

VALUE OF VOLUNTEERING IN CITIZENS ADVICE RESEARCH SUMMARY

MAY 2024



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Key points

- The value of Citizens Advice volunteering is substantial - for the Citizens Advice network and service, for communities and for volunteers.
- Volunteers are key to the delivery of services for the majority of local offices involved in the research. Citizens Advice wouldn't be able to help as many people without volunteers.
- Volunteering brings a range of benefits for volunteers themselves and most have a highly positive experience.
- Volunteering generates value to volunteers themselves, to local offices and to other key stakeholders (such as the NHS and economy) worth at least £100 million in 2024.
- The Citizens Advice network is experiencing challenges in volunteer recruitment, retention and diversity, meaning there is much more potential value that is not being realised.
- Some local offices are evolving or looking to develop the ways they involve and engage volunteers and there are positive examples from the network that they can draw on.
- This project has delivered a Volunteering Models and Options Toolkit (VMOT) including a 'Cost Calculator' that local offices can use to make decisions on developing volunteering. This is a new evidence-based way of understanding and tackling challenges and could be of wider value to the voluntary and advice sectors.
- The research points to the importance of five key principles for enhancing or developing volunteering across the Citizens Advice network - volunteering is most effective when it is balanced, impactful, inclusive, supported and valued.
- Volunteering at Citizens Advice requires ongoing attention and resources at the national, regional and local levels to support the sustainability of services and ensure volunteering can play its full part in delivering Citizens Advice missions going forwards.

About this research

This briefing summarises findings from research exploring the value of volunteering in Citizens Advice. This work is part of the wider Volunteering Transformation Programme which aims to help Citizens Advice better understand and address the challenges and opportunities within volunteering so its contribution can develop to its full potential.

The research, undertaken by the [Centre for Charity Effectiveness](#) at Bayes Business School and [Sonnet Advisory and Impact](#), included 13 'deep dive' case studies, interviews and workshops with local Citizens Advice staff (49 participants) and volunteers (33 participants), interviews with external stakeholders (7) and surveys of volunteers (1,412 respondents from 179 different local offices) and Chief Officers (98 respondents). The scope of the research included current volunteers and volunteering practice in local Citizens Advice offices.

For reasons of scale and complexity, the research did not include trustees or volunteers within the national organisation, including in the Witness Service. Practical guidance and tools for local Citizens Advice offices have been developed from the research. Citizens Advice colleagues can access these on the 'value of volunteering' pages on the Citizens Advice intranet.

FINDINGS

The need for valuing volunteering in Citizens Advice

Citizens Advice involves around 10,000 volunteers (not including trustees, or national Witness Service volunteers) across the network of 240+ independent local Citizens Advice charities. Involved in a range of roles including information and advice giving, service support, media and fundraising, volunteers are at the heart of how Citizens Advice delivers services to local communities.

It is crucial to value volunteering to help evidence, demonstrate and celebrate the contribution of volunteers to Citizens Advice and for the sustainability of local office services. This is more important now than ever given increasing demands on Citizens Advice services and the challenges around volunteering. Like many other charities, Citizens Advice is experiencing issues with the recruitment and retention of volunteers, as well as attracting volunteers with a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences¹.

