

Learning from the 50+ volunteering programme to support COVID-19 recovery: age-friendly and inclusive volunteering

This briefing brings together lessons from the 50+ volunteering programme with other research and resources to explore how volunteering can be developed and sustained in an age-friendly and inclusive way to support recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. This is particularly relevant now as many volunteers aged 50+ had to step back from their volunteering during COVID-19. As organisations bring back their volunteers or look to engage new ones, these lessons will be useful in efforts to sustain the engagement of those aged 50+ and ensure volunteering is age-friendly and inclusive.

Introduction

The 50+ volunteering programme was a government initiative focused on harnessing the skills and experiences of those aged 50 and over. It was made up of four innovation funds, managed by the innovation foundation [Nesta](#), and an [evidence review](#) undertaken by the [Centre for Ageing Better](#).

The programme supported 39 organisations to test and develop ideas or grow existing models involving volunteers aged 50+. Projects from a wide range of fields, backgrounds and sizes were involved, from those growing young people's mentoring projects to new emerging ideas testing the involvement of 50+ volunteers in community fraud prevention. A key focus for the programme was creating volunteering opportunities for those aged 50+ in and alongside public services, enabling them to use their skills and experiences, creating a 'habit for volunteering' and bringing benefits for volunteers and communities.

To identify the learning from the programme and evaluate its impact, [Nottingham Trent University](#) (NTU) undertook an evaluation, including 48 qualitative interviews with grantees, in-depth case studies, analysis of monitoring data and a review of learning partner evaluations which were commissioned by the funded projects.

The [evaluation](#) brought together learning from the funded organisations on engaging 50+ volunteers and growing projects that involve older volunteers. Some of this learning has been captured by Nesta's [Age of Inclusion](#) guide which identifies some of the approaches and ideas which worked well for the funded projects (Deacon and Holman, 2020). The Centre for Ageing Better also produced [Helping Out: Taking an inclusive approach to](#)

[engaging older volunteers](#); a tool to help organisations engage those 50+. This briefing builds on this work to focus on two specific areas.

- **Enabling flexibility**– useful lessons can be learnt from how organisations made their volunteering offers flexible to help those aged 50+ fit volunteering around their lives. Flexibility has been identified as a key area to support returning volunteers and sustain volunteer involvement as part of COVID-19 recovery (see [Stuart et al, 2021](#)).
- **Harnessing the strengths, skills and experiences of volunteers** - this was a key focus of the 50+ programme and the evaluation provides useful learning for developing opportunities for 50+ volunteers.

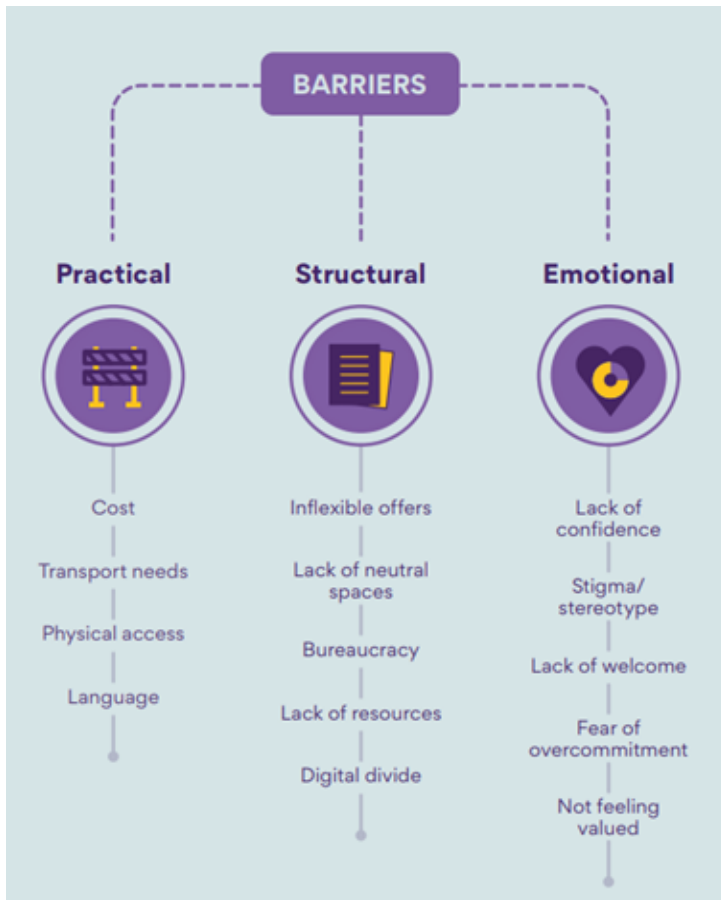
These two areas were specifically identified as important for developing older people's volunteering by the [Commission on the Voluntary Sector and Ageing](#) which highlighted the need for 'new types of flexible, skilled volunteer roles'. They are also two of the principles for age-friendly and inclusive volunteering identified by the Centre for Ageing Better ([Jopling and Jones, 2018](#)).

