Causal Connections: Secondary Data Analyses of the Links Between Volunteering and Social Cohesion in the UK

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Executive Summary

This report presents findings from analyses of three large-scale surveys assessing the relationship between social cohesion and volunteering, and the factors that may encourage or hinder them. The three surveys cover a combined total of approximately 77,000 respondents and cover time periods from 2014-2021. Key findings are:

- **Types of cohesion.** Different forms of social cohesion have different relationships with volunteering. Horizontal cohesion (cohesion within society) has a bidirectional relationship with volunteering. Volunteering is associated with subsequently greater feelings of cohesion and greater cohesion is associated with a subsequently higher likelihood of volunteering. Vertical cohesion (cohesion with the state) has a unidirectional relationship with volunteering. Volunteering is associated with subsequent feelings of cohesion, but initial feelings of vertical cohesion do not anticipate higher volunteering.

- **Levels of social cohesion.** Levels of cohesion differed significantly between different places (locations) and there was also substantial variation in feelings of cohesion amongst individuals within any given place. The relationship between social cohesion and volunteering tended to be uniform and stable between different locations. However, more granular levels of locality (i.e., local authority districts) showed more variability across locations than larger geographic areas (e.g., regions).

- **Demographic differences**. There was no consistent evidence for differences in rates of volunteering based on gender, age, faith, ethnicity, or disability. Whilst these differences were present in data from some surveys, they were absent in others. Moreover, even within the same survey over time some demographic differences were present in some time points but were absent at other time points.

- **Barriers to volunteering.** Time constraints were the most frequently cited barrier to volunteering, particularly external work commitments or childcare. Data also suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic inhibited or prevented some forms of volunteering, as people limited their social contact.

- **Types of volunteering.** Different forms of volunteering had different strengths of relationship with social cohesion. Although both formal and informal volunteering had a significant positive impact on cohesion, formal volunteering had a larger impact. Different domains of volunteering affected feelings of social cohesion differently. For example, people who volunteered to support others (related to improving their local neighbourhood) reported higher levels of social cohesion. However, people who volunteered in areas related to harm prevention (animal welfare or reducing prejudice and discrimination) reported lower levels of social cohesion.

Introduction and Overview

Volunteering behaviours are a key component of community support networks. The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the importance of volunteers in maintaining these community support networks, with 12.4 million adults volunteering during the pandemic (Talk Together, 2021). In addition to driving community networks, volunteering may also help to solidify and uphold the relationships between and within communities. Some research suggests that volunteers feel a greater sense of social cohesion with their community (Lalot et al., 2022; Zischka, 2019), particularly when the motivation to volunteer is driven by prosocial reasons. However, this relationship between volunteering and social cohesion is often blurred by inconsistent conceptualisations of both volunteering and social cohesion. For example, volunteering is often considered in both formal (e.g., volunteering on behalf of an established organisation) and informal (e.g., helping behaviours, such as shopping for a neighbour) formats, and many definitions of social cohesion include volunteering as a component part of the concept of cohesion (Dickes & Valentova, 2012). Such definitions create ambiguity around the causal relationship between volunteering and social cohesion, and consequently there has been little analysis of empirical evidence directly testing this relationship.

This report aims to explore what, if any, relationship may exist between social cohesion and volunteering, as well as the factors that may encourage or hinder each. Specifically, the report addresses five key questions:

- What, if any, is the relationship between volunteering and social cohesion, and if a relationship does exist which aspect comes first?
- What effect does place have on volunteering, social cohesion, and the relationship between them?
- What are the barriers to volunteering: which groups of people are more or less likely to volunteer?
- What forms of volunteering most impact social cohesion?
- How does age, life stage, ethnicity, faith, disability, personal circumstances influence the kind of volunteering people do?

To address these questions, we searched for candidate datasets that contained relevant measures on social cohesion and volunteering. A full list of those explored is provided in Table 1. As can be seen, only a limited set of these were suitable for analysis. In some cases datasets only contained measures relating to one of the constructs (either social cohesion or volunteering). Of those that included both social cohesion and volunteering measures, only a smaller subset examined these constructs longitudinally.

The dearth of longitudinal datasets limits how far we can generalise our conclusions about causal relationships that might exist between cohesion and volunteering. Nonetheless, the data sets we were able to use are quite substantial in terms of geographical coverage and sample sizes, and therefore allow some confidence about the relevance and applicability of the findings to the UK as a whole.

We divide our analyses into two sections. First, because it is the only dataset with comprehensive measurement, we analyse data from the Beyond Us and Them (BU&T) project. The BU&T project, led by Belong and the University of Kent, and funded by the Nuffield Foundation, was a large scale longitudinal social survey conducted between 2020 and 2021, which featured measures of both social cohesion and volunteering. Given its

relevance and completeness the BU&T data provided both a starting point and comparison framework for examining the central questions for this report.

We then turn to wider datasets that are partially suitable, but may not have been longitudinal in nature, such as data from the Understanding Society and the Community Life surveys. These partially appropriate datasets help us to assess whether findings from the BU&T data are echoed across other datasets.

Table 1. Data Sources Considered for Analysis

DATA SOURCE	Study Design	Includes Social Cohesion Measures	Incudes Volunteering Measures	Suitability
BEYOND US AND THEM	Longitudinal	x	x	Suitable for Analysis
UNDERSTANDING SOCIETY	Longitudinal	x	x	Partial Suitability - Social cohesion and volunteering are measured in alternative waves
MORE IN COMMON	Cross-Sectional	x	x	Partial Suitability - Only cross-sectional data
COMMUNITY LIFE SURVEY	Cross-Sectional	x	x	Partial Suitability - Only cross-sectional data
ROYAL VOLUNTARY SERVICE	Longitudinal	x	x	Partial Suitability - Longitudinal but only 2 wave, and measures not available at both time points
RESPOND, RECOVER, RESET (NTU/NCVO)	Longitudinal		x	Not Suitable - Only volunteering measures
TALK TOGETHER	Cross-Sectional	x	x	Partial Suitability - Only cross-sectional data
TIME WELL SPENT (NCVO)	Cross-Sectional		x	Not Suitable - Only volunteering measures
ENGLISH LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF AGEING	Longitudinal			Not Suitable - No relevant measures
MILLENNIUM COHORT STUDY	Longitudinal	x[1]	x	Partial Suitability - Cohort study restricts sample to young adults
NATIONAL CHILD DEVELOPMENT STUDY	Longitudinal	x[1]	x	Partial Suitability - Cohort study restricts sample to over 60's
NEXT STEPS	Longitudinal	x[1]	x	Partial Suitability - Cohort study restricts sample to participants aged 30

[1] Only limited social cohesion measures are available, restricted to social trust and social provisions.

Analysis of Beyond Us and Them Data

The Beyond Us and Them data were collected as part of a longitudinal survey that ran from 2020 to 2021 and had eight waves of data collection. The questions in the survey differed slightly between some waves. We identified waves 6, 7, and 8 as containing the most consistent set of measures relating to social cohesion and volunteering and which would allow a comparable analysis across time. Wave 6 was collected in December 2020, wave 7 in March 2021, and wave 8 in June 2021. The following sections detail the analysis of the BU&T data for waves 6, 7, and 8.

Identifying a Social Cohesion Measure

There is a lack of a widely accepted definition and conceptualisation of social cohesion in the literature. Models of social cohesion vary across several dimensions, including the component parts of social cohesion and the level at which cohesion exists (e.g., neighbourhood, national etc.). Thus, before proceeding with further analysis a working operationalisation of social cohesion was tested using the Beyond Us and Them data.

For the purpose of this report, we adopted Chan et al.'s (2006) model of social cohesion, which positions cohesion as existing as a two-by-two framework comprised of two dimensions; horizontal and vertical (i.e., cohesion within society vs. cohesion with the state) and two components (subjective vs. objective). Based on the available data collected via the Beyond Us and Them project, we focussed specifically on the subjective component, which is primarily concerned with individual's perceptions and feelings of cohesion rather than more behavioural indicators (e.g., political participation).

The **horizontal cohesion** component of Chan et al.'s (2006) model comprises three core features that define social cohesion: a general trust in others, a willingness to cooperate and help others (including people from "other" social groups), and a sense of belonging or identity. From the Beyond Us and Them data we identified three measures that approximately captured these three components of social cohesion:

Neighbourliness: The neighbourliness scale consisted of three items measured from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much so): 'How much do you feel that you belong to your neighbourhood?'; 'Would you say that most people in your neighbourhood can be trusted?'; and, 'How much do you feel a responsibility to try to improve your neighbourhood?'.

Local Identity: The local identity scale consisted of two items measured from 1 (None at all) to 5 (A great deal): 'I feel personally connected to [local area]' and 'I feel like I belong in [local area]'. For each item, participants were asked about identification with their local neighbourhood which was self-selected by the participant.

Tolerance Towards Others: To capture participants' general tolerance of people from other social groups, several feeling thermometer items were utilised to create a general index of tolerance. These items asked participants to rate how they felt towards several different groups from 1 (Very cold feeling) to 11 (Very warm feeling). The full list of groups that were present in all of the waves examined were: wealthy people, poor people, older people, young people, legal immigrants, asylum seekers, black people, Muslim people, seasonal workers, and illegal immigrants. Importantly, the design of the survey questionnaires meant that participants were not asked about all groups and instead were randomly shown one of two blocks of groups. Consequently, we created a standardised score of the average rating

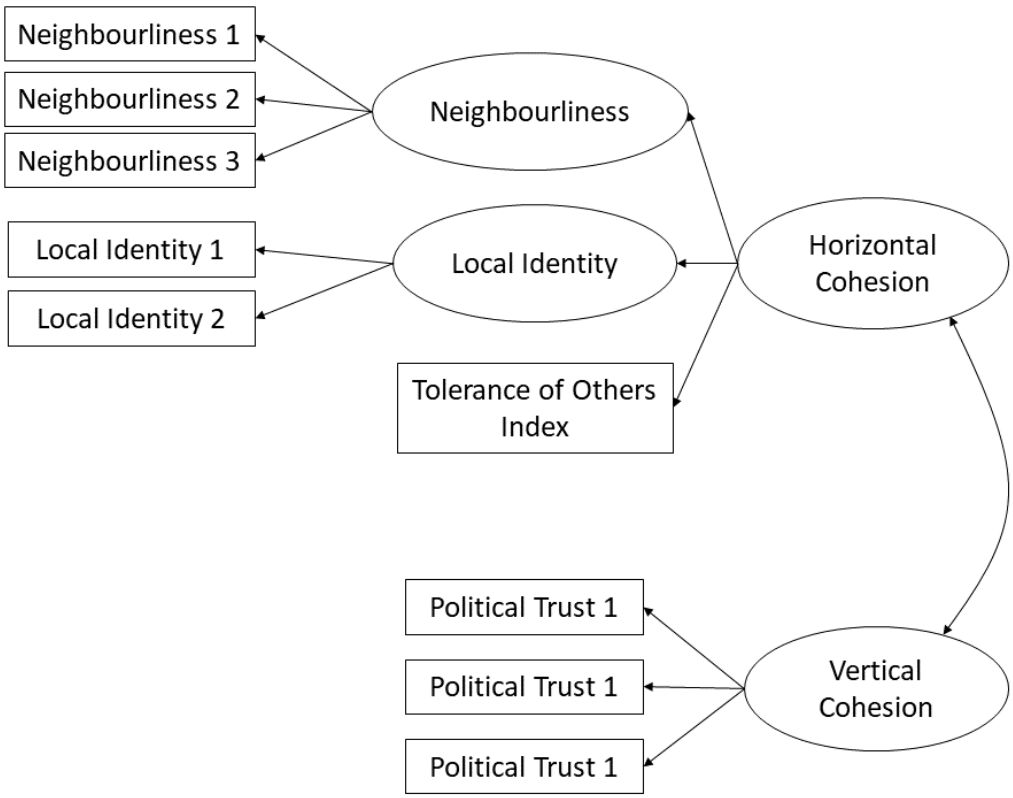
participants had given to the groups in their block, such that the score represented a participant's general tolerance towards different social groups relative to other participants who viewed the same block of questions as them.

