
How to Future-Proof Your Volunteer Programme

In brief

Formal volunteering remains below its long-term peak across the UK, US and Australia, with lack of time consistently cited as a major barrier.

Over the next five years, the programmes that thrive will be those that reduce administrative workloads and give coordinators more time to focus on their people, rather than paperwork.

This guide is for anyone responsible for a volunteer programme, whether you run a national charity, a sport federation, a food rescue network, a council or a major event. It sets out what the latest data tells us, where coordinator time really goes, and the practical changes that make a programme resilient. You will finish with a self-assessment you can run with your team this week.

Five things to take away

- 1 Volunteers are scarcer and busier.** Regular formal volunteering in England sits at 17%, down from 27% in 2013/14. In Australia it is 22.6%, down from 36.2% in 2010. The US has bounced back to 28.3%, but remains below where it was before the pandemic.
- 2 Your core volunteers are carrying more.** Australians gave 618 million formal volunteer hours in 2025, up from 490 million in 2020, from a similar number of people. That is generous, and it is also a risk.
- 3 Coordinator time is the real constraint.** Recruitment matters, but in most programmes the first thing to run out is the time to process, onboard, roster and support the people who do say yes.
- 4 Onboarding is where you win or lose.** The gap between "yes, I'd love to help" and a first shift is where interest fades fastest, and it is also where automation saves the most time.
- 5 Retention and proof go together.** Volunteers stay when they can see their impact, and boards fund programmes that can show it.

Source: DCMS Community Life Survey 2024/25 · AmeriCorps and US Census Bureau, Volunteering and Civic Life in America (2023 data) · ABS General Social Survey 2025, via Volunteering Australia.



01 What is happening to volunteering?

Formal volunteering is below its long-term peak in the UK, US and Australia, and the reasons are practical. People have less time to give, they are less likely to be asked, and many are paying their own way to do it. The result is a smaller, busier volunteer base, with long-serving volunteers quietly picking up the slack.

COUNTRY	LATEST FORMAL VOLUNTEERING RATE	EARLIER BENCHMARK	DIRECTION
England (UK)	17% volunteered formally at least once a month (2024/25)	27% (2013/14)	Stable at a historic low
United States	28.3% volunteered through an organisation (2023)	23.2% (2021)	Rebounding, still below 2019
Australia	22.6% volunteered through an organisation (2025)	36.2% (2010)	Stable since 2020, below 2019

Source: DCMS Community Life Survey 2024/25 · AmeriCorps and US Census Bureau, Volunteering and Civic Life in America (2023 data) · ABS General Social Survey 2025, via Volunteering Australia. Each survey measures volunteering differently, so compare trends within a country rather than rates between countries.



Why do people say no?

The reasons are remarkably consistent across markets, and most of them are within your control.

BARRIER	WHAT THE DATA SAYS	WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT
No time	51% of adults in England who don't volunteer regularly cite work. 47% of Australian non-volunteers say they have no time, rising to almost 58% of 25 to 44 year olds.	Offer short, flexible shifts and let people sign up and swap on their phone.
Never asked	Around one in five people in Great Britain who hadn't volunteered said nobody asked. In Australia, 16% weren't sure how to get involved.	Make opportunities visible and easy to share, and ask existing volunteers to bring a friend.
Cost	54% of Australian formal volunteers paid out-of-pocket expenses in 2025, and very few were reimbursed.	Make expenses simple to claim and say so upfront, especially when recruiting younger people.

Source: DCMS Community Life Survey 2024/25 · ABS General Social Survey 2025, via Volunteering Australia · NCVO Time Well Spent 2023.



