

## Introduction

Since the first lockdown back in March 2020, volunteers' concerns have risen. Volunteer Managers wanted to know how best they can support and keep in touch with their volunteers during these unprecedented times.

At the start of the third lockdown, it started coming up more often that our members wanted to 'sense check' what others are doing to support their volunteers whilst the shops are closed, and also help to alleviate their concerns about volunteering when shops reopen.

We took it upon ourselves to put together few important questions and ask Volunteer Managers from different charities to share with everyone their answers, best practices and what they have learned whilst navigating through the pandemic.

We received fantastic responses and now wish to share those with you too.

Thank you to all participants for coming forward and sharing their experience.

Volunteers are the backbone of charity retail and we want to thank you for your great effort in providing vital support to them.

## Participants in the Q&A:

<b>Name:</b>	Tracey Groom - Volunteer and Community Engagement Lead Carole Edmonds - Head of Retail Field Operations
<b>Role:</b>	
<b>Charity:</b>	Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland
<b>No of shops:</b>	39
<b>Approx. No of volunteers:</b>	1200

<b>Name:</b>	Sarah Boardman
<b>Role:</b>	Retail Volunteering Operations Manager
<b>Charity:</b>	British Heart Foundation
<b>No of shops:</b>	700+
<b>Approx. No of volunteers:</b>	17,000

<b>Name:</b>	Steve Bond
<b>Role:</b>	Volunteer Services Manager
<b>Charity:</b>	St Barnabas Hospice and regional chair for AVSM Midlands
<b>No of shops:</b>	25
<b>Approx. No of volunteers:</b>	483 in Shops roles

<b>Name:</b>	Ginette Gisborne
<b>Role:</b>	Interim Volunteer Manager
<b>Charity:</b>	Devon Air Ambulance
<b>No of shops:</b>	18
<b>Approx. No of volunteers:</b>	450 (Retail)

- **How has your role changed since March 2020 and what have you learnt over this time?**

**Tracy and Carole from Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland shared:**

*“Shift to managing volunteers and supporting with all of our new Health and Safety processes, which are in adherence to Scottish Government Guidance.*

*We have increased the frequency of communication and have developed new communication platforms eg – WhatsApp groups.*

*Learned that we need to be agile and flexible in our approach, every volunteer has different feelings around Covid and on returning to their role and we need to understand that and ensure we listen to those concerns so that we can adapt the support offered to meet their varying needs.”*

**Sarah from British Heart Foundation had a slightly different learning experience:**

*“I would normally be out in the field or working between locations across the UK and I have essentially been working from home since March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2020. It has been a huge change in terms of my work / life. The most significant change currently, of course, is that all of our shops and stores are closed and that means no volunteering and no interaction with our most amazing volunteers.*

*In terms of what I personally have learnt – I have learnt to work in a different way, I have learnt that I am resilient and able to pivot to new ways of working, I have learnt about the complexities of opening / closing / opening / closing (you get the drift!) a retail operation but what I have learnt which will stay with me forever is a lesson in leadership. The people who lead our retail business are exceptional and everyday has been an opportunity to observe and watch their brilliance. This has been a real leadership moment and they have handled it with compassion. Empathy, skill and drive and always kept people at the centre of all their decisions.”*

**Steve from St Barnabas Hospice and who is also a regional chair for AVSM Midlands answered:**

*“In March 2020 everything changed and stopped overnight. All of the shops closed, recruitment halted and we didn’t know how long it would be for. We changed to an information, engagement and retention service. We couldn’t recruit new people so we had to do our best to keep the ones we already had. This was stop start through various lockdown and tier restrictions. The learning over this time has been that you have to adapt instantly and don’t panic when you can’t plan very far ahead!”*

**Gienette from Devon Air Ambulance, shared:**

*“From the initial lockdown my role changed overnight, suddenly I was faced with a wholly digital / telephone based level of engagement with our volunteers. We have certainly missed the face to face interaction with our vols this year and nothing quite replaces those outdoor community events to raise a smile.”*

- **Have you seen any change in the demographic of your volunteers in 2020 /21?**