About 50+ volunteering

Pre-COVID-19

Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic around two thirds of those aged 50+ got involved in some form of volunteering at least once a year. Those aged 65 to 74 were more likely than any other age group to get involved regularly at least once a month, with half participating on a regular basis ([DCMS, 2020](#)). Evidence, however, suggests that there are substantial inequalities in access to volunteering ([Southby and South, 2016](#)). Those from lower socio-economic groups and those with poor health are significantly less likely to get involved in formal volunteering through groups, clubs and organisations. These factors are found to be "more significant than age in determining whether or not those aged 50+ are involved in formal volunteering" ([Jopling and Jones, 2018](#), p25). However, individuals in poorer health and from lower socio-economic groups are those individuals who potentially have the most to gain from being involved ([Stuart et al, 2020](#)). Research, for example, shows greater gains in wellbeing amongst volunteers with lower household incomes compared to those with higher incomes (Lawton and Watt, 2019).

Figure 1: Barriers to volunteering



A range of barriers can prevent someone from getting involved in volunteering or staying involved. Research points to the multiple life transitions amongst those age 50+ which may lead to them withdrawing from volunteering, including ill health ([Jopling and Jones, 2018](#)). Some of the key barriers to volunteering for those aged 50+ are highlighted in Figure 1. Many of these are also relevant to other groups, however, research suggests that some barriers are particularly pertinent to older people, including emotional barriers such as stigma and perceived lack of skills (see

[Southby and South, 2016](#))

(Source: [Centre for Ageing Better, 2020](#))

During COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has, however, significantly affected patterns of volunteering and the barriers people face, including for those aged 50+ ([NTU et al, 2021](#)). The onset of COVID-19 led to an upsurge in informal neighbourly help and mutual aid, and many volunteers aged 50+ got involved in these informal ways, including taking on new caring roles for those outside their household ([Chatzi et al, 2020](#)). Others, however, had to pause or stop their volunteering during the pandemic. Findings from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) found that amongst those aged 50+ who volunteered before COVID-19, 18% reduced their activity and 43% stopped completely during the early stages of the pandemic ([Chatzi et al, 2020](#)). The Community Life Survey ([DCMS, 2021](#)), which explores volunteering rates up to March 2021, reports a decline in formal volunteering through groups, clubs and organisations across all age groups. Some of the largest drops in regular formal volunteering (at least once a month), however, are amongst those aged 65 and over, with little increase in regular informal volunteering amongst this age group. This means that many older people

(as well as other age groups) have been missing out on the benefits of volunteering during COVID-19.

For many, participation can help to enhance well-being; bringing a sense of purpose and social connection (see [Stuart et al, 2020](#)). Added to this has been the loneliness, social isolation and decline in mental health associated with the pandemic, lockdowns and shielding for older people ([Chatzi and Nazroo, 2021](#); [Hu and Qian, 2021](#)). It is currently unclear how many of those aged 50+ who had to step back from volunteering have now returned to their roles or plan to do so.

COVID-19 has exacerbated some of the existing barriers and created new ones for volunteers. Prior to the pandemic the financial costs of volunteering, such as travel costs, have been identified as a barrier to volunteering amongst older volunteers, preventing some people from getting involved or staying involved ([Southby and South, 2016](#)). Research suggests that this barrier may have been exacerbated by the pandemic with a significant number of those aged 50+ adversely affected financially by COVID-19. Nearly a third of those aged 50+ in work, for example, saw their financial situation worsen, and over a third reported a fall in their household income ([Crawford, 2021](#)).

