

Online Volunteering in Powys

Gwirfoddoli Ar-lein ym Mhowys



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1 Summary

Online volunteering is any volunteering that is done **via the internet**, on a computer or smartphone, from the volunteer's home or anywhere else they get online.

Some **6% of volunteering activity** in Great Britain is **online**, and **as much as 57%** is done through **a mix of online and offline** activities.



Online volunteering offer opportunities to **organisations** in Powys:



and **volunteers** in Powys like the idea:



This project supported a small group of PAVO member organisations to **try out online volunteering**. There were some successes:



RENEW connected with a volunteer in Cardiff to create their new **website**



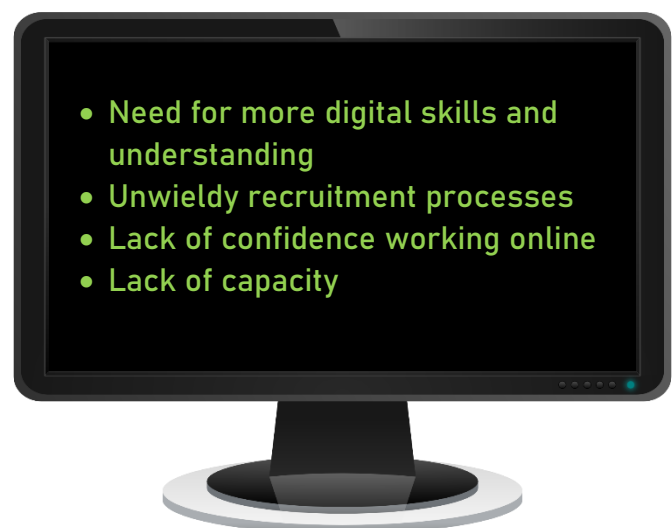
Powys Befriending Service has set up an **online befriending group** run by volunteers from Brecon and London.



However, there are **barriers** which prevent the third sector making the most of online volunteering.

Online volunteering can work in Powys and can help organisations expand their services, but it can't fill digital skills gap on its own.

Organisations need support and mentoring to increase their digital confidence and help them reap the benefits of being online.



2 Background

2.1 History

As long as the internet has been in existence, people have been using it to volunteer. Project Gutenbergⁱ, founded in 1971, is often cited as one of the earliest examples of online volunteering. Gutenberg volunteers from all over the world convert out of copyright books into e-books which are freely available to download.

The US based 'Virtual Volunteering Project' (1996 – 2001) was perhaps the first project set up to promote the idea more widely and attempted to catalogue the organisations in the US employing volunteers via the internet. After a few years though they found that the number was increasing exponentially and it was no longer practical to keep track of them all.¹

A 2014 report into the state of internet-mediated volunteering in the EU found that it is an “established, respected, widespread practice in community engagement in Europe”. The report also found however that while there is likely to be no shortage of volunteers willing to offer their time online, organised online opportunities numbered only in the thousands, compared to the millions of conventional volunteering opportunities advertised online. It concluded that “While internet-mediated volunteering is widespread in Europe, many organisations are still not familiar with the practice and many volunteer centres and volunteerism initiatives do not include internet-mediated volunteering in their volunteerism promotion.”²

The use of the internet continues to rise worldwide. According to 'Digital 2020', “almost 300 million people came online for the first time over the past 12 months”.³ With nearly 60% of the global population now on the internet, the potential for volunteering there can only increase.

2.2 Key terms and definitions

The term most often used to describe this activity is simply 'volunteering', but there is often a need to differentiate internet-mediated volunteering from that carried out in person. Among the terms which have been coined to describe it are virtual volunteering, online volunteering, digital volunteering, e-volunteering, net volunteering and cyber volunteering.

Virtual volunteering

Cymraeg
Gwirfoddoli rhithwir

The term 'virtual volunteering' was coined early on, and is used extensively in reports up to the mid-2000s.

Jayne Cravens, the initiator of the Virtual Volunteering Project, defines virtual volunteering as “...describing a volunteer who completes tasks, in whole or in part, off-site from the organisation or person being assisted, using the internet and a computer, tablet, smart phone or other internet-connected device.”⁴

Various similar definitions can be found in the literature.

ⁱ www.gutenberg.org

Online volunteering

Cymraeg

Gwirfoddoli ar lein

The term 'online volunteering' is synonymous with virtual volunteering and now seems to be more standardised, perhaps due to its adoption by the United Nations Volunteers programme in 2004.⁵

A comparison of search frequency using Google Trends shows that 'online volunteering' is consistently 5–10 time more often searched for than 'virtual volunteering' as well as other terms such as 'digital volunteering' or 'e-volunteering'.⁶

There has also been a tendency to avoid the term 'virtual volunteers' as there is an implication that the volunteers themselves are not 'real' volunteers.⁴ This project therefore uses the terms **online volunteering** and **online volunteers** in the first instance, while recognising that other terms such as virtual volunteering are often used.

Digital Volunteering

Cymraeg

Gwirfoddoli digidol

The term 'digital volunteering' can be used to describe online volunteering but is more frequently used in the UK to refer specifically to volunteers working to increase digital inclusion by teaching digital skills in person, usually at a community venue.

As an indication, the majority (~90%) of search results for 'digital' on the Volunteering Wales websiteⁱ are not online opportunities, but tasks using digital technology outside the volunteer's home. A prominent example is the Welsh Government's Digital Communities Wales volunteer programmeⁱⁱ.

To avoid confusion, this project does not generally use the term 'digital volunteering' to refer to online volunteering.

Micro-volunteering

Cymraeg

Micro-wirfoddoli

There is some overlap between online volunteering and 'micro-volunteering'. A 2013 NCVO report into the potential of micro-volunteering defines it as "bite-size volunteering with no commitment to repeat and with minimum formality, involving short and specific actions that are quick to start and complete".⁷

Micro-volunteering opportunities are found both online and offline, but online micro-volunteering in particular may be seen as a quick and easy way to involve new volunteers. It has been suggested that micro-volunteering opportunities can also provide a "gateway to more sustained and long-term volunteering"⁷

ⁱ volunteering-wales.net

ⁱⁱ www.digitalcommunities.gov.wales/become-a-digital-volunteer

The internet also opens up many possibilities for casual volunteering, volunteering roles that are not necessarily requested or organised by an organisation, such as peer to peer support.

2.3 Features of online volunteering

Activities

Voluntary activity is often categorised into different types, according to, for example, the activities carried out, the formality of the arrangement or the motivations of volunteers. These typologies are helpful when defining an area of volunteering to focus on. One typology of online volunteering is proposed by Peña-Lopez - his analysis of online volunteering opportunities classifies them into four types:⁵

1. Online Advocacy – taking part in online campaigning.
2. Online Assessment – giving advice online, for example on forums, in response to questions from others.
3. 'Onlined' Offline Volunteers – volunteer roles that exist within organisations already, but can be done from home via the internet, for example design or transcription tasks usually done in an office.
4. Pure Online Volunteers – roles that exist purely online, for example social media management or online befriending.

This project focuses on types 3 and 4 – as these are the types of roles for which specific vacancies can be advertised by Powys Volunteer Centre.

The actual tasks carried out by online volunteers are many and varied. A usefully comprehensive (though probably not exhaustive) list of possible tasks for online volunteers has been compiled by Jayne Cravens and published on her websiteⁱ.

Participants

Most research suggests that online volunteers are not in fact a separate group from offline volunteers. 'Time Well Spent', the 2019 NCVO report on volunteer experience in Great Britain, found that "Only 6% of volunteering is done exclusively online; but as much as 57% is done through a mix of online and offline activities."⁸

This is backed up by other studies, which also find that volunteers themselves do not usually differentiate between the two types,⁹ and that online volunteering often does not displace a volunteer's offline volunteering, but complements it.¹⁰

Motivation

The motivation of online volunteers is generally likely to be very similar to offline volunteers. A study in the US by Mukerjee interviewed older adults who were volunteering online and identified that motivations for volunteering online in particular include:

- More choice in the selection of causes, organisations and locations for volunteering.
- The convenience of being able to volunteer from home, especially for those with restricted mobility.⁷

ⁱ www.coyotecomunications.com/vwiki/examples.shtml

Age and experience

A 2018 study by Ackermann and Manatschal investigated the evidence of demographic differences between offline and online volunteering. While all age groups volunteer online, there is some evidence that younger volunteers (15–34) spend a greater proportion of their volunteering time online than older volunteers (35+).¹¹

The Time Well Spent report found that volunteers who had got involved with an organisation in the last 12 months were more likely to have volunteered exclusively online than those who had started volunteering longer ago.⁸

Disability

Time Well Spent also notes that disabled volunteers are more than twice as likely as non-disabled people to provide their volunteering service online, and were also more likely to be interested in new opportunities that could be done all or mostly online than non-disabled people.⁸

Location

The nature of the internet means that online volunteering can to a certain extent be 'borderless' and volunteers need not be based locally to the organisation they are supporting. Prominent examples of international online volunteering include:

- The United Nations Volunteering Serviceⁱ, a dedicated platform for online volunteering relating to peace and development, mobilising over 12,000 online volunteers every year. The UN's 2018 State of the World's Volunteerism Report said that "Online volunteering is a simple, universal and effective way for organisations and volunteers to work together to address sustainable development challenges anywhere in the world from any device."¹²
- The internet encyclopædia Wikipediaⁱⁱ, which has over 140,000 volunteers who regularly contribute their time to creating and editing articles,¹³ from almost every country in the world.¹⁴
- The Digital Humanitarian Networkⁱⁱⁱ, a network of organisations which mobilise volunteer communities to provide technical support for disaster response all over the world.

Potential barriers

Common barriers to online volunteering for individuals include their internet connection speed, the accessibility of websites, and their own skills and confidence.⁹

For organisations the obstacles to involving online volunteers are generally the same as those related to onsite volunteers, the main example being lack of organisational capacity.¹⁵ Some note that organisations can sometimes forget that online volunteers need as much, if not more, communication as onsite volunteers to keep them engaged.¹⁶ Online forums where all volunteers can connect are often cited as a common and helpful practice here.⁹

ⁱ www.onlinevolunteering.org

ⁱⁱ en.wikipedia.org

ⁱⁱⁱ digitalhumanitarians.com

3 Online volunteering in the context of Wales & Powys

3.1 Prevalence of volunteering

The National Survey for Wales asks participants if they are currently giving their time to a club or organisation for free. In 2017-18 28% of adults 16+ from across Wales responded that they volunteered for a club or organisation. This had not changed since 2016-7. The figure for Powys was higher at 34% (down from 38% in 2016-7). Across Wales, the number of young people (16-24) volunteering increased significantly from 22% in 2016-17 to 34% in 2017-8 (breakdown by age is not available at a county level).¹⁷

This question was not asked in the 2018-19 survey.

3.2 Internet use and access

The Office for National Statistics publishes yearly statistics on internet use in the UK. In 2019 9.3% of people in Wales aged 16 or over said that they have never used the internet (down from 17.5% in 2013). In Powys, 85.6% of were reported as recent (used in the last three months) internet users in Q1 of 2019, compare to 79.9% in 2013. This is lower than the overall figures for Wales (89.6%) and UK (90.8%) and is the third lowest level in Wales.¹⁸

The National Survey for Wales also asks about how and why people access the internet. In the 2018-19 survey, 87% of respondents across Wales said they had internet access at home.¹⁹ There has been an increase in superfast broadband access in Powys over recent years. 17% in 2016-7 up from 2% in 2014-5 accessing superfast broadband.²⁰ Although internet use is increasing, the lack of access to superfast broadband connections is still an issue for many in rural areas and can be a barrier to participation in online volunteering.

3.3 Online volunteering opportunities in Wales

An informal audit of the opportunities advertised on the Volunteering Wales websiteⁱ was carried out over 19-22 March 2019, to ascertain how widespread online volunteering might currently be in the third sector in Wales.



