continuity. The team is well-trained and supportive and responsibilities are shared rather than dependent on one person”.

The thousands of hours contributed by volunteers each year have an impact that extends far beyond the tasks performed. Volunteers support local tourism, cultural events, landscape management and biodiversity, as well as community histories and archives (Figure 14). These efforts not only preserve heritage assets but also drive place-based regeneration and skills development, supporting local learning and creative engagement. In this way, heritage volunteering acts as a catalyst for community wealth building, keeping value rooted locally, and fostering economic and social resilience.

3.2.5 Volunteer management capacity remains limited

Support for volunteers among respondents varied considerably (Figure 20). 39% of organisations have volunteer management responsibilities embedded within broader paid roles, such as community engagement staff. Meanwhile, 35% of organisations report having no volunteer manager at all. Only about 12% have multiple full-time dedicated volunteer managers, and a further 6% have part-time, dedicated volunteer managers.

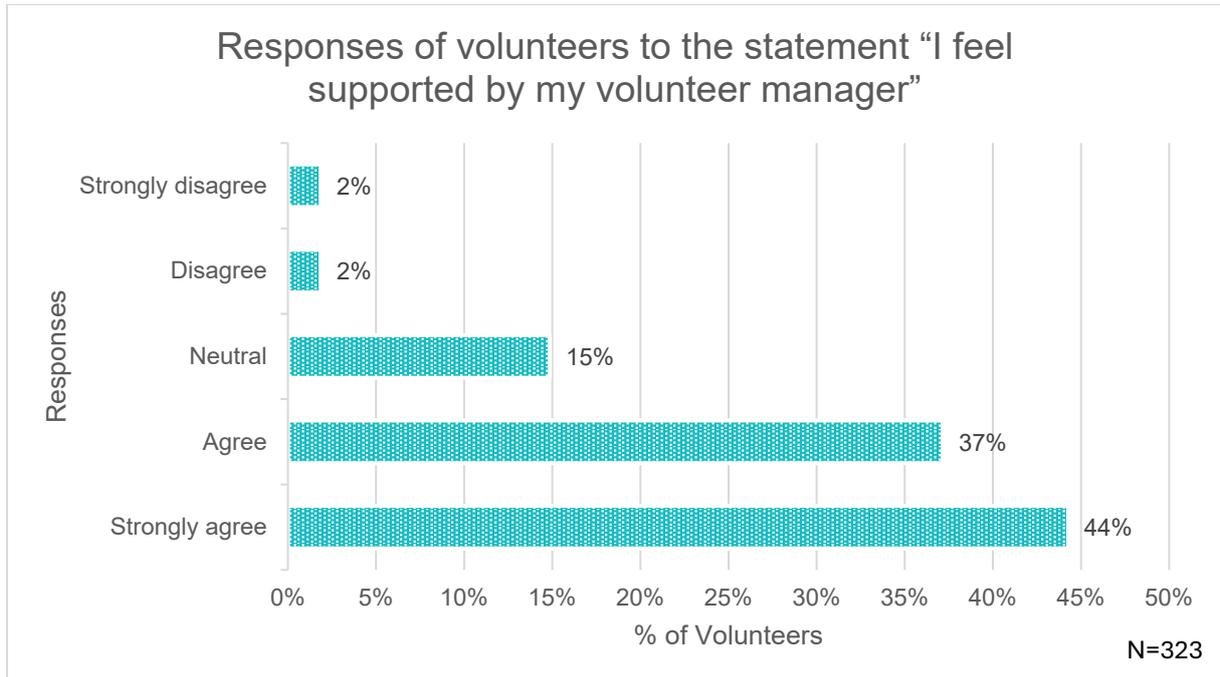
Figure 20 - Volunteer management roles within VIOs (VIO's answers)



In the small organisations surveyed (1–10 volunteers), 60% lack a volunteer manager, indicating informal coordination or shared roles. Medium-sized organisations (11–50 volunteers) vary: some still have no dedicated manager, while others assign part-time or additional responsibilities to staff. Larger organisations (51–100+ volunteers) are more likely to employ at least one formal volunteer manager, sometimes several, due to increased complexity. Very large organisations (over 1,000 volunteers) almost always have paid, full-time managers, though there are rare exceptions relying on decentralised systems.

Volunteer feedback is mostly positive: 81% of volunteer respondents feel supported by their manager. However, 15% are neutral, possibly due to a lack of direct support and 4% feel unsupported, highlighting areas for improvement in volunteer management.

Figure 21 - Responses of volunteers to the statement “I feel supported by my volunteer manager”



3.2.6 Retention remains a sector-wide challenge

More than half (57%) of organisations report difficulties retaining volunteers (Figure 22).

As one volunteer stated: “Recruiting is very difficult. Experience has shown me that a person will personally approach when they see you working because they are attracted to try it out. Compelling someone does not work”.

Organisations are adapting to changing needs. As one VIO respondent explained, “Our supported volunteering has been successful and 'last minute' signups have been received well. Travel costs are reclaimed inconsistently and we have yet to launch our 'family volunteering' pilot”.

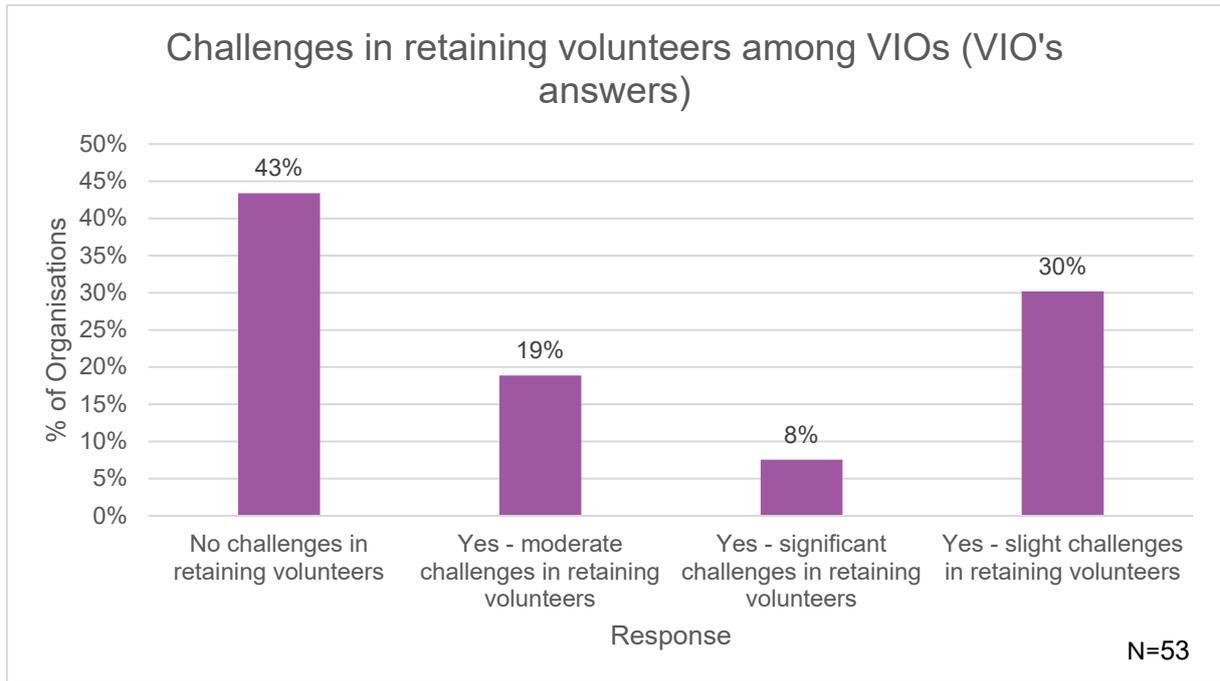
Flexibility and partnership are key. Another VIO noted, “Connecting locally with community-based organisations is effective but extremely resource-intensive and also benefits from effective partnership working”.

Successes are celebrated, as highlighted by one VIO: “Streamlining processes and increasing the number of volunteer managers has encouraged more teams to engage with volunteers, thus increasing volunteer opportunities”.

Yet challenges persist. As one VIO respondent observed, “Ageing volunteer profile and growing lack of volunteers with existing, relevant, industrial skills”.

These organisational voices show that innovation and resilience go hand in hand.