The pandemic has also created a bigger digital divide with digital inequality particularly acute amongst those who are older and those in lower socio-economic groups ([Ofcom, 2021](#)). Some 50+ volunteers have been able to move their volunteering activities online enabling them to stay involved, including some of those who were shielding ([Donahue et al, 2021](#)). Other people aged 50+, however, have not had access to technology, lack the confidence or skills to use technology or do not want to volunteer in this way ([Phillipson et al, 2021](#)). Older people are less likely, for example, to have access to the internet at home; 18% of over-64s do not have access ([Ofcom, 2021](#)) and there are reportedly low levels of awareness of where to access help with digital skills amongst those aged 50+. The Centre for Ageing Better ([2021](#)) found that despite the availability of support from local groups, only one in eight of those aged 50 to 70 in their study were aware of an organisation providing digital support.

Age-friendly and inclusive volunteering

As part of the 50 + volunteering programme, the Centre for Ageing Better developed a framework for age-friendly and inclusive volunteering ([Jopling and Jones, 2018](#)). This focuses on breaking down barriers for those 50+ and includes six key principles:

Age-friendly, inclusive volunteering is:

- Flexible and responsive
- Enabled and supportive
- Sociable and connected
- Valued and appreciated
- Meaningful and purposeful
- Makes good use of volunteers' strengths.

This framework highlights the importance of 'age friendly' and inclusive opportunities which help to overcome the barriers people aged 50+ experience to volunteering, "*ensuring that everyone is able to contribute throughout their life course*". The [Centre's review](#) highlights that 'older people's volunteering programmes' can exacerbate barriers to volunteering. Consequently, the 50+ volunteering programme shifted its focus towards 'age friendly and inclusive volunteering' part way through the programme, moving away from targets for mobilising only 50+ volunteers.

This briefing focuses on two of the principles identified above: a) flexible and responsive; and b) makes good use of volunteers' strengths.

Flexible volunteering

The experiences of the projects funded through the 50+ programme provide useful learning about developing volunteering opportunities and offers that are flexible and responsive. Grantees found that like other age groups, 50+ volunteers experience considerable demands on their time including work, family, caring responsibilities and other community commitments. They talked about the importance of recognising these constraints on volunteers aged 50+ and providing flexible opportunities where possible, which volunteers could fit around their other commitments.

Other research also highlights the importance of flexibility for volunteers. [Time Well Spent](#), the most recent national survey on the volunteer experience, identified flexibility as one of eight key features of a quality volunteer experience ([McGarvey et al, 2019](#)). This should consider how volunteers can give their time and how it fits around their personal circumstances. Amongst those who do not volunteer but are open to getting involved, this study found that 50% said having flexibility with their time committed would most encourage them to participate and 40% said they would want flexibility with the way they give their help. Older people were more likely than younger people to be interested in opportunities that involved carrying out activities in a time and place of their choosing (43% compared to 34%). [The Centre for Ageing Better's review](#) also identified how those aged 50+ want flexibility with

the processes involved, including recruitment and onboarding processes, as well as the opportunity to step back from volunteering if their life circumstances change.

Amongst the 50+ volunteering projects, offering flexibility in terms of the time committed wasn't always possible and depended on the nature of the volunteer role. Grantees spoke of getting the right balance between offering volunteers flexibility but also making sure their roles are meaningful and purposeful and that volunteers feel connected to the project or wider organisation.

For those who were able to offer flexibility, this was approached in different ways:

“We use an online platform to support and manage our volunteers, which gives the individual autonomy to decide what they would like to do and when... which I think lots of volunteers prefer as it gives them the control to fit that around their work or the grandparent duties or you know, other volunteering that they may do, so the structure is decided by them. And I think that works really well with the older volunteer age range” (Grantee interview)

