



Volunteering in Public Libraries:

Insights from the Libraries Connected Surveys



Libraries
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Background

Libraries Connected is developing a Volunteering Management Strategy informed by key learnings from the Know Your Neighbourhood (KYN) programme, a Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport-funded initiative, administered by Arts Council England. The KYN project works with people at risk of or experiencing chronic loneliness and seeks to increase participation in volunteering. It has provided valuable insights into the role of volunteering in fostering community engagement, social inclusion and personal wellbeing - areas where public libraries play a crucial role.

To inform this strategy, Libraries Connected conducted two national surveys in 2025:

01 **Public Libraries and Volunteering Member Survey**
Completed by a nominated library staff member on behalf of their service. This explored how volunteering is currently managed and supported across public libraries.

02 **Volunteer Diversity Survey**
Completed by individual library volunteers. This gathered data on volunteers' backgrounds, motivations and experiences.

Both surveys were short, anonymous and confidential. They aimed to build a sector-wide picture of volunteering, highlight strengths and gaps and support more inclusive and effective volunteer management.

Executive summary

Volunteer engagement and commitment

Library volunteers are highly committed, with half having volunteered for more than two years and most giving time weekly. Many are long-standing library users, with 71% holding a library card before they began volunteering. Motivations are strongly altruistic - supporting communities and libraries - but also include wellbeing, passion for reading and social connection.

Scale of volunteer involvement

Public library volunteering operates at a substantial scale across the country. The Volunteer Diversity Survey received 1,496 responses, reflecting a large and active volunteer community. Individual library services also report highly varied but often significant volunteer cohorts. While around a third have fewer than 50 volunteers, over a third support 100 or more, with some services reporting more than 750 volunteers. This demonstrates the extensive contribution volunteers make to sustaining and enhancing library services nationally.

Volunteer profile

The volunteer base is predominantly older (51% are 65+), female (66%) and White British (69%). There is meaningful, though limited, representation of disabled, neurodivergent, LGBTQ+ and minority ethnic volunteers, suggesting libraries are relatively inclusive but with scope to diversify further.

Volunteer experience

Satisfaction levels are high: 86% rated their volunteering experience as good or excellent and 85% feel valued in their role. Volunteers emphasised positive staff relationships, sense of purpose and personal growth. Key areas for improvement include clearer communication, more structured and varied tasks, quicker onboarding and broader recognition.

Volunteer management and capacity

Most services (79%) have a volunteer management policy or strategy, though models vary. A third have dedicated coordinators, while others share responsibility or rely on partners. The main challenges are lack of staff time (71%), administrative burden (60%) and supervision demands (59%).

There is little link between having a policy and volunteer satisfaction, instead local practice, communication and capacity shape the volunteer experience. Limited staff capacity also restricts recruitment and innovation, highlighting that resourcing - rather than policy alone - is key to effective volunteer management.

Recruitment and retention

The most effective recruitment strategies remain local posters/leaflets (66%) and word of mouth (66%), complemented by websites (60%) and digital platforms (41%). Recognition tends to be informal, through special events (66%), refreshments or thank-yous, with fewer structured reward schemes. Retention is supported by creating varied roles, community-building and meaningful recognition.

Innovation and good practice

Innovative approaches include tailoring roles to individual skills, co-producing activities with volunteers, offering shadowing and training opportunities, using WhatsApp or newsletters for communication and providing youth pathways such as Summer Reading Challenge volunteering.

National initiatives and micro-volunteering

Four in ten services engaged with national initiatives such as Volunteers' Week (52%) or The Big Help Out (22%). Around 43% offer micro-volunteering opportunities, often through one-off events or short, flexible tasks, though these are not yet widespread.

Future outlook

According to library services, volunteers will become increasingly integral due to financial pressures. While they add value in areas such as digital support, community engagement and home library delivery, concerns remain about the risks of job substitution, over-reliance and inconsistent support for volunteers.

Services stressed the importance of clear boundaries, sustainable coordination and ongoing investment in volunteer management.





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Case study: Tina

Tina, Home Library Service volunteer, Kent

Tina has volunteered for more than two years with the Home Library Service in Tonbridge, Kent. She learned about the role through a social media post and now visits three housebound clients each month, spending approximately one hour with each.

She describes the difference it makes: "One lady I visit is unable to talk, so she uses a computer and sign language with her friend when I go and visit. She used to do lots of reading classes, book clubs and everything, so she's lost her independence because of her condition. But having me go to the library, collect books and things, it's just been amazing."

The role goes far beyond delivering reading material. "We forget that these people don't go out. One man I visit, he's 90 and he was born and bred in Tonbridge. All he wants me to tell him is what the high street was like today when I drove through it. So not only do we talk about books, but there's also a welfare chat. That hour is for them to talk about books, reminisce or discuss anything they want."

For Tina, volunteering has brought fulfilment and a renewed sense of belonging. "I retired and was looking for a new purpose. I enjoy reading and chatting to people, so it's a perfect role for me. And it's lovely to give something back to the community."

"it's lovely to give something back to the community."

Tina collaborates closely with library staff to select appropriate materials and access specialist resources, ensuring users benefit from the library's wider offer: "We can bring jigsaw puzzles, audiobooks, materials for people with dementia. And we can reserve any book they like, including new ones."

Tina's story shows how volunteering can bring connection and companionship to both volunteers and beneficiaries.

Volunteer Diversity Survey findings

A total of **1,496 responses** were received for the Volunteer Diversity Survey, which was intended for volunteers at public libraries run by the local council. Fully community-managed libraries were not included in this research. Of all respondents, 89% were volunteers in council-run public libraries, 9% were from community-managed libraries that receive council support, and the remaining respondents were either unsure or chose 'prefer not to say'.

Geographic distribution of survey respondents

This heat map illustrates the number of responses received by region. Despite targeted communications, no responses were submitted from volunteers in Wales, Northern Ireland and the Channel Islands.

The majority of respondents (51%) reported living in towns or suburban areas, while a further 25% were based in rural or village communities. In contrast, only 13% came from cities or large urban areas. This distribution may suggest that volunteering is more common in suburban and rural settings, potentially



reflecting stronger community networks, greater reliance on local services, or fewer competing leisure and cultural opportunities compared to urban areas. In larger cities, where a wider range of activities and services are available, volunteering in libraries may play a less central role in community life, which could explain the lower proportion of respondents from these areas.

What is your main volunteer role?

Top 5 volunteer roles selected by respondents:

- 01** Home Library Service (19%)
- 02** Shelving and stock support (13%)
- 03** Summer Reading Challenge support (11%)
- 04** Digital support, e.g. helping users with devices or online services (9%)
- 05** Welcome desk / customer support and Summer Reading Challenge Support (both 7%)

Non-craft activities (5%) covered a wide range of themes, such as grief cafés, homework clubs, dementia cafés, perinatal support groups, poetry groups, dog therapy, and various language-based initiatives.

These included English as a Foreign Language classes, support for asylum seekers, British Sign Language courses, Makaton sessions, as well as Ukrainian and other language discussion groups.

How long have you been volunteering with your library?

The survey shows that half of library volunteers (50%) have been involved for more than two years, with a further 13% volunteering for between one and two years. Shorter-term volunteers - those with less than a year's experience - make up a smaller share (26% in total).

This indicates that, once recruited, many library volunteers tend to remain committed over time, suggesting a relatively stable and sustained pattern of engagement in this sector.

