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# Consultation Response

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A New Mental Health and Wellbeing  
Strategy

September 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](mailto:sarah.latto@volunteerscotland.org.uk)**

## Introduction

Volunteers are a key part of the mental health and wellbeing workforce, with a significant number of individuals supporting organisations with activities that promote mental health, either directly or indirectly. In addition, over 1.2 million individuals helped somebody informally with their mental wellbeing during 2020. Participation in volunteering also has significant personal benefits for mental health and wellbeing, particularly for those whose wellbeing was lower at the outset. ([‘Volunteering, Health and Wellbeing’](#), 2018, Volunteer Scotland). As a result, it is vital that the contribution of volunteering is reflected in the new Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

## 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.”* ([‘Volunteering for All: National Framework’](#), 2019, Scottish Government)

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.”* ([‘Protecting Scotland, Renewing Scotland: The Government’s Programme for Scotland 2020-2021’](#), 2020, Scottish Government)

Despite this commitment, volunteering remains fairly elusive in wider relevant policy areas. This was reflected in the 2022-23 Programme for Government where volunteering is not mentioned ([‘A stronger and more resilient Scotland: the Programme for Government 2022 to 2023’](#), 2022, Scottish Government) and in the recent Resource Spending Review where volunteering is also not mentioned and funding for the third sector is due to be reduced by £1 million in 2023-24 ([‘Resource Spending Review 2022’](#), 2022, Scottish Government).

Scotland’s national Volunteering Action Plan ([‘Volunteering Action Plan’](#), 2022, Scottish Government and Volunteer Scotland) was launched by the Scottish Government, Volunteer Scotland and other partners in June 2022 and builds upon

outcomes identified in the Volunteering for All framework ([‘Volunteering for All: National Framework’](#), 2019, Scottish Government). Both acknowledge the vital role of volunteering in Scotland, with the Action Plan in particular detailing the societal impact of volunteering including the demonstrable positive effects on mental wellbeing and its ability to increase social capital.

**Given the commitment to volunteering from the Scottish Government in the the Volunteering Action Plan, we believe that the role of volunteering in promoting wellbeing should be better represented in relevant policy, including in the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy.**

## **Consultation Question Responses**

We have chosen to respond to a number of relevant questions in the consultation, including multiple choice and open text questions. Below we have shared the written responses to open text fields.

### **5.1 What are the main things in day-to-day life that currently have the biggest positive impact on the mental health and wellbeing of you, or of people you know?**

Many people volunteer to improve their mental health and wellbeing. Our analysis of the ‘Time Well Spent’ research by NCVO in 2019 found that 80% of Scottish volunteers agreed that volunteering had improved their mental health and wellbeing (‘NCVO – Time Well Spent Scottish Analysis: Volunteer Impacts’, 2021, Maltman, D. and Linning, M.). Regular volunteering can also alleviate depression, anxiety and stress, and reduce loneliness and social isolation ([‘Volunteering, Health and Wellbeing’](#), 2018, Volunteer Scotland).

### **5.2. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about this, whether you’re answering as an individual or on behalf of any organisation?**

We also know that the benefits of volunteering for individual mental wellbeing are intersectional. Research shows that the health and wellbeing benefits of volunteering are more pronounced for those experiencing significant disadvantage. In ‘Time Well Spent’ research, 77% of Scottish volunteers from lower socio-economic groups C2DE agreed that volunteering helped them feel less isolated compared with 68% of ABC1s (‘NCVO – Time Well Spent Scottish Analysis: Volunteer Impacts’, 2021, Maltman, D. and Linning, M.). Further evidence shows that individuals who are disabled, unemployed or older – and thus more likely to experience challenges to their mental health - are likely to generate the highest benefits from volunteering ([‘The contribution of volunteering to Scotland's health and wellbeing’](#), 2019, Volunteer Scotland).

