



# Heritage volunteering in Scotland

Research summary report

**Our Past,  
Our Future**

The Strategy for Scotland's  
Historic Environment



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# 1. Introduction

Volunteer-involving heritage organisations<sup>1</sup> in Scotland are navigating a shifting landscape. Formal volunteering levels<sup>2</sup> 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.



**MAKE YOUR MARK**  
— IN VOLUNTEERING —



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.



# Executive Summary

**1.** Volunteers are critical to the heritage sector, and heritage volunteering supports individual wellbeing and community development.



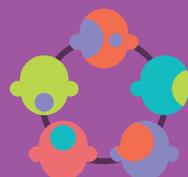
**2.** Heritage volunteering supports people to develop valuable skills, but not the skills most needed by the sector.



**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.



**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.

## 2. **Background**

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.

“ Without volunteers, many heritage sites would not be able to continue.”

“ Volunteering has helped me find a sense of purpose and balance in my life.”

### 3.

# Key findings



## 1. Volunteers are critical to the heritage sector, and heritage volunteering supports individual wellbeing and community development.

Volunteers do a range of tasks, including governance, conservation, digital, research, visitor engagement, collections and more. Organisations surveyed reported at least 76,548 volunteer hours in 2024, though the true total is higher as many respondents (43%) do not track hours. Almost a quarter of responding organisations were volunteer-run, showcasing volunteers' role in caring for and celebrating local heritage.

Heritage volunteering delivers wide-ranging benefits, aligning with national and sectoral wellbeing, skills and placemaking priorities. Most volunteers surveyed said volunteering improved their wellbeing (91%), supported skills development (82%) and helped them learn about new places (87%). This suggests that heritage volunteering contributes meaningfully to Scotland's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, Scotland's Future Skills Action Plan and the National Planning Framework 4. For the heritage sector, inclusive volunteering contributes to Our Past, Our Future, Scotland's Museums and Galleries Strategy 2023 - 2030 and Scotland's Biodiversity Strategy 2022 - 2045.

### Benefits of heritage volunteering according to volunteers



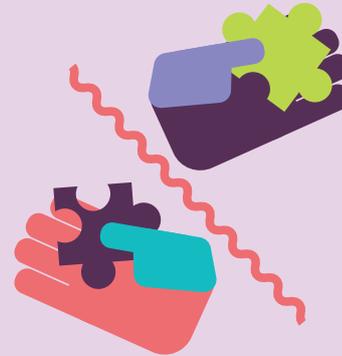
“ [It's] good to meet other volunteers and visitors during the work I do and it is a great way to have time in a beautiful place.”



## 2. Heritage volunteering supports people to develop valuable skills, but not the skills most needed by the sector.

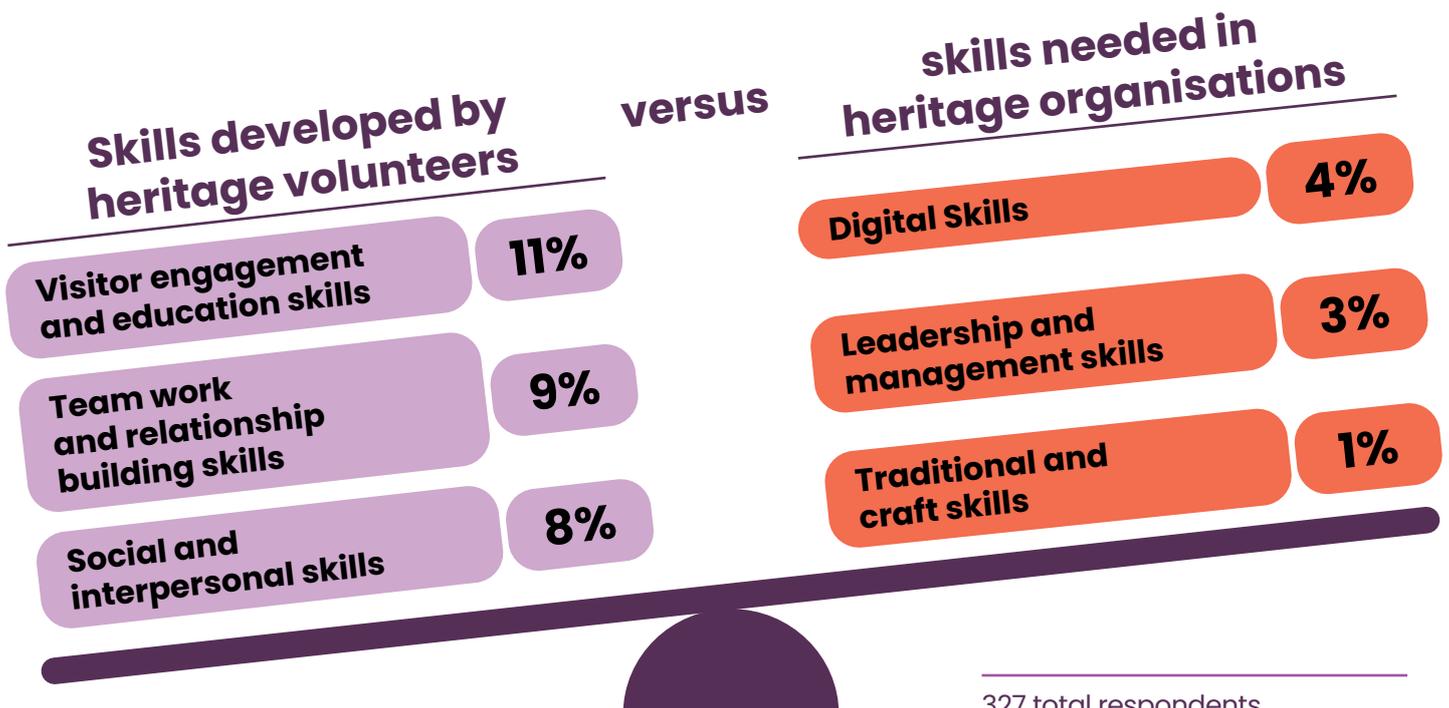
Surveyed volunteers primarily developed visitor engagement and education (11%), communication (11%), teamwork (9%) and interpersonal (8%) skills. Encouragingly, 68% of surveyed volunteers said volunteering helped them develop desired skills. However, the Skills Investment Plan predicts future skills gaps in traditional, leadership and management and digital skills, which few volunteers reported gaining (1-4%).

