

NNRF REMOTE VOLUNTEERING REPORT

14 APRIL 2021



INTRODUCTION

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This report examines how volunteering in refugee charities has changed during the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, since charities were forced to shut their doors. It explores the challenges, the positives and innovations that have occurred that have made it possible to keep these vital services running. The fundamental outcome that we found is that volunteers are immensely proud of their charities and the solutions that they found to the challenge of remote volunteering. Whilst remote volunteering in this sector is not always the easiest and at times can be incredibly challenging and frustrating, many were glad to be able to volunteer in some capacity and still be able to help people.

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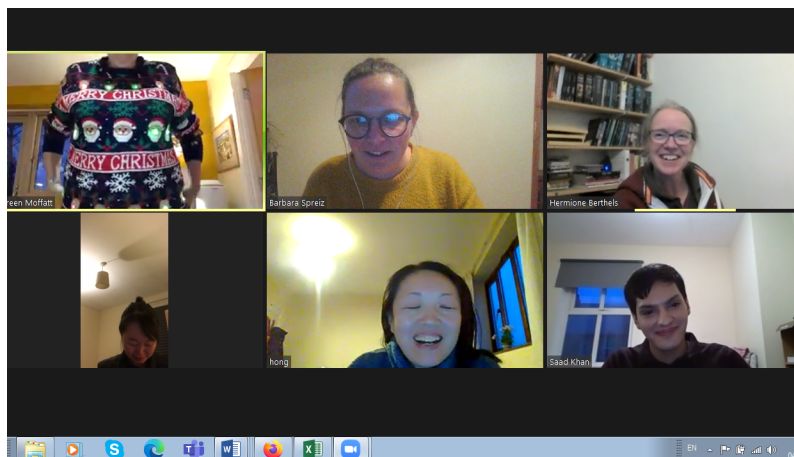


This research was conducted through a survey, as well as follow up interviews with seven of the participants. Twenty- six volunteers responded to the survey, the age groups of our participants ranged from age 18 to 65+, with up to 50% of our participants aged 65+. Of those interviewed, 80% had been volunteering prior to the pandemic for some this year marks their 20th year with their charity! However, 20% of surveyed volunteers joined during the COVID pandemic. Seven refugee charities in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire, responded to the survey, reporting that most volunteering was done remotely, unless face to face was unavoidable. Phone calls, WhatsApp and Zoom were the main channels Organisations used to deliver their services to clients. This has given us a broad range of insights into how remote volunteering has gone.

There were a broad range of roles which the volunteers carried out which all adapted to remote volunteering for example; general advice clinics all went online and on the phone, food groups became food delivery with conversations on door stops. English lessons were taught on zoom, whatsapp and telephone calls with many benefitting from 1 to 1 lessons. Befriending was done over the phone or on socially distanced walks.

Disclaimer:

We appreciate that those who responded to our survey, which informed this subsequent report only form a small portion of volunteers within refugee charities. 26 volunteers responded, 7 Organisations and 1 client. Therefore, the findings in this report may not be representative and accurate of everyone's views.



VOLUNTEER CHALLENGES

REMOTE VOLUNTEERING FOR REFUGEE CHARITIES IS NOT A NATURAL PROGRESSION DUE TO ITS UNIQUE NATURE; LANGUAGE BARRIER, FORMS TO BE FILLED IN, THINGS ARE HARDER WHEN PEOPLE CANNOT BE THERE PHYSICALLY. AS SUCH THIS HAS PRESENTED VOLUNTEERS WITH CHALLENGES:

This is attributable to the lack of physical contact which makes it harder to build relationships with people. They miss being able to talk to people in real life before and after sessions, there is limited opportunity for socialising during remote volunteering and people are really missing the direct contact and support. As well as this volunteers have to deal with the home distractions and having a suitable space to discuss confidential matters.

31%

31% OF VOLUNTEERS REPORTED THAT REMOTE VOLUNTEERING IS NOT AS SATISFYING AS FACE TO FACE IS.