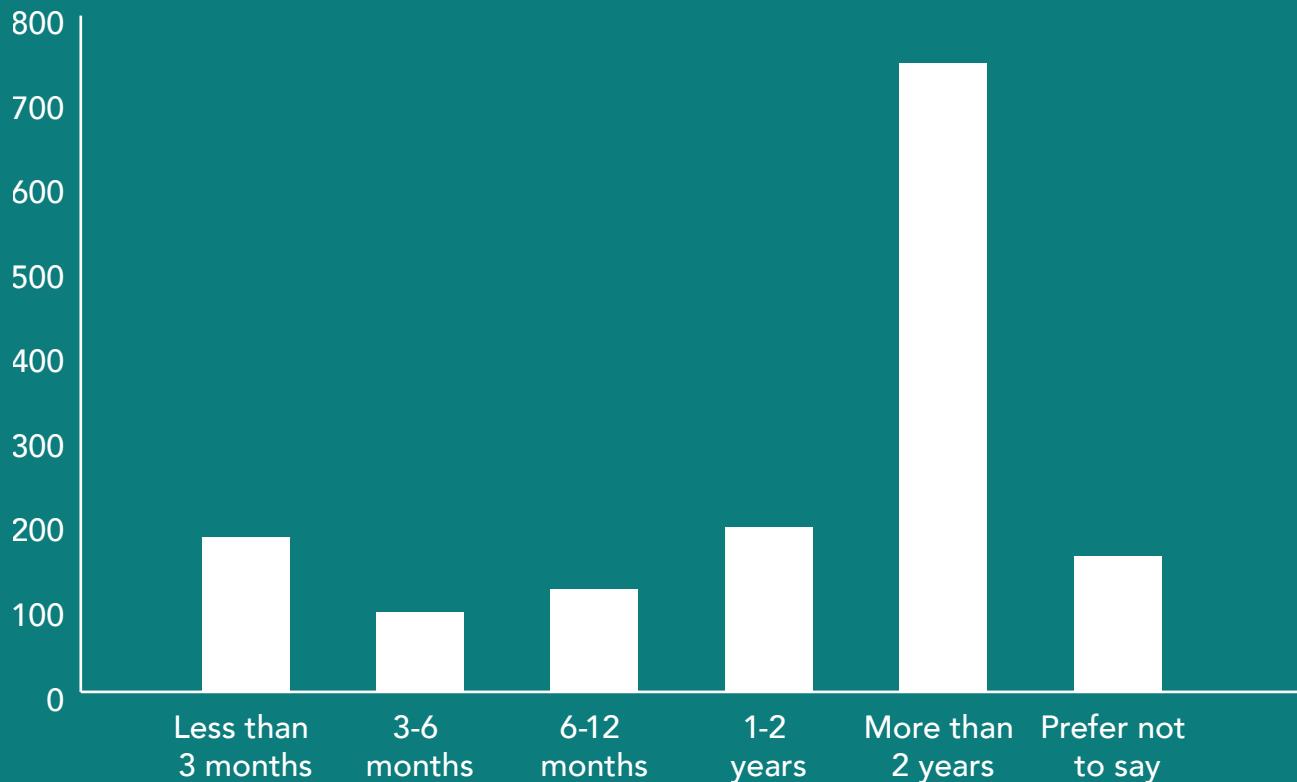
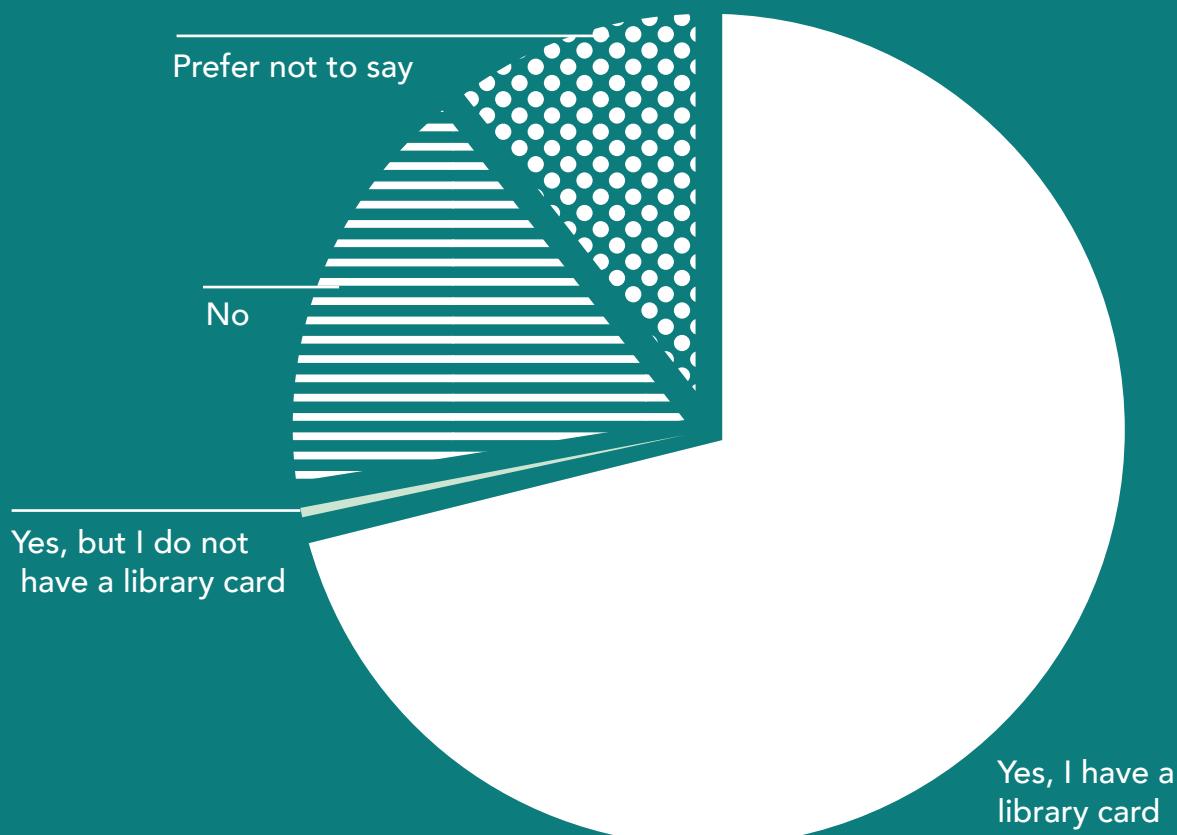
By comparison, NCVO's [Time Well Spent 2023](#) survey highlights that volunteer retention can be a challenge across the wider sector, with many organisations reporting difficulties in sustaining engagement.

The strong presence of long-term volunteers in libraries may therefore point to higher levels of satisfaction, strong community ties or the particular role libraries play as trusted, local institutions. At the same time, it is worth noting that survey responses may underrepresent those who volunteered briefly and then left, so the findings are likely to reflect the perspectives of longer-standing volunteers more strongly.

In addition, many library volunteers bring wider experience from other roles. Over a third (36%) had volunteered elsewhere before joining their library, while nearly a third (32%) were actively volunteering in other settings alongside their library role. This suggests that library volunteering is often part of a broader volunteering journey, with many individuals already embedded in a culture of community participation. Around one in five (21%) indicated that this was their only volunteering experience, highlighting that libraries also serve as an important entry point into volunteering for some people.

How often do you volunteer?

Most volunteers contribute on a regular basis, with over half (55%) giving their time at least once a week and a further 11% volunteering once a fortnight. Around one in ten participate monthly, while very occasional or

How long have you been volunteering with your library?**Were you involved with the library before you started volunteering?**

ad hoc volunteering accounts for only a small minority. This pattern suggests that library volunteering is generally a frequent and consistent commitment, rather than a casual or one-off activity.

It is also possible that frequent volunteers were more likely to complete the survey, as they tend to be more invested in the service and have stronger connections with staff. In addition, because the survey was conducted online, volunteers who are less digitally confident may have been underrepresented in the responses.