Case study: Kinship

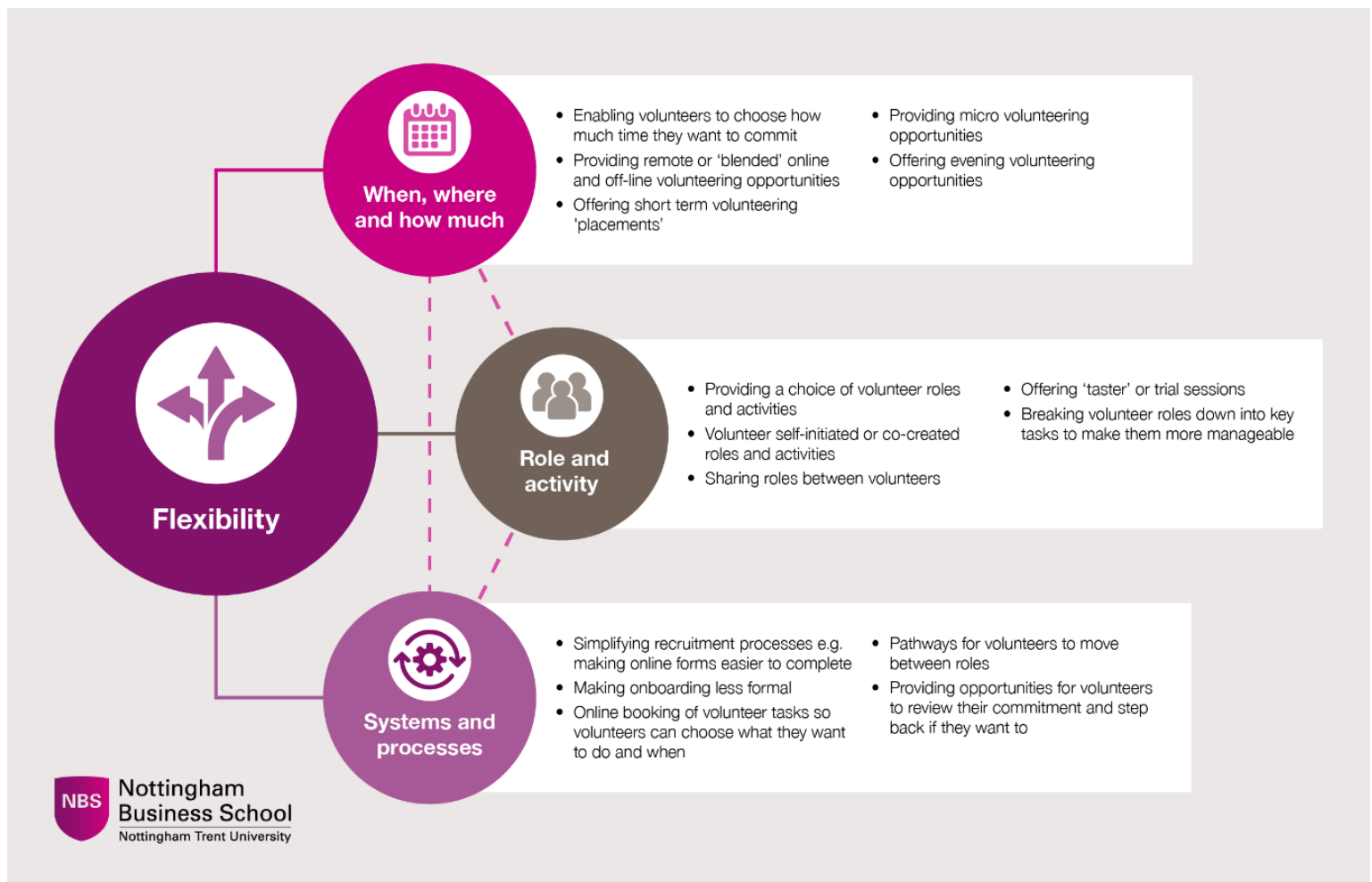
[Kinship](#) (formerly Grandparents Plus) wanted to reduce barriers and open-up opportunities for kinship carers to get involved as volunteers in leading and supporting peer-to-peer groups. Kinship carers are relatives or friends who raise a child or children full-time, usually because their parents are not able to care for them. Staff found that changing the terminology they used made a significant difference to engagement in volunteering amongst kinship carers. While reluctant to register as 'volunteers' because they didn't feel they had the time, kinship carers were more open to registering as a 'friend'. When the roles were broken down, kinship carers recognised that they were already doing many of those voluntary activities within the groups.

“When you're approaching people and saying will you volunteer, most of the carers will say – no way, I've got too much on. But if you say are you willing to belong to this group, it might be bringing tea and coffee or biscuits or just setting up the room most people will say – oh yeah, that's fine. So, then it's talking about it and saying well actually that is volunteering, it's not asking for very much, it's just asking a little bit of your time and then for me, you get much more of an uptake”

Offering role flexibility is also seen as important in helping break down the barriers to volunteering. Kinship carers often have complex lives and the volunteering opportunities developed need to recognise and reflect their needs and personal circumstances. A key element of this for Kinship is the development of self-initiated roles and activities, with kinship carers identifying what they would like to do and what they are able to do as volunteers.

Figure 2 shows the different approaches taken by grantees to make their volunteering offers more flexible. These often linked to reducing the barriers for 50+ volunteers identified in Figure 1, including bureaucracy, lack of confidence and fear of over commitment.