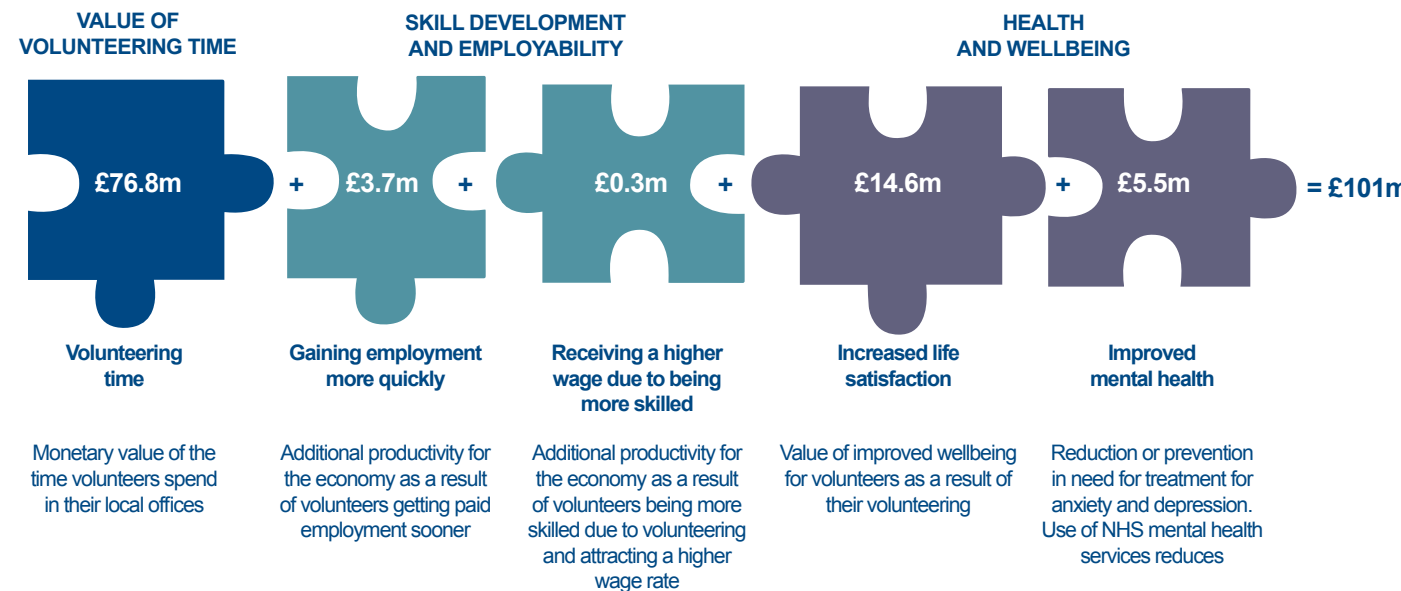
To provide an up-to-date picture of the value of volunteering and insights to help local Citizens Advice offices develop the ways they involve and engage volunteers, this research uses economic evaluation techniques and explores the views and experiences of current volunteers, local Citizens Advice staff and external stakeholders. It should, however, be highlighted that those with more positive experiences of volunteering were more likely to get involved in this research and readers of this briefing should keep in mind this limitation.

Putting a value on what volunteering brings

This research has valued the difference that Citizens Advice volunteering makes to volunteers, local offices and other key stakeholders (such as the NHS and economy) in the following three arenas:

- volunteering time;
- skills development and employability; and
- the health and wellbeing of volunteers.

The total value of this in 2024 is estimated to be at least £100 million. Details of how this value has been calculated is provided below and also in the project technical report (<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/information/impact-of-how-we-work/>).





Tool for local Citizens Advice offices: Value of Volunteering Calculator and Instructions

The value of volunteering calculator enables local offices to value the contributions of their volunteers. The value generated by the calculator is the monetary value of improved socio-economic outcomes as a result of volunteering (the outcomes calculated are described on page 2).

This can be used by national and local Citizens Advice to articulate the value of their volunteering to external stakeholders, including funders, partners, potential volunteers and wider community.

Citizens Advice colleagues can access the calculator and instructions on the 'value of volunteering' pages on the Citizens Advice intranet.

The difference Citizens Advice volunteering makes to volunteers

We found from our research that volunteering with Citizens Advice made a difference to volunteers’:

- Personal development and resilience;
- Skills and employability;
- Health and wellbeing; and
- Community connections and engagement.

PERSONAL
DEVELOPMENT
AND RESILIENCE

1 in 2 increased their confidence through volunteering

1 in 2 felt better equipped to deal with issues that arise in their own lives

9 in 10 developed a wider understanding of social issues

“it really helped myself, my personal and my professional growth, you know, gaining back the confidence and reducing my anxiety.” (Volunteer)

“I think I’ve got a better understanding of how difficult it is out there for some people and how lucky I am that’s never been a part of my life.” (Volunteer)

SKILLS AND
EMPLOYABILITY

80%

I have gained transferable skills from volunteering

53%

I feel that I have enhanced my career prospects through volunteering

67%

Volunteering has provided me with useful work experience

61%

I feel that I have enhanced my employability through volunteering

“Getting back to the workplace, it’s a scary thought. So doing something like this is a way of doing something professional and being back in the office... it’s just that kind of stepping out there again.” (Volunteer)