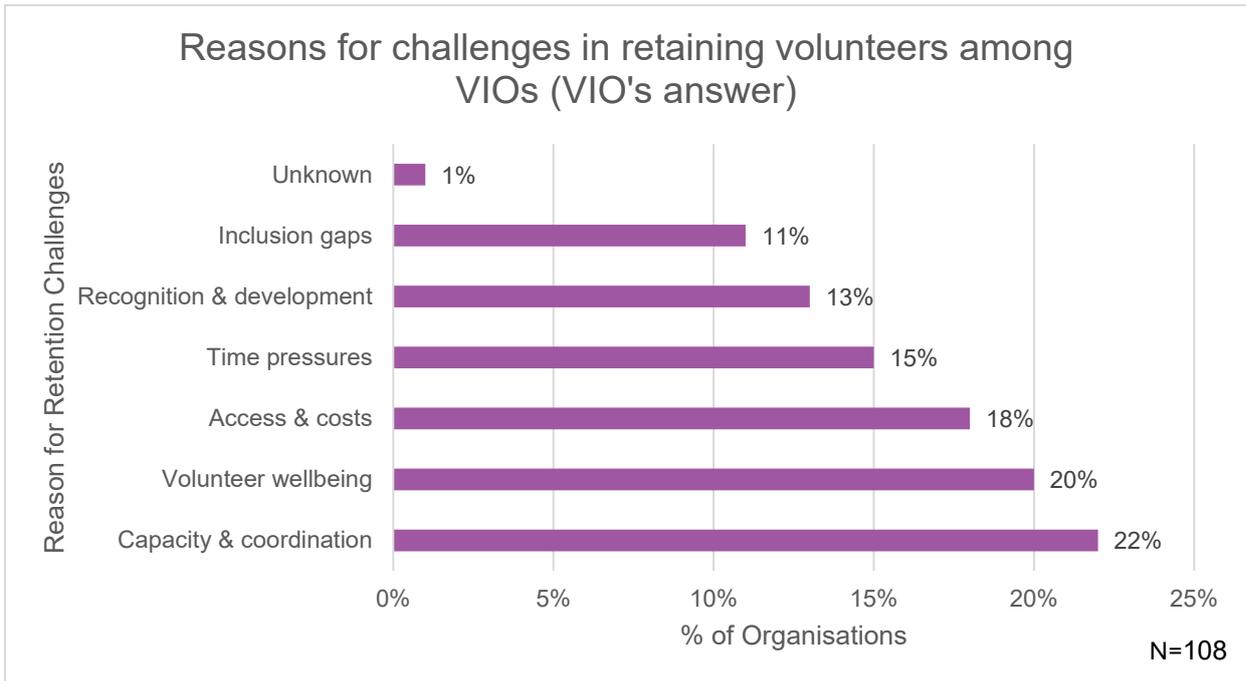
Figure 22 - Challenges in retaining volunteers among VIOs (VIO's answers)



Contributing factors to the retention challenge include (Figure 23):

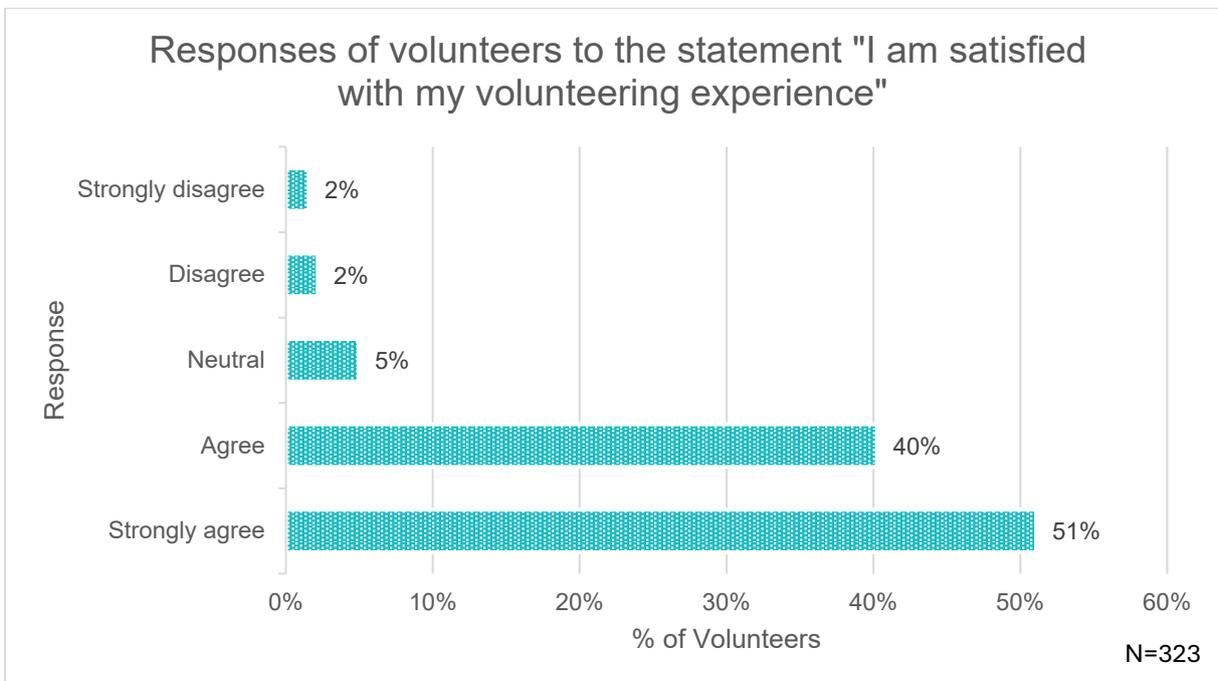
- Volunteers' lack of free time
- Insufficient staff capacity
- Health and wellbeing issues
- Access barriers such as transport costs
- Lack of recognition or clear development pathways.

Figure 23 - Reasons for challenges in retaining volunteers among VIOs (VIO's answer)



Despite these challenges, volunteer satisfaction remains very high (91%), showing strong intrinsic motivation and loyalty within the sector (Figure 24).

Figure 24 - Responses of volunteers to the statement "I am satisfied with my volunteering experience"



3.3 Theme 3: Inclusion, Access and Structural Barriers

While the heritage sector is often described as welcoming, it still lacks many of the structural supports needed for genuine inclusion. This section explores both the structural and cultural barriers that shape who is able to participate in heritage volunteering and examines how organisations are responding to issues of access and inclusion.

Volunteering can be deeply rewarding, but it is not without its challenges. For some, physical barriers are significant: as one volunteer shared, “Aching right knee and hips limit the length of time I can volunteer and I often feel very tired after each session. However, the pleasure I feel from volunteering outweighs my physical discomfort.” Others highlight the need for flexibility and support, such as the volunteer who said, “I work full-time during the week, so I miss training opportunities as they’re scheduled during my working hours. My preference would be the option to do training outside standard working hours.”

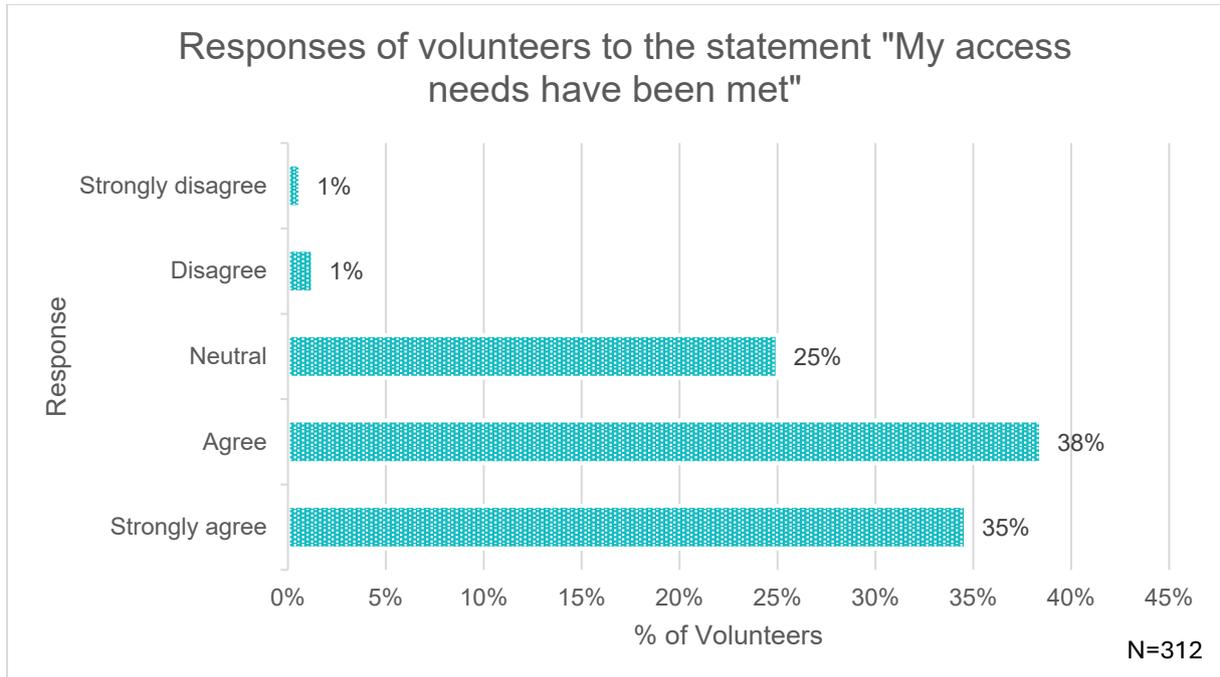
Some volunteers also report feeling unheard or isolated. For example, one noted, “Suggestions by volunteers on how to improve the visitor experience are consistently ignored”, while another described feeling awkward due to employment status: “Other volunteers can be a bit tactless. Sometimes other volunteers ask me where I am working which makes me feel awkward as I don’t have a paid job.”

