

USER VOICE

A yellow line graphic that starts as a horizontal line on the left, dips down into a V-shape, and then rises back to a horizontal line on the right.

THE VOICE OF PEOPLE UNDERTAKING UNPAID WORK

A **THEMATIC** INSPECTION

FEBRUARY 2025

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Contents

Foreword	2
Project Overview	4
Key Findings	5
Research Sample	6
Pre-unpaid Work	8
Personalised Approach	11
Accessibility	15
Purpose of Unpaid Work	18
Skill Acquisition and Employability	23
Good Practice	26
Group Environment	28
Unpaid Work Staff	30
Procedural Justice	36
Expectations	38
Peer-led Solutions	41

FOREWORD

We are delighted to have been commissioned by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation on this thematic inspection of the delivery of unpaid work to capture the voice of people with experience of unpaid work.

User Voice exists to reduce the harm caused by crime and punishment. We believe that the justice system can and should fundamentally change, so that people caught up in it can transform their lives, benefitting victims and increasing public safety.

We are a charity led by lived experience. Hearing and acting on this lived experience is crucial to breaking down barriers and getting to what are the real issues for those in the justice system. We can do this because we've been there – in court, in prison, on probation – so we understand the challenges that those in the justice system face, first hand.

Like any service, customer insights are key to improving the justice system, so we are really delighted that the Probation Inspectorate genuinely want to hear these insights as a key part of improving their practice.

From our work across the country in undertaking this thematic consultation, we are pleased to report that the majority of those on unpaid work found it an overall positive experience with 7 in 10 people responding positively when reporting on their experiences.

Relationships with unpaid work staff are often strong and people reported being supported, listened to and respected. This applied particularly to those who took part in unpaid work schemes such as charity work, sports and retail who found the experience worthwhile and helpful for their future prospects.

“Working in the cemetery, you see the difference. When working you have people coming up to you to say you are doing a great job, not making the cemetery messy. It makes you feel good and that you are doing something worthwhile.”

They also reported that they were able to start their unpaid work without unnecessary delays meaning their reparations to the community were timely, which is really important,

Conversely, those who took part in activities such as litter picking, textile work, and painting found their activities to be more monotonous and primarily more about just punishment than rehabilitation too. Additionally, being picked up in community payback branded vans and branded high visibility jackets were perceived as unnecessary and designed to embarrass people.

We were also concerned about the experiences of people with protected characteristics and other vulnerabilities. Disabled people undertaking unpaid work generally reported a worse experience than others across all areas of unpaid work. Additionally, neurodivergent people undertaking unpaid work generally reported a worse experience than neurotypical people across all areas of unpaid work. Additionally, many service users told us that they are struggling with the cost of travelling to unpaid work.

We are a solution focused charity, so as part of this and other thematic inspections we are commissioned to undertake we always ask those who are living through justice system experiences how the system can improve. Ideas for those undertaking unpaid work included respondents suggesting that more of their time should be spent on training so they could use their experience to help them enter the job market. They also spoke about how unpaid work wasn't tailored to their skills, and this meant it was less likely that their time wasn't useful enough in how it benefitted local communities.

People also spoke to us about a lack of dignity, and a solution to this would be to stop visibly indicating and marking those who are doing unpaid work in the community, as the title of this report so viscerally illustrates.

What is clear from this report, is that with the right support, unpaid work has much potential to play a key role in meaningful rehabilitation, although there are areas, especially in relation to protected characteristics and other vulnerabilities, as well as making sure the skills of those on unpaid work are more aligned with the needs of communities, that need to be improved. We sincerely hope that the recommendations in this report, are utilised to further improve both its operations and positive impacts

Lucie Russell

CEO

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Undertaking unpaid work as part of a community-based sentence has evolved through various legislative changes since it was introduced as community service in the Criminal Justice Act 1972. Rolled out nationally in 1975, it was originally a stand-alone sentence called a community service order. In its various iterations it has subsequently been called community punishment, unpaid work and community payback. Community payback and unpaid work is the current terminology, and the terms frequently get conflated.

Following the introduction of the Transforming Rehabilitation programme, from 2015 unpaid work was delivered in each of the 21 contract package areas by community rehabilitation companies. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 adversely affected community payback performance over a sustained period. Although it precipitated some innovative projects, it inevitably reduced the capacity of community payback teams to deliver UPW placements. Backlogs in terms of commencement and completion inevitably developed and a national strategy to address the issue was implemented in 2021. There has been some improvement but overall national performance for the completion of unpaid work requirements within 12 months stood at only 53% in the first quarter of 2023/2024.

In response to these challenges, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation conducted a thematic inspection of the delivery of unpaid work. User Voice was commissioned to capture the voice of people with experience of unpaid work for the inspection.

The overall objective of the consultation was to better understand people's experience of unpaid work and whether it meets their needs. Furthermore, our objectives were:

- To understand what support people undertaking unpaid work have, or haven't, had from unpaid work staff.
- To understand whether people find their unpaid work to be punitive, rehabilitative and/or reparative.
- To understand if people develop skills or improve their employability/career development whilst undertaking unpaid work.
- To understand how well-organised unpaid work activities are.
- To highlight any good practices that could be built upon by the service.

APPROACH

PRE-FIELDWORK

- Research materials were co-produced with the involvement of a lived experience panel that had experience of unpaid work.
- Participant recruitment had two facets:
 - 1) In-person focus groups set up across all 6 regions.
- 2) All people on unpaid work across 6 regions contacted to complete an online questionnaire.

FIELDWORK

- 17 focus groups were conducted across 6 probation regions by a team of 5 lived experience peer researchers and the project lead.
- Online questionnaires were completed by participants across all six regions.

DATA ANALYSIS

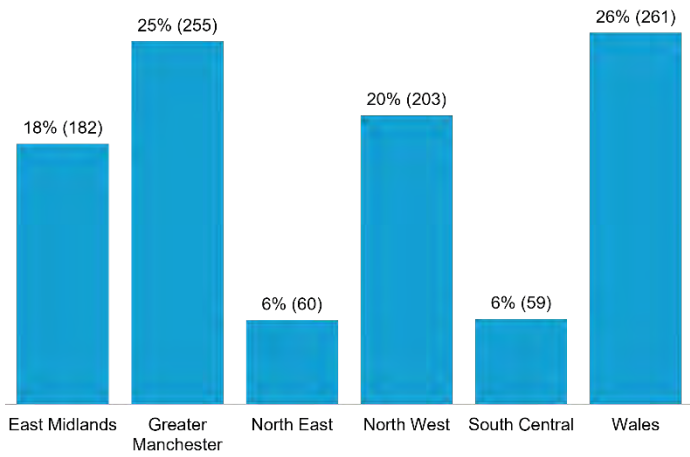
- All focus groups were transcribed.
- Thematic data analysis was completed on all qualitative data.
- Statistical analysis was completed on all Likert-scale questionnaire responses.
- An analysis session was held with all the research staff involved on the project. The purpose was to identify key themes in the data and areas of focus for the report.

KEY FINDINGS

- **7 in 10** people reported an overall positive experience whilst undertaking unpaid work with 4 in 5 starting their unpaid work without unnecessary delays.
- Those undertaking unpaid work in Wales have a better experience than those in England across all areas of unpaid work.
- Disabled people undertaking unpaid work generally reported a worse experience than others across all areas of unpaid work.
- Neurodivergent people undertaking unpaid work generally reported a worse experience than neurotypical people across all areas of unpaid work.
- Relationships with unpaid work staff are strong and people reported being supported, listened to and respected.
- Some unpaid work activities are considered more rehabilitative and an opportunity to give back to society than others.
- People want a tailored approach to unpaid work that is based on their interests, skills, and future career choices.
- Many are struggling with the cost of travelling to unpaid work.
- Being picked up in community payback branded vans and branded high visibility jackets are seen as an unnecessary tool to embarrass people.

RESEARCH SAMPLE

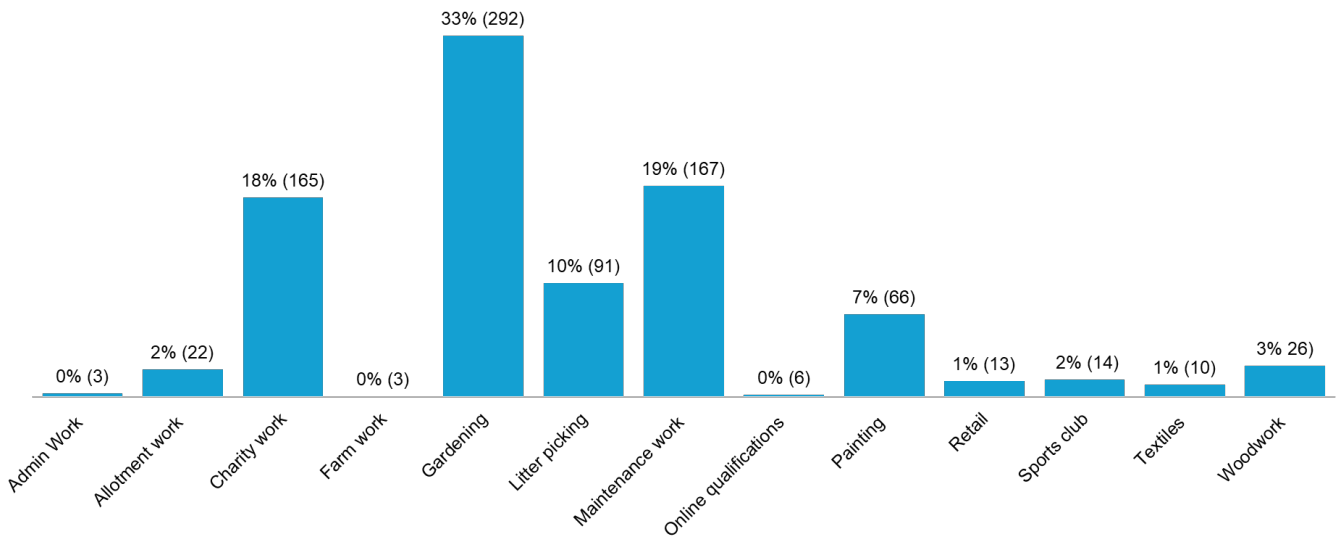
PROBATION REGION



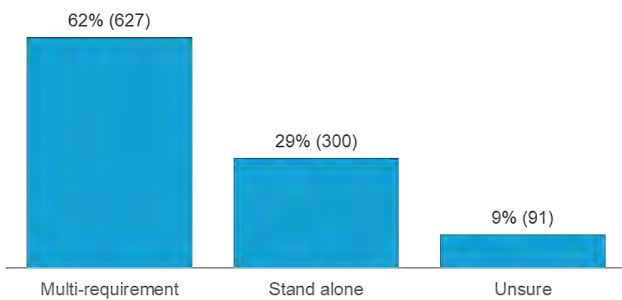
- 6** Different probation regions
- 1,020** People had their say
- 76** Focus group participants
- 946** People surveyed

*2 participants completed a survey and participated in a focus group.