The current search functionality does not have any option to filter by online volunteering opportunities, so an initial search was made instead through those opportunities listed as 'home-based'. Of 63 opportunities, 19 (from 12 organisations) were explicitly 'online' activities.

Assuming the total number of live opportunities to be similar to that reported at the end of the previous quarter (1755), this represents around 1% of those on offer.

Keyword searches (online, website, digital, internet) revealed a further 15 opportunities (from a further 12 organisations) which could be carried out online, but were not listed by providers as being home-based. Of these, some were assumed by the organisation to be carried out at their office, some were expected to be home-based but not listed as such.

ⁱ volunteering-wales.net

What sorts of online tasks were advertised?

NB: Some volunteer roles were listed multiple times as organisations were looking to recruit volunteers in different areas of Wales, the figures below count unique roles only.

Task	Home-based	Found by keyword	Total
Social media/marketing	8	9	17
Website creation/maintenance	1	1	2
Combined social media & website role		2	2
Administration	4		4
Advice/feedback/moderation	2	2	4
Writing/publishing	2		2
Translation		1	1
Crowdsourced transcription	1		1
Networking/partnerships	1		1
Total	19	15	34

Were the opportunities listed short or long term roles?

Opportunity type	Count
Ongoing role	27
One-off project	4
Micro-volunteering/short task	3

Where are the providers based?

Area	Count
Swansea	6
Cardiff	4
England	3
Pembrokeshire	2
Caerphilly	2
Powys	2
Monmouthshire	1
Carmarthenshire	1
Ceredigion	1
Conwy	1
Flintshire	1

Observations

Most of the online opportunities advertised were for social media volunteers and other purely online roles. Role descriptions for social media volunteers were not generally very detailed, and sometimes combined with website management. This perhaps indicates that many organisations would like to be using social media more, but don't currently have enough expertise in the area to specify what they need a volunteer to do for them.

The majority of opportunities listed are for ongoing roles rather than 'task and finish' projects or micro-volunteering opportunities, indicating that in general organisations are looking to increase their digital capacity with online volunteers, rather than to recruit volunteers for online projects.

There are very few examples of volunteers being sought to directly support service users online (though managing social media can become social in this way). The few examples of this type of opportunity are mainly with large national organisations such as RNIB and Cruse.

Two providers in Powys, of 110 listed at the time on Volunteering Wales, had advertised potential online volunteering opportunities. These online opportunities represented around 1% of those listed in Powys at the time. Neither of the organisations in Powys had had any response at the time of the audit.

Of course, one of the features of volunteering online is that volunteers do not necessarily need to live in the same geographical region as the hosting organisation. For comparison, the UK wide Do-it.org website enables users to search specifically for 'virtual volunteering'. A wider range of opportunities is listed there, 185 listed as 'virtual volunteering' at the time of searching. Not all of these are online roles however, so it could be that the term is not completely understood by organisations adding the opportunities.

Some additional types of online opportunities found on Do-it.org include: graphic design, mentoring, coaching, befriending, volunteer co-ordination, grant researcher/fundraiser and trustee, as well as more technical IT type roles.

The difference suggests that those using Volunteering Wales are not yet considering the full potential of online volunteering. It should be noted though that the Volunteering Wales website is a relatively new platform and there are many organisations in Wales who are not yet listing their opportunities there.

3.4 Case studies

Online volunteering currently represents only a tiny proportion of all the opportunities on offer to volunteers in Wales. Anecdotally though, many people are already volunteering online in Wales and in Powys. Some of these online volunteers may not even think of themselves as volunteers. This may be particularly true in the realm of 'mutual aid', for example sharing expertise by answering questions in online forums, advocacy roles such as helping organisations to campaign, and particularly where a role is not formally managed by any organisation. There are Facebook groups run by volunteers helping people in Powys find jobs, events and new furniture. A local Welsh teacher might be drafted in via social media to translate a poster for a community event organised by a group with no fluent Welsh speakers.

As this project looks to focus on more formalised involvement of online volunteers by third sector organisations, some examples of Powys volunteers in established online volunteering roles were sought to illustrate and draw out some of the features of this kind of volunteering from the point of view of volunteers themselves.

Social media volunteer

Jude volunteers as Social Media Officer for the Powys county team of the National Garden Scheme. She manages their various social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Jude also manages social media and other online services for various local organisations she is involved with.

Jude says that the advantage of online volunteering for her is that she can do it from her own settee at a time that suits her and without travelling miles in a car. Unfortunately, the slow broadband in her village means she does sometimes have to travel to somewhere with a better connection.

Volunteers in the same role across the country keep in touch and support each other via a closed Facebook group and the role has been great for learning new skills. Though Jude has a high level of autonomy in how she carries out the role she knows there is support and leadership there when she needs it.

If there is any disadvantage in volunteering online for Jude, it's that it can be easy for volunteers to overdo it as there aren't any checks on how many hours they put in. She suggests more detailed role descriptions may help, to manage expectations of volunteers.

Online group moderator

The author is an online volunteer for Freegle – a UK wide network of local reuse groups. This involves moderating message posted on an online group and answering queries from members.

The group is managed via a website or a phone app which makes volunteering quick and easy. It can be done in a few spare minutes here and there throughout the day. There are five local volunteers for the Llandrindod group, and there is a UK wide team of back up volunteers who can take over if local volunteers are unwell or unable to continue – the online nature of the role means that it can be done from anywhere. The organisation is volunteer run so support is peer-to-peer rather than centralised, with volunteers sharing experiences and troubleshooting problems via an online forum.

This online volunteering role has also led to an offline volunteer role for the organisation, promoting the group at local events.

Cynefin Project

'Cynefin: Mapping Wales' Sense of Place' was a National Library of Wales project which ran from 2013-2017.

"Between 2013 and 2017, the project surface-cleaned, repaired and digitised 1,224 tithe maps held in the National Library. 1,354 volunteers used a crowdsourcing website to transcribe and geo-reference these maps, indexing 28,105 pages of accompanying tithe apportionments to produce an impressive total of 1,837,359 index records for the website."²¹

Following the success of the project, National Library of Wales have now set up a dedicated crowdsourcing platformⁱ to involve volunteers in further transcription and annotation projects.

Powys Volunteer Centre was involved in recruiting local volunteers for the project. PAVO's Volunteer Centre Officer cited this example of volunteers being able to get involved with a large organisation that they wouldn't necessarily be able to travel to from rural Powys. He remembers that there was a lot of appetite among Powys volunteers for being able to contribute online to a national project in this way.

ⁱ crowd.library.wales

4 Project outline

4.1 Motivation

For organisations, online volunteering widens the pool of skills and perspectives they can draw on, by removing barriers of time and distance. For volunteers such as Jude, online volunteering is more flexible and easier to fit around other commitments.

For PAVO, this project feeds into several outcomes within its current strategic plan:

Outcome:	Online volunteering:
Individuals have improved well-being as a result of taking part in high quality volunteering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Offers flexible volunteering for those with other time commitments - Removes the necessity to travel long distances across rural Powys - Offers more opportunities for those with restricted mobility. - Offers more choice of activity and the chance to use and acquire different skills
Organisations involving volunteers are able to learn and continuously improve the volunteering experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Offers organisations the chance to try new ways of recruiting and involving volunteers.
Individuals are able to contribute their knowledge, skills and experience through volunteering and are integral to a thriving and sustainable third sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Helps organisations to find volunteers with the digital skills they need - Offers more opportunities for the growing numbers of young volunteers to contribute their skills and knowledge

As seen, there is a comparatively low take up of organised online volunteering by the third sector in Powys, though it is difficult to gauge the level of informal volunteering. However, there is likely to be a large pool of volunteers in Powys who are willing and able to do at least some of their volunteering online and the potential to recruit them to new opportunities.

4.2 Research questions

Having established the motivation and potential for growing the number of opportunities for online volunteering in Powys, this project set out to pilot online volunteering with a small group of PAVO member organisations. The aim of the pilot activities was to find out how what works, and what doesn't work, both for organisations and for online volunteers themselves.

Within this topic there are three key areas where questions can be asked, as follows.

Opportunities for online volunteers

How much enthusiasm for online volunteering is there in the third sector in Powys?

What sorts of organisations in Powys are interested in online volunteering?

What barriers are there to third sector organisations in Powys involving online volunteers?

What skill gaps are there in third sector organisations which might hinder online volunteering?

How can involving online volunteers help Powys organisations achieve their objectives?

Recruiting online volunteers

What support do organisations in Powys need in order to design good online volunteer roles?

What online opportunities are most attractive to volunteers in Powys?

What are the best methods of advertising online volunteer opportunities in Powys?

What barriers exist in Powys for online volunteers?

To what extent does online volunteering overcome barriers that Powys people have to other types of volunteering?

How can people and organisations in Powys benefit from the 'borderless' nature of online volunteering?

Supporting online volunteers

How do online volunteers prefer to communicate with their host organisations?

What resources do organisations need in order to effectively support online volunteers?

How is the experience of supporting online volunteers different to that of supporting onsite volunteers?

What online collaboration tools are effective for supporting volunteers?

What keeps online volunteers engaged?

How much a 'part of' their organisation do online volunteers feel?

4.3 Scope of the project

Project activity

The project consisted of four main areas of activity:

- Engaging with stakeholders to raise awareness of the concept of online volunteering and to learn about their experiences and attitude towards the idea
- Recruiting and consulting with a small group of organisations willing to pilot online volunteering activities
- Setting up of and recruitment to online volunteer opportunities within each organisation
- Supporting and monitoring the online volunteer placements

Data was collected in the following ways:

- Ongoing incidental observations
- Phone and in person interviews with participants
- Surveys and questionnaires to participants and wider groups of stakeholders
- Analysis of information from online sources such as social media and Volunteering Wales

Volunteer opportunities

In the context of the definitions and features discussed in sections 2.2 and 2.3, this project focussed on volunteering activities which were:

- Online - internet mediated rather than in person digital volunteering
- Organised - activities for which specific volunteer positions can be advertised

Although not investigated, digital volunteering opportunities and more informal online volunteering opportunities from organisations outside the project were promoted to volunteers as part of the awareness raising activity.

Stakeholders

Two main groups of stakeholders were identified:

- Current and potential volunteers – the project targeted volunteers from Powys, but the borderless nature of online volunteering means that volunteers from anywhere in the world could take part
- PAVO member organisations

5 Engagement with stakeholders

5.1 Volunteer survey

An online survey for volunteers was carried out via the Typeform platform in English and Welsh. The survey was promoted via PAVO's social media channels, the Volunteering Wales platform and at awareness raising events attended by the project officer. 41 volunteer responses were gathered over the period April to December 2019.

Questions

- Q1 Have you ever done any volunteering online?
- Q2 If you have, what sorts of tasks did you do?
- Q3 Are you interested in volunteering online in the future?
- Q4 Which aspects of volunteering online appeal to you?
- Q5 Do you have any concerns about volunteering online?
- Q6 What skills could you offer as an online volunteer?
- Q7 Have you seen any opportunities for online volunteers advertised?
- Q8 Do you have any other comments about the idea, or your experience, of volunteering online?

The questions were chosen to:

- Gauge the level of interest in online volunteering in Powys
- Find out what appeals to people about online volunteering in order to know how to promote new online opportunities
- Find out what skills exist among potential online volunteers in order to offer appropriate opportunities
- Draw on the experience of existing online volunteers in order to advise organisations on how to support volunteers
- Find out about any concerns that new online volunteers might have in order to help organisations address these
- Raise awareness about the benefits and opportunities of online volunteering among respondents who may not have previously considered it as an option

Results

The full results of the survey can be found in appendix 10.1, a summary is given here.

- 10 out of 41 people had previously volunteered online
- All but one person answered yes or maybe to volunteering online in the future

Of course, it is likely that respondents to an online survey will also be comfortable doing other tasks online, however this does indicate that online volunteering could be a popular option among volunteers.