Despite the best intentions of many organisations, genuine inclusion remains limited by financial, practical and cultural barriers. As a result, the sector is not yet fully representative of Scotland’s diverse communities, and more work is needed to ensure everyone has the opportunity to participate meaningfully.

3.3.1 Most volunteers say their access needs are met but the sample is unrepresentative

76% of surveyed volunteers report that their access needs are met (Figure 25), although because most respondents were non-disabled, older, white and degree-educated, the findings may not fully reflect the experiences of underrepresented groups.

Figure 25 - Responses of volunteers to the statement "My access needs have been met"



Participation from young people, ethnic minority communities, trans people, lower-income groups and carers is extremely low.

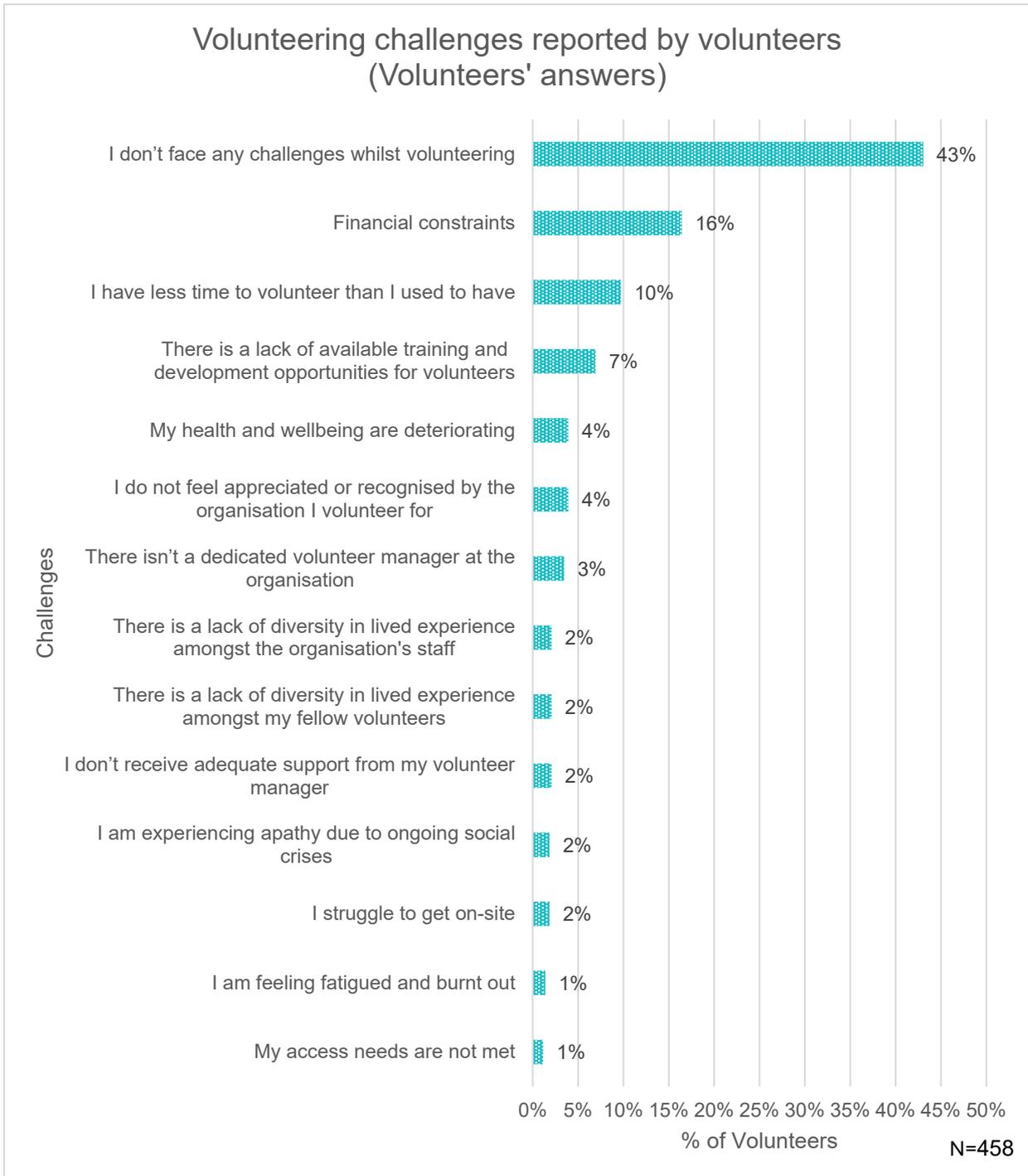
This suggests that heritage volunteering may be accessible to those already advantaged and far less so to those facing systemic barriers.

Heritage volunteering delivers substantial benefits for individual wellbeing and personal growth, even in the face of persistent barriers. Survey responses show that 91% of volunteers experience improved wellbeing and 87% report a strong sense of learning about places through their involvement. These outcomes directly support national priorities, such as Scotland’s Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy and reinforce the imperative to make volunteering accessible to all. Ensuring equitable access means these positive impacts can be shared more widely across Scotland’s diverse communities.

3.3.2 Financial barriers are real, yet under-recognised

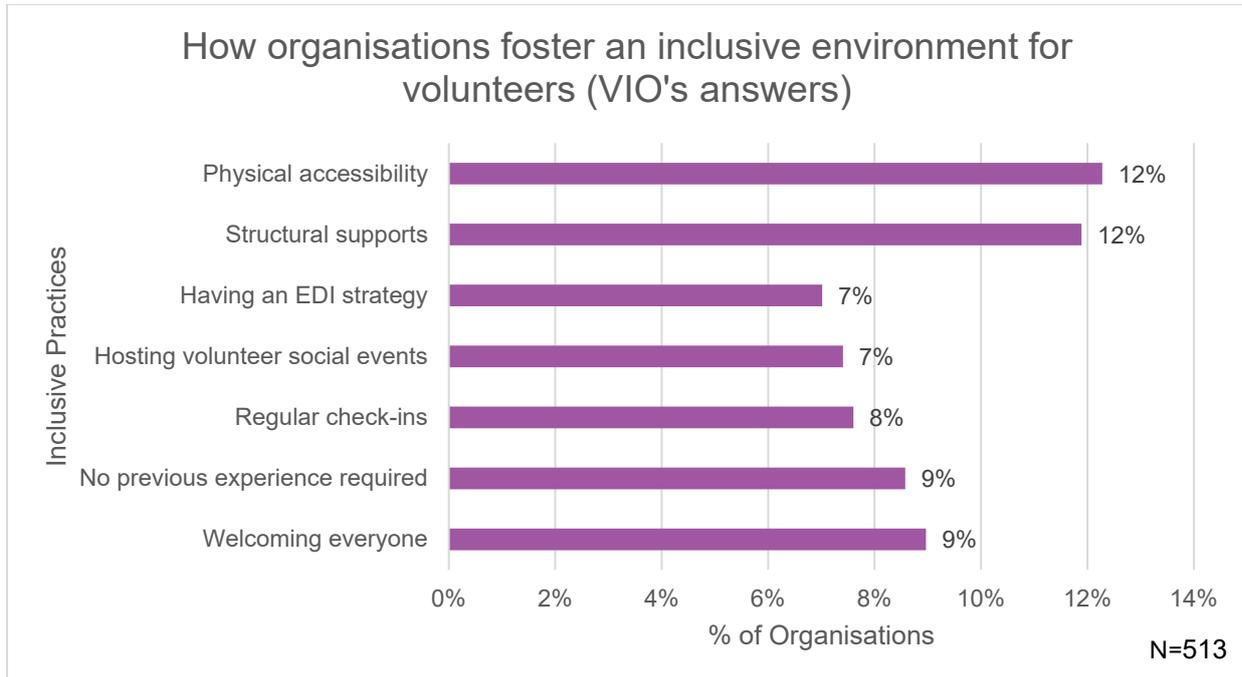
While 43% of volunteers report that they do not face any challenges while volunteering, among those who do encounter difficulties, financial challenges are the most commonly cited barrier (16% – Figure 26).

Figure 26 - Volunteering challenges reported by volunteers (Volunteers' answers)



While this is mirrored by organisations' responses (18%, Figure 23), practical support remains rare (Figure 27), with only 6% of surveyed volunteer-involving organisations covering travel expenses, 4% providing equipment, 2% offering food and none offering childcare.