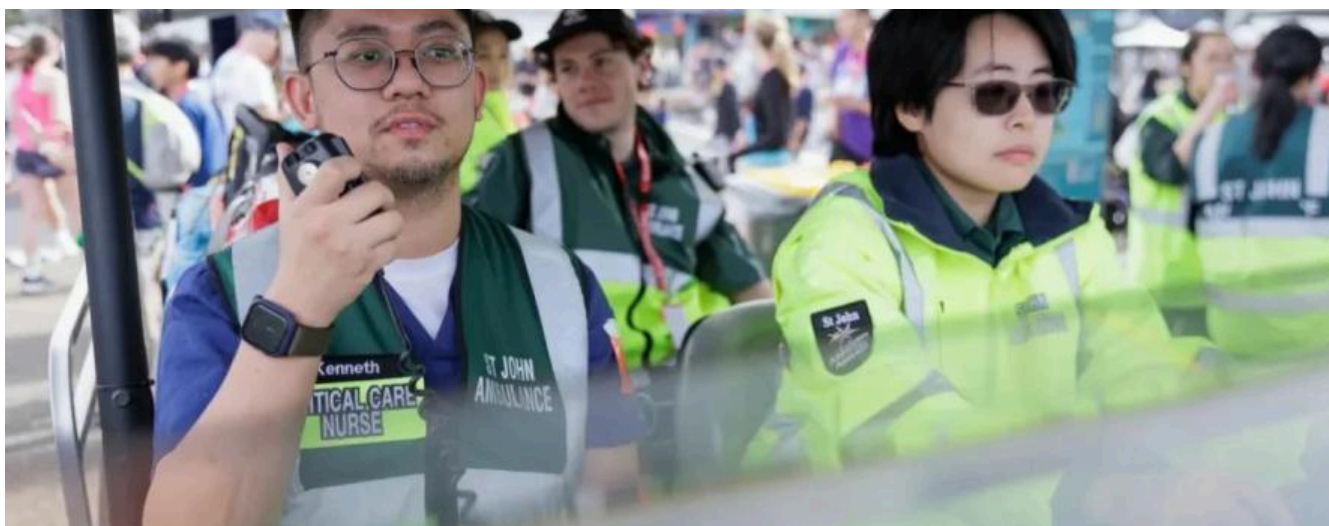
Who is carrying the load?

In every market, a relatively small group of committed volunteers gives most of the hours. That pattern has long been documented in the UK, and the latest Australian data suggests it is intensifying.

COUNTRY	WHAT THE DATA SHOWS
Australia	618 million formal volunteer hours in 2025, up from 490 million in 2020, from a broadly similar number of volunteers. Two in five volunteers have been involved for ten years or more.
United Kingdom	Research by the Third Sector Research Centre found that 31% of the population provided 87% of formal volunteer hours, a group it called the "civic core".
United States	The 2023 recovery was driven by more people volunteering: 75.7 million formal volunteers gave 4.99 billion hours, up from 60.7 million giving 4.1 billion in 2021. Average hours per volunteer held steady at around 66 a year.

That loyal core is something to celebrate. It is also a concentration risk. If a handful of long-serving volunteers step back, many programmes would feel it immediately, and the knowledge they hold often lives in their heads rather than in a system. The US numbers show the other side: when organisations make it easier to get involved, new people do come forward.

Source: ABS General Social Survey 2025, via Volunteering Australia · Third Sector Research Centre, Mapping the Big Society (2011) · AmeriCorps and US Census Bureau, Volunteering and Civic Life in America (2021 and 2023 data).



02 Why is coordinator time the real constraint?

Volunteer coordinators are at the heart of every programme, but their time is limited. Every hour spent manually processing applications, chasing compliance checks or updating rosters is time taken away from welcoming, supporting and engaging volunteers. With fewer people volunteering, making the most of that time is more important than ever for improving the volunteer experience and encouraging long-term participation.

Most coordinators already know this. What is harder is seeing how much time the admin actually takes, because it is spread across dozens of small tasks rather than one big one. A quick audit makes it visible.

Run a 30-minute coordinator time audit

Sit down with your team and list every recurring task in your volunteer journey. For each one, estimate the minutes it takes and how often it happens in a year. Multiply them out.

TASK	MINUTES EACH	TIMES PER YEAR	HOURS PER YEAR
Reviewing and screening an application			
Requesting and chasing a background check			
Assigning and tracking training			
Building and filling the roster			
Sending reminders and last-minute changes			
Recording attendance and hours			
Pulling numbers together for a report			

The numbers add up faster than most teams expect. British Heart Foundation found Rosterfy saved around 15 minutes per applicant at the screening stage alone. At 2,000 applications a year, that is 500 hours, or roughly three months of one person's working time, from a single step.

500 hours

saved a year at 2,000 applications, from 15 minutes per applicant
at screening

What should you do with the result?

Circle the tasks that are repetitive, rule-based and high-volume. Those are your automation candidates, and they usually cluster around onboarding. Then ask a simple question: if we got those hours back, what would we do with them? The answer (more one-to-one support, better recognition, recruiting in new communities) is your case for change.

