Volunteering in community business: meaning, practice and management

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About this report

This research was funded in 2020 by a grant from the Power to Change Research Institute's Open Call for research. These grants aimed to support the community business sector and its partners to deliver the evidence the sector needs for its own development, and to make the case for the value of community business. The Research Institute and the Open Call for research grant programme have now closed, in line with Power to Change's new strategy and direction. The work and any views presented are the authors' own.

About the research team

This study was undertaken by a team of researchers from Sheffield Hallam University (Chris Damm, Jon Dean, Cathy Harris and Rob Macmillan) and the University of Birmingham (Angela Ellis Paine).

About CRESR at Sheffield Hallam University

Sheffield Hallam University, and the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) in particular, hosts one of the largest concentrations of researchers working on the voluntary and community sector (VCS) in the UK. This includes expertise and longstanding interest in how VCS organisations work, their funding and activities, and related topics such as volunteering, relationships with the state and the market, infrastructure, community action, community business, social value and social investment.

About TSRC at the University of Birmingham

The Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC) is one of the UK's leading centres for research on civil society. It is based within the School of Social Policy at the University of Birmingham. Our research investigates the resources, roles and relationships of third sector organisations, and the impacts and distinctive contributions these organisations make. We provide critical and independent research, including on the value and impact of third sector organisations and volunteering. We work closely with practitioners, policy-makers, and other academics to develop our research programmes and explore the relevance of findings for practice.

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Executive summary

Volunteers make a significant contribution across the whole range of community businesses – on boards or committees, delivering services, providing administrative and back office support, and in engaging with their communities. It is estimated that there are four times as many volunteers as paid staff involved in UK community businesses – approximately 148,700 people giving their time to help run a community business, and many wouldn't be able to operate without them. Although we can appreciate the scale of volunteering in community business, a clearer picture of what volunteering looks like in practice is harder to come by.

Overall we know little about the roles volunteers play and how central they are to the successful operation of community businesses. We do not know very much about how volunteers come to be involved in community businesses and why, how they are thought about as part of the purpose and strategy of community businesses, how volunteers are managed and organised, and how their work relates to that of paid staff. More broadly, there is a gap in understanding how volunteering plays out in a more commercially oriented context.

This report attempts to fill in some of the gaps in **understanding what volunteering means in a community business context**.[1] The aim of the study was to conduct a wide-ranging, qualitative study of the organisation and conceptualisation of volunteering in community business, to address the questions **'How is volunteering understood and enacted in community business and what are the implications of this for volunteering experiences and outcomes?'** Within this, we were particularly interested in how volunteering is conceptualised and managed, the role and influence of volunteers, and the relationship between volunteering and the commercial orientation of community business.

The study involved online qualitative research with eight different community businesses, including a community pub, a credit union, a community library, a cooperative bookshop and a community hub. These case studies were selected to ensure diversity in terms of volunteering in a range of different settings and trading contexts. Interviews and focus groups were carried out with 66 people across the community businesses – with volunteers, board members and paid staff, including volunteer managers and coordinators. Analysis of these interviews and focus groups has helped to generate a clearer sense of both the varied ways community businesses involve volunteers, but also the main aspects of what a community business context might mean for volunteering.

The study finds that:
Community businesses in the study varied in how the 'business' and 'community' faces of their work were balanced and related to each other, and also in the significance of volunteering for the operations, viability, purpose and ethos of the organisation. Some would not wish or even be able to run without volunteers, but in other cases volunteering was less central. Three types of volunteer were identified: *super volunteers*, giving a great deal of time over many years to the organisation; *regular volunteers*, providing a bedrock of frequent commitment for the organisation over time; and *episodic volunteers*, involved for specific activities and relatively short periods of time. Volunteers have different stakes and influence within community businesses – they could be regarded as akin to (unpaid) employees, or as members, sometimes as service users, or as co-owners of the organisation.

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1   Another quantitative study conducted by CFE Research (Higton et al., 2021b) was published in June 2021, focusing on the role volunteers play in community businesses and the skills they use, which can be accessed here.

There are contrasting individual motivations and organisational drivers for volunteering in community business, which may not always coincide. Volunteers were drawn to the community businesses in the study as a way of expressing passion or commitment to the organisation's activities or values, as service or to help out and give something back to their community, as experience and to develop skills, and to connect with others. Community businesses can see volunteers variously as a resource (capacity to get things done), as part of the organisation's ethos and values (such as engaging with the community) and as a source of legitimacy (connecting with service users and community members).

There was a consensus that the benefits of volunteering far outweighed the costs, and that the challenges could be mitigated through investing in volunteer support and coordination. Most volunteers were content with the way they were managed and supported within community businesses. For community businesses, volunteering supports financial viability and sustainability, community embeddedness, and creativity and vibrancy. For individual volunteers it brings enjoyment, conviviality, belonging and wellbeing. However, four challenges were highlighted. Some community businesses noted that they lacked diversity and were less representative of their local community than they would like, particularly amongst younger people. This contributed to a problem of succession as some community businesses had become quite reliant on a small number of older volunteers, particularly in governance and leadership roles. Individual volunteers, and indeed staff, were at risk of burning out, given how much some people take on in support of the community business. Conversely, some of the participants in the study were exercised by managing people who had more autonomy over how much, when and how they engaged in the organisation.

While volunteering helps realise the 'community' side of the business, it is not simply the case that the more commercial the operation of the community business the less space there is for volunteering. It can be both constrained and enabled by the 'business' face of community business, and can be vital to it. The regulation of specific kinds of services, or the responsibilities of running the business under commercial pressure, are felt deeply and may limit the involvement of volunteers or put people off taking up governance and leadership positions. But the business dimension of community businesses could also be a facilitating factor, attracting people wanting to use or develop business skills to do good in their community, or in the model of community business itself. The space for volunteering in community business is shaped by the policy, funding and regulatory environment; the purpose, ethos and values of the community business; the pressure to sustain a viable organisation; the relative roles, responsibilities, relationships and positions between people in the community business; and the power structures within community businesses, such as how they are governed and how leadership is distributed.

The study points towards **eight particular implications** of the research findings. Policy-makers and practitioners interested in the role, meaning and possibilities of volunteering in community businesses need to:

1. **Recognise the potential** of volunteering in community business;

2. **Invest more** time, support and resources to help realise the potential of volunteers;

3. **Ask why** organisations want to involve volunteers, as well as why individuals volunteer, in order to adopt sensitive and context-specific approaches to volunteer involvement and management;

4. **Distribute leadership** across community businesses to volunteers and for volunteering;

5. **Take care** of volunteers and share responsibilities to avoid burnout;

6. **Look for balance** in responsibility, autonomy, power and burden in engaging volunteers;

7. **Enable pathways** of participation to allow flexible movement between different roles and responsibilities at different times; and

8. **Acknowledge the risk** that volunteering is seen narrowly as, and becomes, just a contribution to the financial viability of community businesses.

Volunteers are more than a resource, but the study raises important questions about the financial and service models of community businesses and the place of volunteering within them.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and context

Latest figures suggest that there are nearly four times as many volunteers as paid staff involved in UK community businesses, with approximately 148,700 people giving their time to help out (Higton et al., 2021a). Behind the numbers, volunteering has more everyday significance. Many community businesses would not be able to operate without them. Volunteers provide services and organise many events and activities. As committee members, they also oversee and govern the business. In some cases, volunteers are the founders.

Research has shown that within traditional voluntary or charitable organisations, careful consideration needs to be paid to how volunteers are managed and organised, retained and supported (Musick and Wilson, 2008; Rochester et al., 2010). Existing evidence suggests that organisations increasingly tend to operate through what has been referred to as a 'modern/ work based' (Zimmeck, 2001) or 'programme' model of volunteering (Meijs and Karr, 2004). Here volunteers are mobilised, used and managed by organisations in the service of their overall aims and activities, as if they were (unpaid) employees. An alternative, 'home grown/organic' or 'membership' model of volunteering, suggests a much more flexible, informal, bottom up, approach in which boundaries between roles are more blurred and relationships more mutual (Zimmeck, 2001; Meijs and Karr, 2004).

To date, however, much of the research evidence on volunteer involvement has focused on voluntary and charitable organisations. Some focus has been paid to volunteering within public services (McGarvey et al., 2020), but the role, meaning and management of volunteering in more commercially oriented contexts, such as social enterprise or community business, has been under-explored. We do not know how relevant existing research insights into volunteering and good practice advice on volunteer management are when transferred to organisations operating with a commercial ethos in a trading context, such as community businesses.

A community business is defined by Power to Change as 'a business that is locally-rooted, is accountable to and trades for the benefit of the local community, and has broad community impact' (Byrne et al., 2020:2). They suggest that community businesses have four key characteristics:

1. Locally rooted: community businesses are geographically rooted and respond to local needs;

2. Trading for the benefit of the local community: they are businesses, with incomes derived from trading activities;

3. Accountable to the local community: this can manifest in different ways, such as through community shares or membership, with members being involved in decisions;

4. Broad community impact: community businesses benefit and impact the community as a whole.

McArthur (1993) identifies three elements which differentiate community businesses from standard businesses: the nature of ownership (community owned, generally through residency based membership, with members having voting rights, including election of directors who are also community residents); use of surplus income (for community benefit, not personal profit); objectives (community orientated). As such, they are 'hybrid organisations' (Billis, 2010), combining community goals with business practices. Further, as Johnstone and Lionais (2004) describe:

> *'community is not only the location of the entrepreneurial process but also the tool – using the social networks – and the goal –improving the quality of life – in community business entrepreneurship' (p. 227)*

There is relatively little evidence of how volunteering may be affected by such hybrid contexts (Ellis Paine et al., 2010; Hustinx, 2014; Aiken and Taylor, 2019; Rochester et al., 2020). What evidence there is tends to suggest that as organisations become more 'business-like' volunteer-involvement changes. Maier et al.'s (2016) review of the literature on voluntary organisations becoming more business-like found that there are positives and negatives to professionalising the use of volunteers for community businesses that want to build bonds with their community (p. 76). In their community serving role, do community businesses find that changing ways of involving volunteers (i.e. moving from being all volunteer/activist-led to 'save' an asset, towards becoming a trading community business) mean that those leading volunteers become paid staff, or do they step away because the nature of the organisation has changed, or something else? Does having a lot of local volunteers bring customers and business in, or is it just the material that is being traded that attracts customers? These questions point to the importance of understanding the inherently hybrid nature of community businesses, and what this means for volunteering.

There is a need to explore the practices beneath what we know about the numbers of volunteers within community businesses: to examine the different ways in which volunteering is understood and practised in community business, and to explore the implications of different models of volunteering for both the experience of volunteers and the operation and resilience of community businesses. This report seeks to address this gap in our understanding.

1.2   Research aims and questions

The aim of the research which forms the basis of this report was to conduct a wide-ranging, qualitative study of the meaning, practice and management of volunteering in community business. Our primary research question was: **How is volunteering understood and enacted in community business and what are the implications of this for volunteering experiences and outcomes?** This question was explored through three supplementary questions:

- How is volunteering conceptualised and managed within community business, and how does this affect the experience and outcomes of volunteering?