The **vertical cohesion** component of the model comprises both trust in public figures and confidence in political or social institutions. From the measures available in the BU&T data, we identified only one set of items that captured these aspects of vertical cohesion:

Political Trust: Political trust consisted of three items measured from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree): 'Politicians are mainly in politics for their own benefit and not for the benefit of the community' (Reverse coded); 'Most members of the UK Parliament are honest'; and 'I trust my local member of parliament to represent the interests of all communities across the constituency'.

These measures were structured into the social cohesion model shown in Figure 1. The three horizontal cohesion measures (neighbourliness, local identity, and tolerance of others) were additionally loaded onto a higher order Horizontal Cohesion construct.

Figure 1. Measurement Model for Horizontal and Vertical Cohesion



To assess the robustness of this model as a measure of social cohesion we conducted a series of tests to establish factor structure and measurement invariance. Full details of these analyses are reported in the supplementary technical document to this report. In sum, a confirmatory factor analysis suggested that horizontal cohesion is comprised of three components relating to neighbourliness, trust in others, and tolerance of people from other

social groups. Vertical cohesion was comprised of just one component that assessed political trust.

The general structure of these social cohesion constructs was consistent across time (i.e., the components that made up horizontal and vertical cohesion were consistent). However, the representativeness of items of their relevant factors changed across time (e.g., at some waves one item of neighbourliness might have been a stronger indicator of overall neighbourliness than others, but a different item might have been a stronger indicator at a different wave).

Cross-Sectional Statistical Relationships

What Forms of Volunteering Most Impact Social Cohesion?

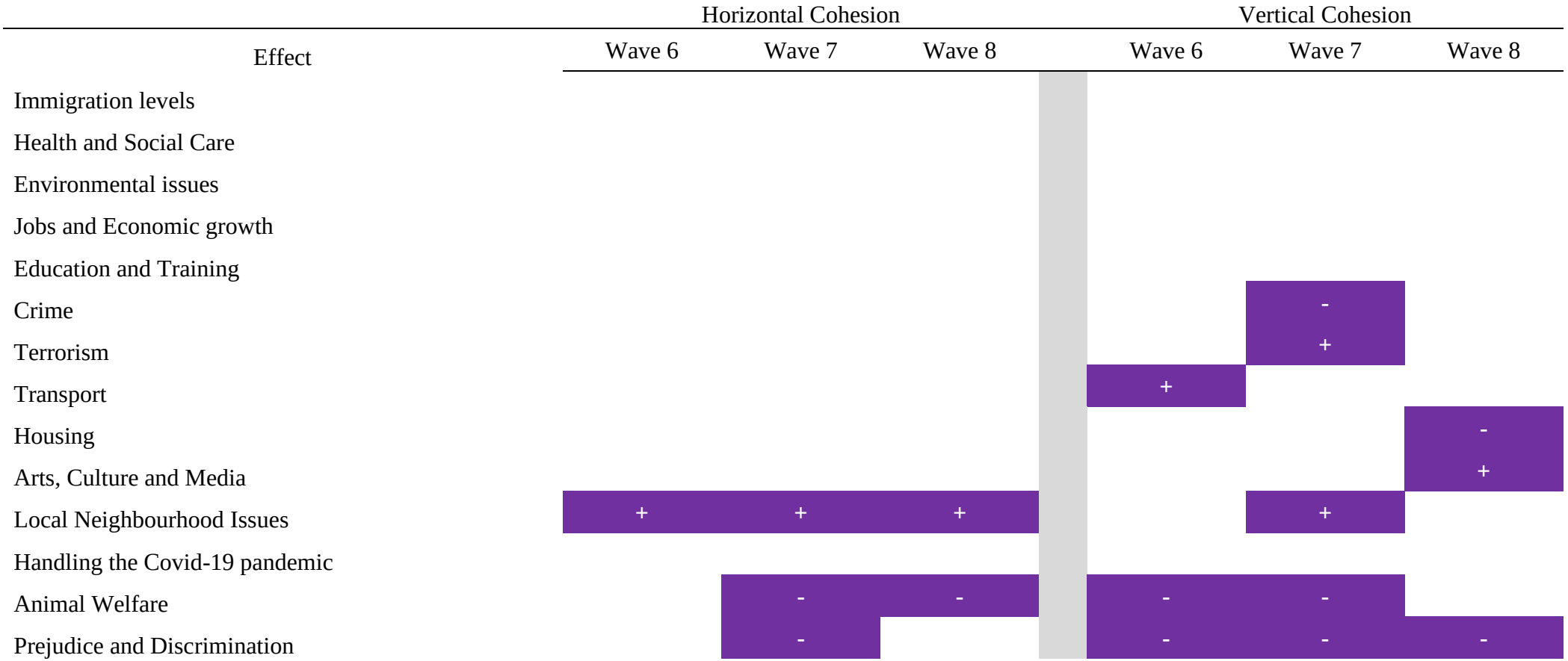
The literature often distinguishes between formal and informal methods of volunteering (Pearce & Kristjansson, 2019), which would seem a suitable dichotomy to apply when assessing how different forms of volunteering impact social cohesion. Unfortunately, not all waves in the Beyond Us and Them dataset included measures of both formal versus informal volunteering. However, all waves did assess the different domains (types and ways) in which people volunteered, such as environmental issues, crime, local neighbourhood issues, or health and social care. To assess whether these different domains of volunteering impacted social cohesion, we conducted several regression models within waves 6, 7, and 8.

Table 2 shows which domains of volunteering had a significant effect on horizontal cohesion and vertical cohesion across the three waves of the study. The full coefficients (relative strength of relationship) for each regression model are provided in the technical document.

Individually, most of the domains of volunteering were not significantly related to either horizontal or vertical cohesion. Those that were did so inconsistently across the three waves. The most consistent patterns in the evidence were as follows. Horizontal cohesion was consistently and significantly related to volunteering related to local neighbourhood issues across waves. Specifically, those who volunteered in local neighbourhood issues reported higher levels of social cohesion. It was negatively related to volunteering in domains related to animal welfare and prejudice and discrimination across waves 7 and 8, though unrelated in wave 6. Vertical cohesion was significantly positively related to neighbourhood volunteering in wave 7 but not in waves 6 or 8. However it was significantly negatively related to volunteering in the domains of prejudice and discrimination across all three waves, and to volunteering in animal welfare in waves 6 and 7, but not wave 8. The remaining effects were either non-significant or were inconsistent across the three waves.

Overall, horizontal cohesion was only positively related to volunteering in domains related to local neighbourhood issues, and to a lesser extent was negatively related to volunteering in domains related to animal welfare and reducing prejudice and discrimination (that is, volunteering in these domains was related to lower levels of horizontal cohesion). Vertical cohesion was negatively related to reducing prejudice and discrimination and to animal welfare domains, although this association was only found in waves 6 and 7 for the latter.

Table 2. Significant Regression Effects for Different Domains of Volunteering on Social Cohesion



Note: + positive association, - negative association

The Effect of Place

To assess the effect of place on the relationship between social cohesion and volunteering we conducted multilevel models for each wave of analysis. These multilevel models partition the variance of social cohesion into two components: within-group variability (i.e., the extent to which variation in scores is due to differences between individuals) and between-group variability (i.e., the extent to which variance in scores is due to differences between locations). To appropriately assess the impact of place, we limited the data to participants based within the Greater London Authority (GLA) and used London boroughs as our grouping variable. Due to the complexity and identification issues with conducting multilevel models using structural equation modelling with a binary variable (volunteering), we instead created horizontal and vertical cohesion factor scores using the above CFA model. As these models were conducted cross-sectionally, they do not allow conclusions to be drawn on the causal relationship between cohesion and volunteering (see the following section for this), but primarily assess the impact of place on the general relationship between cohesion and volunteering. Nonetheless, as a stable and external factor, place can be argued to be causally prior to the particular individuals within a place. For ease of interpretation, we statistically position volunteering as the independent variable and cohesion as the dependent variable (which avoids the use of a logistic multilevel model and the difficulties with interpreting odds and odds ratios).