The 11% who said their involvement depends or varies indicates some flexibility in how volunteering is structured, accommodating different personal circumstances. Overall, the data points to a strong culture of regular, sustained engagement.

Were you involved with the library before you started volunteering?

A large majority of respondents (71%) were already library users with a library card before they began volunteering, while a further 2% had some previous connection without holding a card. This indicates that most volunteers are drawn from the existing user base, suggesting a strong link between personal engagement with library services and willingness to contribute time as a volunteer.

Meanwhile, 17% had no prior involvement with the library, showing that volunteering also serves as a route to engage new people who may not have otherwise used library services. This dual pattern highlights both the importance of nurturing existing users as potential volunteers and the opportunity for volunteering to expand the library's reach into the wider community.

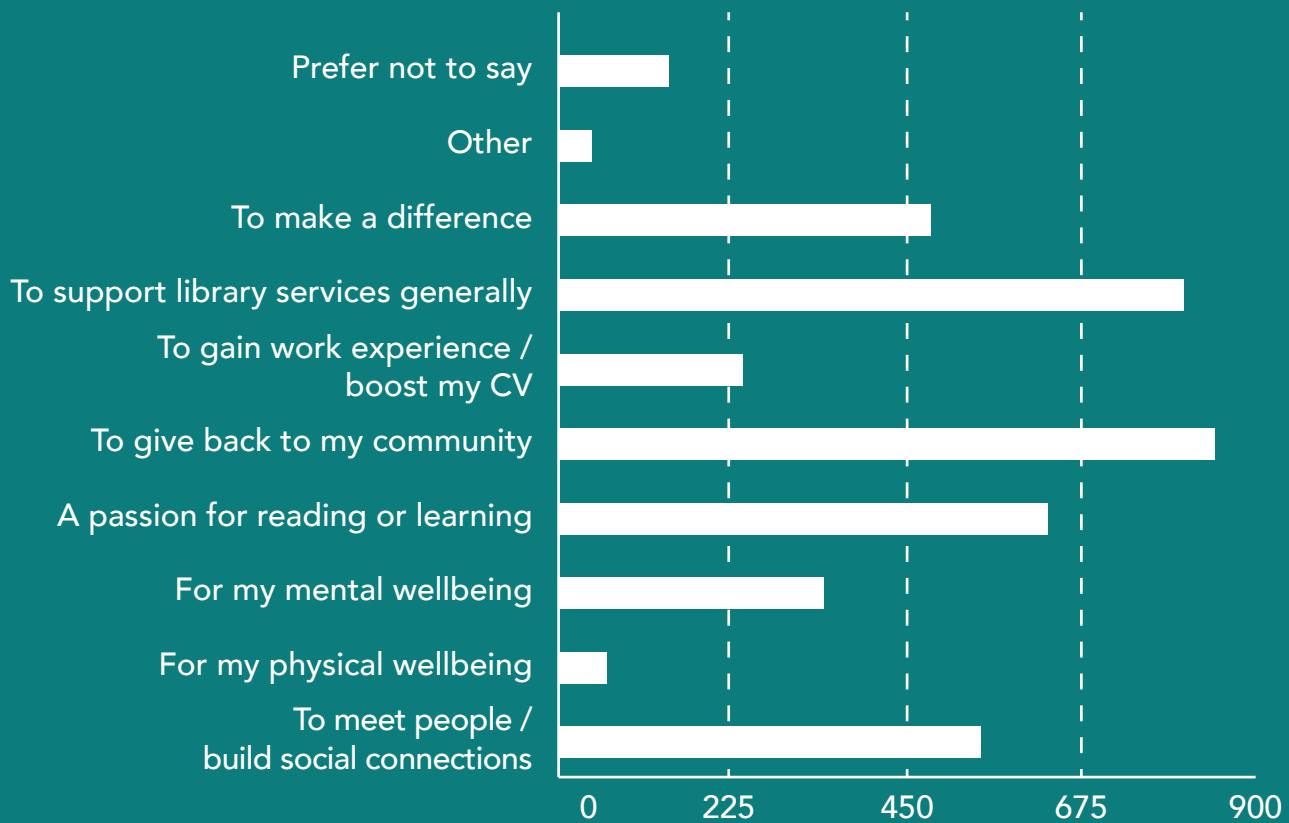
What is your main reason for volunteering in a public library?

The most common motivations for volunteering in public libraries were a desire to give back to the community (57%) and to support library services generally (54%), underlining the strong sense of civic responsibility and commitment to sustaining local provision. Passion for reading or learning (42%) and the opportunity to build social connections (36%) were also significant drivers, reflecting both personal interest and the social benefits of volunteering. Other notable reasons included supporting mental wellbeing (23%) and gaining work experience (16%).

The free-text responses further illustrate the richness of volunteer motivations. Some began through structured programmes such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award and chose to continue, while others were motivated by life stage (e.g. retirement) or prior links to the library (former staff). Many highlighted deeply personal reasons, such as preserving local history, closing the digital divide, supporting children's reading or maintaining the presence of a village library. Collectively, these responses show that while broad themes of community, service and a love of reading dominate, library volunteering is also shaped by highly individual passions and circumstances, giving it a uniquely personal and locally rooted character.

Compared with NCVO's Time Well Spent 2023 survey, the motivations expressed by library volunteers show strong alignment with the wider volunteering population, particularly around altruistic drivers such as giving back to the community and making a difference. However, library volunteering stands out for its sector-specific motivations:

What is your main reason for volunteering in a public library?



How would you rate your overall volunteering experience?



a passion for reading and learning and a commitment to supporting library services were cited by large proportions of respondents, highlighting the unique role libraries play as community and cultural hubs. Social connection also featured more prominently than in the NCVO survey, reflecting the library's function as a local meeting place. Meanwhile, motivations linked to work experience or CV building, though less common overall, mirror NCVO's finding that younger volunteers are more likely to be driven by career-related goals.

How would you describe your prior experience of the library?

Almost all respondents described their prior experience of the library in positive terms, with nearly half (49%) rating it as very positive and a further 32% as positive. Only a small minority reported a neutral experience (5%), and negative views were virtually absent. A small group (4%) had never used the library before volunteering, suggesting that while most volunteers are drawn from an already engaged and satisfied user base, libraries also attract some individuals whose first real contact is through volunteering. This overwhelmingly positive baseline highlights the strong goodwill libraries enjoy among their volunteers, which is likely to support long-term commitment and advocacy for the service.

To what extent did this prior experience influence your decision to volunteer with the library?

Prior experience was a key motivator, with 38% saying it influenced their decision a lot and 31% somewhat. For 15%, it had no influence, showing that while many volunteers are drawn from engaged users, others are motivated by broader community spirit or personal circumstances.

The overall volunteering experience was rated very positively, with 53% describing it as excellent

To what extent has volunteering in the library influenced how you feel about your local area or community?

Volunteering in libraries has had a broadly positive impact on how respondents feel about their local area or community. Over six in ten said their view had become more positive, with 34% reporting it was *much more positive* and 28% *a little more positive*. For around a quarter (26%) there was no change, while negative shifts were rare (just 1% reported feeling less positive). These results suggest that library volunteering not only benefits the service itself but also strengthens individuals' sense of connection and outlook on their wider community.

How would you rate your overall volunteering experience?

The overall volunteering experience was rated very positively, with 53% describing it as excellent and a further 33% as good. Only a small minority rated their experience as *fair* (3%) or *poor* (less than 1%). These results highlight the high levels of satisfaction among library volunteers, reinforcing the value they place on their roles and the strength of the volunteering offer in this setting.

