



Voluntary Action History Society's Survey of Members and Friends

Summary of findings

- 90% of respondents were based in England, the majority in Greater London and the South East, and the remainder in other regions, except the East Midlands and the North East; 5% were based in the other nations of the UK, except Northern Ireland; and 5% were based abroad.
- 54% of respondents were academics; 29% were retired; 14% were consultants, researchers and writers in the government and private sectors; and 8% were practitioners.
- Two-thirds of respondents initially heard about VAHS and its activities by rather vague and unspecific methods (52% by word of mouth, 8% by attending or speaking at seminars or conferences and 6% by long-term involvement), and the remaining third, by more immediate, mainly electronic, methods (18% by IHR's/VAHS's websites, 13% by VAHS's e-mail announcements and 2% by Twitter/social media).
- All respondents but one usually heard about VAHS and its activities through VAHS's e-mail announcements.
- 90% of respondents attended seminars; 27%, Saturday study days; and 25%, both seminars and Saturday study days.
- 48% of respondents attended one or more international conferences (six since 2001) of which the best-attended conferences were Liverpool in 2008, Canterbury in 2010 and Liverpool in 2016. More than half of respondents who had attended conferences attended two or more conferences.
- 33% of respondents read the collection of research papers from the conference in Liverpool in 2008, *Understanding the Roots of Voluntary Action: Historical Perspectives on Current Social Policy* (edited by Colin Rochester, George Campbell Gosling, Alison Penn and Meta Zimmeck; Sussex Academic Press, 2011); 52% read blogs; and 19% listened to podcasts of seminars (both blogs and podcasts available through VAHS's website).
- Respondents reported high levels of enjoyment in VAHS's activities – in particular, the focus on voluntary action, a specialist subject otherwise marginalised by mainstream social research; opportunities for learning; opportunities for networking; bridging past and current debates on policies and practices; and conviviality (there was much favourable comment about VAHS's friendly and welcoming approach to a cross-disciplinary community and those at all stages of their research careers).
- Respondents reported a number of barriers to joining in VAHS's activities and events – in particular, the location of seminars in London (and therefore the time and cost involved in attending for those who did not live within easy-travelling distance), other commitments such as childcare, teaching or other work; time constraints generally; lack of interest/relevance of particular seminars; and lack of personal organisation.
- Respondents also made suggestions for improvement, some of which we have already

implemented and all of which we will be considering.

- Overall on a scale from 1 (least likely) to 10 (most likely) respondents gave VAHS a composite score of 8.25 on how likely they were to recommend VAHS to a colleague or friend.

Introduction

The Voluntary Action History Society (VAHS) aims to advance historical understanding and analysis of voluntary action. We are a registered charity (No.1044549) established in 1991. We are run by a committee of volunteers and have a membership of individuals. We are based in the UK but have members from around the world. We carry out a number of activities including:

- Voluntary Action seminars at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London
- Occasional Saturday study days on specialist subjects
- International research conferences (six since 2001)
- An edited blog of topics of interest to historians of voluntary action

For some time we have wanted to be in closer touch with our members and friends in order to assess our strengths and weaknesses and, if possible, to make changes that might make our activities and outputs more accessible, interesting and effective. As a first step we have undertaken a survey of members and friends.

At the end of September 2017 we asked our 270 members and friends to participate in a web-based survey and repeated this invitation in October 2017 and May 2018. After removing duplicate responses, we received completed surveys from 63 members and friends, a respectable response rate of 23 percent. We would like to thank all of those who took the time to fill in the survey.

In the report below we set out findings from this research.

Because we do not have (and never have had) detailed and complete information about the characteristics and views of our members and friends, we cannot say that these findings are representative, but we would say that they are indicative of the views of some of our more committed and enthusiastic members and friends. These findings are, we think, sufficient to be getting on with.

