

Community First Oxfordshire (CFO) and Oxfordshire Community & Voluntary Action (OCVA) Volunteer Vision Storytelling Evaluation Report

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Storytelling is an evaluation approach developed by Old Fire Station (OFS) in Oxford and inspired by Most Significant Change (MSC). It involves collecting stories from participants about their experience of a project, and then bringing people together to discuss the stories and what can be learned from them.

OFS trained CFO and OCVA staff and volunteers in Storytelling. In spring 2023, Sophie Jaquet Bennett, Volunteering Vision Officer for CFO and OCVA, collected stories from ten volunteers from across Oxfordshire. Sophie had conversations with these individuals (the storytellers) about their experience of volunteering and what it had meant for them. These conversations were recorded and transcribed, and then edited down into shorter stories which aim to faithfully reflect the storyteller's insights while preserving their 'voice' – telling it in their own words.

On 23 May 2023, CFO and OCVA staff met with colleagues and other stakeholders from the community and voluntary sector to discuss the stories. This discussion was facilitated and hosted by OFS.

The discussion comprised two main sections. Firstly, we asked participants for their first impressions of the stories, without any predetermined outcomes or criteria in mind. Then we asked them to consider the stories in relation to four themes selected in advance by CFO and OCVA. There was then a third discussion in which participants shared brief ideas on post-it notes about what volunteers need, and what will help to bring this about.

The key insights that arose from this discussion are summarised below. The best way to understand the insights gathered using Storytelling is to read the stories themselves in full. The stories collected for this project are included as an appendix at the end of this report.

Discussion 1: first impressions

The first discussion was an opportunity for participants to consider the stories without any predetermined criteria shaping their contributions.

Participants were given three prompts: which story or stories strike you most strongly; was there anything that surprised you in the stories; and are there any themes emerging?

The following key themes arose during this discussion.

1. Types of volunteering
2. Volunteering and paid work
3. Volunteer demographics and inclusion
4. Volunteers' capacity
5. Volunteers' motivations
6. Volunteering infrastructure
7. Volunteer wellbeing
8. The impact of the Covid pandemic on volunteering
9. Volunteering in its socioeconomic and political context

These themes are outlined in more detail below, with quotes from the stories inserted as examples.

1. Types of volunteering

Much of the discussion focused on different types of volunteering – for example, the time spent per month on volunteering and the skills and responsibilities associated with different voluntary roles.

One statistic was repeated: that 80% of volunteering was done by 20% of volunteers.

Certain questions followed from this – should the voluntary sector aim to change this ratio, or does it simply reflect the reality of volunteer demographics? Are 'serial volunteers' expected to do too much? Should those who volunteer in a light-touch way be encouraged to do more, or is light-touch volunteering an essential part of the volunteering ecosystem and the only viable option for time-poor people? Should light-touch volunteering in fact be presented as the norm, so that potential volunteers are not put off?

Many of the storytellers in this evaluation are 'serial volunteers', and one discussion participant noted that the 'intensity' of their stories made some participants in the group feel that they had 'not done enough'.

I'm a serial volunteer. I suppose it would have been ingrained in me as a child. My mother was a stalwart in the local church, and she was always volunteering for things. I've just always seen it as the thing that you should do. The people who volunteer tend to be like me, they tend to be busy doing lots of volunteering. And you don't find many people who do an hour a month. A limited number of volunteers are prepared to take on organising roles. And if you're not careful, they end up doing too much. (Story 1)

That's the only problem with volunteering: you'll start off doing one thing and before you know it you've got to do a lot of other things as well. So before I knew it, I was chair, because nobody else would be the chair. I've chaired numerous meetings in my professional life, so it's no big deal, I didn't mind. But sometimes you feel like, 'Hang on a minute, somebody else do some work!' (Story 5)

I was shocked by how much difference you could make by putting in one hour. Or donating one pound. (Story 8)

2. Volunteering and paid work

The question of how much time people should devote to volunteering, and what responsibilities they should expect to assume, led to another question: what is the relationship between volunteering and paid work?

Some participants felt that certain roles – such as those that take more than a given number of hours per week or involve particular responsibilities – should always be paid. Others felt that having skilled people doing responsible voluntary work is fundamental to volunteering (for example, retirees or those on maternity leave who have significant professional experience and expertise).

One participant argued that any regular roles that are designed in advance to be filled should be paid, while voluntary work should always be adaptable to what volunteers want to and can do.

Has this person got the skills that we need? How do you know that somebody is the right person to have access to the bank account without turning it into a job with proper interviews? Because in that case, they ought to be paid, in my opinion. It's a real tricky one, that. (Story 7)

I worked for 13 months as a carer, alongside people working full-time and getting full pay doing exactly the same stuff. It would not be allowed these days, but back then, we're talking early 90s, it was very commonplace. A lot of institutions used Eastern European volunteers like that to cover staffing. (Story 2)

One of OMA's principles is that everyone should be treated equitably, and sometimes that means being paid for your time as well. (Story 8)

3. Volunteer demographics and inclusion

The discussion frequently returned to questions of demographics and inclusion. These included: are some demographics more suited to volunteering, more able to give their time, or better accommodated by existing volunteering infrastructure and the wider socioeconomic context? Is volunteering mainly done by older people, by middle class people, or by white people? Is diversity in volunteering increasing or decreasing, and if it is decreasing or otherwise low, what would attract a more diverse pool of volunteers?

One participant observed that ‘different support is needed for somebody who volunteers from a position of strength than from a position of vulnerability’.

Both the stories and the discussion represented a range of opinion on diversity in volunteering.

I think one of the problems is that younger people tend not to do volunteering. Because older people get tired. But if you're working, it's hard, because you've only got the evenings. And if you've got kids, it's difficult. So really, you are relying on retired people to do it. (Story 5)

The voluntary sector before Covid was made up largely of well-meaning, middle-class white ladies who were retired or something. Now we see more under-represented voices and we see a lot of younger volunteers. That shows how motivated people are to help one another in a crisis. And it also brings a better understanding of the realities of what the population is going through, because you have representation from the classes who are hit harder. That's a huge silver lining to come out of Covid. (Story 3)

We were finding things to do, clubbing together, and sorting things out, moving really fast. It was actually mutual aid. Normal people helping normal people. (Story 8)

The citizen jury project on public transport and LTNs in Oxford was one of the most responsive organisations I have had dealings with in terms of volunteering. I had some reasonable adjustments that I needed. I'm neurodivergent, so the amount of noise, the crowd, and the light will impact how I'm processing visual material. And they responded really promptly to those. So I thought, 'Right, great, I'll do it!' (Story 2)

A lot of the volunteers I work with are not in my demographic, so it's quite interesting to build those relationships, and it's really nice to mix with lots of different types of people. It definitely adds to the innovation that can be input into different projects, people with different perspectives have really imaginative ideas that can create actual long-term solutions to meet the needs of all the different communities. (Story 10)

4. Volunteers' capacity

Questions of inclusion and diversity invited further discussion about the capacity that different people have for volunteering and what factors increase or decrease this. One participant summed the problem up as ‘you don't get something for nothing’.

Even if volunteers nominally give their time for free, volunteering still requires significant resources, both in the lives of individual volunteers and within voluntary organisations. Another participant put it this way: ‘resilience takes resources.’

People have less time to volunteer now. We see a lot of people who are quite affluent volunteering and students, people who maybe have a bit more time, and some security. Working people don't have as much time. The money is drying up, wages are low. (Story 8)

I've got caring responsibilities for parents and grandchildren. So the flexibility was really key. And those roles enabled me to pick and choose what I could do, when I could do it. It was good. I went,

enjoyed being part of a team, meeting people all the time, feeling I was doing something worthwhile, but then not having things to worry about when I got home. (Story 4)

People want to volunteer. The activity during the pandemic and people coming forwards for Extinction Rebellion has been extraordinary. There will be equivalents of that, people who find themselves doing things that they never thought they would do. But where is the money going to come from to pay for these groups, particularly the venues? And people who are worried about money, are they going to be volunteering? They're busy doing three jobs! (Story 7)

5. Volunteers' motivations

As well as people's capacity for volunteering, the discussion also focused on people's motivations for volunteering. This was rarely as simple as asking whether people volunteered for altruistic reasons or for personal benefit – these two justifications tended to exist in complex symbiosis.

Participants observed that the motivations cited in the stories were often specific to the individual. Some touched on the exuberance, joy, and passion of the storytellers, and the nurturing quality of voluntary activity. Others noted that, while many volunteers want to 'change the world', this impulse can lead to unintended negative consequences.

People that volunteer tend to focus on, you know, 'I'm doing it for other people.' And when things get too stressful, they stop, because it's for someone else, not for them. But integrating it into your life and making it part of who you are can be so beneficial for you. People are kind of slow to talk about that aspect, because it seems like you're going into it with an agenda, or it's not real altruism if you get something out of it or if you enjoy it. But you can think both things. (Story 6)

Volunteering was really vital for me, as part of the transition from working life. I'd had quite a senior role, and was really busy, and then was in my back room, quite isolated. I think anyone, when they retire, you lose some confidence. It would have been very easy for me to not have left the house. And I could see that being a downward spiral. I knew it was something I needed to do for myself, to give me that structure, be meeting people. (Story 4)

Volunteering, it's a good thing to do and extends your life expectancy. There's lots of studies that show if you're a volunteer, you're going to live longer. So from a purely mercenary point of view, you can explain to people why it's a good idea to go and do it. (Story 1)

I was brought up in primary schools within the communist system, which taught that you do things for your community for free as part of being a citizen. (Story 2)

6. Volunteering infrastructure

Both the stories and the discussion returned repeatedly to the importance of good infrastructure to support volunteers and volunteering. One participant acknowledged the need for training and accountability to keep volunteers 'engaged, safe, and effective'. Many of the storytellers suggested

that having centralised databases, procedures, or frameworks for volunteer identification, induction, training might help with recruitment, support and retention.