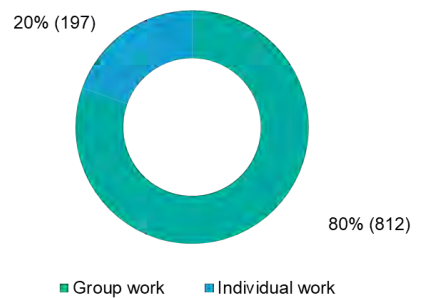
UNPAID WORK ACTIVITY



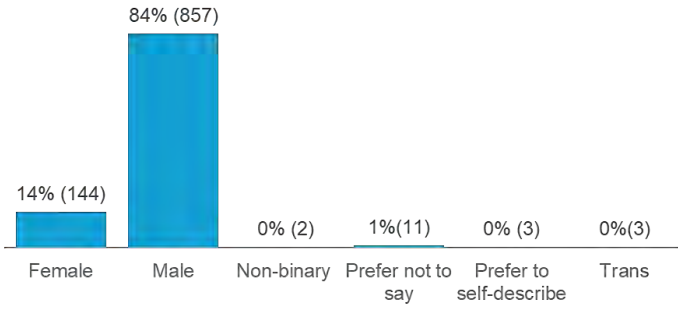
TYPE OF ORDER



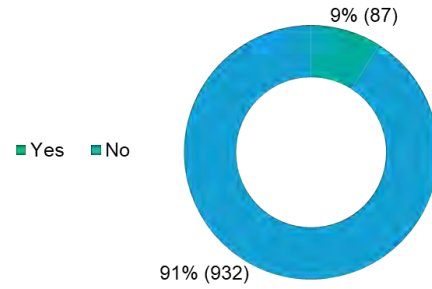
GROUP WORK OR INDIVIDUAL WORK



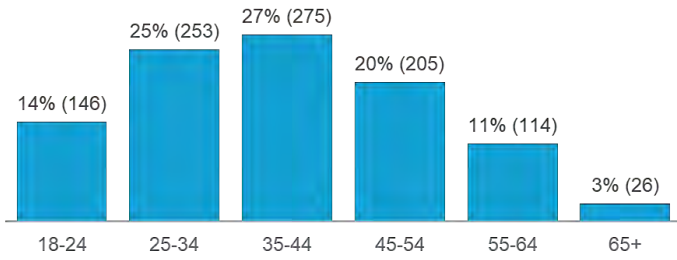
GENDER



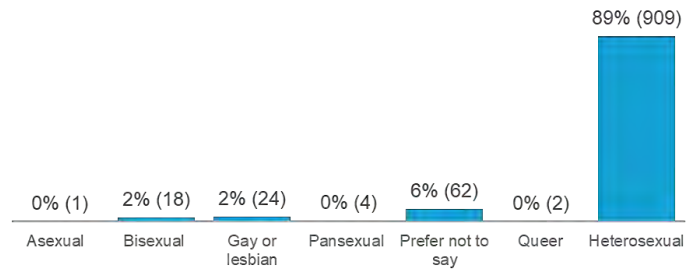
DISABLED PERSON



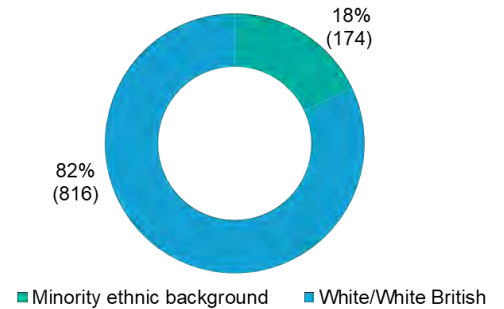
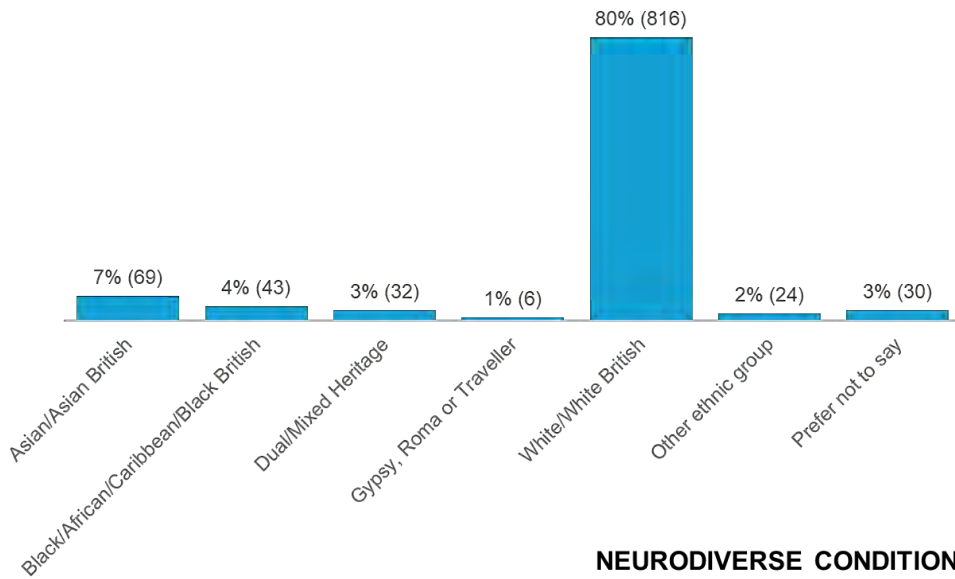
AGE



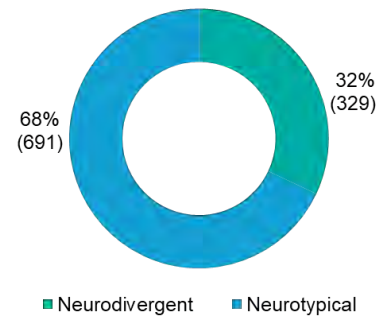
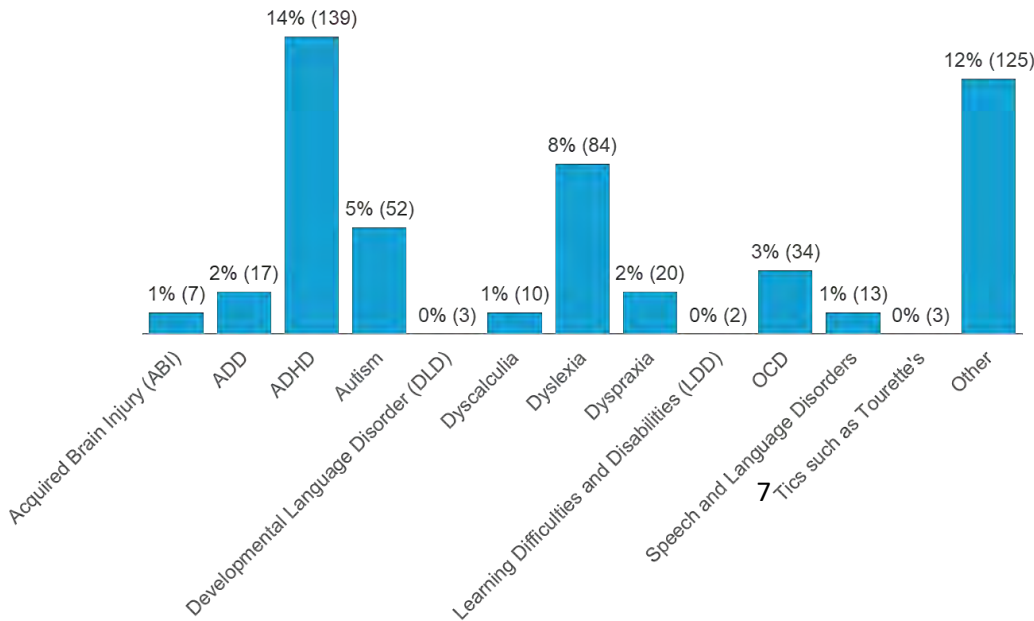
SEXUAL ORIENTATION



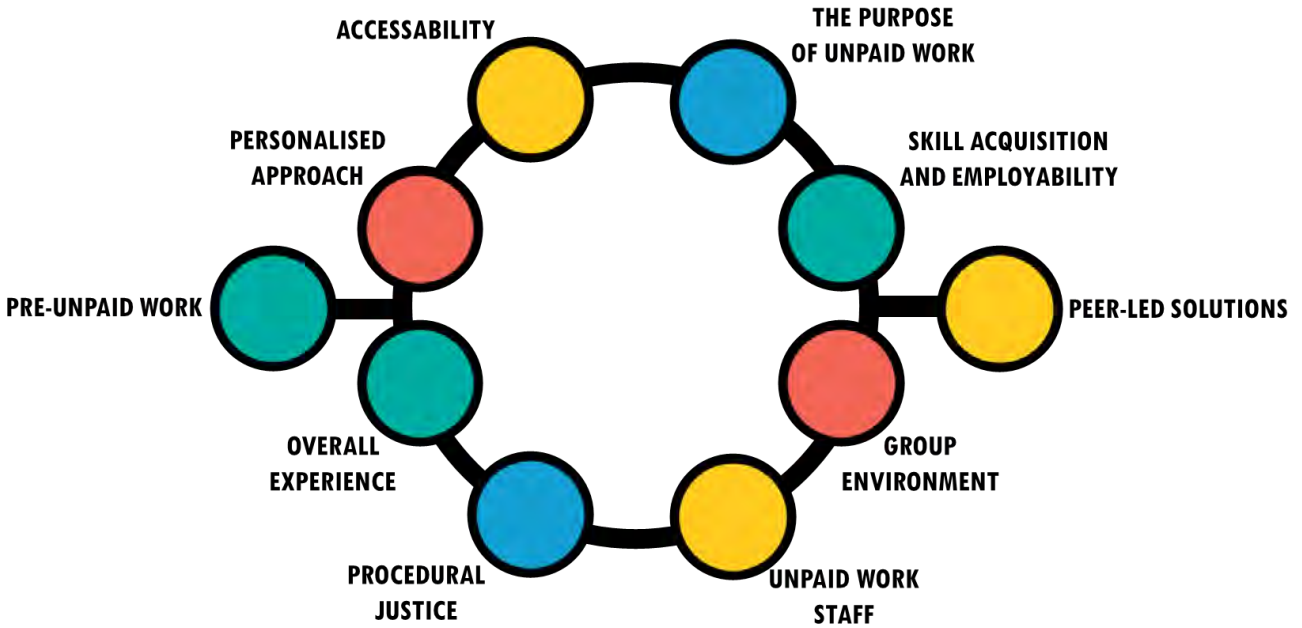
ETHNICITY



NEURODIVERSE CONDITIONS



REPORT MAP

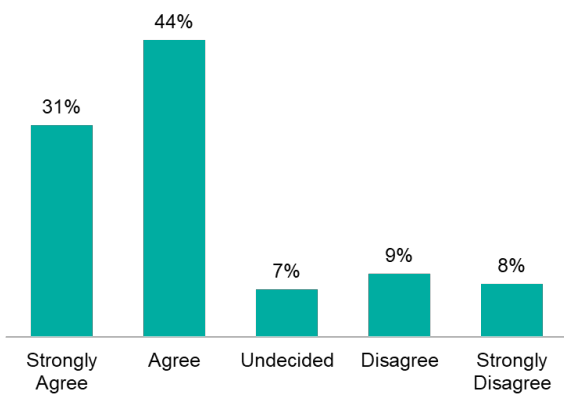


PRE-UNPAID WORK

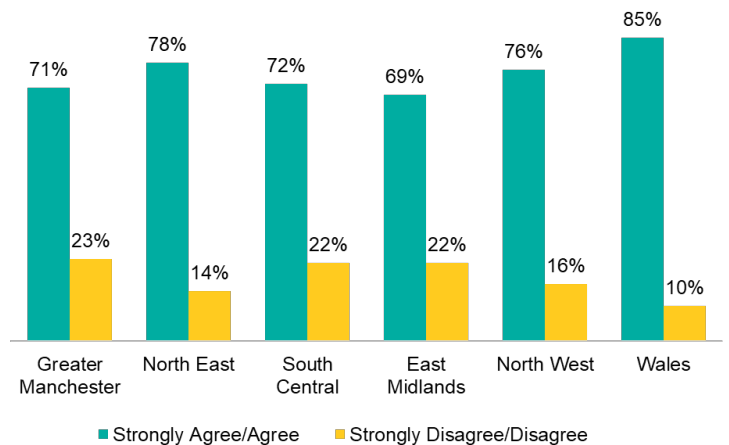
We asked participants about their experience in the build-up to their unpaid work placement. Specifically, we asked about how well informed they felt, if they were able to start without any unnecessary delays, and if Education and Training was offered as part of their unpaid work.

3 in 4 people told us that their unpaid work was discussed with them in advance. Respondents in Wales were more likely to report being well informed compared to other regions.