- What influence do volunteers have in the formation, strategic direction and operation of community businesses?

- What is the relationship between volunteering and the commercial orientation of community business?

As well as an academic concern to enhance knowledge about volunteering in a community business context, addressing these questions can contribute to policy and practice in terms of volunteer recruitment, retention and contribution within community business.
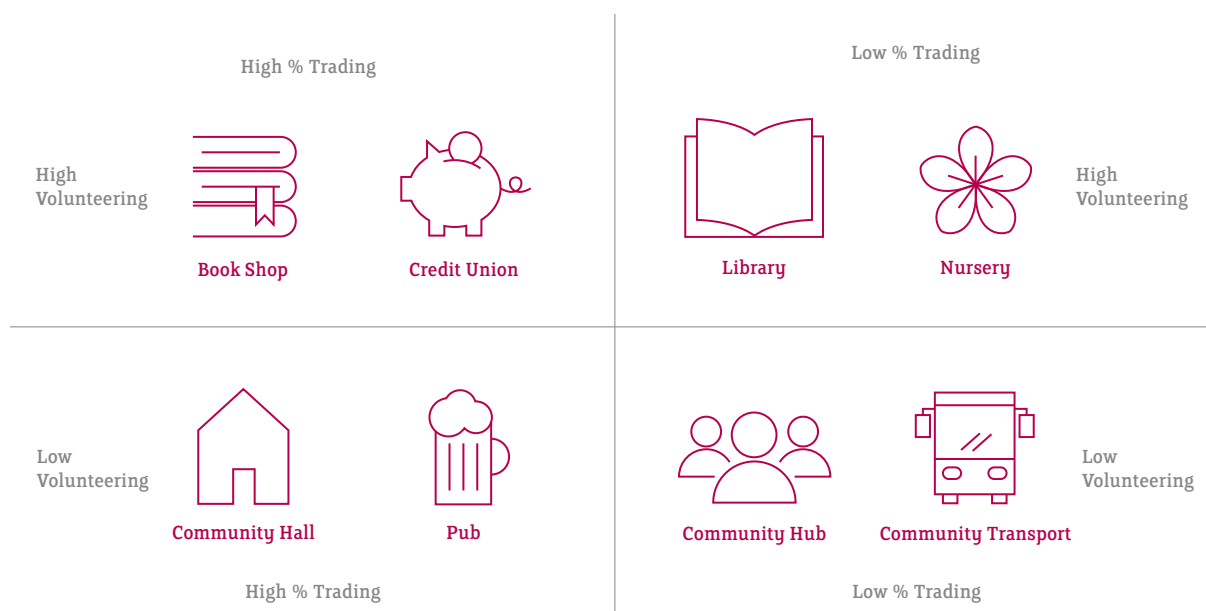
1.3   Research approach

The research involved five elements – further details of which can be found in the Appendix:

Literature review: We conducted a rapid review of existing evidence on volunteering in community business and hybrid organisations, in order to inform our study questions and analysis.

Survey: A short recruitment survey was undertaken amongst community businesses which had expressed an interest in being involved in research on volunteering through Power to Change. The survey asked basic questions about the community business (e.g. type, location, size) and volunteering within it, with the aim of identifying a sample for more in-depth research. We received 59 responses.

Case studies: We selected eight community businesses as case studies. These were chosen to ensure a good mix of community businesses, particularly in terms of: reliance on trading income versus grant income; the centrality of volunteering; and type (see Figure 1 for a summary). Within each case study we spoke to trustees, staff and volunteers, through a mix of interviews (55) and focus groups (4, with a total of 11 participants). As the study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, the research was all conducted virtually, mainly over Zoom. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Figure 1: Case study framework

	High % Trading	Low % Trading	
High Volunteering	Book Shop Credit Union	Library Nursery	High Volunteering
Low Volunteering	Community Hall Pub	Community Hub Community Transport	Low Volunteering
	High % Trading	Low % Trading	

Analysis: We used a framework thematic approach to analyse the data. We analysed the responses within individual cases; before proceeding to look across the cases to identify points of difference and similarity.

Verification: A virtual workshop was held with case studies and other interested community businesses towards the end of the analysis period, to share emerging findings, discuss their resonance and explore implications.

1.4   About the report

This report is split into six sections. Having introduced the study, Section 2 describes **what** volunteering looks like in community business. Section 3 sets out our findings on **why** volunteering happens in community businesses, from both organisational and individual perspectives. Section 4 goes on to describe **how** volunteering is organised and experienced in community businesses, including what outcomes it leads to for both the organisations and the volunteers. While Sections 2–4 tend to highlight difference and variation, Section 5 moves the analysis forward by focusing on exactly **how** different dimensions of 'community business' make a difference to volunteering. Our final section concludes with some implications for policy and practice.

Throughout the report we provide boxed vignettes from our case study community businesses, each offering insights from individual organisations. We also use direct quotations from the people we interviewed. To ensure that the findings remain anonymous, we have given each of the case studies a number which we use to reference longer quotes, along with a simple descriptor of the person who is speaking: trustee, volunteer or staff. Shorter quotes, integrated into the text, are not attributed. Any personal names used are pseudonyms.

Photos used throughout the report are not of the community business case studies who took part in the research.

2. What does volunteering look like in community businesses?

2.1 Community businesses represent diverse settings for volunteering

Our research did not set out to question what community businesses are: we relied on Power to Change's definition and an associated database of community businesses in order to identify our sample. It is, however, important to provide a basic description of the community business contexts in which the volunteering we go on to describe took place, not least because it is recognised that volunteering is a 'situated practice' (Cornwall, 2002), shaped by the multi-layered contexts within which it occurs. This section then provides the framing for the rest of our analysis.

Although all were within Power to Change's broad definition of community business (see Section 1.1), there was considerable diversity across our eight case studies. The case studies had different purposes; provided a diverse range of services or activities; operated at different scales; in different contexts; and within different organisational and legal forms (see Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of case study basic details

Type	Category*	Age	Size**	Volunteers (No.)	Paid staff (No.)	Members	Legal form
Shop	HT, HV	50	Medium	11–30	5–10	Yes	Cooperative society
Credit union	HT, HV	28	Medium	>50	1–4	Yes	Cooperative society
Hall	HT, LV	120	Medium	11–30	1–4	No	Charitable company
Pub	HT, LV	10	Medium	0–10	5–10	Shareholders	Community benefit society
Library	LT, HV	10	Small	31–50	0	Yes	Charitable company
Plant nursery	LT, HV	2	Small	11–30	1–4	No	Community interest company
Transport	LT, LV	29	Medium	0–10	1–4	No	Charity, with trading arm
Hub	LT, LV	25	Medium	>50	>10	No	Charitable company

* HT = high trading, LT = low trading; HV = high centrality of volunteering; LV = low centrality of volunteering. Please note: assessments made based on survey responses, which in some cases were called into question through the qualitative data

** Size, based on the National Council for Voluntary Organisations' (NCVO's) classification as used within its Civil Society Almanac: Small = annual incomes of £10,000–£100,000; Medium = annual incomes of £100,000–£1,000,000

While some regularly used the term 'community business' to describe themselves, others did not. All, however, recognised the label, and that they were at least loosely united by the definitional criteria of being rooted in and accountable to a community, and by being a business which meant having incomes derived, at least in part, from trading. As one respondent reflected:

> *"It ['community business'] does fit well but it's not a term we would use to describe ourselves because it gives [...] the wrong impression about what a credit union is. Because we spend so long explaining to people, we're not like a bank or a building society. We're not just a business with anonymous shareholders; we're a community cooperative. You're the shareholders; you're our family; you're the people who benefit from it; you're the people who run it. So we're not just doing a general business like the others are; we are* **your** *community business; we're your business."*

(CB2, Trustee)

Within this, however, what 'community' and 'business' meant varied significantly. One of our case studies, for example, undertook next to no trading, with most of their income derived from a single grant and only a very small amount from sales and fees. For them, very little emphasis was placed on income generation and any commercial orientation was negligible. In contrast, another of our case studies was almost totally reliant on trading for its income. Some were more reliant on contract funding than on direct trading. Similarly, while some were providing services for a community, others felt more of the community – they were organisations which were run by and for the community, with local people involved in the governance and leadership.

How 'community' and 'business' combined within the organisations also varied. For some, 'business' seemed to come first; for others it was 'community' (or at least a broader notion of social good). This could affect how people within the organisation viewed its purpose, and how it was perceived by others. Respondents from one community business, for example, described how despite being owned by a committee of local residents, they felt that "for it to survive it has to be run as a business", and that the general public using its services would largely be unaware that it was a community business. In comparison, another described how they had adopted a more community-focused outlook, rather than working on the basis of prioritising needing to "make a profit every year and then pay a dividend next month".

And there was movement in both directions, as organisations changed over time. Some of our cases, for example, had seemingly become more 'business-like' over time, with an increasing proportion of their funding derived from trading and/or contracts, and/or a growing emphasis on 'more professionalised' approaches. Others were moving in a different direction, from a more clearly 'business' approach towards an increased emphasis on and relationship with their local community. These were not mutually exclusive either, with one organisation reporting that they were becoming both more business-orientated and more community-focused. The employment of two new staff had been instrumental for this community business in terms of being able to increase the range of activities the business provided, its trading income and its relationship with the local community. For some, COVID-19 had triggered a period of reflection, in which organisational purposes and practices were being re-thought, promoting efforts to move the organisation in one of these directions or the other.

Rethinking priorities and practices during COVID-19

'The Plant Nursery' was founded as a community interest company in the year before the pandemic. It aims to provide accessible gardening and horticultural programmes for the local community with a broad focus on mental health and wellbeing outcomes, including reducing isolation and loneliness. While the ethos of the organisation has always been very community-focused, the COVID-19 pandemic halted development and delivery of its programmes, forcing the founder to explore other options. During this time, priorities were altered and the time made available was utilised to focus on getting the community involved, particularly through volunteering. After reviewing existing evidence of the social return on investment associated with volunteering, and a successful funding application to support the employment of a part-time volunteer coordinator, considerable energy was devoted to building the organisation's volunteer base. As the numbers of volunteers grew in the organisation, so too did their contribution not just in the delivery of activities but also in setting the agenda for the organisation. By bringing volunteers into the decision-making processes, the small team of staff was able to ensure the views of the community were included in the development of the vision and mission of the organisation. This contributed to the development of strong relationships between volunteers and staff, which is expected to have a positive impact on the delivery of programmes in the future. As one of the community-business leaders reflected:

> *"So I have been putting a lot more effort into them [volunteers] as a group and this has had this wonderful benefit, I don't think I would have done, made that effort, if it hadn't been for COVID. But what it's done, it's given me a really strong solid base of people. As you see I have been able to delegate work. I have been able to rely on more people and you know, I have been able to sort of use them as a sounding board for ideas, they helped me develop the vision and the mission for the organisation that kind of thing. So I'm really pleased that we did it and I don't think I would have had the time or necessarily prioritised that if we hadn't have had to shut down the programmes."*

There could be tension in combining the community and business dimensions of organisations. Some, for example, talked about the dilemma of how to strike a balance between needing to make money with a need to be 'fair' and 'community minded'; "being commercial without being seen to be greedy" as one person put it; how to reconcile a demand from the community to be 'cheaper' with a need to ensure quality and to balance the books; of how much profit/surplus is acceptable; about how much time to put into commercial activities versus charitable activities; or a more general reluctance to be (thought of as) 'commercial'. One interviewee reflected upon a debate in which they had participated about whether they were a business or a charity/social entity first – they decided that they had to be a business first, because without the business there would be no money for charitable activities: "without the business making any money, or making a surplus or even making, you know, just breaking even, you've nothing. You've no social enterprise; you've no volunteers; you've no nothing". A similar discussion in another case study led to the conclusion that it was not a matter of business or charity, as without the business the charity would not be viable. This could lead to tensions amongst different stakeholders within community businesses, particularly amongst trustees, as you "inevitably get a differential appetite for that commercial activity and how comfortable people are to run things on a commercial basis versus the charitable basis".