Respondents to this question included those who identified as not ‘retired’ or ‘unable to work’ (290 volunteer respondents)

HEALTH
AND WELLBEING

9 in 10 increased their sense of fulfilment from helping others

4 in 5 increased their sense of purpose through volunteering

2 in 5 continue volunteering because it improves their mental health & wellbeing

“I think it’s been enormously satisfying. In the sense that I know that I’m making a positive contribution. And I know that I’m giving something back.” (Volunteer)

“I think having a sense of purpose, and understanding that I’m helping has been important to me.” (Volunteer)



The data presented above is based on the survey responses of 1412 volunteers from across 179 local offices

The difference volunteers make to Citizens Advice

Chief Officers and other local office staff highlighted the positive contribution volunteers make to Citizens Advice in the following areas:

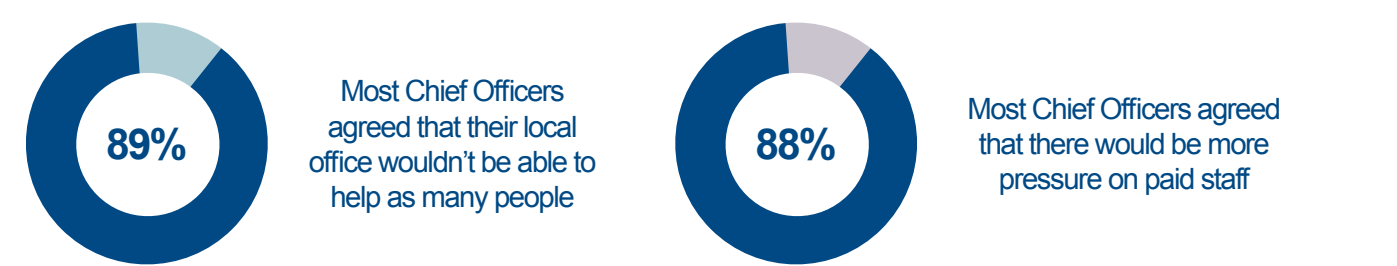
Increased capacity and sustainability

All but one of the 98 local offices responding to the Chief Officers survey said they involved volunteers and 94% agreed they increased overall capacity. Some local offices were dependent on volunteers to sustain their operations:

"Without our volunteers we would not be running." (Staff)

"We probably do three times more with volunteers than we would through just paid staff." (Staff)

Thinking about how their local office would run if they didn't involve volunteers:



While volunteers can help alleviate pressure on paid staff, nearly three quarters (72%) of Chief Officers said that uncertainty around the resources available from week to week is a negative consequence of reliance on volunteering. That said, among those volunteers participating in this research there was a high level of commitment: their volunteering was typically regular and routine with often long-standing involvement and attendance. This suggests there may be a gap between perceptions of lack of reliability and stability and the reality of the way in which the volunteer model actually operates.

Volunteers are an important source of potential recruits for paid staff roles as they have already developed the relevant skills and experience that are crucial for the delivery of services and projects. Some local offices say that these skills and experience are difficult to recruit for otherwise. All but one Chief Officers reported having staff members who were once volunteers. For nearly two in five local offices, over two fifths of staff were former volunteers.

Increased diversity and connection with communities

Volunteers were seen to bring diverse backgrounds and experiences to local offices and services:

7 in 10

Chief Officers said volunteering increases diversity in their local office team

8 in 10

Chief Officers said volunteering develops connections between people from different backgrounds or with diverse characteristics

9 in 10

said that volunteers bring skills, life experiences and knowledge the local office would otherwise not have access to

2 in 3

Chief Officers said that volunteers make services more relevant and connected to the community

"Volunteers give us a greater breadth ... just with a smaller paid staff team we couldn't possibly deliver. So it means we can, for example, within our staff team cover all the background and language skills that are sometimes needed." (Staff)

"It's about getting different people in from different walks of life, different ethnicities, different cultural backgrounds, different ages, you know ... and people that wouldn't necessarily want to work for us." (Staff)

These reflections on how volunteers help to bring more diversity are interesting given that the volunteer survey findings show the demographic diversity of the Citizens Advice volunteer base is limited (see page 7).