The top five aspects of online volunteering that appeal to volunteers are:

- I can give my time flexibly
- I don't need to spend time travelling to volunteer
- I can do it from anywhere
- I can learn new skills
- I can fit it around my caring or other responsibilities

The top five skills that volunteers would offer online are:

- Social media
- Befriending
- Proofreading
- Administration
- Mentoring

Some of these skills matched well with what organisations involved with the project were looking for, for example help with social media and befriending. Others such as mentoring and writing reviews were not so sought after but opportunities for these volunteers could be looked into further in the future.

While respondents were willing to give their time online, 56% had never seen any opportunities for online volunteers advertised.

It is interesting though to divide responses to this question into those received before and after a dedicated social media presence for the project was started to promote online volunteering opportunities. Before this, 86% had not seen any online opportunities, dropping to 25% afterwards.

Concerns raised by respondents were around security and safety, trust and isolation, as well as technical concerns like a slow internet connection. Comments from experienced online volunteers highlighted the need for clear and regular communication as being especially important for volunteers working remotely from their organisation.

5.2 Volunteer feedback from networks and events

Online volunteering was promoted through attendance at events such as the Powys Careers Festival, college Freshers' Fairs, local community events and at PAVO's own events. Feedback was gathered on volunteer motivations and concerns. One young person (who was also a carer) said "I'm not social enough to volunteer, I prefer it when I don't have to communicate with people face to face". Students often cited a lack of spare time in the day which prevented them from volunteering and expressed interest in online options which might help them overcome this.

A Facebook group was set up to engage potential online volunteers and those joining the group were asked to comment on their interest in online volunteering:

I'm currently on maternity leave so I can't commit to volunteering away from home at the moment, however online volunteering would be ideal!

I am interested in online volunteering because I will be able to do it from home.

I have been volunteering in a shop for over 10 years and loved it and would now like to see how volunteering online is

As a carer for my wife I would like an outlet for what little spare time I have and I love helping people

I have skills to share. I'd like to develop my experience outside of doing it for me and work.

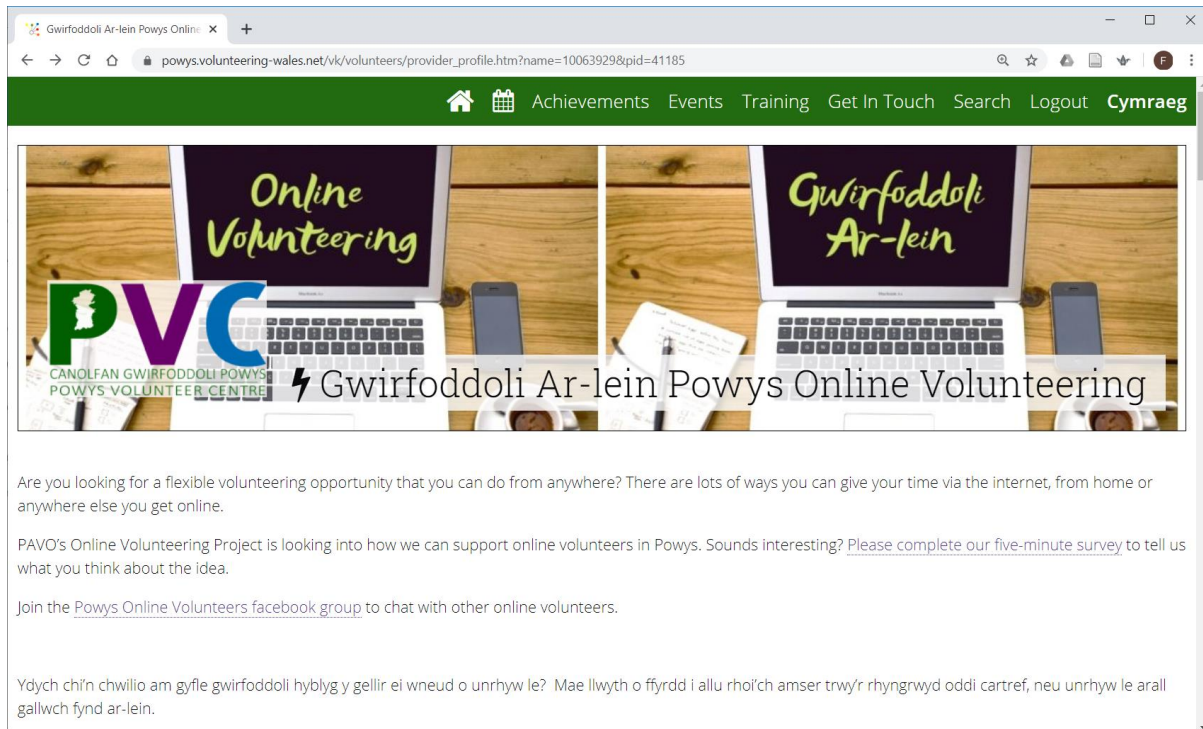
A chance to offer my skills and experiences to help others and to learn new skills myself!

I'd be interested in the opportunities for volunteers. I'm retired would like to know opportunities for volunteers

5.3 Volunteer recruitment

In order to recruit volunteers to online positions, a dedicated page for online opportunities in Powys was set up on the Volunteering Wales platform with news items and updates to help draw attention to it. From this page, opportunities were shared with online social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and local Freegle groups across Powys. They were also sent out weekly to registered users on the site.

Having access to a national platform such as Volunteering Wales proved invaluable as the opportunities posted were able to attract interest from all parts of Wales, Herefordshire, London and even France.



5.4 Organisations

PAVO member organisations interested in piloting online volunteering were invited via PAVO's website, e-bulletin and social media channels. Contacts were also made through PAVO colleagues and local volunteers bureaux. Each organisation had their own interests and concerns about online volunteering, more details of which are given in the case studies in the next section. Online volunteering was also discussed with organisations attending various PAVO events, such as workshops and network meetings.

Some of the organisations were able to meet together to discuss their progress, along with the feedback from volunteers. It was hoped that the project members would also be able to pilot different ways of collaborating with each other online, this was unsuccessful though. An online group was set up to share information, but participants were reluctant to join a new platform. There was also no response to attempts to start discussion by email. Capacity has been an issue for all organisations, either in terms of time, or confidence to try new ways of working.

6 Stories and Case Studies

6.1 Powys Befriending Service

Background

Befriending was one of the most popular skills offered by volunteers responding to the volunteer survey (section 5.1), given by almost half of respondents. Many charities offer online befriending services, both 1:1 via email and video call, or in online groups or forums, though not currently in Powys.

Powys Befriending Service (PBS) is a team within PAVO co-ordinating around 140 volunteers offering 1:1 (in person and telephone) and group befriending services across the county of Powys. Online befriending had been considered previously, but not yet tried.

Lesley, Befriending Service Co-ordinator, had reservations about the staff time that would be needed to set up an online service and co-ordinate online volunteers and so decided to begin by piloting an online group rather 1:1 befriending. Lesley was interested to offer a variety of online opportunities though and suggested that volunteers could also help with the design of posters and newsletters for the service.

What happened?

Design volunteers

Initially two volunteer opportunities, for poster and newsletter volunteers, were advertised on Volunteering Wales. A volunteer who had already contacted the project to offer her poster design skills was keen to sign up to help PBS.

It became apparent though that the usual volunteer application and induction process that PBS uses might not be suited to online volunteers and that some flexibility was needed.

Staff discussed and agreed changes to the process, removing the necessity for some of the checks required for in person volunteers. This took some time, during which the volunteer's situation changed, meaning she was no longer available.

When a second volunteer applied for the role, the revised process was followed and the volunteer was able to get involved more quickly.

Online befriending volunteers

Powys Befriending Service Online was launched as a Facebook group. The project officer supported Lesley to get the group up and running, and researched and wrote appropriate policies for the group and a volunteer role description.



Are you a dab hand at desktop publishing?

A pro at poster design?

Powys Befriending Service is looking for volunteers to help produce posters and newsletters.



Volunteer from home at flexible times to suit you.



For details go to:
bit.ly/volunteeronlinepowys

Two volunteers have been recruited for the group through Volunteering Wales. After initially talking through the service on the phone with each volunteer, Lesley now communicates with them by email, as and when needed.

Successes

Lesley said “Having online volunteers hasn’t been as onerous as I anticipated! I thought it would take much more time than dealing with regular volunteers but it hasn’t been a drain on time or resources at all.” She added that she had been pleasantly surprised by the fact that people are happy to volunteer online.

Volunteer Zoe has now made several posters to promote PBS’s local groups and will be producing their newsletters going forward. Lesley says this has relieved pressure on staff and has helped increase numbers attending groups.

The Facebook group is also growing and involving online volunteers has given PBS the impetus to do more online.

Challenges

As discussed, some online volunteers were put off by the length and the formality of the application process and this was reviewed. Some processes still need to be looked at, for example supervision of online volunteers, and how they can be connected into the wider volunteer group, who often meet in person.

Lesley also notes that she wouldn’t have been able to launch an online service without the support of the project officer to guide her through the process, technical aspects and appropriate policies.

Lessons learned

It is important to review processes when trying new ways of involving volunteers and to be aware that some flexibility may be needed. Existing processes may seem unnecessarily slow compared to instant response that many people have come to expect when working online, and this can put some volunteers off. Of course, flexibility also needs to be balanced against the requirement to do appropriate checks. Where processes necessarily take time, it’s vital to keep in touch with online volunteers to let them know what’s happening. PBS’s application process is still paper based at this time, but Lesley is looking at creating an online form to make the process smoother.

Next steps

Powys Befriending Service plan to continue to welcome online volunteers to support them with design and administration. Staff are also discussing the potential for further online

Could you be an online befriender?

Do you have...?

- Good communication skills
- Empathy and an open mind
- A desire to help others
- Experience of using Facebook groups or other online forums



We’re looking for volunteer moderators to help make the new Powys Befriending Service Online group a safe, supportive and welcoming community.

Volunteer online from home - in your own time and your own place.

For more details and to apply: bit.ly/pbsvolmod

PAVO
Powys Befriending Service

“It hasn’t been as onerous as I anticipated!”

befriending services, though some work is needed to assess the demand and different ways in which these could be delivered.

Befriending Service digital survey

Initial research has begun into the scope for further online befriending services. A survey has been carried out with clients attending befriending groups and more information from 1:1 befriending clients is in the process of being collected.

Initial responses indicate that two thirds of clients surveyed have internet access at home and of these just over half would be interested in exploring online befriending.

Several respondents have expressed feelings of fear and distrust of the online world and as well as assessing the demand for online befriending, the survey seeks to understand the level of digital confidence among clients. It is possible that as well as online volunteers, some in person digital volunteers could be recruited to offer help to get online.

Results from the first 30 responses to the survey are illustrated in appendix 10.2.

6.2 Online Trustees

Background

PAVO's Third Sector Skills (TSS) project supports organisations in Powys to strengthen their governing boards by helping them to recruit and train new trustees. The project was set up in response to PAVO members' concerns over the difficulty of finding and keeping new trustees and the implications of this for succession planning and the sustainability of their organisations.

The Third Sector Skills Volunteer Officer, Melissa Townsend, has been investigating novel ways to recruit, train and involve trustees using digital technology. Melissa has found that online platforms such as social media are an effective route to reach potential new trustees, but that third sector organisations and especially their boards of trustees often lack the knowledge to take advantage of them. With Melissa's support in this area many boards have successfully recruited new trustees, having previously been unable to find anyone through traditional methods – usually word of mouth. Melissa has also trialled online resources for trustees in the form of webinars.

Lucy, one of the online volunteers who had been recruited for Powys Befriending Service, also expressed interest in taking on a trustee role for an organisation in Powys. Since she lives in London, this would also need to be an online role, with meetings attended via a video conference platform such as Skype rather than in person.

Anecdotally, there are various national organisations whose trustees regularly meet in this way. For example, WAMES (the Welsh Association of ME & CFS Support) had recently contacted the Online Volunteering Project to discuss promoting their vacancies and confirmed that their board meets mainly online, so would welcome trustees from anywhere in Wales.