## **5.6 If you answered 'other', can you describe the ways in which you look after your own mental health and wellbeing, or the mental health and wellbeing of others?**

A significant number of the population support the mental health and wellbeing of others by volunteering, either formally or informally. Formal volunteering refers to activity carried out on behalf of an organisation or group, whilst informal volunteering refers to an individual giving their time independently to support an individual that is not related to them. We know from the Scottish Household Survey results in 2020 that 17% of adult formal volunteers – 202,795 people – volunteer with organisations of groups focussed on health, disability and wellbeing ('Analysis of SHS 2020 data', 2022, Volunteer Scotland). Whilst this figure does not explicitly relate to mental health and wellbeing organisations, we know that 21% of health related Scottish voluntary organisations have a focus on mental health (['State of the Sector 2022'](#), SCVO).

Drilling down further, we know that 8% of formal adult volunteers – or 94,624 people – directly look after the mental wellbeing of others by 'visiting, buddying or befriending' ('Analysis of SHS 2020 data', 2022, Volunteer Scotland). In addition, many volunteers indirectly support mental health and wellbeing by providing support, advice, coaching, or supporting people with their physical health.

A high number of people also support the health and wellbeing of others informally. During 2020, 51% of the adult Scottish population – 1,299,256 people – kept in touch with someone who was at risk of being lonely (Ibid). This represents a significant rise on the figure for 2018 which was 289,758. These figures highlight the significant contribution of volunteers to the health and wellbeing of the Scottish population, particularly in times of hardship.

## **5.8 Referring to your last answers, what stops you doing more of these activities? This might include not having enough time, financial barriers, location etc.**

There are a number of barriers to volunteering, and evidence suggests that these are most pronounced for people experiencing disadvantage. The Scottish Household Survey results for 2020 highlight those groups who are least likely to volunteer ('Analysis of SHS 2020 data', 2021, Volunteer Scotland). The volunteering participation rate for all adults in Scotland is 26% and this has remained static for the past 3 years. However, for those in SIMD Q1 areas the participation rate in 2020 was 14% (6% less than the 2018 rate, and 15% lower than the equivalent rate for SIMD Q5). For those with a disability the participation rate in 2020 was 20%, 7% less than the rate for non-disabled individuals. This demonstrates the inequality that exists in

volunteering participation, particularly for those groups who are more likely to benefit from volunteering.

Digital exclusion is a significant barrier. In 2018, Citizens Advice Scotland found that 18% of respondents who had sought advice from them in a given period had difficulty using a computer and 16% couldn't use one at all ([‘Disconnected: Understanding digital inclusion and improving access’](#), 2018, Citizens Advice Scotland). It also found that broadband costs were a barrier for 18% of respondents. During the pandemic most charities adapted to online delivery models. This also had an impact on volunteer deployment, with 56% of volunteer involving organisations reporting that they moved some or all of their volunteering online ([‘Road to Recovery’](#), 2021, Volunteer Scotland). Given the Citizens Advice Scotland figures about digital exclusion, many volunteers are likely to have been unable to continue volunteering during the pandemic.

Interestingly, however, the rate of disabled people volunteering exclusively online is more than double the rate of non-disabled volunteers, with rates of 10% and 4% respectively ([‘Time Well Spent’](#), 2019, NCVO). This would suggest that digital volunteering models are more inclusive for those with disabilities.

Covid-19 has had a significant adverse impact on volunteers which is now being exacerbated by the cost of living crisis. We know from research during the pandemic that some volunteers are experiencing burnout, and there is a concern that the sustained demand for help from volunteers because of the current cost of living crisis will add significant additional pressures. For example, the Scottish Government's survey of Volunteer Involving Organisations in May 2021 found that 47% of respondents acknowledge 'Volunteers experiencing fatigue/burnout or other wellbeing issues' was presenting 'major/some challenge' ([‘Scottish Third Sector Perspectives on volunteering during Covid-19: Survey Report’](#), 2020, Scottish Government).