Figure 27 - How organisations foster an inclusive environment for volunteers (VIO's answers)



The absence of childcare support alone excludes a significant demographic.

3.3.3 Limited accessibility infrastructure

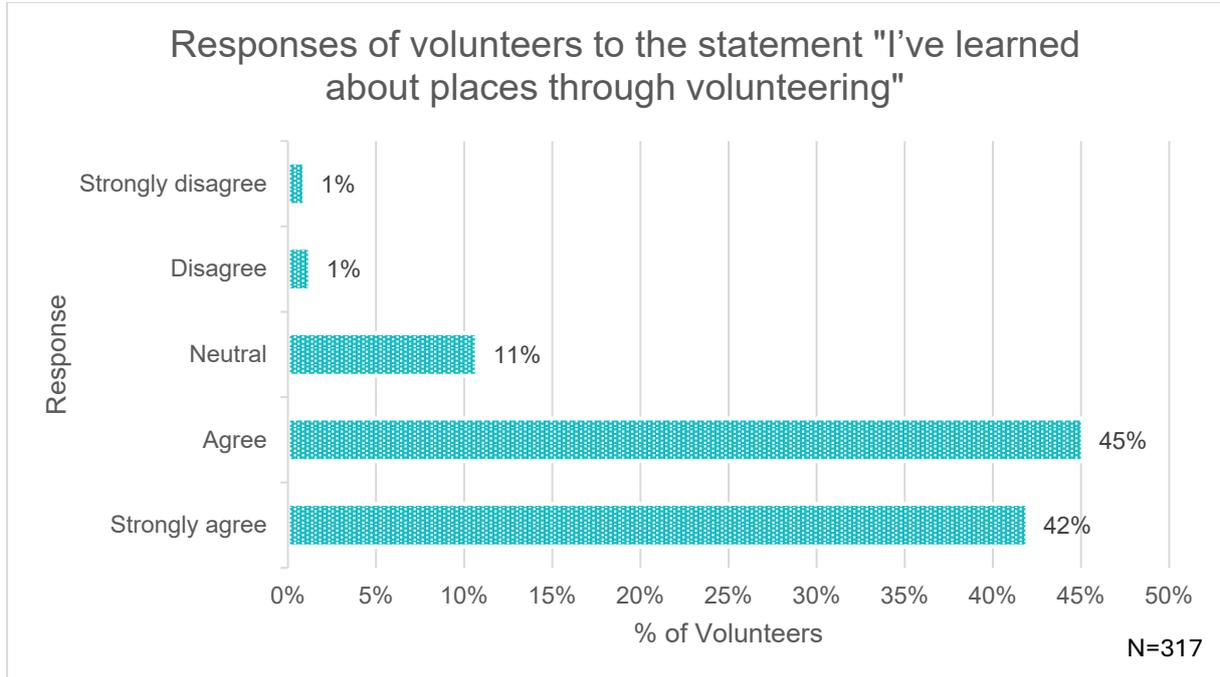
Accessibility provisions are sporadic:

- Gender-neutral toilets (4%)
- Quiet spaces (3%)
- Period products (3%)
- Prayer spaces (1%)
- Hearing loops (1%)

Most organisations focus on a welcoming culture rather than structural accessibility, reinforcing social inequalities in who can volunteer.

Heritage volunteering delivers substantial benefits for individual wellbeing and personal growth, even in the face of persistent barriers. Survey responses show that 87% (Figure 28) report a strong sense of learning about places through their involvement. These outcomes directly support national priorities, such as Scotland's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy and reinforce the imperative to make volunteering accessible to all. Ensuring equitable access means these positive impacts can be shared more widely across Scotland's diverse communities.

Figure 28 - Responses of volunteers to the statement "I've learned about places through volunteering"



3.4 Theme 4: Skills, Learning and Pathways into Heritage Careers

Learning is at the heart of volunteering. Many volunteers are motivated by the opportunity to develop new skills and stay engaged. As one respondent shared, “I would like to do more social skills/training because it's a bit lonely just sitting with paper all day”. Others are eager for hands-on experience, expressing interest in activities such as “drystone dyking and mountaineering, map and compass skills,” or “boatbuilding skills”.

This section explores the skills that volunteers gain, how well these skills align with the needs of the heritage sector and the extent to which volunteering serves as a pathway into heritage careers. In doing so, it highlights both the opportunities and the limitations of current volunteer experiences.

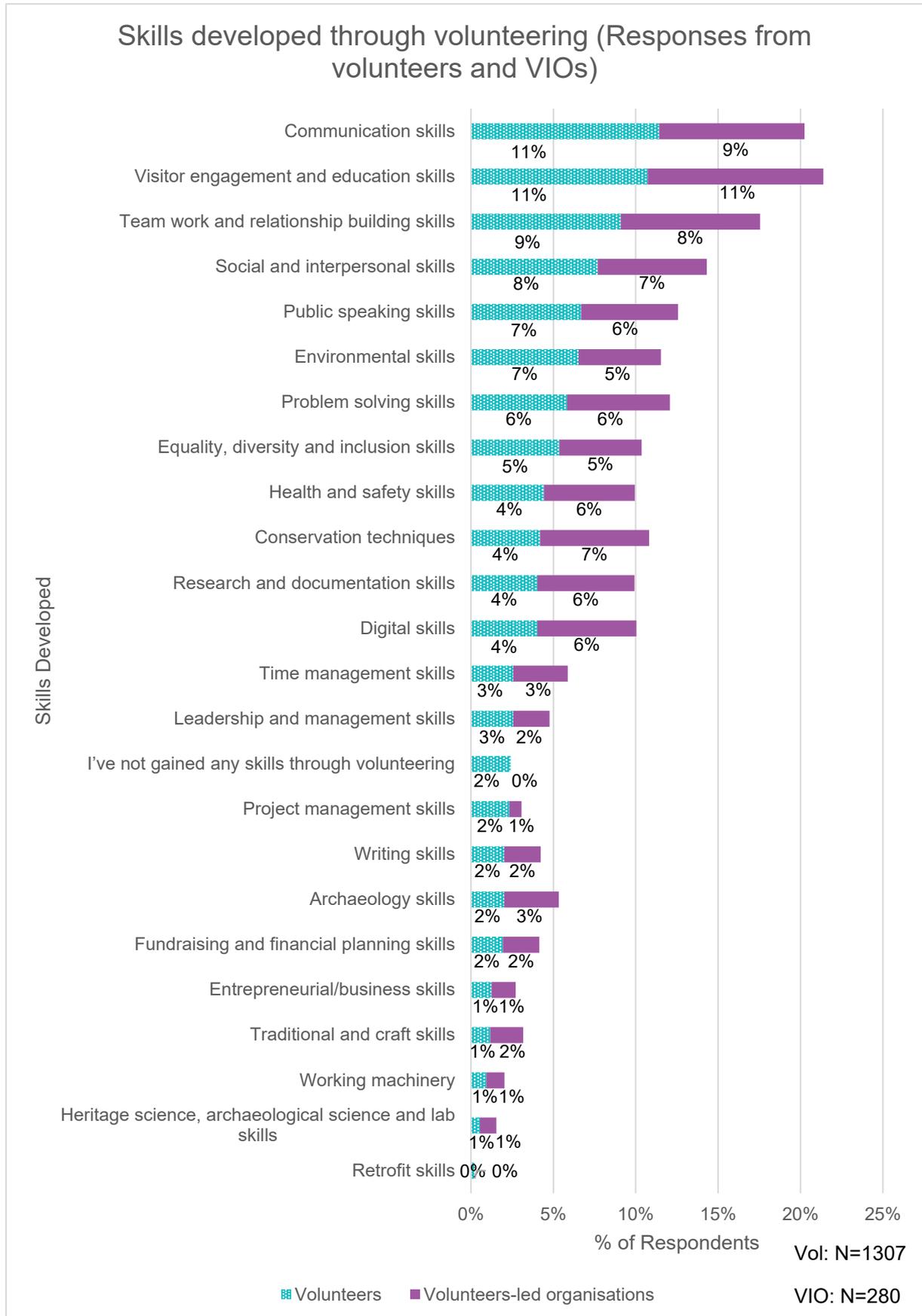
For some, volunteering is a way to stay mentally active and engaged: “There will always [be] other people who would learn what I have learned and I have enjoyed it as I like to learn and keep my brain healthy for my age (73)”. The desire for growth is universal, as another volunteer put it: “I'd like more training in all aspects of my role so that I'm fully confident and competent at my job”.

However, while heritage volunteering is a strong contributor to skill development, especially in soft skills, the skills acquired do not always match those most urgently needed by the sector. As a result, there remains a notable gap between the skills volunteers gain and the sector's workforce needs, as well as persistent barriers to career progression.