Q: My unpaid work placement was discussed with me in advance

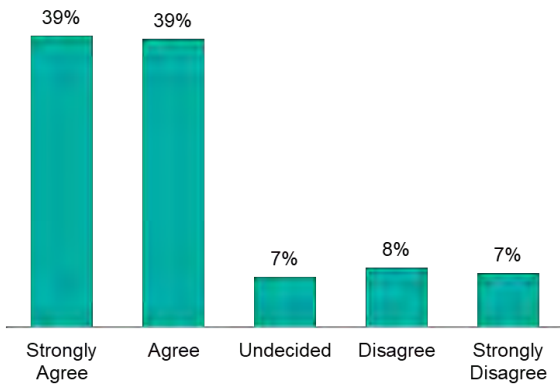


Q: My unpaid work placement was discussed with me in advance

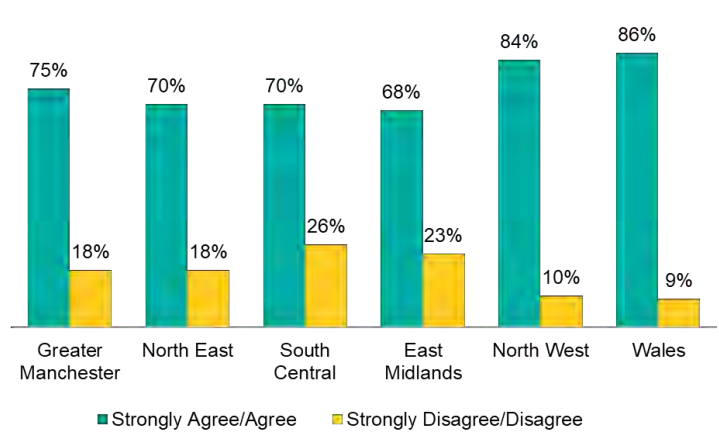


Almost 4 in 5 people told us they were able to start their unpaid work without any unnecessary delays. Respondents in Wales and the North West were less likely to report delays compared to other regions.

Q: I was able to start my unpaid work placement without any unnecessary delays

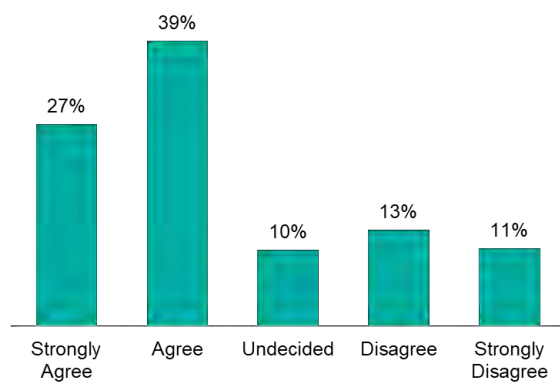


Q: I was able to start my unpaid work placement without any unnecessary delays

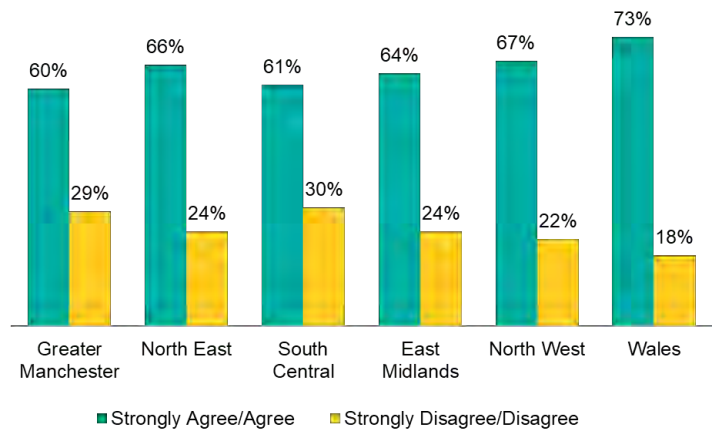


2 in 3 people told us they were offered Education and Training as part of their unpaid work hours.

Q: Education or training was offered to me as part of my unpaid work requirement



Q: Education or training was offered to me as part of my unpaid work requirement



Online courses were offered to the majority of focus group participants, but most didn't find them beneficial.

Most focus group participants were aware they could complete a percentage of their unpaid work hours on online courses. Some found completing the online courses beneficial. However, the majority used them to get their hours down and didn't find much benefit and would prefer an option of in-person training and education.

Health and Safety seemed to be the most popular course that added the most benefit. Female focus groups told us that they didn't find much benefit in most of the courses and that most

courses are tailored towards men such as construction and electrician courses. However, some women told us that this isn't necessarily negative.

"Nah, just online hours, which gets some of your hours knocked off. Just... Same as that, really. Some in-person training would have been nice."

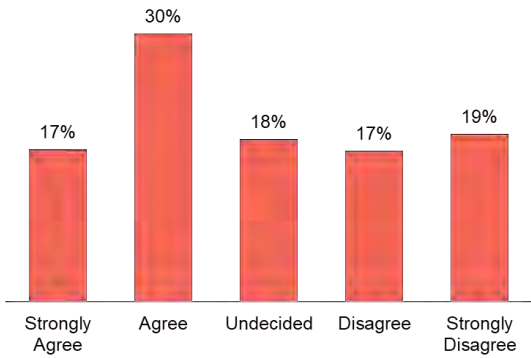
"I started doing them and it was all about social care and I thought what does this have to do with me."

"I enjoyed the electrician one which I liked for knowledge. It's usually for men isn't it. But it's taught me to not rely on men. I think it's good."

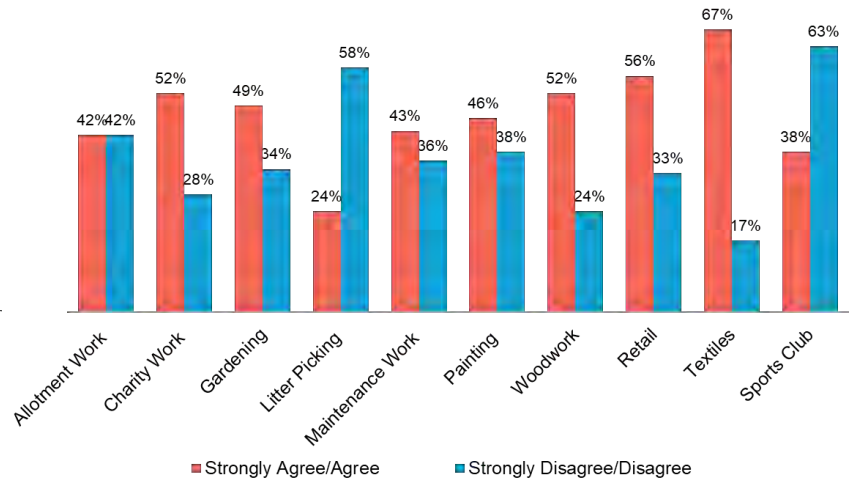
PERSONALISED APPROACH

Almost half told us that their unpaid work activity took into account their skills and interests. Textiles, retail and charitable activities were most found to be relevant to the skills and interests of participants.

Q: My unpaid work activity takes into account my skills and interests

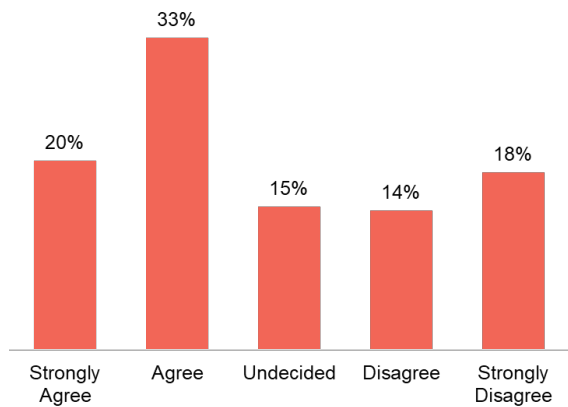


Q: My unpaid work activity takes into account my skills and interests

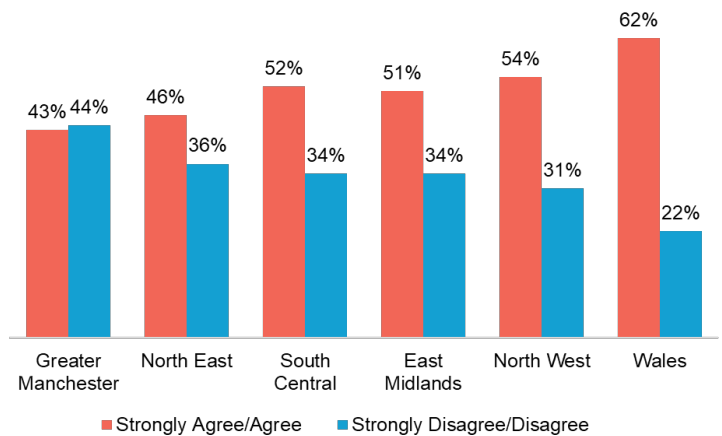


Just over half told us that their unpaid work activity took their individual experiences into account.

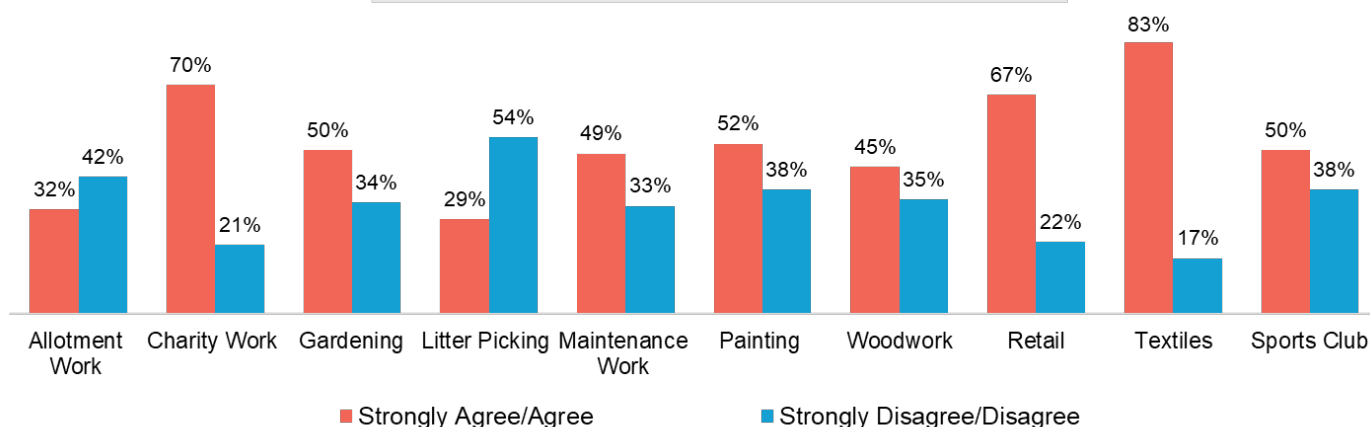
Q: My unpaid work activity takes into consideration my experiences and personal circumstances



Q: My unpaid work activity takes into consideration my experiences and personal circumstances



Q: My unpaid work activity takes into consideration my experiences and personal circumstances



The majority of focus group participants told us their unpaid work is not tailored to their individual needs.

Some focus group participants told us that they were not given “manual labour” as an activity due to being a physically disabled person. A couple of participants said that they had to do physical tasks despite not being capable of doing so.

Those who did something less tailored to them would have liked to be asked about their skills and interests. Litter picking, allotment work and working in a sports club were activities that people reported to be less relevant to their skills and interests.

People in Wales were more likely to state that their unpaid work activity took into consideration their experiences and personal circumstances with **62%** (153/245) compared to the average of **49%** (338/696) across England.

People in Wales were also more likely to answer that their unpaid work activity takes into account their skills and interests at a rate of **58%** (141/245) compared to **43%** (298/698) across England.

“I don’t see the benefit it in me doing this. They could ask everyone about their skills and ask for their input.”

"No. I think it's just that they've got this to do, and this group can do that. They don't ask us."

"I have five fractures and I shouldn't be doing manual labour. I should have retired when I was 65 but at 73, they gave me community work, how ridiculous is that? Were out here with big machines working so hard. They don't care."

Those with small children and in full-time employment find it difficult to fit in their unpaid work hours.

Parents of small children told us that it is difficult to juggle childcare and other aspects of their lives whilst completing their unpaid work hours. Some participants were instructed to find alternatives for childcare to fulfil their hours. However, they told us that they either don't have family to rely on or don't have the money to pay for private childcare.

