

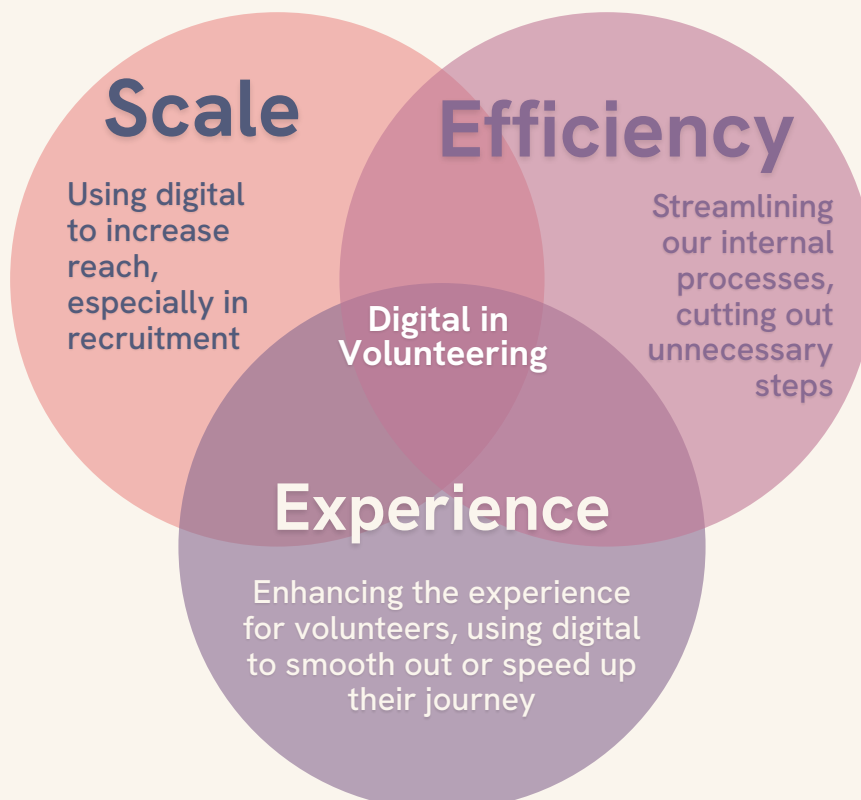
The Digital Reality Check: Volunteering in 2026

Signals from the front line on scale, efficiency, volunteer experience and AI.

As many of you will know, around here we tend to think of digital issues in terms of their ability to help us tackle challenges (or realise opportunities) around *scale, efficiency and experience.*

Scale is about growing our volunteering programmes, efficiency helps us improve something within our own workflows as volunteer leaders, and experience focuses on aspects of the journey that really matter to volunteers.

With that in mind, here are **six key insights** from our survey results - with a sideways look at the role AI is already playing.



SCALE

#1 Busy? Yes... But can we prove it matters?

When asked which stage of the volunteer journey is the most challenging, you told us that **impact** - specifically **evaluation, monitoring and reporting** - was your biggest current management issue (44% of respondents).

Good data helps us not only to justify our programmes but to plan well and grow sustainably. But is this finding suggesting the opposite is our reality? That even though we might be getting new people through the door, our digital tools are failing us when it comes to proving why their presence matters?



Fig 1: Survey Results - areas of challenge
 In addition to challenges around Impact Capture, ongoing management and communication, onboarding and marketing and recruitment also presented as significant issues for Volunteer Leaders.

