

Report on activities 2020-21 to support people with additional health needs to secure and sustain volunteering

Introduction

The Health and Wellbeing service within Volunteer Edinburgh has been delivered for 35 years and has supported people who experience the greatest health inequalities to become active volunteers in their community. The service has evolved and developed over the years in response to changing need but like all others in the sector, 2020-21 brought its biggest and most significant challenge.

Almost instantly in March 2020, volunteering stopped for most people engaged with our Health and Wellbeing Team. Underlying and long-term health conditions dictated that many began 'shielding'. All volunteering opportunities, except those providing direct COVID related emergency support, were suspended. Along with most of the population, our clients were at home without occupation, purpose, or normal connections. For fragile and complex individuals with limited resilience and poor social networks, this experience was tougher.

Our team's efforts focussed on supporting all clients, whether they were able to continue volunteering or not. Throughout the period of lockdown and during the months that followed, our Health and Wellbeing staff provided responsive and ongoing welfare support to current and historic caseloads, whilst supporting volunteer involving organisations (VIOs).

Activity by Numbers Through the Pandemic

29 Volunteer-Involving Organisation (VIO) enquiries

113 referrer enquiries

38 new clients engaged

43 existing long-term clients (pre-existing contact for over one year) supported

761 follow emails, phone calls, walk and talks, zoom calls for health and wellbeing support during lockdown to above clients

20 clients placed into volunteering during lockdown

Supported a team of 14 Health and Wellbeing volunteers who have helped us to deliver the service – most of whom have support needs themselves

Helped clients to access:

- Dyslexia support
- Carpets
- Cooker
- Laptops
- Foodbank
- PlayStation
- Heater
- Clothes
- Blankets
- Jigsaws
- Crutches
- Gym and walking groups
- Plants for their garden
- Books

47% of all volunteering enquiries that came into the Volunteer Centre over the year identified themselves as having support sort of additional support need

10% of all enquiries were from support workers

In addition, our Health & Wellbeing staff were deployed to duties in the citywide COVID response:

- Ready Scotland campaign
- NHS Lothian fast track volunteer engagement

Ready Scotland Campaign

In April 2020, the Scottish Government launched the Ready Scotland volunteer appeal in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In Edinburgh, 5,550 people registered interest and were routed to Volunteer Edinburgh. A unique, remote, on-boarding process was created which included a telephone interview with an experienced volunteer manager, telephone reference checking, completion of an on-line training course (designed by Volunteer Edinburgh, including content on boundaries, confidentiality, and safeguarding) and identity checking. Over 1,000 applicants were interviewed, of whom **524 became Community Taskforce Volunteers (CTVs)** supporting people affected by the pandemic, and beyond.

As of 1st September 2021, **CTV support has been provided on 6,041 occasions** to some of the most vulnerable people in Edinburgh, particularly those with no familial or neighbour support. This has included shopping, dog walking, prescription collections/delivery, gardening, waste/recycling tasks and a variety of other one-off, practical tasks.

In addition, CTVs have supported statutory sector partners:

- **569** hearing aids have been collected and delivered to patients on behalf of NHS Lothian Audiology Department
- EHSCP Flu vaccination clinics benefitted from **2,244** hours of CTV time over **561** shifts
- EHSCP COVID Vaccination clinics have benefitted from **5780** hours of CTV time over **1445** shifts

Our Health and Wellbeing officer was heavily involved in the interviewing and selecting of CTV applicants. The team's resources were intrinsic to CTV training. This skill, knowledge and experience proved invaluable in ensuring that competent and appropriate volunteers were recruited and deployed for this unique and bespoke programme.

NHS Lothian

Volunteer Edinburgh has had a long-standing role in supporting the strategic and operational development of volunteering in NHS Lothian. The pandemic forced a rapid volunteer initiative with fast-track NHS recruitment undertaken in three weeks compared to the usual 12, whilst maintaining all safeguards and governance.