There's almost a requirement for sort of a national register. Something to take away all that requirement for endless form filling, DBS, insurance. You're just filling in bits of paper, you're not doing anything. Get all that done once and then you're a volunteer, you get your badge and off you go. (Story 1)

It would be good to have a directory divided into themes. I know that maybe it's resource-heavy. But that would be great, it would make it easier for people to feel like they could volunteer. Because the barrier can be wondering 'What would I do? Or do I have the skills?' (Story 2)

It would be my ideal world to have a centralized platform where you could log on and say, 'Okay, I've got ten hours this week, let's see who needs me.' If you could have a flexible way to do that, it would really be helpful. (Story 4)

There is a skill set that is needed when you are working with vulnerable people. Training people for volunteering is important. More consistent opportunities that are accessible. Doing shorter sessions to learn things that will help the entire volunteering movement. I'd really like there to be some kind of central body with fundraising to provide subsidised courses in things like first aid, mental health first aid, facilitation skills. (Story 9)

It'd be good to have something standardised. I want to be assured that I'm supported, protected, all the legal stuff, which a lot of community-based groups struggle with. (Story 10)

7. Volunteer wellbeing

The question of volunteer wellbeing arose frequently, with every group mentioning the risk, or past experiences, of burnout. Participants frequently cited clear expectations and good infrastructure as key safeguards against threats to volunteer wellbeing. They also frequently noted the value of volunteering itself as a source of satisfaction and community.

People need to be honest about what they want from you, so you have an opportunity to say, 'this is what I can give and these are the boundaries of what I want to give.' Because very often people find that they've been pulled into volunteering to do things they don't want to do. (Story 2)

I've been involved with different committees over the years – that's the sort thing that comes up at my age – but every time I felt it made no difference if I was there or not. I left completely burnt out, and I lost all my confidence and my ability to work with other people. Completely. In all these situations I've gone in vague but idealistic and come out disillusioned. (Story 7)

I've seen a lot of people in the volunteering sector burn out. But training and sharing responsibility, having non-hierarchical processes that empower people, would help there. So that it never feels overwhelming for any one person. (Story 9)

I've definitely had interesting times with my mental health, interesting times with my physical health as well. But volunteering and getting engaged with community has really helped with that – there's people around that care. (Story 6)

I'm definitely happier now. I enjoy my working and personal life a lot more. I have friends and a community which I hadn't had before at the university. (Story 8)

8. The impact of the Covid pandemic on volunteering

The impact of the Covid pandemic was a precipitating factor in the Volunteer Vision project. It was therefore not surprising that it came up in frequently in discussions and in the stories themselves.

The pandemic was widely seen as raising the profile of volunteering, while also highlighting – and creating – increased need for voluntary work. Some organisations emerged to respond to Covid, while others found themselves unable to operate due to public health measures. For some storytellers and discussion participants, the structures that arose in response to the pandemic seemed to have eroded since, while for others new voluntary activities seemed to have gone from strength to strength.

The last few years were quite difficult, with Covid. Lots of what I would normally be doing didn't happen. Nearly all of it stopped because a lot of the key volunteers just really didn't want to be doing anything, even if it was outside. (Story 9)

There was a general upswing in kind of community spirit, let's call it that. And I did see more people volunteering to do stuff. There was more neighbourliness visible, you know, we're all in this together, and let's help each other. It's gradually whittled away since then. But it actually inspired some innovation and reaching out to people who might otherwise never have got involved with those organisations. (Story 1)

We had a huge amount of volunteering during the pandemic and I think the ball was dropped. That's how it feels to me – that it didn't grow from that, where it could have done. A lot of connections were made, a lot of networks were made. And there hasn't been the will, the time, the resources to make the most out of that. (Story 4)

Covid really brought to light how the existing systems and infrastructure were simply inadequate to deal with any kind of crisis. Things have actually gotten much worse for the average person now. You know, in terms of people who have long Covid, people who were out of work for a long time, the sort of economic downfall is still quite serious. (Story 3)

Covid was what drove us to establish OMS, and it's interesting to see that the pandemic has gone away but we're much, much busier than we used to be. We have a phone line that people can ring up and ask for emergency support. We used to say yes to everyone. Now we have to turn people away when there's not enough food or volunteers. (Story 8)

Particularly after Covid – people got more interested in volunteering in the pandemic, but a lot of people are now experiencing burnout and fatigue, and I think that's definitely going to be a challenge. (Story 10)

9. Volunteering in its socioeconomic and political context

Participants observed that societal need often increases when the support available to meet it decreases. When statutory services are cut, volunteers may be expected to make up the shortfall. However, when real-terms wages reduce, or people have less free time, then volunteering capacity is also squeezed. This means that a cost-of-living crisis is an especially challenging time for the voluntary sector.

The discussion and the stories covered these questions in some detail, with different perspectives on the role that volunteering should be expected to play in relation to statutory provision. Is volunteering a 'nice to have' or a 'need to have'? Is it a stopgap on the way to more systemic change, or a desirable permanent feature of society?

With the cost-of-living crisis, increased need for social care due to the aging population, increased isolation and mental health issues; there is a rise in need for support for many reasons, and this just means that even more volunteers are needed. It's going to snowball. Volunteering is not a nice-to-have, it's really a need-to-have. (Story 4)

Voluntary organisations have a greater role now because society is relying on them for provision of social services. Charities are becoming necessary, where before maybe they were just seen as a frill. Unless government policy changes and there's proper funding for services, charities will grow, and they're going to need people to staff them. (Story 2)

It plugs the gaps more quickly and flexibly than the government structures can do. So a group of people can see there's a need for something and do it. At the bottom level, you know, we can't fix ambulance wait times. But we could go and help people who've just come out of hospital or who need to go and get their shopping. (Story 1)

For me personally, it's sort of felt like a call to use my skills to build the solutions I don't feel the government is building. There's a feel-good factor in giving someone food and knowing that you're helping them, but I don't do it for the feel-good factor, I do it thinking, 'This is a short-term step, but the long-term strategy is to build a different and better system.' (Story 3)

I think everyone's exhausted right now, in the UK, just across the whole country. Everyone's kind of in crisis mode. Getting people out of that is the most important thing you can do to get people back involved with the community. It's hard to feel involved with the community when you feel fundamentally unsupported by government. You need head space for it. In an ideal world, we'd have a government, and a local government, that were able to support and help community initiatives flourish. (Story 6)

There's an increasing amount of social prescribing. I think it's really important, and I'm fully supportive. But there's nowhere near as much funding for it as there should be. At the moment, it's

offloading people who can't access thorough mental health support from public services onto volunteering groups, who aren't trained to support people potentially at risk of mental health crises. All this 'Big Society' stuff effectively says that the volunteering sector, people who've got time and privilege (but maybe not actually that much), are going to support a lot of people who should be receiving better support from the state. (Story 9)

I mean, the country would collapse if it weren't for volunteers – it really would. So many services for older people and disabled people just wouldn't exist if it wasn't for the voluntary work that's done. So I really do think it's important. It's good to do it. I don't mind doing it. But sometimes, I just think, 'I can't do this any longer.' (Story 5)

Discussion 2: themed discussions

The second discussion was an opportunity to think about the stories in relation to four themes chosen in advance by CFO and OCVA. These themes were:

1. Recruitment and retention
2. Relationships and connection
3. Inclusion and access
4. Infrastructure, support, and training

The discussion participants addressed one of these themes per table. Key outcomes of each table's discussion are as follows (with quotes from the stories to illustrate):

Table 1: Recruitment and retention

- Encouraging an ethos of volunteering in children and young people through work with schools, or consultation with organisations such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award that have experience of working with under 18s.
- Making better use of corporate social responsibility schemes, which are often inflexible, badly targeted, and prioritise the needs of businesses over those of voluntary organisations where employees are placed to do volunteering.
- Exploring opportunities provided by Oxfordshire County Council's Inclusive Economy Charter.
- The importance of clear statements of purpose to attract and retain volunteers.
- While many storytellers speculated that centralised online resources would be helpful for volunteer recruitment, participants emphasised the effectiveness of in-person recruitment embedded in communities.

I mean, when I was at school, we had one lesson a week where you had to go out and do community volunteering. We went and did gardening in an old folks' home. But when I was the chair of a charity, we found it difficult to work with young people. The bureaucracy in order to be able to take somebody on part-time as a volunteer meant that a lot of the time, we just said we're not going to do it. It's too much aggravation. Which is so stupid, because if you can get kids at that age to volunteer, it makes them better citizens. (Story 1)

I don't like when you turn up, you've been told that there's a need, and there isn't a role really, they just want you to make yourself useful. For me that's not specific enough, I need to have a clear idea what is needed. (Story 2)

Table 2: Relationships and Connection

- The opportunities that volunteering provides to connect people to other people, to organisations, to communities, and to activities.
- Physical proximity is valued by some, and the move online during the pandemic made volunteering less attractive to such people.
- For others, online participation improved access because it suited their needs better.
- The importance of personal relationships to aid recruitment.
- Alignment with life events can make people feel more connected to volunteering, such as those who join toddler groups and then move on to Parent-Teacher Associations.
- The importance of good communication and feedback in maintaining connections with volunteers.
- That some people may require the creation of deliberate support networks to access volunteering – for example those who do not have preexisting support from friends and family.

The pandemic put stop to a lot of things. A lot of things have moved online, and I kind of opt out of that, because I don't get that connection. (Story 2)

The experience of trying to encourage people to do things on Zoom was very tricky because if you wanted to have a quiet chat with someone, you can't do it while you're all on Zoom. It's not like you can sidle up to someone in a room while you're making the drinks. (Story 7)

Unlimited Oxfordshire has actually worked better on Zoom, because more people can come to meetings – especially disabled people who can't necessarily get out and about very easily. (Story 5)

Having a personal contact you can talk to as a volunteer and feeling a sense of 'belonging' to a team is also vital. (Story 4)

Then as soon as you're a mother, you become entangled with people in the same boat, so you go to a toddler group and volunteer, then as the child grows older, you go to a PTA kind of thing. (Story 2)

I certainly felt I knew my own community better. There were probably about six of us who were regular volunteers. So we formed really close relationships. We really did have a lot of fun. That was probably the part that I enjoyed the most, and I've still got those relationships with those people. I think they will carry on whether the volunteering does or not. (Story 4)

Table 3: Inclusion and access

- The obstacles to volunteering created by complex bureaucratic processes.
- That sensitivity to individual need is both ethically necessary and invaluable in recruitment and retention, but also resource intensive.
- The need to balance sensitivity to individual need with the individual's right to privacy.
- That some volunteers may feel a moral obligation to volunteer, even if their own needs are not being met by the voluntary organisation, because volunteering can be seen as an inherently self-sacrificing activity.
- That people on low incomes or benefits often want to volunteer but accepting any remuneration (even far below the level of paid employment) can affect their entitlement to benefits.
- The risk of burnout if voluntary roles are too onerous, and that such roles should therefore be paid.
- That inclusion strategies are not one-size-fits-all, for example if introverts who enjoy working alone are asked to participate in person in democratic decision-making processes.