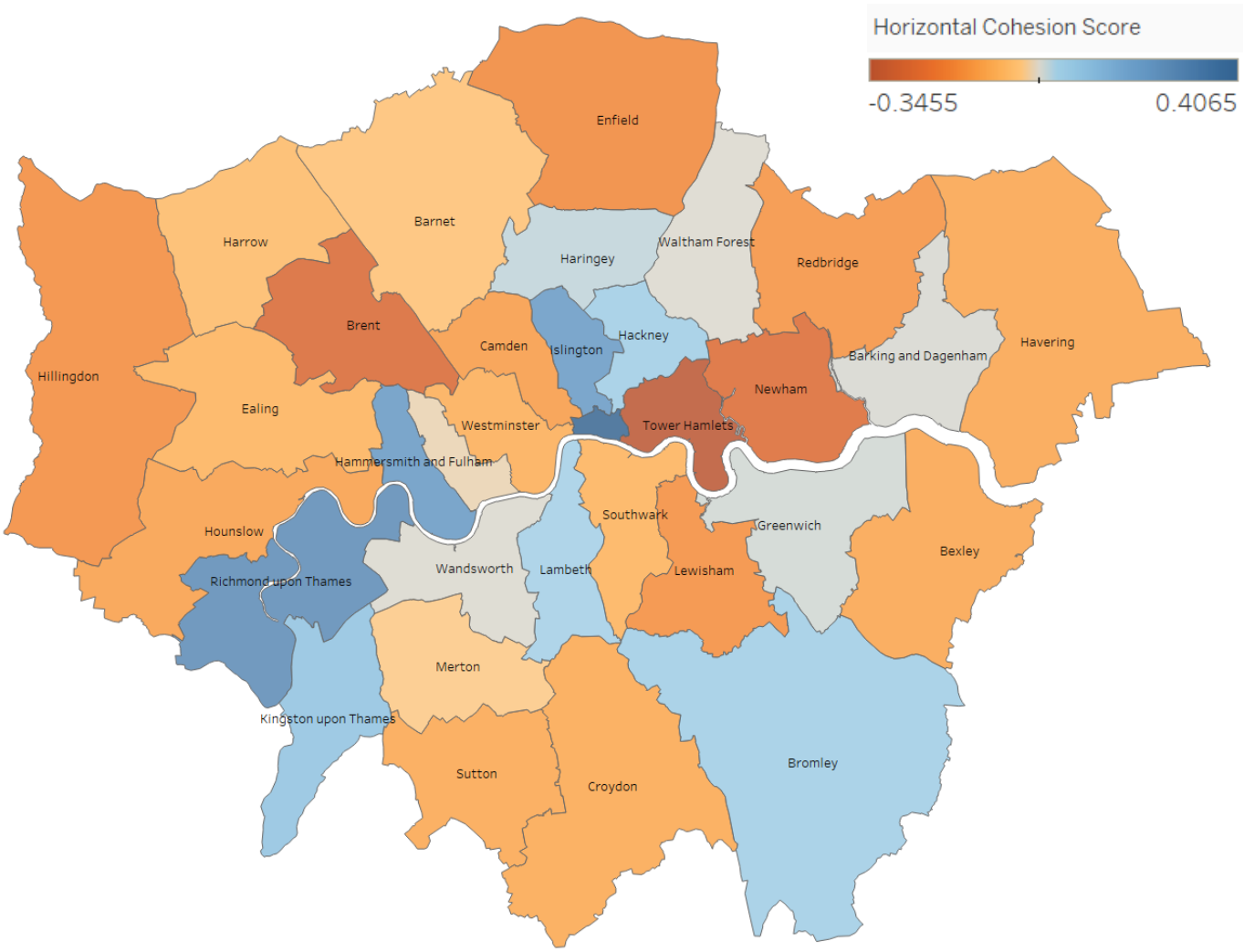
The full technical details of the multi-level analyses are reported in the technical document. In sum, these analyses revealed that horizontal social cohesion significantly differed between London boroughs. These differences were consistent across all three waves. As an example of this variation, Figure 2 shows the variation in horizontal social cohesion levels for London boroughs at wave 6. Beyond the differences in average levels of horizontal cohesion associated with different places, there was substantially more variation between individuals who lived within any particular London borough, as illustrated in Figure 3.

The relationship between volunteering and horizontal cohesion within each wave was consistently strong and positive, and equally so across boroughs (i.e., the positive relationship between social cohesion and volunteering was consistent across all places).

In contrast, average levels of vertical social cohesion did not vary by location. The relationship between volunteering and vertical social cohesion was also non-significant and did not vary across boroughs.

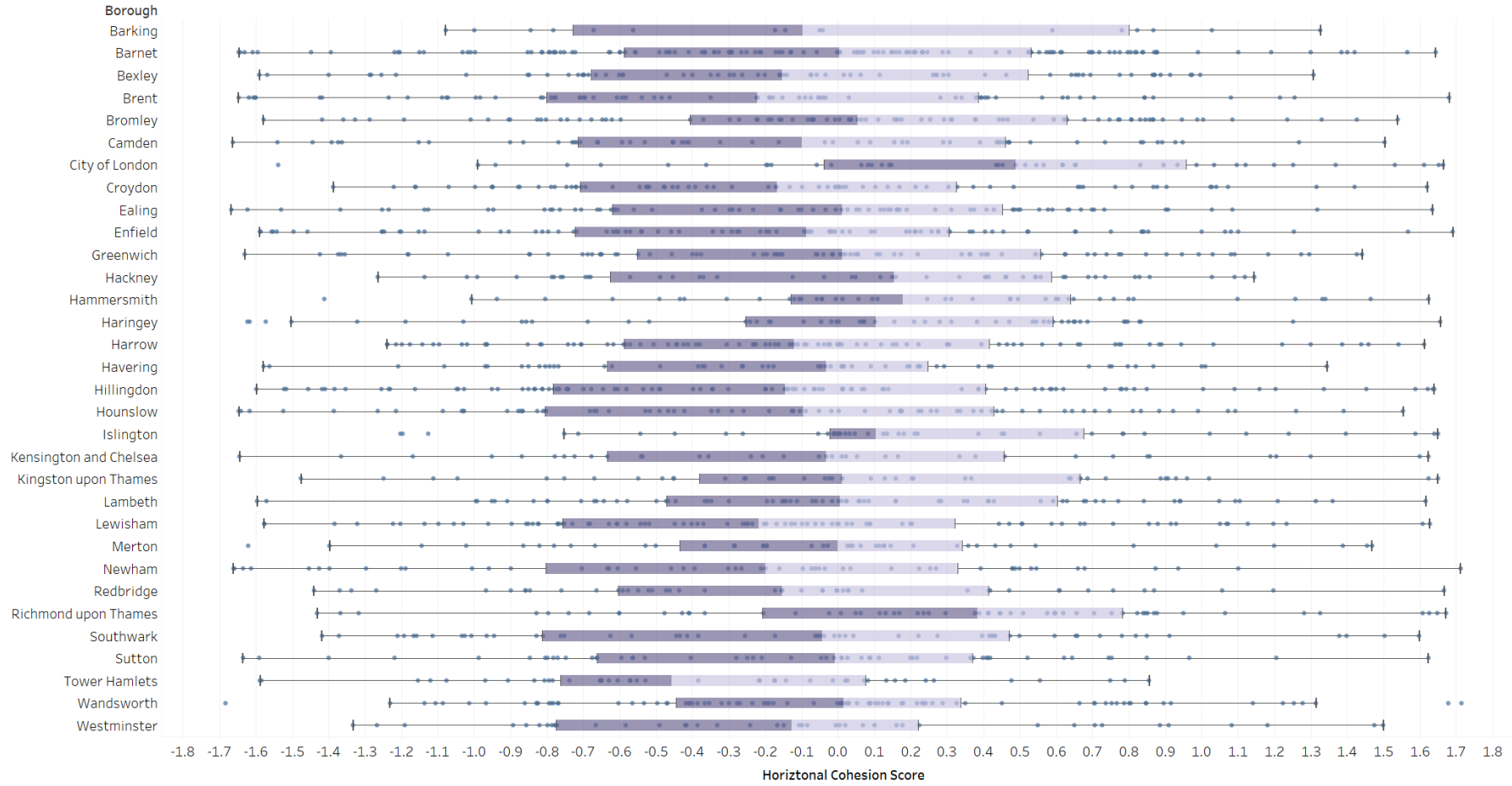
In sum, the multilevel analysis suggests that mean levels of horizontal cohesion vary both between different places and, to a greater extent, between individuals who live in the same place. That is, some places will have greater overall levels of horizontal cohesion and likewise some individuals will feel more cohesive with their local area than other individuals who live in the same location. The relationship between volunteering and horizontal cohesion was positive and significant and was uniform across different places. However, the relationship between vertical cohesion and volunteering was non-significant and did not vary between locations.

Figure 2. Horizontal Social Cohesion Scores by London Borough (Wave 6 Data)



Note: The factor score for horizontal social cohesion was standardised. Red colours therefore represent lower than average social cohesion and blue colours represent higher than average social cohesion.

Figure 3. Box Plots Showing the Variation in Horizontal Social Cohesion Scores Between London Boroughs (Wave 6 Data)



Note: Purple bars show the interquartile range (difference between scores at the 25th and 75th percentiles) for horizontal cohesion scores in each London borough. Blue dots show cohesion scores for individual participants living within each borough. Although there is variability between the London boroughs (i.e., the spread of the purple bars differs across locations), there is more variability between individuals within the same location (i.e., the spread of the blue dots within a location).

How do Demographic Factors Influence the Types of Volunteering People Do?

To assess how the demographic factors of age, gender, ethnicity, disability, and faith influenced the type of volunteering people engaged in, we conducted a series of chi-square tests to compare the proportion of people within each demographic category with the proportion of people who did and did not volunteer from those categories. As age was a continuous variable, this was assessed using logistic regression. The full statistical output of these analyses is available in the technical document, with a summary of findings presented in the following sections.

Age

As age was a continuous variable, its relationship with the likelihood of volunteering in different domains was assessed via a series of logistic regression models. Table 3 shows which relationships between age and volunteering domain were significant across waves 6, 7, and 8. Several coefficients were statistically significant but most of these had a very small effect size. Overall, this indicated that, despite being statistically significant, age did not have a meaningful impact on the domains that people chose to volunteer in.

Table 3. Logistic Regression Results for the Effect of Age on Volunteering Domain

	Effect of Age		
Volunteer Domain	Wave 6	Wave 7	Wave 8
Immigration levels		-	-
Health and Social Care			
Environmental issues			
Jobs and Economic growth	-	-	-
Education and Training	-	-	-
Crime	-	-	-
Counter-Terrorism		-	-
Transport			
Housing		-	
Arts, Culture and Media			
Local Neighbourhood Issues	-	-	-
Handling the Covid-19 pandemic			
Animal Welfare			
Reducing Prejudice and Discrimination	-	-	-

Note: - negative association. Only effects significant at $p < .01$ are shown.

Gender

Volunteering was compared by gender (binary male vs. female) for each domain of volunteering within waves 6, 7, and 8. Table 4 shows the significant chi-square results across the three waves of data. Women were significantly more likely to volunteer in animal welfare domains than men across all three waves.. Men were significantly more likely to volunteer in domains related to jobs and economic growth and transport than women, though this was only found in waves 7 and 8.. Women were significantly more likely to volunteer in domains related to prejudice and discrimination, though this was only found in waves 7 and 8. Finally, there was a significant relationship between gender and volunteering in domains related to

counter-terrorism, but only for wave 7 in which men were more likely to volunteer than women. All other tests were non-significant.

Table 4. Chi-square Test of Independence Results for Gender and Volunteer Domain

	Effect of Ethnicity		
Volunteer Domain	Wave 6	Wave 7	Wave 8
Immigration levels			
Health and Social Care			
Environmental issues			
Jobs and Economic growth		**M**	**M**
Education and Training			
Crime			
Counter-Terrorism		**M**	
Transport		**M**	**M**
Housing			
Arts, Culture and Media			
Local Neighbourhood Issues			
Handling the Covid-19 pandemic			
Animal Welfare	**F**	**F**	**F**
Reducing Prejudice and Discrimination		**F**	**F**

Note: F: Female participants were more likely to volunteer. M: Male participants were more likely to volunteer. Only effects significant at $p < .01$ are shown.

Ethnicity

For ease of comparison, ethnicity was dichotomised into a binary "white" vs. "non-white" variable, and chi-square tests were conducted to assess the relationship between ethnicity with each domain of volunteering. Table 5 shows the statistically significant results of these analyses across waves 6, 7, and 8. Several effects were significant across all three waves, including crime and reducing prejudice and discrimination, in which non-white participants were more likely to volunteer, and local neighbourhood issues, in which white participants were more likely to volunteer. Other domains, such as education and training and counter-terrorism, were only significant across two waves.