Those in full-time employment struggled to fit in their hours with some taking holiday to complete their hours. However, some employed people told us that despite it being a struggle, it is part of their order, and they must get on with it.

"I have five fractures and I shouldn't be doing manual labour. I should have retired when I was 65 but at 73, they gave me community work, how ridiculous is that? Were out here with big machines working so hard. They don't care."

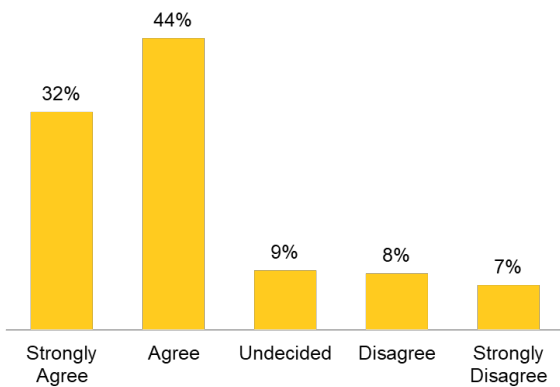
"They don't care if you have kids, my PO goes to me can you get someone else to pick your kids up and I was like, No I can't. I'm the mum, I need to be there."

"If you communicate what your commitments are beforehand of your life. You have no choice but to work around. Here I mean if you if they know you work five days a week, they 9 till five they can't put you in here, that's not fair on you innit."

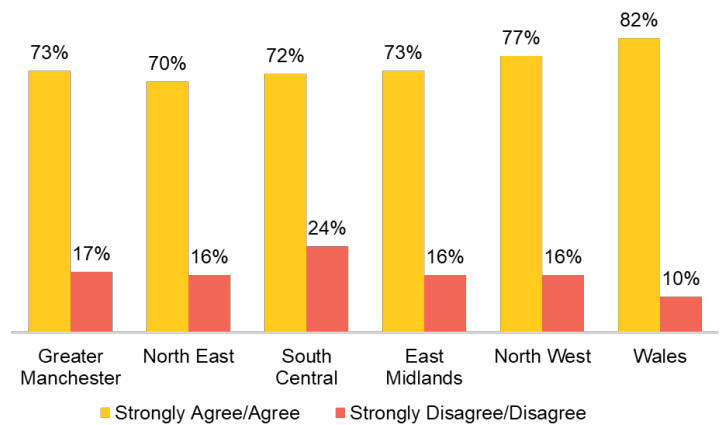
ACCESSIBILITY

Over three-quarters told us that their unpaid work was easy to travel to. While those living with a disability found unpaid work more difficult to travel to.

Q: My unpaid work is easy to travel to



Q: My unpaid work is easy to travel to



Participants living with a disability told us they found travelling to unpaid work difficult compared to non-disabled participants. **67%** (50/75) of disabled people reported difficulties compared to the **77%** (666/867) of non-disabled participants across England and Wales.

Women told us they find travelling to unpaid work less difficult compared to Male participants. **74%** (587/789) of men reported their unpaid work being easy to travel to compared to **87%** (117/134) of women. This difference was down to women being less likely to be given an activity type that was further out of town.

Many struggle with the cost of travelling to unpaid work across all regions.

Participants told us that they struggle with the costs associated with travelling to unpaid work, especially given the current cost-of-living crisis.

In addition, there's a lack of consistency as to whether people are able to get their travel costs reimbursed. When people do get their travel costs back there's a lack of consistency in how it is processed. Some participants told us that you can only get your money back from the reception at probation which can be embarrassing. Others told us that their supervisor reimburses their travel costs.

"I mean look at the cost of living today and I mean it's quite high so people might be struggling to put food in front of them, even if you've got a job, some of these jobs aren't very well paid and it can affect people in a lot of ways so if they're doing this then it's taking away their livelihood so then it can prove hard for them to have money for food and transport."

"We don't get reimbursed for the travel expenses. We should because many of us are struggling."

"I get a taxi here every day. But it's 15 quid there and 15 quid back."

There's a lack of consistency with whether or not people can be picked up for their unpaid work activity. Some areas offered it, whereas others didn't.

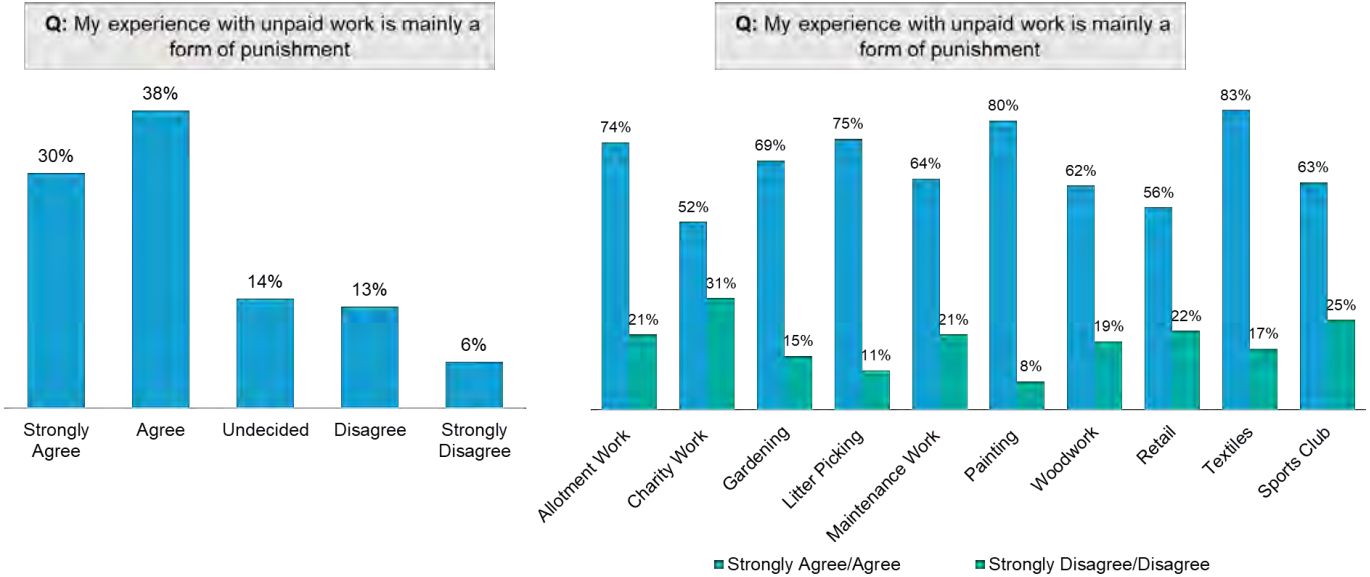
"We get picked up from town every time... They take us back as well. We don't pay for travel."

"We don't get a lift... It depends on traffic. Like when I used to work and stuff it would take me about 40 minutes."

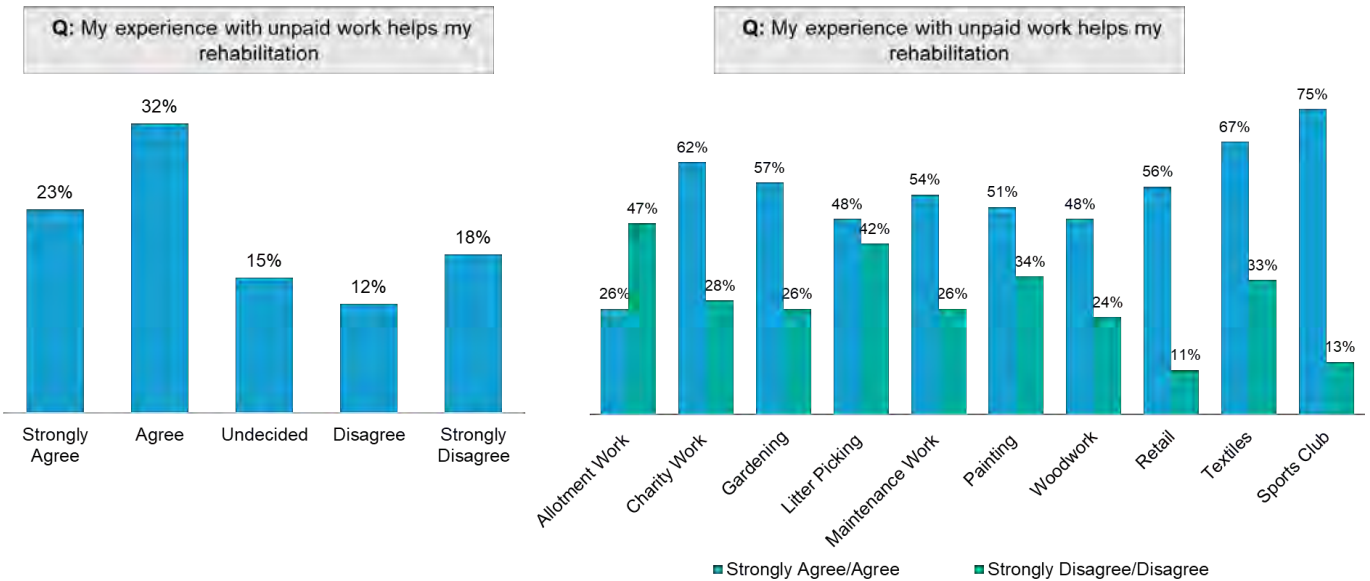
"I live on the other side of Barry, it's not too bad because I can get a lift if I need it."

THE PURPOSE OF UNPAID WORK

More than 2 in 3 believe their experience with unpaid work is mainly a form of punishment. Allotment work and gardening were more likely to be seen as punitive.



More than half told User Voice their experience with unpaid work helps their rehabilitation. Those activities considered to be more rehabilitative are working at a sports club, charity work, and textiles-based work.



Most participants told us they think unpaid work should focus more on rehabilitation rather than punishment.

People told us that if unpaid work aims to stop reoffending, a more rehabilitative approach should be taken. However, some people saw the benefit of punishment as a preventative measure.

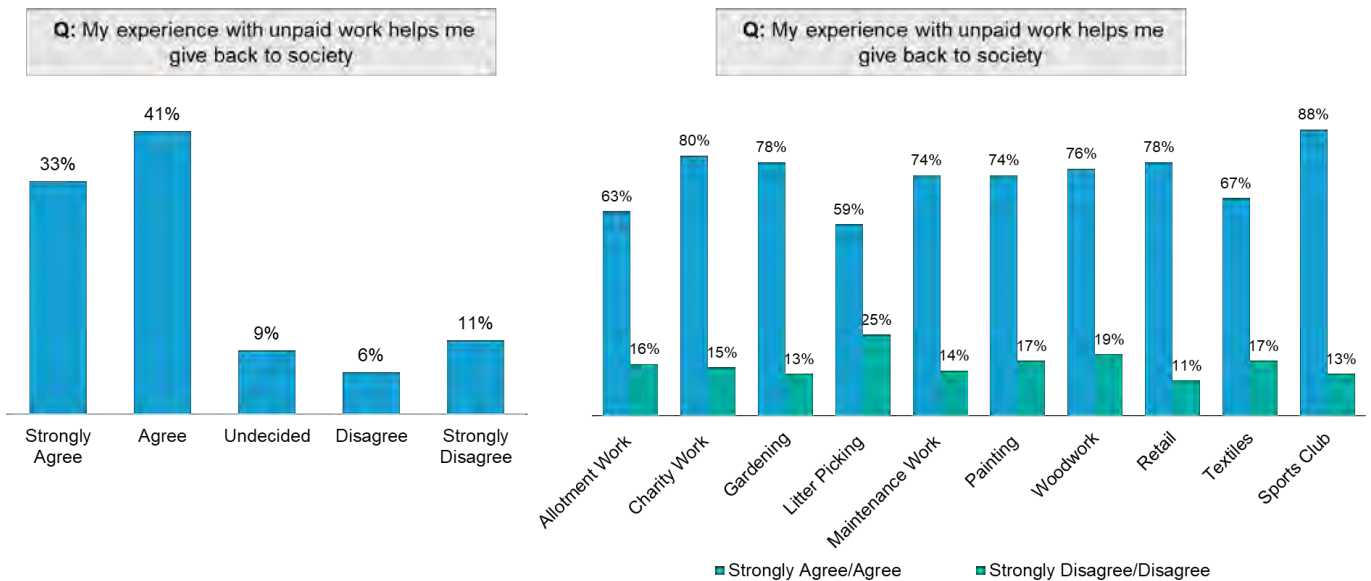
"I wouldn't really call it rehabilitation to be honest, there's a lot of different options they could do to help with rehabilitation rather than unpaid work. Realistically unpaid work, you could sit and do your unpaid work for 100 hours, you could do those 100 hours, but realistically, what skills have you gained at the end of it."

