



Consultation Response

**A new Suicide Prevention Strategy
for Scotland**

August 2022



About Us

Volunteer Scotland is Scotland's National Centre for Volunteering. We believe that volunteering should be an enjoyable, rewarding and fulfilling experience for the volunteer; that volunteers have the right to be safe and protected in delivering their volunteering roles; and that to derive health and well-being benefits from volunteering requires regular and meaningful contributions of time.

Should any queries arise from our response, please contact our Policy Officer by emailing **sarah.latto@volunteerscotland.org.uk**

Introduction

It is vital that the Scottish Government considers the important role of volunteering when finalising the new Suicide Prevention Strategy for Scotland. Volunteers are often in key roles supporting people at increased risk of suicidal ideation, and therefore require appropriate training and support to do their roles effectively whilst also being protected from vicarious trauma.

Policy Context

The Scottish Government have acknowledged on many occasions that volunteering has an important role in the successful delivery of many policy priorities. In 2019 Aileen Campbell MSP, then Cabinet Secretary for Local Government and Communities, stated that:

“volunteering is key to us achieving our shared ambition of a fairer and more prosperous country with equality of opportunity for all – a country where everyone has the chance to participate and make a difference.”

Similarly, in the 2020-21 Programme for Government, it is stated that:

“[The Scottish Government’s] role must be to create the best conditions for the third sector and volunteering to thrive and contribute to a recovering economy and society.”

Despite this rhetoric, volunteering remains fairly elusive in wider relevant policy areas. This was reflected in the recent Resource Spending Review where volunteering is not mentioned, and where it is stated that funding for the third sector is due to be reduced in 2023-24.

Scotland’s national Volunteering Action Plan was launched by the Scottish Government and Volunteer Scotland and partners in June 2022 and builds upon outcomes identified in the Volunteering for All framework published in 2019. Both acknowledge the vital role of volunteering in Scotland and create a clear blueprint for improving volunteer participation in Scotland with a particular focus on addressing inequality. The Volunteering for All framework is mapped to four of the outcomes in the national performance framework, specifically those related to education, health, communities, and inequality.

As a result of this policy context, we feel it is necessary to ensure that the role of volunteers in addressing poor mental health should be reflected in the Suicide Prevention Strategy.

Guiding Principles

We fully agree that suicide is everybody’s business, and that effective support should be available for everybody who needs it. Volunteers play a key role in suicide

prevention, in direct counselling/listening roles but also in a range of roles promoting positive mental wellbeing and social connection.

One of the most prominent ways that volunteers support prevention of suicidal ideation is through social connection. Volunteers contribute to increased social connection amongst in a range of ways. This is recognised explicitly in ‘A Connected Scotland’ strategy, which gives particular focus to the role of befriending and mentoring (2018, Scottish Government). Befrienders provide regular social and emotional support for individuals experiencing social isolation and can also empower individuals to build or restore other social connections within their community.

As a result, it is vital to ensure that volunteers who are active roles which directly or indirectly support suicide prevention are afforded access to timely and compassionate support.

Priority Areas

We agree that suicide prevention needs to be addressed using a holistic, ‘whole society’ approach. A similar approach is being adopted for the Volunteering Action Plan published in June 2022, which provides a clear blueprint for improving volunteer participation in Scotland (2022, Scottish Government & Volunteer Scotland).

As part of this ‘whole society’ approach, it is vital that the role of volunteering in preventing suicide is considered. Volunteers form part of the ‘workforce’ helping to prevent suicide in communities across the country. According to the 2020 Scottish Household Survey, 4% of Scotland’s formal volunteers (47,312 people) are involved in counselling activity, and a further 8% (94,624 people) are involved in visiting, buddying or befriending (Comparative analysis of SHS 2018 and 2020 data, 2021, Volunteer Scotland).

Participation in volunteering itself can also have significant health and wellbeing benefits which in turn can prevent or reverse more serious mental health issues. In a report from December 2018, we found that regular volunteering can alleviate depression, anxiety and stress, and reduce loneliness and social isolation (‘Volunteering, Health and Wellbeing’, 2018, Volunteer Scotland).

As a result, a whole society approach is required to ensure that the role of volunteering in preventing suicide is acknowledged and maximised.

Delivery and Governance Proposals

We agree with the models for both the National Suicide prevention Leadership Group and the Scottish Delivery Collaborative, however it is vital that the voluntary sector, including relevant volunteer involving organisations, are meaningfully engaged.

The Voluntary sector is incredibly diverse with over 40,000 voluntary organisations estimated to exist, including 24,832 registered charities (‘Sector Stats’, SCVO,

2022). Meaningful collaboration with the voluntary sector is challenging, particularly given it is estimated that half of voluntary organisations are community groups who will likely be largely or wholly operated by volunteers (Ibid). As a result of significant restrictions on time and resource, many voluntary organisations find it difficult to engage with collaborative decision-making processes ('Development of Scotland's Volunteering Action Plan: Evaluation Report', 2022, Volunteer Scotland - publication pending).

It is therefore vital that consideration is given to ensuring that the voluntary sector – and contribution of volunteers – can be meaningfully engaged on both groups.

Strategy and Action Plan

In addition to points previously raised about the meaningful engagement of the voluntary sector and the role of volunteering in preventing suicide, we would like to reinforce the fact that volunteers are a key part of the 'workforce' who have a role in helping to reduce suicidal ideation and the incidence of suicides. As such, it is important that they are explicitly mentioned for consideration when discussing the need for training related to suicide awareness.

Similar to the paid workforce whose roles can make them vulnerable to suicidal ideation, volunteers can also be susceptible to vicarious trauma and also require a robust programme of support to protect their wellbeing.

Finally, the Scottish Government have expressed the need to reduce expenditure in the recent Spending Review (2022). Therefore, the appropriate engagement of volunteers should be an important consideration in the Suicide Prevention Strategy. Volunteers, or indeed volunteer run services, should never replace paid staff or prop up services normally provided by paid staff that are under-resourced. Research published in 2019 found that 19% of volunteers felt that their volunteering 'was becoming too much like paid work' ('Time Well Spent', 2019, NCVO). We also know from our own research that this level of burden can impact on the positive wellbeing benefits of volunteering, and can actually lead to declining wellbeing due to excessive volunteer hours, emotionally demanding roles and lack of effective support ('Volunteering, Health and Wellbeing', 2018, Volunteer Scotland). As such, it is important that organisations provide quality volunteering experiences that do not over-burden volunteers or replace paid roles.

Volunteer Scotland and the Scottish Trade Union Council developed a shared Volunteer Charter identifying the key principles for 'assuring legitimacy and preventing exploitation of workers and volunteers' ('Volunteer Charter', 2019, Volunteer Scotland). In particular, the 5th principle states that 'volunteers should not carry out duties formerly carried out by paid workers nor should they be used to disguise the effects of non-filled vacancies or cuts in services.'



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