3.4.1 Volunteers gain skills, mostly soft skills

93% of organisations support skill development, and volunteers most commonly develop visitor engagement skills (11% for both VIOs and volunteers), communication skills (9% for VIOs and 11% for volunteers), teamwork skills (8% for VIOs and 9% for volunteers), and interpersonal skills (7% for VIOs and 8% for volunteers), which align well with employability strategies and community engagement aims but do not address heritage-specific skills shortages (Figure 29).

Figure 29 - Skills developed through volunteering (Responses from volunteers and VIOs)



3.4.2 A mismatch between skills gained and skills needed

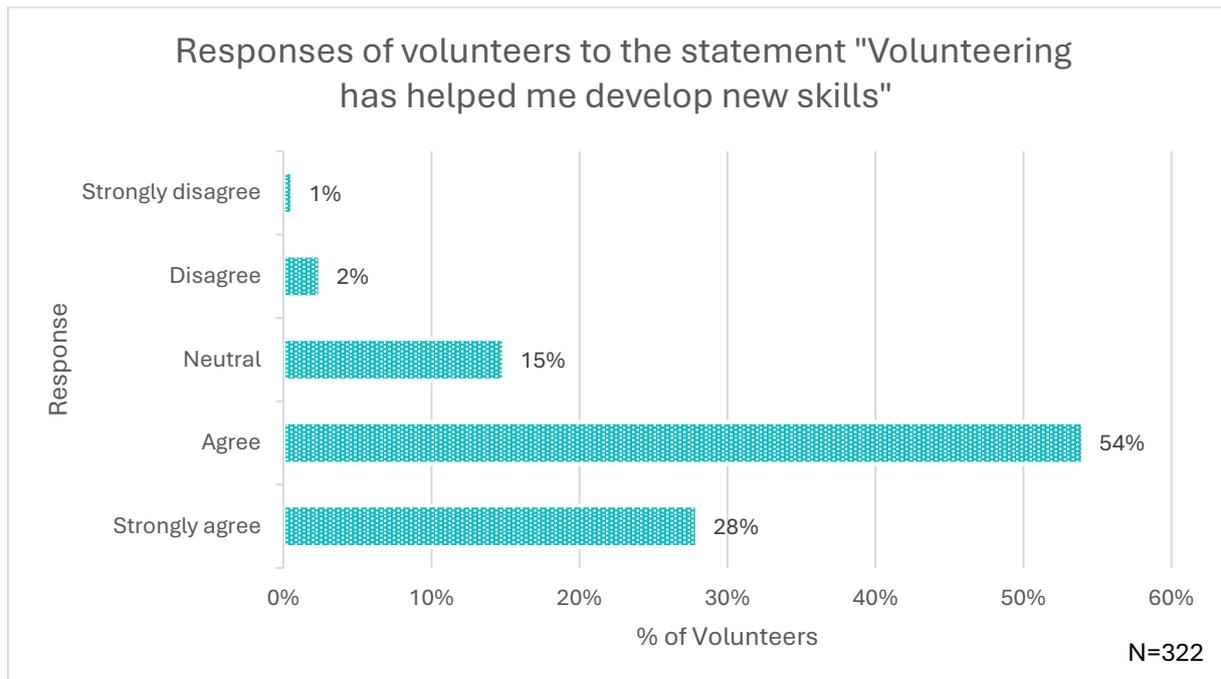
Sector-wide workforce analysis³ highlights urgent gaps in:

- traditional craft skills
- digital capability
- leadership and management.

Only 1–4% of volunteers report gaining these high-need skills, highlighting an opportunity for organisations to redesign roles and training.

On the other hand, the strong positive response to the ‘volunteering has helped me develop new skills’ question (Figure 30) confirms that heritage volunteering is a valuable pathway for skill developments and that those new skills are highly valued by volunteers.

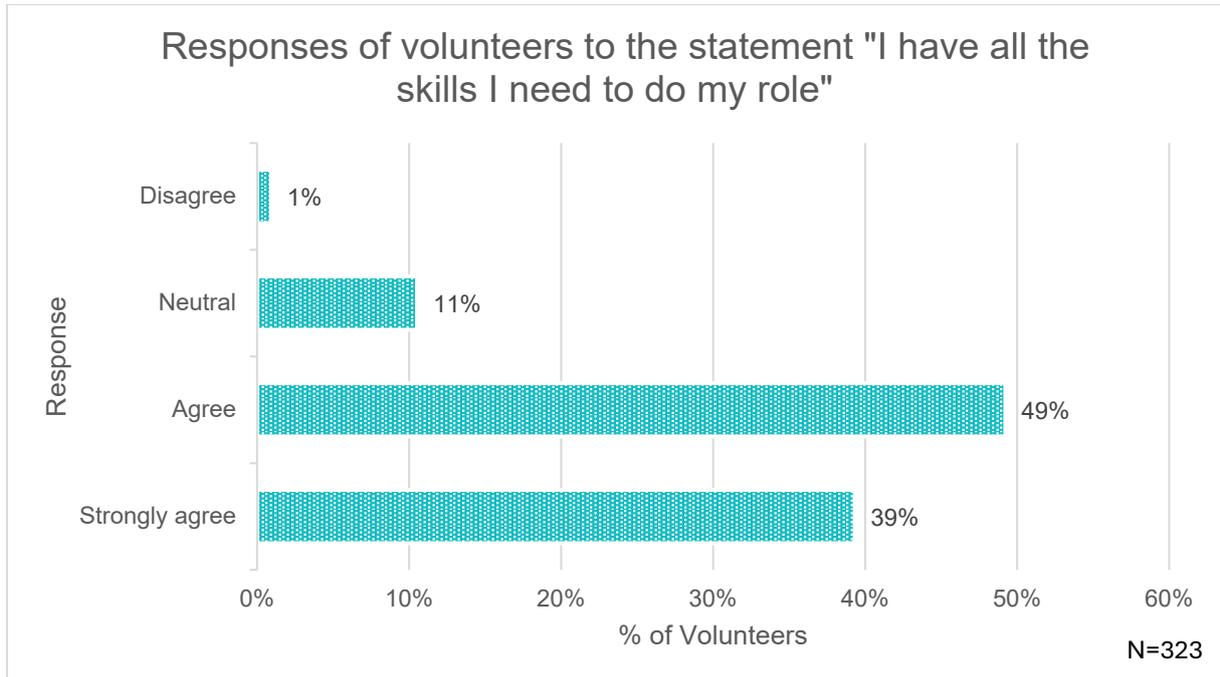
Figure 30 - Responses of volunteers to the statement "Volunteering has helped me develop new skills"



Moreover, the high agreement with the question ‘I have all the skills I need to do my role’ (Figure 31) confirms that current volunteer training and onboarding practices are effective, aligning with the desire to ensure volunteers are equipped to contribute effectively.

³ Source: [Skills Investment Plan](#)

Figure 31 - Responses of volunteers to the statement "I have all the skills I need to do my role"

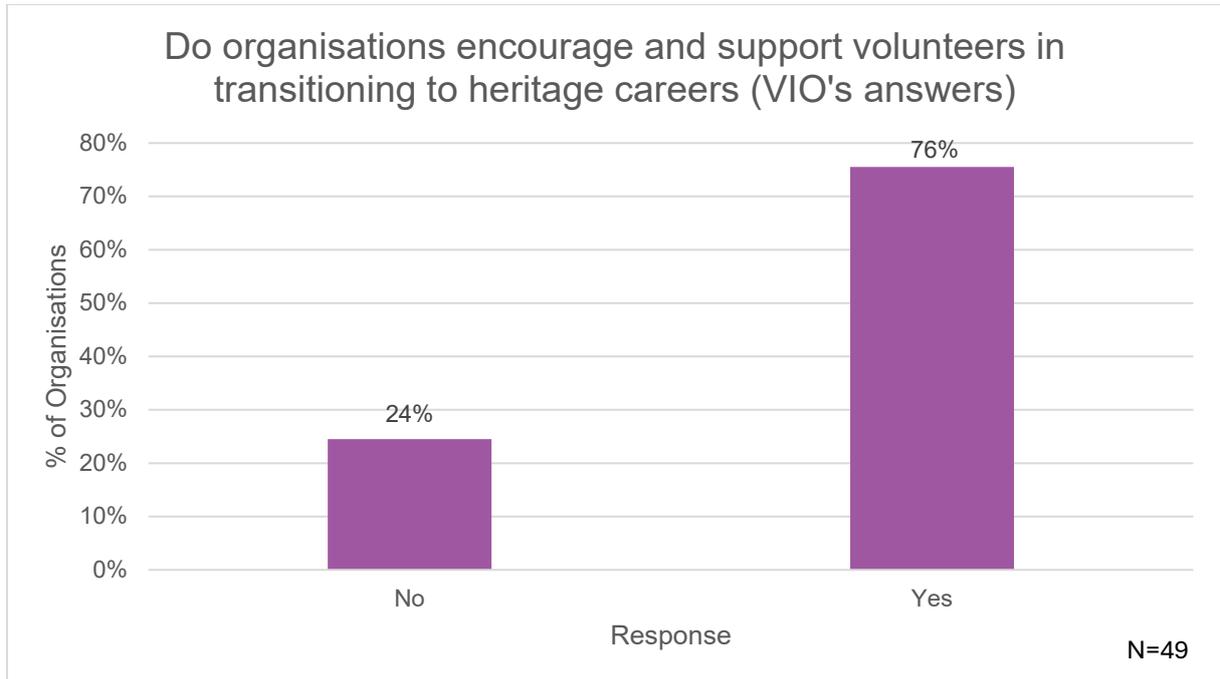


Beyond individual skill development, heritage volunteering supports community wealth building by developing local skills, strengthening community ownership and generating social value. These outcomes align strongly with Community Wealth Building principles, ensuring that the benefits of volunteering are felt not just by individuals, but by communities as a whole. Volunteers' efforts in heritage also contribute to local economic resilience and the sustainability of Scotland's historic environment.