#2 Recruiting for Tomorrow, Marketing Like Yesterday

With **Younger Volunteers (37%)** and **Skilled Working Professionals (34%)** your top recruitment target groups, Volunteer Leaders are clearly looking to the future. But other results raise a wider question - **are we still using the tools of the past?**

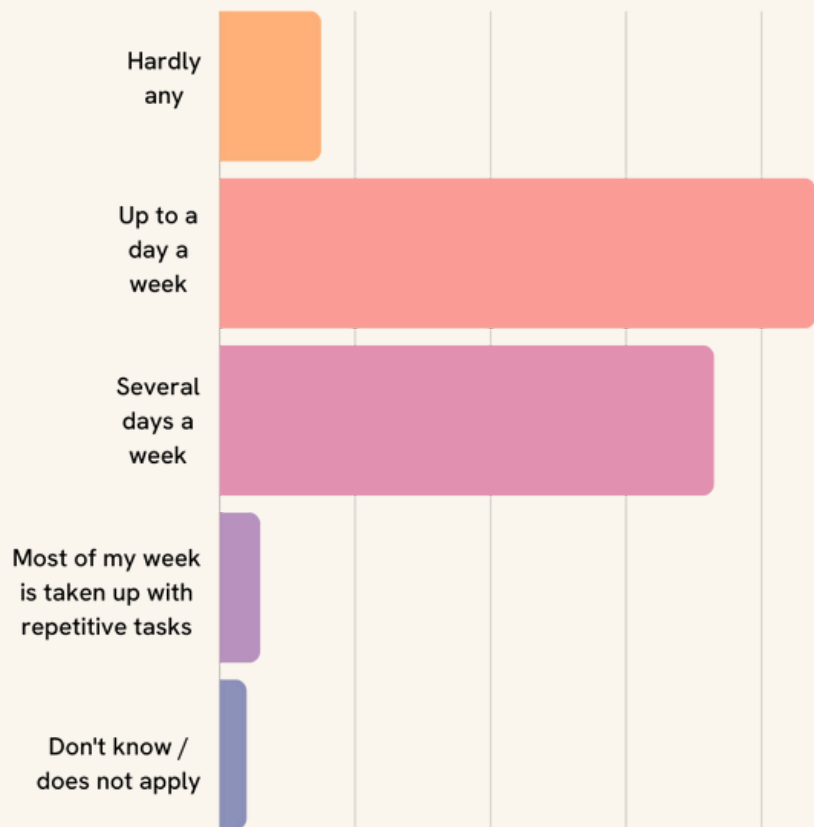
Despite targeting digital-native generations, 44% of respondents' organisations still rely on "in real life" physical posters and fliers, and 39% on **word of mouth** - around double the numbers of those using national recruitment platforms like Dolt or GoVo (both 21%).

Should this give us pause for thought? After all, if we're targeting a 22-year-old professional with a physical poster surely we're not just missing them - we're invisible to them.

EFFICIENCY

#3 When Volunteer Leadership Becomes Data Entry

Just how real or serious is "efficiency drain" in volunteer management? 42% of you told us you spend **several days a week** (or more) on **repetitive administrative tasks** such as data entry, report writing, and query responses. Does this make us **Volunteer Managers or Spreadsheet Managers?**



Greater efficiency appears to be a huge driver behind AI adoption, with 92% of you citing efficiency its biggest perceived advantage. If your digital infrastructure isn't already starting to reclaim time for you, perhaps it isn't working.