"This isn't rehabilitation, what's this? What's it rebuilding? They don't tell you to do anything they don't put you on towards work they don't help you out with anything like that they just say go and do that see you later."

"It should focus on rehabilitation, hundred million percent, because rehabilitation is what makes you not reoffend."

"I actually think it does rehabilitate you. Because if you do something bad you go straight back to prisons, over here you working and busy so it keeps you out of trouble. I think it's changed me a little bit."

Almost 3 in 4 believe their experience with unpaid work helps them give back to society. Litter picking and allotment work were seen as activities that provide limited opportunities to give back to society.



The vast majority of focus group participants told us that they prefer to do something reparative. However, opinion was split as whether what they have been doing gives back to society.

People from certain activities such as allotment work told us that in most cases, they're just trying to get their hours done rather than doing anything that contributes to society. For example, people in the North East told us that the food grown at the allotments is supposed to go to local food banks but the majority of it ends up being thrown away.

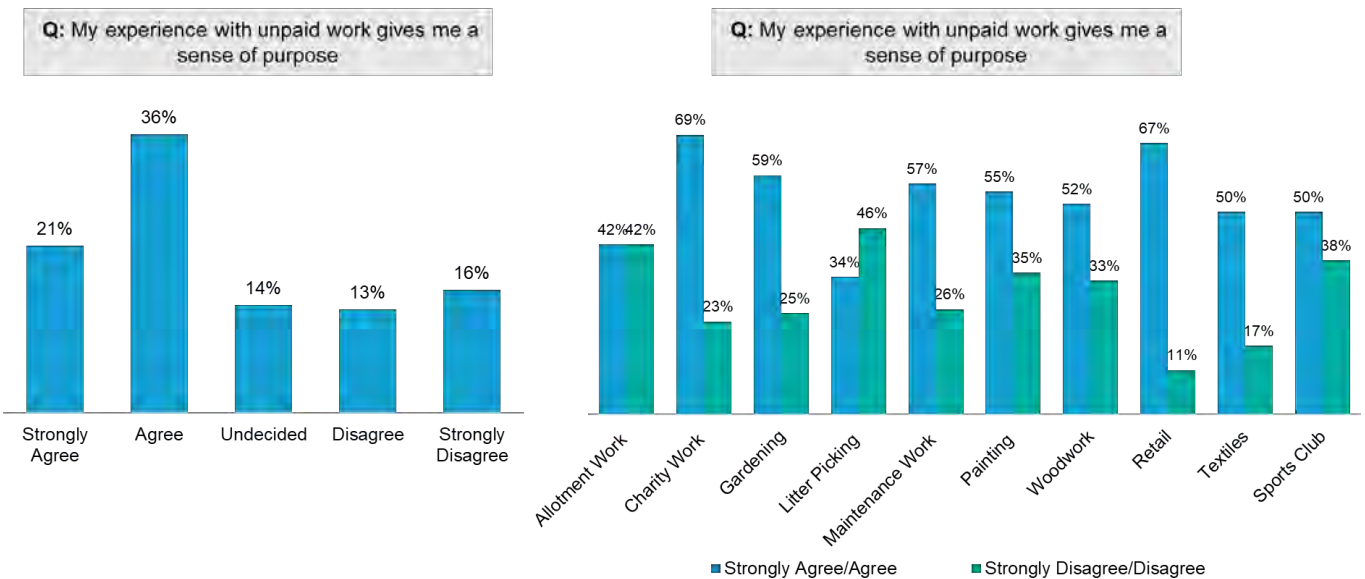
"I'm just here to get my hours done, mate. I'd rather it benefit people but the reality is, they say the food we grow goes to a food bank but it doesn't, it just goes to waste. The potential is there."

"Working in the cemetery, you see the difference. When working you have people coming up to you to say you are doing a great job, not making the cemetery messy. It makes you feel good and that you are doing something worthwhile."

"I don't think I'm giving anything back to the community by cutting some grass. There are a thousand better ways to do that."

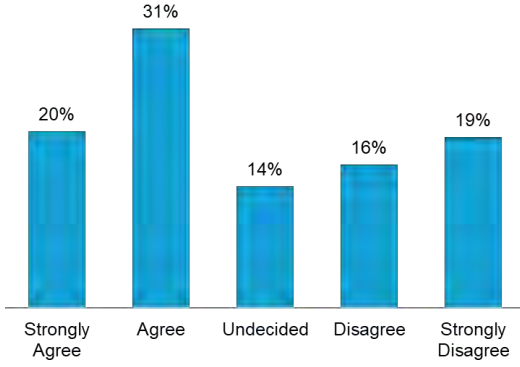
"To me it feels like if you're in your local area, it does have a better feeling if that makes sense but if you're just anywhere it does just feel like it's a punishment. So if you could choose to like, I don't know, be where you want to be in a sense, it could help."

Over half of participants told User Voice their experience with unpaid work gives them a sense of purpose. Working in a charity shop was the activity most seen to give a sense of purpose.

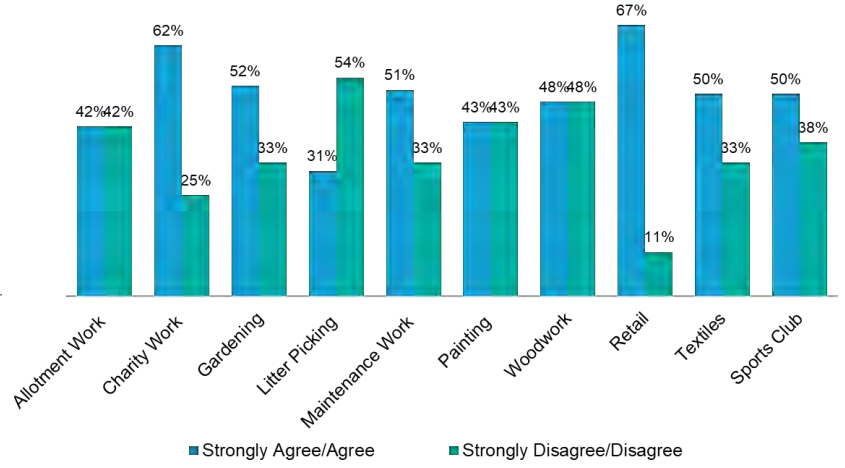


Over half of participants said their experience with unpaid work improves their self-esteem. Working in a charity shop and retail activities were noted as activities that improve self-esteem. Whereas litter picking was reported as least likely to improve self-esteem.

Q: My experience with unpaid work improves my self-esteem

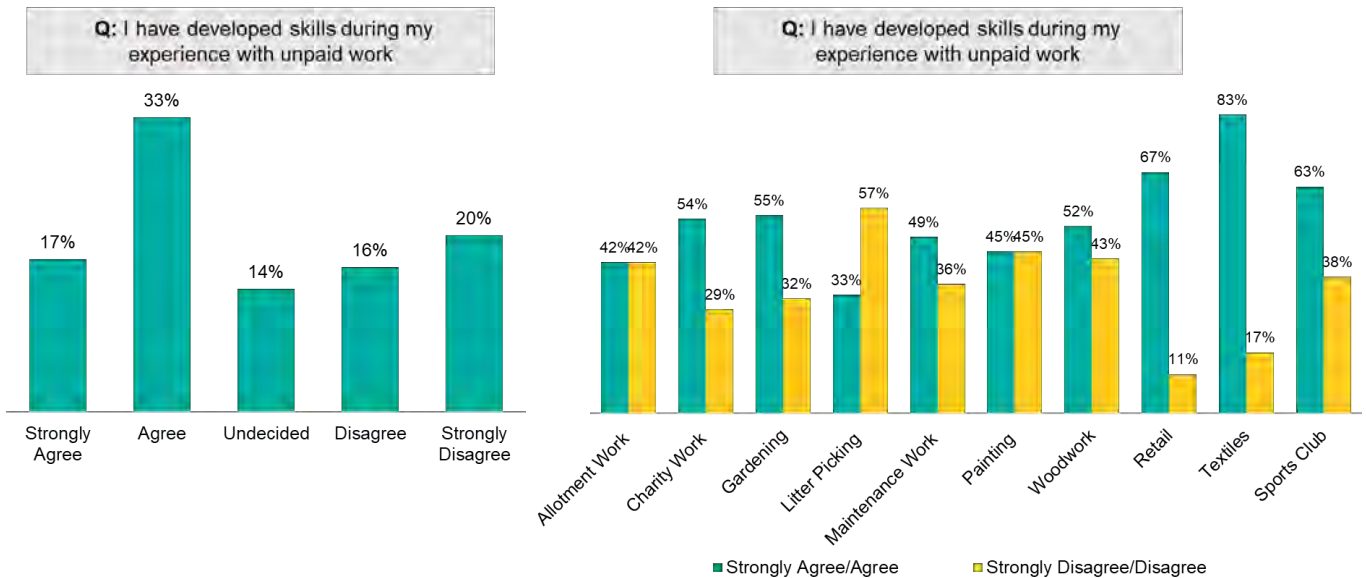


Q: My experience with unpaid work improves my self-esteem



SKILL ACQUISITION AND EMPLOYABILITY

Half of the survey participants told us they developed skills during their unpaid work experience. However, skill acquisition varied significantly depending on the activity.



Whether people acquired skills during their unpaid work experience was dependent on the activity. Those who were placed in a charity shop or were gardening were more likely to acquire skills than those litter picking for example. Some people told us that they developed communication skills and their confidence. Whereas others developed skills directly associated with the task such as using a strimmer.

Neurodivergent people were less likely to say that they developed skills during their unpaid work experience, with **41%** (124/302) agreeing to the statement, compared to the **54%** (348/639) neurotypical people that agreed.

Women were more likely to tell us that they developed skills during their unpaid work experience at a rate of **64%** (87/135) compared to the **48%** (381/787) of the men that agreed to the statement.

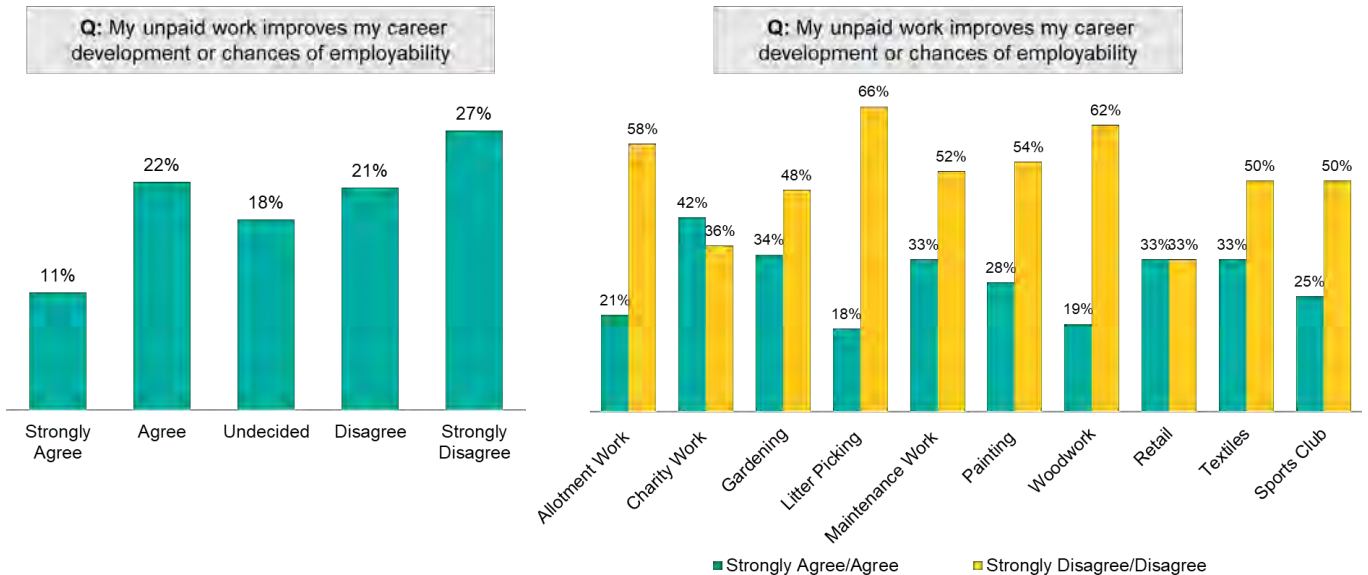
“Yeah, to me, I'm a qualified mechanic. To me this doesn't offer me any skills at all. But it broadens your skills a bit if you've never used a strimmer before or you've never used a lawnmower or never done it, fair enough, you're learning some new skills.”