Source: Rosterfy customer results. The 2,000-application example is illustrative.

"Rosterfy has meant our coordinators spend less time chasing paperwork and more time actually talking to our volunteers, and that personal interaction is so much more meaningful."

Lynda Baker

Head of Volunteering, OzHarvest



03 How do you get volunteers from "yes" to their first shift faster?

One of the fastest ways to grow your volunteer programme is to retain the people who have already expressed interest. Volunteers are often most engaged when they first apply, but long delays in onboarding can cause that enthusiasm to fade. By automating applications, screening, compliance checks and training, organisations can reduce onboarding times from weeks to days, helping volunteers get involved sooner.

In a manual process, each step waits on the one before it, and each handover depends on someone remembering to do it. A volunteer applies on Monday, hears back the following week, waits for a check, then waits again for the next training session. By the time they are ready, many have moved on, and you may never know why.

Measure your time to first shift

If you track one number this year, make it this one: the average days between an application arriving and that volunteer's first shift. Break it into stages so you can see where people stall.

- 1 Application to first contact.** How long before an applicant hears from you?
- 2 First contact to screening complete.** How long do reviews and interviews take?
- 3 Screening to checks cleared.** How long do background checks take, including chasing?
- 4 Checks to training complete.** Are volunteers waiting for a session, or can they train online straight away?
- 5 Training to first shift.** Can a ready volunteer book a shift immediately?

The longest stage is your bottleneck. Fix that first.

What does a fast onboarding journey look like?

- 1** A short, mobile-friendly application that asks only for what you need right now.
- 2** An instant, personal acknowledgement, so applicants know what happens next and when.
- 3** Automatic screening against role requirements, using past records to match people to the right opportunity.
- 4** Background checks triggered automatically through your existing providers, with renewal reminders before they expire.
- 5** Role-based online training that volunteers can complete in their own time, tracked automatically.
- 6** Instant shift eligibility the moment every requirement is met, so nobody waits for a coordinator to unlock them.

What results are organisations seeing?



OzHarvest

Onboarding cut by 80%, from six weeks to one, using National Crime Check integration a two-way Salesforce sync and Rosterfy's automations.



Lifeline Australia

Lifeline increased volunteer application processing from 3–5 to 10–12 applications per hour, helping the team support more than 5,000 active volunteers.



British Heart Foundation

Onboarding that previously took 42 days was reduced to 21 days because of the operational efficiencies introduced by Rosterfy.

Source: Rosterfy customer results.

04 How do you keep the volunteers you have?

Volunteers stay when their time is respected, their contribution is noticed and they can see the difference they make. Retention starts on day one: a smooth onboarding experience tells a new volunteer they have joined something well run. After that, it comes down to flexibility, clear communication and genuine recognition, delivered consistently rather than when a coordinator has a spare minute.

The warning signs are already there. In Great Britain, the share of recent volunteers likely to continue slipped from 80% in 2018 to 77% in 2022, and satisfaction fell from 96% to 92%. Look at what changed underneath those numbers:

26%

of volunteers felt their role was becoming too much like paid work, up from 19%.

24%

felt their organisation expected too much of them, up from 17%.

82%

of 18 to 24 year old volunteers were satisfied, the lowest of any age group (96% for over-55s)

Source: NCVO Time Well Spent 2023 (7,006 adults in Great Britain, fieldwork November to December 2022).

The common thread is an experience that feels heavier than it should, and that is something every organisation can fix.



Five habits of programmes volunteers stay with

- 1 They make it flexible.** Volunteers choose shifts that fit their lives, swap without a phone call and can give an hour as easily as a day.
- 2 They never leave volunteers guessing.** Expectations, contacts and shift details arrive before the shift, not on the day.
- 3 They say thank you properly.** Recognition is specific, timely and automatic for milestones, so nobody slips through the cracks.
- 4 They close the loop on impact.** Volunteers hear what their time achieved. Making a difference is the main reason people give for staying.
- 5 They listen early.** Short feedback after shifts surfaces problems before a volunteer quietly stops showing up.

How does technology help without making it feel transactional?

The best tools take the logistics off the coordinator's plate so the human parts get more attention, not less. A volunteer app or portal keeps shifts, training, messages and recognition in one place. Automated reminders and milestone messages run in the background. That frees coordinators to make the calls and conversations that make volunteers feel valued.