Such tensions and dilemmas were not, however, inevitable. In some of our case studies 'business' and 'community' seemed to blend more harmoniously, enabling them to more seamlessly use "the power of business to make social good", as one respondent described the purpose of their community business. As a staff member in one of our cases described:

> *"that is such an important two things to bring together to be able to use the economic system for our benefit and for our advantage as a community or voluntary organisation"*
>
> (CB1, staff)

These different dimensions of being a community business can each have implications for how volunteering is understood, organised and experienced in community businesses.

Balancing community and business, and growing volunteering

'The Hall' is a community business situated in a large city. It is a Grade II listed building which has been managed by a board of trustees on behalf of the local community since the 1990s, although the hall itself is much older. For many years the hall was maintained by this group of volunteers, and utilised for regular room hire by a small number of groups, from which the organisation derived most of its income. Five years ago, however, the trustees felt the model was becoming untenable, and moved to employ their first paid staff members to support the organisation. These staff members include a charity development manager and an artistic director. Their employment represented a move towards a more professional and strategic focus for the hall, including a growing emphasis on more commercial activities.

While the purpose of the organisation has always been "to serve the community", relatively little attention was historically paid to actively building the business. The move to a more professional, strategic model and expansion in fundraising and trading activities has not come at the 'cost' of community, but has instead included a greater focus on community engagement, through providing accessible activities and opportunities for local people with a focus on wellbeing. Developing community projects has become part of the business model for The Hall.

As a result of this expansion, the trustees expect that volunteering (beyond the board) will become more central to the organisation and they will seek to involve local volunteers for specific volunteering roles. For example, it is likely that they will need to recruit a volunteer receptionist to manage the different groups using the hall and any enquiries.

2.2   Volunteers are involved to different extents

As indicated within existing survey data, levels of volunteering vary considerably across community businesses as do the ratios of paid staff to volunteers (Byrne et al., 2020; Higton et al., 2021a). Amongst our case studies, two involved fewer than 10 volunteers (including trustees), two involved over 50. Numbers, however, only tell part of the story.

For some community businesses, volunteering was fundamental to their operations, even when the absolute number of volunteers involved was relatively small. Volunteers could be 'fundamental' to either/both the *resources* or *ethos* of community businesses (we consider this point further below). Several, for example, said that they couldn't operate without volunteers. This included one community business which had no paid staff at all: it was entirely dependent on volunteers for all aspects of running the organisation. Others said they would not *want* to operate without volunteers.

For some community businesses, volunteering was far more marginal: they could operate without volunteers, even if they were "all the richer" for having them. In one of our case studies, for example, volunteer involvement was minimal beyond a small, core group of trustees: there were few volunteers involved, apart from one annual special event supported by volunteers, and volunteering was not particularly significant to the ways in which the organisation understood its purpose or values.

But volunteering could also be thought of as both fundamental and marginal. One of our case studies, for example, was heavily reliant on one volunteer who acted as an executive chair – essentially fulfilling the roles of both chair and CEO. It was suggested that the organisation would not be viable without them. And yet, beyond this one person, supported by the other trustees, the organisation currently involved only one or two volunteers outside of these governance roles, with marginal influence compared to a considerable number of paid staff who had responsibility for delivering most of the organisation's activities.

In some of the community businesses, the extent of volunteering had increased over recent years. This could be the result of a deliberate strategy to boost community involvement. In others it had decreased. As a staff member from one case study described: "over the years, volunteering has become less and less and less". Some had seen little change, at least until the pandemic.

COVID-19 had affected the extent of volunteering in community businesses in different ways. In some cases, volunteering had increased. One of our case studies, for example, had been able to involve volunteers in outside spaces throughout the pandemic when other volunteering opportunities in the local community that were restricted due to being indoors had closed down. This had combined with a renewed emphasis in the organisation in getting the local community involved, and with some people having more time to volunteer due to being furloughed, all of which served to increase the extent of volunteering taking place. For others, however, volunteering had decreased, particularly those organisations which relied on older volunteers or which needed to close down activities and services due to the pandemic. For some, volunteering had paused, as organisations had asked volunteers to stay away, or as volunteers had been required to shield. For some organisations, COVID-19 had "highlighted the precarity of the volunteer model", due to its dependence on an 'older generation' of volunteers who "straight away they all went shielding or isolating, or too afraid to come out, or we had to say to them, 'we don't want you to risk your health by coming in the office'. So we had to stop all volunteering".

The changing use of volunteers

'The Pub' is situated in a village in England. Around 10 years ago, the private owners put it up for sale after it struggled financially, and it was taken over by the local community with a grant and through a share offering. To date, volunteering at the pub has taken three main forms: the committee, general maintenance and odd-jobs in terms of the building and grounds, and helping out at an annual festival.

When the pub was newly re-opened, lots of volunteer hours went into redecoration, fixing things and getting the garden ready. Some festival volunteers will still help with painting and decorating, or small building work on occasion. Some volunteers are so local, one said, that committee members can just "come knock on the door" and ask him to help out with something.

In general, the pub has not changed much since its inception. But it did used to have a volunteer-run café – a space in the pub, where local volunteers would sell sandwiches to residents, and cakes they had made. The café was popular with mother and baby groups especially, and people grabbing lunch, but it was felt the pub needed to expand its kitchen in order to provide highest quality food and cater fully to all markets. This led to removing the café – which "wasn't that popular" and had "pretty variable usage", according to two trustees.

In talking to us, it was assumed by the trustees that the removal of the café was an unpopular move with the volunteers, with a feeling that business was put above community in this instance. A lead café volunteer disagreed, however, and felt that it was time (in general and for her specifically) to stop running the café so the pub could grow. The baby groups and others could buy coffee and cake in the pub, so it did not feel like a dramatic change – "it was a nice small welcoming space but there could be some afternoons where you wouldn't have anybody at all" said a trustee.

The extent of volunteering also varied considerably on an individual level. We identified three groups of volunteers within the community business case studies, based on the extent to which they engaged with the organisation:

Super volunteers: In a number of the case studies we found a very small number of what Einolf and Yung (2018) call 'super volunteers', or those who might broadly be considered part of the 'civic core' (Mohan and Bulloch, 2012). These individuals, who were sometimes but not always amongst the founding members of the community business, dedicated themselves to the organisation, giving "a hell of a lot of hours" of their time each week, often over the course of many years.

General volunteering literature talks about the distinction between those for whom volunteering is one of a number of role identities, and those from whom volunteering becomes 'essential for the entire identity', a 'deeply personal processes of personal identity and values' (Grönlund, 2011: 871). The 'super volunteers' we encountered within the community businesses fitted the latter description. Indeed, volunteer and organisational identities can become closely linked, which can lead to a strong sense of commitment and ownership. As one volunteer reflected:

> *"with [this type of community business] it's one of them things that you either really encompass it and love it and you'll defend it to the … you know … to the realms of the earth, or you just think of it as […] something that you can do occasionally. I'm one of them who really feels that I love [this type of community business]: I'll support them forever and a day"*
>
> **(CB2, trustee)**

Super volunteers were recognised as an amazing asset for community businesses. It was also recognised, however, that there is a risk that an organisation would become overly dependent on just one or two people. For the volunteer, the risk is of burnout. We return to these points below.

A 'super volunteer'

The chair of the board of one of our case study organisations, who also acts as the de facto chief executive officer, is central to the successful operation of the community business and has been involved since it was founded. This individual performs a variety of roles, including managing the paid staff and volunteers, but also getting involved with frontline activities. One interviewee described them as "the king pin, they do practically everything … we'd be lost without them".

This 'super volunteer' was described as working nearly full-time on the community business, combining the role with part-time paid work with the local authority. The arrangement meant that the community business avoided having to pay for a manager, but also ensured that it remained aware of developments within the local area. The individual also brought significant management experience from other roles.

It was acknowledged by several interviewees, however, that this level of reliance upon an individual and their skills brought challenges relating to succession planning. Finding a replacement volunteer with the same skills, ability and commitment would be extremely difficult and it was unclear whether a community business of this size would be able to remain viable if they had to pay a chief executive officer. Even if recruiting a suitable replacement proved possible, it seemed likely that the part-time staff would have to take on more responsibility and that it would take a long time for a successor to be able to 'bed in'.

One interviewee, however, reflected that many of the smaller community businesses of the same type were entirely volunteer run. They provided an example of another 'super volunteer' from their past experience with similar community businesses, which suggests that this scenario is far from unusual.

Regular volunteers: Community businesses can also rely on many regular volunteers – those who help out on a frequent basis, once or twice a week or a few times each month, for example. These volunteers are the mainstays of community businesses. It was notable that across most of our cases we heard stories of volunteers being involved within the same community business for many years – with the suggestion that once they got involved, they tended to stay involved:

> *"The majority [of volunteers] stay a long time. There's very few that only stay for a short period of time, unless it's something to do with health-wise or their circumstances have changed or they've got a full-time job or something. But the majority of volunteers we have stay for a long time."*

(CB2, trustee)

Episodic volunteers: In some community businesses, there was also a wider group of more occasional, or *episodic volunteers* (Macduff, 2005) – those who get involved for a relatively short period of time and/or for discrete activities or projects. This included, for example, student volunteers who wanted experience of working in a particular environment and moved on when their circumstances changed. It also included those who helped out for a specific activity, such as renovating a building, or supporting fundraisers, including some who returned each year to help out with an annual event.

2.3   Volunteer roles

We observed three main groups of roles fulfilled by volunteers within community businesses: governance, management and delivery.

Governance: Through their roles as trustees, directors or committee members, volunteers were ultimately responsible for all the community businesses in our sample. The exact nature of the governance role depended upon the structure and legal form of the organisation. The cooperative structure in one of our cases, for example, saw equal roles and responsibilities for paid staff and volunteers on its main governance committee. The charities within our sample had boards of trustees, all of whom were volunteers. The fact that (most) trustees/board members are themselves volunteers is something that is often overlooked in research, policy and practice, with community businesses being no exception. This was recognised by many of our respondents: "… we kind of forget that they're [trustees] volunteers, don't we? I think that's a common thing".