I know it has happened in the past that I was the right demographic because I was an ethnic minority woman, and neurodivergent, so great, we're ticking those boxes, we don't really have a role for you, but just sit in a seat. That's not what I want to do. (Story 2)

We have quite a few people who receive support and volunteer with us. That has always been quite a low and consistent number. I'd like it to increase because that's what we're about but I'm not sure if it will. Within OMA, the term volunteer has always been a bit iffy because I think we consider ourselves a bit more of a platform or a movement. (Story 8)

It's really nice to have a work situation that is more flexible for families. So, for example, when the teacher strikes were happening, we had the ability to open up to anyone who wanted to bring children in, so we had families working in the same space and the children all together. (Story 3)

Disabled people are always the last to be thought of in any context. Oxford has lots of problems with access. (Story 5)

Table 4: Infrastructure, support, and training

- The difficulty for smaller organisations of identifying training resources or opportunities (if they lack the time or experience to discover these).
- That brokering of training and development opportunities from larger organisations could be a valuable service.
- That bureaucratic processes can often be too time-consuming for smaller organisations to engage with effectively.
- The value of peer-to-peer support within the voluntary sector and the lack of capacity for smaller organisations to access this.

I did some training around supporting black people to have better access to activism, bringing in more inclusive spaces. I feel like that transformed what I was doing, how I was doing it, and who I was doing it with. I think that's a really important part of volunteering, building relationships with marginalised communities. I would love to see more of that in the voluntary sector. (Story 9)

From a volunteer's point of view, I think the challenge of all the paperwork, all the screening, all the training, should be minimised. Because sometimes you feel, you know, 'I'd like to do that short-term role. But actually, is it worth it for them and for me, with all the stuff we've got to go through to enable me to do that?' (Story 4)

As communication and technology improve, it'll be key in connecting and linking up volunteers, which I think is desperately needed. It's difficult, because obviously you have so many different bodies, especially in Oxfordshire. Everyone has their own media, their own websites, but you do have the local authority that could almost act as the central branch for all these things. So perhaps we should be working more with the county council to display information on what's available and thematically link things, so people can easily access what they want to volunteer in, the different aspects of society they want to help out. (Story 10)

Especially in the centre of Oxford, all of the space is owned and run by the university. So running voluntary and community initiatives can be really difficult if you're not part of that institution. There are lots of great student-led groups, but it does feel like there's a big disconnect in Oxford, between the local community and the university and students. (Story 6)

Discussion 3: what do volunteers need and how can we make this happen?

The third discussion invited participants to write on post-it notes brief ideas about 'what volunteers need?' and 'how can we make this happen?' The key outcomes of this exercise are outlined below:

- Volunteers need to have clear points of access to volunteering opportunities – to know where, when, and how they can volunteer – and have a clearly defined role. This requires the use of thoughtful and inclusive language when advertising roles, as well as an effort to organise volunteering in areas that are currently less well represented. It also requires organisations to be open to all and responsive to individual need.
- Volunteers need to feel recognised, to be praised, to understand the outcomes of their efforts, and to feel that they are making a difference. This requires effective communication on the part of voluntary organisations and systems of feedback.
- Volunteers need to feel respected, trusted, and welcome. This requires that voluntary organisations are prepared to be transparent and prepared to share responsibility.
- Volunteers need to enjoy volunteering. This requires the cultivation of social opportunities and relationship-building, as well as activities not directly related to the volunteers' task, such as social events, walks, BBQs, and annual celebrations.
- Volunteers need to be able to work according to their strengths and within appropriate boundaries. This requires that organisations tailor their expectations to individual circumstances, avoid making assumptions, and are responsive to individual need.
- Volunteers need time to reflect and opportunities to experiment. This requires that organisations are open to saying 'yes' and include space for supervision.
- Volunteers need training and support. This requires that knowledge and experience is shared widely between voluntary organisations.
- Volunteers need opportunities to start new organisations or create new volunteering projects. This requires that funding and physical space are made easily available, as well as training for founders and facilitators.

Appendix: The Stories

Story 1: The Thing You Should Do

You want to know all the organisations that I'm involved with? There's the Institution of Engineering and Technology. I'm a chartered engineer, and I sit on the panels that interview engineers trying to become professionally registered, plus the diversity and inclusion panel, and one looking at how to make the institution more attractive to volunteers. I'm a canal boater and one day a week in season I'm a lock keeper for the canal river trust. There are a couple of patient participation groups related to my GP surgery. I'm a volunteer litter picker with the Banbury Litter Pickers. I cook for Cropredy Lunches – that's lunches for old folks in the village near where I live. I'm a walk leader for Cherwell Wellbeing. I'm chair of Banbury Community Action Group, which encompasses Bridge Street Community Garden, among other projects. We've got a thriving community garden, and we're just starting a project called Cook Together, Eat Together, aiming to teach people to cook with surplus food. What else? I'm an active member of Banbury Shed. Because men can find it difficult to talk about mental health issues, it's a place to go and do something while they're talking. Effectively, it's sort of a repair café we run there. I'm a coordinator for the local group of Banbury Extinction Rebellion. And I'm also a coordinator for the national Extinction Rebellion stewarding group team, who provide safety marshals at the big actions. Then I do social media support for about five different Facebook pages. I think that's probably about it, so there you go, quite a long list.

I've always volunteered, it's just something I do. Right from way, way back in primary school. When I was living in China, I ended up chairman of the sailing club. When I lived in America, I was chair of the local Block Club, their equivalent of community groups. So there's been a long history, I'm a serial volunteer. I suppose it would have been ingrained in me as a child. My mother was a stalwart in the local church, and she was always volunteering for things. I've just always seen it as the thing that you should do. But there are themes. There's an environment theme through quite a lot of them. I became politically activated when I lived in America and President Trump got elected. And local community. I've always felt if you put something into a local community, it will be better. I have skills in organising and chairmanship. So, you know, that's what I give.

I lived in China, I lived in America. I only came back from America in 2018/19. Covid was fairly soon after we came back. So it kind of all hit the same sort of time. We moved back onto the canal boats all the way through lockdown, which made the Covid experience no problem at all. You were allowed your one walk a day. So we did our five miles up to where I did the volunteer lock keeping, and we dug up part of the ground next to the canal and started a little vegetable patch there, guerrilla gardening. Also during the lockdowns they were asking for volunteers to drive people to hospital appointments and go and collect shopping and stuff. So I did that. Partly it was personal, because if you were volunteering, you were allowed to get out and see society. I wasn't that scared of Covid. I was happy to go and do shopping, and take people to hospital appointments and things. So I gained from it and the community gained from it.

There was a general upswing in kind of community spirit, let's call it that. And I did see more people volunteering to do stuff. There was more neighbourliness visible, you know, we're all in this together, and let's help each other. It's gradually whittled away since then. But it actually inspired some innovation and reaching out to people who might otherwise never have got involved with

those organisations. I volunteer with a number of different organisations. And that's interesting because you see their different approaches to how they treat volunteers. So in terms of big organisations you've got the Engineering Institution, RVS, Canal and River Trust. They're what I would call big corporate, volunteer organisations, they run on volunteers. They're all set up with training courses, and you know, sort of registration and you're almost like an employee. And then I'm also volunteering with small community-led groups that are just a group of people who've come together with an idea. So I see the sort of spectrum of formal and informal volunteering.

On that spectrum, there was a project linking together all of the community services in Banbury, to address its pockets of severe deprivation. So that would be GPs, church groups, other voluntary groups, Sure Start, social services, all those sorts of professional groups that would interact with the community. I was there as a member of the public through my patient participation group links. My chief aim was to keep getting them to stop thinking about what you can do *to* the community, and ask, what does the community want you to do *for* it? You know, when you get a group of professionals in a room, they all think about their particular little box, and that's their focus. And they very often forget, well, okay, you could do that and that and that. But all the people want locally is some cheaper buses or whatever, you know, so, kind of constantly trying to bring them back to community. It comes back to this point of finding out what your customers want and giving them that, instead of what you think they should want.

There's a common theme in all the organisations: how do we get more volunteers? You know, the people who volunteer tend to be like me, they tend to be busy doing lots of volunteering. And you don't find many people who do an hour a month. A limited number of volunteers are prepared to take on organising roles. And if you're not careful, they end up doing too much. I'm no longer full-time employed. So I have the luxury of time. And I'm financially secure, so I can afford to spend the time doing volunteering. But austerity may mean people have a bit less time to volunteer because they're taking on third and fourth jobs. There's supposed to be long-term decline in volunteering. I don't see it. But the volunteers tend to be older, we need to get younger volunteers.

I think working with school-aged children would be the best way of doing that. I mean, when I was at school, we had one lesson a week where you had to go out and do community volunteering. We went and did gardening in an old folks' home. But when I was the chair of a charity, we found it difficult to work with young people. The bureaucracy in order to be able to take somebody on part-time as a volunteer meant that a lot of the time, we just said we're not going to do it. It's too much aggravation. Which is so stupid, because if you can get kids at that age to volunteer, it makes them better citizens, and it starts them off for life, because they've then got into the habit. So there's almost a requirement for sort of a national register. Something to take away all that requirement for endless form filling, DBS, insurance. You're just filling in bits of paper, you're not doing anything. Get all that done once and then you're a volunteer, you get your badge and off you go.

Volunteering, it's a good thing to do and extends your life expectancy. There's lots of studies that show if you're a volunteer, you're going to live longer. So from a purely mercenary point of view, you can explain to people why it's a good idea to go and do it, it binds you into your community better, which makes people know each other. And the more you know about your local community, the more likely you are to be a supporter of it and care for it and look out for it. It plugs the gaps more quickly and flexibly than the government structures can do. So a group of people can see there's a need for something and do it. At the bottom level, you know, we can't fix ambulance wait

times. But we could go and help people who've just come out of hospital or who need to go and get their shopping. I think it would be better if more people did it.