The payoff shows up on the day. At the Australian Open, Rosterfy helped Spark achieve 99% volunteer attendance across more than 4,000 shifts.

99%

volunteer attendance across more than 4,000 shifts at the Australian Open, with Spark

Source: Rosterfy customer results.

"We know there is a direct correlation between volunteer experience and fundraising effectiveness. If our volunteers feel engaged and well supported then they'll keep coming back and raise more funds."

Jacinta Webster

Volunteer and Fundraising Manager, Cancer Council

05 Is your programme ready for a surge?

A future-proof programme can scale up quickly without falling over. Major events, emergencies, seasonal peaks and sudden spikes in demand all ask for more volunteers, faster, with no drop in safety or compliance. Programmes that cope have their processes, data and communication ready before the surge arrives, rather than building them under pressure.

Surges come in different shapes depending on what you do:

ORGANISATION TYPE	TYPICAL SURGE
Major events and sport	Thousands of volunteers deployed across a single weekend or tournament
Food rescue and community services	Rising demand during cost-of-living pressure or seasonal appeals
Government and emergency response	Rapid mobilisation for floods, fires or civic events
Health and cause-led charities	National campaigns, fundraising events and new service launches
Federations and national networks	A season start, when every club or branch onboards at once



Five questions to test your surge readiness

- ☐ Could you process ten times your usual number of applications in a week without hiring temporary admin staff?
- ☐ Can volunteers check in on the day in seconds, by QR code or kiosk, rather than queuing at a clipboard?
- ☐ Can you message every volunteer on a site, or in a role, within minutes when plans change?
- ☐ Do you have an approved, trained reserve pool you can call on?
- ☐ If you work across sites, states or entities, can local teams run their own volunteers while you keep the national view?

If any answer is no, that is the place to start planning, well before your next peak.

The scale this makes possible is significant. Rosterfy managed 50,000 volunteer applications in 72 hours for Expo 2023 Doha.

50,000

volunteer applications managed in 72 hours for Expo 2023 Doha

Source: Rosterfy customer results.



06 How do you prove your volunteer programme's impact?

You prove impact by tracking a small set of metrics consistently and connecting them to the outcomes your board and funders care about. Hours and their economic value are the starting point. Retention, time to first shift and mission outcomes make the story credible. When reporting is automatic, impact becomes something you can show on demand, not a scramble before every board meeting.



Which metrics should you report, and to whom?

METRIC	WHAT IT TELLS YOU	WHO CARES MOST
Hours contributed and economic value	The scale of your volunteer contribution	Boards, funders, government
Time from application to first shift	How efficiently interest becomes capacity	Operations and volunteer teams
Retention and return rate	Whether the volunteer experience is working	Volunteer managers, boards
Shift fill and attendance	How reliable your programme is on the day	Operations, event and service leads
Compliance status	Whether checks and training are current	Risk, safeguarding and audit
Diversity of your volunteer base	Whether your programme reflects your community	Boards, funders, inclusion leads
Mission outcomes	What volunteer time achieved, such as meals delivered or events run	Everyone, including volunteers

Make impact work twice

The same data that convinces a funder can keep a volunteer coming back. Share outcomes with volunteers as well as stakeholders: the meals their shifts delivered, the events they made possible, the hours their team gave this year. It reinforces the main reason people say they volunteer, which is to make a difference.

Rosterfy tracks hours, attendance, retention and compliance automatically, with live dashboards you can share with stakeholders whenever they ask.

07 Where should you start?

Start with an honest look at where your programme is today, then fix the bottleneck that costs you the most time and the most volunteers. For most organisations that is onboarding. The self-assessment below takes about ten minutes and works best as a team conversation, because coordinators, managers and leaders often see different parts of the picture.

Future-proofing self-assessment

Score each statement: 0 = not yet, 1 = partly, 2 = yes.

AREA	STATEMENT	SCORE
Onboarding	A new volunteer can apply on their phone in under ten minutes.	
Onboarding	We know our average time from application to first shift.	
Onboarding	Background checks and training are tracked automatically, with renewal reminders.	
Coordinator time	We know roughly how many hours a year go on volunteer admin.	
Coordinator time	Rostering and reminders happen without manual chasing.	
Retention	Volunteers can view, book and swap shifts themselves.	
Retention	Recognition for milestones happens automatically.	
Surge	We could handle a 50% jump in volunteers without extra admin staff.	
Impact	We can report hours, retention and outcomes without building a spreadsheet.	
Impact	Volunteers regularly hear what their time achieved.	