A fifth of respondents viewed volunteering as a route to heritage employment, saying



it provided work experience (16%) and transferable skills (15%). However, barriers include limited paid opportunities, job insecurity and unclear career pathways. Among organisations not supporting volunteer progression, 38% cited lack of capacity to provide support like references or mentoring.

“ [My] volunteering role has really helped build my confidence and improve my communication skills with people.”



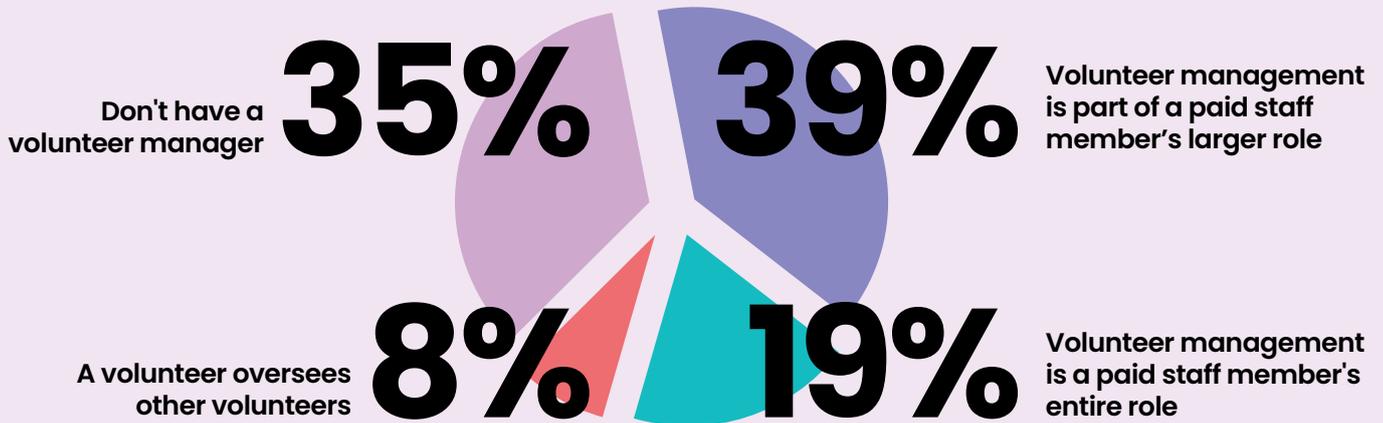
327 total respondents



### **3. Volunteer engagement is underfunded and understaffed.**

#### **Does your organisation have a Volunteer Manager?**

51 total respondents

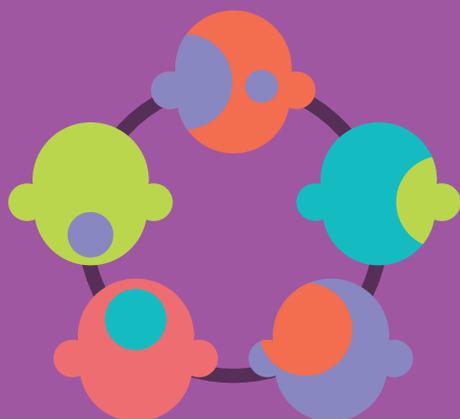


Of organisations surveyed, 35% have no volunteer manager, 39% include it within wider roles and only 18% employ someone dedicated to volunteer engagement. This lack of staff limits programme success. Volunteer retention is a problem for 57% of surveyed organisations and 69% lacked succession plans, risking the loss of volunteers' knowledge and skills.