Story 2: My Internal Audience is Clapping

I became a volunteer at 17, when I came to this country, because that was a condition of my visa. In those days, it was the only way to come to the UK from Poland. I had a scholarship for a year, and I had to give 30 hours a week to an organisation as a volunteer. So I worked for 13 months as a carer, alongside people working full-time and getting full pay doing exactly the same stuff. It would not be allowed these days, but back then, we're talking early 90s, it was very commonplace. A lot of institutions used Eastern European volunteers like that to cover staffing. I then did not volunteer for quite a long time, until after my daughter was born. Then as soon as you're a mother, you become entangled with people in the same boat, so you go to a toddler group and volunteer, then as the child grows older, you go to a PTA kind of thing. When my son was born, I also volunteered in children's centres and was a member of an advisory group. I have done a great amount of cleaning, contributing cakes, that kind of stuff. My daughter's 25 now, so for 25 years consistently I have volunteered alongside my children's school. I always felt like, if my child was benefiting from something, I wanted to add some value to it from my own time.

I volunteered as a parish councillor about seven years ago. I found that quite a difficult experience, because the job description didn't quite match reality. I don't like when you turn up, you've been told that there's a need, and there isn't a role really, they just want you to make yourself useful. For me that's not specific enough, I need to have a clear idea what is needed. I know it has happened in the past that I was the right demographic because I was an ethnic minority woman, and neurodivergent, so great, we're ticking those boxes, we don't really have a role for you, but just sit in a seat. That's not what I want to do. I'd like to respond to a real need. People need to be honest about what they want from you, so you have an opportunity to say 'This is what I can give and these are the boundaries of what I want to give.' Because very often people find that they've been pulled into volunteering to do things they don't want to do.

Some types of volunteering I would happily do again, some I wouldn't. Since 2004, I have volunteered for a restorative justice charity, I came to that through doing a criminology degree. I work with American prisoners on death row, and their families. You never break continuity once you're assigned someone. They have people coming in and out of their life, and it's important that some people will stay the course. There are other things too, I tend to volunteer in my local community picking rubbish. I was involved with a biomedical research patient participation group, on their steering group for quite some time, and I volunteer for a lot of medical research. I give blood. My father was very ill in the early 90s and we have a rare blood group – there was a shortage in Poland, and I thought, 'I'm going to make balance in the universe, I give here in the UK, maybe someone will give over there.' So I started giving blood, and I have done it all those years. You felt really good about it because there were all these perks, they really wanted you to do it. And now it's a real difficulty, you have to jump through so many hoops. I don't mean the medical hoops, because that is absolutely essential. But the process is really rigid now. I'd like access to volunteering to become more flexible. Both sides need to be happy.

The citizen jury project on public transport and LTNs in Oxford was one of the most responsive organisations I have had dealings with in terms of volunteering. They were really good at answering

questions. When you are an employee, there are certain rules that people follow, in terms of responding to you, but when you volunteer, you're kind of like a poor relation, very often you don't hear back or it's out-of-date. So I was quite pleasantly surprised. I had some reasonable adjustments that I needed. I'm neurodivergent, so the amount of noise, the crowd, and the light will impact how I'm processing visual material. And they responded really promptly to those. So I thought, 'Right, great, I'll do it!' I've got some dietary needs too, and I realised very quickly that food was a huge element of the citizen's jury. You would have this kind of hovering over the cake and chatting. So they provided what I needed and then I had a discussion with one gentleman whose views were very polarised to mine. I actually saw something from a different perspective. And that would have not happened had we not had the food to mediate, you know?

Voluntary organisations have a greater role now because society is relying on them for provision of social services. From my perspective as the parent of a special needs child, for instance, there are charities now serving a role that was covered by the council before. Charities are becoming necessary, where before maybe they were just seen as a frill. Unless government policy changes and there's proper funding for services, charities will grow, and they're going to need people to staff them. So there's going to be a bit more advertising. I'm sure I don't know half of what exists, otherwise I'd be volunteering in other areas. I've tried to have something for all the core parts of life. I don't like being stuck in one pot, I like to have many things cooking at the same time. But there are some things I could do that I probably don't know exist. It would be good to have a directory divided into themes. I know that maybe it's resource-heavy. But that would be great, it would make it easier for people to feel like they could volunteer. Because the barrier can be wondering 'What would I do? Or do I have the skills?'

I have never not volunteered. I like to update my activity to my current status, volunteering around my interest areas. My father did a lot of community work, where he should have got paid and didn't because he could see people didn't have a capacity to pay. So I think that's his conscientiousness, and this is probably what I've inherited. And I was brought up in primary schools within the Communist system, which taught that you do things for your community for free as part of being a citizen. So we had Saturdays where you had to go to school and do community work. That was very much outdoors, and something that I liked doing, things like raking leaves, or shovelling snow, or painting equipment in the children's park. And there was a feeling that this is part of life. So it's become second nature, if I see a need, it feels like an itch I need to scratch.

The pandemic put stop to a lot of things. A lot of things have moved online, and I kind of opt out of that, because I don't get that connection. As much as I like to think that my volunteering is altruistic, I think it is very much about the connection. I've got this communication disorder, I don't connect very easily, and through volunteering there is this feeling of connection. I benefit and it gives me the positive vibe that I really like having. My internal audience is clapping, and I like that feeling! I know that a lot of people believe that it's altruistic, and maybe there is an element of that, but I think there's a philosophical debate! I have never volunteered where I didn't get that feeling.

Gaining knowledge is another big consequence of volunteering. I like to do some research. So there'll be a lot of gained knowledge and as a result, skills that will usually branch out to something else, because I never learn and just close the door, there's always another door that opens. And I've made a lot of friends, some for a long time, some just for the duration of the project. But that was really good because I'm not an extrovert, so for me, meeting new people is not easy. Also I'm trying

to be a voice. Sometimes that is a little bit abrasive. I'm not one of those people who will just nod their head at anything. If I disagree, I will put my five pennies in. But then if that does stimulate debate, or open up another perspective, I feel like I've made a difference.

Story 3: Make that Bubble Bigger

Since the start of the pandemic, I've contributed to two major voluntary action groups. First came my involvement in Oxford Mutual Aid, helping out in the early days, triaging families in need, and making sure they had ways to access food during the Covid crisis. And then I started Cherwell Larder, which later became Cherwell Collective and its constituent groups. So my involvement has been in organisational logistics, bringing people together, helping signpost people to the right services during the pandemic, in particular for access to food and medicine. Cherwell Collective includes a few other community groups and voluntary groups, so Cherwell Larder, Harvest @ Home, Climatedarian Kitchen, Oxford Party Library, and Waste Innovation Station Headquarters. I do things like finding team members to run different parts of it, partnership building with different suppliers, looking for funding, looking for space and supply chain stuff. But I mean, you know, I do anything – I'm the founder, so that's what you do when you create something.

I think the level of deprivation in our community was something I was quite naïve about. There is a real grimness to the realities people are living in Oxfordshire. I think it's a common assumption, that it would be more affluent. But there's a real need for a lot of work, and Covid really brought to light how the existing systems and infrastructure were simply inadequate to deal with any kind of crisis. Things have actually gotten much worse for the average person now. You know, in terms of people who have long Covid, people who were out of work for a long time, the sort of economic downfall is still quite serious. And then on top of that, you have this cost of living crisis, and then you have this refugee issue, where you see a xenophobic mood overtaking part of the population, because they're just so desperate, and they feel like these other people are taking something from them. There's no vaccine for poverty, there's no vaccine for xenophobia, there's no vaccine for having a lack of a future plan that includes job growth. We wiped out our own food chain with Brexit and there doesn't seem to be much care taken in forming preventative plans in central government that would alleviate those issues. What that means is the voluntary sector is going to have to step up.

The voluntary sector before Covid was made up largely of well-meaning, middle-class white ladies who were retired, or who like myself at the time were on a maternity break or something. So I think that there is a diversification of the sector that has happened, we see more under-represented voices and we see a lot of younger volunteers. That diversification is quite important, because it shows how motivated people are to help one another in a crisis. And it also brings a better understanding of the realities of what the population is going through, because you have representation from the classes who are hit harder. That's a huge silver lining to come out of Covid.

For me personally, it's sort of felt like a call to use my skills to build the solutions I don't feel the government is building. Before, I did psychology research, I was an academic. I always did volunteering that was more climate-oriented, and I saw this as an opportunity to create something that could be a real lasting legacy and part of the solution to the climate crisis, because I finally had the kind of career flexibility and break to do that, imposed by Covid. So now I'm not going back to neuroscience research, I'm going to just keep doing this, and try to put all of my skills into reducing

the carbon footprint of the community. It's now or never. Green energy in a circular economy is a very good way to build resilience in the community. There's a feel-good factor in giving someone food and knowing that you're helping them, but I don't do it for the feel-good factor, I do it thinking, 'This is a short-term step, but the long-term strategy is to build a different and better system.'

We have hundreds of volunteers across Cherwell Collective. A lot of people want to help make meals in the Climatarian Kitchen. It's 'pay what you can', the guide prices are all based on the carbon footprint of the dish. So we suggest £1 donation per car mile equivalent. But also we are trying to show the beauty of the food that people throw away, so it's not like a cafeteria, it's a serious kitchen, very fast-paced, very regimented and strict. The young kids who come in to volunteer, they're interested in getting jobs in kitchens. So we're trying to teach them skills that they could take into fine dining, making sure they learn the mother sauces, the French names, making sure they know these different techniques. Now the council have asked us to supply soups to people in need, so we're still running our usual café, but now we do these extra 160 soups. And we all do just muck in. People know I'm never gonna ask them to do anything they haven't seen me doing, right? They've seen me emptying trash, they've seen me mopping the floors, washing the dishes.