## **Part 6 - Access to advice and support for mental wellbeing**

**Our mental health and wellbeing are influenced by many factors, such as our home life, our work, our physical environment and housing, our income, our relationships or our community, including difficult or traumatic life experiences or any inequalities we may face. In particular, research suggests that living with financial worries can have a negative influence; whilst good relationships, financial security and involvement in community activities support mental wellbeing. However, we want to hear what you think are the most important factors.**

**6.6 Is there anything else you would like to tell us about this, whether you're answering as an individual or on behalf of any organisation?**

Volunteers provide a critical input to supporting mental health and wellbeing across both the statutory and third sectors. Healthcare Improvement Scotland supports the involvement of volunteers in NHS settings. In the period between 1 October 2021 and 31 March 2022 volunteers across NHS Scotland gifted a total of 109,010 hours ([‘NHSScotland Volunteering Programme Annual Report 2021-22’](#), 2022, Healthcare Improvement Scotland).

In the third sector, the SCVO ‘State of the Sector 2020’ report found that there were 189 charities focussing on mental health and wellbeing in 2018, with 103 new mental health and wellbeing charities set up between 2016 and 2018 (2021, SCVO). This does not account for those charities that provide a broader range of services which support mental health and wellbeing, and indeed the significant number of voluntary groups focussing on mental health and wellbeing that are not registered charities.

Volunteers have a key role in promoting positive mental health and wellbeing in these settings, both in terms of treatment and prevention. They undertake a range of activities which support positive mental health and wellbeing including befriending, support and activities to promote community connection. Many hospital, residential or respite care services also engage volunteers to provide person-centred support and their mental health, as evidenced in the examples below.

A case study from Healthcare Improvement Scotland describes a 72 year old patient, registered blind, who was admitted to hospital with multiple medical conditions ([‘Regular visits from volunteers helped reduce the isolation and anxiety felt by an elderly patient in Glasgow’](#), 2018, Healthcare Improvement Scotland). The patient reported that the visits from volunteers were ‘keeping her going’ and described the volunteers as ‘the kindest people’. Staff members reported that the patient was more amiable and less anxious after a visit from a volunteer.

Volunteers support a significant number of voluntary organisations that help people experiencing a range of mental health needs. See Me Scotland engages volunteers with lived experience of mental health in a variety of roles, including 41 ‘Community Champions’ who identify where stigma and discrimination exists in their local communities and come up with ideas and projects to challenge it ([‘Champions’ webpage](#), 2022, See Me). Similarly, Support in Mind Scotland has a Students Project whereby volunteers map local mental health support services and increase awareness of these within the student population ([‘Volunteering Opportunities’ webpage](#), 2022, Support in Mind).

Volunteering also supports mental wellbeing through prevention and early intervention services. In particular, volunteers have a significant impact on social isolation and loneliness. Research has shown that social isolation and loneliness can be both a cause and consequence of poor health and is linked to increased risk of

depression, cognitive decline and dementia, amongst other issues ([‘Risk to Health’](#), 2022, Campaign to End Loneliness).

In research undertaken by Befriending Networks into the benefits of befriending in one specific project, beneficiaries reported positive changes in their confidence, happiness and social connection ([‘A stitch in Time - The benefits of Befriending’](#), 2015, Befriending Networks). Befriending and mentoring services have a key role in ensuring that many people have regular meaningful social interactions, which in turn improves their mental wellbeing and can help to prevent onset of more severe health issues.

Paths for All engage volunteers to support inclusive walking and wheeling activities for older people, often building in opportunities for social interaction and accessible volunteering opportunities ([‘Walking and talking started Jessie and Alice’s volunteering journey’](#), 2022, Paths for All). Two volunteers at their Dementia Friendly Health Walk in Carlisle shared their experiences of participating, with one saying:

*“...the Friday Walk is an excellent opportunity for people to get out and about for a stroll and a good blether. It is a chance for carers to talk with folk in the same situation as themselves and exercise in the open air is good for everyone. We have both been in the same situation as the people who walk on Fridays so know first-hand how beneficial the walking group can be. Every wee bit of support helps.”*

It is clear from the evidence above that the efforts of volunteers have a significant impact on the overall wellbeing of communities, ensuring that a rich variety of person-centred services are available for people with mental health and wellbeing issues.