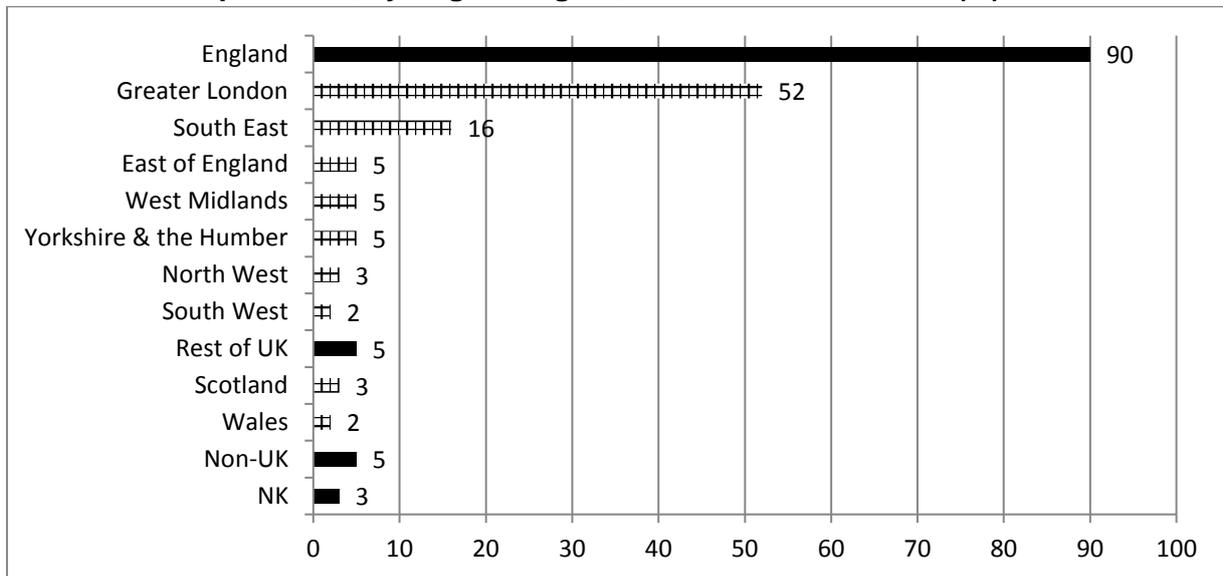
1. Location of respondents

Sixty-one respondents (97 percent of the total) provided information (postcode and town) about where they were based. We have allocated these to the following categories: English regions, nations of the UK and locations outside the UK.

Of these respondents 90 percent were based in England, with just over half based in Greater London, a sixth in the South East and the remainder distributed in other regions, with the exception of the East Midlands and the North East; 5 percent were based in the other

nations of the UK, with the exception of Northern Ireland; and 5 percent were based abroad, in Canada, Ireland and the USA.

Location of respondents, by English region, rest of UK and non-UK (%)

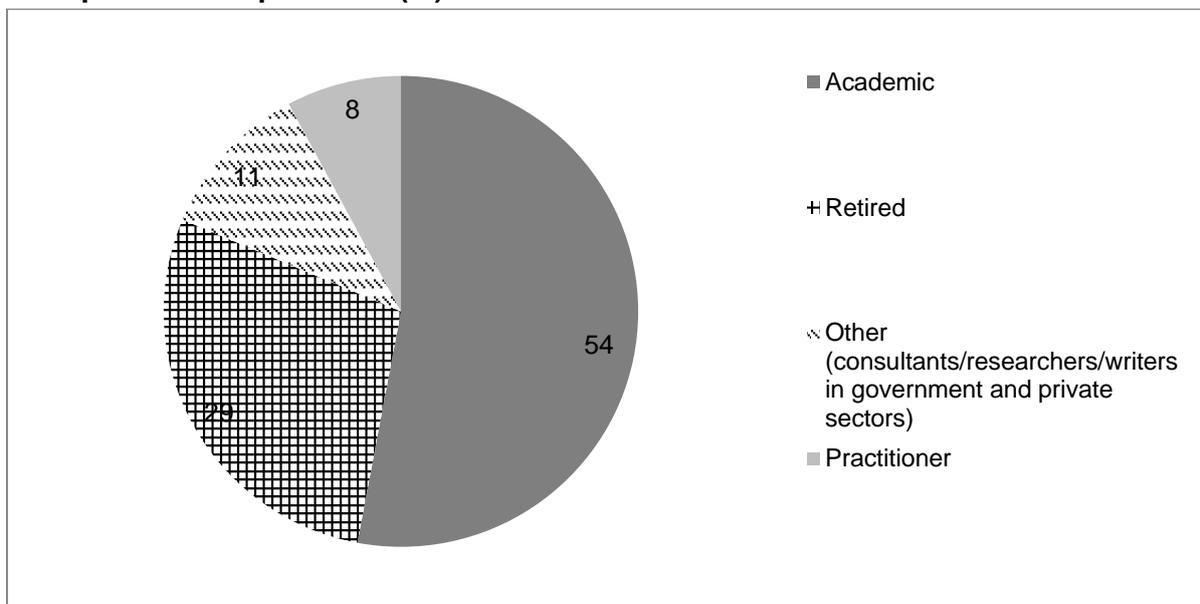


N of respondents = 63

2. Occupation of respondents

All respondents provided information about their occupations. Slightly more than half were academics; three-tenths were retired; a tenth were consultants, researchers, and writers in the government and private sectors; and a twelfth were practitioners.

Occupation of respondents (%)