What makes the experience: positive

- **Welcoming, supportive staff** – friendly, respectful, appreciative and make volunteers feel part of the team.
- **Sense of purpose & community impact** – contributing through the Home Library Service, children's activities, IT/digital support and groups.
- **Belonging & social connection** – meeting new people, making friends, and feeling more connected to the local area.
- **Personal growth & wellbeing** – building confidence, establishing routine, gaining skills and experiencing mental health benefits.
- **Enjoyment of books & environment** – pleasure in being around books, discovering new titles and working in a positive space.
- **Good practical setup** – adequate resources, flexible scheduling, thoughtful client matching and suitable spaces.

less positive

- **Communication & coordination gaps** – patchy or slow emails, unclear liaison and delays in onboarding/admin.
- **Under-utilisation** – not enough to do, sporadic duties or limited chances to use existing skills.
- **Promotion & attendance issues** – activities under-advertised, leading to low take-up for some groups.
- **Training & support gaps** – mixed experiences, with some volunteers lacking refreshers or support on new systems.
- **Operational constraints** – limited system access, booking problems or single-staffing pressures.
- **Resource pressure & variability** – stretched staffing, limited materials/funding and differences across branches.



To what extent do you feel valued in your role as a volunteer?

Most volunteers reported feeling appreciated in their roles, with nearly two-thirds (65%) saying they felt *very valued* and a further 20% *somewhat valued*. Only a small minority expressed neutrality (4%) or felt undervalued (1%), while almost no one reported feeling not at all valued. These results point to a strong culture of recognition within library volunteering, where the majority of participants feel their contribution is acknowledged and respected—an important factor in sustaining motivation and long-term commitment.

Suggestions for improving the volunteering experience

Broaden responsibilities and permissions

Provide limited, role-appropriate access to systems (e.g. Spydus, phones, self-service) so volunteers can help at busy times, alongside more opportunities for customer-facing work.

Increase tasks and clarify structure

Ensure there is enough to do in each session, with clear duty lists, rotas and project plans and a greater variety of roles beyond shelving and crafts.

Improve training content and delivery

Offer short, role-specific refreshers; access to relevant training (e.g. first aid, safeguarding, dementia awareness, diversity); more practical inductions and supervision; and reduce unnecessary or irrelevant e-learning.

Strengthen communication and coordination

Provide quicker email responses, a clear liaison point of contact, confirmed calendars for sessions and follow-up after reviews.

Build volunteer community and peer support

Facilitate regular meetups (including out-of-hours), buddyng schemes, WhatsApp/online hubs, newsletters and cross-branch sharing.

Enhance recognition and inclusion

Show visible appreciation (e.g. thank-yous, certificates, long-service awards, badges/lanyards), involve volunteers in decision-making and ensure consistent respect for their time and skills.

Improve promotion and outreach (including HLS)

Advertise services, groups and the Home Library Service more widely through social media, local media, care homes and GP surgeries and maintain active library Facebook pages.

Streamline onboarding and scheduling

Speed up onboarding and DBS checks (with single checks valid across roles), enable volunteers to pre-book availability, inform them when not needed, and offer more flexible session times.

Provide adequate resources, equipment and IT

Allocate small budgets for materials, ensure reliable Wi-Fi/IT, improve catalogue filters, maintain Spydus stability and address building infrastructure (heating, lifts, windows) alongside adequate rooms and storage.

Enhance space and environment

Create quieter areas for conversation and homework groups, improve room bookings and signage and minimise noise near learning sessions.

Reduce process and bureaucracy

Make annual reviews optional, simplify mandatory modules, enable online expenses and reduce red tape.

Strengthen HLS delivery

Recruit more clients, improve matching and expectation-setting, allow volunteers to check out items for rounds and provide access to past loan histories where appropriate.

Gather and share feedback and impact

Introduce simple ways to collect participant feedback, share outcomes and usage statistics and track volunteer hours.

Offer pathways and progression

Provide opportunities to try different roles, increase hours, pursue CPD and clearer routes into paid employment where possible.

Improve practical access and amenities

Ensure appropriate access to staff areas, kitchens and locked rooms, along with parking and toilet facilities during sessions.

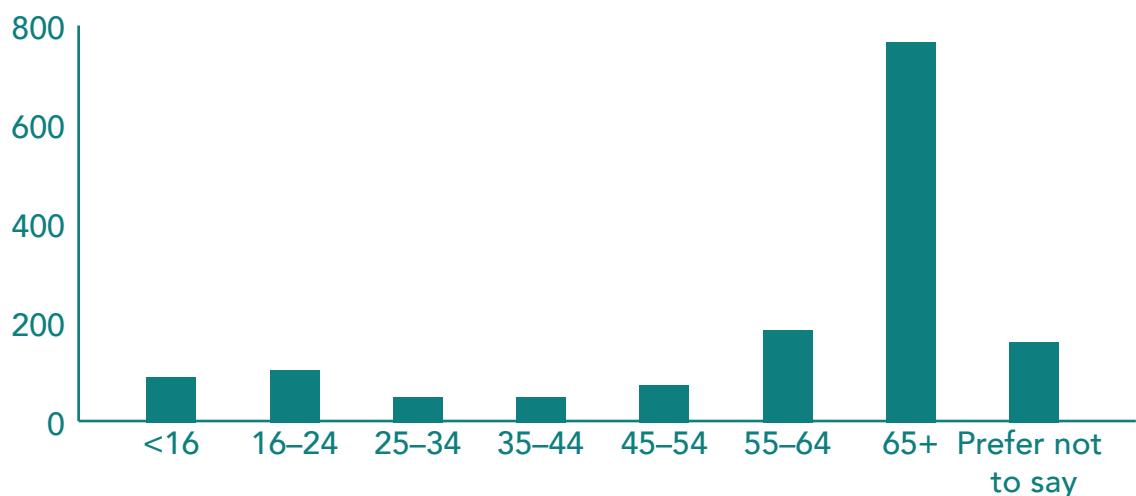
Demographic information

The age profile of volunteers is heavily skewed towards older adults, with over half (51%) aged 65+ and a further 13% aged 55–64. Younger volunteers are present but in much smaller numbers, suggesting that library volunteering is particularly attractive to those in later life, often post-retirement, while engagement among younger age groups remains limited.

Disability

While 10% of respondents said they consider themselves to have a disability, the large majority (84%) of those disclosed it to their volunteering organisation - a notably high rate compared to many workplace settings, where disability disclosure rates often average around 25% (HR Datahub). The reported conditions were diverse: social and communication impairments such as autism were most common (35%), followed by learning differences (23%), mental health conditions (21%), physical or mobility issues (20%), long-term illnesses (15%), hearing and visual impairments and combinations of multiple conditions.

What is your age?



Among volunteers, 8% identified as neurodivergent, the majority citing autism (74%) or ADHD (39%), with smaller numbers reporting dyslexia, dyspraxia, OCD or other traits. These findings underline both the diversity of lived experience within the volunteer cohort and the importance of creating inclusive, supportive environments that respect and respond to volunteers' needs.

Ethnic background

The ethnic profile of library volunteers is predominantly White, with 69% identifying as White British and a further 5% as White European. Small proportions identified with other White backgrounds (Irish or self-described) or with minority ethnic groups, including Asian or Asian British (6% in total across Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese and self-described), Black or Black British

(2%), and Mixed ethnic groups (1%). A relatively large share of respondents (14%) preferred not to state their background.

Overall, this suggests that the volunteer base is less ethnically diverse than the population of England and Wales, where 81% identify as White and 19% as minority ethnic according to the 2021 Census. This underrepresentation may indicate barriers to participation among minority ethnic communities or it may reflect local demographics in areas where library volunteers are most active.