**According to Tracy and Carole from Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland:**

*“Increase in the number of new younger volunteers 18 – 40.*

*Older volunteers’ anxiety about returning re: anxiety and risk to own health and the health of their families and this has prevented some volunteers returning to their role.”*

**Sarah from British Heart Foundation saw a similar change in age, however uncertain if it is because of Covid-19:**

*“This is a tricky one to answer because we have seen the average age of our volunteers plummet in 2020 but what we don’t know yet, is whether this is a permanent change or a temporary re-positioning due to the Covid-19 backdrop and shielding implications.*

- *For 27 years there has been minimal change in average volunteer age at BHF; from 1992 to 2019 it sits between 49.93 years and 46.30 years. In 2019 this dropped to 40.45*
- *The most significant shift in average age of volunteers at BHF has happened in the last 6 months, dropping to 34.24 years”*

**Interestingly, Steve from St Barnabas Hospice, had a different overview for us:**

*“The Volunteer demographic hasn’t changed too much. We continue to attract the same demographic of people to our Volunteer roles. The noticed increase has been from people of working age who have been furloughed from their work or lost their jobs. The other demographics have continued as before.”*

**Gienette from Devon Air Ambulance, shared the same opinion of demographics change as Steve above:**

*“Not really, expressions of interest to volunteer with us have continued to arrive even during Covid and although we can’t put these kind offers to good use just yet, it’s fantastic to know that even in these difficult times, people of all ages and abilities are still keen to step in and help.*

*Initially some of our volunteers needed to shield to stay safe, either because of their own needs or those of their families. We have been lucky that nearly all our volunteers have remained with us throughout and are waiting patiently in the wings, eager to get back to their duties when it is safe to do so.”*

- **How have your retail teams engaged with their volunteers during the various lockdowns?**

**Tracy and Carole from Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland shared their ways of staying in touch:**

*“Shop Managers have set up WhatsApp groups to keep in regular direct contact with their Volunteers.*

*The wider organisation and Volunteer Engagement team have given enhanced support to the Retail Volunteers including regular weekly email comms, National Volunteer Engagement Events, Volunteer Survey – Volunteering: Your Views Matter, A New Volunteer Facebook group, providing alternative volunteering opportunities eg Kindness, Health and wellbeing support, Volunteer Strategy Group and most importantly a listening ear with the Volunteer team – never underestimate the power of a cup of tea and a blether!”*

**Sarah from British Heart Foundation shared the same experience as Tracy and Carole above:**

*“Centrally we have been sending weekly newsletters to our volunteers, this has been one of the greatest pleasures for me personally during the closures as I feel it helps us to all stay connected, in fact the newsletter is called Stay Connected. Each week I get responses direct from the volunteers, sometimes thanking and sometimes asking questions about their concerns. We have had great readership and really fabulous open rates throughout.*

*At shop and store level, the paid teams have all set up group chats and we have seen some great engagement with virtual coffee mornings, virtual quizzes, bake off....all sorts of amazing things.*

*We have also been encouraging our paid teams to keep in touch with volunteers and check in regularly.*

*It must be said that lockdown #1 felt much easier, with nice weather and lots to do outdoors. Lockdown #3 is more of a challenge and people are finding it more difficult.”*

**Steve from St Barnabas Hospice told us they had a slightly different approach:**

*“It has been difficult for our retail teams to engage with volunteers during lockdown periods as they have all been furloughed. The Volunteer Services Team have supported with this engagement by conducting welfare telephone calls and sending information and updates via email and letter if appropriate. Information not just on shops, but about the hospice overall and also wellbeing support and tips for mental and physical health. We have strived to ensure that everyone is kept in touch with in some way, to show that they’re important to us and to let them know that their volunteering is still there for them when they wish to return.”*

**Gienette from Devon Air Ambulance also shared with us a slightly different approach:**

*“While our shops remained closed, our retail staff were furloughed, but even during this time, many of our Managers and Asst Managers, who have close relationships with their volunteers, kept in touch on a personal level with calls to each other to check in and have a chat.*