Management: In some of our cases, volunteers fulfilled management roles within the organisation. This might be managing the whole organisation, or managing certain people, activities or services. In one of our cases, all management was undertaken by volunteers as there were no paid staff; in two others a CEO-equivalent role was undertaken by a volunteer. As we will discuss later, this might be through choice or circumstance; an important difference with potentially significant implications. As a trustee in one of our case studies reflected: "the board manages the paid staff and the board sets the strategic direction. I mean we do need a chief executive; that will happen once we get some income".

Delivery: All of our case studies involved volunteers in frontline roles, although the scale and significance of this varied considerably. As indicated above, in some of our case studies volunteers were the frontline – there were few or no paid staff, with volunteers fulfilling all the frontline roles within the organisation. In other case studies, paid staff took up the core frontline positions, with volunteers fulfilling more supplementary roles, in some cases at a very minimal level with just one or two volunteers involved and/or only on an occasional basis.

Different perspectives on the role and position of volunteers

'The Community Hub' is located in the north east of England and provides a range of services for the local community, including childcare, employability skills and recreational activities. This organisation is relatively large and volunteers play a range of roles across the organisation.

Paid staff tend to hold the view that the organisation could run without volunteers, however they feel that the organisation is "all the richer for having volunteers" providing additional "people power" and helping them to achieve their goals and serve the community. Despite feeling that volunteers are not crucial to activities, they are clearly highly valued.

Senior staff highlighted that many of their volunteers required additional support and guidance. The recent employment of a volunteer coordinator reflects the views of senior leaders and the trustees that volunteers need to be appropriately supported to ensure they have a positive experience. The organisation welcomes volunteers and offers flexibility in the range of roles available and time that volunteers are able to commit.

Volunteers shared the perspective that they were valuable to the organisation, highlighting that they may facilitate connections between the organisation and the local community and service users, making the hub and the services they provide more accessible. Volunteers also felt well-supported, listened to and appreciated the flexibility of their roles.

2.4   The meaning and position of volunteers

Underlying these different roles and contributions, are different meanings and positions ascribed to volunteering and volunteers within the community businesses. We identified four different ways of conceptualising volunteering: workers/employees; members; service users; or co-owners. These different understandings of volunteering are neither fixed nor mutually exclusive. They reflect the different positions that volunteers occupy within community businesses, and have implications for the level of influence they have.

Workers/employees: In some cases volunteers were positioned very much as **workers**, or **'employees'**, albeit without formal contracts or pay, sometimes fulfilling very similar if not identical roles to paid employees, with similar selection criteria, training requirements, expectations and responsibilities. As a volunteer in one organisation concluded "you've still got that responsibility whether you're a volunteer or whether you're a professional".

Members: Volunteers could alternatively be understood and positioned more as **members**, reflecting a more mutual relationship and set of expectations and practices. This was often closely linked with an active sense of community engagement – volunteering as a way of ensuring that community members were involved and had a say in the organisation: "It's run by volunteers for the volunteers, and [...] you know, and it's community". Not all of the community businesses had formal membership schemes, but some did, including one which had a requirement for members to volunteer for a minimum of five hours a year. While this was not vigorously pursued, it provided a broad framing for both membership and volunteering.

In the following quote, the respondent (a staff member) reflects on how volunteering was understood and practised in their community business, making a contrast between volunteering as unpaid work and volunteering as membership or community engagement and capacity building; between volunteering as a gift exchange and volunteering as a mutual exchange:

> *"I'm not saying that money is fantastic at the moment in terms of the shop, because we are in the midst of a pandemic, but it's definitely in terms of volunteering it isn't – the focus isn't on unpaid labour, so to speak; it really, really, isn't. It's actually about, you know, getting people involved, getting them learning about the shop, about what the shop does, helping people get new skills."*

(CB1, staff)

Service users: Volunteers could also be understood and positioned more as **service users**. Volunteering was seen as a way to engage, support and empower those it sought to help. This could either be a direct strategy of the organisation, a key part of how it fulfilled its purpose or met its objectives, or more coincidental, something that had developed over time and was an added value of the work of the organisation. As the leader of one community business reflected: "a lot of our volunteers really come here because they've got their own sort of needs …". This could have significant implications for how the organisation viewed the investment they put in to supporting and managing volunteers, to the balance of the equation between cost and benefit (see also Section 4 for further discussion of this point).

Co-owners: Further, in some cases, volunteers were positioned and understood as **co-owners**, investors or – as described by one respondent – custodians. Co-ownership could sometimes be in a literal sense, with volunteers having invested financially in the establishment of the organisation or the purchase of its assets (e.g. building or land). More often, however, co-ownership was figurative, reflective of a strong sense of ownership having built up through volunteers being heavily involved in establishing and/or influencing the strategy and direction of the community business and its delivery. As one volunteer said: "I'm enormously … not only protective over it but proud of it".

These different meanings or positions for volunteering suggest different 'stakes' for volunteers within community businesses in terms of their levels of: vested interest in the organisation; influence; and autonomy over their own work and the work of the organisation. They are also suggestive of different approaches to organising and managing volunteering, and more broadly of leading and governing organisations. They are influenced by organisational structures, ethos and values, and by the presence or absence of others (e.g. paid workers) within individual community businesses. We return to these points within Sections 5 and 6.

3. Why does volunteering happen in community businesses?

There is an extensive literature on why people volunteer, focusing mainly on individual motivations but also exploring the resources which enable people to volunteer and the circumstances which may trigger people's involvement. Less attention is paid to why organisations involve volunteers. Perhaps it is too obvious a question to ask, but it is an important one, given that not all community businesses do involve volunteers or they may involve them to a relatively small extent. Our research revealed contrasting organisational and individual perspectives on the issue.

3.1   Organisational drivers for volunteering

Reflective of the earlier discussion of what volunteering means in community businesses, and indeed to later discussions on its outcomes, we identified three broad sets of reasons offered as to why community businesses involve volunteers.

Volunteering as a resource: The key reason for community businesses to involve volunteers was because they provide resource: a capacity within the organisation to get things done at a relatively low cost: "It would be nice in an ideal world if there were a lot more volunteers […] because it would affect our balance sheet directly". This driver for volunteer involvement was found in all our case studies, but was more dominant in some than others. It was also changeable over time, even within individual organisations, with a growing emphasis on involving volunteers as a resource to get things done when other resources (e.g. money) were in short supply:

> *"going forward I think volunteering is going to play a much bigger role in what we do because again we don't have an income. I mean we are not sure of our income and so we are going to have to use, we want to use volunteers actually."*
>
> (CB3, trustee)

Volunteering as a reflection of ethos and values: For some community businesses, volunteers represent more than a resource; volunteer involvement was a reflection of their core values and ethos as an organisation. As one volunteer described, volunteering is "an embodied expression of some of the values behind the business". For some, volunteer involvement was at the very heart of being a community business: it was the way in which community engagement and accountability happened. Indeed, some had directly sought to increase volunteer involvement as a way of enabling more people from the local community to have a say in the organisation's development: "it's not really a community centre if you don't have a community involved in it and decision making in the process of it". For others, it was more specific to their organisational purpose and values, such as inclusivity, anti-discrimination, education or empowerment. As one community business leader reflected:

> *"Why involve volunteers? I think it sort of adds to the richness of who we are and what we do, we, you know, recognising that for people who volunteer, sometimes it's as much about what they can give to us, you know, they have a skill or capacity or knowledge or experience and yeah, wanting to acknowledge and be grateful for that offering. And then I think there is the other side of the coin, of helping to support people who want to contribute but need some guidance and help in doing that"*
>
> **(CB1, staff)**

Volunteering as a way to build legitimacy and distinction: Connected to ethos and values, some community businesses sought to involve volunteers as a way of building legitimacy and trust amongst those who used their services or amongst community members more generally, and/or as a way of personalising services and distinguishing themselves from other organisations. Volunteering, it was hoped, could help community businesses in this way both directly through recruiting volunteers from the community who were known to and trusted by the community, helping to break down barriers, and through creating capacity within the organisation to spend more time with their customers/service users and provide a more personalised approach. Volunteers, it was suggested, could help to ensure "we're not a faceless enterprise who don't care about you. We do care about you. I think that's what is built into us from the beginning". This was particularly so when volunteers were recruited with similar backgrounds to service users – either through being local residents, or through personal issues that aligned with those of service users (e.g. experience of mental ill-health) – which could reduce the 'distance' between the person giving the support and the person receiving it.

3.2 Volunteer motivations for getting involved in community businesses

Our research did not attempt to replicate the extensive existing literature on volunteer motivations, or to dwell too long on questions of why people volunteer for community businesses. It did, however, reveal four interrelated sets of reasons given for why people got involved. These motivations are not unique to volunteering in community businesses, but are shaped by some of their characteristics.

Expression: Many of the volunteers talked about getting involved in the community business due to their passion for or commitment to: the activities which were the focus of the organisation (volunteers talked about being motivated by, for example, their love of books, love of performing arts, love of gardening, enjoyment of driving), or for a particular ideology or philosophy which underpinned the organisation (e.g. working cooperatively). Volunteering was a way to practise or express these interests and values. In this way, for many, volunteering could be thought of as a form of serious leisure (Stebbins and Graham, 2004).

Service: Volunteers also talked about getting involved in a community business as they wanted to help out, to serve their community or a particular group within it, and/or "to give something back". The place-based and local nature of many community businesses appeared significant here – it might be less about the specifics of what the community business did, but more about what/how it contributed to the community in general: "I kind of wanted to do something that was closer to home where I could see a difference being made, so it was really important that it was, that I was doing something local". Although motivations could be strengthened when place and passion combined: "I have always enjoyed driving and I wanted to put a bit back into the community as well so the two came very neatly together but that was basically the motive".

Experience: Volunteering was often seen as a way of developing or using skills and experience, to keep active and keep the "brain in gear". This was often associated with a desire to be and feel useful. It gained particular significance for people at the point of retirement: volunteering for some was a way to use their existing skills and to replace the routine and sense of productivity associated with employment, albeit with the flexibilities and freedoms associated with volunteering that were often contrasted to paid work (see below). For some people, volunteering in a community business was a way to build new skills and/or to gain experience as a route to employment. More often, however, it was an end in and of itself. One volunteer reflected that "job satisfaction" was for them a key driver:

> *"since I retired you need something, well partly, you need something to get your teeth into and I thought I didn't want to go back on the cards with somebody where you have to be in at eight o'clock [...] I've had forty odd years of that. It's cooperative, it's a volunteering service, it's a lot more flexible, they can't sack you, if you're late you're late, if you're early you're early, it's more flexible and I think that's a big thing to me, I don't have to do it. I do it because I want to do it, you know."*

(CB2, volunteer)

Connection: Some people volunteered in their community business as a way of meeting people and making social connections. Again, the locally-based nature of the community business appeared significant. Volunteers often talked about wanting to meet people within their local community "in a way that you wouldn't otherwise", sometimes reflecting on the potential to meet and mix with a "more diverse" range of people than they would within their usual social circles.