Gender identity & sexual orientation

The majority of respondents identified as women (66%), with men making up 20% of the volunteer base. A small proportion identified as non-binary (1%) or chose to self-describe, while



13% preferred not to state their gender identity. This gender profile is broadly consistent with wider volunteering trends, where women are typically more likely than men to volunteer, particularly in community-focused and service-oriented roles such as libraries (NCVO, UK Civil Society Almanac 2023). It is also worth noting that the library workforce itself is heavily female, with 75% of the Library and Information Services workforce reporting as women (CILIP, Workforce Mapping 2023).

The proportion of non-binary volunteers (1%) is higher than the 0.06% of the population in England and Wales who identified as non-binary in the 2021 Census (ONS 2023), suggesting that library volunteering may be relatively more inclusive or attractive to gender-diverse individuals, though absolute numbers remain small.

In terms of trans identity, 1% of volunteers identified as trans, compared to 0.5% of the population in England and Wales reported in the 2021 Census (ONS 2023). A further 14% of respondents preferred not to say, which may indicate some hesitancy around disclosure in this context. While numbers are modest, the slightly higher proportion of trans volunteers compared to the national average again suggests that libraries may provide a relatively welcoming environment for gender-diverse people.

Looking at sexual orientation, nearly three-quarters of respondents (73%) identified as heterosexual, while small proportions identified as gay/lesbian (2%), bisexual (2%), asexual (1%), pansexual (<1%) or queer (1%). Around one in five (20%) preferred not to state their orientation. Compared with the 2021 Census, where 3.2% of the population identified as

LGB+ (ONS 2023), the proportion of LGB+ respondents in this survey is broadly in line, though the high rate of 'prefer not to say' may mean some underreporting. Taken together, these findings suggest that while the volunteer base is predominantly heterosexual, there is meaningful representation of LGBTQ+ volunteers, further reinforcing the perception of libraries as relatively inclusive community spaces.

Religion or belief

Most volunteers identified as Christian (42%), while 30% reported having no religion. Smaller proportions represented other faiths, and nearly one in five (19%) preferred not to state their religion or belief. Overall, the religious profile of volunteers broadly reflects national patterns, with Christianity and no religion the two largest groups.

Caring responsibilities

Most volunteers (72%) reported having no caring responsibilities, while around 13% indicated that they had some form of caring role — most commonly for children, older people, or disabled adults. This suggests that the majority of volunteers are free from significant caring duties, which may help explain their availability, though there is also meaningful representation of those balancing caring roles alongside their library commitments.

Socio-economic background

The socioeconomic profile of library volunteers points towards a relatively mixed background, though with some clear trends. In terms of schooling, the largest share (42%) attended non-selective state schools, with a further 28% from selective state schools and 10% from fee-paying schools (with or without

bursaries). This indicates a broad spread, but with independent schooling slightly overrepresented compared to the national average. Parental occupation also shows diversity: many reported parents in modern or traditional professional roles (32% combined), technical and craft roles (12%), or senior management (10%), while smaller shares came from routine and semi-routine occupations (12% combined). This suggests that, on balance, volunteers are somewhat more likely to come from middle-class or professional family backgrounds.

Indicators of childhood socioeconomic disadvantage are present but less common: 9% reported eligibility for Free School Meals, lower than the national average (around 15% in England), and only 1% reported a parent who was long-term unemployed.

At the same time, the large number who said “don’t know” or “prefer not to say” limits firm conclusions.

Current employment status reflects the age profile of volunteers: more than half (55%) are retired, with smaller proportions working part-time (8%), studying (10%) or unemployed (5%). This suggests that volunteering in libraries is strongly shaped by life stage and availability of free time, with retired people forming the core of the volunteer base.

Overall, the data suggests that library volunteers are disproportionately drawn from older, retired, and relatively advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, though there is still meaningful representation across the spectrum, including people from lower-income households and those with caring or work constraints. This pattern is consistent with wider research on volunteering, which shows that people with higher socioeconomic resources are more likely to engage in formal volunteering, partly due to greater flexibility, confidence, and access to opportunities. It may also be influenced by the lack of paid expenses, which is a key enabler for participation and can otherwise act as a barrier for those with fewer financial resources. One volunteer reported that

it costs them around £200 a year in parking fees to undertake their volunteering role, highlighting how out-of-pocket costs can discourage or exclude some potential volunteers.

Volunteering in libraries is strongly shaped by life stage and availability of free time, with retired people forming the core of the volunteer base.



Woolly

Case study: Mick

Mick, community walks volunteer, Staffordshire

For more than fifteen years, Mick has led community walks that begin and end at libraries across Staffordshire. What started as a simple idea to “get more people to come into the library and to know what else it offers” has become a valued programme that supports wellbeing, social connection and community confidence.

Mick leads five or six walks each year, using his longstanding knowledge of the local area. “Show me a map and I’ll put a walk together,” he says. Participants meet at the library before setting out on an eight- to ten-mile route, stopping for lunch and returning mid-afternoon for refreshments and conversation. The post-walk catch-up is a key part of the experience – a moment to “put the world to rights”.

The walks have a clear social purpose. “A lot of it is company,” Mick explains. Many participants live alone or feel nervous

about joining formal walking groups. The library connection makes the activity feel safe, familiar and welcoming: “Because they know somebody from the library, it gives them the confidence to come out.”

For Mick himself, the role is deeply rewarding: “The main benefit is feeling useful – companionship, and keeping me active!” The library service also gains significantly: the walks increase footfall, challenge outdated perceptions of libraries and encourage people to explore the wider offer once they step through the door.

"The main benefit is feeling useful – companionship, and keeping me active!"



Member survey findings

Alongside the volunteer survey, a staff survey was conducted to capture how volunteering is organised, managed and supported across library services. Each service was invited to submit one response on behalf of their organisation, providing a system-wide perspective rather than individual views. The findings highlight current approaches to volunteer management, the support structures in place and areas where staff see strengths and gaps. This evidence helps to build a fuller picture of how volunteering operates in practice, complementing the volunteer perspective and informing the Volunteer Management Strategy.

Respondent profile

Responses were received from 58 library services across England, representing just under two-fifths of the approximately 150 services nationally. While not fully comprehensive, this provides a substantial sample that offers a strong evidence base for understanding how volunteering is managed and supported across different library contexts.

Respondents to the staff survey represented a range of seniority and responsibilities within library services. The largest group were Heads of Service (36%), followed by Professional/Senior staff with specialist roles such as stock, digital, or outreach (28%) and Senior Managers with departmental responsibility (21%). Smaller shares were reported for Middle Managers/Leads supervising teams (7%) and those in other roles (9%), including Volunteer Coordinators,

Customer Service Officers and Library Access Assistants. This distribution shows that responses were weighted towards senior decision-makers, but also included staff with direct responsibility for volunteer management and day-to-day delivery.

The vast majority of staff respondents (91%) reported working in local authority-run library services, with the remainder coming from commissioned services delivered by trusts or external organisations.