"Yeah, gardening skills. Also, the online courses which help to get some certificate."

"Yeah, I think it does, you talk to people, it builds confidence... It helps your communication skills"

"I think with the gardening stuff, you are brushing up your skills, summertime is coming and you see other people making a mess of their bushes and gardens. So, I can go up to them and say give me X amount of money and I can do this with the right tools. I can do a little butterfly or trim up the edges if you want me to. that way I'm brushing up my skills section by section."

1 in 3 told us that their experience with unpaid work has helped their career development or led to a change of employment. Charity work was most frequently cited as the activity that benefits an individual’s career path.



The majority of focus group participants told us that their unpaid work activity has not improved their career advancement or made them more employable. To improve the chance of career development or employability, people suggested a tailored approach to activity allocation starting with inductions and utilising regular catchups.

However, a minority told us that the experience has given them ideas for future careers or that they have developed skills that will help them with employment.

“When I was doing the leaves, that was basic manual maintenance, when I went out, I thought maybe I can do that for a career, it gave me ideas.”

“They should just ask each individual when you go for a meeting with probation, they should ask you what you want to do... Then they can match this to your career choice or interest.”

“Not really, no [it doesn't improve employability]. Maybe having more jobs centred around trades or skill-based type things would help.”

“It should be more independent. People should use their skills to go help people in the community instead of putting everyone in one box.”

GOOD PRACTICE: SUPPORT FINDING EMPLOYMENT

DT [pseudonym] had never had a full-time job when he started his unpaid work hours. He was tasked with the upkeep of local gardens in his community and found that he enjoyed learning how to use the tools and seeing the fruits of his labour.

On top of the manual skills he learned, it was the comradery and teamwork skills that stood out to DT as being the most beneficial to his development and overall positive experience.

DT was treated with respect by his supervisor who saw him more like an employee than a criminal. When he told his supervisor how much he was enjoying working for free, his supervisor said he'd get him a full-time role in a similar position.

Six months later, DT is still in the job and thriving. It's what gets him out of bed in the morning and gives him a routine whilst keeping him away from the bad influences of his past.

DT's unpaid work experience has “changed his life forever.” He is about to embark on a landscaping qualification and looks to develop his career further. Once he has 5 years or so of experience under his belt, DT would like to start his own company that works with young people with lived experience of the criminal justice system. He wants to show them that there are alternatives to making money than through crime.

“When I was given unpaid work, I was relieved I wasn't going to prison, embarrassed that it had got to this point and dreaded the thought of doing unpaid work where anyone passing by would know. I thought I'd be in a public park picking litter with an 'I'm a bad person' label hanging off me...

...But it wasn't dreadful, it was the complete opposite! The supervisor treated us like employees. People who pass us don't judge, they thank us for looking after their relative's graves. It's not litter picking either, it was learning to use proper gardening tools, learning that health and safety isn't just boring stuff haha...

...My supervisor, Pete, he's an amazing guy who got me the job I'm in now. It was weird, one day I realised I was enjoying working for free and when I told him he asked would

I do it full-time. I'd never had a full-time job before so to be honest, I didn't really believe he could help. In fact, I actually just didn't think he would want to help me out like he has. No one has before so why would he? But he did and here I am, six months in and about to start a landscaping qualification!..

...I love it, it's my reason for getting out of bed, it's my reason for keeping away from people who had helped get me in trouble. I'm not saying it wasn't my fault I ended up on court, it definitely was, but the fact I was hanging around with people who were committing crimes on a daily basis didn't help. This has helped me get a new set of mates. I'm down the pub with this lot on a Friday instead of what I used to do which is why I landed in court...

...Oh, I could list the practical skills I've learned all day, but to me, the real skill was learning about teamwork and stuff. Nothing feels better than finishing a job where it was a shit hole, sorry, a mess when you started and when you finish, it looks amazing. You look around and you're like 'We did this!' Then it's down to the pub to celebrate. That feels so good. I've learned to garden, I've learned about the different tools, what's best for what type of soil and stuff. But like I say, the best skill is teamwork. It was new to me, I was a loner, a 'weird kid', so it was brand new to me...

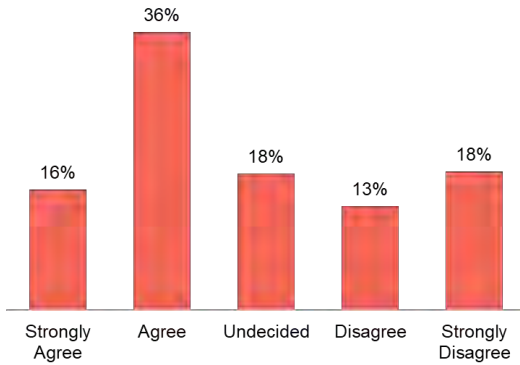
...I'd say I'm one of the lucky ones. There's people who I know who were given less interesting work or stuff that felt pointless and I know they're still dealing or whatever. Being given something, I was interested in and thanked for, as well as the supervisor treating me like a person, was a stroke of luck that's changed my life forever. I used to be up at all times, and my life was just chaos when I look back. Now I'm in a routine, up for a brew at 6 and never in bed after 10 pm. My life just feels calmer to be honest with you. And I've got direction now, I know where I'm heading, and it isn't to jail!..

...Well, the future, wow, so different than it did this time last year! I'm going to get my landscaping qualification first. Then I'm going to build on that, get at least 5 years of experience under my belt first. Then what I'd really like to do, and I don't know the ins and outs yet, but what I'd really like to do is set up my own company and work with young people who don't have like, what's it called, academic skills. I want to show people you don't have to use crime to earn money and to show them that people will help them. You just don't know how rewarding work can be until you find something you love, and it makes you want to share that feeling. Even though being a criminal was how I found that, I still feel lucky that I did."

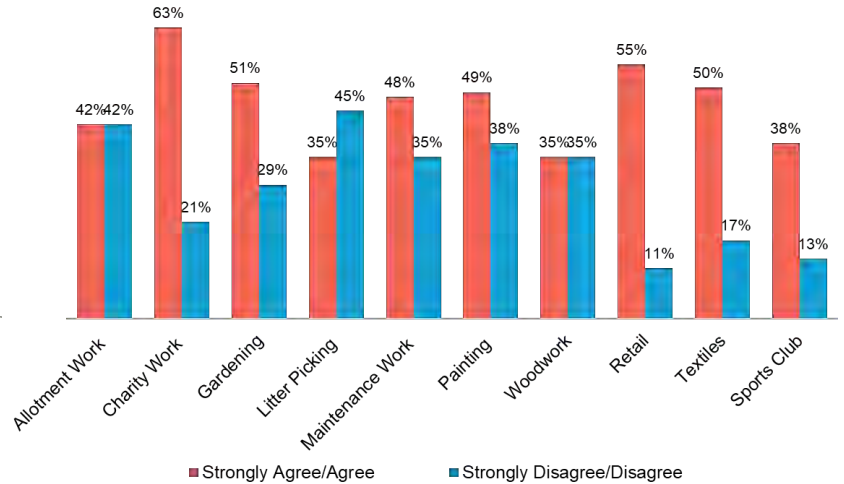
GROUP ENVIRONMENT

Just over half of survey participants told us that unpaid work has allowed them to build effective relationships.

Q: My unpaid work gives me the opportunity to build effective relationships



Q: My unpaid work gives me the opportunity to build effective relationships



Focus group participants told us that working in a group gave them a vital sense of community that they often lack.

Focus group participants generally spoke of a positive group environment. Some people told us they developed friendships during their unpaid work hours that would continue after their orders had finished. However, some participants said that there could be risks associated with the group environment at unpaid work, specifically for younger people or people with substance misuse disorders.

Some people told us that the group environment helped them to develop confidence and social skills, and even kept them on the path of sobriety. Others in the group were supportive regarding an individual's struggles with alcohol and substance misuse. However, some people said it was difficult to be in a group with others that had similar struggles with substances to themselves.

"You get to meet new people and everything like and just gives you a change of faces really as well like the advantage of it all meeting new people, people you've not met before and making new friends as well you know what I mean which I have done and everything like I get on quite well with a couple of the guys here like I can sit and talk to them during the breaks and its quite nice."

"You feel motivated with people around you which is good because it is a long day. You are a part of a team."

"If we don't have food, we will all share food. We are helpful. Nicki our supervisor will come with drinks, tea and biscuits."

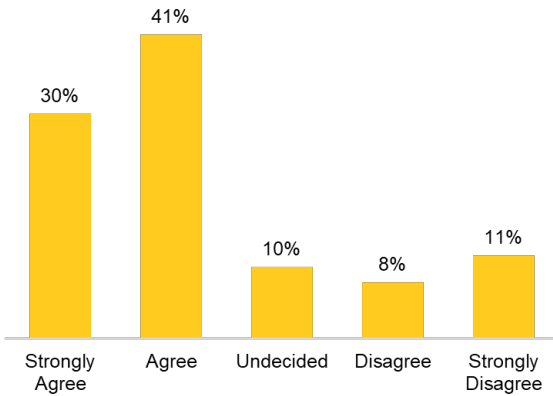
"It's good, you speak with people from different backgrounds and you learn from different people."

"If you're being done for drugs and you get put with people for the same thing, I don't think that's an ideal situation to be in the same group. It doesn't make sense does it."

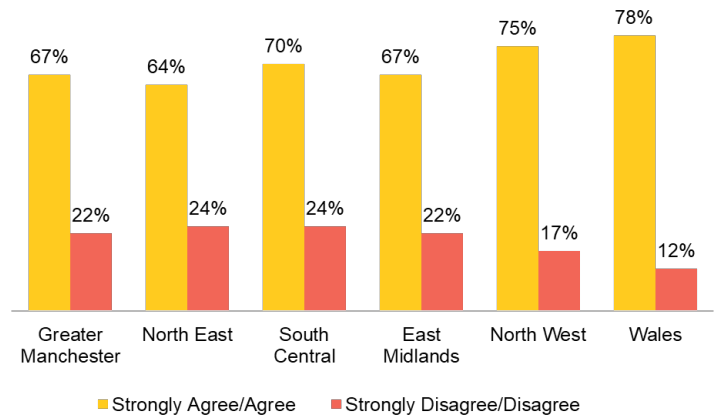
UNPAID WORK STAFF

Just over 7 in 10 survey participants told us that unpaid work is organised well. Participants in Wales and the North West were more likely to report their activity being well organised.