But I probably still live a much better work-life balance than I did before. Because I was in academia, I did not focus much on the life part of my work-life balance! I'm probably working the same number of hours a week now, but I can have my family involved in a lot more of those. It's really nice to have a work situation that is more flexible for families. So, for example, when the teacher strikes were happening, we had the ability to open up to anyone who wanted to bring children in, so we had families working in the same space and the children all together. It was just very nice to be able to take responsibility for things like community childcare, which are actually quite critical in building a different society. This is how to have a healthy community that looks out for one another. We all want this to feel safe, to create a more comfortable space for everyone. There are a lot of homophobic people in the community, because there are a lot of old, rural people, but we've also been able to make some inroads with that, we just approach it by saying 'Can we talk about this?' We can have those discussions in a very real and meaningful way and it's kind of opened up a space that's not punitive. Because we want everyone to be a partner. We do have a very broad membership, we have a Green Party councillor and a Conservative Party councillor who help us every single week, and it works really well being integrated, you know, being that open. It's quite a powerful way of kind of breaking those barriers and creating a space where people can talk about stuff. We're going to build that bubble, and then make that bubble bigger and bigger and bigger.

I'm never gonna get that 'I've done it' feeling with this work, it always has me running on a wheel and chasing the hamster! It doesn't have an end, I'm trying to create a greener society! I think the next five or ten years, the socio-economic costs of Brexit are going to be rather dire. And the result of that is that the community sector will be picking up a lot of increase in demand caused by financial distress. From our point of view, it is a bit of an opportunity, because we want to engage people in the climate fight, and there are cost savings and jobs that can be created from climate work. I think a lot of voluntary work just goes from crisis to crisis, and we are much more solution-based in our vision. If people eat healthier diets and grow local food, and we do all of these at Cherwell Collective, the health benefits are there. So they will naturally rely less on the NHS, and

they will connect to others and rely less on social workers, and those protections for the current system will be put into place, the more and more people become involved, and likewise, they will get essentials from us and they will have a buffer for the cost of living crisis. So we are still keeping our eye on climate change as the problem we need to address, because it's the existential crisis that needs the most work. But some of the other issues can be alleviated if we put our eyes towards that prevention. What we're trying to do up here is keep resources in circulation, because that is the best way to deal with whatever the future may bring. It's a solution-focused way of working. I have faith that our model will stay strong.

Story 4: Nice to Have, Need to Have

I worked for the NHS in a non-clinical role, which changed an awful lot during the pandemic. Pre-pandemic, I was doing a lot of face-to-face work, such as educational training events and quality improvement projects. When the pandemic came I was working just in front of the screen, everybody was firefighting, and the resource and time for the kind of work I was doing reduced dramatically. This combined with increased caring responsibilities made it seem a good time for me to retire.

Volunteering was really vital for me, as part of the transition from working life. I felt it would work best if I initially did something connected to health, because it was a familiar world to me. So I did three things. I joined the Royal Voluntary Service and did vaccine marshalling at the Kassam. I helped at my local surgery, Eynsham and Long Hanborough, with running the clinics for Covid and flu. I became an Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust volunteer, (they are the local community and mental health trust). I already had relationships with them through my previous employment volunteering initiative, so I just pulled on that when I retired. The work I did with them was more ad hoc, e.g. producing a newsletter, supporting carer's week, delivering staff care packages. More recently, I've been part of a team inspecting community hospitals from the public point of view.

Volunteering was really important for me at that particular time. I'd had quite a senior role, and was really busy, and then was in my back room, quite isolated. I went from a very full-on role, to no real structure. I think anyone, when they retire, you lose some confidence. It would have been very easy for me to not have left the house. And I could see that being a downward spiral. I knew it was something I needed to do for myself, to give me that structure, be meeting people. And it needed to be easy to start with.

I've got caring responsibilities for parents and grandchildren. When my mum and my dad – both living on their own separately, both 90 – call on me, I don't want to feel that I'm letting anyone down. So the flexibility was really key. And those roles enabled me to pick and choose what I could do, when I could do it. It was good. I went, enjoyed being part of a team, meeting people all the time, feeling I was doing something worthwhile, but then not having things to worry about when I got home. And that was what was important at that stage for me.

I am at the moment kind of considering what next. Having done those roles, you know, I have got more confidence now to do something else. The Kassam has cut down a lot now, and the surgery as well have stopped running clinics. Oxford Health volunteering team has changed quite a lot since I joined and I am not connected to any volunteering opportunities with them at the moment.

I think it would really help to have one set of training which could be used wherever you volunteer, because it's all the same things, manual handling, data protection, and so on. Then, you know, you've got a passport to say, 'I've done it,' so you can go and work anywhere. I think that would be really useful, because otherwise everybody ends up doing it over again.

It would be my ideal world to have a centralized platform where you could log on and say, 'Okay, I've got ten hours this week, let's see who needs me.' If you could have a flexible way to do that, it would really be helpful. From a volunteer's point of view, I think the challenge of all the paperwork, all the screening, all the training, should be minimised. Because sometimes you feel, you know, 'I'd like to do that short-term role. But actually, is it worth it for them and for me, with all the stuff we've got to go through to enable me to do that?' So I think those are some of the challenges. Having a personal contact you can talk to as a volunteer and feeling a sense of 'belonging' to a team is also vital.

We had a huge amount of volunteering during the pandemic and I think the ball was dropped. That's how it feels to me – that it didn't grow from that, where it could have done. A lot of connections were made, a lot of networks were made. And there hasn't been the will, the time, the resources to make the most out of that. I hope that it will grow, and that people will realise actually, it's essential that volunteers are much more involved in communities. Certainly in health and social care. A lot of my working life was trying to connect the voluntary sector with the NHS, and maximising the benefits of community input to support the NHS. At the preventative end of health and social care, working with people with loneliness, working with people who are feeling anxious, sad, before they have a clinical need, I think there is huge, huge space for volunteers to step in and help. It's happening in some areas, but it's not happening everywhere.

At the height, at the Kassam, there were 20 volunteers a day. Over 20 people a day, maybe 200 a week, and then suddenly, nothing. For a lot of those people, it was a really important part of their weeks. There were people in their 70s and 80s volunteering, and it was maybe their one chance to get out of the house, meet people and feel they are making a valuable contribution. Some people were volunteering every day, they really found it worthwhile, and then suddenly there's nothing – no contact. I felt that that was really sad actually, and a missed opportunity, because we're still linked, you know, we're still part of RVS. But there's been no personal contact or communication saying, 'This is stopping now. Is there something else you can do?' And I think those 200 people would have said, 'Yes, we want to do something else.' In the broader volunteer sector, there's so much. That's what I meant by the ball drop. But I think nationally as well, it feels that nothing came of it. If there had been a big web platform, maybe, linking lots of people or just some comms around it, where everybody felt that they belonged to something. At the moment, it's very piecemeal. I think it's infrastructure, I think it's comms, and I think it's that sense of belonging as a volunteer. That sense of a role – that you're part of something.

Particularly with the work in the local surgery, I certainly felt I knew my own community better. There were probably about six of us who were regular volunteers. So we formed really close relationships. We really did have a lot of fun. That was probably the part that I enjoyed the most, and I've still got those relationships with those people. I think they will carry on whether the volunteering does or not. Feeling part of your own community, it's great. I did learn quite a lot about what makes things accessible for people, what helps people.

With the cost of living crisis, increased need for social care due to the aging population, increased isolation and mental health issues; there is a rise in need for support for many reasons, and this just means that even more volunteers are needed. It's going to snowball. And like with health, social care can't pick up everything. Volunteering is not a nice-to-have, it's really a need-to-have. If the ball can be picked up from the pandemic, the infrastructure can be put in place for the voluntary sector getting more involved in communities. I think it's got to happen, really. Otherwise, it's a big, big resource that's being missed. But you need volunteer management, you have got to put in the investment to start with, to make sure it works and then you have to sustain as some volunteers leave and others join. All the screening. All the training. And obviously, that costs. But the return can be huge.

Story 5: A Cup of Tea can be Quite a Challenge

I volunteer for a few different groups. I'm a trustee of Unlimited Oxfordshire, which is a charity for disabled people. I'm disabled myself – I have mobility problems because of multiple sclerosis. Disabled people are always the last to be thought of in any context. At Unlimited we try to pick up on problems that people might be having, and see if we can do anything about it. Mostly, that involves letter writing. For instance, Oxford has lots of problems with access. There are so many shops in Oxford that I can't get into – they don't have ramps. Even the university's access can be poor. We're frequently writing to the Council trying to get things changed. And we have a really big whinge once a month on Zoom, in a meeting where people can just chat about their problems. Recently the low traffic neighbourhoods have been a major issue: people being able to get in and out quickly, carers being stuck, that sort of thing. Some disabled people completely rely on their carers. The carers themselves should be treated really brilliantly, but of course they're not. Often they're not even paid for the time it takes them to travel from one person to another. So this is all part of the huge problem we have of reforming social care.

Then I'm the chair of Oxford Bury Knowle Art Group. My job as Chair there is really admin – sending out Zoom links and chivvying people to come and make cups of tea if they want to come to the live events, things like that. Most of the people in the group are over 80. We have some people over 90. At 70, I'm probably one of the youngest people in the group. So I feel like I'm doing a social service by bringing these elderly people together. I think that most people like to do it because they get together, have a cup of tea and a chat. It's very much a social thing. Artists come and give demonstrations and we try to have a couple of exhibitions every year. Pre-Covid we had quite a big exhibition in the Baptist Church in Bonn Square, and raised over £1000 for the winter night shelter for the homeless. Then Bury Knowle library lets us use their foyer for a little exhibitions. People like to see it, the kids like having a look at the pictures. We've also done some workshops at the library, which was good fun. And they really love us at the library for doing these things.

I'm also an editor for *Oxtalk*, which is a talking newspaper for blind and visually impaired people. I go through the *Oxford Mail* and select stories of interest, then someone reads and records them, and a technical officer puts the whole lot together. We've got a website, and the material goes on there. It also goes on to little computer sticks, which people who don't have a computer can use. You have to remember that so many disabled people and older people don't have computers, they can't do Zoom, they're struggling. And they're completely forgotten. It's not really right that they're stuck because they can't deal with a world where technology is changing all the time. There's a huge financial consideration here as well. Many people can't afford it. Though Unlimited

Oxfordshire has actually worked better on Zoom, because more people can come to meetings – especially disabled people who can't necessarily get out and about very easily. That's one of the changes around Covid that's made things quite easy in a way. We thought Covid was going to cause us a big problem. But in fact, we were able to put most things on Zoom, which suited most people. It's only really the art group that's gone back to in-person meetings now. I think some people are quite reluctant to meet up again, especially disabled people. A lot of them are still shielding.