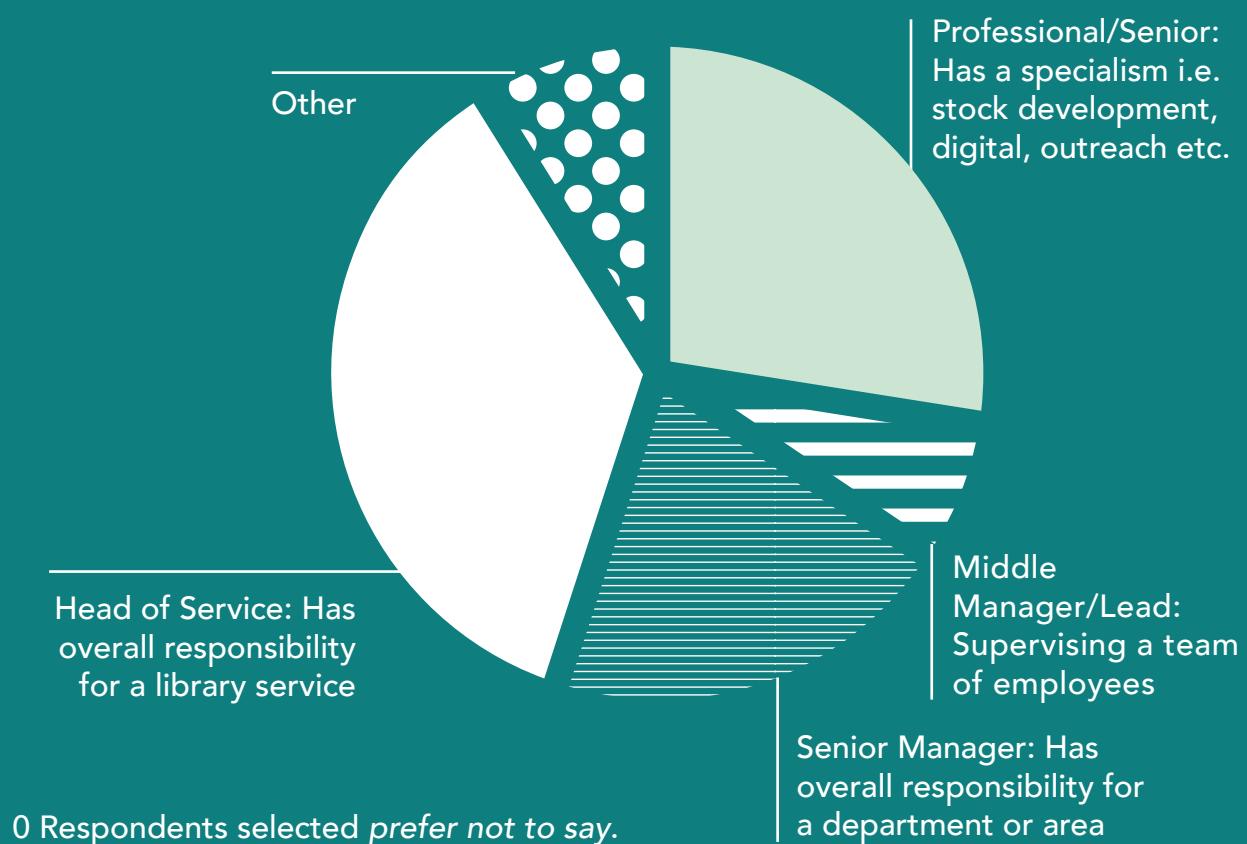
Number of volunteers per library service

Library services vary widely in the scale of their volunteer involvement. While around a third of services reported having fewer than 50 volunteers (31%), a significant number supported much larger cohorts, with over a third (34%) reporting 100 or more volunteers and some exceeding 750. This spread highlights the diversity of volunteer engagement models across library authorities – from relatively small-scale support to very large, structured volunteer programmes. It also suggests that capacity, resources and local priorities strongly shape how volunteering is embedded in different services.

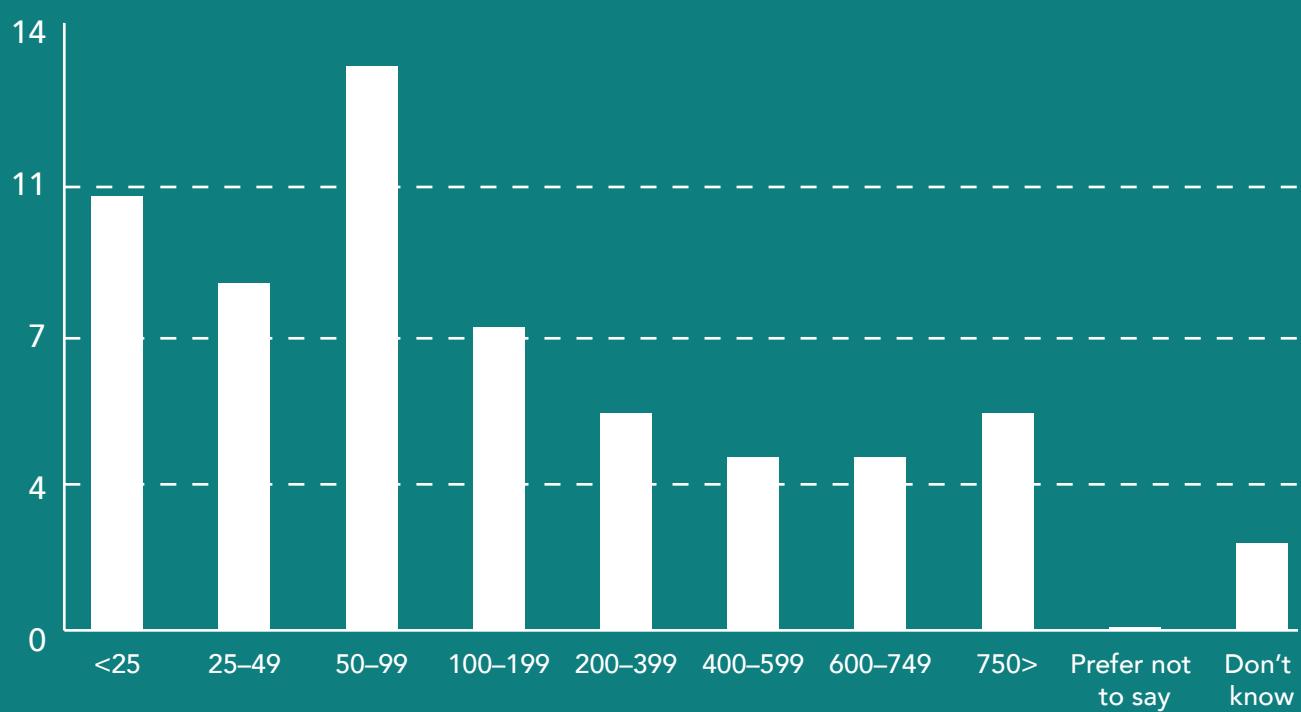
Volunteer management policy or strategy

Most library services (79%) reported having a formal volunteer management policy or strategy in place, suggesting that structured approaches to supporting volunteers are now common practice.

What is your role in the library service?



Number of volunteers per library service



A smaller group (16%) said they did not, and a few were unsure. This indicates that while the majority of services have embedded policies, there remains a minority without formal frameworks, which may affect consistency in volunteer support and management across the sector.

Among those with a policy or strategy, the majority found it helpful in practice: 41% described it as *very effective* and 45% as *moderately effective*. Only a small number felt it was *slightly effective* (8%) or *not at all effective* (6%), and none rated it as *extremely effective*. This indicates that while most services value having a policy, there is scope to strengthen how these strategies translate into consistent support for volunteer management and recruitment.

Overall, there appears to be little correlation between the presence of a formal Volunteer Management Policy or strategy and volunteer satisfaction. While most services reported having such a policy, their volunteers' average satisfaction levels were very similar to those in services without one. At both the individual and service level, volunteers generally rated their experience as "Good" or "Excellent," regardless of whether a policy was in place. Other factors, such as local management practices, communication or volunteer roles, may play a greater role in shaping the volunteer experience.

Volunteer recruitment

The most effective strategies for recruiting volunteers were posters/leaflets (66%) and word of mouth (66%), showing the continuing importance of local, community-based methods. Online routes also played a major role,

with 60% citing the library website and 41% using digital volunteering platforms successfully. Partnerships with third-party organisations (45%) and hosting open days or events (33%) were also reported as effective approaches. Local authority websites were less frequently highlighted (22%). However, it is important to note that many of these recruitment routes may also perpetuate a lack of diversity in the volunteer base, as they often rely on affinity grouping—reaching people already connected to the library, its users, or existing volunteers—rather than extending opportunities more widely. Addressing this would require more time-intensive, targeted and relational outreach activity to connect with underrepresented groups.