Local offices and external stakeholders highlighted how volunteers help represent communities, have an understanding of local issues and an ability to relate to members of their community:

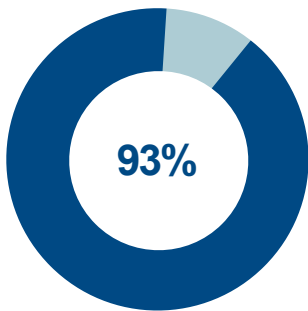
"... the volunteers reflecting the needs of the community, I guess, is something that they do really well ... in terms of bringing that true understanding [of] what's going on out there." (External stakeholder)

While recognising the difference that volunteers make, stakeholders also pointed to the vital role of paid staff and the value they bring to the Citizens Advice network and wider community. Staff were highlighted as key to enabling volunteer value and impact, including through managing their involvement, training and supporting volunteers and reviewing their work.

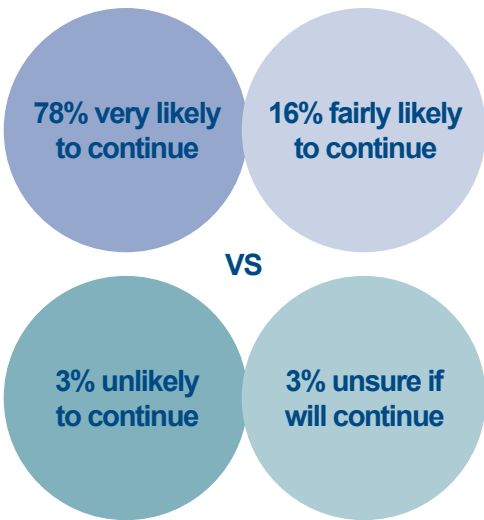
A positive experience for volunteers

Current volunteers were, in the most part, highly positive about their experiences with Citizens Advice.

9 in 10 volunteer respondents would recommend Citizens Advice as a great place to volunteer:

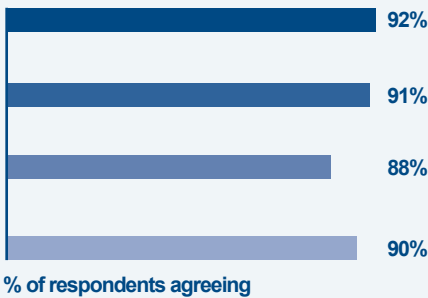


4 in 5 volunteers said they were ‘very likely’ to continue volunteering with Citizens Advice over the next 12 months:



Most volunteers were happy about how they were supported by their local office, they felt their contribution was recognised and thought Citizens Advice was a positive environment to volunteer in:

- I feel supported by staff in my local office
- I feel able to discuss any issues I have with my colleagues
- I feel that my local office acknowledges and recognises my own contributions to Citizens Advice
- My local office has a culture of trust and respect



Number of volunteer respondents = 1412

Volunteers’ access to support was a critical element of their experience, in particular the role of session supervisors and those involved in their day-to-day management:

“That supervisory relationship is so important to me ... getting the right people in those jobs is fundamental for me as a volunteer because they’re just the lynchpin for me.” (Volunteer)

Volunteers highlighted that volunteering could be challenging and despite most feeling well supported, over two in five (44%) agreed that they worried about clients after speaking with them. Recognising this, some local offices have in place volunteer wellbeing programmes and Citizens Advice offers access to Togetherall, an online mental health and wellbeing service to all its volunteers.

“I don’t think I realised quite how much of a sponge I was in terms of you know, times are very hard, people are suffering enormously. And it’s very easy to kind of soak up a lot of that emotion.” (Volunteer)

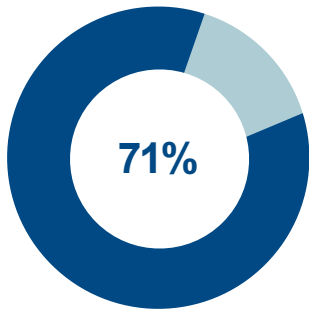
The research points to three further areas for improving the volunteer experience:

- Volunteer voice** - There were mixed views from volunteers relating to whether they felt heard by their local offices. Some did not feel that their views, feedback and ideas are listened to and valued by local Citizens Advice.
- Meaningful roles/activities early on** - The speed with which volunteers move through initial training was highlighted as important to the volunteer experience and volunteer retention; two in three Chief Officer respondents thought this took too long and it is reasonable to conclude this may contribute to the high levels of drop out and turnover in the early stages of the volunteer journey. The research suggests engaging volunteers in meaningful activity with support and supervision, including early access to client contact, even before all core training is completed has positive impacts.
- Making good use of existing skills and experiences** - Some volunteers and staff felt that Citizens Advice could do more to recognise and draw on the strengths of volunteers. This was particularly highlighted in relation to training and how there could be more recognition of prior experience or tailored learning in training plans.

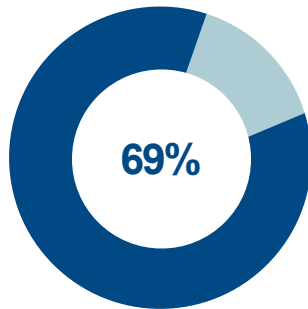
Further potential for volunteering

Nearly all Chief Officers responding to the survey said their local office is looking to recruit more volunteers. It was common for Chief Officers to say they regularly worry about volunteering:

Chief Officers regularly worry about retaining volunteers:



Chief Officers regularly worry about having enough volunteers in the office:



The research identified a need to further diversify the volunteer base across the network. The overall volunteer base within Citizens Advice is less diverse than the UK volunteering populationⁱ as a whole and the general UK population. The network is missing out on potential experience and skills due to the lack of diversity.

2 in 3 local offices said they are taking steps to diversify recruitment. These were typically narrowly focused on working or partnering with other organisations and advertising more widely in areas likely to attract a diverse range of applicants rather than adaptations to roles or different ways in which people could volunteer time to the organisation.

The research points to high levels of volatility in volunteering in Citizens Advice, particularly in the important early stages of attraction, recruitment and training. There are high levels of drop out in these early stages and a high level of turnover of volunteers in the first year. Half (51%) of Chief Officer survey respondents reported that for every ten expressions of interest four or fewer individuals went on to become volunteers.

There is interest in evolving and developing approaches to volunteering in local offices to address these recruitment, retention and diversity issues. Many local offices, however, feel constrained by the lack of staff capacity and potential available pool of volunteers. There is a great deal of innovation but there is a lack of effective ways of sharing good practice across the organisation that would enable it to become more than the sum of its parts.

Factors shaping and influencing volunteering

Across the Citizens Advice network there are a wide range of ways in which volunteers are involved, managed and supported. For some local offices volunteering is a means to an end: a cost-effective way to deliver services. For others, the involvement of volunteers is a core part of the Citizens Advice mission and ethos, bringing benefits beyond additional capacity. For many, it is both. A small minority do not involve volunteers.

To make sense of why volunteering differs and how it can be further developed it is useful to think about how three *dimensions* shape volunteering in Citizens Advice:

LOCAL CONTEXT

The size, scale and location of local offices, the level of resource and funding they may have available and the volunteer management capability and capacity within that local office

LOCAL OFFICE CULTURE

The attitudes, beliefs and behaviours towards volunteering that impact the way in which volunteers are involved and supported such as volunteering ethos and innovation in volunteering

MANAGEMENT PRACTICE

Practical decisions about stages of the volunteer journey that create the day to day experience of volunteer involvement and support such as volunteer recruitment, support and development



Tools for local Citizens Advice offices: Volunteering Models and Options Toolkit

The Volunteering Models and Options Toolkit (VMOT) comprises the Cost Calculator, Data and Insights, and Volunteering Models and Options workbook. These map and provide guidance on different volunteering models and is based on the three dimensions above.

Volunteering Models and Options workbook and Data and Insights guide maps and provides guidance on different volunteering models. It aims to inform, inspire and enable local office teams to consider how their approach to volunteer involvement could be further developed to meet existing challenges and ongoing opportunities.

The cost calculator and user instructions enables local offices to a) understand the costs of their current volunteering model and b) explore the costs associated with any potential changes to this.