4. How is volunteering experienced in community businesses?

4.1   Volunteer coordination and management

Volunteer management practices were more or less explicit within the case study community businesses involved in this study. Two of the case studies had dedicated, paid, volunteer coordinators, others had designated people responsible for volunteers (either paid staff or trustees), or had decided upon a collective responsibility whereby everyone looked out for each other. Within some cases, however, responsibility for volunteering/volunteers was far more implicit, with relatively little direct attention seemingly given to how to best involve and support volunteers.

Similarly, the investment needed to engage and support volunteers effectively was more or less acknowledged. Some talked about a need for greater investment in volunteer coordination, whether in terms of time or money. There was, it was suggested, something of a catch-22 in which it was acknowledged that in order to reap the benefit of volunteering community businesses needed to invest in volunteer support and management, yet they struggled to find the resource to make that investment.

Reflective of the different ways in which volunteering is understood in community businesses, a couple of organisations noted specific challenges they faced in ensuring that volunteering opportunities were inclusive. While these organisations wanted to support the involvement of volunteers who were vulnerable or who had additional support needs, and were attractive places to volunteer precisely because of these values and practices, they sometimes struggled to find the resources necessary to meet their aspirations. On occasions this led to questions of whether the 'cost' of involving volunteers was more than the 'value' they contributed to the organisation. For some, this had been built into their model of volunteering, which recognised that "it's more about what they get out of it rather than what we get out of it". For others it had built over time through a reputation that they had developed locally for being "a very welcoming space to everybody" which had led to more "vulnerable people" looking to volunteer with them: while this was viewed as a positive, it was acknowledged that it could occasionally be challenging in terms of the resources required to support people's contributions.

Overall, most of the volunteers we spoke to appeared happy with the support that they received. Several respondents commented upon the retention of volunteers, which they perceived to be relatively high, and saw this as a reflection of positive volunteering experiences: "there must be something going well if they've been doing it for 17 years [...] They can see there's something good about it because you wouldn't get the volunteers staying that long if it wasn't good".

Volunteers generally seemed to give relatively little consideration to the ways in which they were supported or managed, particularly volunteers in governance positions who thought more about how they should be looking after other volunteers than how they themselves should be supported as volunteers. When pressed, reflecting existing research and general good practice guidance on volunteer involvement (e.g. McGarvey et al., 2020), volunteers talked about the importance of:

- a balance of formality and informality – ensuring that procedures were in place to involve volunteers 'safely', yet minimising bureaucracy and formality (what Gaskin (2003) refers to as a 'choice blend');

- flexibility in roles, responsibilities, time and approach – being able to do more or less depending on changing circumstances;

- meaningful opportunities – volunteering roles which made a significant contribution to the organisation and felt worthwhile;

- appreciation – recognition of the contribution that volunteers make to the organisation;

- meaningful two-way communication – where volunteers felt informed about everything that was going on in the organisation, and able to 'have a say' in how it developed.

This is not to say, however, that the experience of involving, organising and supporting volunteers was without its challenges, from either an individual/volunteer or organisational perspective. Four, related, areas of concern were highlighted – diversity, succession, burnout and autonomy:

Diversity and representation: a lack of diversity amongst volunteers was raised as a concern in a number of the case studies, with a recognition that this meant the community businesses were "not representative of our local area". In particular, it was suggested that community businesses (in common with other organisations) struggled to engage younger volunteers. We frequently heard concerns from across our case studies about having an ageing volunteer base. In some cases it was also suggested that people from ethnic minority groups were under-represented. For some, this issue had been highlighted by COVID-19, when much of their volunteer cohort had been asked to shield due to their age. Ensuring diversity and representativeness of trustees was felt to be a particular challenge, possibly due to perceptions of the level of responsibility the role entailed. For example, one organisation described struggling to attract local community members to the board due to it being perceived as a demanding and daunting role, but stressed the importance and value of supporting local community members to become involved:

> *"we have tried to get trustees from the local community. We have two residents on the board, and to me they're the most important because, you know, they've lived there all their lives. And it's to get them engaged. But at first it was quite difficult for them. You know? They were a bit overawed about it. And yet they are the most important people because they should be feeding into the board telling us, you know, what the community needs."*

(CB8, trustee)

Some organisations acknowledged that they did not know how to begin to address the question of diversity; and some appeared to do relatively little in terms of actively reaching out to recruit new volunteers. It was apparent that some community businesses were heavily reliant on word of mouth as their main form of volunteer recruitment, despite the limitations that this was acknowledged to have in terms of who was likely to be reached. One of our cases had recently taken a more pro-active approach through the use of an external volunteer recruitment service and had been pleasantly surprised by the level of response they had received, including from younger, more diverse volunteers.

Succession: More specifically, the issue of succession was raised as a potential risk factor for community businesses that had become particularly reliant on a small number of (super) volunteers, particularly those in governance and/or leadership positions. This was often connected to the issue of diversity, in that there was a particular concern about dependency on a small group of ageing volunteers and the need to ensure effective succession. This "volunteer risk" was identified as a significant issue for organisations:

> *"... I'm not talking about the volunteers that are doing it on day-to-day basis; I'm talking about the trustees. Because, you know, at the end of the day, [we] do a ginormous amount and, you know, if we drop out [...], I don't know what we would [do] [...] So, we don't have a succession, you know, a policy from that point of view. I think that's probably the biggest risk factor, if you like, at the moment."*

(CB5, trustee)

Recruiting volunteers to take roles that encompassed greater levels of responsibility and/or time commitment, such as trustee positions, was felt to be particularly challenging. Indeed, it was suggested that this was increasing as regulatory and funding environments become more challenging and/or as organisations grew and roles became more complex:

> *"So you're asking a lot of people volunteering, taking on those sorts of responsibilities and going back into a situation which they thought they'd left behind. And on top of that, of course, they get involved in all the other activities of running a business like, you know, the HR and the employment issues and the financing issues. So you're asking a lot of volunteers and a lot of people aren't willing to take those sorts of responsibilities on"*

(CB8, trustee)

It was recognised that fear of being over-committed could put people off from getting involved, particularly if they had seen how much existing volunteers put into the organisation. Some felt the need to downplay potential commitment requirements when trying to recruit new volunteers, for fear that it would deter people from getting involved.

Boundaries and burnout: While succession was recognised as an organisational issue, it was closely related to concerns about burnout at an individual/volunteer level. Boundaries were raised as an issue within some community businesses both in terms of the lack of distinction between paid and unpaid roles, but also in terms of how much some people take on. Some volunteers talked about a sense of guilt when they were not able to help out. Volunteers' commitment to an organisation could lead them to take on too much, to put in too many hours, take on too much responsibility, or absorb too much stress and anxiety sometimes at considerable personal cost. It is worth noting, that while this was highlighted in a number of case studies as a concern for 'super volunteers', it was also raised by volunteers about paid staff within one organisation – volunteers felt they needed to step up to help support paid staff who were at risk of exceeding their limits.

Autonomy and control: Subtler concerns were raised by respondents in some of our case studies about the (perceived) level of autonomy and freedom that volunteers have within organisations. In contrast to the concerns about boundaries and burnout raised above, some respondents questioned the reliability of volunteers – if they were not required by contract to turn up, could they be relied upon to do so? The ability of organisations to require them to do anything or to challenge any unfavourable behaviours or viewpoints was also questioned. One person (themselves a volunteer), for example, suggested "the trouble with volunteers is [they] are very fickle", going on to describe how volunteers could easily be pulled into other commitments and responsibilities meaning that "suddenly they're no longer volunteering" and making it hard for organisations to manage.

While the experiences of volunteering were not always unproblematic, for either individual volunteers or for community businesses, the consensus was that the benefits of volunteering far outweighed the costs, and that the challenges could be mitigated through investing in volunteer support and coordination.

Volunteer management practices and experiences

'The Library' found it relatively easy to recruit and manage its volunteers. As a small, community-minded organisation in a pretty suburb of a large city, the library was an attractive place to volunteer. Volunteer shifts were described as "quite basic ... quite easy", with another volunteer saying, "It's really not hard!". Volunteers work four-hour shifts every few weeks, and are responsible for everything that goes on in the library day-to-day: opening up and closing down, checking books in and out, helping members and fielding queries. There are no paid staff at all, but the trustees are only a phone call away if there are any issues.

One of the trustees is tasked with organising the rota, and takes the unofficial role of volunteer coordinator. The rota comes out a few weeks in advance, and is generally kept the same, with this one trustee tasked with finding substitutes if someone is on holiday, and finding short-term replacements if someone is ill. On the rare occasions when there are conflicts between volunteers or clashes of personality, the coordinator will change the rota so specific people don't work together.

Overall, volunteer management is quite hands-off, as it was felt that once the volunteers had some experience, there was not much complexity to the role. There are not that many avenues for doing things differently, and the volunteers reported they were perfectly happy with this: they liked the experience of being able to see the immediate impact of helping people, without the work being hard or lasting beyond one's shift.

In terms of training, volunteers are given a three-hour training session alongside a trustee, with sometimes a second if people need more support. Generally, this leads to a consistent placement but not always. As one trustee put it "when we recruit a volunteer we give them a half-day training session where we can assess them, and they can decide whether it's for them, basically. And we have some who say afterwards, 'No, I don't think it's for me', basically. And we've had, you know, one or two cases where we've said, you know, 'We don't feel you're perhaps suitable – in a nice way'". After that, the volunteers are paired with an experienced volunteer, with extra support on hand in the form of a comprehensive manual, and phone support if needed. None of the volunteers reported ever feeling unable to do the work required, or abandoned by the trustees and coordinators if things went wrong, and felt enough support was there. They were happy with the way things were.

4.2   The outcomes of volunteering

We turn now to consider the outcomes of volunteering in community businesses. Here the focus is more directly on the difference that people said volunteering makes, rather than why they got involved with it in the first place or what they hoped it would achieve. Volunteering was often described as a "win-win", or as a "two-way street", with benefits for both the organisation and the volunteer, reflective of a view of volunteering as mutual exchange, rather than as 'gift relationship'. Indeed, in some cases this was directly built-in to the ways in which community businesses thought of and organised their volunteering: ensuring that volunteers got something in return for helping out. This was recognised by both paid staff and volunteers.