Table 5. Chi-square Test of Independence Results for Ethnicity and Volunteer Domain

	Effect of Ethnicity		
Volunteer Domain	Wave 6	Wave 7	Wave 8
Immigration levels			
Health and Social Care			
Environmental issues			
Jobs and Economic growth		NW	
Education and Training	NW	NW	
Crime	NW	NW	NW
Counter-Terrorism		NW	NW
Transport			
Housing			
Arts, Culture and Media			
Local Neighbourhood Issues	W	W	W
Handling the Covid-19 pandemic			
Animal Welfare	W		
Reducing Prejudice and Discrimination	NW	NW	NW

Note: W: White participants more likely to volunteer, NW: Non-white participants more likely to volunteer. Only effects significant at $p < .01$ shown.

Faith

Faith was dichotomised into a binary "faith" vs. "no faith" variable for comparison in the chi-square tests. Table 6 shows the statistically significant chi-square tests between faith and each domain of volunteering across waves 6, 7, and 8. The only relationship that was significant across all three waves was between faith and volunteering in domains related to counterterrorism, in which people with faith were more likely to volunteer than those without faith. Participants following faith were also more likely to volunteer in domains related to jobs and economic growth, but only in waves 6 and 7, and in domains related to reducing crime, but only in waves 6 and 8. All other effects were non-significant or inconsistent across the three waves.

Table 6. Chi-square Test of Independence Results for Faith and Volunteer Domain

	Chi-square Result		
Volunteer Domain	Wave 6	Wave 7	Wave 8
Immigration levels			
Health and Social Care			
Environmental issues			
Jobs and Economic growth	F	F	
Education and Training			
Crime	F		F
Counter-Terrorism	F	F	F
Transport			
Housing			
Arts, Culture and Media	NF		
Local Neighbourhood Issues			
Handling the Covid-19 pandemic			
Animal Welfare			
Reducing Prejudice and Discrimination			

Note: F: People following a faith were more likely to volunteer, NF: People not following a faith were more likely to volunteer. Only effects significant at $p < .01$ are shown.

Disability

Disability was dichotomised into a binary "has disability" vs. "does not have disability" variable.. As shown in Table 7, no effects were consistently significant across all three waves. In wave 6, only the relationship between disability and animal welfare was significant, with those with a disability more likely to volunteer than those without. In wave 7, only the relationship between disability and housing was significant, with those with a disability more likely to volunteer than those without. In wave 8 only the relationship between disability and health and social care was significant, with participants with a disability more likely to volunteer than participants without a disability.

Table 7. Chi-square Test of Independence Results for Disability and Volunteer Domain

	Chi-square Result		
Volunteer Domain	Wave 6	Wave 7	Wave 8
Immigration levels			
Health and Social Care			D
Environmental issues			
Jobs and Economic growth			
Education and Training			
Crime			
Counter-Terrorism			
Transport			
Housing		D	
Arts, Culture and Media			
Local Neighbourhood Issues			
Handling the Covid-19 pandemic			
Animal Welfare	D		

Note: D: Participants with a disability were more likely to volunteer. Only effects significant at $p < .01$ are shown.

Summary of Demographic Differences

Overall, across these demographics, we observed consistent differences in domains of volunteering for certain categories. Across all time points, women were more likely to volunteer in domains related to animal welfare. Non-white participants were more likely to volunteer in domains related to reducing crime and reducing prejudice and discrimination, and white participants were more likely to volunteer in domains related to local neighbourhood issues. Participants following a faith were more likely to volunteer in areas related to counter-terrorism. There were statistically significant differences across several domains for age, in which younger participants were more likely to volunteer, but the effect sizes for these effects were small and not practically meaningful. There were no consistent differences in the domains that participants with and without a disability volunteered in.

The Barriers to Volunteering; Which Groups are More or Less Likely to Volunteer?

To assess which demographic groups were more or less likely to volunteer we conducted a series of chi-square and logistic regression analyses comparing different demographic categories with the binary "Have you volunteered in the last month: yes or no" question at waves 6, 7, and 8. Table 8 summarises the demographic groups where there were significant differences, and the full statistical output is available in the technical document. As shown in the table, none of these effects were consistently significant across all three waves. Faith and ethnicity were the most consistent effects. The effect of faith was significant in waves 7 and 8, with participants following a faith being more likely to volunteer than participants not following faith, and the effect of ethnicity was significant in waves 6 and 8, with non-white participants more likely to volunteer than white participants.

Table 8. Test Results for The Relationship Between Demographic Category and Volunteering

Demographic Variable	Wave 6	Wave 7	Wave 8
Gender			**Fe**
Ethnicity	**NW**		**NW**
Faith		**Fa**	**Fa**
Disability			
Age			**Y**

Note: Fe: Females more likely to volunteer, NW: non-white participants more likely to volunteer; Fa: participants following a faith more likely to volunteer; Y: younger participants more likely to volunteer. Only results significant at $p < .01$ are shown.

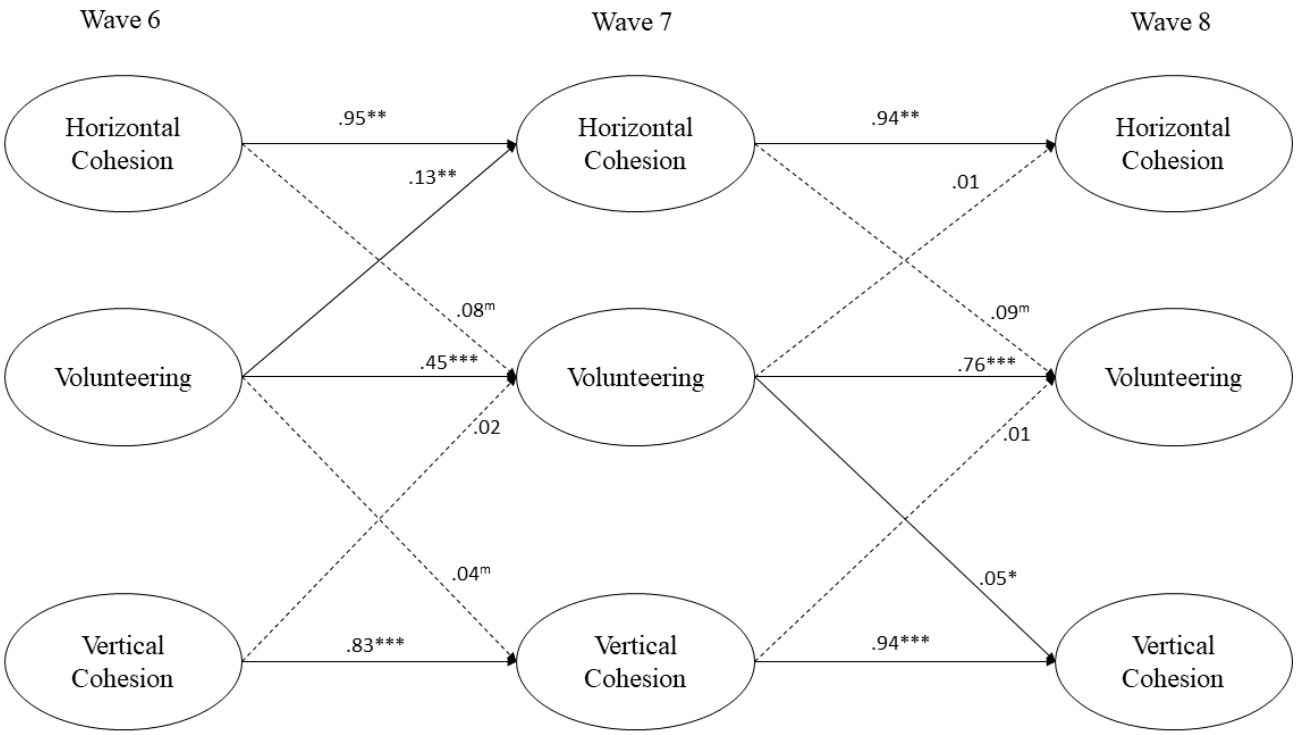
Longitudinal Analysis

To assess the causal relationship between social cohesion and volunteering, we conducted a longitudinal cross lagged panel model examining waves 6, 7, and 8.

Across waves 7 and 8, social cohesion and volunteering at wave 8 were predicted by social cohesion and volunteering from wave 7. The model also included the full measurement model for horizontal and vertical cohesion as outlined in our confirmatory factor analysis. Age, gender, political orientation, status, income and ethnicity (binary White vs. Non-White) were included in the model as controls. As volunteering was a binary outcome measure, the diagonally weighted least squares estimator was used. The structural component of the model is displayed in Figure 4 with standardised estimates reported.

The overall model provided a good fit to the data, $\chi 2$ (513) = 3157.99, $p < .001$, CFI = .96, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .05. As shown in Figure 2, all autoregressive paths between waves were significant. However, there were inconsistent cross-lagged effects between time points. Between waves 6 and 7, horizontal cohesion (but not vertical) marginally predicted volunteering at wave 7 (b = .08, $p = .050$), but volunteering at wave 6 did significantly predict horizontal cohesion at wave 7 (b = .13, $p = .005$) and marginally predicted vertical cohesion at wave 7 (b = .04, $p = .086$). Between waves 7 and 8, horizontal cohesion (but not vertical) again marginally predicted volunteering at wave 8 (b=.09, $p = .098$). Volunteering at wave 7 did significantly predict vertical cohesion at wave 8 (b= .05, $p = .029$).

Figure 4. Longitudinal Cross Lagged Panel Model Showing the Relationships Between Horizontal Cohesion, Vertical Cohesion and Volunteering



Dashed lines represent non-significant paths. Standardised effects are shown.
*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$ m $p < .10$

Interim Summary

The first section of this report aimed to answer key questions about the relationship between volunteering and social cohesion, as well as the barriers and amplifiers of each, using longitudinal data collected as part of the Beyond Us and Them project. The results of this analysis indicate that the longitudinal relationship between social cohesion and volunteering varies across time, and that this relationship is different for horizontal (cohesion within society) and vertical (cohesion with the state) cohesion.

The relationship between horizontal cohesion and volunteering was both bidirectional and varied across time. Horizontal cohesion had a marginal impact on volunteering at both time points (that is, higher cohesion within the community was marginally associated with more subsequent volunteering behaviour), but the impact of volunteering on horizontal cohesion was only significant between waves 6 and 7.

For vertical cohesion, the effects were largely consistent across time, showing that volunteering has a marginal impact on feelings of vertical cohesion, but the reverse (i.e., that vertical cohesion increases volunteering) was not supported. Additionally, findings from the multilevel analyses indicate that the fixed effect between volunteering and horizontal cohesion was significant within each wave, whilst the relationship between vertical cohesion and volunteering within each wave varied. Overall, we conclude that the relationship between horizontal cohesion and volunteering is likely to be positive within any one time point, although the relationships over time are liable to change and lack consistency. One plausible reason for this variability over time is that these relationships are liable to unpredictable external factors that may temporarily influence the relationship between social cohesion and volunteering.