Before Covid we had about 60 people in the art group. Post-Covid, we've got 25, which is making getting the exhibition together a little bit more difficult, because you just don't know how many paintings you're going to get or who's going to come and volunteer to look after them. But we've tried to carry on. I'm determined. I mean, the very first chair of the art group was John Henry Brookes, who they named Brookes University after. And I sort of feel like I've got him sitting on my shoulder to keep the group going. This is the 75th year. We've got to keep going this year, even if we fold up at the end of the year.

A friend of mine who did an art degree at Oxford Brookes was a member, I joined through her. And then of course, once you join something, they get you to do more. That's the only problem with volunteering: you'll start off doing one thing and before you know it you've got to do a lot of other things as well. So before I knew it, I was chair, because nobody else would be the chair. I've chaired numerous meetings in my professional life, so it's no big deal, I didn't mind. But sometimes you feel like, 'Hang on a minute, somebody else do some work!' When you start volunteering, everybody wants you. I mean, the country would collapse if it weren't for volunteers – it really would. So many services for older people and disabled people just wouldn't exist if it wasn't for the voluntary work that's done. So I really do think it's important. It's good to do it. I don't mind doing it. But sometimes, I just think, 'I can't do this any longer.'

The problem is that most of the people who do volunteering seem to be older women. We've got a few men in Unlimited, including someone from the global majority, so that's good, it makes us slightly more diverse. The very white art group also has a few men; they're mostly elderly ladies, and chivvying them up is quite hard. I just think it's old age, you know – they're getting too tired. So it's a bit of a battle. I've found especially since Covid that people just don't have the energy. A lot of people have lost energy physically, partly because they've got long Covid.

I think the disability group is always fighting more. You know, we get a bit angry. Because it's less about enjoyment, and more about things that need sorting out. It's really a question of constantly keeping on, because they just forget about us otherwise. And it takes somebody becoming temporarily disabled to appreciate the problems. One of our local councillors broke her leg. And she said it was an absolute nightmare getting on and off of buses, trying to go anywhere. She suddenly realised how awful everything was. Even though it's been the law to make places accessible for years, the law is quite weak in that sense. And the Equality Commission hasn't got very much money anymore, it had its funding cut. So it only can take the most obvious drastic cases to court. You can't get any money for any of this stuff. Every now and again, we find something – Aviva Insurance did a competition, where you can compete for a bit of money for some projects. We've managed to employ a worker to help boost our social media presence. But you're not talking big sums of money. You're talking £1000, that sort of thing.

I think one of the problems is that younger people tend not to do volunteering. Because older people get tired, as I say. But if you're working, it's hard, because you've only got the evenings. And if you've got kids, it's difficult. So really, you are relying on retired people to do it. And they do a great job. Some of them are so busy they're working full-time. It'd be nice if younger people could join in, but I don't see it happening. As with any of these things, it could get better or it could get worse. I mean, we just don't know, there could be another pandemic – anything like that can just screw everything up, can't it? We just have to respond to things as they happen, and carry on doing what we're doing. It seems to be a never-ending task but feels worthwhile.

Story 6: You Can Have Both

The last six to eight months really has been entirely about community for me. Your mid-20s can feel like some of the loneliest times in your life. For a lot of people – and I know I felt this when I was still doing my PhD – you can feel so alone because for your entire life, you've got people around, you've got a prescribed community, at school or university, you've got this group of people that are going through the same things at the same time. And something really difficult can be transitioning into the working world, where there are different boundaries. So for me, something that has been incredibly beautiful about the past eight months has been creating that community for myself, finding people that are working in the area that I'm living in, so I can just kind of walk around Cowley and feel like I know people, feel grounded, feel safe.

I lived in London before, and I was doing voluntary work with the Royal Institution of Great Britain. They're a science communication charity, and I was running some of their primary school maths master classes. Then I moved to Oxford in September 2020. For the first year and a half after moving here, I was doing my PhD, during the pandemic. I volunteered for the Coronavirus Tutoring Initiative, working with students that couldn't access support. I worked with a few students doing their GCSEs or their A levels, to help them through, get them to exams when their teachers just weren't turning up, or they weren't having great experiences. Then I did some volunteering with an organisation called IntoGrad, writing a bit of content for them and reaching out to colleges. They work to support people looking to get into graduate education, demystifying the whole process, exploring why particular groups of people might feel like they can't access it. Just getting all the information out there in a more digestible, cohesive way.

I decided in July of last year to take a year out of my PhD. Since then, I've been volunteering at the East Oxford Farmers' and Community Market, quite a small farmers' market based in a primary school just off Cowley Road. It's got a really lovely community atmosphere. I went there with my friend a couple of times, and signed up to be a volunteer, volunteered once, and then the next week, they were like, 'Can you be a manager?' So since then, I've been there most weeks managing. I started at the market when I'd stopped doing my PhD, and I just wanted something to do that was not too intense, something I could go to and just interact with people and be in a lovely space for a while. I wasn't expecting the sense of community it gave me, but it has been amazing in that respect. I'm supporting the stallholders, thinking of ways to promote it, hopefully taking over their Instagram to make it a bit more relatable to younger audiences. In terms of the people that manage and are on the committee for the market, I am significantly younger, so it's a really great opportunity to reach a different audience. They're struggling at the moment, trying to get people to come. We've had a few stall holders drop out because they're not making enough money, but we can't really get more until we have more people coming.

I also run a queer-led, anti-capitalist swap shop in a pub once a month. So people bring in clothes, they get tokens, and they can take anything they want from our community closet. It's called Cowley Community Closet. It's on for four hours on a Sunday, so people come in, get a drink, have a chat, stay for a while, see what other people bring in. We specifically try to foster community. A lot of the people that come are queer, trans, or otherwise part of the LGBT community, and just making people feel supported is really what we want to do.

Volunteering is something I've always tried to integrate into my life, wherever I am. It just gives you that joy, seeing other people get happiness and not getting anything from it other than that. Doing educational volunteering with the Royal Institution from the first year of my undergrad, going every Saturday, I was just seeing how excited these nine and ten-year-olds were about everything that they did. And people who come to the farmers' market as well, some of the people that come in always stop by for a chat. You can see that when they move away they're happier. Or at the swap shop last time, one of my trans friends came in, and she brought in all of her old, as she described them, 'man clothes,' to swap for floral dresses and stuff that made her feel joy. And that's amazing to see.

I haven't decided yet whether or not I'm gonna go back to my PhD. But if I did, I would be in such a different place. I've definitely had interesting times with my mental health, interesting times with my physical health as well. But volunteering and getting engaged with community has really helped with that – there's people around that care. I think if I do move back into a PhD, it will be with such a different focus. Knowing I've got a community behind me, and I've got things that help me feel grounded, it'll put me in a hugely better mindset going back to that.

I've tried to not do education-based volunteering since I've stopped the PhD. I just want a break from it, and a little break from science. I haven't had a break from science since I was 11. The community stuff does give me more of what I need right now, in terms of feeling connected to people around me. It's also easier to do education-based volunteering while in education, just based on the opportunities you get. If you're a student there, it gives you that foot in the door, whereas if you're just a member of the public, a local, there's not that incentive to listen to you. Especially in the centre of Oxford, all of the space is owned and run by the university. So running voluntary and community initiatives can be really difficult if you're not part of that institution. There are lots of great student-led groups, but it does feel like there's a big disconnect in Oxford, between the local community and the university and students. And there's still a huge amount of work to be done in Oxford in terms of accessibility.

I do really worry that volunteering is going to dwindle, and we're going to lose really important things in our community. I think everyone's exhausted right now, in the UK, just across the whole country. Everyone's kind of in crisis mode. Getting people out of that is the most important thing you can do to get people back involved with the community. It's hard to feel involved with the community when you feel fundamentally unsupported by government. You need head space for it. In an ideal world, we'd have a government, and a local government, that were able to support and help community initiatives flourish. That would be amazing.

It is scary to think about the people that slip through the cracks when they're not able to access support. Both the stuff that is fundamentally required, but also a chat and a nice place to be.

Because that can be really important. Human interaction is a basic need. There's things that make life happen and things that make life worth living. And I don't think there should be barriers to make life worth living. The things I'm involved with, that's a really big focus, making sure people feel supported. Even just other volunteers, you know. What I would hope is that people can realise that even if everything's stressful, volunteering is something you can do to help yourself and to help everyone else. Even though it feels like a huge thing to do, spending a couple of hours at a farmers' market can just be such a beneficial experience for you as well. People that volunteer tend to focus on, you know, 'I'm doing it for other people.' And when things get too stressful, they stop, because it's for someone else, not for them. But integrating it into your life and making it part of who you are can be so beneficial for you. People are kind of slow to talk about that aspect, because it seems like you're going into it with an agenda, or it's not real altruism if you get something out of it or if you enjoy it. But you can think both things. You can have both.

Story 7: Doughnut Darning

I suppose quite a lot of what I've done would be called campaigning, rather than purely voluntary activity that has no 'out there changing the world' dimension. I've been involved with different committees over the years –that's the sort thing that comes up at my age – but every time I felt it made no difference if I was there or not. I left completely burnt out, and I lost all my confidence and my ability to work with other people. Completely. In all these situations I've gone in vague but idealistic and come out disillusioned. That idealism that you bring to volunteering can really get squashed, and it takes the wind out of your sails. And that's been a sad experience for me because with all my history with charities, I thought I knew what I was doing.

During the pandemic, I thought I ought to do something for other people. All I was doing was lots of exercise and keeping safe because of health issues. And so I volunteered to do something on the phone. There were vast amounts of training, I got the hang of all these electronic systems, and then the person I was given was someone that I half knew, who was barely old. He was supposed to be an old person, you know, he's my generation, which was a real wake up call for me! I thought "Well, that'll teach me to try and patronisingly be helpful to old people!"

I decided (in my wisdom) to resuscitate Low Carbon East Oxford in 2018/2019. There were similar groups around town who seemed to be doing all these wonderful things, so why not try to revive it? Whether that was a good idea or not, I don't know, but as of Tuesday there is a fully constituted committee! It's taken a long time, and obviously the pandemic didn't help.