Melissa has been interested to find out if such an arrangement could work for Powys organisations, as it would potentially widen what is often a limited geographic pool of future trustees.

What happened?

Melissa got in touch with Lucy to explain the role of a trustee and discuss her interests. Lucy was especially keen to use her previous experience of befriending and counselling in a mentoring role.

Initially a match with Powys Samaritans was explored. Melissa introduced Lucy to the director of Powys Samaritans via a Skype meeting where they discussed how being an online trustee might work. This was a new idea for Powys Samaritans, whose trustees hadn't previously held any meetings online but were open to exploring it. No barriers were identified to involving a trustee online, however after some discussion Powys Samaritans realised that they did not have the online mentoring role that Lucy was looking for.

Accessibility Powys (the new working name of Disability Powys) had previously approached PAVO as they were looking at recruiting more trustees and in particular at removing any barriers to recruiting and involving disabled people as trustees. Melissa suggested that working online could provide one solution to overcome these barriers. This was something that the current trustees don't have a lot of experience in and so hadn't considered.

Melissa again facilitated an introduction for Lucy via Skype to discuss being an online trustee and a match was made. Lucy is disabled herself and has done a lot of online volunteering previously, though not in the role of a trustee. Melissa trained Lucy in the roles and responsibilities of a trustee online via Skype, having posted hard copies of all the training materials, and Lucy is now a trustee for Accessibility Powys. She has taken on two roles - overseeing safeguarding and mentoring local access groups. She is also leading on online working for the board.

Successes

Melissa says that, given the right support, having online trustees could work well for the third sector in Powys and she will suggest it as option to other groups looking for trustees. This could help boards who are struggling to find new trustees, perhaps with specific skills, within their local area.

Having trialled online trustee training with Lucy, Melissa has also now arranged to train two trustees from Ystradgynlais online. This offers advantages for both the trainer and trainees, especially in Powys where travel distances can be prohibitive. Training online saves time, inconvenience and the cost of room hire and make it easier for organisations and volunteers spread across rural Powys to access training at a time convenient to them.

Accessibility Powys are now looking further into digital communications for their trustees and how technology can remove physical barriers, making their meetings accessible to all. For example, one trustee who has mobility issues would previously often miss meetings, making written contributions by email. The option of attending via Skype means that she can fully participate more often. It's important to note though that the board also plan to rotate the location of their meetings to enable more members to physically attend more often - as with any complex situation, a diverse mix of solutions is important.

Although the trustee match with Powys Samaritans didn't work out, the opportunity to consider it with support from Melissa has prompted the organisation to look further into how digital technology could facilitate their meetings. A key factor is that they have a younger trustee who is willing and confident to take on organising the technical aspects.

Challenges

Trustee boards in Powys are generally older and perhaps lacking in confidence when it comes to using digital communications. Melissa has found that change is possible and can happen quite quickly, but that some intensive support and handholding is often needed to get things rolling.

It is also important to consider that although technology can improve accessibility, not every technology suits every ability. Video conferencing, for example, does not always suit those who are partially sighted. Organisations should be supported to find the mix of technologies which work for them. Specialised equipment may be needed, and Accessibility Powys are currently looking into the funding they need to purchase this.

6.3 Radnorshire Enterprise for Nature, Education & Wellbeing (RENEW)

Background

RENEW is an educational charity dedicated to promoting environmentally sustainable living. Based in a 1½ Victorian walled garden overlooking the river Wye near Rhayader, RENEW offers courses and workshops on subjects such as growing organic fruit and vegetables, working with local wood, renewables energy systems, crafts and ecology.



RENEW have a lot of experience involving volunteers on site, some have been long term, regular volunteers and some drop in occasionally. Recruitment is usually through word of mouth or posters in the local area, and sometimes through referral from organisations supporting people. It can be difficult to attract regular volunteers though as the site is somewhat remote.

RENEW's current focus is on raising their profile with a view to attracting more funding to pursue their aims. To this end they have been recently supported by PAVO's Development Team to increase their visibility and get more of their local community involved.

RENEW's gardener and project lead, Dave Burridge, wanted to find volunteers who could help with this profile raising. He was interested to find out if online volunteers could help in particular with digital expertise that existing members did not have, as the project did not have a website or strong social media presence.

Dave's main concern around online volunteering was that a volunteer would find it difficult to understand what the project was all about. He also wondered how best he could support a volunteer at a distance and how to ensure remote volunteers feel appreciated, as in person volunteers are offered produce and access to the garden as a gesture of thanks.

What happened?

Following discussions with Dave about the roles that online volunteers could take on, it was decided to concentrate on finding a volunteer (or volunteers) who could help RENEW to design and set up a website. The project officer wrote a role description based on information from Dave about what would be required.

Initially the opportunity was posted on the Media Trust volunteering platformⁱ, to find out if an opportunity with a tiny rural organisation would be appealing to their audience of media professionals. Since this did not attract any interest, the opportunity was then posted on Volunteering Wales, and promoted via social media and local online groups such as Freegle. Within a week Alex, a student at Cardiff university, responded via Volunteering Wales.

There were initially some difficulties with email communication between Dave and Alex but these were resolved with support.

ⁱ mediatrust.org/volunteer/

Dave still had concerns over how a remote volunteer could get to know RENEW and its ethos so he decided to invite Alex to visit the walled garden, offering to pay travel expenses. Alex was happy to take up the invitation and visited for the day. They had a long chat about the project and Dave's hopes for a website, and Alex took plenty of notes.

Following the visit Dave sent Alex more information and they continued regular correspondence by email over the next couple of months. Alex has now completed an initial design for the website and Dave is working to input text content.



Successes

Dave says that having an online volunteer has worked out exactly as he had hoped. He and Alex have got on well and have got to know each other through their regular emails. For Dave the main advantage of finding a volunteer in this way is that he has been able to recruit someone further afield and to bring in skills he hadn't been able to find in his local volunteers.

Challenges

Dave had a clear idea of what he wanted a website to do for him, but not of the skills required, so the project officer supported him by translating his ideas into a volunteer role description. RENEW has been able to involve an online volunteer to fill a digital skills gap, however support with other digital skills was essential to enable this.

The initial introductions by email ran into problems when Dave's first email to Alex ended up in Alex's junk folder and some support from the project officer was needed to get them back in touch. An understanding of the sometimes unreliable nature of online communications may be needed in order to make these relationships work!

Lessons learned

Dave said "The main thing is to keep communication going and to have a clear idea of what you want the volunteer to do." It was also very important to Dave to be sure that Alex had a feel for what RENEW is all about and the fact that Alex was able to visit made this a lot easier. This may be especially important for a place based project such as RENEW, and a volunteer from somewhere more distant may not be ideal.

"The main thing is to keep communication going!"

Next Steps

Once the website is up and running, Dave hopes that a current onsite volunteer will also become an online volunteer to help maintain it.

Following his experience with Alex, Dave is also looking to recruit more online volunteers, to help with social media, and to research and apply for grant funding for the project.

RENEW has an account with Volunteering Wales which was set up for them by PAVO's Development Officer, but Dave will need some training and support to be able to use this digital tool independently. He would also like help to make more use of different digital communication platforms such as Skype.

Volunteer profile: Alex

Alex has recently graduated from Cardiff university and was looking to accumulate some professional experience in programming. He had volunteered for a couple of charities in the past, mainly in onsite roles.

He found the opportunity with RENEW via the Volunteering Wales website. Alex says online volunteering appeals to his homebody nature and for him this opportunity was the perfect combination of a project that he is supportive of needing his skillset.

The relationship has worked well and he has found Dave to be always responsive to requests by email. He also felt that being able to visit the project in person was valuable, for him to get a sense of what the project was about and how the website would be used.

“it feels very much like a collaboration”

Alex has enjoyed volunteering for RENEW, he says “Dave values my input and it feels very much like a collaboration rather than like a job.”

6.4 Community Action Machynlleth & District (CAMAD)

Background

CAMAD is the volunteer centre for the Dyfi Valley. They are a hub for volunteer opportunities in the Machynlleth area as well as co-ordinating various community support services such as community transport and meals on wheels.

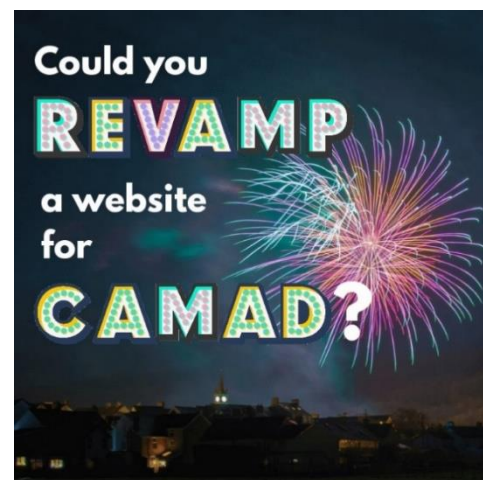
CAMAD's manager, Linda, has noticed that the footfall of volunteers coming to them in person has much reduced over the past few years as more and more people look online for volunteering opportunities. She was keen to find volunteers to help CAMAD update their publicity, both online and offline. CAMAD has a website but staff don't currently have the capability to update it. They also don't have a strong social media presence, relying on staff to use their personal profiles to share information.

What happened?

Two online volunteers were recruited for CAMAD via Volunteering Wales, one to design posters and leaflets, and another to update their website.

Neither of the volunteers was based locally to Machynlleth however and Linda realised that she had too many reservations about working with volunteers remotely.

Linda says she felt that communicating with a volunteer online, especially someone not familiar with the local area, would take a lot more staff time than supporting a volunteer on site. CAMAD decided not to pursue online volunteering for the time being. The volunteers were offered alternative placements.



Next steps

Having realised that they aren't yet ready to involve fully online volunteers, CAMAD have found a different solution to fill one of their digital skills gaps. They have recruited a local volunteer through the youth service, who will work on updating their leaflets from home but will also be able to come into the office.

Lessons learned

Linda identified a lack of capacity as the main barrier for CAMAD to involving online volunteers and a belief that dedicated staff time would be needed. This has not been the experience of others involved in the project though and more work may need to be done to connect organisations with others on a similar digital journey, to help boost confidence.

Online volunteers may be seen as a solution to digital skills gaps, but a certain level of digital skill and confidence within organisations is necessary in order to support someone working remotely. It is possible that many organisations need in person digital support themselves before they can feel ready to work with online volunteers. Linda acknowledges that outdated IT systems and practices can frustrate CAMAD's work at times. Following several recent outages, she is currently applying for funding in order to purchase new equipment for the organisation. Digital development is not a high priority though.

6.5 Teme Valley Environment Group (TVEG)

Background

TVEG is a community group working on various different projects around environmental sustainability in the Knighton area. Their chair, Nicola, got in touch to see if they needed help with publicity for the group, designing a leaflet and posters, setting up social media accounts and updating their website. As happens with many small organisations, their website had been set up by a group member who was no longer involved, so the group no longer had the skills to manage it beyond adding basic updates. Nicola hoped that advertising for online volunteers would be a way to tap into skills they hadn't been able to find in their volunteers locally.

What happened?

TVEG came late to the project and no specific volunteering opportunities had yet been advertised for them. When CAMAD realised they wouldn't be able to support a remote volunteer to work on their website, Heloise was asked if she would consider doing a similar volunteer role for another organisation. Nicola jumped at the chance of a ready volunteer and they were put in touch with each other.

Nicola offered to visit Heloise initially to talk through what was needed and they have continued their collaboration in this way, sometimes online, sometimes in person, and are making progress with the website. Nicola says she is learning a lot herself and feeling supported by her volunteer.

Lessons learned

In contrast to the previous case studies, here a known volunteer was matched to an organisation who needed her skills, rather than applying to a role they were advertising. Flexibility on the part of both volunteer and host organisation was important in making this work.

For some volunteer skills such as website design, it would be interesting to look further into the feasibility of having a Powys wide online volunteer 'pool' rather than recruiting to individual vacancies.



