



Volunteer engagement & shop staff wellbeing - ideas for engaging your teams whilst charity shops are closed due to COVID-19

Introduction

This document has been prepared by Daniel O'Driscoll from [Engagement Consultancy](#), and Vicki Burnett & Jayne Cartwright from the [Charity Retail Consultancy](#) with input from the [Charity Retail Association Discussion Group](#) on LinkedIn.

Together we have brought together ideas for you to help ensure your volunteer teams remain engaged through the shop closures - and what to think about when planning and implementing communication strategies.

If you are furloughing your staff, we recommend that you consult the **Charity Retail Association (CRA)** [Coronavirus Guidance](#) to ensure that anything you do complies with regulations surrounding this scheme before making any firm plans which involve your paid staff. If you are not already members of the CRA, you can join [here](#).

Wellbeing & mental health

These are difficult times for everyone and it is highly likely some of your team will be worried, anxious or depressed. Some volunteers will already have their own mental health issues, and volunteering, with the structure and support it can bring, may have helped them to manage symptoms. With that opportunity no longer available, this can be a vulnerable time for people. It is important to take this into consideration when asking your staff to keep in touch with and support their volunteer teams. The points below provide suggestions as to what to consider and how to ensure your staff and volunteers are supported whilst the shops are closed.

Consider the impact for some of not being able to volunteer during this period. What can support for these people look like? More than ever, having provision for mental health and wellbeing to support shop teams will be at the forefront of helping volunteers and staff. Think about how the team will manage the impact on vulnerable volunteers who might have poor mental health and/or dementia or who rely on the routine of coming to the shop regularly.

Where and how does your organisation draw the line to make sure staff are not feeling overly responsible for these volunteers - and how are they (the staff AND the volunteers) supported by the charity?

Having a clear and defined process for what to do if you are worried - either about yourself or someone else - will help staff and volunteers know where to turn. Ensure safeguarding is considered throughout this process.

If there are any vulnerable volunteers in your shops e.g. those who live alone or have health issues, your charity may be their only contact. If your staff are furloughed then it may be wise to ask them to share this information with you to ensure the volunteer doesn't fall through the

net. It is important, however, to be mindful of privacy and manage this within your organisation's guidelines.

Be prepared for and open to information about volunteers and staff who may be struggling to come from different sources, e.g. from work friendship groups/peer groups.

Provide volunteers and those who are keeping in touch with them with a list of organisations who offer emotional and wellbeing support such as Mind or The Samaritans, so people have somewhere to turn or can signpost others (Links to some of these organisations are at the bottom of this document).

Investigate offering online Mental Health First Aid training to your teams who are supporting volunteers. (The Government have confirmed it is acceptable to offer training to furloughed staff).

Make wellbeing resources readily available to all volunteers via an easily and widely accessible intranet or your charity's website.

Share ideas such as desk yoga, and mindful moments.

Take care of your own mental health and wellbeing - looking after yourself means you will be better equipped to look after your team.

Communication and engagement

The reason for keeping in touch with your volunteers is that you want to make sure that they are communicated to, that they can access support from your charity, but ultimately that you care for them and that you want to keep your volunteers engaged during this really uncertain period. When shops reopen, volunteers will be more important than ever and not take for granted that volunteers and supporters will just revert back to how it was before. Keeping them engaged will be key.

Having a communication plan

Are you able to coordinate and join up with internal teams on how you are communicating? Some of your shop volunteers will also be fundraisers in your charity, or campaigners or have other voluntary roles. If they are getting different comms from different departments, that isn't joined up then that can have mixed messages. If one department is communicating well with their volunteers but shops aren't getting the same level of support then how does that look?

Having a structured, joined up approach to communicating with volunteers and supporters will be essential. NCVO has a helpful resource which you can access <https://knowhow.ncvo.org.uk/campaigns/communications/communications-strategy>

Visible leadership from senior staff

Your staff will be communicated to during this crisis, but there can be a disconnect with those messages getting through to your volunteers. Can your senior leaders, Heads of Retail, Trading Directors send out messages to your volunteers? One way this could happen is through video messages. Can your senior team send out a short video to volunteers telling them that they haven't been forgotten, that you're looking forward to seeing them again in person and if they want to get in contact sharing the ways in which they can do that.

How do volunteers want to be contacted during this period when shops are closed?

Can your Shop Managers make contact with your volunteers and ask how they would like to be contacted while shops are closed? If your Shop Managers are not able to make contact because they have been furloughed or are unwell, then what other resource internally do you have to make contact with volunteers?

Use your website

Using your website to create a dedicated page and a single source of information to communicate updates on COVID-19 in relation to your charity. Update that with what you are doing and what support you might need, how volunteers and supporters can keep in touch. You may decide to create a weekly / monthly email that volunteers and supporters can sign up to, so they can have information sent to them directly.

Phone contact

For on-going phone contact with volunteers, some charities have redeployed staff from other areas of the business e.g. street fundraisers, to contact volunteers directly to offer a friendly voice at the end of the phone. This could be especially important for any vulnerable volunteers or volunteers who are currently self-isolating.