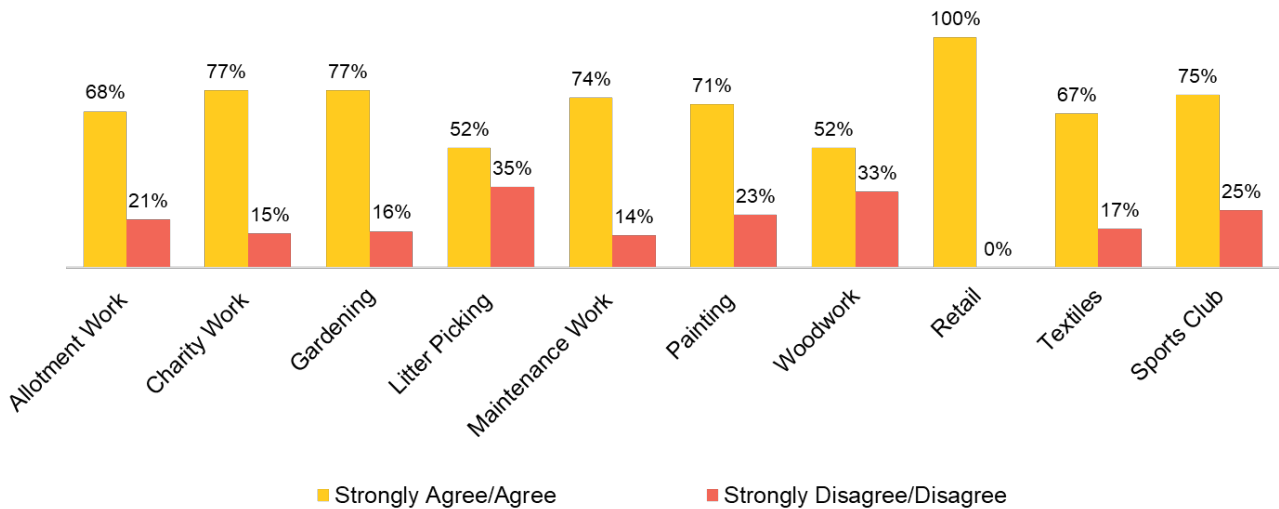
Q: My unpaid work is organised well



Q: My unpaid work is organised well



Q: My unpaid work is organised well



Most focus group participants told us that their unpaid work was organised well. However, this is dependent on a good supervisor. For example, a supervisor who made the extra effort through sending text reminders of their unpaid work activity for example, was appreciated more, and led to better-organised activities overall.

A minority of focus groups reported that their activity isn't organised well. For example, one group told us that the schedule was never followed and that they did not have the correct tools to do the work. They told us that being there sometimes felt "pointless."

"It's very well organised, they know how many people are coming in the day before and what work to give to people. Sometimes there's more people that turn up like I sometimes turn up voluntarily to get my hours done quickest."

"Yeah, very well organised. They make sure to text you two days before coming."

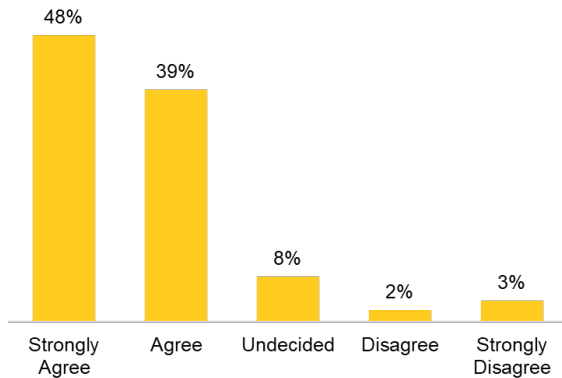
"When we come here, everything is prepared for us."

"Very unorganised. I've got a pair of boots here that about fifteen people have worn before me. You can't bring your own boots in. So grimy. I'm a size 8 but I'm wearing a 7. They don't care"

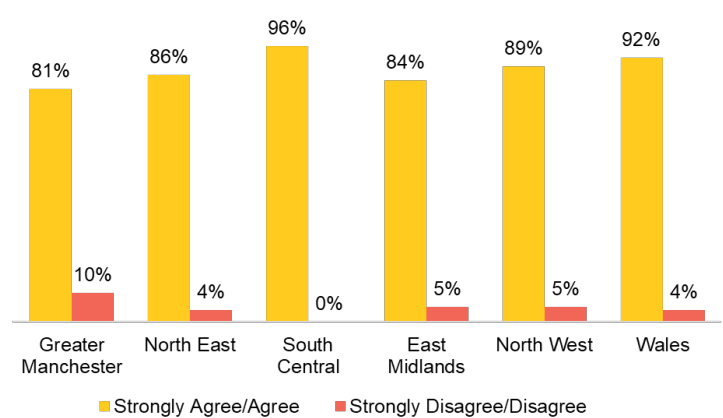
"Sometimes they don't even text me when they don't show up like I've gone there and they don't show up before."

Almost 9 in 10 told us that they had a good relationship with unpaid work staff. Relationships were strong across all regions but both South Central and Wales were above the national average.

Q: I have a good relationship with the unpaid work staff



Q: I have a good relationship with the unpaid work staff



Despite positive overall feedback regarding people’s experience with unpaid work staff, we found that that two groups were less likely to report a positive experience:

People from a minority ethnic background were less likely to report a good relationship with unpaid work staff. **80%** (120/150) of people from a minority ethnic background reported a positive relationship compared to **89%** (677/764) of people from a White British background.

Neurodivergent people were also less likely to report a good relationship with unpaid work staff. **79%** (240/303) of neurodivergent people reported a positive relationship compared to **91%** (581/640) of neurotypical people with experience of unpaid work.

Focus Group participants praised the attitude of most members of unpaid work staff.

People unanimously told us that they felt respected by unpaid work staff, they didn't judge the individual and treated everyone fairly.

Many attributed the positive approach of unpaid work supervisors to many of them having lived experience. When reflecting on their probation experience, people undertaking unpaid work told us that probation staff could learn from their unpaid work supervisors. According to focus group participants, unpaid work staff were more friendly, looked after individuals and took more interest in them compared to how probation practitioners behaved. They told us that lived experience should be utilised more in the probation service.

“They understand we're being punished. But there's no sign that they treat you like that. They do treat us with respect.”

"I've not had any bad experiences here, everyone here is friendly and accommodating, if you give your respect, you get it back."

"They read to you specifically, black and white, clear. There is no using abusive language. There is no disrespect. I've seen in my experience here being 100% respect and very good with some people sharing life experiences."

"Probation staff could learn a thing or two from these lot. Those lot show no interest and just see through us. They look after us here and actually listen and take the time."

"Completely different, I'd rather have one of these to be my PO in all honesty."

The vast majority of people we spoke to felt supported by their unpaid work supervisor and are able to communicate with them openly.

Focus group participants praised the support received from their unpaid work supervisors. Most people told us that they can speak openly with their supervisor and that the comfort they have with them allows them to have meaningful conversations that are often helpful to their rehabilitation.

"That's what makes you feel comfortable around him and he's really good at giving advice and everything and stuff like that like I have good conversations with him because we're not far from each other – like he's a bit older than me I mean I have conversations about anything. But when he's talking to one of the younger ones and trying to point them in the right direction and I think that's good. He's really really good."

"It's been all good, even if she was having a bad day, you wouldn't tell, other people get angry and show you, but she wasn't like that. She was caring."

"She's fantastic. I can't praise her highly enough, she's fantastic to work with, incredibly professional but also at the same time makes you feel, I don't know, supported."

Most people told us that the communication between their probation practitioner and unpaid work supervisor is poor.

Focus group participants told us that the main reason communication is poor between probation staff and unpaid work staff is the perceived increased workload of probation staff. This results in a lack of communication which can mean consequences for people undertaking unpaid work, sometimes as serious as being breached.

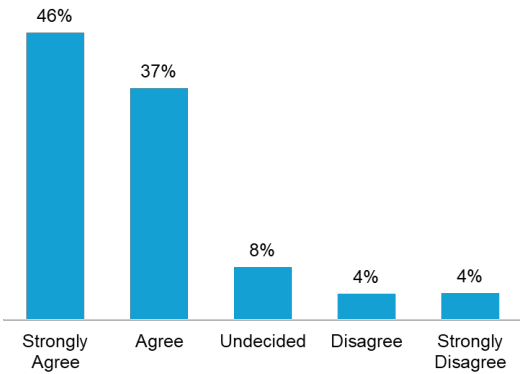
"You tell probation that you can't come on Friday because I'm leaving to go home because something's come up about like whatever I've got to go do and she's like, 'Alright. I'll make sure you're marked. I'll make sure I'll tell them'. But you're still going to be breached."

“There's just probably a problem with our Probation Service. They've had so many people in the last three months added to probation, they physically haven't got enough probation officers to cover it and that affects things like this, communication with us and our supervisors here.”

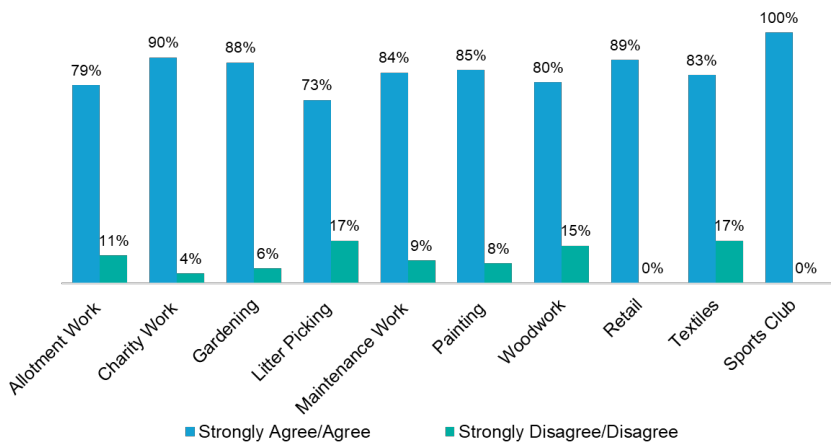
PROCEDURAL JUSTICE

More than 4 in 5 participants told us they felt safe whilst attending unpaid work. However, those who had litter picking as an activity felt less safe than other activities.

Q: I feel safe whilst attending my unpaid work



Q: I feel safe whilst attending my unpaid work



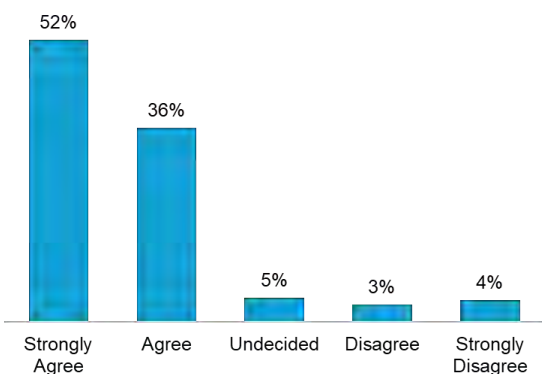
Two groups were less likely to report feeling safe whilst attending unpaid work. Namely, neurodivergent individuals and young adults:

84% (685/813) of people aged 25+ reported feeling safe when attending unpaid work compared to **76%** (96/126) of young adults (aged 18-24).

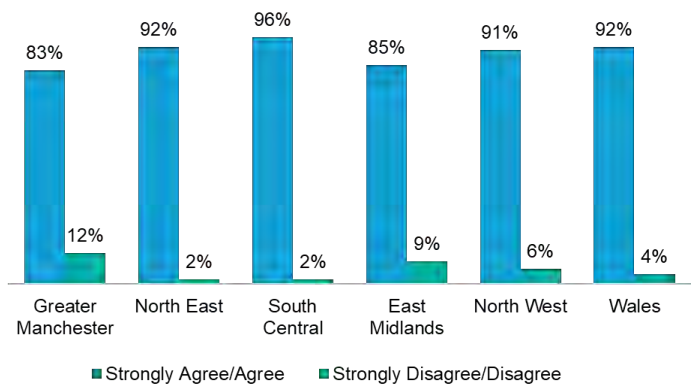
87% (557/637) of neurotypical people reported feeling safe when attending unpaid work compared to **74%** (224/302) of neurodivergent people with experience of unpaid work.

More than 4 in 5 participants told us they believe unpaid work staff treated them fairly.

Q: The unpaid work staff treat me fairly



Q: The unpaid work staff treat me fairly



People told us they felt treated with dignity and respect but did not see the need for “branded Hi-Vis jackets”.

A key finding from the consultation was that despite feeling respected by unpaid work staff, other aspects of attending unpaid work were seen as a counterproductive tool designed to embarrass them. People told us that they understand the need for high visibility jackets, but they needn't be branded with 'community payback' leading to them being targeted.

Equally, participants also told us that the community payback branding of the vans people are being picked up is seen by many as a tool to embarrass people on unpaid work. People told us this isn't good for their self-esteem or community ties.

“No, community payback on the back of your high vis is basically advertising what you've done. It doesn't need to be. So, people can see and it can be embarrassing and I think that's wrong.”