The free-text responses underline both opportunities and challenges. Some services described success through social media, dedicated Facebook volunteering pages, or converting existing activity participants into volunteers. Others raised concerns that recruitment is difficult without sufficient staff capacity to supervise and support volunteers, noting that resource pressures and lone working make it challenging to sustain meaningful recruitment efforts.

Services that experience staff or time capacity constraints appear somewhat less able to experiment with or implement innovative recruitment strategies, even when they have formal volunteer management policies in place. This suggests that capacity limitations may inhibit innovation and strategic development, not necessarily due to lack of policy structure, but because limited resources reduce flexibility to try new methods.

Overall, the findings suggest that while traditional and word-of-mouth methods remain highly effective, digital tools and targeted outreach can also play a significant role. However, recruitment capacity is closely tied to staffing levels and organisational resources, meaning that even effective strategies may falter without the infrastructure to support them.

Volunteer management

Volunteer management and recruitment is facilitated in different ways across services, with an even split between those with a dedicated role such as a Volunteer Coordinator (34%) and those where responsibility is distributed across several roles (34%). Only a small number (3%) reported that this was managed centrally by the local authority. A further 29% selected other, reflecting a wide variety of approaches.

The free-text responses highlight this diversity: some services rely on community groups or partnerships (e.g. Royal Voluntary Service or partnership with a local Volunteer Organisation), others combine fixed-term or project-funded posts with existing library staff responsibilities, while in some cases coordination is rotated among frontline staff or added to specialist roles such as outreach or children's services. A few noted that recruitment had been outsourced in the past or that dedicated roles are being lost due to restructures, raising concerns about sustainability.

Overall, the findings show no single model dominates. While dedicated coordinator roles can bring consistency and focus, many services are forced to share or reassign responsibilities due to funding pressures. This variation suggests that the capacity to recruit and support volunteers is uneven



across the sector, with some services well-resourced and others struggling to sustain structured volunteer management.

The greatest challenges in managing volunteers were lack of staff time (71%) and the administrative burden involved (60%).

The greatest challenges in managing volunteers were lack of staff time (71%) and the administrative burden involved (60%). Around six in ten services also pointed to the demands of supervising volunteers (59%), while 40% highlighted issues linked to mandatory training requirements. Taken together, these findings suggest that while volunteers are highly valued, effective management requires significant staff time and resources, which are not always available, creating a risk of over-reliance on goodwill and underinvestment in structured support.

Volunteer retention

The most common strategies used to reward and motivate volunteers were special events (66%), reimbursing expenses (45%), and providing refreshments (36%). Around a third also offered training and development opportunities (34%) or marked milestones such as long service (29%). More formalised approaches

such as awards (12%), in-house reward schemes (9%) and badges (7%) were less common, while only one service reported using a time banking scheme.

Free-text responses highlighted additional recognition practices, including thank-you certificates, participation in national initiatives such as Volunteers' Week and the provision of employment references. Overall, the findings suggest that most services focus on social and experiential forms of recognition, such as events and informal gestures of thanks, rather than structured reward schemes. This reflects both the community-oriented nature of library volunteering and the practical limits on budgets for formal incentives.

Successful or innovative practices

Recruitment approaches

- Using community channels: posters, open days, word of mouth, library events and local volunteer centres.
- Expanding digital routes: library websites, social media, dedicated platforms (e.g. Assemble, Volunteer Essex, Get Involved).
- Targeted recruitment: converting activity participants into volunteers; youth-specific schemes (e.g. Summer Reading Challenge, Culture Hacks).
- Informal pathways: trial sessions, "bring a friend" coffee mornings or removing procedural barriers to attract more diverse volunteers.

Matching roles to people

- Offering a variety of roles and tailoring them to individual skills, interests or wellbeing needs.

- Allowing volunteers to create or co-produce activities, giving them ownership and pride.
- Ensuring clear, accessible role descriptions and expectations to aid recruitment and retention.

Onboarding, training, and development

- Structured induction and training programmes, sometimes via online platforms (e.g. Learning Zone, Niche Academy).
- Providing shadowing opportunities and role-specific refreshers.
- Offering access to wider personal development opportunities, CPD and progression routes (e.g. guaranteed interviews, references).

Communication and engagement

- Maintaining regular contact through newsletters, WhatsApp groups, forums and meetings.
- Designating volunteer champions or coordinators as points of contact

- Ensuring timely communication and building relationships based on mutual trust.

Recognition and retention

- Hosting thank you events, milestone celebrations and seasonal gatherings.
- Using small but meaningful gestures (cards, gifts, certificates, publicity) to show appreciation.
- Uniforms, branding and visible acknowledgement that reinforce volunteers' identity as part of the service.

Partnerships and projects

- Collaborating with local voluntary sector organisations for recruitment and support.
- Linking volunteering into funded initiatives such as the DCMS-funded Know Your Neighbourhood project.
- Involving volunteers in co-production of services and new project development, leading to stronger outcomes and, in some cases, employment opportunities.

What strategies do you use to reward and motivate volunteers?



Case study: Glenda

Glenda, digital genealogy volunteer, Sunderland

Glenda's volunteering journey shows how libraries can harness local expertise to widen access to learning and create opportunities for community connection.

"Volunteering was purely by accident," she explains. A chance conversation during a photo restoration session at Washington Library revealed her 20 years of experience in family history research. Recognising this, library staff invited Glenda to support others using Ancestry and other similar tools.

Since then, Glenda has become part of a small team - alongside fellow volunteers Anne and Paul - helping residents explore their family heritage. Many people arrive unsure how to begin, often overwhelmed by the volume of online information.

"Family history is addictive – it's nice to see and pass on this good addiction to those that drop in either on an occasional or regular basis," she says. With Glenda's support, people gain confidence in digital tools, avoid common pitfalls and connect with their personal histories. "We still get so excited in what we find for others, along with helping and guiding them – particularly away from the many 'rabbit holes' on these genealogy sites!"

"We still get so excited in what we find for others"

Glenda's role illustrates how libraries can amplify their impact by drawing on the skills already present in the community. By enabling volunteers to share their passion and expertise, libraries can reach new users, help people gain new skills and strengthen community ties.



National initiatives

Four in ten services reported participating in national volunteering initiatives over the past three years. The most common was Volunteers' Week (52%), followed by The Big Help Out (22%) and the Vision for Volunteering (17%). A small number mentioned other schemes such as the Macmillan Big Coffee Morning, Citizen Coin, Investing in Volunteers, Reading Hacks, and the Great Big Spring Clean. This suggests that while some national initiatives gain traction, particularly high-profile, sector-wide campaigns, engagement is uneven, with many services not taking part. It may reflect limited capacity, local priorities or the perceived relevance of these initiatives to library volunteering.

Support from third-party organisations or the local authority

Two-thirds of services (67%) reported working with third-party organisations or their local authority to support volunteer recruitment and management. Partnerships span a wide range of local and national bodies, including volunteer centres, voluntary sector infrastructure organisations, universities, schools, and specialist charities. Many services use these partnerships for advertising opportunities and initial recruitment, while day-to-day volunteer management often remains in-house.

The examples highlight both formal arrangements (e.g. Lancashire Volunteer Partnership, Royal Voluntary Service contracts, local CVS structures) and more informal collaborations, such as advertising through community groups, schools, and digital

volunteering platforms. Some services described benefits from shared resources and expertise, while others noted challenges linked to funding changes or reliance on temporary external capacity.