3.4.3 Volunteering is a gateway into heritage careers, but barriers remain

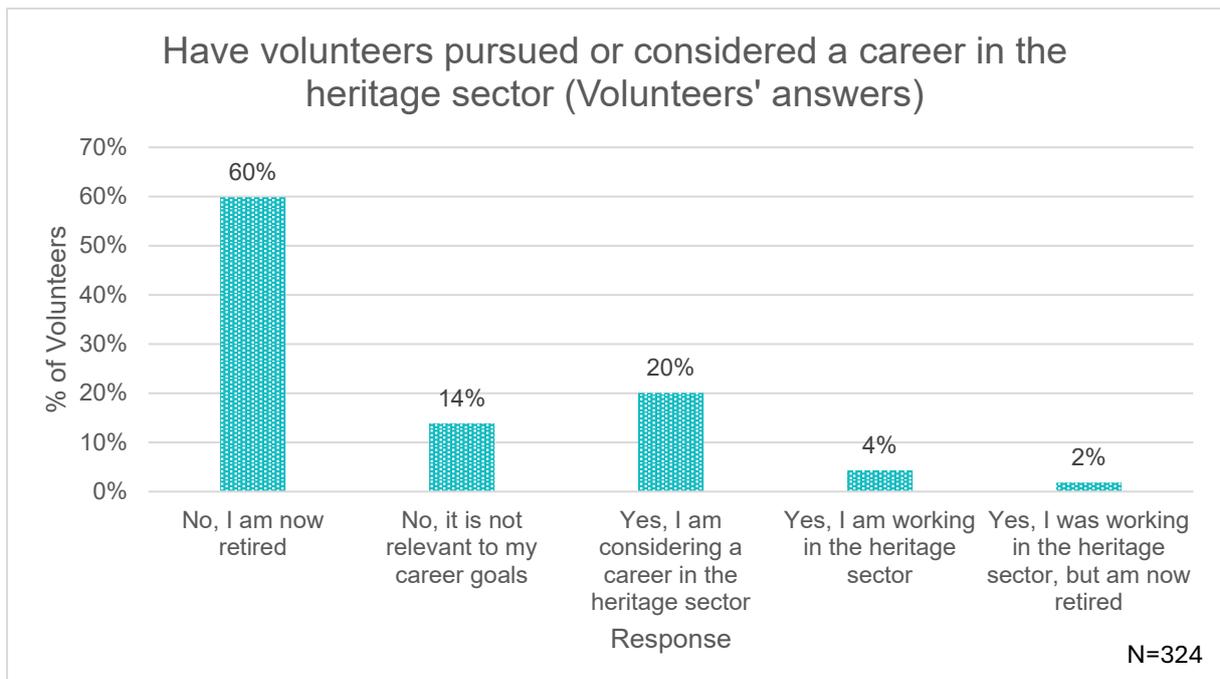
Survey data reveals a complex picture of how volunteering links to heritage careers. Most organisations (76%) report supporting volunteers' career ambitions, yet nearly a quarter do not and only a minority of volunteers surveyed are actually seeking heritage careers (Figure 32).

Figure 32 - Do organisations encourage and support volunteers in transitioning to heritage careers



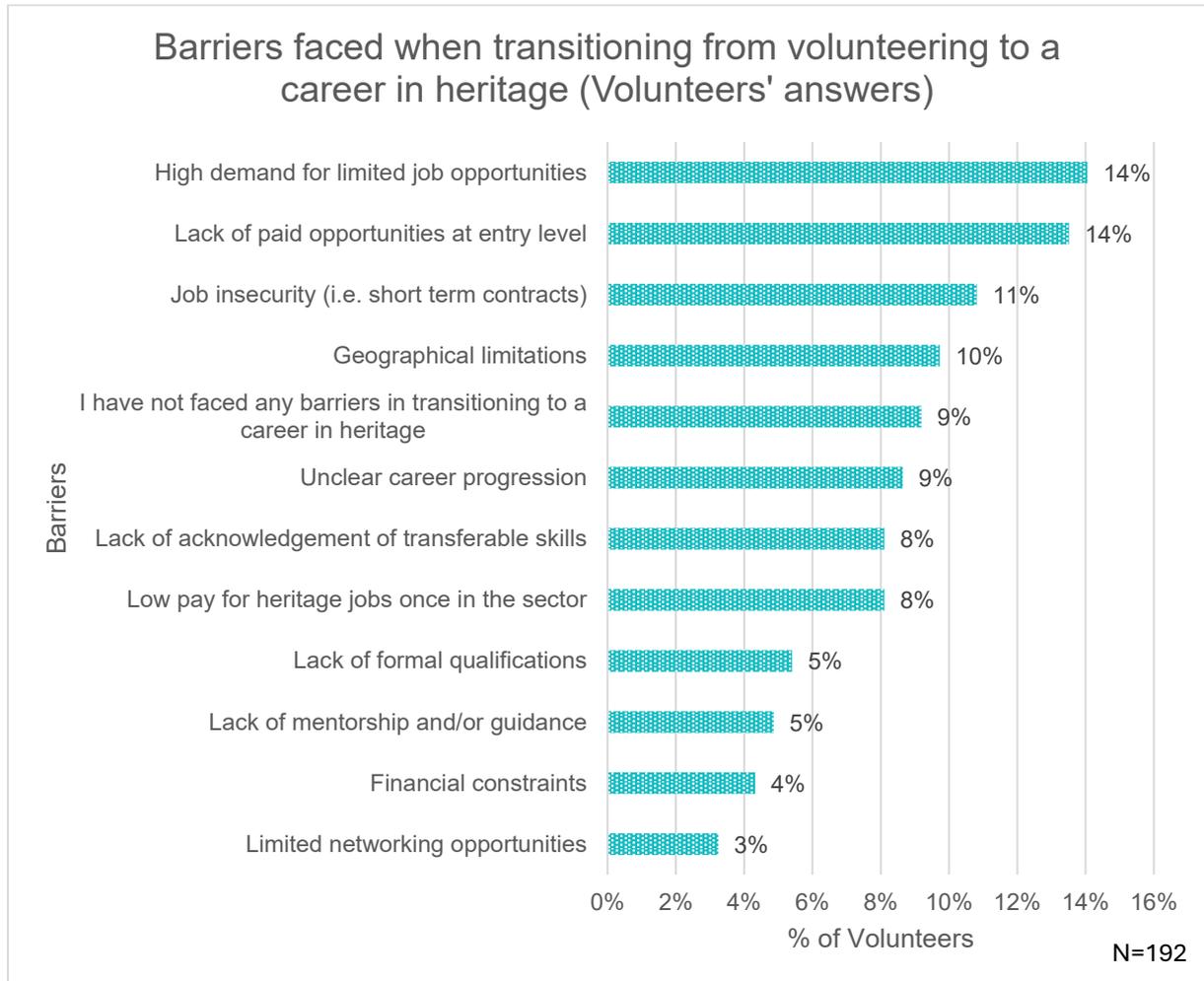
60% of volunteers are retired and just 20% are considering a career in the sector, highlighting that for many, volunteering is not a pathway to employment but a meaningful activity in its own right (Figure 33).