*For the short period we were open, the number of volunteers allowed in the shop at any one time was reduced to ensure social distancing guidelines were followed. With some careful rota organisation, those volunteers that wanted to come in and help were able to do so safely.”*

- **Can you share one way you are supporting volunteers during this third lockdown, whilst all the shops are again closed?**

**Tracy and Carole from Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland answered:**

*“National Virtual Volunteer Engagement event held over 3 days and evenings to ensure maximum accessibility for our Volunteers.”*

**Sarah from British Heart Foundation said:**

*“In the newsletter I mentioned above we are including articles on wellbeing (physical and mental), we are offering financial advice and we are signposting to experts in the respective fields. We have also been able to extend our EAP to our volunteers.”*

**Steve from St Barnabas Hospice shared with us their innovative way:**

*“We have begun doing vlogs as additional information and support pieces. This has involved the CEO with organisational updates, the Head of Fundraising and Head of Retail with information on their areas, the Head of Wellbeing offering emotional and wellbeing support and me talking about the Volunteers, offering them support, reassuring them that safety is paramount and that we can’t wait to welcome them back.”*

**Gienette from Devon Air Ambulance answered:**

*“We are lucky to have an e-newsletter database set up that reaches over 70% of our volunteers who have registered their email addresses with us. This has been an invaluable tool which has enabled me to keep in touch and to update the team with the latest news and changes within the charity. This has been extremely well received as our volunteers have felt included and part of our journey through the pandemic. Phone calls and wellbeing checks are still essential to catch up with volunteers who may need our support and this is an ongoing part of my role.”*

- **Have you implemented any new technology to assist you in supporting volunteers since the first lockdown in March 2020 and how did your volunteers respond to it?**

**Tracy and Carole from Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland answered:**

*“We have communicated more via email and have introduced WhatsApp group and Zoom/ Teams calls, where appropriate. In general, feedback has been very positive, volunteers have really appreciated the extra effort to engage with them and seek their feedback, they really feel valued.”*

**Sarah from British Heart Foundation answered:**

*“No we haven’t – except perhaps the use of group chat as a means of staying in touch with groups of people. We are working on solutions for this though and expect to launch our VMS sometime this year.”*

**Similarly to Sarah from BHF, Steve from St Barnabas Hospice said:**

*“Nothing new, just the same as above and development of that. As a Volunteer Leader in the Hospice world, we have increased our networking support for ourselves through the AVSM, Association of Voluntary Service Managers, taking this virtual regionally and nationally supporting others in similar roles. This self-care is just as important as trying to care for everyone else.”*

**Gienette from Devon Air Ambulance also shared the same views as Sarah and Steve:**

*“We haven’t implemented anything new as such but over the first 3 months of lockdown we did increase the regularity of our volunteer e-newsletter from fortnightly to weekly which enabled us to keep them right up to date with our service at a time when things were changing operationally on a very regular basis.”*

- **Have you been able to gather any insight directly from your volunteers about their experiences during lockdown and whilst trading in the Covid-19 environment? If so, can you share any key insights?**

**All of the participants kindly shared their insights with us which we are thrilled to share with all the readers.**

**Tracy's and Carole's insights, from Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland:**

*"Through our Volunteering: Your Views Matter survey and responses to Comms the key themes that have come out are:*

1. *How much of a positive impact Volunteering has on our Volunteers own health and wellbeing.*
2. *Our Volunteers have been encouraged to give us feedback on how they are feeling while trading and dealing with the public. We have been delighted with the engagement we have had from Volunteers, the huge amount of positive support, ideas and communication with Volunteers which has been really valuable while helping us develop and adapt future plans.*
3. *Volunteering is a hugely positive experience with 98% of the respondents to our Volunteering: Your Views matter survey saying they would recommend volunteering with CHSS to a friend or family member."*

**Sarah's insights, from British Heart Foundation:**

*"We have run 4 surveys with our volunteers in lockdown and are just about to run survey #5. The insight has been amazing, but it is also of that moment and things have changed so dramatically from month to month that a review is needed before and after we re-open. I'd be happy to talk this through in more detail if it would help but some of the key things we know are:*