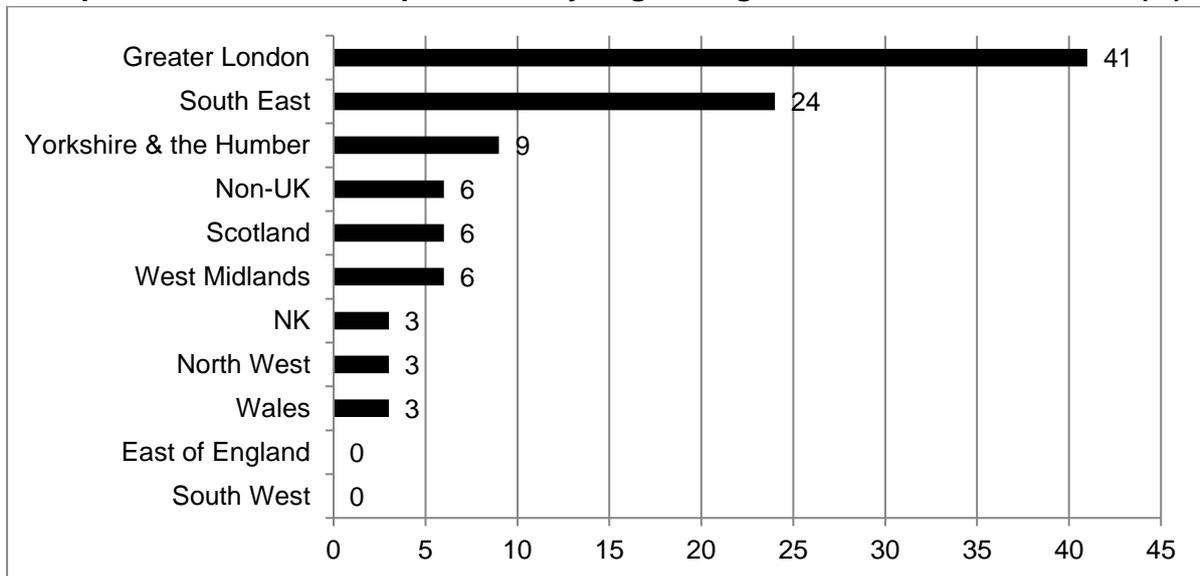


N of respondents = 63; percentages add up to > 100% due to multiple responses

Of respondents who were academics two-thirds were based in London and the South East and the remainder were distributed relatively evenly across the remaining regions of England

(with the exception of the East of England and the South West), Scotland, Wales and abroad.

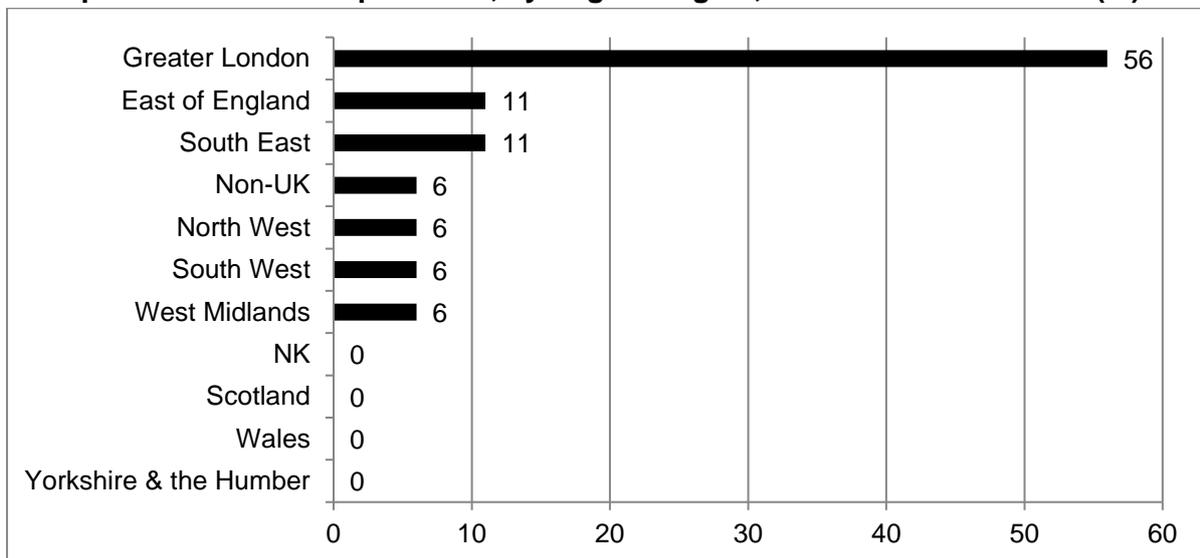
Occupation of academic respondents, by English region, rest of UK and non-UK (%)



N of respondents who were academics = 34; percentages for all occupations by location add up to > 100% due to multiple responses

Of respondents who were retired three-quarters were based in London, the East of England and the South East, and the remainder were distributed across the North West, South West and Midlands regions of England and abroad.

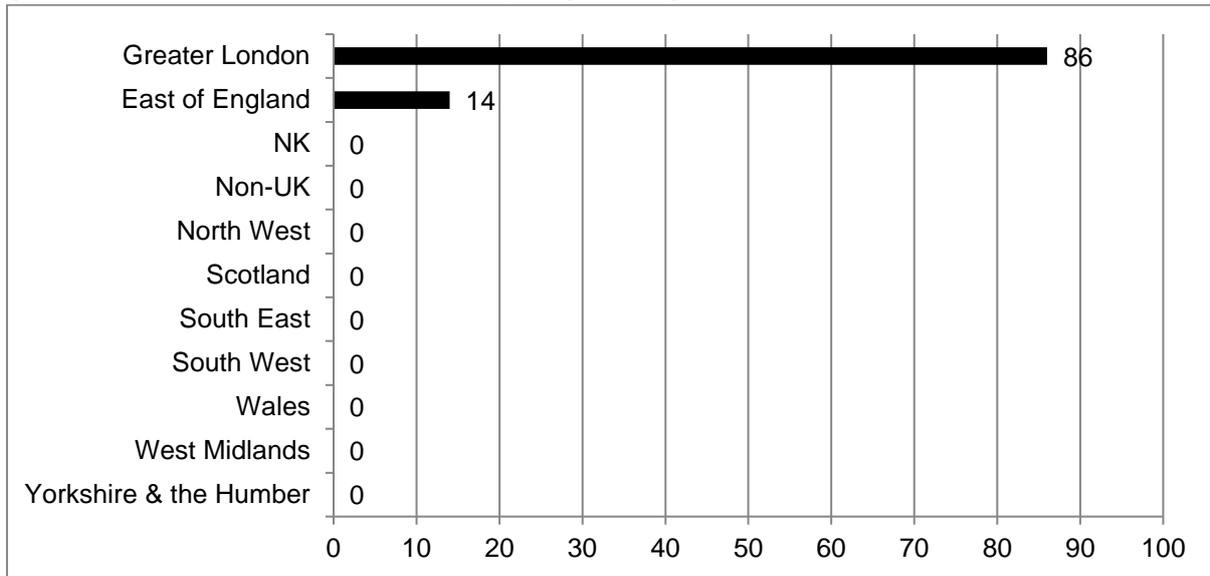
Occupation of retired respondents, by English region, rest of UK and non-UK (%)



N of respondents who were retired = 18; percentages for all occupations by location add up to > 100% due to multiple responses

Respondents who were consultants, researchers and writers in government and the private sectors were clustered in London and the East of England (caution: numbers very small).