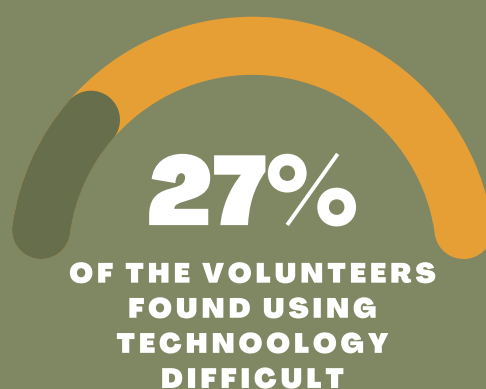


“I did feel less motivated to volunteer as it is less enjoyable over the phone and not seeing people. But I know that it’s worthwhile to do so as these people still need help” Jane



In addition to this, 31% of volunteers find it harder to assist clients as they cannot use non-verbal communication, like facial expressions and gestures, particularly where the client is not confident with conversing in English. This not only made it difficult for volunteers to understand the client's issue, but it also made it difficult to know if the clients understood the information conveyed to them. Incidental things also crop up when it's face to face so some issues might not be caught. As well as making it harder to convey compassion and care especially when faces could not be seen during phone calls

The above was compounded by the fact that 27% of volunteers found using the technology that makes remote volunteering possible difficult to use. This was attributed to a number of reasons; limited technological experience, limited equipment, poor IT skills, not being able to ask someone physically to help, and lack of confidence. Moreover, when equipment is provided it is often older and clunky which can make sending out texts and using them frustrating and the task less enjoyable. Most of the recipients reported some level of difficulty in using the technology.



Delivering the services was also challenging. Teaching via WhatsApp, zoom or the phone is difficult, especially for those volunteers who joined during the pandemic with limited experience in teaching. General advice clinics often involve three way calls which are complex to set up and waits for interpreters can be long. And despite support always being available it is no longer immediate in the way it is when volunteers are physically there.



23% of volunteers reported that challenges arose due to clients' limited and unreliable access to technology in terms of WIFI and devices. There were persistent problems with clients not having enough data to complete all their learning for lessons, service dropping out during lessons, or not having a device that could access the services. Volunteers also reported that attending zoom lessons uses a lot of data up. This resulted in less clients attending classes and services.

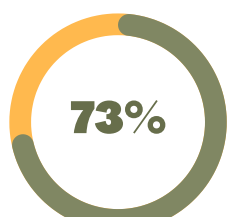
Due to the shielding from COVID some individuals could not volunteer in their role due the way in which it had changed. Their families did not want them to volunteer as they were worried for their safety, which is completely understandable. For example, doing delivery drop offs. This sadly meant that they could no longer volunteer until they have been vaccinated but are eager to resume once they have been.



VOLUNTEER POSITIVES



Even though it was tough and not an ideal situation there were many positive takeaways, without remote volunteering charities would have had to largely shut down and wouldn't have been able to function. Volunteers and Charities alike have shown huge resilience and determination to keep delivering incredible services.



Highly Motivated



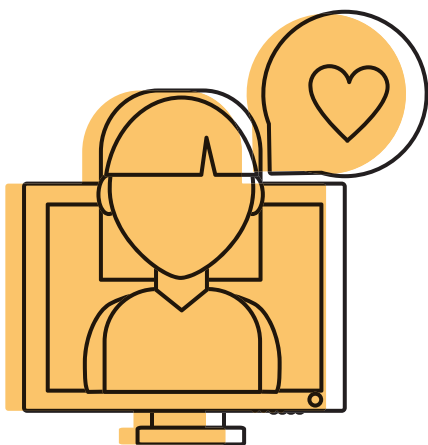
No Change in Motivation



A Little Less Motivated

When asked about why the volunteers chose to volunteer, there were a broad range of responses some were looking for something useful to do, while others were seeking to make a difference to the community and others sought to do something meaningful during the pandemic. It is positive to know that these reasons still persist for most of the volunteers and in many cases persist more so and to a greater extent. Most volunteers remain highly motivated. There has been an increase in the number of people wanting to volunteer across refugee charities.