1. *99% of our volunteers say that they are either very satisfied or satisfied with the weekly newsletter*
2. *92% strongly agree that BHF cares for its volunteers*
3. *Top 3 reasons for missing volunteering are:*
  - *My colleagues 84%*
  - *Having a routine 64%*
  - *Making a difference 60% "*

### **Steve's insights, from St Barnabas Hospice:**

*"We have had wholly positive feedback from Volunteers, thanking us for keeping in touch with them and keeping them updated. They're feeling valued and involved and most are itching to get back as soon as they can. It's clear that the best wellbeing support they can receive is being able to return to their volunteering, seeing their fellow volunteers, shop manager and customers. Volunteering itself is the biggest wellbeing factor that we can provide to them."*

### **Gienette's insights, from Devon Air Ambulance:**

*"Our volunteers are an extremely passionate group of people. They have accepted and adapted to additional safety measures in shops to ensure we are operating in a Covid - Safe environment and for some this has been challenging. Most just want to get back to enjoying their regular visits to our shops, support a charity they care for and meet up with their fellow volunteers who they miss greatly."*

- **Can you recommend a good resource or platform for signposting volunteers to who need extra support?**

### **Tracy and Carole from Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland recommended:**

*"We are able to access internal support for our Volunteers if needed through our Adviceline, Health and Wellbeing Group, Physical activity Blog & ideas, our own publications including – Mental Wellbeing, Physical Activity & Healthy Eating and direct contact with the Volunteer Team.*

*Externally we have ensured our Comms and Facebook Groups have signposting opportunities to other third sector organisations tackling several issues including Citizens Advice, Local & National Mental Health support – Breathing Space, Samaritans and the NHS, local Foodbanks, support for carers, Physical Activity Opportunities and many more!"*

### **Sarah from British Heart Foundation recommended:**

*<https://www.bhf.org.uk/informationsupport/coronavirus-and-you>*

*The link above is to our own Coronavirus Hub which is great as a starting point.*

*Additionally, we have signposted to the experts in the field we are talking about, so Mind for Mental Health support for example – the list is endless."*

### **Steve from St Barnabas Hospice recommended:**

*"There are many platforms with similar offers. If I could signpost someone to anything though it would be to get outside for fresh air, sunshine, exercise and a change of scenery wherever possible. Personally this has worked for me so I'm always happy to recommend it to others!"*

### **Gienette from Devon Air Ambulance recommended:**

*“Here at DAA we are lucky to have 2 ladies who offer pastoral care also on a voluntary basis. They are always available to our staff and volunteers who would simply like to have a chat and a coffee with (virtually or on the phone), talk about their worries or concerns or just have a conversation to make them feel better. If someone like this is available to your organisation I would strongly recommend seeking them out.”*

- **What concerns do you have around the return to volunteering once non-essential retail is allowed to re-open? Do you have any plans to address these concerns? How could CRA and its members support?**

### **Tracy and Carole from Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland shared a few of their concerns with us:**

*“Concerns around the number of volunteers who will return and how many will still feel too anxious to return and how we manage that return in alignment with shops re-opening.*

*Ensuring the Wellbeing and Health & Safety of our volunteers, all will receive a welcome back to retail pack prior to re-opening, updating them on all H&S measures we’re taking and any changes that have been made since they were last in their shop*

*Managing anxieties around public interaction and understanding what we can do to support and help ease those anxieties – our increased engagement with our volunteers is a huge asset in how we manage and support the anxieties of our returning Volunteers.*

*Challenges around recruitment of volunteers, there’s going to be lots of competition out there, how do we stand apart and encourage volunteers to choose us and so we are in the process of developing a recruitment campaign that will be launched as soon as the lockdown restrictions are announced.”*

### **Sarah from British Heart Foundation shared:**

*“I am very concerned about the return of volunteers - How will they feel? Will they return? How can we support the people who support us? How can we reignite volunteering, specifically on the high street?”*