The research identified three key sets of outcomes of volunteering for community businesses:

Financial viability and sustainability: It has been estimated that the financial value of volunteering to community businesses is £210-250 million, or an average of £25,000 a year for every community business (Power to Change, 2020). There was repeated reference to the time and skills that volunteers contributed to community businesses that would otherwise have to be paid for. As a number of respondents pointed out, volunteers contribute directly to the bottom line. This has been made particularly apparent in one of our case studies when they had received a quote for costs to prepare a property that they were vacating for return to the landlord – rather than pay the £60,000 bill for paying someone else to clean and repair the property, they mobilised a team of volunteers instead. Volunteers enabled some organisations to provide more or better services and activities:

> *"It could run without volunteers. But it runs so much better with them. We are, you know, dependent on, really, the good will of the volunteers. Yeah. We could run without it but it wouldn't be the same. It wouldn't be the full offer that we can provide now."*
>
> (CB8, trustee)

For some community businesses, however, it was clear that it would not be financially viable for them to operate without volunteers: they could not afford to pay for staff even if they wanted to. This could be a double-edged sword:

> *"… it's nice to have the volunteers. We rely on them. But it would be ideal if we didn't need to rely on them. We could just have them rather than have to rely on them. That would be better; if we could afford the staff with the volunteers as backup. Instead of volunteers being the mainstay and the staff as backup. It's the wrong way around"*
>
> (CB2, trustee)

This was seen as particularly challenging for larger or more complex community businesses where there was a desire, or a perceived need, to pay someone to take on the responsibility of managing the organisation – a CEO or equivalent – but the business model meant this was not financially viable. In one case, there used to be a paid CEO but when the last one left the decision was made not to replace them and instead the chair had stepped into the position on a voluntary basis: the feeling was that if they had to pay for someone to fulfil the role "it would fold. I'm convinced it would fold. It just couldn't sustain that sort of money".

Community embeddedness: Involving volunteers often helped to embed an organisation within its local community. This was recognised as a positive outcome for new community businesses which were trying to establish themselves in a community, and also for more established organisations which were seeking to re-embed themselves after a period of being relatively detached from the community. Volunteering, for example, was a way to raise the profile of the organisation, to involve the community with the organisation, of ensuring that the community had a say in its development, and building a sense of ownership over and commitment to the organisation. Volunteering could help to ensure it was run by and for the community, helping to build a sense of ownership, and an understanding of the organisation as a "community resource": "if you are standing behind the till and serving people, you know they want to be there and they want to be a part of it, so that's a really nice thing".

It was suggested that residents who used the services of one of our case studies behaved differently because of the involvement of volunteers within the community business – they would view it as a local organisation, made up of local people, doing things for the local community, and would as a result have a different attitude towards its services:

> *"I think that the fact that the library is a voluntary … – you know, is run by volunteers, means that the people who use the library are much less demanding … They're kind of – they're sort of understanding that we're not the experts. That if we can help, we will, but if we can't we're not failing professionally"*
>
> (CB5, volunteer)

Creativity, innovation and dynamism: It was recognised that volunteers brought with them energy, enthusiasm, different ideas, skills, knowledge, perceptions and experiences which all contributed to the creativity and innovation of community businesses. They helped in building more dynamic teams, contributing to a positive work environment for all. By bringing wider perspectives, it was suggested that volunteers help community businesses think beyond the bottom line. Reflecting on what the organisation would be like without its volunteers, one staff member said "it just feels quite sort of barren and soulless", another said:

> *"it's so much better when the volunteers are around and you know, you are sharing all the tasks and obviously it means that everything's done quicker, but you also have like a bit more banter and a little bit more kind of you know, more of an atmosphere and like a sense of community and so we really miss them, like we have really been missing them and we've really, like they are all wanting to come back and we all want them to come back."*

(CB8, staff)

Four sets of outcomes were also identified for the **volunteers themselves**: enjoyment, conviviality, identity and belonging, and wellbeing.

Enjoyment: For many people, volunteering in community businesses was a source of enjoyment. Volunteers talked about being 'happy to volunteer', about their 'love' for it, how 'fantastic' it is, the sense of 'satisfaction', 'interest' and 'enrichment' they felt from being involved, and how 'fun' it was. As one volunteer put it: "I just love it and love doing the work I'm doing, like the people I work with, what more do you want in life?".

Conviviality: Many volunteers benefited from the social connections, interactions, acquaintances and friendships that they gained through volunteering. Some reflected that a particular benefit had been interacting with a more diverse range of people through their volunteering, and how this had helped to 'widen [their] horizons':

> *"… The fact that everybody that's doing it is from a different background, so you may get talking about odd different things […] I wouldn't normally have access to […], and people seem oddly fascinated with what I do and tend to want to talk for hours of what I actually do at work when I am. The same with other people if you like. I enjoy listening to what other people get up to …"*

(CB4, volunteer)

Identity and belonging: For some, volunteering within the community business provided a sense of purpose, belonging and identity: of being part of something bigger. This could relate to the organisation itself, or to the wider community. In part this was due to the social contacts that people made through their volunteering – in the words of one, "walking down the street, I'd see people and they recognise me". It was also a much deeper feeling of connection that came through being engaged and contributing to the development of a sense of ownership. One volunteer talked about how volunteering had led to a sense of "being part of" the community business, which had been "good for the spirit".

Wellbeing: Relating to each of the above sets of outcomes, volunteering within community businesses could contribute to individual (and arguably community) wellbeing. Volunteering kept people active, engaged, connected, mentally stimulated. It structured time with meaningful activity; it "makes you feel good". This seemed particularly important for people who were retired or otherwise not in employment, and for those who otherwise felt isolated, particularly during the pandemic, or who had relatively few close personal contacts living nearby, for example if they had recently moved into a community. Volunteering could encourage people to get out and about, which in itself was beneficial:

> *"I do honestly, genuinely feel so much better when I've been there for the morning or the afternoon or whatever and I come home, from just being outside really and doing something useful, you know."*

(CB8, volunteer)

5. How does being a community business make a difference to volunteering?

Our review of existing literature suggested that volunteering may look and feel different in community businesses compared with certain other settings in which it takes place: that the 'business' aspect makes a difference. So far within this report, our findings about how volunteering is understood and experienced in community businesses are not dissimilar from reports of volunteering in wider voluntary sector settings. We have highlighted the variability of volunteering practices between organisations, rather than focusing on what it is about being a community business in particular which leads to those experiences or variations. After all, community businesses – and therefore our cases studies – are a diverse set of organisations, many of which fit comfortably within broader, more mainstream, definitions of the voluntary sector. In this section, however, we distil points that arose in earlier sections to consider more directly how being a *community business* makes a difference to volunteering.

5.1 Constraints on volunteering in community businesses

There are good reasons to think that volunteering may be limited in more commercially orientated organisations; that a focus on 'the bottom line' of trading, turnover, and surpluses, and associated business practices and procedures, can leave little space for volunteering. This would suggest that volunteering may be constrained within community businesses. We found some evidence to support this idea.

For some community businesses there are direct constraints on volunteering from the regulatory or legislative environment in which they operate. This was highlighted as a particular issue for community transport organisations, for which changes in government legislation over the past decade have effectively ruled out the use of volunteer drivers on contracted transport routes that operate under certain licenses. The legislation aims to reduce the potential for voluntary organisations to 'undercut' commercial providers through using volunteers to cut costs, and therefore constrains the space for volunteering within these organisations. Even on routes where volunteer-drivers were permitted, lengthy training requirements were off-putting. This was identified as a real dilemma for community transport organisations:

> *"... we are not a statutory organisation; we're here because there was a gap in the market to be filled, and the only way it could be filled was by a voluntary sector organisation. And you can dress that differently now and call it a social enterprise and make it more commercial, which I suppose is how I try and describe what we're doing. But, I mean, the true ethos of why we're here, it's about being in the voluntary sector, which by definition requires volunteers. But then government legislation and time will make it more difficult for volunteers to do what they set out to do."*

(CB7, trustee)

Constraints associated with regulation were also raised as an issue for the credit union within our case study sample. Rather than a specific piece of legislation directly ruling out the involvement of volunteers, here the issue was more one of stronger and more prescriptive regulation associated with running credit unions (and other financial institutions) which had increased the level of responsibility and the complexities associated with volunteering positions, especially at board level. This could, as the following respondent argued, "dissuade" people from getting involved:

> *"The regulations over my 20 years in the credit union or whatever, have increased, notched up more and more every year. Particularly in the wake of 2008 when credit unions deemed to be financial institutions … regulations and the time, time consuming"*
>
> **(CB2, trustee)**

As this suggests, alongside direct constraints there can also be indirect constraints on volunteering within community business contexts, not least of which are the issues of time and commitment. The level of responsibility and associated time commitments required of trustees within community businesses was highlighted as a barrier to volunteering across most of our case studies. In the community pub, for example, the board was currently considering changing its operating model to give greater responsibility for running the business to a landlord as the pressure was felt to be too great for the volunteer committee.

More broadly, it was suggested that the "commercial imperatives" that underpinned (some) community businesses could be off putting to (some) volunteers. This was identified as an issue which particularly affected governance positions, as trustees were the group of volunteers who were most likely to be exposed to the commercial pressures and to the responsibilities and tensions that community businesses grappled with around this. Some experienced this as a very personal, moral dilemma about whether or not they should be involved in a voluntary organisation that worked on a commercial basis. It was also identified as an issue for the retention of long-standing volunteers (trustees and frontline) when the organisation was changing in a way which saw a greater emphasis on commercial imperatives – or moving towards a greater emphasis on 'business', rather than 'community'. As some withdrew themselves from such positions, it left others shouldering even more of the burden.

Change and limits on volunteering

'The Community Transport' is a well-established, medium-sized community business, operating in the north of England. It is clear that its purpose is a social one – to tackle isolation, enable independent living and access to services, through providing transport to isolated individuals and communities. It is a volunteer-led organisation. The trustees are all volunteers, and at the time of research the chief executive role was fulfilled by the chair. Paid staff are responsible for managing services and contracts, and most of the drivers are paid.

Beyond the core group of trustees, who bear considerable levels of responsibility, volunteer involvement is minimal. This has not always been the case, but changes in the funding, legislation and regulation surrounding community transport, particularly associated with a shift from grant funding from the local authority to contract funding, have meant that it is difficult to involve volunteers as drivers. Also in response to the changing funding environment, the board took the decision a few years ago to set up a separate trading arm. The hope is that the income generated through the trading arm – which increasingly includes private and event hire – will subsidise the charitable activities of the wider organisation.

The change has been considerable – "the whole nature of the beast has changed so much over the last ten years" – and has not always been easy. Not all of the volunteers were comfortable with the change in direction within the organisation. Some have left because of the increasing levels of complexity and responsibility they were having to deal with or because they didn't "understand the commercial imperatives and don't want to be involved", or because they felt "drawn into situations as a trustee that [they] felt quite uncomfortable with". Some volunteers that remain struggle with the demands and dilemmas their involvement creates for them, but all remain strongly committed to the organisation and its social purpose.

5.2   Enablers of volunteering in community businesses

We also, however, found evidence that certain aspects of community businesses can enable volunteering. Indeed, for some volunteers in some of our case studies, it was the very idea of 'community business' that motivated them to volunteer. Here, the 'business' side of community businesses was not a barrier to volunteering, but a facilitating factor for it: "So for me I'm less motivated by the volunteering by the local kind of community type thing, whereas actually I'm more interested in volunteering because of what [this community business] stands for, the model it's trying to create. It's something, then, I think that then becomes – they become beacons of light in a homogenised landscape". Whereas this volunteer was directly motivated by the business model which underpinned their community business, others were more generally motivated by desire to use their business skills to "do good" in the community, in what was often seen as a pioneering way: "So, I am one of those people in life who does like to help, and I think the other thing that drew me to it was I could see the bigger picture, I could see how it would be beneficial to the area, I could see how it could be picked up and rolled out in lots of other communities".