“They have found good work arounds to problems since there is no one to show you how to do things directly. The things I cannot do like fill in the forms, I send the charity the answers and they fill the form in for me”
- Jan

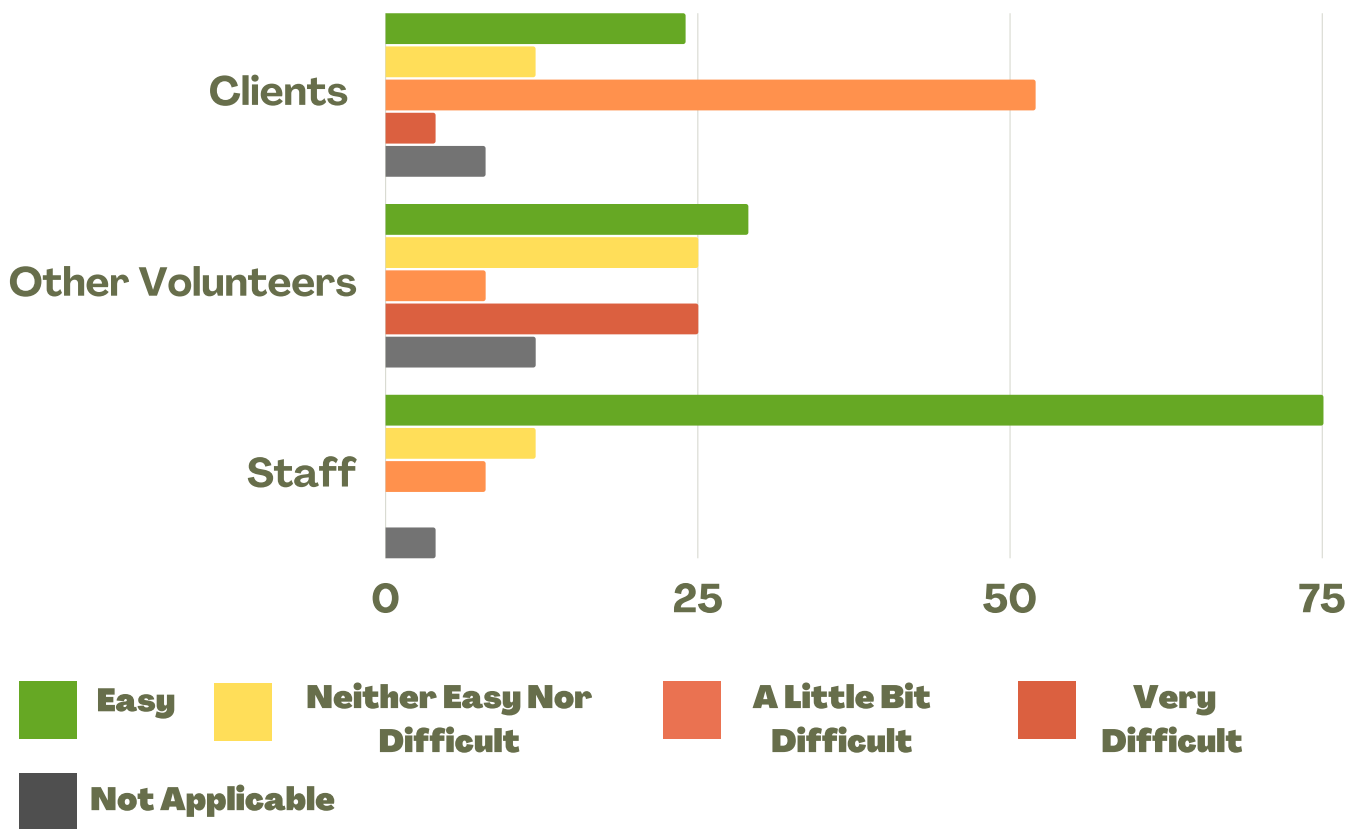


“The staff have done a wonderful job of setting up a remote advice service and I am very proud to have been part of it. Great to learn new skills e.g. taking part in three way telephone conversations with a client and an interpreter. Doing things I wouldn't have imagined I'd ever do this time last year. Got to keep up with the technology!”

