



Tracy Duff, Development and Engagement Coordinator, explores why ethical endings are a vital but often overlooked part of the volunteer journey.

Why How We Say Goodbye Matters: Ethical Volunteer Endings

As we celebrate Volunteers' Week, much of the focus is rightly on recognising the incredible contribution volunteers make. But there's an important part of the volunteer journey that often goes unspoken, how it ends.

Research by Morna O'May, exploring ethical considerations in volunteer endings, highlights just how overlooked this stage can be. As she notes, preparing volunteers without considering how their journey will end is like "learning how to start a train without knowing how to stop it." It's a powerful reminder that endings are not an optional extra, they are an essential part of ethical volunteer practice.

Endings are inevitable - but rarely planned

Volunteer journeys end for many reasons. Roles evolve, projects end, people's circumstances change, or organisations shift direction. And yet, many organisations still focus heavily on recruitment, with far less attention given to how volunteering ends.

The research highlights a common tension, the desire to attract and retain "as many volunteers as possible, for as long as possible." While understandable, this can mean that endings are treated as a failure, rather than a natural and valuable stage of the volunteer lifecycle.

An ethical lens on volunteer endings

Thinking about endings ethically means considering fairness, respect, and responsibility at every stage of the volunteer journey, including the final one.

Volunteers give their time, skills, and often emotional energy. Without clear and thoughtful endings, there is a risk they may feel undervalued, disconnected, or unsure of the difference they made.

An ethical approach ensures that, whatever the reason for leaving, volunteers finish their role feeling recognised and respected.

The emotional impact of 'unfinished' endings

Morna's research also points to the emotional dimension of endings. Volunteer experiences can be deeply meaningful, particularly where strong relationships are formed or where roles involve supporting others.

When endings are abrupt or unacknowledged, volunteers may be left with a sense of unfinished business. In some cases, this can feel like loss rather than transition.

Creating space for reflection, closure, and appreciation can make a significant difference to how that experience is carried forward.

From reactive to intentional

A key message from the research is the need for organisations to move from *reactive* to *intentional* approaches to volunteer endings.

This means recognising that endings are not something to deal with at the last minute, but something to plan for from the beginning.

5 Steps to More Ethical Volunteer Endings

- **Plan for endings from the start**
Be clear about the nature of the role, is it ongoing, fixed-term, or project-based?
- **Communicate openly and early**
If a role or project is coming to an end, give volunteers time to prepare.
- **Offer a chance to reflect**
A simple conversation or exit questionnaire can help volunteers process their experience and provide valuable insight.
- **Say thank you, meaningfully**
Go beyond generic recognition. Be specific about the contribution they've made.
- **Keep the door open**
Ending a role doesn't have to mean ending the relationship. Invite volunteers to stay connected in other ways.

Endings shape what comes next

The final stage of a volunteer's journey often shapes what they do next. A positive ending can lead to future involvement, advocacy, and continued support. A poor ending, however, can quietly close those doors.

A moment to reflect

As we mark Volunteers' Week, this is an opportunity not just to celebrate volunteers, but to reflect on the full journey we offer them.

How we welcome people matters.

How we support them matters.

And how we say goodbye matters just as much.

Because every volunteer deserves an ending that reflects the value of what they have given.