The very concept of community business could, then, facilitate the recruitment of new volunteers. In some cases, the ethos which unpinned the community business and the associated organisational structures and practices which had been put in place could also facilitate volunteer retention. Governance and leadership structures and practices which enabled volunteers to have a say in the organisation, for example, seemed important in terms of building a sense of competence, autonomy and ownership (or emotional commitment towards the organisation) amongst volunteers which could encourage retention. For some, this was something that distinguished community business from volunteering in other charities or community groups:

> *"... but volunteering for something like a community project, as I see [this community business] is completely different [...] I mean people build up loyalty don't they to a shop like that and it's completely different, trust, competence, you know and you get that loyalty and you feel part of that."*
>
> **(CB1, volunteer)**

As discussed in Section 3, within some community businesses opportunities had deliberately been opened up and effort made to involve more volunteers as a strategy (more or less explicitly stated) to fulfil the 'community' side of the community business, helping to embed the organisation within the community and/or to help build legitimacy and create distinction from other 'businesses'. Here, volunteering was seen as a 'hybridising force' (Rochester et al., 2020) – helping to bring in aspects of the 'community' to what had previously been more 'business-orientated' organisations. At the same time, however, community businesses often looked to volunteers to help fulfil the 'business side': here volunteers were the resource, they made the organisation work and the business viable and sustainable. Sometimes this was explicitly pursued, sometimes implicitly so.

Devolved governance and distributed leadership

'The Book Shop' is a radical bookshop with a cooperative structure and a focus on inspiring social change. A recent change of leadership team has brought a new energy to the organisation and renewed its commitment to its roots in the local community. This was most clearly demonstrated when the organisation relocated recently, with funds raised from within the community to buy the building, volunteers recruited to renovate old and new buildings and do the moving, spaces created within the new building for various community facilities, and a move from being a workers cooperative to a stakeholder cooperative, ensuring more people have a say in how the organisation works through their membership. As one person explained: "in order to sort of honour that commitment from the community, to give them a space to have agency in the running of the business, so that was why we decided to become a multi-stakeholder co-op".

Volunteers are involved throughout the organisation – they sit alongside staff on committees, run working groups, get involved in various front of house and back office activities. The devolved governance and flat leadership structures enable volunteers to have an influence, with the potential to take on more or less responsibility and involvement in the running of the business depending on individual preferences and circumstances. A commitment to inclusivity and empowerment, supportive working practices, and the variety of roles available, helps to ensure they "appeal to people that are interested in equality and having a level playing field", which in turn leads to the inclusion of volunteers "of all abilities and from all backgrounds". Rather than 'business' being a constraint on volunteering, the settled combination of community and business was helping to ensure that "it's complementary rather than contradictory in getting volunteers involved".

5.3 Underlying dimensions

Community business, then, can both enable and constrain volunteering. In this section we bring together the key factors which seemed to make the difference to which way this fell within individual organisations. We identified five, interrelated, dimensions of community business which appeared particularly important:

Policy: The specific policy, funding and regulatory environments within which community businesses operate can be significant dimensions affecting volunteering. As discussed in Section 5.1, these contextual factors can directly and indirectly influence the space available for volunteering in ways which are often beyond the control of individual organisations. They can affect how much volunteering is allowed to take place, and how much people are willing to volunteer. Different types of community businesses are more or less affected by broader policy contexts: the regulatory context of community transport organisations, for example, is particularly constraining for volunteering; while arguably the policy context for libraries is currently enabling for volunteering given its recent emphasis on asset transfer to volunteer-led community groups.

Purpose: The purpose, ethos and values of individual community businesses were influential in shaping volunteering, particularly in terms of the understanding of volunteering, and the approach adopted to organising and supporting volunteers. What matters is not only what the community business' purpose and values are (e.g. being *of* rather than *for* the community, being inclusive, focused on social justice, empowerment and education all appeared to enable volunteering), but also how well defined, mutually-agreed, communicated and settled they were. An organisation's purpose and value can influence the extent of volunteering that takes place, but importantly also the meaning, position and practices of volunteering: whether volunteering was a means to an end for organisations (e.g. a resource, used to deliver services, with volunteers positioned as unpaid workers or employees) or an end in and of itself (e.g. involving volunteers as a direct way of meeting wider organisational objectives, with volunteers positioned as members or service users). The alignment between organisational purpose and value and individual (volunteer) motivations and values was also important, particularly in terms of volunteer retention.

Profit: Business practices, such as trading and making a profit, were not in themselves a deterrent to volunteering; indeed when balanced by a community-orientated purpose, they could be an attraction for volunteers. Further, volunteering was itself a direct contributor to and encouraged for its direct contribution to the financial viability of many community businesses. Too much dependency on volunteers for the viability of the organisation and too much of a focus on the 'bottom line' ("on hard sales" as one person put it), and associated business practices, could, however, be off-putting. When commercial imperatives, or making profit, dominated (i.e. when there is too much emphasis on the 'business' side of community businesses, and this was not off-set by an equal emphasis on 'community') there was less space for volunteering. Illustrative of this point, direct comparisons were made between volunteering in community businesses and volunteering within private sector businesses, within which volunteering was not seen as legitimate, suggesting that it is the 'community' part of community businesses which is important for volunteering. What was motivating the drive for income ("doing it for good, rather than profit"), and where any 'profit' was going were important aspects of this. People emphasised, for example, that it was important to know there was "no one getting rich" off the back of volunteering within community businesses, instead any 'profits' (more comfortably understood as 'surpluses') were being used for the benefit of the community. Community businesses that were not registered charities, with the associated requirement to demonstrate public benefit, needed to evidence their commitment to community, build legitimacy and signal purpose beyond profit in other ways. As one volunteer reflected:

> *"I wouldn't feel happy volunteering in Waterstones [...] I'm sure they are very nice people that run it, but [...] it's not the same, it's not a community it's not the same, run on the same basis. And it will, you know getting back to that exploitation, I don't feel exploited at all at [this community business] because it's something that I want to do ..."*
>
> **(CB1, volunteer)**

People: It is not possible to understand volunteering within community businesses without also knowing who else is involved, and what their relative roles, responsibilities, relationships and positions are. The role, position and meaning of volunteering is shaped by the presence or absence of paid staff, members, investors and/or services users, for example, what their respective roles and responsibilities are and how much blurring there is between them. This in turn is shaped by the organisation's purpose, values and structure. It is people who are recruiting volunteers, and people who are managing them. Good connections and relationships between staff, trustee volunteers and day-to-day volunteers make people want to come back and give their time again. In several of our cases, because the people at the top of the organisation had 'saved' the business in some way, they imbued the ethics of the organisation and its values. Volunteers in turn connected to and respected these colleagues, cementing stronger commitments to the venture. In many cases there are no neat and clear distinctions between these different roles, with the same people occupying multiple positions and/or moving between them over time. Addressing questions about volunteering then leads to wider questions about membership (who is a member, how are members engaged/active, is membership changing, what does membership mean) and the nature of work for community business (including exploring the concepts of affective commitment, emotional labour and burnout) (see Stumbitz et al., 2021).

Power: How governance is structured and enacted and how leadership is distributed is an important dimension shaping volunteering within community businesses. Both affected the extent to which volunteers felt they had a 'stake' or a say within the organisation, which in turn influenced feelings of ownership and commitment. It was apparent, however, that while developing a sense of autonomy, influence and power were important for many volunteers within community businesses, too much power and responsibility could become problematic when it was held amongst too few people and the burden became too great.

Together, these five different dimensions interact to influence the practices and ultimately the outcomes of volunteering: how volunteering was organised, managed and experienced. At times, a lack of attention to volunteering, and a tendency to take it for granted, can mean these wider organisational dynamics have unintended consequences for volunteering and/or individual volunteers. Overall, it was the mix and balance of 'community' and 'business', as reflected through these five dimensions, which was important. As we described in Section 2, for some there was a tension in the combination of community and business. For others there was not. This can affect how settled or unified the understanding of what the organisation is about – whether the different stakeholders within and around community businesses (including volunteers) agree on its purpose and value, for example – and how this is then reflected in organisational structures and practices, which can in turn affect volunteering. Where they are successfully combined, with few tensions, the organisation and volunteering within it has the space to flourish; when kept separate and held in tension it is harder for the organisation and for volunteering to flourish within it.

This is not fixed, but can change over time, which can have an effect on volunteering. As we described earlier, some of our case studies had become more 'business-like' over time, with an increasing proportion of their funding derived from trading and/or contracts, and/or a growing emphasis on 'more professionalised' approaches. Others were moving in a different direction, from a more clearly 'business' approach towards an increased emphasis on and relationship with their local community. This can be influenced by changes in the external operating environment of any community business – the policy, funding, and regulatory context, for example – shifts in which may unsettle the organisation and can directly affect what volunteering is possible. It can also be influenced by internal dynamics, such as new leadership or strategy, which can also affect volunteering. Change can unsettle an organisation's sense of who they are, what they do, and why. All this can have direct and indirect implications for volunteering, affecting understandings of what volunteering is for, how it is organised and supported, who is recruited and retained and ultimately what it contributes to the community business and to the individual volunteers.

Combining financial sustainability with a community ethos

'The Credit Union' is a financially regulated cooperative that provides loans and savings accounts to local residents, who sign up as members for a small fee. Some of these members might not otherwise be able to access credit. Members can vote on major decisions at the annual general meeting and stand for election to its board, all of whom are volunteers. The organisation makes heavy use of volunteers in addition to its small number of part-time staff. It maintains a strong community ethos and interviewees contrasted the organisation to commercial banks, which were less likely to maintain their local physical presence. Providing the more personal, face-to-face service, especially from the volunteers, is central to the ethos of the organisation but allows it to compete with other cheaper lenders. As one person described:

"You wouldn't go into your bank to have a chat – cashier behind the counter and tell her how your week has been or that your husband is poorly or whatever. But with credit union, it is that. People come in to talk to us. They want to tell us about their life; they want to talk to us. We want to know their story. We want to know our members. You're part of our family. We want to – we care about you; we want to know about your issues; we want the friendship."

The Credit Union has to balance its social aims against the need to remain financially viable. Volunteers are integral to the organisation operating at its current scale, both at the frontline and board level. When it has to make business decisions regarding dividends, interest rates, lending decisions, or how far to pursue non-payment, it is understood that it does so as a non-profit and in the interest of its members. Volunteers are willing to give their time because they believe in the community and cooperative ethos of the credit union, but they also understand the credit union needs to be financially sustainable to keep operating: "It has to come down to the business because if we don't get that working and we don't have it working successfully then [it doesn't] exist and there's too much at stake for that not to be going on".

6. Conclusions and implications

6.1   Summing it up

Volunteering is extensive within community businesses. Many are entirely dependent on it: volunteers are the community business. Others rely on it for their financial viability and/or their legitimacy as a community business: a point of distinction from other players within their field. Volunteers provide a much needed resource for community businesses, they help to embed organisations within their local community, and they help to ensure community businesses are dynamic, innovative organisations able to offer personalised activities and services. From the volunteers' perspective, getting involved in community businesses is often an enjoyable and deeply connective experience, uniting people and place through shared interests and a common commitment to the community. Volunteering means more than getting the job done.