Over **1,500** notes of interest were received within 24 hours of advertising; **1,037 applications** were received, and **678 volunteers placed**. New volunteer roles included 'Stop and Gel' guides, laundry pick up/collection, help in the Donation and Distribution Hub, collating art activity packs for patients and shopping.

Our Health and Wellbeing Service Manager was heavily involved in this programme and deployed for **116 hours** during May and June 2020 to provide expert volunteer management to new recruits at the Western General Hospital, and informal mentoring to NHS staff. As with CTV, this skill and experience proved invaluable in ensuring smooth programme delivery and helping to keep expectations (of volunteers and staff) realistic and achievable.

Statement from Supported Volunteer

"I always knew how much I valued volunteering as part of my life generally but, specifically, as vital to my continuing mental and physical wellbeing and my recovery from alcohol issues, but if I did not, I became acutely aware of it going into the first lockdown.

My volunteering as a tutor at Access to Industry, my shifts at the Scottish Poetry Library, most of my voluntary work at Volunteer Edinburgh along with facilitating Serenity Strings recovery music group - it all came to an end, and I was left with several huge voids; my weekly timetable was rent asunder.

I volunteered to do phone befriending on a weekly basis for several months, but this was insufficient to replace my routine. Volunteering gives me fulfilment and a sense of worth, so I was now struggling to keep mind and body active and making a contribution. I feared my old demons would return as my mood suffered and this was to happen in a serious way during the second lockdown which proved a stage too far for me.

Although I have my writing projects and the phone befriending, I found that I was becoming increasingly demotivated, and feelings of isolation and depression became harder to counter. Lack of personal contact, the to-and-fro of office life and especially not being able to play music with folk became more and more significant when it came to looking for reasons to get up in the mornings. I am a person who needs activity to battle against depression and anxiety and to enhance my already low self-esteem.

I am very much hoping that the world of work – voluntary or otherwise – does not return as a 'working from home' / Zoom environment as this does not suit me at all. I need to be busy among people and not in solitude, reliant on computers for company.

I tried against all advice and my own instincts to re-enter the world of paid employment but, though I fought it, the pressure grew in me in a very bleak way, and this eventually fell through. It was a job I was singularly unsuited to. Instead of being a solution to my predicament, it became a cause of another breakdown.

Doing voluntary work, for the moment, suits me, as it allows me into a work environment without inviting the pressures I experience in regular employment."

Overview of Health and Wellbeing Survey

In Spring 2021, Volunteer Edinburgh conducted a survey on the impact of supported volunteering during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Aim

To compare the effect of supported volunteers continuing or stopping their volunteering during the pandemic (i.e. from March 2020).

Reach

We contacted approximately 800 VIOs, volunteer centres, support workers, and referrers in Edinburgh, Scotland, the UK and beyond.

Response

We received 120 responses, and 83 of these worked directly with supported volunteers. 48 respondents worked with 10 or more supported volunteers and 33 respondents worked with between 2 and 10 supported volunteers. Therefore, responses to this survey gave us an understanding of over 650 supported volunteers' experiences during the pandemic.

Main Questions

We asked respondents to provide information about those volunteers who had continued and those who had stopped volunteering during the pandemic.

We were interested in whether they felt their volunteers had improved, stayed the same or worsened in the following areas:

1. Contact with other people
2. Learning
3. Confidence
4. Feeling of being valued
5. Mental health
6. Physical health
7. Motivation
8. Reliance on medication
9. Isolation
10. Self-development

We also asked whether the respondents felt this could be attributed to continuing or stopping volunteering.