Overall, the findings suggest that partnerships with the voluntary sector and local authorities are an important mechanism for widening the reach of recruitment and providing additional support, but their effectiveness depends heavily on local funding arrangements, continuity and the balance between external and in-house management.

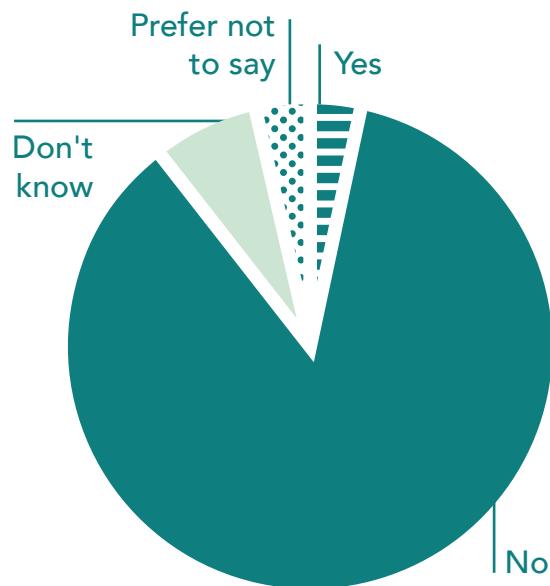
Volunteer management accreditation

Very few services have pursued formal accreditation for their volunteer management programmes - only two services reported doing so. The examples shared suggest that while accreditation can be valuable in providing external recognition and boosting confidence in volunteer programmes, it is also seen as resource-intensive and sometimes burdensome to achieve.

One service highlighted the benefits of a local, no-cost quality standard (VAST Award), while another noted that the NCVO Investing in Volunteers scheme was a useful tool but required significant effort.

Overall, the low uptake suggests that for most library services, accreditation is not currently a priority, likely due to capacity, cost, and competing pressures, even if the perceived benefits are positive.

Have you pursued accreditation for your volunteer management programme?



Digital platforms

Just under half of library services (48%) reported using digital platforms to support volunteer recruitment or engagement. The tools mentioned were diverse, with the most common being local or regional platforms (33%) and council-specific portals (17%). National platforms such as Do it Life (13%), NCVO (8%), and the Royal Voluntary Service (8%) were also used, alongside a small number of specialist systems including VConnect, Reach Volunteering, Assemble, Volunteering Matters, and Citizen Coin.

This variety suggests there is no single dominant digital tool in the sector, with services drawing on a patchwork of platforms depending on local arrangements, partnerships and resources. It also highlights the challenge of consistency and visibility in digital recruitment for libraries, which in turn may risk narrowing recruitment to particular demographic groups rather than reaching the widest possible pool of potential volunteers.

Micro-volunteering

Around 43% of services reported offering some form of micro-volunteering opportunity. The examples shared cover a wide spectrum, from one-off or seasonal contributions (e.g. helping with Warm Welcome Spaces, gardening days, LEGO events) to short, low-commitment tasks such as preparing craft materials, tidying shelves or writing postcards for Home Library Service deliveries. Many services also use micro-volunteering to engage young people through Duke of Edinburgh placements or to support high-profile programmes like the Summer Reading Challenge.

Some services noted that while they provide a wide range of opportunities that could be classed as micro-volunteering, these are not always formally recorded or recognised. Others acknowledged that most of their roles remain regular and ongoing but there is growing interest in more flexible, informal or family-friendly options to widen participation.

Overall, the findings suggest that while micro-volunteering is not yet mainstream in libraries, it is being used creatively to diversify opportunities, respond to community needs and attract volunteers who might be unable to commit to longer-term roles.

Recommendations for the future of library volunteering

01 Plan for strategic expansion of volunteer involvement

Explore the strategic development of volunteer roles across the service to maximise the benefit of library involvement to the local community. This includes expanding volunteer-led services (e.g., Home Library Service, community-run branches) while ensuring staff capacity is protected for essential tasks such as recruitment, training and ongoing volunteer supervision.

02 Position volunteers as value-adding contributors

Libraries should clearly define volunteer roles to complement, not replace, paid staff. Establish and communicate boundaries that prevent job substitution or de-skilling, ensuring volunteers focus on enhancing activities, such as events, group facilitation and digital support, while staff retain responsibility for professional and complex functions.

03 Diversify and adapt volunteer roles to widen participation

Develop a broader mix of opportunities that accommodate different skills, interests and life stages. This should include youth placements (e.g., Duke of Edinburgh), specialist roles (digital, language, heritage), family-friendly options and micro-volunteering. Libraries should also explore co-design and co-production roles that enable volunteers to shape services directly.

04 Strengthen the infrastructure that enables high-quality volunteering

Invest in dedicated volunteer coordination, training programmes and clear policies to ensure consistent and safe practice across all sites. Where capacity is limited, libraries should prioritise creating or updating volunteer strategies, management systems and guidelines to support sustainable engagement and ensure volunteers have a positive experience.

05 Maximise the social and wellbeing benefits of volunteering

Recognise and communicate volunteering as a reciprocal relationship. Libraries should design roles and support structures that foster social connection, confidence-building and personal development, especially for individuals who may be isolated, bereaved or seeking work experience.

06 Explore and pilot new forms of volunteering

Take advantage of emerging opportunities such as digital mentoring, wellbeing support, heritage and intergenerational projects, and partnerships with external voluntary organisations. Libraries should also consider remote or technology-enabled volunteering models to engage new audiences and increase accessibility.

Overall Recommendation

Library services should pursue a planned, well-supported expansion of volunteering, ensuring volunteers remain an integral but complementary resource. To mitigate risks, such as over-reliance, role creep and inconsistency, services should invest in coordination, clear role design and safeguards that maintain professional standards and positive volunteer experiences.



Appendix: Survey design

The two survey instruments used in this research were adapted from previous volunteering studies to ensure relevance. The library services survey was developed from the original professional doctorate Delphi study conducted by Dr. Biddy Casselden, which explored volunteering in public libraries. It also drew on Casselden's more recent work on volunteer engagement in the post-Covid period: Casselden, B. (2023). *What's going on with volunteers in public library services? Information Professional*, pp. 39–42. The volunteer diversity survey was informed by a similar study in the museum sector: Historic England (2025). *What does the volunteer cohort of the heritage sector look like in 2025?* Available at: <https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/inclusion/sector/volunteer-cohort-2025/>

Both surveys were piloted with library services to ensure clarity, relevance and accessibility. A library volunteer provided detailed feedback on the volunteer diversity survey, offering reflections on how it felt from a volunteer's perspective. Changes were made to allow volunteers to provide more detailed responses about their experiences. Similarly, a public library Head of Service reviewed the library services survey, leading us to adjust the way volunteer numbers were grouped by size. This feedback revealed that services often have significantly more volunteer groups than the research team had initially anticipated.

We would like to thank all the contributors for their valuable insights, which helped ensure the surveys were relevant and reflective of the public library sector.

Academic researchers may request access to the survey instruments by contacting projects@librariesconnected.org.uk

About Libraries Connected

We are an independent charity that supports, promotes and represents public libraries. Our work is driven and led by our membership, which includes almost every library service in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Crown Dependencies.

Across the areas we serve there are 176 individual library services with around 3,000 library branches serving over 61 million people. Our unique approach is to bring these services together to share experience, expertise and evidence – driving innovation and impact across the public library sector. While senior library leaders sit on our board and committees, we work with library staff at all levels.

As well as providing practical support, training and advice to libraries, we represent them to government and raise their profile in the media. We also develop and lead national library projects with cultural, academic and corporate partners.

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Blades, T., Scott, B., & Daniel, E. (2025). Volunteering in Public Libraries: Insights from the Libraries Connected Surveys. Libraries Connected.