Figure 33 - Have volunteers pursued or considered a career in the heritage sector (Volunteers' answers)



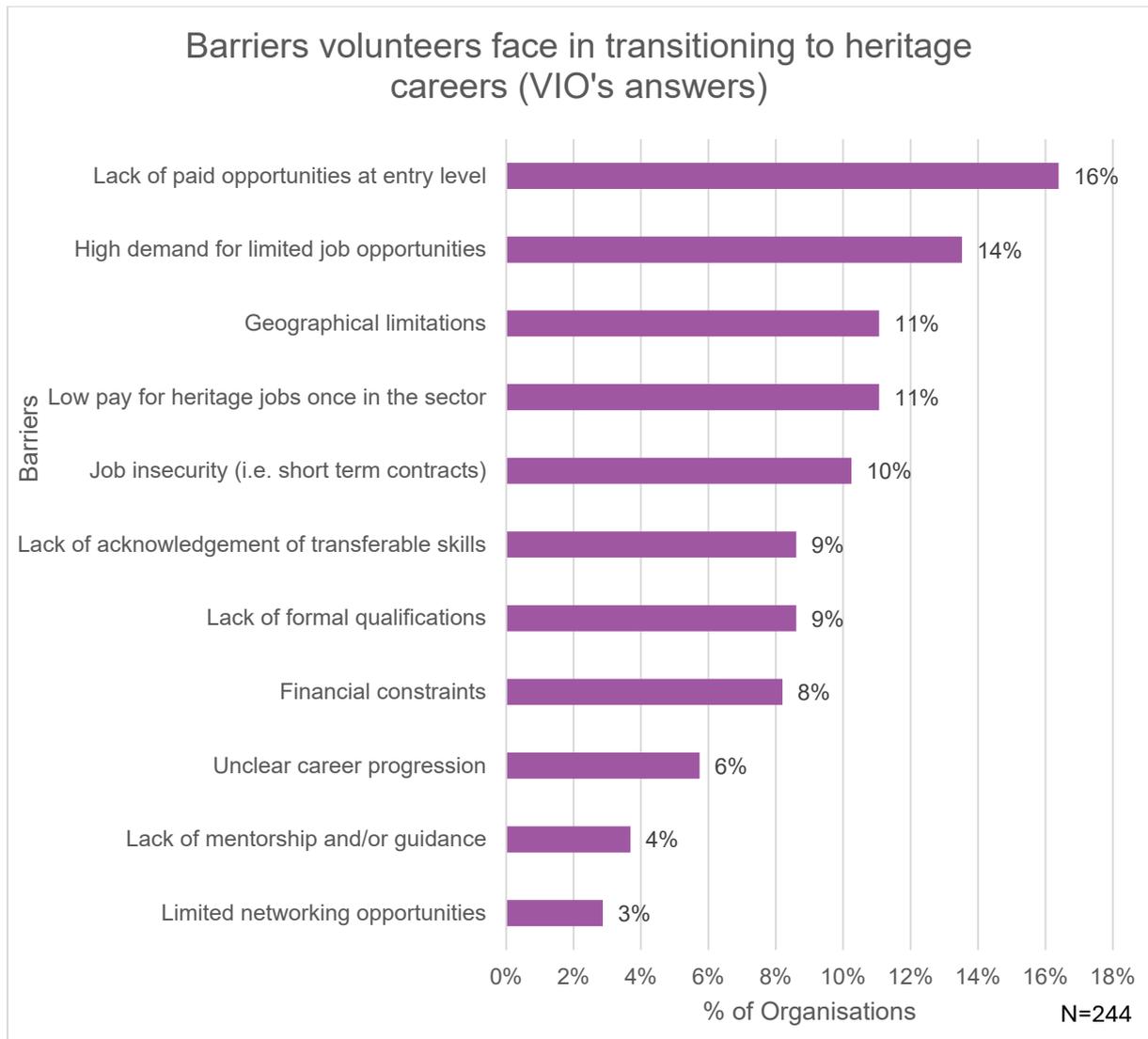
For those who do wish to transition into heritage careers, significant barriers remain. Both volunteers and organisations identify the lack of paid entry-level roles and high competition for jobs as the most common obstacles. Other challenges include job insecurity, low pay, geographical limitations, and unclear career progression. Only a small proportion of volunteers report facing no barriers at all (Figure 34).

Figure 34 - Barriers faced when transitioning from volunteering to a career in heritage (Volunteers' answers)



The alignment between volunteer and organisational perspectives underscores the structural nature of these challenges (Figure 35). While organisations are making efforts to support career pathways, the sector as a whole should look to address these persistent barriers, especially the scarcity of paid opportunities and the need for clearer progression routes, to make heritage careers more accessible to those who aspire to them.

Figure 35 - Barriers volunteers face in transitioning to heritage careers (VIO's answers)



For those seeking a career in heritage, the path is not always straightforward. “Have some relevant qualifications, but not been selected for posts despite being interviewed” shared one volunteer.

Visa requirements and lack of paid opportunities are recurring themes: “Visa sponsorship requirements; I'd consider other roles if it weren't for this”.

These stories highlight consideration of clearer pathways and better support for volunteers aspiring to professional roles.

3.4.4 Support for career progression is widespread but inconsistent

Three-quarters of organisations surveyed (76%) offer some form of support for volunteers such as references, shadowing, training or guidance (Figure 36).

However, only a minority use structured training plans, audits or career frameworks (Figure 36) and out of 16 organisations who were not able to provide support, 6 organisations (38%) lack the staff capacity to offer it (Figure 37).

Figure 36 - Do organisations actively encourage and support volunteers in transitioning to heritage careers (VIO's answers)

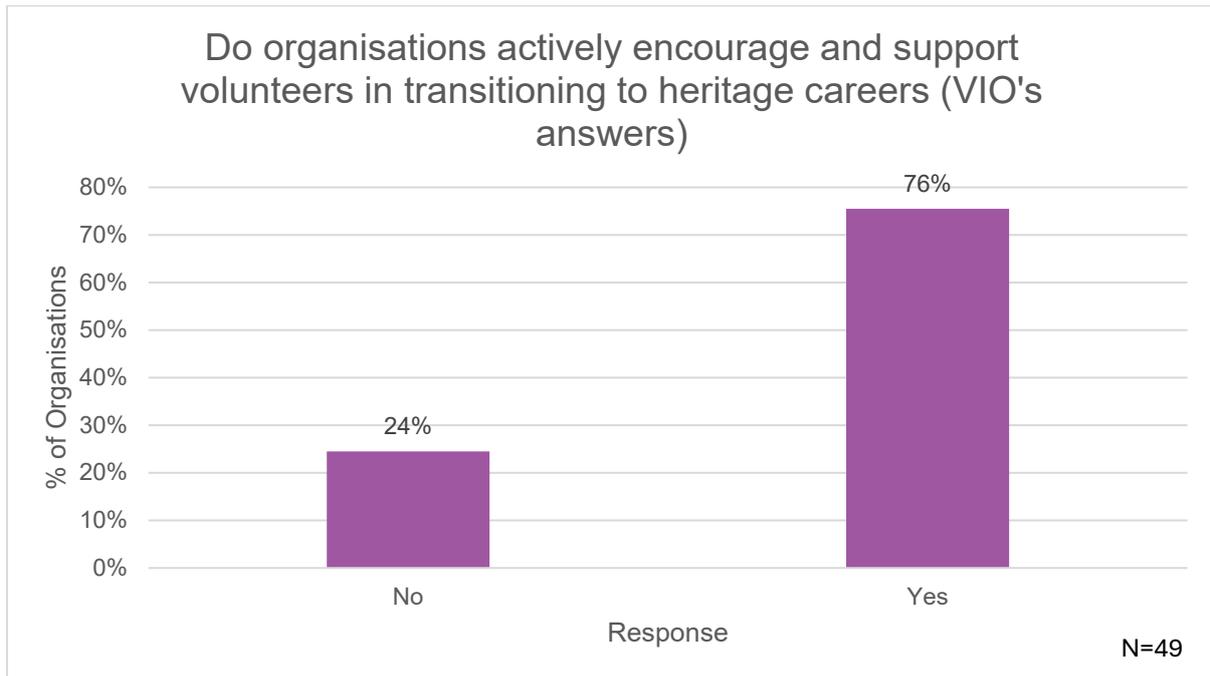


Figure 37 - How organisations encourage and support volunteers in transitioning to heritage careers (VIO's answers)