Figure 2: Different approaches to flexibility taken by grantees



During COVID-19 some organisations have taken more informal and flexible approaches to volunteering, some of which reflect the practices in figure 2 (see [Stuart et al, 2021](#)). Research points to a 'blending and braiding' of formality and informality as organisations and

communities responded to the pandemic ([Wilson et al, 2020](#)). Some organisations became more flexible in their approach to volunteering, in part through necessity ([NTU et al 2021](#)). Some have simplified and reduced the bureaucracy involved in recruiting and onboarding volunteers, making the process easier and more flexible ([Stuart et al. 2021](#)). There has been a rise in digital volunteering with some activities and roles moving online allowing volunteers to participate from home ([NTU et al. 2021](#)). There are examples of organisations providing digital skills training to volunteers to enable them to engage online. Some organisations have shifted to using volunteering apps and new online platforms, enabling volunteers to identify and choose roles that they want to do at a time that suits them. There are also examples of organisations coming together to enable volunteers to move between volunteer roles and organisations ([Stuart et al. 2021](#)).

Harnessing strengths, skills and experiences

A key focus of the 50+ volunteering programme was on how organisations and public services can better tap into the skills and experiences of volunteers aged 50+. Without harnessing this it is argued that “*communities will continue to miss out on the talents they bring*” ([Jopling and Jones, 2018](#)).

Consistent with the findings from our evaluation, the [Centre for Ageing Better’s review](#) found that for those aged 50+ making good use of pre-existing skills while volunteering is more important than developing new ones. They found that while some older volunteers value developing new skills, those aged 50+ are keen for this to happen “in the context of a recognition of their wider capabilities” (p65).

Wider research has found that older volunteers are also more likely to report using their skills and experiences when volunteering compared to younger people. [Time Well Spent](#) found that three in five of those aged 55 and over said they use their existing professional skills and experiences when volunteering. Just over half say they use other non-professional skills while volunteering ([McGarvey et al, 2019](#)). In terms of encouraging those aged 50+ to get involved, [Time Well Spent](#) found that volunteering opportunities of most interest were those that make use of existing skills or experiences.

To explore this more fully, the 50+ volunteering programme evaluation captured the views of 50+ volunteers and grantees on how volunteering enabled volunteers to use their skills and experiences and the difference this made to them.

Volunteers felt they were able to bring their existing skills, knowledge, and experiences to their volunteering roles. 50+ volunteers used skills and knowledge from their current or previous professions including teaching, nursing, care work, and from the emergency

services. For some, their roles resonated with other things they had done or areas that interested them in their professional lives:

“In a previous life I was a school teacher, no longer. But I think that’s really helped me to engage with my mentee. And, because the sort of things we are doing is picking a location, going to a museum or something like that, where I spend a lot of time talking and explaining things to him... for me, that’s kind of what I was wanting to do really, to teach and share knowledge. So, you know, it’s an extension of that” (Volunteer interview)

Both grantees and 50+ volunteers commented on how volunteering helped volunteers to feel they were putting their skills to ‘good use’ and how they didn’t want to waste those experiences. For some, these came from the lived experiences of being a parent or carer or from life events. 50+ volunteers commented on how they wanted to use these experiences in a positive way. The inter-generational aspect of this was also highlighted and how through volunteering, skills and knowledge could be passed onto different generations in a mutually beneficial way:

“It’s all about people using the skills and experience that they have and I think that’s a really, really important thing for us that we can do is to help older people see that the life experience, the work experience that they have, really can be of value to young people. You can really make that kind of bridge between older people and young people” (Grantee interview)

Grantees, however, also learnt they should not make assumptions that all 50+ volunteers want to use and build on their existing skills; some intentionally opted for volunteering roles which were unrelated to other areas of their life.

At times, projects also needed to support and work with 50+ volunteers to help them fully recognise the skills and experiences they were able to offer. Grantees reported that some 50+ volunteers lacked the confidence to take on new roles, in particular those involving leading others.

Funded projects took a number of different approaches to ensure roles and volunteering opportunities made good use of the skills and experiences of 50+ volunteers. These included:

- Encouraging volunteers to share information about their prior experiences as part of the recruitment process
- Matching roles to volunteers’ skills and experiences
- Developing volunteer roles and activities around individuals’ skills

- Co-creating roles and volunteer activities with volunteers
- Providing support to volunteers to help them develop confidence to take on new roles and responsibilities
- Creating 'pathways' to ensure volunteers can progress into new roles, for example from being an advocate to leading a group

Case study: Grandmentors

The [Grandmentors programme](#) (co-created and run by Volunteering Matters) provides practical and emotional support to young people transitioning from care. Trained volunteer mentors (most of whom are aged 50 and over) are matched with a young person, typically aged 16 to 24. They meet regularly on a one-to-one basis for at least 6 months. With funding through the 50+ volunteering programme, the Grandmentors model was replicated in 5 new local authority areas reaching 275 new mentees.