Similarly to Dave and Alex at RENEW, it has also been important to Nicola and Heloise to meet in person to get to know each other, rather than having a purely online relationship.

6.6 Social Media Volunteers

As well as the core group of organisations group piloting online volunteering, various other PAVO member organisations got in touch over the course of the project, to ask for advice on finding online volunteers. By far the most common role that these organisations were looking to fill was that of social media volunteer.

Two of the project group members also wanted to recruit social media volunteers. This has proven difficult so far, though there are some lessons to be learnt from their experience.

The Bracken Trust

The Bracken Trust is a cancer support charity based in Llandrindod Wells. They have a lot of experience with managing volunteering onsite, having some 60 volunteers, some of whom have volunteered for years. The Trust are in the process of reviewing and revising their volunteer systems and are keen to try new ways of involving people.

As the Bracken Trust had recently started new outreach programmes in other areas of Powys they were keen to improve promotion of their services. They were looking to find volunteers to help them promote their services via social media and their website, and also to set up an online booking system for their fundraising events.

Both tasks were developed into role descriptions by the project officer and advertised via Volunteering Wales and PAVO social media.

Two volunteers expressed interest in the social media role, though neither eventually took it up. It is interesting to note though that both volunteers had previously been either supported by or a supporter of the work of the Bracken Trust, indicating that it may be most effective for organisations to look for volunteers among their current supporters and contacts. This has worked for other organisations such as RENEW, who found someone to set up their Facebook page from within their current volunteers.

Credu

Credu supports carers and their families in Powys. In contrast to many other groups, Credu's staff are confident to use social media themselves. However, time capacity is a major issue and staff find it difficult to prioritise areas like their website and social media.

Thought staff have been keen to try innovative ways of working and to contribute ideas to the project, time capacity has also been a barrier to recruiting volunteers.

7 Digital Skills in the third sector

Following the experience and feedback received from participants in the project, some time was spent researching levels of digital skills in the third sector.

7.1 PAVO member survey and feedback

An email survey of PAVO member organisations was conducted over November and December 2019, with questions on organisations' current use of and confidence with IT, and their support needs. The survey was sent out to 875 PAVO contacts. 49 responses, from 47 organisations were received. Though an email survey, by its nature, favours responses from those with a level of comfort online working and an interest in the topic, the survey was designed to be straightforward enough for anyone to complete with only basic digital skills.

The results of the survey are illustrated in the appendices, but the main findings are:

- The majority of organisations have the basics in place, that is a website, email and social media, though many recognise they don't use these to their full potential.
- Only a minority use digital technology for things like fundraising, volunteer recruitment, consultation or offering any digital services.
- Just over 80% of respondents said that they would like some support with digital technology, which the top areas being online fundraising, social media and digital communications.
- There was a mixture of ideas about how this support would be best delivered, including through training, guidance, 1:1 support, mentoring and volunteers.
- A lack of capacity in terms of time, finance and skills was raised by many. Often organisations rely on the knowledge of one or two members to keep things running.

Participants in a workshop at PAVO's October 2019 AGM also highlighted the use of digital technology as a key area for more support and development. The following comments were recorded in response to the question of what support would be needed by the third sector, now and in the future:

Wi-Fi/phone reception/digital enablement
Better use of social media
Engagement with new (future) technology
IT isn't being used effectively in a digital age
Develop population's use of IT
Investment in IT development
Support for more digital and new technology

Though feedback from groups is that they see a need for support in this area, it can be difficult to engage the sector in discussions on digital. A recent Powys Volunteer Involvers Network meeting on digital platforms was cancelled due to lack of interest. More research is needed to find out how best to engage the sector in moving forward with digital.

7.2 The wider picture

There is widespread across the UK that a large proportion of the third sector is getting left behind in terms of online and digital working. For example, a 2019 'Charity Digital Skills Report' found that most charities (68%) rate their board's digital skills as low or having room for improvement.²²

The UK government's 'Essential digital skills framework' defines the digital skills adults need to safely benefit from, participate in and contribute to the digital world.²³ In 2019 Lloyds Bank, the Federation of Small Businesses, Be the Business and Google worked with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and its Digital Skills Partnership to develop an equivalent framework for the charity sector.²⁴

Essential Digital Skills framework for charities:

- **Communicating:** Communicate, interact, collaborate, share and connect with others
- **Creating:** Engage with communities and create basic digital content
- **Managing Information:** Find, manage and store digital information and content
- **Problem Solving:** Increase independence and confidence by solving problems using digital tools and finding solutions
- **Transacting:** Purchase and sell goods and services, organise finances, register for and use Government Digital Services
- **Cybersecurity:** Protect the organisation and its customers from fraud and other harms through appropriate policies and best practice

The 2019 Lloyds Bank Charity Digital Index report found that 56% of charities in the UK have all six essential digital skills, and that 13% showed almost no digital activity at all in 2019.²⁵

There is recognition that intensive support is needed to help the sector move forward in this area, and that charities won't be able to take advantage of the digital world without addressing the basics.²⁶ For example, the National Lottery Heritage Fund recently launched their Digital Skills for Heritage initiative, which includes a 'Digital Confidence Fund' to help organisations who "are only just beginning to get to grips with how technology can help them".²⁷

More and more relevant processes and information for the third sector are moving to online only formats. Examples include many grant application processes, and the new Wales Safeguarding Procedures.²⁸

Digital exclusion of individuals amplifies social exclusion and inequalities by reducing access to services and support. Similarly, organisations which don't have digital skills and confidence miss out on opportunities, one of which is access to the potential of online volunteers. At the time of writing, the Covid-19 pandemic is making this switch to digital working ever more urgent.

8 Observations and issues raised

8.1 Opportunities for online volunteers

Organisations see online volunteering mainly as a way to fill their digital skills gaps

It is clear that many organisations in Powys are struggling with essential digital skills. Skills relating to digital communication, websites and social media are in short supply among staff and trustees and this is the most common reason expressed by organisations for wanting to involve online volunteers.

There is potential for online volunteering to fill some of these skill gaps, as has been seen with RENEW and TVEG. The facility to advertise via a national platform – the Volunteering Wales website – has meant organisations have been able to draw in skills, even from outside Powys. These skills do often exist among current volunteers and supporters as well and organisations may benefit from help to audit their existing skill resources before looking further afield.

While online volunteers can bring more advanced technical skills, it's essential that organisations have at least a basic understanding of these skills, in order to effectively support their volunteers. Feedback from volunteers is that clear guidance is especially important when working remotely.

What works:

- Organisation has a clear idea of what they want to achieve with digital, even if they don't know all the technical details of how to get there
- Organisation gets support to put together detailed role descriptions for their volunteers, or uses model roles written by project officer
- Organisation is flexible, keen to support their volunteer and open to learning from them
- Organisation looks among existing volunteers and supporters and find they can take on online roles

What doesn't work:

- Organisation has no understanding of the skills that the role requires or what success would look like
- Organisation advertises a generic role e.g. 'website volunteer' with no background or detail
- Organisation wants to hand over responsibility for their online presence to a volunteer without any knowledge of how to support them

New digital projects and services can provide opportunities for online volunteers

Online volunteers can bring the new energy and experience needed to get digital services off the ground. This has been seen with Powys Befriending Service's new online group, managed by a volunteer with extensive experience of online befriending. Many organisations such as PBS may lack the confidence and skills to start these projects on their own, but could do so with support.

There is more potential here, with increasing numbers of enquiries from organisations received over the course the project and respondents to the PAVO digital skills survey indicating they would like to expand their digital use.

There aren't many opportunities yet for online befrienders in Powys

Although befriending was one of the most common skills offered by online volunteers, befriending organisations in Powys currently tend to offer services only in person or by telephone. From discussions, befriending organisations do see the potential of online volunteering to reach more people more regularly, while also involving a wider range of volunteers.

They are not sure however, about the level of digital skill and internet access among their clients, or how to design these services. It is likely that, as with PBS, intensive support and advice would be needed to help these organisations set up their online services.

Various befriending organisations have also expressed interest in digital volunteers, to help their clients learn how to access the internet. These organisations have been signposted to the Welsh Government's Digital Communities Walesⁱ programme though it is not clear if many have the capacity to organise digital volunteers themselves.

8.2 Recruiting online volunteers:

Volunteer application processes can be unwieldy and difficult to navigate online

Some volunteer placements have been unsuccessful, or have taken a long time to set up, as volunteers have found existing applications processes difficult to comply with. It is important for organisations to review their volunteer policies and processes before starting to recruit online volunteers.

One common problem is that application forms are in a format which is not accessible on all the devices that volunteers usually use to find opportunities, such as smart phones and tablets. Good practice for all volunteering opportunities advertised online is that application forms can also be completed online. In reality this is difficult for many organisations to set up. PBS is looking into moving their application form online using the Google Forms platform.

One volunteer said, "Sometimes it can be hard to know whether to trust lesser known charities/organisations with all the personal information they require during the application process.". Volunteering Wales does not yet allow for a sophisticated online application process but it is possible work could be done to achieve this. Organisations could then handle their volunteer applications via this well-known platform, to assure volunteers that their information is secure.

Of course, it is important to balance ease and accessibility against the need to ensure that appropriate checks are in place for volunteers. If the volunteer's role will include complex document handling, then perhaps a complex application process is more relevant.

What works:

- Organisation reviews their application processes to check relevance for online volunteering, adaptations put in place where needed

What doesn't work:

- Application form does not seem to be applicable to online roles. Volunteers get put off
- Application involves a lengthy word document to be first sent to the

ⁱ www.digitalcommunities.gov.wales

- Application process can be completed online and is accessible to all people and devices
- Where delays are necessary, organisation keeps in regular touch with volunteer via their preferred method of communication and gives volunteer clear timescales
- volunteer by email and then filled in and sent back via email again. Document is not accessible on volunteer's phone.
- Volunteer does not hear from an organisation while application is processed and assumes they have been forgotten

Recruiting volunteers from 'anywhere' doesn't suit everyone

The borderless nature of online volunteering widens the pool of skills which organisations can draw from and several organisations have benefitted from attracting volunteers from outside Powys. This works when both the organisation and the volunteer are happy to forge a relationship which is purely online. For those for whom this is a new idea, it can help to meet in person at first, where practical. Use of video calling may also help with this and organisations have indicated they would like to make more use of this, with support and training.

Distance can be a worry for volunteers themselves. For example, one befriending volunteer expressed her concern that clients in Powys would not want to engage from her as she is based in England. She needed some support and reassurance that this would not be the case. Again, use of video calling via Skype helped to build trust between volunteer and organisation.

It's important for organisations to consider from the outset what background and knowledge they need in a volunteer and to make this clear, but equally not to dismiss the possibility of help from outside their area. Where local knowledge is a pre-requisite for a role, using existing networks to promote opportunities is important. Experience indicates that organisations looking for social media volunteers are more likely to find them closer to home.

What works:

- Organisation welcomes volunteers with different perspectives
- Organisation is realistic about what they need from a volunteer and how comfortable they feel working online
- Where practical, a face to face meeting helps to create a trusting relationship
- Video calling and other technology is used effectively to break down barriers of distance

What doesn't work:

- Organisation is not clear about what they are looking for in a volunteer
- Organisation is not comfortable or confident to work effectively with a volunteer online

8.3 Supporting online volunteers

Online volunteers need similar support as onsite volunteers

Online volunteers need supervision and support in the same way that all volunteers do. It is important to review and adapt processes as needed, such as supervision meetings and volunteer appreciation activities.

Some organisations are put off by fears that this may take more time and resources than for onsite volunteers. This has not been the experience of other organisations though. For the volunteer, online volunteering saves time which might be spent travelling, so the organisations may well benefit from an increase in productive volunteer hours. It may be helpful to have a platform or network for Powys organisations to share their online successes, to boost confidence among those with doubts.

What works:

- Organisations are realistic about time they need to spend supporting all volunteers, online and offline
- Organisations adapt their processes so that online volunteers receive equivalent support to other volunteers

What doesn't work:

- Organisation sees supporting online volunteers as fundamentally different from supporting other volunteers

Communication is everything!