The experience of trying to encourage people to do things on Zoom was very tricky because if you wanted to have a quiet chat with someone, you can't do it while you're all on Zoom. It's not like you can sidle up to someone in a room while you're making the drinks. I had to bump into people in the street to find out why they were coming to the meetings. It's been very interesting, working out why people come. Why do they keep coming when they don't seem to want to make anything happen, or join in with anything that's going on? I'm still confused about that.

People want to volunteer. The activity during the pandemic and people coming forwards for Extinction Rebellion has been extraordinary. In XR, it's the sort of people who had never thought about the environment until 2019 who are hugely active. There will be equivalents of that, people who find themselves doing things that they never thought they would do. But where is the money

going to come from to pay for these groups, particularly the venues? I'm concerned about that. How do venues keep going, in order for stuff to happen? And people who are worried about money, are they going to be volunteering? They're busy doing three jobs!

Some people just want to have a nice time, which can be good, but I see people who do far too much volunteering, or people who sign up to things and are far too busy. They don't want the checks and balances. They want to come to a meeting and deliver, but don't want to take on any responsibility. One person told me she comes to meetings, not because she's going to volunteer for anything, but because she saw that it was a very small meeting and so she thought they should come. That's a waste of time! That's a waste of *their* time! So, there's a little thread that runs through this whole world of volunteering for me now – is this the right person? Has this person got the skills that we need? How do you know that somebody is the right person to have access to the bank account without turning it into a job with proper interviews? Because in that case, they ought to be paid, in my opinion. It's a real tricky one, that.

I've seen the way that voluntary operations have developed over a longer period. Data protection, safeguarding, all of that. That never happened before. I think it's become quite hard for people to take the whole question of children's and vulnerable people's safety on board. It may have gone a bit too far the other way – it's just so complicated. But on the other hand, you don't want things to go wrong. Whatever you do, you still have to have appropriate management and supervision. But who decides what's appropriate in a charity setting when there's volunteering going on?

And are there the volunteers to make organisations work? These are my real concerns. For instance, I've noticed that a lot of people of my age who aren't working are basically becoming free childcare. It affects all sorts of organisations. People can't commit to things, because if there's a chance of being with the grandchildren, they want to take it, and sometimes really feel obliged to. That cuts down people's availability, or at least their sense of availability. Sometimes, I wonder if because we're the generation that brought up kids that feed on demands – now they're wanting childcare on demand.

I'm using some of my professional skills as a community musician in my current voluntary work. I run Singing in Nature at a local nature reserve once a month, and any money that people donate goes to the reserve. It's varied, month to month. Sometimes nobody comes if it's raining. I organised one and it turned out to be the hottest day there's ever been, so I cancelled that. But I have insurance, and I point out risks to people, and quite a few of them know the space already. And they come at their own risk.

Oh, there's another thing I do! I'd forgotten! It's an extraordinary animal, a sewing and discussion group at the Westgate library. There are amazing things that go on there in those public rooms. We all had to have DBS checks done because it's a public place and anybody could come in, especially when it was cold. Librarians turned into social workers over the winter because it was a warm space. But I've helped to hold that space, the discussion group. It's really a campaigning thing. We sit and sew, and we talk about donut economics, which is about reaching sustainable use of resources, but without falling down that hole, below the minimum consumption to prevent human suffering. I call the group 'donut darning', although that's not what it's officially called!

It is important for people to feel that they can contribute in ways that aren't absolutely prescribed. At the repair stall, part of Low Carbon East Oxford, someone brought a woollen glove which had a little hole, and it was a simple thing. So I put the glove on my hand, and just went at it. And that person was happy to watch and learn. It was a tiny hole and I could do it straight away. So maybe they will darn their own gloves in future, which is the point. And, you know, there's no interview process to see if we're any good at doing this thing. I suppose the theory is, even if you're not great at it, if you didn't, no one would, so it seems better than none.

Story 8: Making a Difference Locally

In the year before Covid, I was a student here, and I wasn't doing any regular volunteering. I was within my own head in my studies, and then the pandemic hit. I had more time on my hands and one of my friends recommended me to volunteer at Oxford Mutual Aid (OMA). So it wasn't purely altruistic – it was something to do!

I started as a driver initially, delivering food parcels to people experiencing food insecurity around Oxford. I think at that point it was probably a WhatsApp group, and you just asked what you needed. People ringing up and saying I need food, someone answering the phone and saying, fine, we'll get it to you in a couple of hours. That was amazing. We were finding things to do, clubbing together, and sorting things out, moving really fast. It was actually mutual aid. Normal people helping normal people. It was really rewarding to see the change and being able to support more and more people in an effective way. I moved into the more organisational side of things at our warehouse, which was less solitary. Also more remote stuff, like phone calls to people. I was still a student, so I was just doing it in my free time, which OMA is very good at accommodating.

OMA was mainly set up to combat isolation from Covid-19. People were very separated, and in Oxford the social imbalance already wasn't great. Then Covid hit, and it was just entrenching a lot of isolation and exploitation. Covid didn't affect everyone the same. We focus on distributing food, but we also give out baby products, toiletries, and cleaning products. Stuff that people need to live their lives. If you're on our regular list, we ring you every week, ask if you need any more food, and we guarantee you a food parcel. We'll keep giving you one every week, until you don't need it anymore. That's OMA's model. A lot of people will say it's shocking OMA doesn't means test, that there must be loads of people taking advantage. But people take advantage of rules, and we don't have any around accessing support. We don't ask any questions. We'll always just try and do our best.

I was shocked by how much difference you could make by putting in one hour. Or donating one pound, because all the finances at OMA are transparent. I don't think I've ever seen that anywhere else. Now we spend more on staffing and stuff, and we're more sustainable, it's not as like that. Before, if you donated one pound then that pound was going towards people who needed it, like 100% of that money.

I don't really know how paying people happened, but it was from the point of view of reimbursing people for the enormous number of hours that they were putting in. People putting in 40, 50, 60 hours a week, who had stopped doing their normal jobs, or been furloughed. There are six employed staff now and I think it amounts to about 200 hours a week. One of OMA's principles is that everyone should be treated equitably, and sometimes that means being paid for your time as

well. I still regard the pay that I receive as a kind of reimbursement of my time rather than a work salary. I almost treat it like volunteering still.

When I applied for the job, I was finishing my degree in Oxford. I'd thought that if I didn't get a job, I'd probably move away. So working for OMA has meant that I'm still here in Oxford. That's a big thing. Whether this is a career or not is yet to be decided, but I've been paid by OMA in some way for 18 months and I will be here for at least another year. It's changed what I wanted to do, I think. I was a scientist going into research, but I wasn't really enjoying it that much. It's been brilliant, having a completely different job and being much more aligned with how I used to live my life, being a staunch lefty. That was something which never entered my career, my ideals would be something I would do in my spare time.

Covid was what drove us to establish OMA, and it's interesting to see that the pandemic has gone away but we're much, much busier than we used to be. We have a phone line that people can ring up and ask for emergency support. We used to say yes to everyone. Now we have to turn people away when there's not enough food or volunteers. Brexit affected our stock levels quite a lot. We're buying what we can to replace decreasing surplus deliveries, but it's nothing like what we used to give out. The uptick in how many people we're seeing, particularly new people, has really soared since the cost-of-living crisis. In all, about 2000 households have requested support from OMA in the last three years. The phone doesn't stop ringing.

It's really nothing to do with Covid anymore. At some point we knew that OMA needed to be around for other reasons, and those reasons are national and systemic. We need to get more sustainable in order to continue to provide support. That phone call every week is much more than just asking people whether they want the food next week. It's a safe space to cultivate a relationship between OMA and people who are on the regular list and try to get them to bring other issues to us. And if we can't help, we'll be able to signpost you to someone else. And then, over time, we have built really strong relationships with a lot of these people. I think almost all of the other organisations in Oxford refer people to us, particularly if they need delivered food, and we will refer to everyone else as well. We've seen people's lives change, issues come up, and we always try our best to solve it, really just listening and treating people with respect. We say that people who receive support are as much a part of OMA as volunteers.

People have less time to volunteer now. We see a lot of people who are quite affluent volunteering and students, people who maybe have a bit more time, and some security. Working people don't have as much time. The money is drying up, wages are low. But in my opinion, people are being exploited more, working hard, and receiving less for it. And when you get pushed to the edge you contract your sphere to people who you have responsibilities for. When you feel victimised, you basically contract your world view. I think volunteering will drop because of that. It's difficult. I think more money would help.

We have quite a few people who receive support and volunteer with us. That has always been quite a low and consistent number. I'd like it to increase because that's what we're about but I'm not sure if it will. The pockets of deprivation around Oxford, especially in North Oxford, are not as well known about. If it becomes widespread enough, then maybe there might be more community action and we might get a lot more volunteers. Within OMA, the term volunteer has always been a

bit iffy because I think we consider ourselves a bit more of a platform or a movement, you know, so more people becoming part of what we do would be better than the people going for the Tories.

Since we've become much more sustainable and structured, I think that the volunteer experience is better. We used to put a lot of responsibility on volunteers, so it used to be a bit of a warzone – you'd turn up for your shifts and you'd get out of there as soon as you could. And we've managed to remove that element. The systems just weren't working. When you know that someone's been promised food, you'll put in everything you can to deliver those things. People looking out for other people really does help. I mean, then people can voice concerns or issues, or ideas, or whatever. And it can be dealt with properly. The structure does benefit the volunteers and I'm always trying to share that responsibility.

I'm definitely happier now. I enjoy my working and personal life a lot more. I have friends and a community which I hadn't had before at the university. A lot of scientists don't really get along. I came from a place where I would go into the office and not really talk to anyone, but now I'm talking to people all day. I can't imagine volunteering anywhere better, or where you'd make more of a difference.

After I leave OMA, whether I end up in a professional private sector job or something else – especially if it's something else – I'll be wherever people are making a difference locally. I think I need that now.