Our analysis also indicated that place is an important factor in levels of social cohesion and the relationship between volunteering and cohesion. Different locations did vary in their levels of social cohesion, some reporting higher levels than others. However, this variability was relatively small and the largest variations in feelings of social cohesion occurred at the individual level, where some individuals felt substantially more cohesive than others.

Despite these qualifications, the association between volunteering and horizontal cohesion was equal across different locations and did not vary by place. In line with these findings, the analyses also suggest that a key driving force behind volunteering and social cohesion is one of relevancy, of which place may be a key candidate. Specifically, people who volunteered in areas relating to local neighbourhood issues had a consistently positive relationship with feelings of social cohesion. That is to say, those who volunteered in their local area felt a stronger sense of social cohesion.

Finally, we found no strong evidence that demographic differences are an important influence on rates of volunteering. This is not to say demographics are irrelevant, and there were some notable differences (albeit not always consistent across each survey wave) in the domains in which different demographic groups opted to volunteer. For example, across all three waves of data, women were more likely to volunteer in domains related to animal welfare than men. Across all waves, non-white participants were more likely to volunteer in areas related to reducing crime and prejudice and discrimination, although white participants were more likely to volunteer in domains related to local neighbourhood issues. Additionally, participants who reported following some form of faith were more likely to volunteer in domains related to counter-terrorism than participants who did not follow a faith. Additional

data is needed to fully assess why these differences occur, but one plausible reason, consistent with other analyses in this report, may be an issue of relevancy. Specifically, it is likely that people volunteer in domains that are personally relevant to them or directly affect them, and it may be that these demographic differences reflect the issues that affect and are relevant to different demographic groups.

Other Datasets

The following section of this report re-tests the relationships examined in the preceding section but uses alternative datasets that included measures of social cohesion and volunteering. Despite a concerted effort to unearth data sets for this purpose, we found only two that were useable: the Understanding Society survey and the Community Life survey. The Understanding Society survey is a longitudinal large-scale dataset that allows causal inferences to be made about the relationship between volunteering and social cohesion. The Community Life survey, although only cross-sectional, contained more detailed measures of volunteering and social cohesion, including an explicit comparison between formal and informal volunteering and a wider investigation of the barriers to volunteering. Therefore, although not allowing causal claims to be inferred, the Community Life survey provided data that would allow a more detailed investigation into the nuances of social cohesion and volunteering. The other datasets we examined are excluded as they did not provide additional necessary information: i.e., they were either not longitudinal and would not allow causal claims to be made or they contained more limited measures of volunteering and social cohesion.

Understanding Society

Understanding Society is a large-scale household panel survey involving approximately 40,000 participants per wave that has been running annually since 2009. The survey covers a wide range of topics, including modules on social cohesion and volunteering behaviours.

Despite being fielded annually, the Understanding Society survey does not present the same questions every year. From the available data, measures relating to both social cohesion and volunteering were only simultaneously present within wave 6 (conducted during 2014-2015). Measures on volunteering (but not social cohesion) were available at wave 8 (conducted during 2016-2017) and measures on social cohesion (but not volunteering) were available at wave 9 (conducted during 2017-2018). Consequently, we were only able to conduct longitudinal analyses across two time points.

The measures used to capture social cohesion and volunteering at these time points are described below:

Social Cohesion: Social cohesion was measured using Buckner's (1988) Neighbourhood Cohesion Instrument. This measure is comprised of items assessing three components of cohesion: *attraction to the neighbourhood* ('I plan to remain a resident of this neighbourhood for a number of years'), *neighbouring* ('If I needed advice about something I could go to someone in my neighbourhood'; 'I borrow things and exchange favours with my neighbours'; and 'I regularly stop and talk with people in my neighbourhood'), and psychological sense of community ('I feel like I belong to this neighbourhood'; 'The friendships and associations I have with other people in my neighbourhood mean a lot to me'; 'I would be willing to work

together with others on something to improve my neighbourhood'; and 'I think of myself as similar to the people that live in this neighbourhood'). Each item was measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). A confirmatory factor analysis indicated that a factor model in which the items in this scale loaded onto one latent factor (social cohesion) provided good fit to the data at both waves. Details of this analysis are available in the technical supplementary document.

Volunteering: Volunteering was measured using the item 'In the last 12 months, have you given any unpaid help or worked as a volunteer for any type of local, national or international organisation or charity?' which had the binary response options of 'Yes' or 'No'.

From the available measures none were identified as a suitable metric for vertical cohesion. The most applicable was one item on political efficacy ('People like me don't have any say in what the government does') but, as this was conceptually different to trust and confidence in political figures or institutions, this was not deemed an appropriate measure of vertical cohesion.

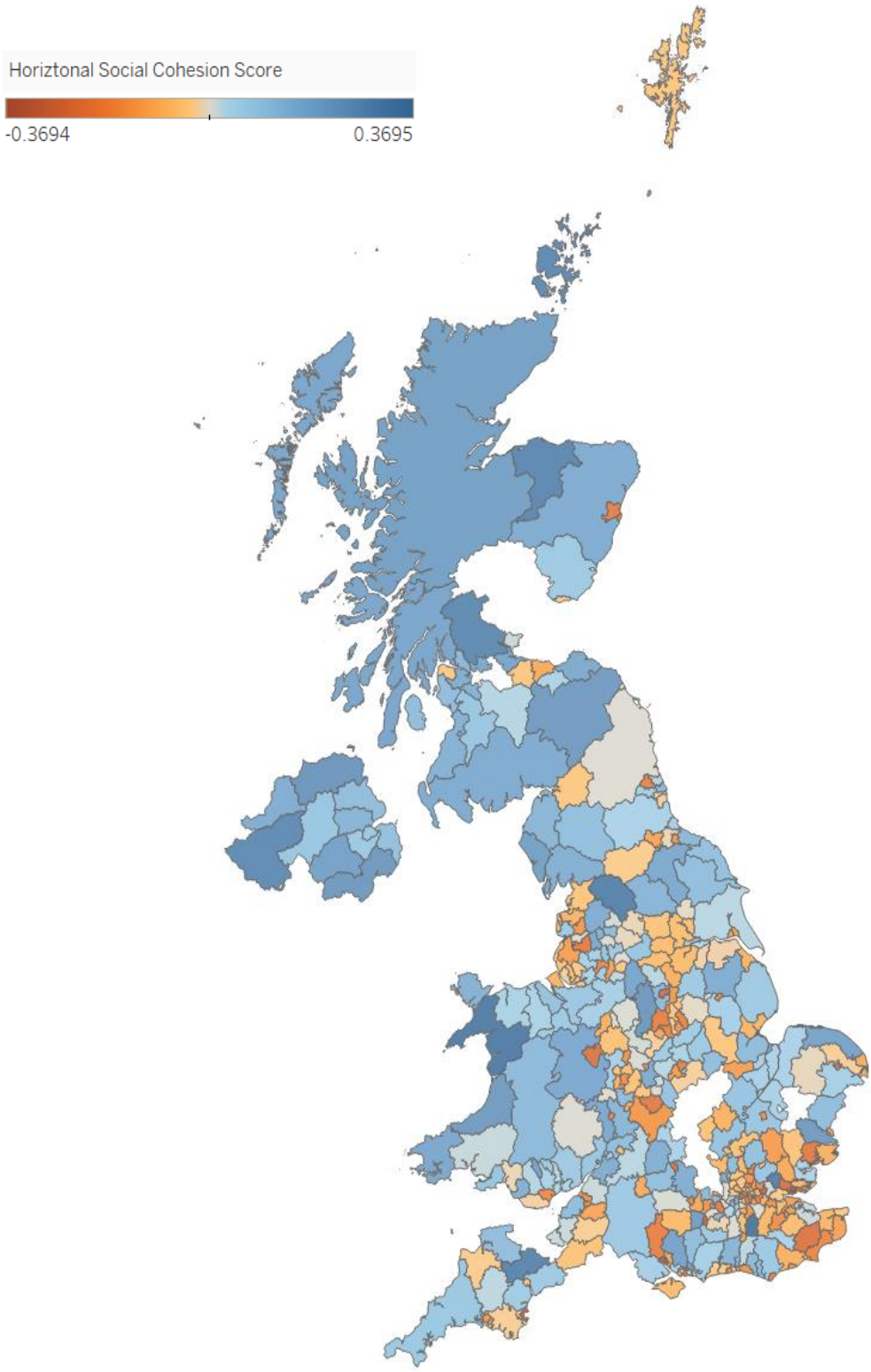
Other possible measures of horizontal social cohesion and volunteering were also available in the Understanding Society dataset, but were discounted for several reasons. For example, an alternative 3-item neighbourhood cohesion scale was also used in Understanding Society, but was only available in waves 3 and 6 and was therefore not suitable for a longitudinal analysis with volunteering. Unfortunately, measures relating to tolerance of other social groups or a willingness to help others from different social groups were not present in the Understanding Society dataset. Although the Buckner cohesion scale does reflect some components the Chan et al. (2006) model which was utilised in the Beyond Us and Them analysis, namely a sense of belonging, trust in others, and willingness to help others, the scale does not effectively capture the notion of helping others from different social groups. The Understanding Society dataset also included alternative measures of volunteering, such as the frequency people volunteered at (e.g., once a week, on a one-off basis) and the number of hours that people had spent volunteering in the previous month. For consistency with the Beyond Us and Them analysis we opted to utilise the binary measure of volunteering outlined above.

The Effect of Place

To assess the impact of place on the relationship between social cohesion and volunteering we conducted the same multilevel model as in the analysis for the Beyond Us and Them data. For simplicity in interpreting the results we again statistically positioned volunteering as the independent variable and the factor score of horizontal cohesion as the dependent variable. Location data within the Understanding Society survey was available at the local authority district level[2], which represents the geographic area for which local Governments are responsible. The multilevel model therefore assessed how mean levels of horizontal cohesion and its relationship with volunteering varied between different local authority districts relative to how they vary between individuals who live in the same local authority district. As measures for both volunteering and horizontal cohesion were only available within wave 6, we conducted the analysis using data from just this wave.

[2] For a full list of all Local Authority Districts see https://geoportal.statistics.gov.uk/documents/d1fab2d9fb0a4576a7e08f89ac7e0b72/about

Figure 5. Variation in Horizontal Cohesion Scores Between Local Authority Districts (Understanding Society Data)



Note: The factor score for horizontal social cohesion was standardised. Red colours therefore represent lower than average social cohesion and blue colours represent higher than average social cohesion. Districts where no data was available are not shown.

Figure 5 shows the mean horizontal cohesion score across local authority districts. The results of the multilevel analysis revealed that horizontal cohesion varied between different local authority districts, although there was larger variability between individuals who lived in the same district. The fixed effect between volunteering and horizontal cohesion was positive and significant. However, the multilevel analysis indicated that the relationship between volunteering and horizontal cohesion varied between different local authority districts. In some districts the relationship between horizontal cohesion and volunteering was stronger than in other districts. The full coefficients for the multilevel analysis are available in the technical document.