-Jan

This sentiment has been echoed by many of the volunteers. Another said NNRF have been great and so is the support. The system works well you just have to be patient

HOW VOLUNTEERS FOUND ENGAGING WITH:



“I have found it less stressful and less rushed as clients are not left waiting in the hall, instead they can wait in the comfort of their own homes”

-Jan



“As a student when I had to move home during the first lockdown and have subsequently gone home for the holidays, I have been able to continue volunteering”

- Miriam



“Initially, I couldn't volunteer with NNRF when they moved online due to other reasons. When I could return the technology was a put off and it was intimidating as I couldn't figure out how the volunteering would work remotely and I'd lost my confidence. But they couldn't have set up a better system. I am very well supported. And now when I have to sit and wait I can knit.”

- Helena

“It felt great to be delivering presents off at the front door, people were delighted to be remembered, as the messenger I got to enjoy that feeling” -Jonathon

In cases where volunteers have faced challenges with some technologies, they were able to switch to other roles. For instance, one volunteer found telephone advice work too difficult and demotivating; they made a decision to switch to telephone befriending only. This has allowed them to not only continue volunteering despite the challenges brought by remote volunteering, but they also report that they have been able to build relationships with clients in ways they couldn't before.

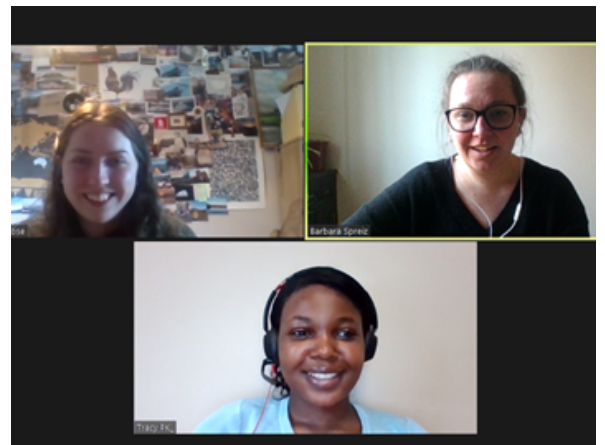


For those who are in Nottingham remote volunteering has meant that there is no travelling to volunteer, this means that for some they don't have to get up as early to travel in and out saving what can be a 16 mile round trip. Volunteers can help from the comfort of their own homes; out in the sunshine - on the rare day it's nice - and have as many coffees as their heart desires.

"THE GRANTS COMMITTEE WORKS BETTER ON ZOOM, WE ALL KNOW EACH OTHER AND IT'S ABOUT GETTING BUSINESS DONE INSTEAD OF TRYING TO BUILD A RAPPORT WITH A CLIENT. WE MEET ONCE A MONTH AND IT SAVES ME A 30 MIN TRIP TO COME TO THE FORUM. I'D BE HAPPY FOR THIS TO STAY ONLINE"
- JANE



Furthermore, remote volunteering means that more people can volunteer. Remote volunteering offers greater flexibility and accessibility. Thus, this increases the amount of people who can volunteer. Moreover, it provides the opportunity for those who are moving out of Nottingham, like students to continue volunteering.



REMOTE TEACHING

Volunteers expressed that they were able to interact with clients on a more personal level through one-to-one support. This was particularly the case with volunteers who conducted 1 to 1 lesson, as opposed to group face to face teachings. This also resulted in lessons being tailored to individuals needs and interests making them more effective and beneficial. :



“CLASSES BEFORE COVID WERE MADE UP OF GROUPS UP OF 6- 15. NOW WE HAVE TO DO IT 1-1, I HAVE FOUND THIS FAR MORE REWARDING. I CAN PERSONALISE THE TEACHING; THEY ARE ALL VERY INDIVIDUAL PEOPLE, WITH DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS. IT HAS MADE THE TEACHING MUCH MORE PERSONAL. I HAVE BEEN ABLE TO LEARN FROM THEM AS WELL, WHICH WOULDN'T HAVE HAPPENED OTHERWISE DUE TO TIME CONSTRAINTS. FURTHERMORE, EVERYONE LEARNS AT DIFFERENT SPEEDS, IN GROUP LESSONS IT'S NOT POSSIBLE TO STOP FOR EVERY PERSON BUT WHEN IT'S 1-1 WE CAN GO AT THEIR PACE.”- SUE

Moreover, volunteers have been able to create online resources which can be kept and used for many years to come. In the future they can be downloaded at centres and sent home with people, enriching their learning.