One experienced online volunteer said, "Fast and efficient communication and clear guidance is a must for online volunteering. It doesn't work when charities or organisations take ages to respond or provide muddled guidance."

All volunteer and organisations have highlighted the importance of regular communication to successful online volunteering experiences. Where issues have arisen they have often been due to a lack of communication. The nature of online relationships is often that they can seem less 'real' than in person relationships. It is important for organisations to give as much attention to their online volunteers as to their onsite volunteers, and this may require a culture shift for some.

It can also be difficult for organisations to be flexible and respond to online volunteers when they are not confident with all the different ways in which people communicate online nowadays. There has been a reluctance among participating organisations to try new ways of communication but there is also recognition that this is necessary. Organisations are open to training and support on this.

What works:

- Organisation communicates as often with online volunteers as with onsite volunteers (if not more often)
- Where staff work part time and can only respond to queries at certain times, this is made clear to volunteers
- Organisation is willing to try different communication methods and adapt to their volunteers' preferences.
- Organisation understands that digital communications can sometimes be unreliable and regularly follows up with their volunteer.

What doesn't work:

- Organisation does not prioritise responding to online volunteers
- Organisation does not follow up on missed messages

9 Conclusions and recommendations

This project set out to look into the feasibility of online volunteering in Powys. Six PAVO member organisations were involved in setting up pilot opportunities for online volunteers, they met with varying degrees of success.

Online volunteering offers many advantages both for volunteers and for organisations, especially in a rural county such as Powys, where distance is often a barrier. It is clear that there are volunteers in Powys looking for opportunities to volunteer online, and indeed volunteers from outside of Powys who are willing and able to help Powys based organisations over the internet. Volunteers have many skills to share, among them digital skills such as using social media, and social skills such as befriending. Volunteers don't currently see very many formalised opportunities to volunteer online in Powys, though this is starting to change.

As is the case nationally, parts of the third sector in Powys are not confident to use all the essential digital skills they need to take advantage of the online world. These gaps have been observed mainly in the skills of communicating and creating, these were also identified, along with transacting, by respondents to a survey of PAVO members.

Organisations see the potential of online volunteers to help them fill some of these gaps. Volunteers can certainly bring new skills into an organisation, as has been seen with RENEW, and may be an essential part of moving forward with them. Organisations do however need certain digital skills in order to support online volunteers. They need to be confident and flexible online communicators, willing and able to form working relationships with volunteers who they may never meet in person.

A little intensive support at the right time can help to nurture these relationships and lead to successful online volunteer placements. It can also kick-start new digital projects, such as Powys Befriending Service Online, creating opportunities for more volunteers

Online volunteering offers opportunities, both for volunteers and for organisations. Without support though, there is a risk that the third sector in Powys will be left behind in an increasingly digital world. This has been brought into sharp focus by the sudden enforced switch to digital working many are experiencing due to Covid 19.

Recommendations for further work:

1. Continue the promotion of online volunteering opportunities from Powys, Wales and further afield via Powys Volunteer Centre and the Powys Online Volunteer Network, as part of offering a diverse range of opportunities to Powys volunteers.
2. Work with Volunteering Wales to offer tools for organisations to make their volunteer application and recruitment processes more convenient and accessible for all volunteers.
3. Trial a digital mentoring service for the third sector in Powys, with two strands:
 - Support with the basics - to help every organisation achieve all six skills of the Essential Digital Skills Framework.
 - Intensive support for organisations who wish to start digital projects and services, creating more opportunities for online volunteers.
4. In particular, grow the number of opportunities for volunteers who wish to offer online befriending. More work is needed, in partnership with befriending

organisations, to understand the level of demand and the implications for further support on digital inclusion for individuals.

5. Develop a Digital Powys Network of organisations working on their digital skills and on digital inclusion, to share experience and inspiration, with the aim of increasing digital confidence across Powys.

Top tips for involving online volunteers:

- Get support with your digital skills – online volunteers can help you with digital projects but you need to know the basics in order to support them.
- Put together a detailed role description for your volunteer – be clear about what you want them to achieve
- Review your application process and policies – do they make sense for online volunteering? Is your application form accessible to all?
- Clear and regular communication is vital - find out what method of communications suit your volunteers best. Remember that online communications are not always reliable and make the effort to keep in touch regularly
- Make your online volunteers feel part of your organisation – think about how you will show your appreciation and celebrate their achievements, and how you can include them in your volunteer community.

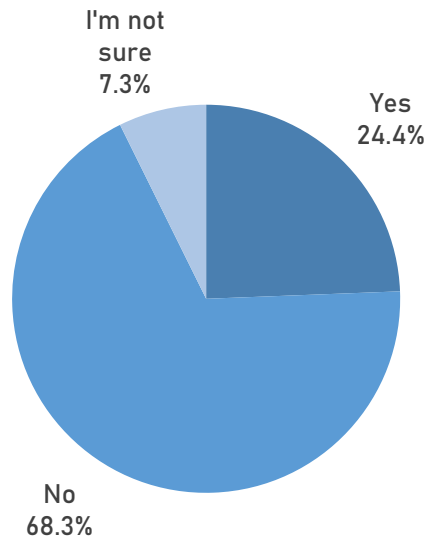


10 Appendices

10.1 Volunteer survey results

41 volunteer responses were gathered over the period April to December 2019.

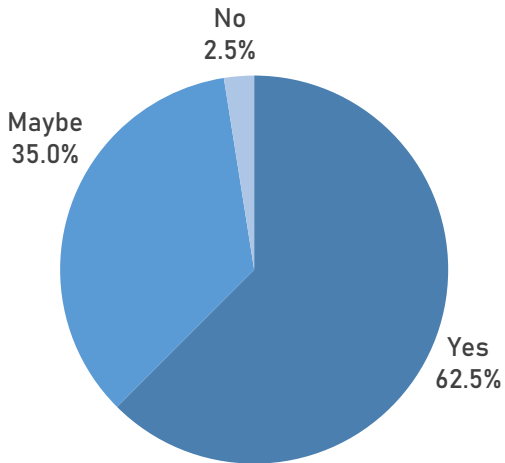
Q1 Have you ever done any volunteering online?



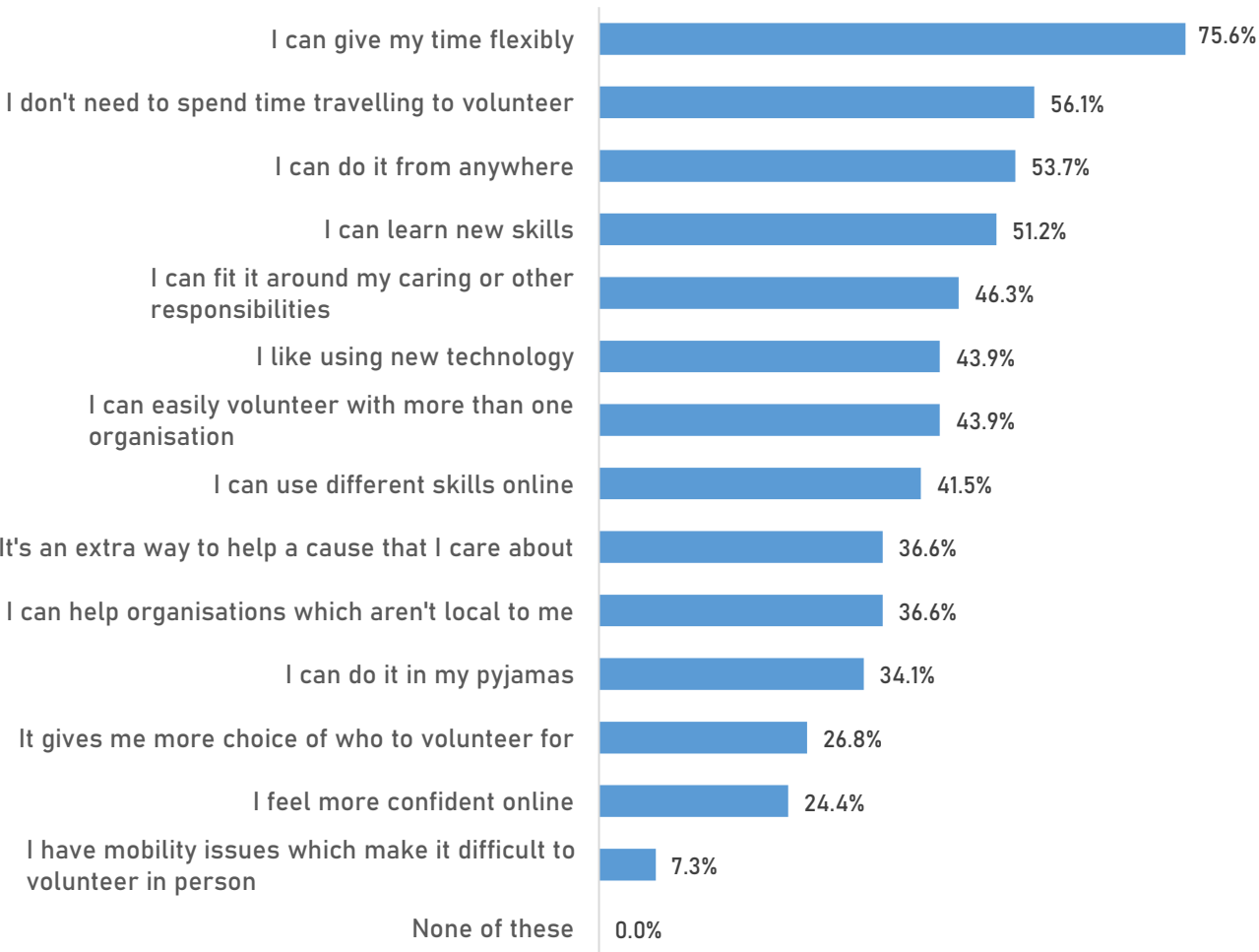
Q2 If you have, what sorts of tasks did you do?

Administration duties, Minutes, Rosters
Digital volunteer for older people
Duke of Edinburgh, social media accounts, fundraising
Helping to develop an online catalogue for Denbighshire Archives in Ruthin
I used to be a secretary of a local charity in my local town. That involved taking minutes at meetings and then typing them ready for the next meeting for all members.
information gathering
Mentor, befriending, bereavement counsellor, forum administrator and moderator, mental health text chat listener.
Moderate a face book page and admin
online social media help
Sharing social media
social media promotion mailchimp (supporter database) grant applications
Transcription, data entry, research, social media, proofreading, general admin

Q3 Are you interested in volunteering online in the future?