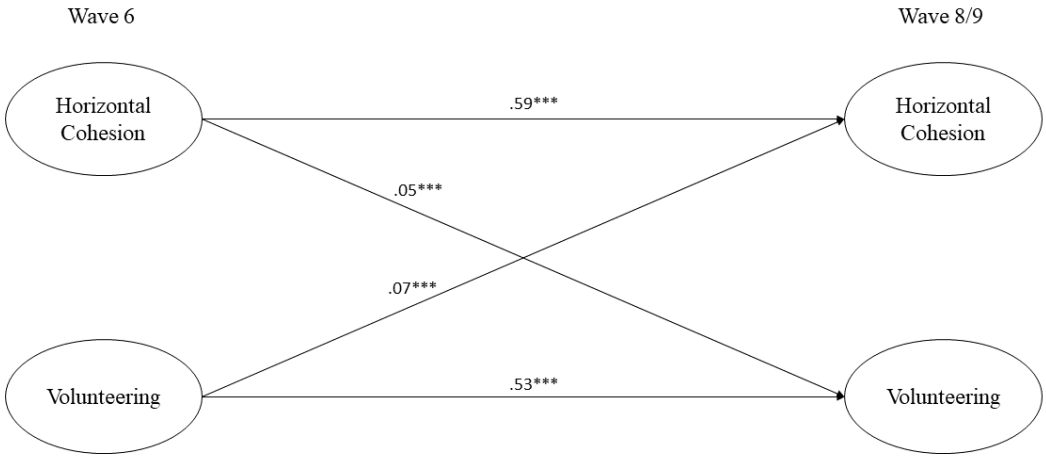
Barriers to Volunteering; Which Groups are More or Less Likely to Volunteer?

To assess whether there were differences in rates of volunteering between people from different demographic backgrounds we conducted a series of chi-square tests across waves 6 and 8. Gender, ethnicity, and faith were significant in both waves, with women, people following a faith, and white participants more likely to volunteer than men, people not following a faith, and non-white participants respectively. The effects of disability and age however were inconsistent, being significant in one wave (wave 6 for disability and wave 8 for age) but non-significant in the other wave. The full statistical output for these analyses are available in the technical document.

The Relationship Between Social Cohesion and Volunteering

To assess the relationship between horizontal cohesion and volunteering we conducted a longitudinal cross-lagged panel model that replicated the general model conducted in the Beyond Us and Them analysis. As the measures were surveyed at different waves in the Understanding Society data, we regressed volunteering at wave 8 and horizontal cohesion at wave 9 on both measures of horizontal cohesion and volunteering at wave 6. The configural measurement model for horizontal cohesion was included in the model and participants' age, gender, and ethnicity (binary white vs. non-white) were included in the model as controls. The model is displayed in Figure 6. The model provided a good fit to the data, $\chi 2$ (169) = 15098.09, $p < .001$, CFI = .96, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .038 and all regression paths between horizontal social cohesion and volunteering were significant at $p < .001$. These results suggest that the relationship between horizontal cohesion and volunteering is bidirectional.

Figure 6. Longitudinal Cross-Lagged Panel Model Between Horizontal Cohesion and Volunteering (Understanding Society Data)



Note: Horizontal cohesion was measured at waves 6 and 9, volunteering was measured at waves 6 and 8. *** $p < .001$

Community Life

The Community Life survey is an annual representative survey of adults living in England that covers topics relating to community, volunteering, wellbeing, and civic engagement. Although the survey has been administered each year since 2012, it does not employ a longitudinal methodology (i.e., the same individuals are not surveyed each year) and instead utilises random sampling. Consequently, the data are cross-sectional. The data analysed in this report are taken from the 2020-2021 round of the survey.

Identifying Measures

The available data from the Community Life survey provided several measures that aptly captured (horizontal) social cohesion and volunteering. The survey did not contain any defined scales and instead contained several individual items that were related to cohesion. From the available measures we identified ten items that suitably reflected horizontal cohesion but none that suitably reflected vertical cohesion. The horizontal cohesion measures are outlined below with associated short-form item names[3]:

[3] Additional measures that might be related to social cohesion were also available in the survey but were removed for various reasons. For example, an item "How strongly do you feel you belong to Britain" was not included as it was inconsistent with the remaining measures, which were targeted at the neighbourhood level. The item "How comfortable would you be asking a neighbour to mind your child(ren) for half an hour?" was also not included as it excluded participants who did not have children. Several other items such as "Do you think that over the past two years your area has gotten better vs. gotten worse" and "Generally, how satisfied are you with the local services and amenities in your local area" were not included as these related primarily to local services rather than cohesion per se.

Belonging[4] - How strongly do you feel you belong to your immediate neighbourhood (1 = *not at all strongly*, 4 = *very strongly*)

Chat_Neighbours - How often do you chat to your neighbours, more than to just say hello? (1 = *Never*, 5 = *On most days*)

Borrow_Neighbours - Generally, I borrow things and exchange favours with my neighbours (1 = *Definitely disagree*, 4 = *Definitely agree*)

Comfort_Keys - How comfortable would you be asking a neighbour to keep a set of keys to your home for emergencies, for example if you were locked out? (1 = *Very uncomfortable*, 4 = *Very comfortable*)

Comfort_Shopping - If you were ill and at home on your own, and needed someone to collect a few shopping essentials, how comfortable would you feel asking a neighbour to do this for you? (1 = *Very uncomfortable*, 4 = *Very comfortable*)

Improve_Neighbourhood - To what extent would you agree or disagree that people in your neighbourhood pull together to improve the neighbourhood? (1 = *Definitely disagree*, 4 = *Definitely agree*)

Trust_Neighbourhood - Thinking about the people who live in this neighbourhood, to what extent do you believe they can be trusted? (1 = *None of the people can be trusted*, 4 = *Many of the people can be trusted*)

Trust_General - On a scale where 0 (zero) is not at all and 10 (ten) is completely, in general how much do you think people can be trusted? (0 = *not at all*, 10 = *completely*)

Neighbourhood_Mixing - To what extent do you agree or disagree that your local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together? (1 = *Definitely disagree*, 4 = *Definitely agree*)

Mixing_Importance - How important is it for you personally that you have opportunities to mix with people from different backgrounds? (1 = *Not at all important*, 5 = *Very important*)

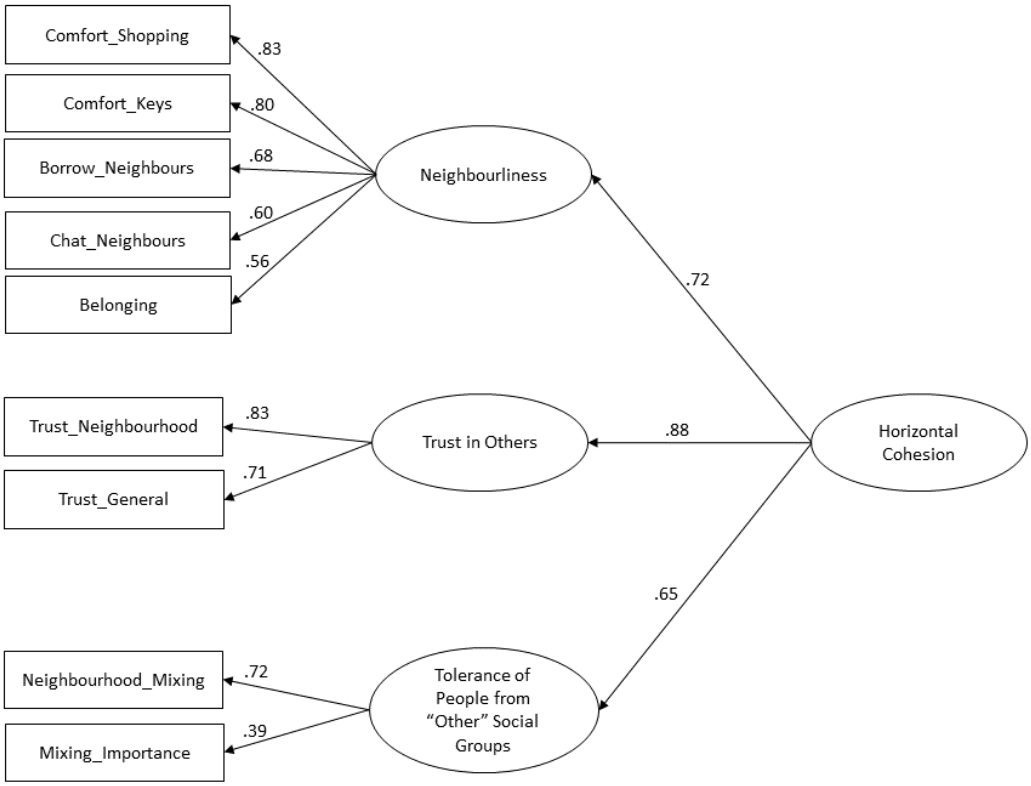
Based on an exploratory factor analysis (see the supplementary technical document for details), we identified three latent factors from the 10 items[5]. These factors were broadly consistent with the components of Chan et al.'s (2006) horizontal cohesion model. Specifically, Factor 1 broadly comprised a construct akin to neighbourliness, consisting of belonging and engagement with other people within the community, Factor 2 comprised trust in others, and Factor 3 comprised tolerance and willingness to help people from "other" social groups. To assess whether these three components reflected a broader horizontal cohesion construct we additionally conducted a confirmatory factor analysis model as displayed in Figure 7, which showed good fit to the data.

[4] In the survey the item scales were reversed (e.g., 1 = definitely agree, 4 = definitely disagree). These were recoded during analysis so that higher scores represented higher levels of social cohesion.

[5] One item, "To what extent would you agree or disagree that people in your neighbourhood pull together to improve the neighbourhood?", was removed from the measurement model as it cross-loaded on all three factors.

Three measures were used as metrics of volunteering. Specifically, the Community Life survey drew a distinction between formal volunteering (defined in the survey as involvement with a set of clubs, groups, or organisations that included "anything you've taken part in, supported, or that you've helped in any way, either on your own or with others.") and informal volunteering (defined in the survey as "any unpaid help you as an individual may have given to other people, that is apart from any help given through a group, club or organisation. This could be help for a friend, neighbour or someone else but not a relative"). Three derived variables in the dataset were used to identify participants who had engaged in informal volunteering in the past 12 months (yes or no), participants who had engaged in formal volunteering in the past 12 months (yes or no), and participants who had engaged in any form of volunteering in the past 12 months (yes or no). An additional two items also asked participants who had not formally volunteered before or who had recently stopped volunteering their reasons for doing so, which was additionally analysed to explore potential barriers to volunteering.