"A refugee doctor needed to pass their English proficiency test. They were able to be matched with a suitable ESOL tutor and given 1-1. support that wouldn't have otherwise happened" - Sue



"1-1 volunteering works well and is less intimidating than big group lessons"-
Miriam

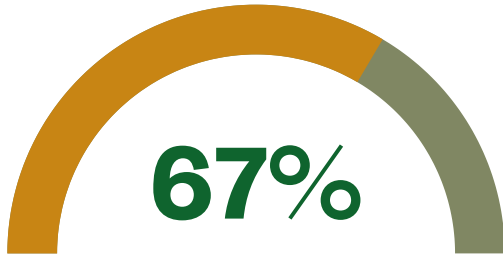


"Lessons can be recorded and set out to more people, this means that if people can't make a lesson they can catch up and don't lose out"- Charlotte

Organisations Response to COVID-19



For many charities this has been an opportunity to reflect on themselves and the services that they offer and the way in which they are delivered. COVID challenged the way that all refugee services are delivered. It meant that no one could continue on in a business as usual style. They had to adapt in the short term. However, this was not a totally pointless exercise. It led charities thinking outside the box and doing things they never thought would be possible. Some volunteer managers expressed that before the pandemic, volunteers and their organisations were often reluctant to change. However, remote volunteering has forced everyone to become innovative and find more efficient ways to broaden their reach while working with much less. This has led to lasting changes that will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the work that the charities do. It has shown that charities can still be successful despite changes in the way services are conducted.



67% of all charities surveyed will continue to operate in the future in some form of blended approach providing both remote and in person services. Had it not been for the pandemic it would have been very unlikely that charities would have chosen to offer services remotely, this has widened the choice and flexibility of services meaning that they can reach more people

Organisations have equipped their staff and volunteers with phones, laptops, tablets, mobile data and technological support and training.

“We are constantly evolving as a charity but the pandemic has forced an acceleration of this change. We will evolve a new face to face. We have new computers, which will be used in English sessions alongside having 1-1 sessions as well.”



Combatting Digital Exclusion

There have been great success stories with charities coming together and cooperating to ensure that digital exclusion was a lessened barrier for refugee and asylum seekers:

- NNRF introduced a specific phone line in certain languages: Arabic, Farsi, Kurdish, Dari, Tigrinya, Amharic to increase the accessibility of their services.
- ESOL packs were made up and delivered to homes to increase participation.
- Charities through corporation donation distributed phones and laptops to clients
- Nottingham Arimathea Trust have combated digital exclusion by installing WIFI in accommodation
- Data top ups were provided



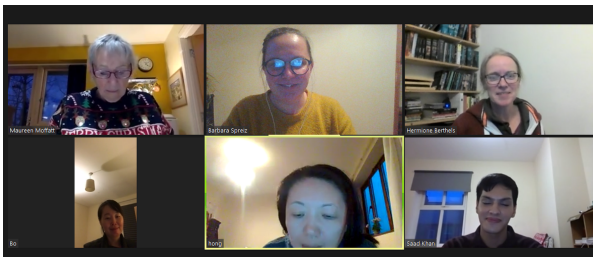
Although some aspects of remote volunteering came with challenges, volunteers have been forced to expand their comfort zones and contribute to their charities in ways they didn't before. Some volunteers had to buy a laptop or learn how to use zoom. Although this was challenging to adapt to and required them to spend some money, it has improved their ability to use modern technology in ways they couldn't before.

Administrative Improvements



Positive steps were taken in terms of digitalisation process which will remain in force when normality returns. For example, feedback forms, referrals and assessments were all digitalised, which has made it easier to monitor and analyse. The triage system has become more effective than before due to the incorporation of an online shared spreadsheet. Charities who previously ran purely drop in sessions but had to introduce a booking service due to COVID hope to keep run bookable appointments alongside the drop in services.