Despite these challenges, volunteer respondents were split between those new to heritage volunteering and those who have been involved for over 10 years. High satisfaction (91%) helps retain long-term volunteers, while new recruits suggest a strong volunteer pipeline.

**“ The person I was volunteering with was always too busy working their full time job to really focus on volunteers and how our needs could be met.”**





“ [There’s a] great diversity of lived experience but not a diverse community of volunteers...”



#### 4. Most respondent volunteers’ access needs are met, but more needs to be done to include marginalised people.

Almost three-quarters of respondents reported that their access needs were met. As respondents to the survey were predominantly white, female, non-disabled, heterosexual, degree-holders and retired, the evidence suggests that heritage organisations are creating inclusive environments for these groups. This may be due to 45% of respondents volunteering at a high intensity (16+ hours/month), which excludes many in or looking for work, with caring or multiple responsibilities and/or with access needs. Volunteer managers surveyed were from similar demographics, which may discourage a more diverse range of volunteers from applying.

Organisations seeking to diversify participation focus on creating welcoming environments (9%) and not requiring experience (9%). Few covered travel (6%), equipment (4%) and childcare (0%) expenses, and accessibility provisions such as gender neutral toilets (4%), quiet spaces (3%), period products (3%), prayer space (1%) and hearing loops (1%) were also limited.



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

Volunteers' motivations extend beyond heritage. Although 16% note "a passion for heritage", the most popular motivation highlighted by respondents was "to make a difference" (21%), followed by "to give back to my community" (11%) and "to be part of a community" (11%). Organisational respondents may overestimate volunteers' interest in the sector, with 70% believing their volunteers seek heritage careers, compared with 20% of volunteer respondents themselves.

### What is the main motivation for volunteering in the heritage sector?

307 total respondents



Volunteers and organisations also perceive different barriers to volunteering. Volunteers highlighted financial pressures (16%) as the main challenge, whereas only 11% of organisations recognised this. Organisations were more likely to cite pressure on people's time (15%) compared with 10% of volunteers. Volunteers (7%) also reported limited development opportunities, despite 70% of responding organisations offering free resources or training.



## 4. Actionable insights

### Recommendations for heritage organisations

#### Recognise and invest in volunteers.

- » Embed volunteer engagement as a core function.
- » Track volunteer contributions to demonstrate impact.
- » Improve communication to understand volunteer needs and motivations, highlighting benefits beyond heritage interest.
- » Position heritage volunteering as a contributor to national and sectoral wellbeing, skills and placemaking strategies.

#### Provide more flexibility and support for volunteers.

- » Allocate dedicated time and resources for volunteer engagement.
- » Offer flexible, lower-intensity opportunities (short-term, remote, microvolunteering).
- » Implement succession planning and knowledge sharing systems.

#### Embed equity and inclusion on a systemic level.

- » Cover expenses and provide equipment, training, childcare and other access provisions.
- » Diversify volunteer management and leadership.
- » Develop skills and career pathways.
- » Redesign roles to help volunteers develop sector-needed skills (traditional, digital, leadership).
- » Provide mentoring and peer support and signpost to training and job opportunities.

## Recommendations for **sector support bodies** (infrastructure organisations, umbrella bodies and networks such as Make Your Mark)

### **Provide guidance and best practice.**

- » Develop and/or signpost resources for volunteer engagement, with succession planning as a priority area.
- » Support organisations in implementing inclusion practices, including expenses, access provisions and flexible opportunities.
- » Share case studies of successful inclusive volunteering initiatives.

### **Enable networking and knowledge sharing.**

- » Organise sector-wide events, forums and online platforms to foster collaboration amongst heritage volunteer organisers.

### **Facilitate skills development and career pathways.**

- » Provide case studies and resources to help organisations design volunteer roles that address sector skills gaps.
- » Offer sector-wide mentoring programmes and peer networks to help volunteers progress into paid roles.

### **Support evidence collection and impact tracking.**

- » Provide tools and guidance for organisations to capture volunteer impact.
- » Aggregate sector-wide data to highlight economic and social impacts of heritage volunteering, as well as opportunities for development.

## **Recommendations for funders**

### **Fund volunteer infrastructure.**

- » Ensure that grants include provision for volunteer engagement, training and support, especially for small and medium organisations.

### **Support inclusive volunteering practices.**

- » Fund measures to reduce volunteer barriers, including travel, childcare, equipment and other access provisions.
- » Encourage systemic approaches to inclusion (offering flexible opportunities, ensuring a diverse range of people are represented in leadership roles) rather than surface-level measures (welcoming everyone).

### **Strengthen evidence and accountability.**

- » Require or incentivise systematic tracking of volunteer contributions and experiences.

### **Promote skills and career development.**

- » Fund programmes that help volunteers gain needed skills (traditional, leadership, digital).
- » Fund initiatives that provide mentoring, peer support and pathways into heritage employment.

# Our Past, Our Future

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