### **7.1 - Do you have any specific suggestions of how to improve the types and availability of mental health and wellbeing support in future?**

To ensure that a range of volunteer-led mental health and wellbeing services continue to exist within the voluntary sector, it is vital that the Mental Health and Wellbeing strategy is developed with meaningful engagement of the sector. It is also essential that the strategy addresses current funding pressures experienced by the sector.

The third sector is incredibly diverse with over 40,000 voluntary organisations estimated to exist, including 24,832 registered charities ([‘Sector Stats’](#), 2022, SCVO). Meaningful collaboration with the voluntary sector is challenging, particularly given that approximately 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.

The recent evaluation of the Volunteering Action Plan development process found that many organisations struggled to maintain engagement due to time constraints, particularly given funding challenges and the pressures of the Covid-19 pandemic ('Development of Scotland's Volunteering Action Plan: Evaluation Report', publication pending, Volunteer Scotland). In Volunteer Scotland's recent research exploring the impact of Covid-19 on volunteering, 48% of volunteer involving organisations identified dedicated funding for their volunteer programmes as a priority for their medium or long term recovery (['Road to Recovery'](#), 2021, Volunteer Scotland). Similarly, OSCR's survey exploring the impact of Covid-19 on Scottish Charities exposed a particularly acute issue related to fatigue and burnout experienced by trustees, particularly in smaller organisations with no paid staff (['November COVID-19 survey: Volunteers and Trustees Supplementary'](#), 2020, OSCR).

Cost of living increases are also affecting the balance sheets of many voluntary and community organisations. Demand for services is increasing, as are operating costs, yet the money available is often decreasing. Those whose core funding comes from the public sector are often subject to either fixed funding (but declining in real terms due to high inflation) or reduced funding. This is compounded by the fact that many people will likely have less disposable income to donate to charities in the months ahead. The Charities Aid Foundation recently found that 12% of individuals are planning to cut back on charity donations (['Cost-of-living squeeze hits donations to charity sector'](#), 2022, Charities Aid Foundation).

This highlights a key consideration for the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy if it wishes to ensure meaningful collaboration and participation in achieving its priorities. As stated by SCVO, a commitment to multi-year funding for the voluntary sector is 'vital' (['"Overlooked": Voluntary sector body reacts to Scottish Government's four-year spending plans for public services'](#), 2022, SCVO). In a response to the Spending Review, they stated that:

*'it is disappointing to see that it contains more warm words on the need for collaboration and partnership with the voluntary sector, yet next to no mention of the fair, long-term funding that voluntary organisations so desperately need.'*

**To develop a holistic Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy in Scotland which recognises the significant contribution of volunteers and the voluntary sector, it needs to address the acute funding situation that the sector is currently facing.**

### **11.1 Do you have any further comments on what could be done to address mental health inequalities for a particular group of people? If so, what are they?**

As demonstrated previously, volunteering has significant benefits for the mental health and wellbeing of participants, particularly for individuals experiencing disadvantage. As such, commitment to inclusive volunteering practices would help to address mental health inequalities.

The Volunteering Action Plan has inclusive volunteering at its centre, and actions 46 and 47 in particular have strong read across to the new Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy ([‘Volunteering Action Plan’](#), 2022, Scottish Government and Volunteer Scotland). These are:

46) Create a wellbeing training resource which supports volunteers to maintain positive physical and emotional wellbeing and sets a national baseline to support volunteer practice.

47) Improve and widen the uptake of standards of practice through the increased promotion of ‘a quality pipeline’ which includes the Volunteer Charter, Volunteer Friendly (VF) and Investing in Volunteers (IiV). Assess potential for ‘QA marked’ opportunities.