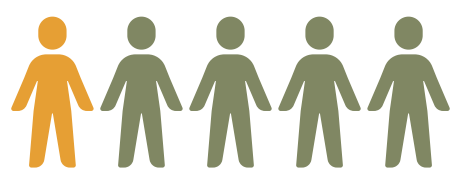
Most charities have emphasised the important role that WhatsApp groups have played during the pandemic. Staff in some Charities have set up WhatsApp groups as a way of maintaining contact and supporting each other where necessary; while other charities used WhatsApp groups for communication between clients and volunteers where matters of urgency were a key concern.



It has been reported by NNRF that the use of teams for meetings has led to a higher attendance rate in comparison to face-to-face meetings. For volunteer managers, setting up larger meetings remotely has been easier to organise and facilitate. Moving forward, some charities are looking to keep these aspects of remote volunteering as they have proven to be just as, or even more, effective.



3 in 5 Organisations have struggled with training volunteers remotely.



1 in 5 of the Charities do not wish to keep any aspects of remote volunteering. However, most of the Charities would like to take a blended approach.

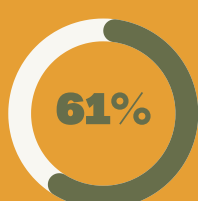
LOOKING TO THE FUTURE



Remain Remote



Blended



Face to Face

With strong prospects of the UK opening up soon, participants to the research were asked if they would prefer to continue online, face to face, or a blended approach which would entail a combination of both. 61.5% of the volunteers would like to volunteer face-to face only, while 15.38% would like to remain remote and 23% are happy to take a blended approach moving forward.



CLIENT'S FEEDBACK

Unfortunately, only one client filled in the survey. It has been noted that prior to COVID, feedback responses were often low, therefore the barriers of the survey being remote and online resulted in even lower responses. As well as this a number of other factors can be attributed to the low response rate. Digital exclusion remains the key barrier as many service users do not have access to internet, mobile data, or smartphones that they can use. Those who do have smart phones sometimes feel that using their data for surveys is not the best use of their limited resources.



For others, language can be a barrier that affects the low survey response rate. It has been suggested by one of the volunteer managers that this research could have better been achieved in person rather than online as surveys could be circulated in English classes where they can be assisted in the completion of the survey.

The client who responded to the survey has found remote services to be very convenient as they do not need to spend time travelling to the Charity's Centre. The service user was provided with a laptop by a charity and found that remote services were a better way to work. Moving forward, the service user would like to receive services through a blended approach.



WHAT WE CAN TO HELP

One of the main themes that we have found is that Refugee and Asylum Seekers have been disproportionately impacted by digital exclusion. At the end of this report is a template letter to send to your Member of Parliament to help lobby change in this area, to pressure the Government to increase accessibility of digital services for Refugees and Asylum Seekers.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Having analysed the results of the report and the follow up interviews, we would like to make the following recommendations:

01

Partnership

Charities need to communicate and work better with each other to get better deals from providers and provide more technology to clients. Make it clearer for clients where they can get certain resources from and prevent overlap.



02

Shared ESOL resource pool

Some charities have created online pools of resources, these should be shared and added to by all to enhance the effectiveness and reach of these resources. This should be created in such a way that it can be downloaded at a given charities centre where there is WIFI and used at the clients convenience



03

Instruction sheets/ FAQ's

For roles have easily accessible FAQs. Create instruction sheets for activities like hosting a zoom lesson for the first time or a three way call. This needs to be clear and straightforward to help ease any technology anxieties.



04

Digitalisation

Sharing methods of digitalisation and the advantages this can have. Such as online booking services, utilising online forms. This can improve efficiency of operations within charities.



05

1-1 Telephone Lessons

These have been beneficial both for volunteers and clients. They should continue to run alongside in person classes. They offer an opportunity to reinforce what was learnt in class and provide more tailored tuition



06

Volunteer Opportunities

A spreadsheet should be created of the different volunteer roles available in the different charities along with the description of the role and how it is carried out. This will better volunteer participation and ensure that people are happy and satisfied in their role and that it is most suited to their ability.



THANK YOU

We would like to thank the following charities and the volunteers from Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum, Upbeat Communities, Derbyshire Refugee Solidarity, ELSA(UoN), Refugee Roots and NTU STAR in collaboration with the British Red Cross.



Thank you very much for reading the report, we hope that you found it interesting and maybe even learnt from it.



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