Figure 7. Confirmatory Factor Analysis Model for Horizontal Cohesion (Community Life Data)



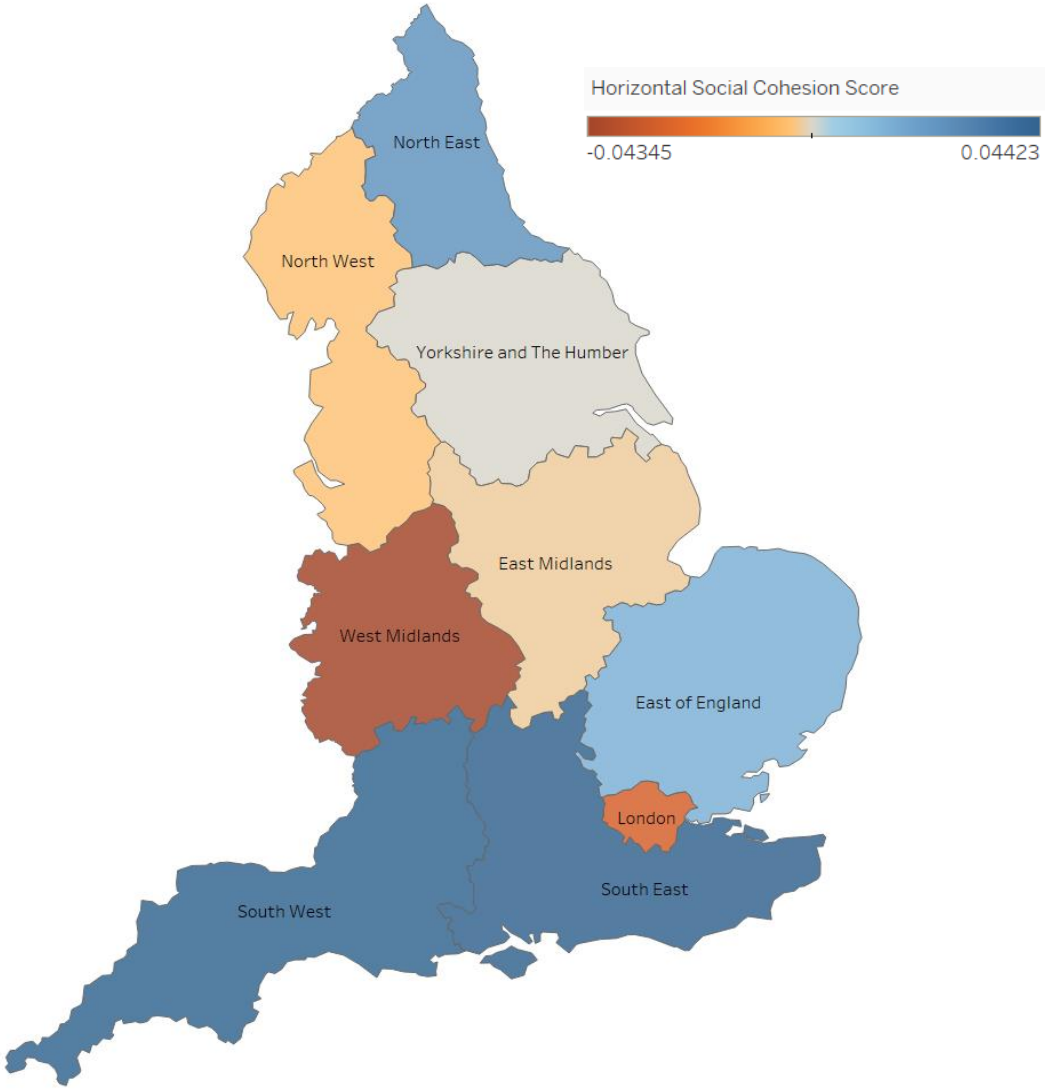
Analysis of Place

To assess whether social cohesion and its relationship with volunteering differed by place we conducted the same multilevel models as with the Beyond Us and Them and the Understanding Society datasets. Location data within the Community Life survey was only available at the regional level (specifically the nine regions of England: North East, North West, Yorkshire and The Humber, East Midlands, West Midlands, East of England, London,

South East, and the South West), and hence the analysis considered differences between regions relative to differences between people who live in the same region. We again statistically positioned volunteering as the independent variable and the factor scores for horizontal cohesion as the dependent variable in the model. The full statistical results of the multilevel analysis are available in the technical document.

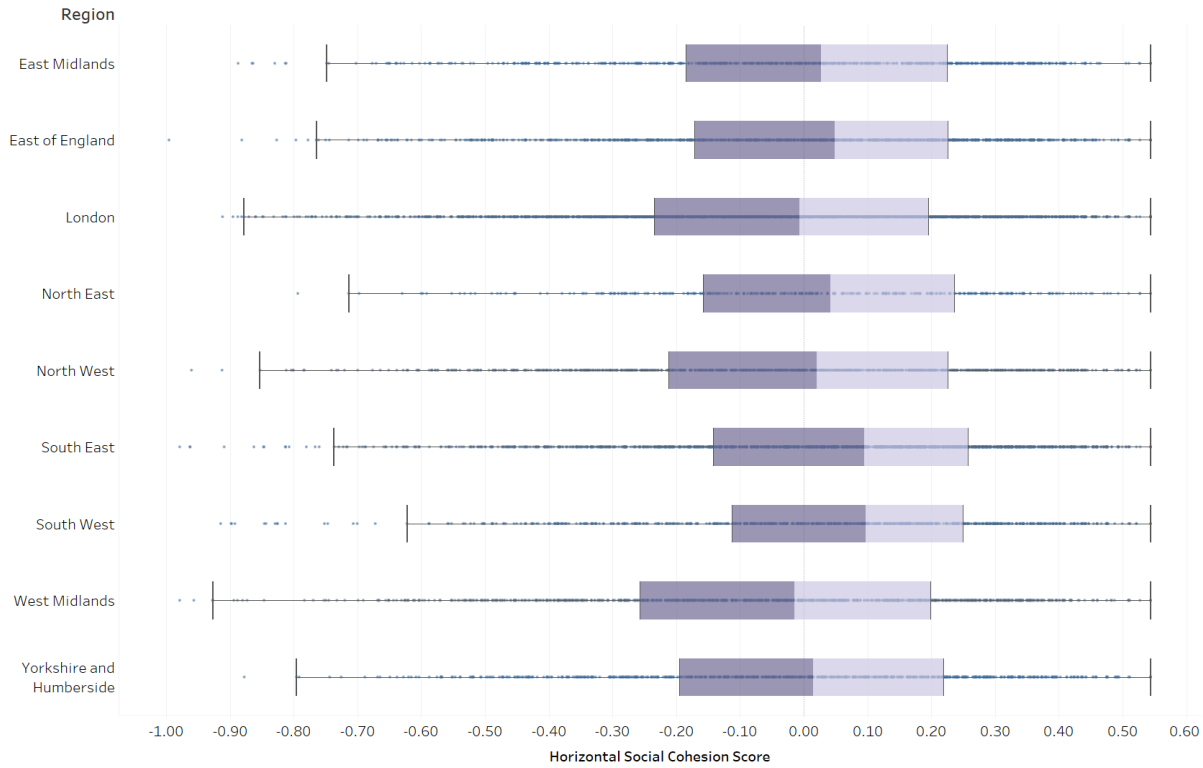
The multilevel analysis revealed that mean levels of horizontal cohesion only differed by small amounts between different regions (differences are shown in Figure 8 but note that the scale only ranges from -0.043 to +0.044). However, as displayed in Figure 9, there was a larger amount of variation in horizontal cohesion scores between individuals who lived within the same region. The relationship between volunteering and horizontal cohesion was positive and significant and this did not vary between different regions.

Figure 8. Horizontal Social Cohesion by England Regions (Community Life Data)



Note: The factor score for horizontal social cohesion was standardised. Red colours therefore represent lower than average social cohesion and blue colours represent higher than average social cohesion.

Figure 9. Box Plots Showing Variations in Horizontal Cohesion Between and Within England Regions (Community Life Data)

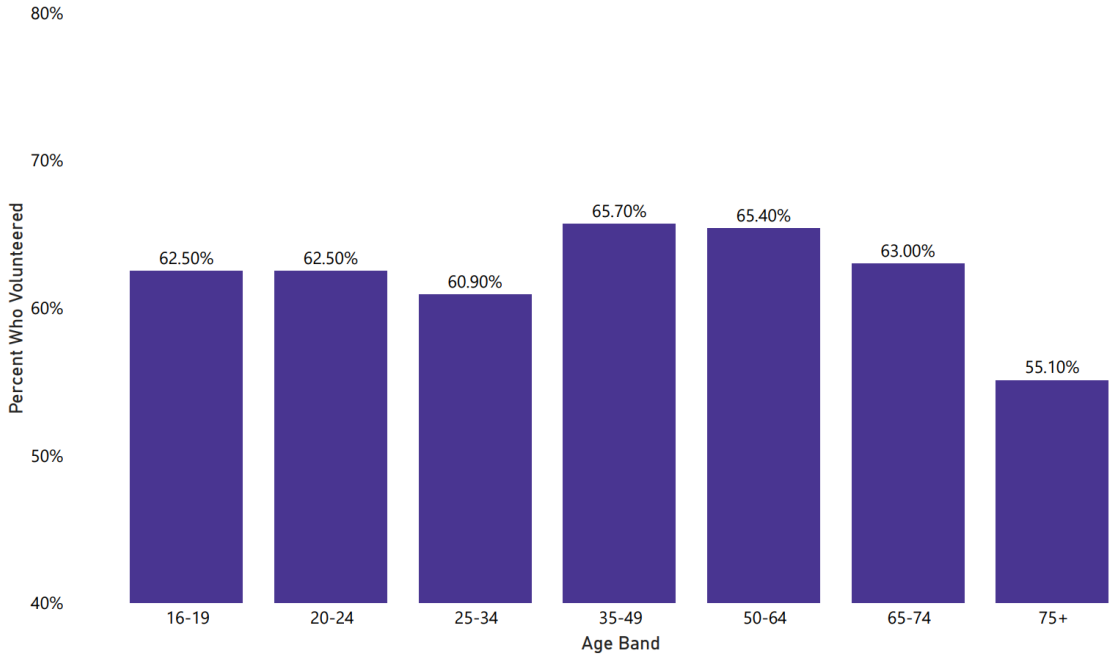


Note: Purple bars show the interquartile range (difference between scores at the 25th and 75th percentiles) for horizontal cohesion scores in each region. Blue dots show cohesion scores for individual participants living within each region. Although there is variability between the regions (i.e., the spread of the purple bars differs across locations), there is more variability between individuals within the same location (i.e., the spread of the blue dots within a location).

Barriers to Volunteering; Which Groups are More or Less Likely to Volunteer?

To assess the potential barriers to volunteering we again conducted a series of chi-square tests to assess whether the proportions of people who indicated that they volunteered (either formally or informally) differed between different demographic groups. The specific age of participants was not available in the Community Life data, which instead categorised age into: 16-19, 20-24, 25-34, 35-49, 50-64, 65-74, and 75 and older. The chi-square analysis therefore assessed whether proportions of volunteers differed across these age bands. Across the different demographic categories, only gender and age were significantly associated with volunteering. For gender, a higher proportion of women indicated that they volunteered than did men. We calculated the percentage of people who stated they volunteered at each age band. As shown in Figure 10, there is a small curvilinear relationship between age and volunteering. Specifically, people aged between 35-49 and 50-64 are most likely to volunteer and the proportion reduces among people aged 75 and over. The full statistical output of these analyses is available in the technical document.