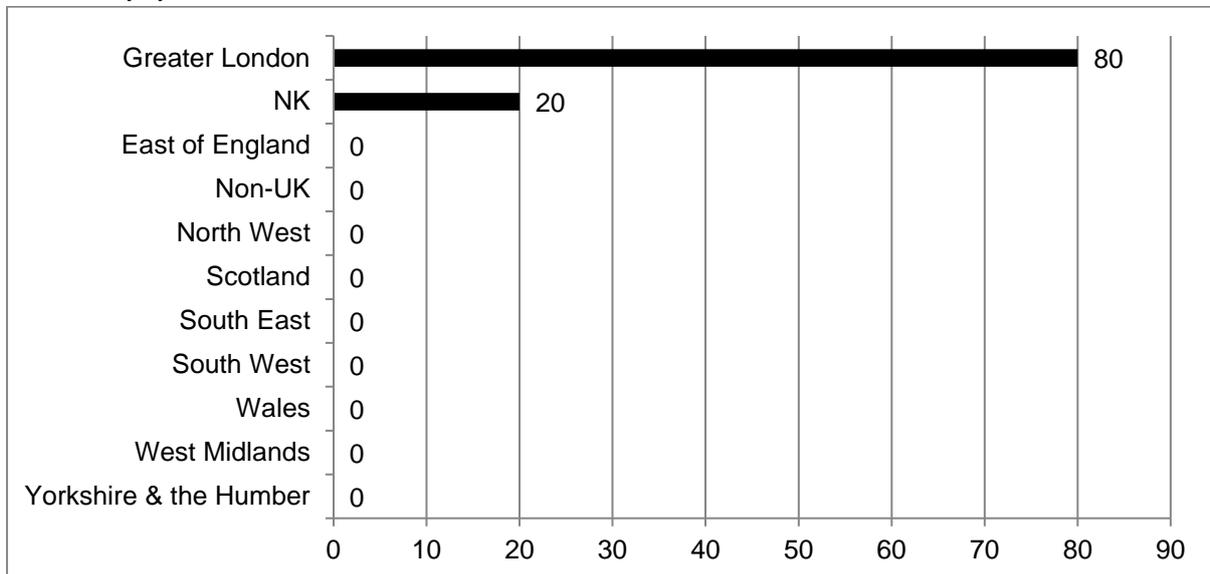
Occupation of other respondents (consultants, researchers, and writers in the government and private sectors), by English region, rest of UK and non-UK (%)



N of respondents who were Other (consultants, researchers, and writers in government and the private sectors) = 7; percentages for all occupations by location add up to > 100% due to multiple responses

Respondents who were practitioners, so far as their location is known, were clustered in London (caution: numbers very small).

Occupation of respondents who were practitioners, by English region, rest of UK and non-UK (%)



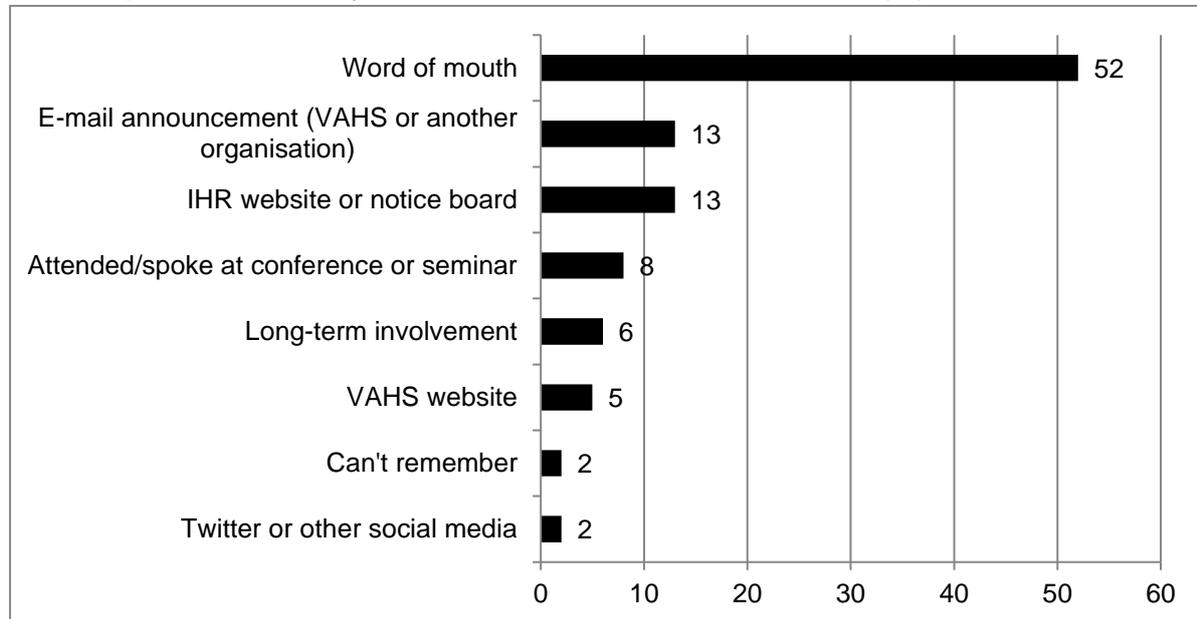
N of respondents who were practitioners = 5; percentages for all occupations by location add up to > 100% due to multiple responses