**The Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy could commit to support the development of a wellbeing training resource for volunteers and ensure that a relevant quality standard is a pre-requisite for any volunteer involving organisations funded through associated funding streams. These would help to ensure that inclusive best practice is observed by funded organisations.**

### **12.3. Is there anything else you’d like to tell us about [funding], whether you’re answering as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?**

As mentioned previously, for the voluntary sector and volunteers to continue providing mental health and wellbeing services, it is vital that funding is sustainable. In particular, funding needs to reflect current levels of inflation, including increasing funding allocation for volunteer recruitment, training and expenses. Also, multi-year funding is essential for volunteers to provide meaningful support to individuals. Volunteer recruitment, training and confidence-building takes time, and 1-2 year funding is likely to have a significant detrimental impact on the efficacy of volunteer-led services.

## **Part 14 - Our vision and outcomes for the mental health and wellbeing workforce**

**We have consulted with partners and identified a series of outcomes for each of the five pillars of workforce planning set out in the National Workforce Strategy for Health and Social Care: Plan, Attract, Train, Employ and Nurture.**

**14.7. Are there any other short and medium term outcomes we should be working towards?**

Volunteers have a valuable role to play in the provision of mental health and wellbeing services, but it is vital that this is not a replacement for duties previously performed by paid staff. **Reflecting the Scottish Government's commitment to Fair Work, and to ensuring that the mental health and wellbeing workforce is recognised and valued, we would like to see an explicit outcome that volunteers are not engaged to carry out duties normally performed by paid staff or to disguise the effects of staff shortages.**

Volunteer Scotland and the Scottish Trade Union Council developed the Volunteer Charter identifying the key principles for 'assuring legitimacy and preventing exploitation of workers and volunteers' (2019, Volunteer Scotland and STUC). 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.'

We would also like to see the inclusion of specific outcomes related to the recruitment, training and support needs of volunteers. Volunteers have different needs to paid employees in terms of skillset, capacity and availability, and expectations around the activities they do should also be different. **An outcome acknowledging the specific needs and experiences of volunteers is required to ensure service providers are not using the same processes for staff and volunteers, as is often the case.**

Finally, volunteer-led services are often seen as a cheaper option. This undervalues the contribution of volunteers and misrepresents the level of investment required for sustainable volunteer management. Whilst volunteers are unpaid, they are not free. The effective and inclusive engagement of volunteers requires dedicated resource, usually in the form of paid coordinators and budget to cover recruitment, training, ongoing support and recognition costs, for it to thrive. **As such, it is important to include an outcome acknowledging the need to invest in skilled volunteering practitioners when funding volunteer-led mental health and wellbeing services.**

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that volunteering has a vital role to play in the delivery of mental health and wellbeing services in Scotland. Volunteers support a range of services focussed on

both the treatment and prevention of mental ill health. Volunteering also has significant personal health and wellbeing benefits, particularly for those in deprived communities and those with a disability or long term condition. As a result, we have made the following recommendations for the development of Scotland's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy:

- Ensure meaningful consultation with the voluntary sector that acknowledges its complexity and the current challenges around capacity to engage.
- Commit to sustainable multi-year funding of voluntary groups delivering mental health services, and ensure that a relevant quality standard is a pre-requisite for any volunteer involving organisations funded through associated funding streams.
- Commit to support the development of a wellbeing training resource for volunteers.
- Include an explicit outcome that volunteers are not used to carry out duties normally performed by paid staff or to disguise the effects of staff shortages in the outcomes for the mental health and wellbeing workforce.
- Include outcomes related to the specific recruitment, training and support needs of volunteers in the outcomes for the mental health and wellbeing workforce.
- Include an outcome acknowledging the need to invest in skilled volunteering practitioners when funding volunteer-led mental health and wellbeing services in the outcomes for the mental health and wellbeing workforce.



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