Key Results

In all 10 areas, people who continued to volunteer fared better than those who did not. For example:

- 68% of those who continued volunteering said their **learning** had improved or stayed the same, compared to 21% of those who stopped volunteering. 75% of those who stopped volunteering said their learning had got worse, compared to 38% of those who continued volunteering.
- 66% of those who continued volunteering said their **feeling of being valued** had improved or stayed the same, compared to 13% of those who stopped volunteering. 55% of those who stopped volunteering said they felt **less valued**, compared to 12% of those who continued volunteering.
- 42% of those who continued volunteering said their **mental health** had improved or stayed the same, compared to 8% of those who stopped volunteering. 69% of those who stopped volunteering said their **mental health** had got worse, compared to 34% of those who continued volunteering.
- 54% of those who continued volunteering said their **motivation** had improved or stayed the same, compared to 8% of those who stopped volunteering.
- 81% of those who stopped volunteering said they felt **more isolated**, compared to 62% of those who continued volunteering.

Comments from Organisations

- *"A positive is people who have been furloughed have increased volunteering opportunities, however the negative is supported volunteering has taken a hit over the last year."*
- *"For supported volunteers on our projects, supported volunteering completely stopped in March 2020 and has not resumed."*
- *"It has meant loss of routine and structure, a world greatly changed and much smaller for our supported volunteers."*
- *"COVID has had a devastating effect on supported volunteers whose services we have not been able to employ during this time; helping with our project is usually a lifeline for these individuals."*
- *"It put indefinitely on hold opportunities that were supporting people to build their confidence, self-esteem and feeling more part of the community or a group and may result in people needing more support to volunteer than they would have done pre-COVID."*
- *"VIOs either were on furlough or they did not have the capacity to support people with barriers if they were operating during COVID."*

Volunteers Who Continued to Volunteer

- *“Kept me going helping others from a distance.”*
- *“It was good to chat/help someone who was isolated and need to speak about all their problems.”*
- *“Helped me feel connected, wanted and supported.”*

Contribution of Volunteering

- 28% of those who continued to volunteer said their volunteering had helped them feel valued. 24% said it had helped keep their motivation.
- 44% said stopping volunteering had had a detrimental effect on their contacts and friendships.
- Over 35% said stopping volunteering had worsened their motivation, learning new things, confidence, feeling valued, mental health.

Volunteers Who Stopped Volunteering

- *“Devastating, eradicated most things, a total 'hole' for an autistic talent like me.”*
- *“It pretty much destroyed the three volunteering options I had.”*
- *“I miss the feeling of being appreciated for the help I gave.”*
- *“Because the cafe I was volunteering in closed, I lost confidence in going out and decreased my circle of people in my life.”*
- *“It stopped me meeting new people and helping others.”*

Additional Findings

- 88% said they felt their clients' volunteering would resume.
- 44% said they were planning a new project while 56% said they were not.
- 39% felt it would be more difficult to place volunteers while 61% felt the situation would be similar.

Survey conclusions and observations

People who continued to volunteer fared better than those who did not – more of them retained their level of mental health, connections, confidence, motivation and were less isolated. It might be that this was the reason they were able to continue to volunteer rather than being a result of their volunteering.

However, many people with support needs were denied the opportunity to continue a vital activity that had previously benefited their social contact, confidence, feeling of being valued etc. The vast majority of volunteers will be looking to resume volunteering and places will have to be found for them in areas where capacity is limited.

Going Forward

It is widely acknowledged that volunteering by people who experience health issues or have other support needs will be slow to resume. The priority for VIOs is to get services back up and running. Capacity and resources for volunteers who need support is harder to identify. VIOs are exhausted and for many, goodwill has been stretched. Recent Scottish Government research¹ reports that “inclusion in volunteering” is a priority for 37% of organisations, compared to 79% of Third Sector Interfaces (TSIs). As a team that has championed inclusion in volunteering for over 30 years, we are painfully aware that inequalities in volunteering have massively widened over the past year. A key focus of our resumption and recovery plan is therefore to support the confidence and capacity of the city's organisations in their engagement of people who need support to volunteer.

¹ Scottish Government: Survey on role of volunteering and the third sector response to COVID-19 - Preliminary results
June 2021