3. How respondents initially heard about VAHS and its activities

All respondents provided information about how they initially heard about VAHS and its activities. Given that VAHS is a long-established society with a specialist (and unique) focus, it is not surprising that two-thirds of respondents reported rather vague and unspecific

methods of initially hearing about VAHS and its activities – through word of mouth, long-term involvement and attending or speaking at seminars or conferences. The remaining third referred to more immediate, mainly electronic, methods such as IHR's/VAHS's websites, VAHS's e-mail announcements and Twitter/social media.

How respondents initially heard about VAHS and its activities (%)



N of respondents = 63

4. How respondents usually hear about VAHS and its activities

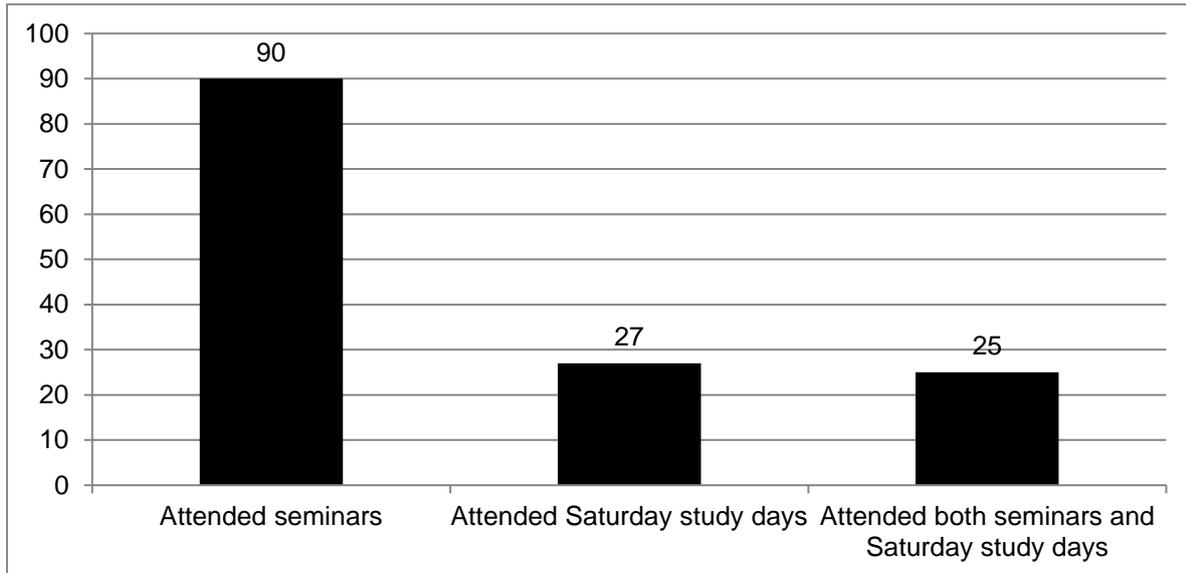
All respondents provided information about how they usually hear about VAHS and its activities. All but one (98 percent) heard through e-mail announcements by VAHS or other organisations (usually asked by VAHS to circulate information of interest).

5. Whether respondents attended seminars and Saturday study days

All respondents provided information about whether they had attended seminars and all but one (98 percent) provided information about whether they had attended Saturday study days.

Nine-tenths of respondents stated that they had attended seminars; slightly more than a quarter, Saturday study days; and a quarter, both seminars and Saturday study days.

Attendance of respondents at seminars and Saturday study days (%)



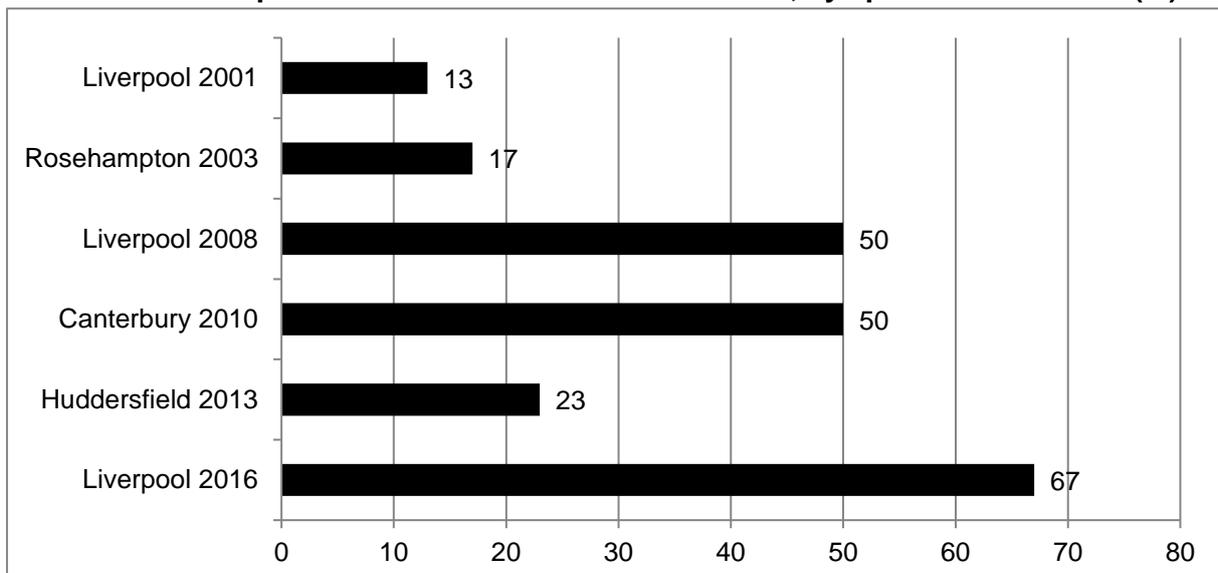
N of respondents who answered question re attending seminars = 63; N of respondents who answered question re attending Saturday study days = 62; N of respondents who answered question re attending both seminars and Saturday study days = 62