Yet the ways in which volunteering is thought about, resourced, and practised vary considerably across community businesses. For some, volunteering was central to both the organisation's resource base and purpose. For others, it was far more marginal. Some paid considerable thought and attention to how they involved and supported volunteers and to what ends; others invested relatively little in their engagement. While for most community businesses and individual volunteers volunteering was a positive experience, for some it created its own challenges for the organisation and represented a considerable burden of responsibility for the volunteer.

Within all the variation and difference, there are some patterns. The practices and outcomes of volunteering are shaped by the configuration of policy, purpose, profit, people and power within community business. The values of an organisation appear to be more important to volunteers than the precise structure or organisational form of an organisation. Volunteers appeared motivated primarily by whether they believed in what the community businesses was trying to achieve. It is not simply the case that the more commercial the operation of the community business the less space there is for volunteering. Far from it. While it can be seen as a tension within organisations – that voluntary labour is being 'used' to make money – we've found the existence of business motivations less off-putting to volunteers than previous research had led us to expect. Volunteers often think of their local community business as a local asset. If the mission is to improve a community, and that involves trading, and volunteers want to improve their community, they may not be in tension after all. It is then how the 'business' and the 'community' parts combine which is important. Tension in the combination of community and business, or a lack of balance between the two, can affect how settled the understanding of what the organisation is about, which in turn affects the understanding, organisation, experience and outcomes of volunteering.

Change is an important dimension for understanding volunteering in community business. Voluntary and community sector organisations and community businesses alike are constantly having to deal with change. At the current time, they are grappling with responding to and recovering from the impacts of the pandemic. But there are also longer-term social developments, and policy changes that have meant that community businesses have had to adapt how they work from their original aspirations and vision. At times, these changes can disillusion volunteers, because the community business isn't quite what they signed up to originally: often with a sense that it has become too commercially orientated, or simply too complex and too much of a responsibility for volunteers to take on. Equally, however, change has at times led to a renewed emphasis on the involvement of volunteers, to new opportunities for volunteers to get involved and have a say in how the community business develops. Here volunteering can itself be a hybridising force – a realisation of the 'community' side of the business. Organisationally, involving volunteers helps financially, but it also helps the organisation think beyond the bottom line, bringing 'a wider perspective' to the organisation.

Of course, volunteers do not operate in isolation within community businesses, and how volunteers interacted with paid staff, members and service users is important. Within this are questions of power and influence. Power relations exist in all organisations and community businesses are no exception. Volunteers work at the top of community businesses (on trustee or management boards for instance) and often set up or 'saved' the organisation for the community in the first place. And volunteers are often doing day-to-day or supplementary tasks. These different forms of volunteering mean there are some occasions when volunteers have huge influence over the strategy of the community business, and some where they have little ability to affect its direction. The extent to which volunteers feel that they have a say within the community business can affect their commitment to the organisation, and the likelihood of them staying involved.

6.2   Implications

Our overall conclusions point towards **eight particular implications of the research findings**. We suggest that the findings urge policy-makers and practitioners interested in the role, meaning and possibilities of volunteering in community businesses to:

1) **Recognise the potential**: Volunteering can offer a lot to community businesses and to individual volunteers. Volunteering adds to the 'business' operations and viability of community businesses, as well as to meeting their 'community' purposes. Volunteers help to fulfil and balance business and community imperatives, and their role as a connecting or 'hybridising force' should be recognised by individual community businesses and those working locally and at a national level to support and shape the policy environment for them. Recognising the potential includes mainstreaming our understanding of the role of volunteers in community businesses. Volunteers make significant contributions to a range of organisations with different levels of trading and commercial orientation – being a (community) business does not in and of itself mitigate against the effective involvement of volunteers. This should be recognised in wider conversations taking place about volunteering at local and national level, which sometimes assume that volunteering only happens in informal associations, charities or public sector bodies.

2) **Invest more**: It is worth paying more attention to volunteering within community business, and investing more time, support and resources to help community businesses in realising the potential of volunteers. This does not and should not mean adopting a more formalised or formulaic approach. We have observed a range of operating models, different balances of staff and volunteers, and different ways of organising and supporting volunteering. There is no one 'best model' and while volunteers bring many strengths, there are also risks and challenges, which need to be acknowledged and worked through. Volunteering and community businesses are far too diverse for one size to fit all.

3) **Ask why**: We are too used to thinking about why individuals volunteer, perhaps as a way of encouraging more people to get involved. The emphasis on volunteer motivation leads us to adapt volunteering opportunities accordingly. But it is also crucially important to think about why organisations want to involve volunteers. Community businesses have different understandings of what volunteering is and what it can offer to their work and purpose, and this suggests the need for sensitive and context-specific approaches to volunteer involvement and management.

4) **Distribute leadership**: Volunteers can play an essential part of what it means to be a community business, in terms of its 'business' and 'community' aspects alike. Volunteers are involved at multiple levels – governance, management and delivery – and while the line between them can be blurred, it is clear that in many cases volunteers are providing the leadership and strategic direction of community businesses and provide one of their key defining links back to the community. This involves recognising that they are part of the collective leadership of community businesses, of making things happen. Distributed leadership involving volunteers involves sharing responsibility across community businesses, acknowledging that they are ambassadors for the organisation as well as contributing to the day-to-day work and activities.

5) **Take care**: Volunteering can take a lot out of volunteers, especially those with high levels of responsibility and the 'super volunteers' who give so much of themselves to community businesses and can be what makes a community business possible in the first place. There is a collective responsibility to understand how the sheer effort of being involved in the work is shared, to ensure that people are not over-burdened, and that community businesses do not becoming overly reliant on one or two individuals. Further attention and support is needed specifically for volunteers who become central to the governance, strategic direction and sustainability of community businesses. Effort at a national level is required to develop a better understanding of 'super volunteers' and the reliance of community businesses on them and the subsequent development of support for community businesses in their involvement. It could also offer support and guidance to those looking to start new ventures or take over assets and run them as community businesses to make sure people are aware of the hours involved and the myriad amount of tasks they will need to learn. It also requires effort within individual community businesses, to ensure that those involved take care of each other while also taking care of the organisation.

6) **Look for balance**: Our research draws attention to the importance of several balancing acts involving volunteers: around appropriate levels of responsibility, autonomy, power and burden; between formal and informal approaches to management; and in building a sense of enduring commitment with appropriate limits. Understanding these balancing acts will help to avoid misreading everyday challenges as unwelcome conflicts, or of downplaying them in favour of an unduly positive and unrealistic view of volunteering as without challenges.

7) **Enable pathways**: Recognising the complexity and fluidity of how community businesses operate involves appreciating the multiple and flexible ways in which volunteers are engaged across organisations. Flexibility can be supported by community businesses enabling different pathways and trajectories of participation. It would allow people to move between different roles and responsibilities, and also to facilitate volunteers stepping up as desired, but also stepping back. This idea suggests the need for long-term planning for and leadership of volunteering within (and potentially across) community businesses, supporting succession to key roles, and thinking beyond the recruitment of volunteers to fulfil specific roles as and when needed.

8) **Acknowledge the risk**: Volunteering is an essential component of how community businesses operate, including their bottom line financial viability. This idea can create twin risks. First, that those involved in promoting and supporting community businesses may expect too much of them as the 'solution' to a range of challenges found in many local communities, such as widespread disadvantage and poor access to amenities. There isn't always going to be enough money, time and skill locally to make a community business a success. Second, celebrating the contribution of volunteers could create taken-for-granted assumptions about their role as a resource, effectively as low-cost labour, without which community businesses simply could not function. This is not, however, a necessary, automatic or singular feature of community businesses, and it defies a simple judgement as either a good or bad thing. Volunteers are more than a resource – they contribute in many different ways to community businesses, above and beyond a net wage equivalent calculation of financial value. The role of volunteers in supporting community businesses, however, in making both 'business' and the 'community' faces work, raises important questions about the financial and service models of community businesses and the place of volunteering within them.

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Appendix: Research methods

The study was carried out between July 2020 and June 2021. It was conducted in accordance with the research ethics processes of Sheffield Hallam University. The research was undertaken in five stages:

1. **Literature review**: We undertook a rapid evidence assessment, bringing together and reviewing literature on community businesses, volunteering and organisational hybridity. The purpose was to gather together and synthesise findings from existing relevant academic, policy and practice literature to inform the subsequent stages of the research. The overall conclusions from the literature review are discussed in a short blog.

2. **Recruitment survey**: We sent a short questionnaire to more than 100 community businesses who had previously expressed an interest in being involved in Power to Change-funded research on volunteering. The survey asked basic questions about the community business, including type, location and age data, and also questions about size (in terms of number of staff, number of volunteers and turnover), the extent to which turnover came from trading, and a qualitative judgement from the respondents as to how central volunteering was to their day-to-day work. We received 59 responses, and from that sample eight case study organisations were selected.

3. **Case studies**: Eight case studies were chosen according to a 2x2 framework emanating from our literature review: on one scale, community businesses which made a high percentage of their turnover from trading and those that did not, against those that felt volunteering was central to their organisation, against those that felt it was less central. These four quadrants (high trading, high volunteering; high trading, low volunteering; low trading, high volunteering; low trading, low volunteering) provided a framework for how to select cases, and we chose two community businesses which fitted each quadrant.

The final case selection was based on recruiting a diverse group of eight organisations, by type (a pub, a book shop, a credit union, for example), organisations that were of different ages, and organisations from across different regions of England. While a sample of eight community businesses cannot be representative (in a statistical sense) of the wider population of community businesses, the aim was to achieve a good range of community businesses and to ensure as far as possible that there were no obvious major gaps in the sample (for example, we avoided the situation where all eight case studies were very large community businesses).

Contact was made with senior leaders at each of the selected community businesses, who then helped us access participants, such as senior managers, paid staff, volunteer managers and a variety of volunteers. These interviews with key participants provided insight into each community business' developmental story, the role of different kinds of volunteer, and questions around meaning, practice and coordination of volunteers. Due to restrictions associated with COVID-19, interviews and focus groups were conducted through online video software, and then professionally transcribed. Overall, 55 individual interviews, and 4 small focus groups with 11 participants in total, were conducted, meaning we spoke to 66 people across our eight cases. Interviews and focus groups generally lasted around 40–60 minutes, although some were substantially longer.

4. **Analysis**: Once all the data was collected, the research team conducted analysis of the key ideas emerging from the data, using framework analysis (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994), in line with the research questions. We first conducted 'within case' analysis, considering the research findings from each individual case study, combining and contrasting views from within each of the cases. We then conducted 'cross-case' analysis, focused on identifying areas of similarity and difference between the cases.

5. **Verification**: Towards the final stages of data analysis we hosted a verification workshop online, bringing together representatives from case study organisations and other key stakeholders (including some who had completed the recruitment survey but had not been selected as a case study) to discuss the emerging findings and their implications. The workshop involved the discussion of what we had found, and how it resonated with workshop participants; the implications of the findings; and what they thought should happen in the light of the findings.