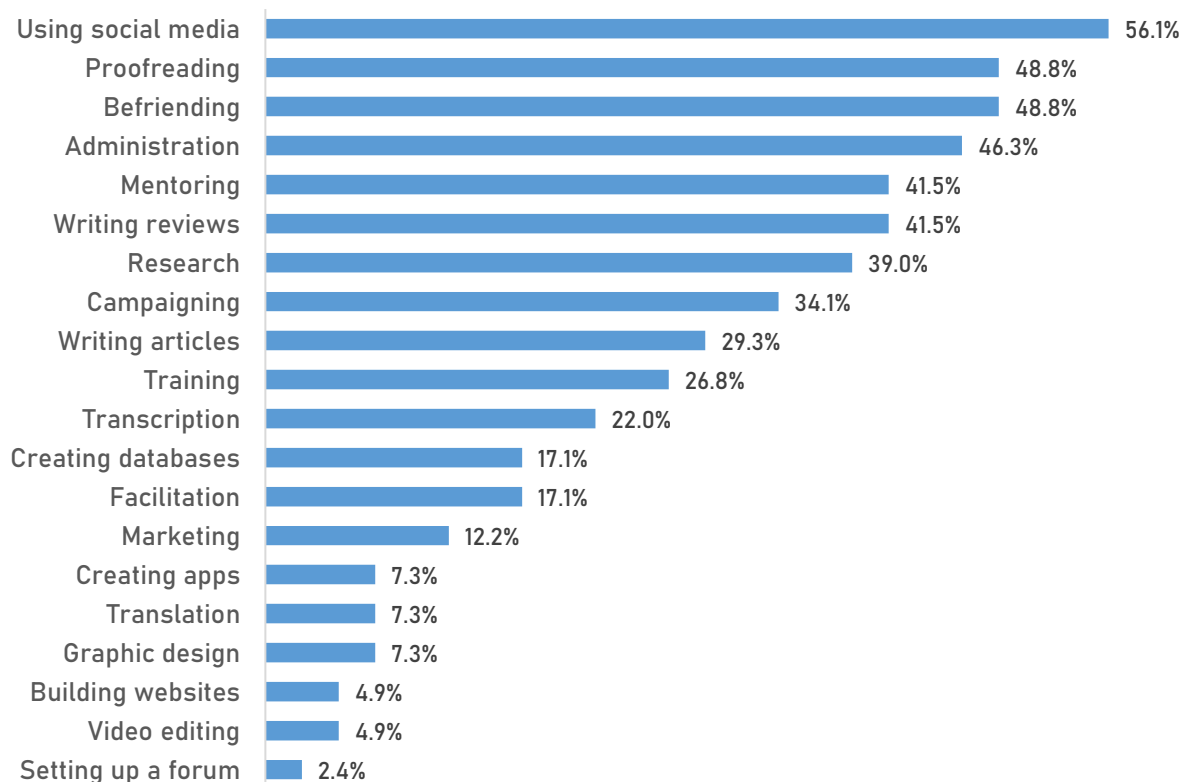
Q4 Which aspects of volunteering online appeal to you?



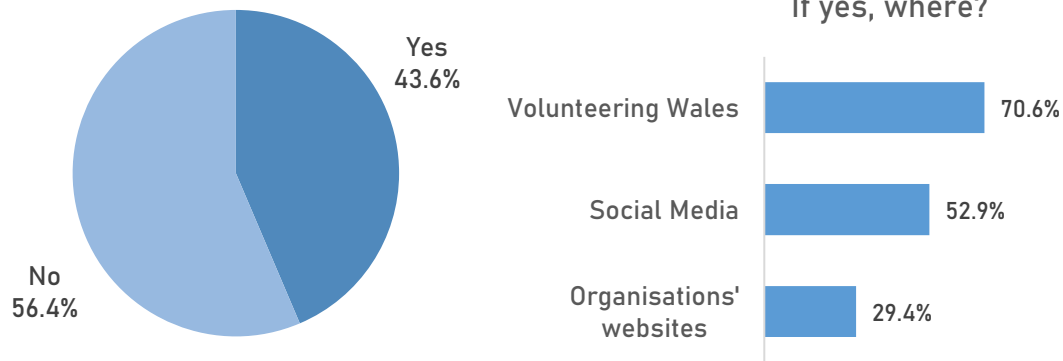
Q5 Do you have any concerns about volunteering online?

I have a slow internet connection which can hamper things.
if it is safe
isolation getting things wrong
my lap top is very old
Not at this time. Would need to know more about it.
Part of the purpose of volunteering is to meet people and make connections. This May not happen with online approaches.
Security and using personal information
Sometimes it can be hard to know whether to trust lesser known charities/organisations with all the personal information they require during the application process.
The safety aspect
Yes. Confidentiality and lack of digital literacy skills to do the job effectively.
No none I feel it is a very good idea to be able to help with the aid of technology
none, as long as it is safe, secure and worthwhile.
Not a concern, just a comment. Skype etc. can help bring the teamwork feeling into online volunteering.
[16 people simply answered No and 10 left it blank]

Q6 What skills could you offer as an online volunteer?



Q7 Have you seen any opportunities for online volunteers advertised?



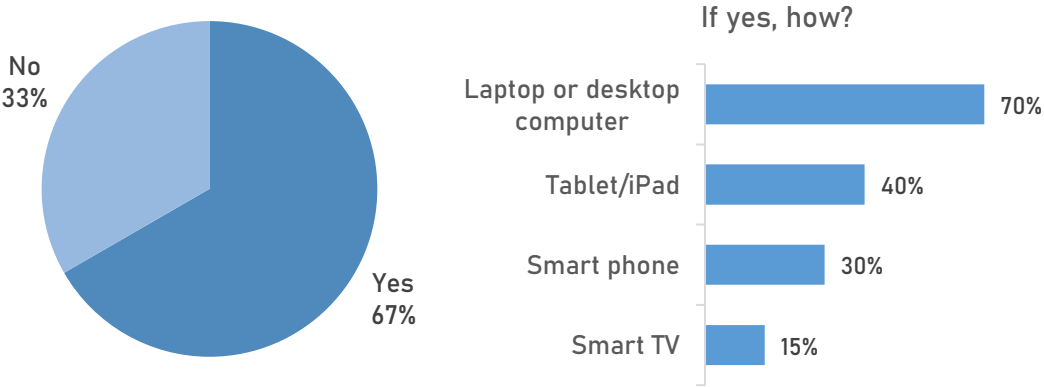
Q8 Do you have any other comments about the idea, or your experience, of volunteering online?

- Downside is you won't meet people like you do when volunteering in person, but lots of upsides of flexibility of time and number of places you could help out in.
- Fantastic idea. Potential for so many opportunities. Great for people who live in rural areas who wish to volunteer their time.
- Fast and efficient communication and clear guidance is a must for online volunteering. It doesn't work when charities/organisations take ages to respond or provide muddled guidance.
- Give them an incentive
- I had never thought of doing this locally. It would be good if there was a special internet volunteer database.
- I have just completed my level 3 counselling skills
- I really like this idea. I think Live Chat is a great tool to give advice and guidance. I'm more comfortable sorting a problem this way. I'd like to find other ways of volunteering and collaborating online.
- I think it's a great way to help in many ways to promote the development of charities and the great work they do!! and give them praise for all the hard work that goes on behind closed doors that we don't see!!
- It is the perfect way to involve everyone, young and old as everyone has a skill to offer others, they just need the opportunity.
- It's great to learn of the opportunities on-line for people to use their skills as volunteers
- need to build in good support and feedback for volunteer and organisation needs to assure itself of skills; also safeguarding and reputation management issues with social media
- No experience but I like the idea
- Sounds like a great idea
- Supervision and how this would work if it is only online that you are volunteering
- With social isolation being a major factor being able to befriend/ support online is really great for myself and others.
- Would be a great opportunity and pleasure to be able to connect with people via mobile and on line
- Easy to get information about roles and have a definitive task

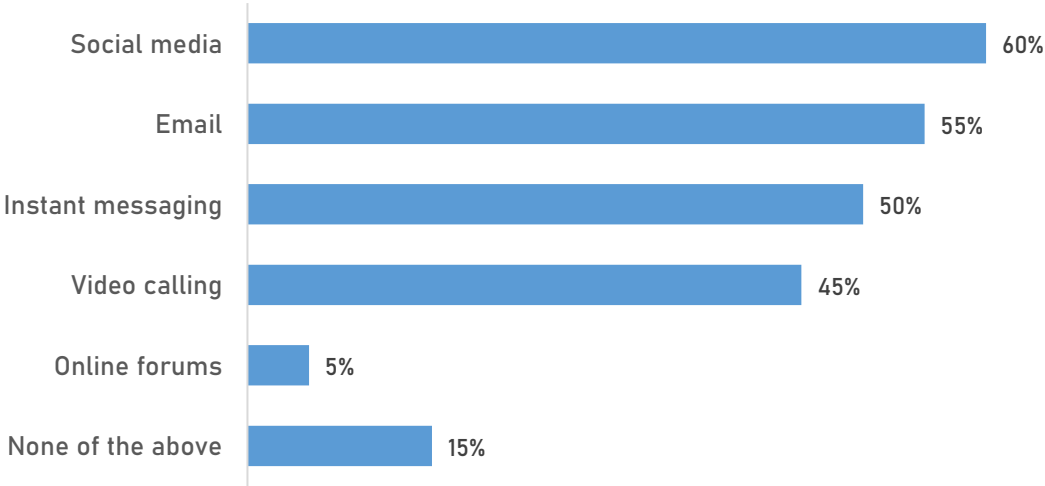
10.2 Befriending Service digital survey results

30 responses from attendees at Befriending groups, December 2019.

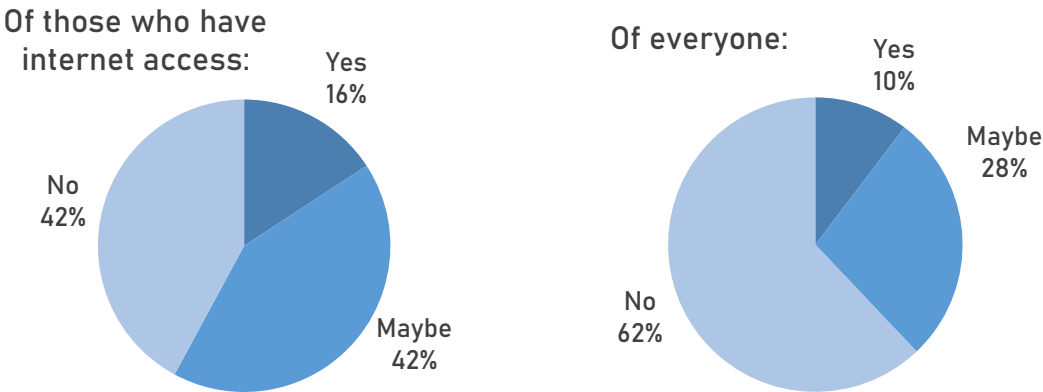
Q1 Do you have internet access in your home?



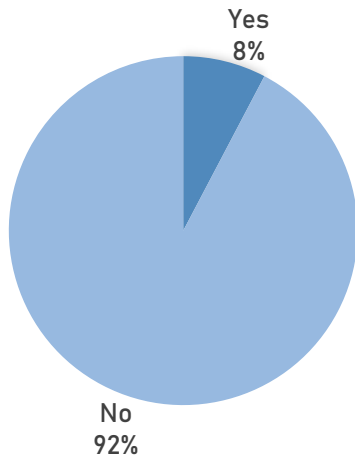
Q2 Do you use any of the following? [Of those who said they have access to the internet]



Q3 Would you be interested in taking part in befriending services over the internet?



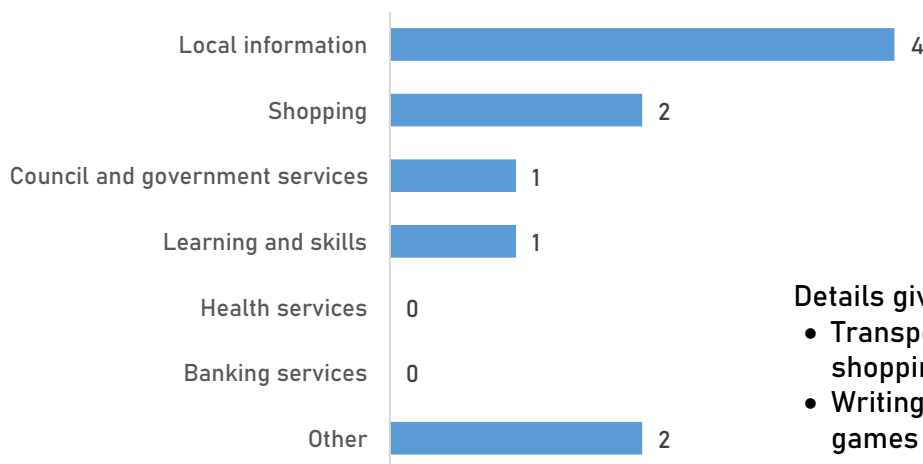
Q4 Would you like support to help you access internet communications like email, video calling and social media?



Q5 If yes, what sort of support would help you?