“Regarding the vans and high-vis jackets, We're just getting targeted or labelled more isn't it.”

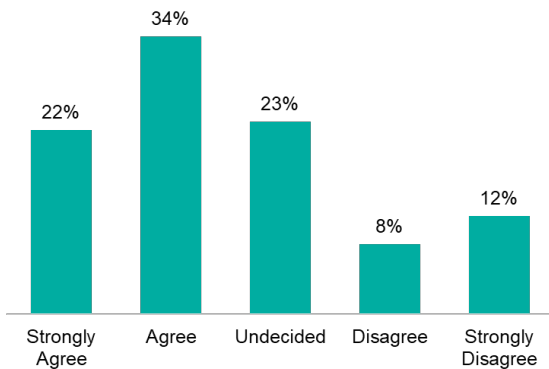
“It's embarrassing getting picked up in van with community payback plastered all over it. Is that really necessary? I mean, I get that we're being punished here but is there a need to embarrass us and let the whole community know?”

“When we were litter picking, so people driving fast they laughed at us, if people are walking past us and laughing at us.”

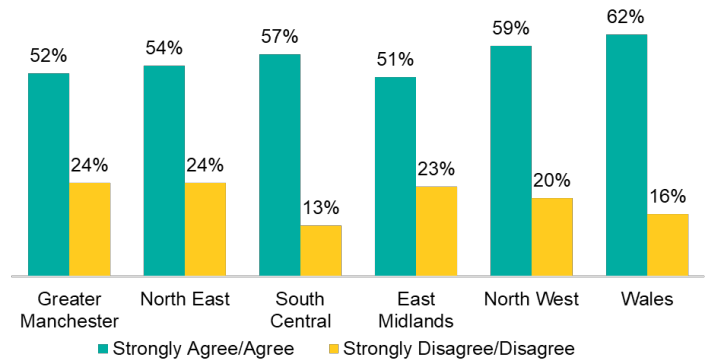
EXPECTATIONS

More than half of the participants told us that their experience of unpaid work has exceeded their expectations. However, those who undertook allotment work and textile work were less likely to report it exceeding their expectations.

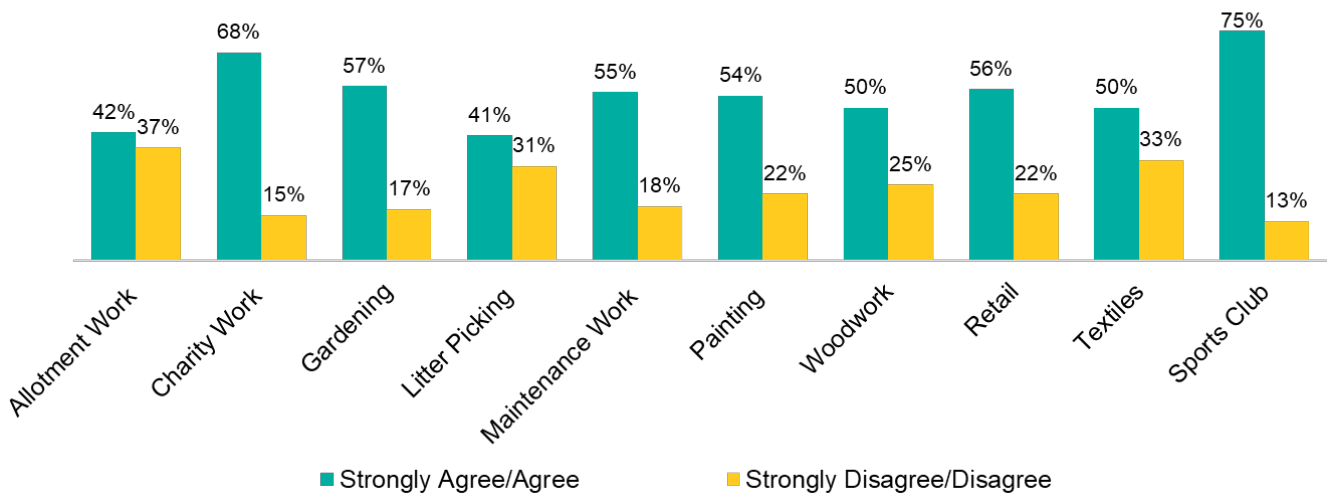
Q: My experience with unpaid work has exceeded my expectations



Q: My experience with unpaid work has exceeded my expectations

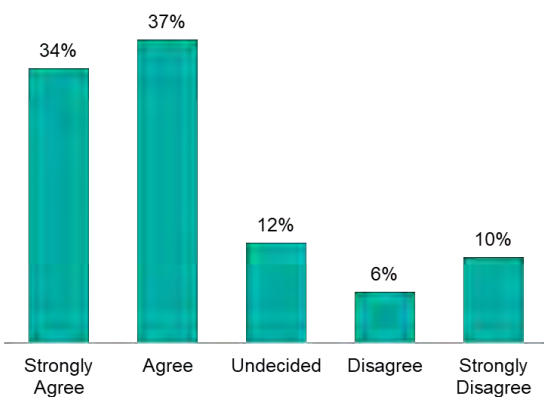


Q: My experience with unpaid work has exceeded my expectations

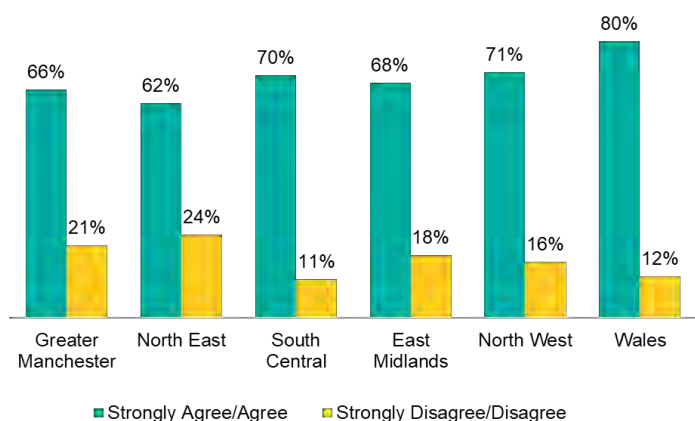


More than 7 in 10 reported an overall positive experience. People in Wales were more likely to report an overall positive experience.

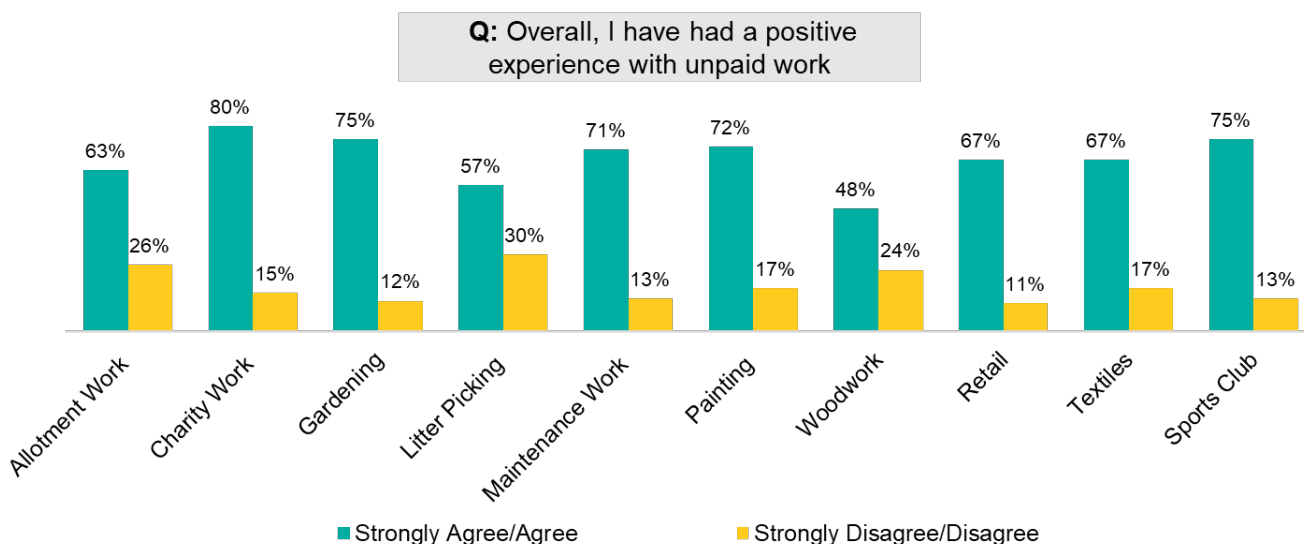
Q: Overall, I have had a positive experience with unpaid work



Q: Overall, I have had a positive experience with unpaid work



An overall positive experience and enjoyability of unpaid work is dependent on the unpaid work activity.



Those that felt like they were making a difference told us that they found the experience enjoyable. For example, **68%** (112/165) of those who undertook charity work told us that it exceeded their expectations. Some people told us that it offered them an opportunity to relax and get away from stressful home and work lives.

Those people that viewed their unpaid work activity as more punitive, such as litter picking and allotment work, were less likely to find their experience enjoyable.

“Yeah, it's enjoyable. Gives you something to do. Gets you out of the house.”

“I wouldn't say enjoyable because you don't have a choice. But its fair and if everyone's cool and respectful it makes the time easier for everyone else.”

"I've enjoyed it yeah, it's just from my everyday life, because I own two businesses like, and it's a nice break from it if you know what I mean because I don't have my phone on and my phone's usually non-stop ringing so having that taken off me, I don't mind, I feel quite relaxed and I enjoy it you know what I mean. As stupid as it sounds, I do enjoy it."

Most told us that attending unpaid work had a positive impact on them avoiding further offending behaviour.

Focus group participants told us that the structure of unpaid work helped them avoid further offending behaviour and offered them the time to reflect on their offending behaviour. However, others told us that other factors such as alcohol dependency have much more bearing on their future offending behaviour than their unpaid work experience.

"I wouldn't want to do it again in it. So, I'd say it's impacted me. Yeah, it would make me think twice, you know?"

"Yes, the structure helps. if I've got structure, it keeps me busy, so I don't have to think about offending again."

"I'm here knowing that I'm serving the sentence. Yes, but stopping me from offending I wouldn't say stopping you to go to reoffend."

PEER-LED SOLUTIONS

All our work is solution-orientated at User Voice. We ask people what their issues are and how to solve them. **5** peer-led solutions emerged from the focus groups to improve the challenges people faced during their unpaid work hours:



THE ISSUE:

Some people want to use the experience as a way not to reoffend which isn't often the focus of unpaid work.

SUGGESTED PEER-LED SOLUTION:

Implement a theory side to unpaid work where people can reflect and learn about the impact of their offending behaviour.

"I would suggest bringing the theory side of it where somebody comes to talk to you more about what you've done. To make you understand more, because becomes like a job where we get used to it and we don't reflect on what brought us here in the first place. I would have thought the practical side, we're doing it well, but we at the theory side of it, reminding you more about the impact of what you did."



THE ISSUE:

People told us that their unpaid work activity isn't often relevant to their skills and experiences.

SUGGESTED PEER-LED SOLUTION:

People want a tailored approach that benefits the individual.

"If you don't want to do unpaid work, if you'd rather do a course to learn more skills. If you want to become a qualified builder or something like that, you should have the option of doing that course to try and get people back into work, and back into being a member of the community. Take the community service sign out of it... We don't need to be labelled."



THE ISSUE:

People find wearing a branded high vis and being picked up in a branded van embarrassing.

SUGGESTED PEER-LED SOLUTION:

Introduce unbranded high vis jackets and vans.

"Take the community service sign out of it... We don't need to be labelled."



THE ISSUE:

People struggle with the cost of attending unpaid work.

SUGGESTED PEER-LED SOLUTION:

Additional help with travelling to unpaid work.

“They need to help us out more getting here. Not all of us are on benefits but most of us are struggling badly.”



THE ISSUE:

People with experience of more punitive activities want a better way to give back that benefits the community and their rehabilitation.

SUGGESTED PEER-LED SOLUTION:

People want to feel like they're giving back to the community through more meaningful activities like those with experience of working in a charity shop.

“Rehabilitative payback time that’s not punishment oriented.”

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