### **Steve from St Barnabas Hospice shared his concerns:**

*“The concerns are around restarting recruitment and showing people that it is safe. The demographic to be targeted needs to change. There will be a lot more people of working age out of work and we really need to push our marketing towards them so they can see that its flexible, helps employability, updates CVs and provides references for paid work applications. High Street retail is already seeing huge closures and redundancies. These are people with retail experience that we can’t afford to miss out on. CRA could perhaps produce a centralised database of known shop closures, certainly from large brands such as listing all the Arcadia Group and Debenhams locations etc.”*

**Gienette from Devon Air Ambulance shared:**

*"We don't anticipate changing the format from that which we were operating before the closure of non-essential shops. Sadly, I think we will need to continue to communicate the importance of treating our shop teams kindly upon re-opening as there are still likely to be restrictions and rules regarding the safe handling of donated goods which can sometimes be frustrating for our donors."*

- **Do you have any advice for helping to alleviate volunteers concerns about volunteering during the pandemic?**

**Tracy and Carole from Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland advised:**

*"Connectivity at both a local and national level.*

*Keep Volunteers up to date with Govt Guidance and how this will affect their role through regular emails.*

*Ensure every Volunteers knows the impact they make through their role – if it wasn't for Volunteers we could not deliver our strategy and ensure No Life is Half Lived in Scotland!"*

**Sarah from British Heart Foundation advised:**

*"Stay in touch with them and listen to their concerns – they are real."*

**Steve from St Barnabas Hospice shared his advice:**

*"Be open and transparent, share risk assessments, explain PPE and social distancing measures. Reassure people that you're doing everything. Showcase that you're Covid secure. If you can do this visually, that's brilliant. We launched such a marketing campaign last summer that was seen by 70k people on Facebook.*

*It is here if you wish to upload it for people to see: <https://vimeo.com/454381412>"*

**Gienette from Devon Air Ambulance advised:**

*"Due to most our volunteers being stood down from their duties during the pandemic we have not seen any major concerns in any volume. The concerns that our volunteers have voiced have firstly been about their own personal circumstances and secondly concern for the charity which is heart-warming. Communication is key, along with reassurance, updating and including them every step of the way!"*

- **What is your mantra that has helped you and your team over the last year?**

**Tracy and Carole from Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland shared their mantra:**

*“No Life Half Lived \_ More than Surviving!”*

**Sarah from British Heart Foundation shared her’s and her team’s mantra:**

*“Oh, we have several! – “Plan for the worst and hope for the best”, “Don’t let perfect get in the way of good”, “Feel the fear and do it anyway” to name a few.”*

**Steve from St Barnabas Hospice stated:**

*“Nothing prophetic I’m afraid!”*

**Gienette from Devon Air Ambulance shared her mantra with us too:**

*“As above really – To make sure our volunteer team know they are still valued and very much part of the charity – they are not forgotten and that we know they have a special connection to us. Keeping positive and upbeat and looking to the future is vital to lifting the spirits.”*

- **What has been your key learning from 2020, what will you be taking forward into 2021?**

**Tracy and Carole from Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland said:**

*“Volunteers want to continue to support and we need to embrace this energy/ commitment. Listen to anxieties and support actions - be people led - the voice of volunteers is vital to ensure continued engagement!”*

**Sarah from British Heart Foundation shared:**

*“That when you pull together with a common goal and you keep people at the centre of your decision-making, you can survive anything and then go on to thrive!”*

**Steve from St Barnabas Hospice said:**

*“Engagement to aid retention has been vital throughout 2020. Maintaining that engagement through 2021 and into the future will create a more positive volunteering experience and higher level of retention should anything like this happen again in the future.*

*Also, self-care. Look after yourself and you’ll be able to support others better.”*

**Gienette from Devon Air Ambulance shared her key learning with us:**

*“I will be handing my interim volunteer manager role over to our permanent volunteer manager who returns from maternity leave this month – and what a year she missed! My biggest learning of 2020 is that we have an amazing volunteer team, resilient, passionate and ready to face any challenge that comes their way. They are an inquisitive bunch and they feel their best when they are well informed.*

*2021 will be all about forward thinking, we will be looking at how our volunteers can continue to support our fundraising team as they look at developing new ways to fundraise, whatever 2021 brings we know that their desire to do whatever they can to help will lead to new and different opportunities for them to get on board with.”*