The evaluation explored the impact of volunteering on mentors aged 50+. Mentors spoke of how rewarding it was to be a mentor, to help others and to see first-hand the positive changes in young people and their lives. The programme has helped them feel that they have something valuable to offer young people, giving them an important sense of purpose.

“And I think maintaining a link with a teenager and being helpful to them, at the same time for me is really rewarding because it just kind of makes me feel I've got something to offer rather than just doing my own thing, you know, for my own benefit” (Mentor focus group)

Mentors spoke of how they felt that through volunteering they were using their experiences and skill sets, drawing on other experiences in their lives. Mentoring helped them use and build on their experiences or continue to pursue their interests, including engaging with young people. For some, their previous experiences (for example of volunteering as a scout leader or as a social worker) has helped to shape how they are working with their mentee:

“Having that non-judgemental approach and saying, I really am not judging here, you know, things are as they are. But in order for you to cope with it, we have to understand it and work through it. But this isn't a judgement... But actually it really helps, being in the care sector, understanding mental health, understanding, you know, the impact mental health can have on you” (Mentor interview)

During COVID-19, many volunteers, including those aged 50+, had to step back from their volunteering ([DCMS, 2021](#)), meaning they were unable to use their skills, knowledge and experiences in the same way. Organisations have been less able to harness the skills of

older volunteers during the pandemic and many of those aged 50+ have missed out on the benefits that this brings.

Some organisations have been able to pivot and adapt during COVID-19, continuing to harness the skills of 50+ volunteers through digital or remote volunteering. There were examples of projects funded through the 50+ programme that set up new telephone befriending pairings involving older volunteers and volunteer peer support programmes which moved online with training for 50+ volunteers in using zoom.

Conclusions

While in many ways the pandemic has opened-up new opportunities for involvement in communities, it has also meant many people have had to pause their participation, including those aged 50+. As we move towards recovery, bringing back volunteers and sustaining the engagement of 50+ volunteers will be an important part of organisations' efforts.

Opportunities that are age-friendly and inclusive will be a key part of this.

This briefing has explored key lessons from the 50+ volunteering programme to help organisations develop their programmes and opportunities in ways that are flexible and that harness the skills and experiences of volunteers aged 50+.

The evaluation highlights that developing a flexible offer for volunteers may not just be about the amount of time committed but also the type of volunteer role or activity and the processes and systems for involving volunteers. As we move towards recovery and as organisations look to re-introduce volunteers, building flexibility into volunteering programmes will be important and there are many examples of flexible approaches adopted and adapted during the pandemic which can be built on. This could include:

- Testing out 'blended' approaches to volunteering, combining digital and face to face engagement; giving volunteers more choice over where they participate, including from home if appropriate
- Providing opportunities for volunteers to choose how much time they want to commit and when
- Offering different kinds of volunteering opportunities, enabling volunteers to move between them and move out of them if they want to. This could include family volunteering opportunities and micro-volunteering
- Connecting volunteers with one another to enable them to share roles, enabling more flexibility

- Reviewing recruitment and on-boarding processes and ensuring flexibility is built in. This may include onboarding volunteers virtually if this is preferred and enabling volunteers to test out roles

The findings from the evaluation also highlight how organisations funded through the 50+ volunteering programme have sought to harness the skills and experiences of 50+ volunteers. COVID-19 has impacted on people's ability to apply these skills through volunteering and wider research suggests that the pandemic may have exacerbated some of the existing barriers to volunteering for those aged 50+, including confidence ([Phillipson et al, 2021](#)) and ageist attitudes ([Fraser et al, 2020](#)).

Approaches to help harness the skills and experiences of 50+ volunteers as we move towards recovery could include:

- Additional support for volunteers to help build confidence as they return, including support to help them recognise the skills and experiences they continue to bring to volunteering.
- Co-creating volunteer roles and activities with volunteers
- Recognition of the skills and experiences volunteers may have gained during COVID-19, as well as the ways their personal circumstances may have changed. Volunteers might want to bring different skills to their volunteering or change what they do.

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