Story 9: Doing What You're Doing Better

I started in environmental volunteering, and it's moved into social issues, just recognising how much need there is. The last few years were quite difficult, with Covid. Lots of what I would normally be doing didn't happen. The group I was mostly involved with, Abundance, is an urban harvesting and foraging collective. It redistributes food across the city to non-profits for free, and sometimes does workshops on preserve-making. Nearly all of it stopped because a lot of the key volunteers just really didn't want to be doing anything, even if it was outside. Especially as an organisation involving foodstuffs, it felt like a lot of things were just not possible. So we couldn't do café stuff. Couldn't do harvest things. And then we didn't really know how to recruit new people, because it just felt a bit uncomfortable in the lockdowns. Having to take the pause was difficult because I knew lots of people needed food, and everything I put on is normally free, or very low cost. I like to cover costs, I find it joyful.

So Covid changed a lot of things. I did a couple of really small things – I started CoGrow Oxford, an online platform inspiring people to grow and also share what they were growing. People could show their seedlings, or how they were upcycling plant pots from random things around the house. That was a little thing in the community that was sort of self-sustaining, and we've managed to get people sharing resources. The other thing I got into is the Oxfordshire Land Justice trust. That's really around issues of land and access to land. I want us to have a just and equitable food system that's good for nature and people. Food's my passion, but we can't work in silos, and we thought we should make space for people to come and talk about these issues. Realising that a lot of people feel the same way was really special. I've been coordinating, facilitating, trying to reach out to different groups and bring more people in. I guess that's been a sideways step, trying to help people feel empowered.

I really upskilled during the pandemic and did some thinking and reflecting. I ended up doing some online courses which really helped put a focus on who comes to these kinds of events, which I've been thinking about for a long time. I did some training around supporting black people to have better access to activism, bringing in more inclusive spaces. I feel like that transformed what I was doing, how I was doing it, and who I was doing it with. These were issues I've been thinking about for years and years, but the pandemic was a catalyst for really doing something about it. I think that's a really important part of volunteering, building relationships with marginalised communities. I would love to see more of that in the voluntary sector. Creating things *with* people that want them, rather than creating things *for*, say, a refugee group, without actually talking to them. People who get involved often bring in more people who look and sound like them, so if you don't have someone who's specifically reaching out then it just perpetuates the same dynamics. It becomes for some people and not everyone.

I think what has really enabled me to be a good ally, and therefore a good volunteer, something that adds capacity, is a lot of listening. I do talk a lot, but I've done a lot of listening to understand what people's concerns are. I've just done some work with farmworkers who want to unionise. I felt a bit like an undercover reporter, just listening to understand what the issues are on the ground and how they impact people. It's been incredible for learning what to ask for, and in terms of how we can work well together.

There is a skill set that is needed when you are working with vulnerable people. Training people for volunteering is important. More consistent opportunities that are accessible. Doing shorter sessions to learn things that will help the entire volunteering movement. I'd really like there to be some kind of central body with fundraising to provide subsidised courses in things like first aid, mental health first aid, facilitation skills. Some of that benefits volunteers themselves. Sometimes volunteers have to take on quite a lot. A lot of organisations will run on nothing for a long time because no one has the capacity or confidence to apply for funding. But when someone is more external, or has a fundraising skill set, or even just the idea of applying for funds comes up, it can really transform organisations. Recently I found some funding, two days before the deadline, and was like, 'I think we can apply for this.' and facilitated making that happen. We just found that we've got the funding.

There's an increasing amount of social prescribing. I think it's really important, and I'm fully supportive. But there's nowhere near as much funding for it as there should be. At the moment, it's offloading people who can't access thorough mental health support from public services onto volunteering groups, who aren't trained to support people potentially at risk of mental health crises. All this 'Big Society' stuff effectively says that the volunteering sector, people who've got time and privilege (but maybe not actually that much), are going to support a lot of people who should be receiving better support from the state. So it's important that people who are volunteering are better equipped, and that people being socially prescribed with volunteering are also better supported, through volunteer training. The sector needs to acknowledge the importance of developing volunteers and community actors who are better at doing what they're doing, and who can more easily manage what's often difficult work. I've had quite a lot of free facilitation training and I feel better equipped to deal with difficult situations, rather than someone who hasn't done those things and sometimes feels out of their depth or a sense of responsibility. I've seen a lot of people in the volunteering sector burn out. But training and sharing responsibility,

having non-hierarchical processes that empower people, would help there. So that it never feels overwhelming for any one person.

Story 10: What Volunteering Can Be

I think the most prominent volunteering I've done is for the School Streets scheme in Oxfordshire, restricting traffic outside schools at drop-off and pick-up times. They were running pilots in the summer of 2021. Initially, I was seeking to volunteer, but I was prompted to become a paid steward instead, which involved managing volunteers. I covered two schools in Oxfordshire, one in Bicester and one in the city. All of this began in January of 2021, and suddenly we're in a national lockdown, so it was sort of pushed back. But some of the schools got in touch saying that they want to go ahead, and then we could use that as an example to other schools to say, you know, 'This is going really well. Do you want to take part?' Each trial scheme for each school lasted a period of six weeks, and then it was handed over to the county council, who are looking at schools where they want to make it permanent. After I got the role I'm currently in with Sustrans, who manage the National Cycle Network, I continued with the School Street schemes that I lived closest to, on a volunteer basis. It did cause some volunteer fatigue, because it's a scheme where you can get some conflict. So I wanted to continue.

Sustrans has volunteers doing butterfly conservation on the cycle network, among other things. A lot of the cycle network is built on closed down rail lines, with quite steep slopes, and that provides a really good environment for this particular species of butterfly, but the brambles and things that cover the foliage that they feed on need to be cleared away. I've also helped clear planters on the National Cycle Network, and worked with volunteer groups to plant edible things into them, so that people can pick things as they ride along.

Since the lockdowns I've become part of a lot of community groups in Abingdon. Initially that started as paid time, but it's become partially voluntary as well. It's sort of a grey area. I offer suggestions and support events to do with, for example, cutting plastic waste in the town, not just around active travel and walking and cycling, which is my job. That includes some market days, stalls and things where we do promotion. It's included lobbying councillors to deliver pledges around plastic waste and active travel, and some work tree planting in the town. That's with groups such as Abingdon Carbon Cutters and One Planet Abingdon. And I ran a project with Abingdon Green Gym, path clearance on urban neighbourhood routes and litter picking, things like that.

A lot of the volunteers I work with are not in my demographic, so it's quite interesting to build those relationships, and it's really nice to mix with lots of different types of people. I now am wanting to recruit Sustrans volunteers from demographics that are not represented currently, particularly in Abingdon. A young person, or, you know, a woman, because most of the Sustrans volunteers currently are the retired, white, male demographic, and it needs to be diversified. One of the objectives of my role is to make the voices of these different communities heard in terms of active travel and what their needs are. Inclusivity is key, and everything should be for all. And it definitely adds to the innovation that can be input into different projects, people with different perspectives have really imaginative ideas that can create actual long-term solutions to meet the needs of all the different communities. My home city is Birmingham, so I did some volunteering there and obviously that was a bit more diverse, but there's different people everywhere. It's always just trying to make them more heard.

I've always recognised the benefits of doing volunteering. But as I've gotten busier with work, that sort of has taken a back burner. I'm trying to balance volunteering with the different aspects of life, and wanting it to relate to other things that I'm doing. Because even though you want to be beneficial to others, you also, sort of selfishly, want it to be beneficial to you! Especially at this age, when you're trying to build up a portfolio of different experiences to support you going forward. But volunteering is good for that, I've made or solidified these connections and relationships a lot more over time. Most of the work is very community engagement focused.

In Oxford, I know there's lots and lots of things out there, but strangely, it feels that in a market town, you get to know what's available more. In the city, there's lots of things that are extremely close to me, but I didn't know they existed until last month. And I've been in Oxford for over four years! I think if I lived in Abingdon I would definitely partake in more voluntary action that's less related to my role. I'm always cycling, so it takes me an hour to get to Abingdon, and building that into your daily routine with other things that you want to do becomes a bit difficult. I volunteered on the school in Abingdon a little bit, but I would always travel via cycling and it would take a bit of time out of the working day to go and volunteer there, just for half an hour at school closure. So I'd prefer to volunteer in the city. But I've gotten so involved in Abingdon, I'm not actually working on building up where I live, which results in a bit of a lack of identity and attachment to where I am, and more attachment to somewhere I'm not. Which is probably why I want to go and live there! A lot of people brand the town as being for older people, not somewhere a younger person would flourish, but I disagree, because I know of everything that's available to me. It has so many different groups that you could be part of, and things you can do. And most of that is on a voluntary basis.

As communication and technology improve, it'll be key in connecting and linking up volunteers, which I think is desperately needed. It's difficult, because obviously you have so many different bodies, especially in Oxfordshire, I think the county's really rich in people wanting to volunteer. Voluntary groups in the city do a lot more work on sourcing funding. They have a lot of voluntary members who had these quite high-flying careers in certain sectors, and these people are now retired and they're wanting to try and continue that in some capacity. So I think they do a lot more lobbying, proposals, getting really involved with the local authority, and I think the local authority works with a lot of voluntary groups, more so than they would in the rest of the county. Some of that has started in Abingdon, which is great. Part of my role is to coordinate to deliver impact and you can do that on your own, but it would obviously really help if there were already links made, and sharing of knowledge and skills across the different groups, because there are so many volunteers that can offer so much. Everyone has their own media, their own websites, but you do have the local authority that could almost act as the central branch for all these things. So perhaps we should be working more with the county council to display information on what's available and thematically link things, so people can easily access what they want to volunteer in, the different aspects of society they want to help out.

Freshers Fair is like a microcosm of this – but there you have the university to support you, and in the outside world, there isn't that overarching support. It'd be good to have something standardised. Because, you know, if you're working, you need to be in a good space to be productive, and the same sort of comes to volunteering. I want to be assured that I'm supported, protected, all the legal stuff, which a lot of community-based groups struggle with. OCVA have all the things in place, but, for example, a local carbon cutter group will not necessarily be a registered

charity, able to apply for income and funding in order to deliver some of the work that they do, it's just run by local people. I think that would help maintain these groups in the long-term. Because a lot of these groups form and then sometimes once the key people have left, they dissolve. Particularly after Covid – people got more interested in volunteering in the pandemic, but a lot of people are now experiencing burnout and fatigue, and I think that's definitely going to be a challenge. I think just having that continued support will help build up what volunteering can be.

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