0 to 8

Running on goodwill. Your programme depends on manual effort and a few key people. Start with a coordinator time audit and your time to first shift.

9 to 15

Ready to scale. The foundations are there. Connect the gaps between onboarding, rostering and reporting so they stop relying on workarounds.

16 to 20

Future-ready. Focus on impact storytelling, surge planning and keeping the experience fresh for long-serving volunteers.

What does a good rollout look like?

If you run a large or multi-site programme (a national charity, federation, government body or major event), bring volunteering, operations, IT and compliance together early. Prioritise permissions across sites or entities, integrations with your CRM and background check providers, data security, and board-level reporting. Phase the rollout so each region or programme goes live with support, rather than all at once.

If you run a growing single-site or regional programme, start with the highest-volume part of your journey, usually onboarding, and expand once the team feels the time coming back. Choose a platform you can grow into, so you are not facing a second migration at 2,000 volunteers.



How Rosterfy helps

Rosterfy is built for organisations whose volunteer programmes are too complex for spreadsheets and lightweight scheduling tools: thousands of volunteers, multiple roles and sites, strict compliance and stakeholders who expect proof of impact. It manages the full volunteer journey in one secure platform, from the first application to day-of-event check-in and the board report afterwards.

Our team has worked inside volunteer programmes, so we understand the pressure coordinators are under. Rosterfy has powered over 180 million volunteer hours across 77 countries, in 9 languages, with regional data hosting in Australia, the UK, Europe, the US and Canada.

180M+

volunteer hours powered

77

countries

9

languages

Book a discovery call and bring your time to first shift. We'll show you where Rosterfy could give your coordinators their time back.

[Book a discovery call](#)

Frequently asked questions

What does it mean to future-proof a volunteer programme?

It means building a programme that keeps working when things change: fewer volunteers, a sudden surge, new compliance rules or a key coordinator leaving. In practice, that comes down to fast onboarding, low admin, a volunteer experience people want to stay for, and impact data you can share on demand.

Why are fewer people volunteering?

Mostly time. Work commitments are the top barrier for 51% of non-volunteers in England, and 47% of Australian non-volunteers say they have no time. Many people have also simply never been asked, and rising out-of-pocket costs are putting some off.

What is a good time from application to first shift?

There is no single benchmark, because roles with background checks or clinical training naturally take longer. The useful step is to measure your own and shorten it. OzHarvest cut onboarding from six weeks to one by automating checks and data sync.

How can I improve volunteer retention?

Make volunteering flexible, never leave volunteers guessing about their shifts, recognise milestones automatically and show people the difference their time made. Short feedback after shifts helps you spot problems before volunteers quietly drift away.

How do I measure the impact of a volunteer programme?

Start with hours contributed and their economic value, then add time to first shift, retention, attendance, compliance status and mission outcomes. Volunteer management software can report these automatically for boards and funders.

When does an organisation need volunteer management software?

Usually when spreadsheets and email stop keeping up, such as hundreds or thousands of volunteers, several roles or sites, mandatory checks and training, or stakeholders asking for impact reporting. Rosterfy is built for programmes at that level of complexity.

Sources

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1. Department for Culture, Media and Sport. [Community Life Survey 2024/25: Volunteering and charitable giving](#). Published December 2025. Barrier figure (51% work commitments) via [Civil Society](#).
 2. AmeriCorps and US Census Bureau. [Volunteering and Civic Life in America](#), 2023 data, published November 2024. Hours and economic value via [US Census Bureau](#).
 3. Volunteering Australia. [Volunteering Statistics: General Social Survey 2025](#), based on ABS data released 6 May 2026.
 4. NCVO. [Key findings from Time Well Spent 2023](#). Survey of 7,006 adults in Great Britain, fieldwork November to December 2022.
 5. Rosterfy customer results: British Heart Foundation, OzHarvest, Lifeline Australia, Spark (Australian Open), Expo 2023 Doha.
 6. Third Sector Research Centre, Universities of Birmingham and Southampton. [Mapping the Big Society](#), 2011. The "civic core" analysis is in Briefing Paper 73, [The idea of a 'civic core'](#).
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