- One to one instruction - probably many times!
- Time needed to learn how to use any of these properly

Q6 Would you be interested in getting support to help you access any other services on the internet? [There were only four responses to this question]



- Details given under 'Other':
- Transport and help with shopping
 - Writing and printing, some games for brain power

Q7 What sort of support would help you?

Guidance on typical pitfalls - scammers etc.

Q8 Do you have any other comments about the internet and your use of it, or is there anything else you'd like to know about it?

My daughter helps me with all of this because of my poor eyesight.

Have a general distrust of internet - but realise I will have to start using it.

I can't concentrate enough to do this since my stroke

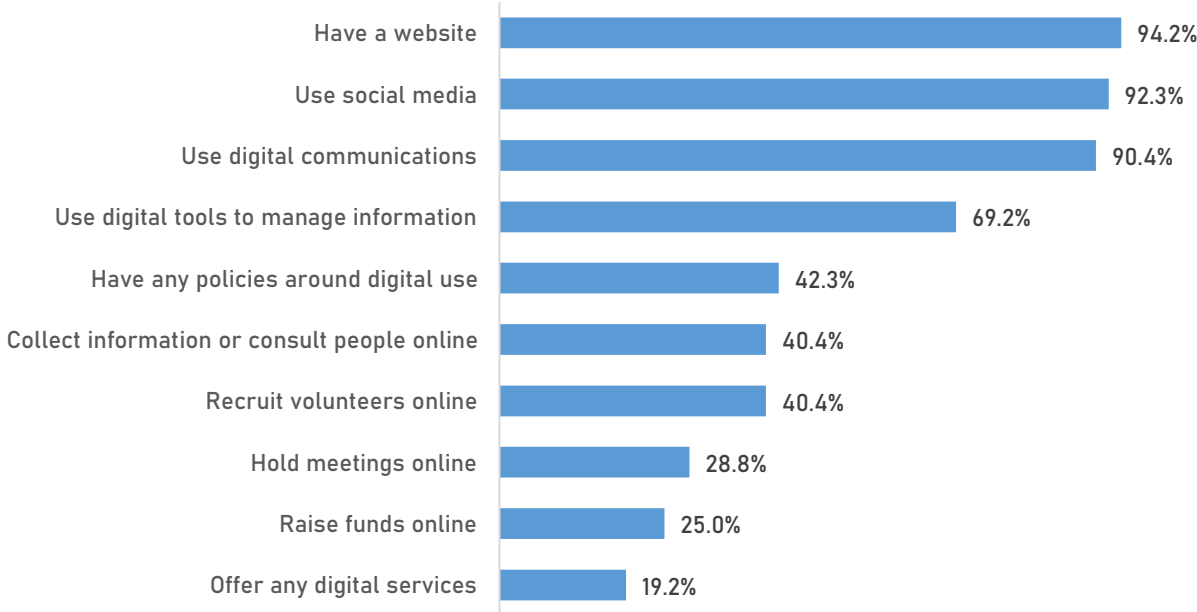
It's frightening and new and beyond me

I think organisations are relying too much on the internet

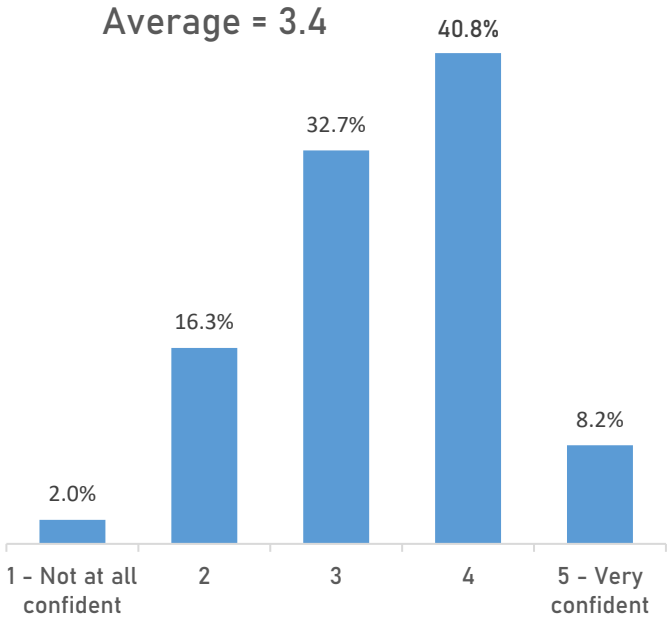
10.3PAVO members digital survey results

49 responses, from 47 organisations, gathered November and December 2019.

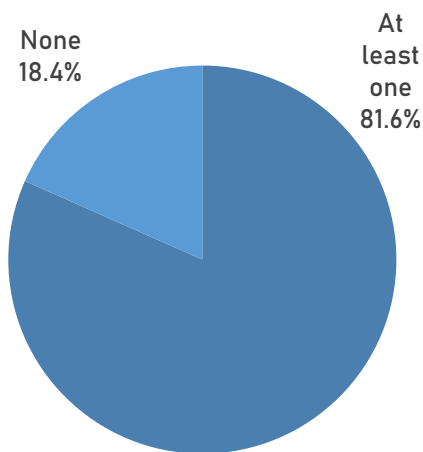
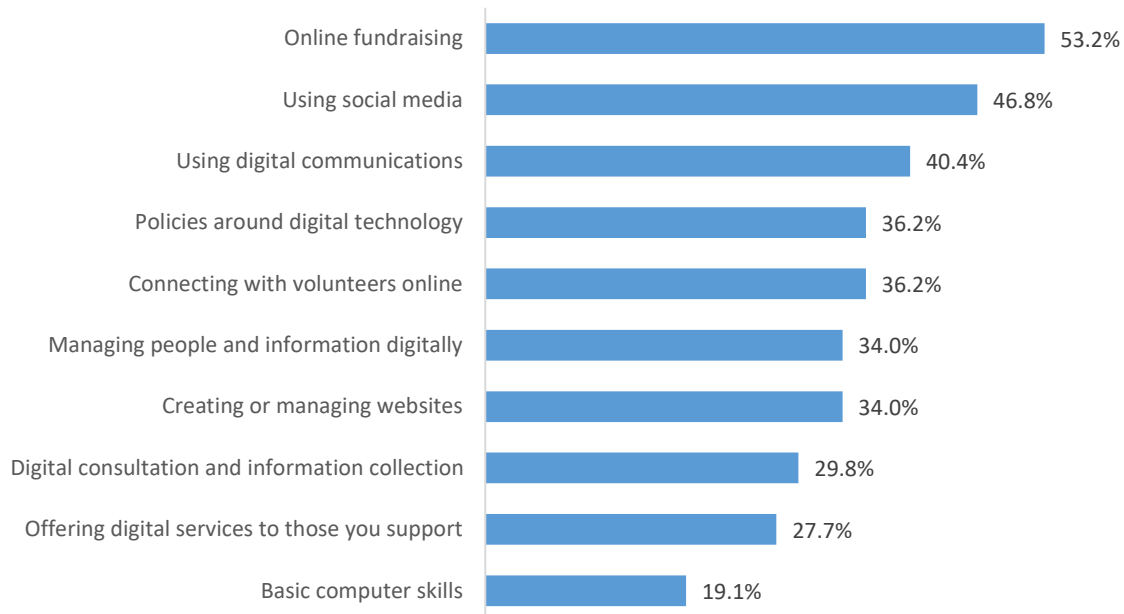
Q1 Does your organisation...?



Q2 Overall, how confident is your organisation to use digital technology and ways of working?



Q3 Do you think that your organisation would benefit from support with any of the following?



Q4 What kinds of support would help you?

We are looking to develop online resources for teachers and pilot delivery of streamed classes online over the next few years. if there was any expertise PAVO could offer in these two areas, we would welcome it!

Workshops on policy, effective and efficient digital services, communicating to diverse audiences

Training to increase confidence when using social media etc. and how to offer digital services to those we support

Not sure at moment. Maybe ideas for doing some things better. Also, ensuring good data practice.

Having someone do the digital work!

A training session

website design, optimisation and maintenance use of social media

Use of online timesheets for payroll. Advanced Excel functions.

Facebook skills and WhatsApp

We are a small community hall with website and Facebook page. One of our committee members is responsible for these and more knowledgeable than the rest of us. It would be useful to know how else we may use digital communication to enhance the services we provide.

Setting up and maintaining a website including costs

Training in intermediate computer skills e.g. Excel, Word, Publisher, PowerPoint

We would probably benefit from training in policies on the use of digital technology, digital databases, online fundraising and online recruitment of volunteers.

training in social media, databases, community engagement and membership recruitment

Information, training sessions

Guide to funding sources

Using Mail chimp

Information to read. Face to Face training is best, but can rarely be attended, as can't leave the workplace. Mentoring on site would be ideal!

We have volunteers willing to help run the club but they either do not own a computer or laptop or aren't confident using a computer. Being able to borrow a laptop?

We use Google Drive for sharing documents among Committee members but we don't find it very easy. Is there a better method - which we can get for free? (Dropbox was fine until we had too much material).

Help with updating our website would be helpful.

Developing financial targets, deliverable through online activity

Workshops

Help to get volunteers to join

Like a simple way to store all our admin documents and event photos etc. online with shared access for officers, trying to use Dropbox but people say it's too complicated

We have a website which is desperately in need of a facelift but have no longer got any members with the skills to do it.

Interested in anything you can offer

Graphic design and skills on social media and setting up photo libraries and how to use them

We are already liaising with experienced people to help us with the IT areas that we have identified need addressing

Volunteers to take on digital roles, training for the volunteers if needed. Setting up basics, accounts, software etc. drop in IT support?

Q5 Do you have any other comments about your organisation's use of digital technology, how it helps you, any barriers that you face with it, or support that you need?

We are finding that although we had hoped that the use of digital would improve efficiency, particularly in thinking about selling products (in our case dance classes) online, we do find the online shop cumbersome and adds further layers to our work. We also struggle to maintain an up to date Welsh version of our site - we use a mixture of online translation services and real life translators and it is very unwieldy and nowhere near as "live" as the English site.

As all of our record keeping is digitally based we are fairly good at keeping up with that but finding volunteers that are really confident in using social media and other digital communication is difficult.

We primarily use email, Facebook (different pages for different projects as well as main organisational one, and a main website. Email can be clunky in some ways but is accessible to a large number of people, including those who don't (and perhaps don't want to) use social media.

Insufficient time and interest to devote to developing this aspect when there's so much else to do and we are all volunteers with limited time available anyway.

none of the organisation's 'officers' are up-to-date with the latest digital techniques, particularly facilities for website design/maintenance, online 'form filling' and safe use of social media

We don't use it as much as we could

Some of our trustees do not use any sort of social media apart from email which means that we are restricted in ways to communicate e.g. some of use WhatsApp, online calendars etc. but others do not. Ditto for fundraising and paying online - some of use PayPal online banking etc. others do not and are wary.

As a domestic abuse support provider it is important we are aware how technology/apps can be used to abuse, for example stalking. This is an issue when technology changes at such a speed

As we face funding challenges there is less time to look into how digital technology could help our work and raising of funds.

Barriers we face are creating policies, reaching new audiences and finding content

I find social media very useful but some Cllrs are wary of using it at times, it would be useful to have some info or training on how social media can be used to engage with the local community regularly

Getting the right balance between face to face & digital

Main barriers are lack of capacity in both time and manpower - social media, better databases, updated website etc. become a luxury.

For me - protecting scanned documents? Document passwords. Storing data securely. For club - Several of our learning disabled athletes have no access to a computer. Powys People First help but maybe NPTC would also be a supportive place where they could drop in and access emails?

Financing of this work (same as many, many others!)

When problems or questions arise it can be difficult to find the answers by googling it due to confusion over terminology. There is no one to ask.

One of our committee members is familiar with digital technology and has set up our website and maintains it.

Ongoing help would be very useful

We wouldn't really survive without Facebook- we have a private group page on there and use it to communicate with all members and promote events locally, it's great for keeping in touch with other groups too

Always open to learn

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