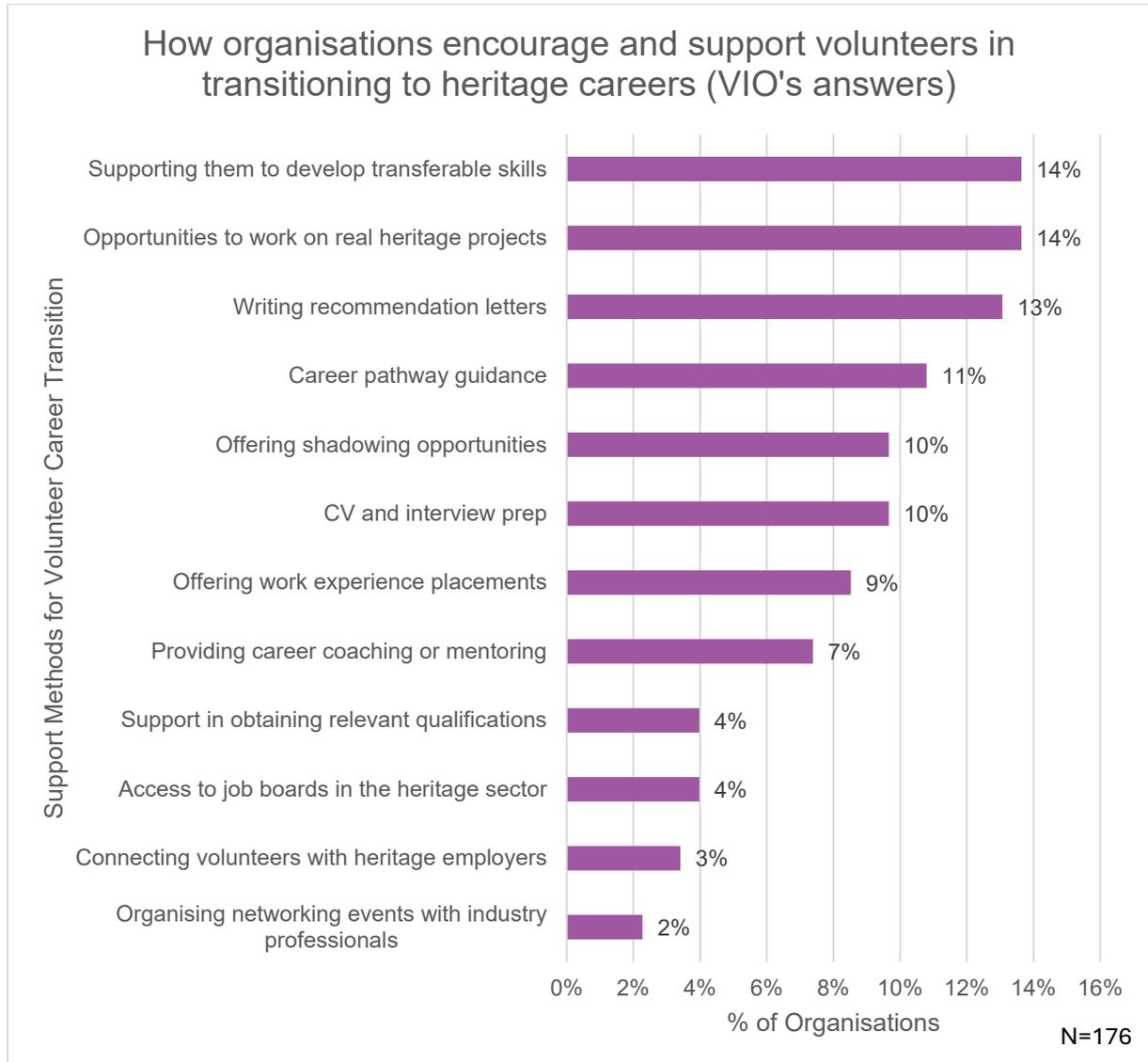
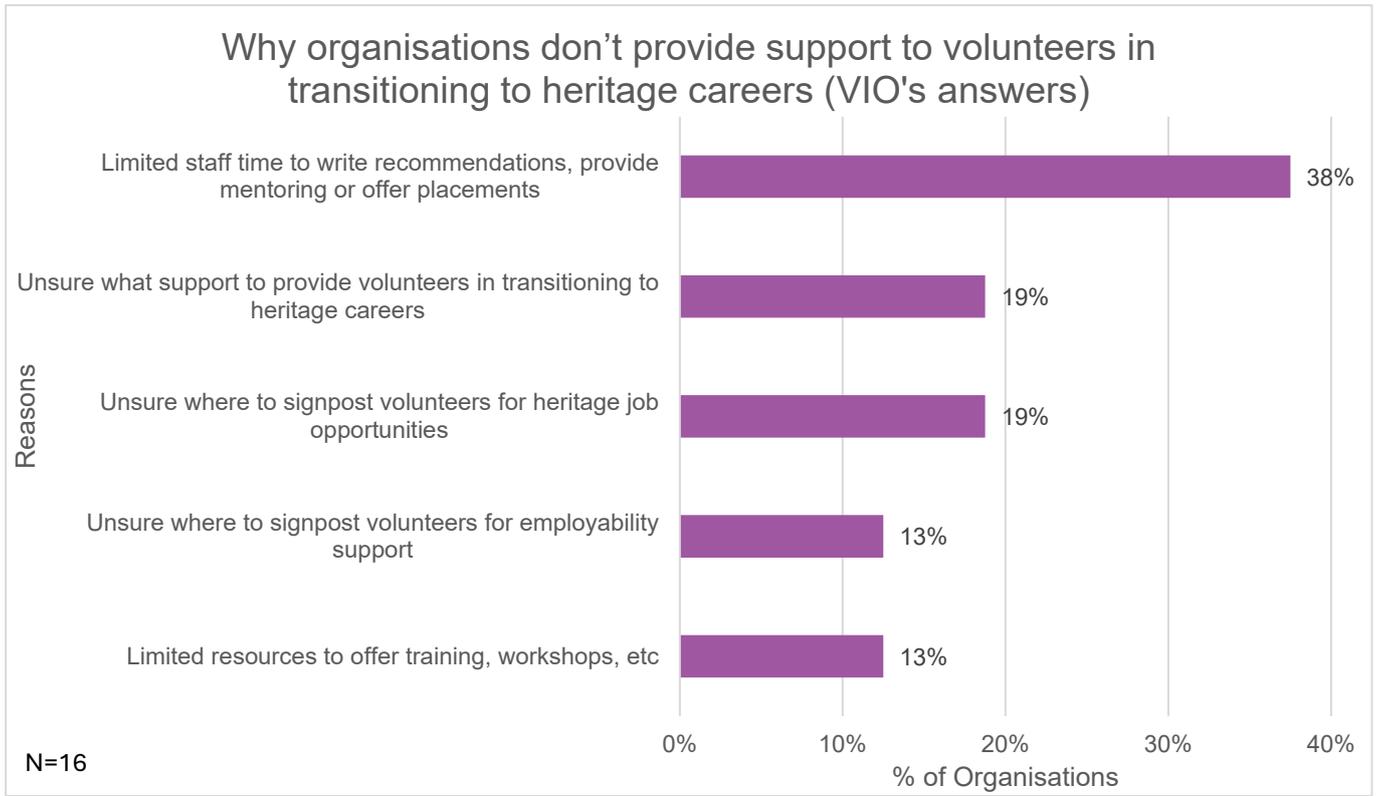


Figure 38 - Why organisations don't provide support to volunteers in transitioning to heritage careers (VIO's answers)



Conclusion

This survey indicates that heritage volunteering represents a significant asset to Scotland. It is a living expression of care, connection and commitment. Across every region, volunteers contribute to opening the doors, telling the stories, preserving the archives and protecting the landscapes that define our shared history. Their contribution is considerable, their impact measurable and their motivation rooted in connection and care.

This research suggests that, for respondents, heritage volunteering delivers significant social value. It improves wellbeing for individuals, strengthens communities, develops skills and sustains placemaking. For many respondents, volunteering is not simply a pastime, it is a pathway to belonging, confidence and purpose. At a national scale, volunteering is a quiet but powerful machine for community wealth, learning and inclusive growth.

Yet the same findings also reveal the pressures that surveyed volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations face. Many groups operate with limited staff and shrinking budgets. Volunteer management and succession planning are under-resourced and pathways into heritage careers remain uneven. While inclusion and accessibility are valued across the sector, they are not yet fully embedded by surveyed organisations. Too many potential volunteers such as younger people, carers, those on lower incomes, or with access needs still encounter practical or cultural barriers to participation.

Despite these challenges, the story of heritage volunteering in Scotland is ultimately a hopeful one. The data paints a picture of a sector rich in energy, passion and care. Surveyed organisations large and small are already innovating; creating flexible, remote and inclusive roles; investing in skills and confidence; and finding new ways to connect people with heritage. These examples prove that with the right support, interventions such as a funded volunteer coordinator, a travel bursary or a clear training pathway can transform both volunteer experiences and organisational resilience.

The opportunity now is to build on this foundation. By investing in volunteer engagement as a core part of heritage work, not an optional extra, Scotland can unlock the full potential of its people and places. Funders and policymakers can embed volunteering within wider strategies for wellbeing, skills and community wealth building. Heritage bodies can share best practice, champion diversity and ensure that every volunteer regardless of background or circumstance has the opportunity to contribute meaningfully.

Heritage volunteering is not just about preserving the past; it is about shaping the future. The people who give their time, energy and expertise to Scotland's heritage are helping to create a more connected, confident and inclusive country. With

| Our Past Our Future

collective action and sustained investment, we can ensure that heritage volunteering continues to thrive: inclusive, resilient and representative of Scotland.



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Historic Environment Scotland
Longmore House
Salisbury Place
Edinburgh
EH9 1SH
+44 (0) 131 668 8600
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