Can you support your volunteers to start informal ring arounds between volunteers to offer support and a friendly voice at the end of the phone? Volunteers may already be in contact with each other, but having some coordination could help to make sure some volunteers don't fall between the gaps.

Groups, forums and videos

Set up a volunteer email group to keep volunteers updated on what is happening in your charity. Direct your volunteers to the single source of information on your website. Setting up an internal forum or extending an invitation for volunteers to join. You may already have an internal group on your intranet, or you might use Facebook workplace. But what existing groups do you have that volunteers could join and be part of? A local extension of this will be to have WhatsApp / Facebook groups that volunteers can join and connect with each other.

To keep that local connection and interaction with your volunteers, can your regional teams, Area Managers, Heads of Department record a short video message to send out to their volunteers? During shop closures, showing that you care and want to hear from volunteers will go a long way.

Have a regional, area conference / video call with your volunteers. Giving the option to dial into a weekly call where they can connect with staff, ask questions and get support. At the moment staff and teams will be having those calls with each other, so can this be extended to volunteers or create a specific call for them to join.

If you don't have full contact details for all your volunteers, social media can be a big help – and reaching out to fellow shift members to ask those whose contact details aren't available to get in touch. Using existing shop Facebook pages or setting up new ones can be a great way to keep in touch. Are you able to empower your teams to do this for themselves?

Online training

Refresher / online training for volunteers. With volunteers at home, this will be a good opportunity to do some refresher training with them or if you have the facility to send out some internal training to volunteers.

When shops re-open, if your volunteers have completed training or have upskilled in another section (books, high value items, online selling) then that will be a benefit for your shop. If individuals are eligible, Derby College runs free training courses for shop volunteers. Some of these have moved online now. You can get in touch with Lisa Ede who coordinates the courses. Lisa.Ede@derby-college.ac.uk

Keeping the team spirit alive

Can you arrange a virtual shop visit with your team or a shop meeting? Setting up a video call with your volunteers and Shop Manager to have a coffee and cake might be a really good way to keep connected and engaged. You also get to eat some cake!

Organise a team quiz or a coffee morning. Having that human connection during this will be vitally important and keeping that team spirit going will be essential. Volunteers can take the lead in organising this and setting up the meeting. Be mindful of volunteers who aren't able to join virtually so consider other ways you can do this.

Are you able to celebrate any volunteer milestones (length of service) or your volunteer's birthday? What would you do if the shop was open and how can you still celebrate and make that occasion virtual?

Don't just focus on your favourite shops. It would be easy to call and get in touch with those shops that you have a close relationship with as it's easy. Call and get in touch with those shops that you aren't as close with and use it as an opportunity to get to know the team better.

Look at what other organisations are doing on their social media accounts. Use those good ideas for your charity. One such idea is showcasing your team or celebrating a birthday.
<https://twitter.com/OxfamCastleSt/status/1243497698126372864>
<https://twitter.com/OxfamCastleSt/status/1243945728105426944>

Encourage your shops to share their good news stories on their social accounts. Some of these might be older stories, or can you ask your volunteers to record themselves talking about their volunteering, why they joined and that they are looking forward to coming back.

You could do a short interview with your volunteers or a Q&A or get them to talk about what they did before volunteering in your shop. You can get really creative and put out some great content.

Teams could hold upcycling/crafting/poetry activities from home and encourage everyone to check in on each other's progress (over the phone/via social networks etc). The physical crafting side will keep people busy and be a helpful distraction from current events – also it gives a positive topic to call about and ideas and patterns can be shared online. You could also use this as an opportunity for the team to create props for future window displays or items to sell in the shops when you reopen.

Links

Further advice, help and information can be found via these links:

Mental Health & Wellbeing

[The Samaritans](#)

[Mind – The mental health charity](#)

[The Retail Trust](#) - CRA members have free access to their services

[UK Government Guidance](#)

To connect with sector colleagues

[Charity Retail Association Discussion Group](#) – via LinkedIn, with live discussion every Monday, Wednesday and Friday between 1pm and 2pm

[Charity Shop Visual Merchandising & Display](#) – Facebook Group showing examples of great visual merchandising and general charity shop chat

Volunteering advice & information

[NCVO – National Council for Voluntary Organisations](#)

[Volunteering England](#)

[Volunteer Scotland](#)

[Volunteering Wales](#)

[Volunteer Ireland](#)

Free Virtual Meeting Apps

[Zoom](#) – Video conferencing

[Google Hangouts](#) – Video Conferencing from Google

[WhatsApp](#) – Text, phone and video groups

[WhyPay](#) – Telephone conferencing

About us & contact details

[The Charity Retail Consultancy](#)

Voted Supplier of the Year 2019 in the Charity Retail Awards, we provide a range of services to support charities and other not-for-profits to make the very most from their retail and trading operations.

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[Engagement Consultancy](#)

We specialise in strategic planning, audience engagement, learning and development, and interim resourcing services. Focusing on volunteering, staff and supporters in the not for profit sector Dan works with all organisations of any size.

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