#4 Practitioners Are Moving Faster Than Policy

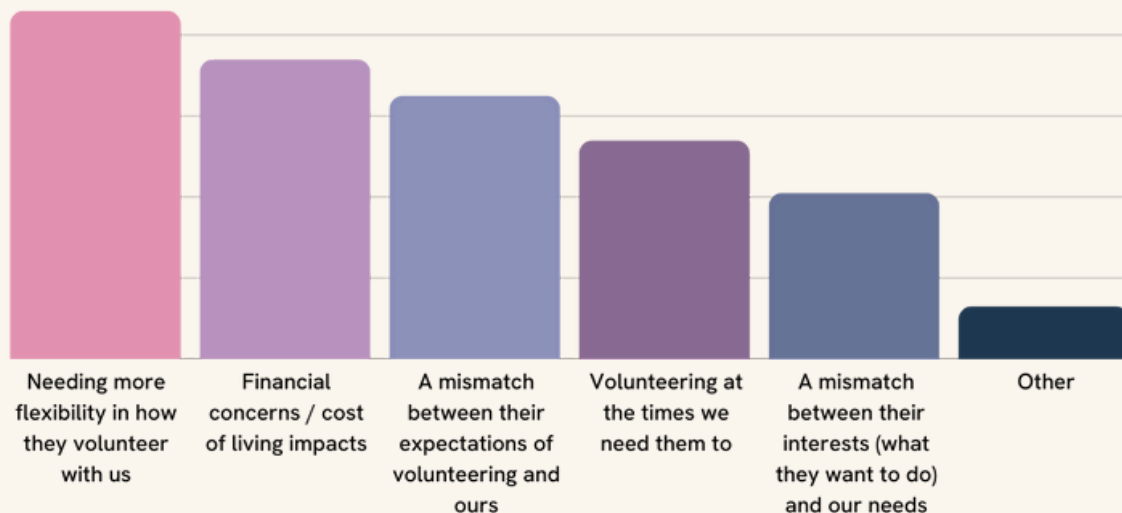
There's a common perception that the volunteering sector is slow to adopt digital tools. Our survey suggests a more nuanced picture, with volunteer managers leading the charge in AI adoption: a massive 80% of respondents are **already using AI** in some capacity to support their work, with 85% of their organisations also **using AI already somewhere in their business**.

But whilst adoption amongst Volunteer Managers is already high, a third of you told us you are operating with **no clear guidance or policy** from your organisations, suggesting even though we're using the tools, some of us are also flying blind.

EXPERIENCE

#5 Have We Made Volunteering Too Open?

We already know that the traditional 'rota' is facing something of an existential threat: many new or modern volunteers are no longer willing to fit into a rigid, offline box. Our survey showed that the top challenge affecting how individuals engage with us is their need for **greater flexibility in how they volunteer** (cited by 46% of respondents).



Volunteers are also increasingly citing a **mismatch between their expectations and our needs** (35%), signalling a desire to contribute more on their own terms. In recent years the sector has made real efforts to be more flexible and accommodating - but is this coming at the expense of clarity of expectation?

#6 Ethics Before Efficiency

And finally, it turns out your top fears about AI are not "robots taking jobs" (an issue for 28% of you) but trust. **Inaccurate information** (60%) and **Data Privacy** (58%) were the biggest concerns about increased AI adoption, highlighting the centrality of ethical practice within the volunteering movement.

By putting such concerns top, respondents appear to be saying these are non-negotiables - perhaps reinforced by the significant minority working without a clear organisational policy.

LEADERS AND PARTNERS: WHAT'S NEXT?

Volunteer Leaders, what do you make of these findings?

Did you find yourself nodding as you read? Or perhaps some of our results surprised you, or gave you pause for thought? [Post your reactions in the Community of Practice](#) or [drop us a line](#) directly.

Partner organisations, let's collaborate to drive change.

We know we're not the only ones interested in these findings and their implications for volunteering practice. If you're from or connected to an infrastructure or sector-supporting organisation and would like to work with us to support better digital adoption in your own communities, [we'd love to hear from you](#).

Everyone - look out for more findings!

Keep an eye on the [CoP Google Group](#) and our [LinkedIn page](#) over the next few weeks, where we'll share further survey data and discussion points.



METHODOLOGY

This analysis is based on 186 completed survey responses, collected between 11 November 2025 and 13 January 2026. The survey was promoted through the Digital in Volunteering Community of Practice, the CoP LinkedIn page, partner channels including TeamKinetic and AVM distribution lists, and the personal LinkedIn profiles of the project leads. To encourage participation, respondents were offered entry into a £100 voucher prize draw.

For many questions respondents were able to select multiple areas of focus, meaning percentages reflect breadth of engagement rather than exclusive categories. The largest representation came from health, disability and social care (31%), followed by education, employment and training (25%), community and neighbourhoods and families, children and young people (both 24%) and environment and conservation (23%).