6. Whether respondents attended VAHS's international conferences

All respondents provided information about whether they had attended VAHS's international conferences. Forty-eight percent stated that they had attended one or more conferences, while 52 percent stated that they had not attended any conferences.

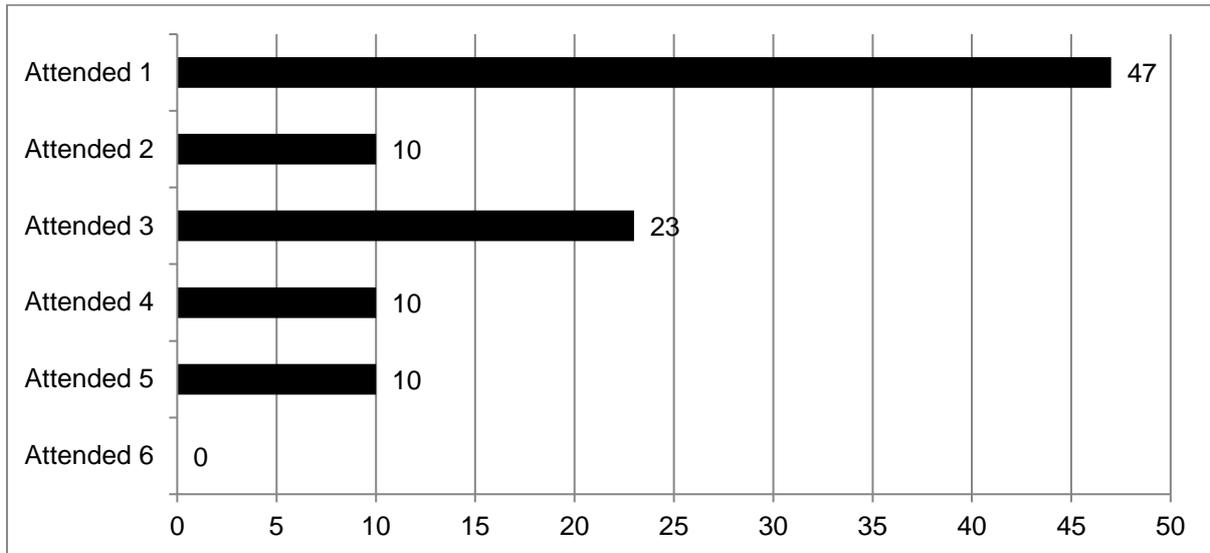
Of those who had attended conferences half or more had attended those at Liverpool in 2008, Canterbury in 2009 and Liverpool in 2016; and more than half had attended two or more conferences.

Attendance of respondents at international conferences, by specific conference (%)



N of respondents who attended conferences = 30

Attendance of respondents at international conferences, by number of conferences attended (%)



N of respondents who attended conferences = 30

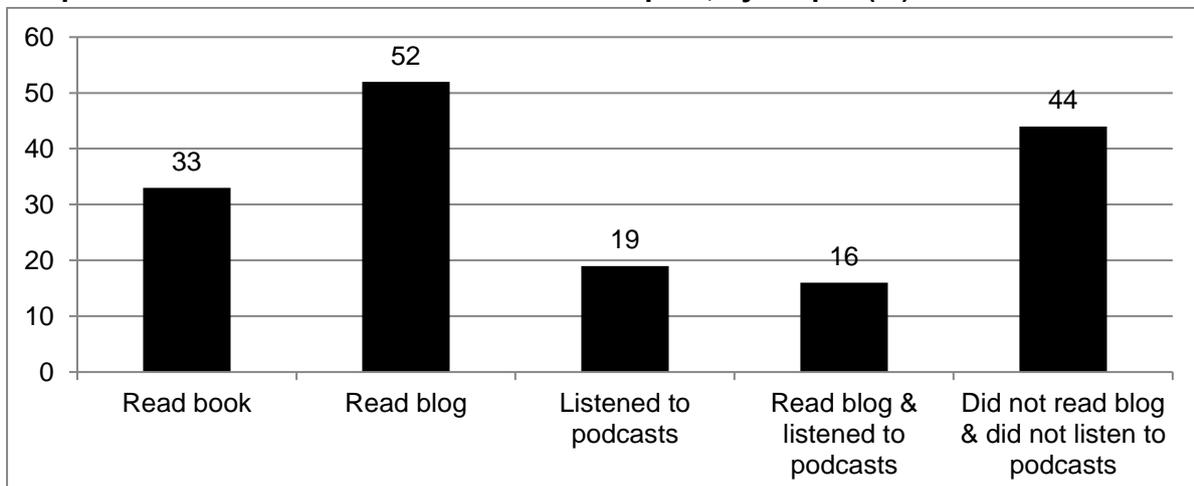
7. Whether respondents accessed VAHS’s research outputs

VAHS has published and is continuing to publish a number of research outputs. All respondents answered questions about their access to different research outputs.