Principles for enhancing and developing volunteering

The research points to the importance of the following five key principles for enhancing or developing volunteering across the Citizens Advice network. These principles were identified from the findings that emerged through the research and have also been informed by external work by NCVO, which identifies the key features of a quality volunteer experienceⁱⁱⁱ.

BALANCED

Balancing the formality and bureaucracy of recruitment and onboarding processes with an easy to navigate and rapid start for new volunteers.

Balancing the need for comprehensive training with the retention benefits of volunteers becoming active early in role.

Balancing the need to be able to plan around knowing when volunteers will be volunteering, with the need to offer flexibility for volunteers.

IMPACTFUL

Ensuring volunteers' needs to make a difference to other people's lives are meaningfully met.

Providing training and ongoing support that enables volunteers to feel confident they are helping others.

Sharing with volunteers how data and feedback they gather and share on cases and clients is used and makes a difference nationally as well as locally.

INCLUSIVE

Proactively and consistently seeking to attract and retain a more diverse range of volunteers.

Proactively and consistently working to create and maintain inclusive local office cultures, including for those working remotely.

Focussing work on equity, diversity and inclusion on role design, support and recognition, as well as how volunteering is promoted.

SUPPORTED

Supporting volunteers to give their time flexibly, to fit volunteering in around the rest of their lives.

Supporting volunteers in dealing with the sometimes emotionally challenging nature of the work they are involved with.

Supporting volunteers to progress in role and beyond, as is appropriate for each individual.

VALUED

Valuing volunteers through regular, routine thanks and other forms of recognition, remembering to be inclusive of those working remotely.

Valuing volunteers by listening to their ideas, concerns and questions.

Valuing volunteers by involving them as partners in developments in the local office.

Valuing volunteers by taking time to understand and make use of the skills, knowledge and experience they bring.

Valuing the diversity of thought that comes from involving volunteers with different life experiences.

Next steps

Volunteering requires ongoing attention and resource to ensure it can play its full part in supporting sustainability of services and deliver Citizens Advice missions.

At the national level, next steps could include:

- Work to embed routine use of the resources developed through this research project as a way to continue to develop the range and quality of volunteering across Citizens Advice including the Volunteering Models and Options Toolkit (VMOT).
- Increase specialist staff resource for supporting volunteering development across the network, particularly focused on working across regions/ areas to support innovation, change and sharing of good practice.
- Develop guidance and resources to support local offices in developing volunteering, including attracting a diverse range of volunteers and taking more streamlined approaches to volunteer recruitment and volunteer induction.

At the local level, next steps could include:

- Using the tools developed as part of this research to review current volunteering practice, challenge existing thinking, and to demonstrate to others the difference volunteers make. This includes making use of the value calculator and data it generates to influence funders to invest in supporting the development of volunteering and Citizens Advice services generally.
- Working with national Citizens Advice to facilitate the sharing of good practice, learning and innovation in volunteering amongst local offices, including attracting a diverse range of volunteers.

This briefing has been written by Joanna Stuart and Dr Helen Timbrell (Centre for Charity Effectiveness) and is based on research undertaken by the authors with Lucy Clague, Jim Clifford OBE, Catherine Cooke, Emily Hunter, Emily Hutchison (Sonnet Advisory and Impact) and Dr Angela Ellis Paine (Centre for Charity Effectiveness). The full research report is available from <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/information/impact-of-how-we-work>

Thank you to all the volunteers, Chief Officers and staff across the Citizens Advice network and external stakeholders who took the time to participate in surveys, workshops, interviews, meetings and calls to contribute to this work.

Thank you to all members of the Volunteering Transformation Programme Steering Committee for your enthusiastic engagement in every stage of the research, and the invaluable ideas and contributions you shared.

The Value of Volunteering research project would not have been possible without your support.

ⁱ Kenley, A. and Larkham, J. (2023) *Shifting out of Reverse*, Probono Economics and Nottingham Business School

ⁱⁱ DCMS (2023) *Community Life Survey 2021/22*: ⁱⁱⁱ McGarvey, A., Jochum, V., Davies,

J., Dobbs, J. and Homung, L. (2019) *Time Well Spent: a national survey on the volunteer experience*, NCVO