Figure 10. Percentage of Respondents who Indicated They Volunteered by Age Band (Community Life Data)



To further explore potential barriers to volunteering, we additionally examined responses to the questions “Which, if any, of these are reasons why you don’t give unpaid help to groups, clubs or organisations?”, which was asked to respondents who had not formally volunteered, and “What were the main reasons you stopped giving unpaid help to any groups, clubs or organisations?”, which was asked to respondents who had previously volunteered but who had recently chosen to stop volunteering. Tables 9 and 10 show the proportion of respondents who selected each available reason for either not volunteering or recently stopping volunteering.

Time related reasons tended to be the most frequent reason people chose for not volunteering, such as having work commitments (45%), having other things to do in their spare time (30%), or looking after children (22%). People also indicated that they did not volunteer as they were limiting contact during the coronavirus pandemic (22%). A similar pattern was also evident for people who previously volunteered but had recently stopped. Time related reasons, such as a change in home or work circumstances (43%) or volunteering taking up too much time (10%) were frequently selected reasons for stopping volunteering. Other common reasons were limiting contact due to COVID-19 (25%) or because the previous volunteering that respondents had engaged in was a one-time event (24%).

Table 9. Reasons for Not Volunteering Shown by Proportions of Respondents (N=8531)

Reason for not volunteering	No	Yes	% Yes
I have work commitments	4662	3869	45%
I have to look after children	6695	1836	22%
I have to look after someone elderly or ill	7868	663	8%
I have to study	7688	843	10%
I do other things with my spare time	5934	2597	30%
I'm not the right age	7840	691	8%
I don't know any groups that need help	7571	960	11%
I haven't heard about opportunities to help	7515	1016	12%
I'm new to the area	7987	544	6%
I've never thought about it	7188	1343	16%
I have an illness or disability that I feel prevents me from getting involved	7632	899	11%
It's not my responsibility	8222	309	4%
I am limiting contact with others due to coronavirus	6621	1910	22%
Too difficult during the coronavirus outbreak	8477	54	1%

Table 10. Reasons for Stopping Volunteering Shown by Proportions of Respondents (N=1682)

Reason for not volunteering	No	Yes	% Yes
Not enough time - due to changing home/work circumstances	958	724	43%
Not enough time - getting involved took up too much time	1518	164	10%
Group/club/organisation finished/closed	1578	104	6%
Moved away from area	1542	140	8%
Due to health problems or old age	1529	153	9%
Group/club/organisation wasn't relevant to me anymore	1615	67	4%
Lost interest	1623	59	4%
It was a one-off activity or event	1282	400	24%
Felt I had done my bit/ someone else's turn to get involved	1614	68	4%
Got involved in another activity instead	1651	31	2%
Didn't get asked to do the things I'd like to	1657	25	1%
Felt the group/club/organisation was badly organised	1668	14	1%
Felt my efforts weren't always appreciated	1647	35	2%
It was too bureaucratic/ too much concern about risk and liability	1660	22	1%
Activity linked to my school/college/university/job I have now left	1610	72	4%
I didn't feel my contribution made a difference	1648	34	2%
I am limiting contact with others due to coronavirus	1263	419	25%

What Forms of Volunteering Most Impact Social Cohesion?

To assess which forms of volunteering (formal or informal) most impacted horizontal cohesion, we used structural equation modelling to estimate a linear regression model in which the latent horizontal cohesion was predicted by two dummy coded variables for whether a participant had engaged in informal (0=No, 1=Yes) and formal (0=No, 1=Yes) volunteering. Gender, age, ethnicity (dichotomous white vs. non-white), faith (dichotomous faith vs. no faith), and disability (dichotomous disability vs. no disability) were included in

the model as controls. The model provided adequate fit to the data. Both formal and informal volunteering were positively and significantly associated with horizontal cohesion.

To assess whether there was a significant difference in the strength of the association between each type of volunteering and horizontal cohesion, we computed an additional model in which the regression paths between formal and informal volunteering and horizontal cohesion were constrained to be equal. This model provided worse fit, indicating that that the relationship between formal volunteering and horizontal cohesion was stronger than the relationship between informal volunteering and horizontal cohesion.

Summary and Discussion

Main Findings

This report set out to examine UK-based empirical evidence from large-scale longitudinal survey data to explore the relationship between social cohesion and volunteering, as well as some of the potential barriers to volunteering. We sought to answer five general questions. The following sections outline our conclusions about the evidence on each of these, viewed across the different sources of evidence.

What, if any, is the Relationship Between Volunteering and Social Cohesion, and if a Relationship Does Exist Which Aspect Comes First?

We find a positive and bidirectional relationship between horizontal social cohesion and volunteering. Data from both the Beyond Us and Them survey and the Understanding Society survey support this bidirectional relationship. Data at any given time point confirm that this relationship is strong and positive. Longitudinal data from the Beyond Us and Them survey indicate that this relationship is not stable over time, however, and is subject to external influences.

The relationship between vertical cohesion and volunteering is unidirectional. Data from the Beyond Us and Them survey suggest that higher rates of volunteering are related to higher levels of vertical cohesion at later time points, but that the reverse does not appear to be the case (i.e., higher vertical cohesion does not lead to more volunteering).

What are the Barriers to Volunteering: Which Groups of People are More or Less Likely to Volunteer?

Although we identified some demographic barriers to volunteering, their role was not consistent across different times or surveys. In fact, no demographic categories were consistently associated with differences in volunteering rates across all data sources or across all time points within a survey. Those that were most consistent were gender (in which women had higher volunteering rates than men), faith (in which people following a faith volunteered more than those not following a faith), and age. Data from the Community Life survey indicate that the relationship between age and volunteering is curvilinear because both younger people and those over 75 are less likely to volunteer.

The Community Life survey shows clearly that a common barrier to volunteering is lack of time, due either to work, child-care, or other commitments. The data also indicate that the pandemic may have acted as a barrier to volunteering, with people limiting social contact due to COVID-19.

What Effect Does Place Have on Volunteering, Social Cohesion, and the Relationship Between Them?

A series of multilevel analyses conducted across data sources indicated that mean levels of social cohesion certainly differ between different locations. Some areas had higher levels of social cohesion than others. However, there was larger variation between individuals who lived within the same location.

Across places, the association between social cohesion and volunteering tended to remain uniform. However, data from Understanding Society, which used a more granular level of location data, indicated that in some locations this relationship was stronger than others. Additionally, data from the Beyond Us and Them survey indicate that people who volunteered to improve issues in their local neighbourhood had higher levels of social cohesion, suggesting that place may impact the relationship between volunteering and social cohesion in so far as volunteering activities work to improve the local area.

What Forms of Volunteering Most Impact Social Cohesion?

Different forms of volunteering had a different impact on social cohesion. The Community Life survey reveals that formal volunteering is more closely related than informal volunteering to horizontal cohesion, although the association between informal volunteering and cohesion was still positive and significant.

The specific domain of volunteering is also relevant. Data from the Beyond Us and Them survey suggest that some pro-active 'helping' activities, such as working to improve local neighbourhood issues, had a positive impact on social cohesion. However other activities that are more concerned with protection or prevention of harm, such as working in animal welfare or working to reduce prejudice and discrimination, are associated with a less positive perception of social cohesion.

How Does Age, Life Stage, Ethnicity, Faith, Disability, and Personal Circumstances Influence the Kind of Volunteering People Do?

There is some evidence that people from different demographic backgrounds may be more likely to engage in different domains of volunteering. For example, women in the Beyond Us and Them survey were more likely to volunteer in domains related to animal welfare. People from non-white ethnic backgrounds were more likely to volunteer in domains related to crime and reducing prejudice and discrimination. However, for other domains of volunteering and when exploring other demographic characteristics, the evidence was inconsistent and additional data is needed to make more robust conclusions.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings in this report have several implications for fostering both social cohesion and volunteering behaviours within communities. Given that there is a bidirectional relationship between volunteering and horizontal cohesion, investing in infrastructure to support both horizontal cohesion and volunteering is likely to be doubly effective in promoting both. In contrast, although volunteering may bolster vertical cohesion (with the state), it does not seem to be the case that building stronger links to hierarchical structures will necessarily promote volunteering (indeed, we would speculate that there could be counteracting effects such as reducing people's time or capacity for volunteering).

Second, it is clearly useful for organisations to understand the people and places where cohesion or volunteering initiatives are being implemented. The strongest impact of volunteering on social cohesion was in volunteering to work in and improve the local areas in which volunteers live. Understanding the distinctive needs and issues that are important to volunteers and communities will be crucial in developing effective initiatives that build social cohesion. We also know there is likely to be large variation between individuals who live in the same community – some will feel highly cohesive and willing to volunteer whereas others will not. A better understanding of the factors that drive these individual differences will enable organisations to better understand who in their communities is likely to volunteer and feel the most cohesive, and how to encourage people who are not.

Our evidence also leads us to affirm that both formal and informal forms of volunteering have roles to play in building social cohesion. Although formal volunteering tends to have a stronger impact on cohesion, the effect of informal cohesion is still strong and positive and should not be discounted. This is especially true given that a frequently cited barrier to volunteering is time commitments and constraints. Informal volunteering, or helping behaviours that do not require an explicit commitment, may be easier to encourage than formal volunteering, and therefore may be a more amenable route for embedding volunteering behaviours (and the subsequent cohesion) within communities.

Close attention also needs to be paid to the domain in which people are volunteering, as different domains of volunteering may have different impacts on social cohesion. Volunteering in domains such as improving the local neighbourhood have a positive impact on social cohesion, but in other domains such as animal welfare and reducing prejudice and discrimination there can be negative impacts on social cohesion. It may be that positive relationships between social cohesion and volunteering reflect proactive behaviours (e.g., helping people within the local community) whereas negative relationships reflect preventative efforts (e.g., reducing prejudice and discrimination) where the motive to volunteer depends on perceiving there to be concerns over lack of cohesion. This highlights that we should not always aim or expect to improve cohesion and volunteering at the same time. In some cases, it is people's recognition that there is a deficit in social cohesion that may motivate their volunteering. Conversely, in a highly cohesive context some individuals may begin to feel complacent (there is always someone else who is likely to volunteer, or they feel there is no real need for more volunteering). It is also important to bear in mind the social and psychological costs of volunteering in situations that may be distressing, hazardous, or require additional support and monitoring, or those that might disconnect rather than connect volunteers to their immediate communities.

Concluding Remarks

Overall, there is a clear relationship between volunteering and social cohesion, which appears bidirectional in the case of horizontal cohesion and unidirectional in the case of vertical cohesion. Investment in people and social infrastructure that supports either volunteering or social cohesion is therefore likely to be mutually beneficial for both objectives. Across Britain there is wide variation in feelings of social cohesion and rates of volunteering, both between communities and between individuals. When developing initiatives aimed at fostering either social cohesion or volunteering, attention needs to be paid to both the location and wider context in which initiatives are being developed, as well considering which individuals these initiatives do and do not reach. Understanding the needs and issues that are relevant to communities and encouraging volunteering behaviours to tackle these will foster a greater sense of social cohesion.

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