A third of respondents stated that they had read the collection of research papers from the international research conference in Liverpool in 2008, *Understanding the Roots of Voluntary Action: Historical Perspectives on Current Social Policy* (edited by Colin Rochester, George Campbell Gosling, Alison Penn and Meta Zimmeck; Sussex Academic Press, 2011).

Slightly more than half of respondents stated that they had read blogs published on VAHS’s website and around a fifth, that they had listened to podcasts of seminars available through VAHS’s website. Around a sixth stated that they had both read blogs and listened to podcasts, while slightly more than two-fifths, that they had engaged in neither activity.

Respondents’ access to VAHS’s research outputs, by output (%)



N of respondents = 63

8. Respondents' enjoyment of VAHS's activities and events

Respondents were asked to describe what, if anything, they had enjoyed about VAHS's activities and events. Fifty-six respondents (88 percent) gave their views, some of them eloquent and almost all of them enthusiastic, about what they had enjoyed. Their views fall under a number of headings:

Focus on voluntary action, a specialist subject that is otherwise marginalised by mainstream social research

- 'The society brings together a cohort of researchers and practitioners in a neglected field'
- 'Coverage of what used to be a relatively neglected area of history'
- 'It is rare to get comparable presentations covering front-line voluntary action'
- 'The presentation of the history of the voluntary sector is, I feel, unique to VAHS, and I have learnt a lot'

Opportunities for learning

- Provides a way of learning about different aspects of the sector'
- 'Interesting informed discussion'
- 'Wide variety of perspectives, good way of finding out about voluntary activity in one place'
- 'So many papers in a field that is often not included in other conference programmes'
- 'The variety of the work and the passion of the people'

Opportunities for networking

- 'Collegiality, variety, presence of postgrads and new researchers, links to practitioners'
- 'Networking with other historians and catching up with the latest work in the field'
- 'Cross-disciplinary community'

Bridging past and current debates on policies and practices

- 'Useful insight into social policy debates from a historical perspective'

Conviviality

- 'Friendly and stimulating conversation'
- 'Good community atmosphere'
- 'Friendly and collaborative atmosphere; attendance by a broad mix of people – practitioners, academics, independent researchers, people just interested in the subject'
- 'The most enjoyable aspect is how friendly the conference is, and how welcoming the society is to new members'
- 'The festive dinners at the conferences and the organization's own rock band can't be topped!'

Overall

- 'Everything! VAHS is my favourite academic society, and I am hugely appreciative of all that you do'
- 'Seminars are GREAT!'
- 'Good to know you exist'

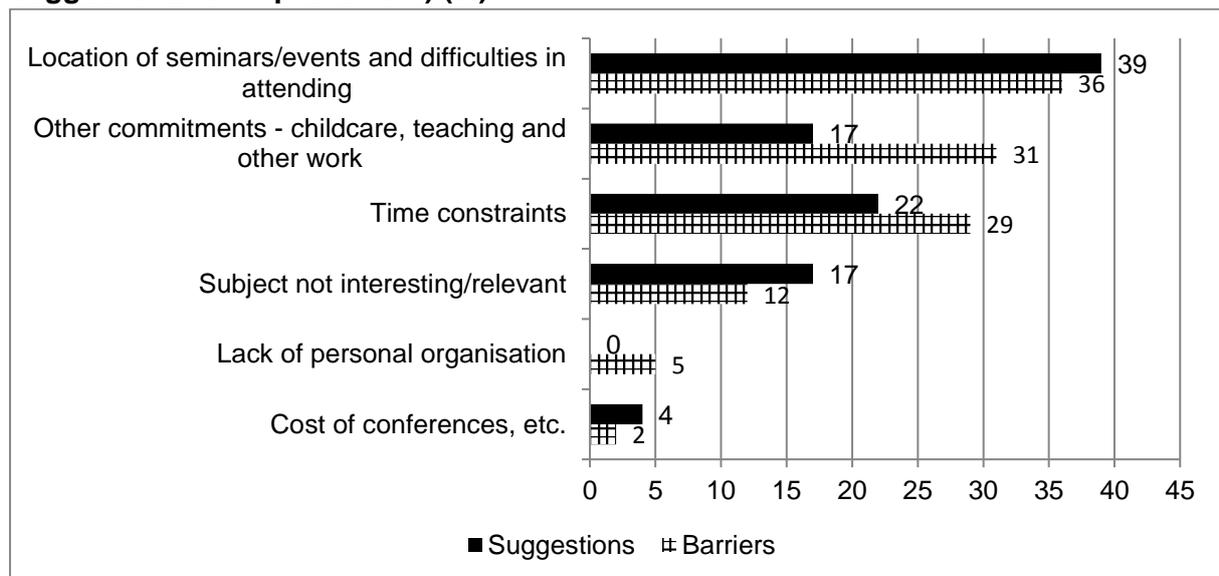
9. Barriers and Opportunities

Respondents were asked to describe barriers, if any, to their joining in VAHS's activities and events. Fifty-three (84 percent) responded: Of these just under four-fifths described barriers they had experienced; one-fifth stated that they had experienced no barriers; and the remaining respondent made a suggestion about the means to improvement.

Respondents were also asked to make suggestions about how VAHS could make improvements to its activities and events. Forty-six (73 percent) responded. Of these half made suggestions for improvement; just under a third stated that they were satisfied and had no suggestions; and a fifth made suggestions about the various means to improvement.

Because respondents, in effect, conflated the answers to the questions re barriers and suggestions for improvement, we have extracted and coded these two sets of responses to produce a list of perceived barriers (in order of descending importance) and relevant suggestions for improvement. The rank order of the two sets of responses is roughly but not completely consistent.

Barriers to joining in VAHS's activities and events, by question asked (barriers/ suggestions for improvement) (%)



N of respondents who set out barriers in barriers question = 42; N of respondents who set out barriers in suggestions for improvement question = 23; percentages for respondents in barriers question add up to > 100% due to multiple responses

Barrier: Location of seminars/events and difficulties (distance and cost) in attending

As noted above, attending seminars either on Monday evenings or on Saturdays is not easy for people who do not live in or relatively close to London, and those respondents who lived furthest from London were the most likely to point out their difficulties in attending:

- 'Main barrier to attending is seminar series is London-centric. Too far/expensive to travel.'
- 'Would like to attend more seminars, but distance, getting back by coach from London late at night is a barrier'.

- 'Just wish I could go. Hard being in Canada.'

Suggestions for improvement include holding seminars in different locations outside of London and setting up an online link-up for attendees not present in London.

In principle we would welcome the opportunity to have non-London-based seminars, and we have made a point of locating our international conferences (with the exception of the second) outside of London in order partially to redress the balance. Our challenges in so devolving include the necessity of maintaining a close relationship with our host, the Institute of Historical Research (to which we are committed for a programme of seminars) and finding someone willing to organise a non-London event. We have been podcasting our seminars for some time (although there have been difficulties on the technical side with Senate House).

Barriers: Other commitments (childcare, teaching and other work) and time constraints:

These are difficult issues, as people try to manage their work/life balance, and we do not really anticipate that there is any effective solution:

- 'Weekends are difficult to attend; find Monday seminars tricky & don't like the new 6pm start as it makes it a late evening'.
- 'Barriers are in my diary.'
- 'Monday evenings I don't finish work until 6.30.'
- 'Saturdays are not going to be possible now I have kids.'

Suggestions include changing days of seminars (other workdays, Saturdays), changing times of seminars (lunchtime, later in the evening; providing more special events such as walking tours).

Following earlier discussions we changed the timing of our Monday seminars from 5.30 to 6.0 PM in order to accommodate those who were teaching in late afternoon. However, we found that in so doing we had upset those who were attending the seminars and then travelling home to destinations outside London. We have revived Saturday seminars in the form of annual study days, and to date we have held two very successful events, which have drawn in many new people, who have come because of interest in the topic of the day, but we have not attracted many of our usual attendees. We have also held several seminars with attached walking tours, which were very popular.

Barrier: Subject/topic under consideration not considered interesting or relevant

Voluntary action is a broad church, and we have tried our best to ensure an eclectic programme of seminars and events in terms of topic, period and geography. While our seminars and events are open to all, we have rather hoped to attract a body of regular attendees as well as those (three-quarters of the total since 2006) who attend only once. That is, we have hoped to attract people to come on a regular basis because they are interested in learning about the field of voluntary action in all its diversity rather than on just a single subject of interest.

- 'Depends on the subject.'
- 'Topics not of interest'
- 'Since many of the topics are so specific I only attend when I think it will be specific to my interests or to enhance my general understanding.'

Suggestions include more seminars on pre-twentieth century voluntary action, more topical (that is, current) issues, non-UK history, more generalised surveys of the history of voluntary action to provide a point of entry for people unfamiliar with the subject; outreach to young and early career researchers; higher profile on social media; workshops on studying voluntary action.

We are dependent upon recruiting researchers working on voluntary action subjects, and our community is small, specialised and dispersed. We are always on the hunt for speakers willing to share their research with us, and we are particularly keen on those who are investigating more unusual topics. In the past we have supported a group of new researchers but this group is now in abeyance.

Personal disorganisation

- 'Other than being more organised, no [other barriers].'
- 'I forget about the podcasts and the website – you could remind us in emails, and maybe do more to push out tweets etc to alert everyone to good content; even if it's not new it's worth telling people.'

Suggestions include 'more warnings in advance', 'more updates', 'email postings to university event calendars'.

Disorganisation is part of the human condition, and we have attempted to make sure that members and friends know what we are doing via our website and e-mails. We have now reorganised our mailing lists and improved arrangements for contacting members (with reminders).

10. Overall satisfaction

As a measure of overall satisfaction respondents were asked how likely were they to recommend VAHS to a friend or colleague on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being the least likely and 10 being the most likely. Sixty respondents (95 percent) answered this question and awarded VAHS a score of 8.25, which is very high indeed. According to Survey Monkey's global benchmark of responses to this standard question VAHS has scored remarkably high: a net promoter score of 31 as compared to the average of 11.

We are very grateful for the support given to VAHS by our members and friends and very proud that they think that we have been doing a good job! We will do our best to keep up the good work and, if possible, do even better work in future.

Survey managed by Louis Carserides
 Report written by Meta Zimmeck
 September 2018