

Hidden treasure: volunteering time and talent



Volunteering is ‘the new alchemy’, turning donations of time and talent into ‘human gold’, according to nfpSynergy¹ in their extensive report into volunteering.

Volunteers are exerting their transformative influence throughout Welsh society, not least in spheres of health and care. The exemplary contribution of volunteers in providing [care after hospital discharge in Pembrokeshire](#) and in [assisting hearing aid users in rural Powys](#) is demonstrated in these case studies. In both examples, volunteers help to ease pressures on the NHS, as well as contributing to positive health and wellbeing. A recent video co-produced with Welsh Government highlights how [volunteers contribute to the agenda of A Heathier Wales](#).

Whether in hospitals or community, in formal roles or through informal, task-based activity, volunteer time and talent is a resource we could harness more extensively, more strategically and more effectively. How to do this is the question we need to ask, looking forward. But firstly we cannot ignore the significant lessons learned from volunteering during Covid 19.

What have we learned?

Experience in Wales has been documented in a report [‘Volunteering to support NHS: looking forward in the light of Covid 19’](#), based on a web event hosted by WCVA.

Interest in volunteering has increased during the pandemic. Indeed, the unprecedented response from volunteers exceeded the capacity of health boards to involve them in a timely and mutually beneficial manner. County Voluntary Councils (CVCs) often acted as the first port

¹ The New Alchemy. How volunteering turns donations of time and talent into human gold. M Guild, T Harrison and J Saxton (2014) Nfp Synergy. <https://nfpsynergy.net/free-report/new-alchemy>

of enquiry, handling recruitment and training processes, keeping contact with volunteers and managing expectations.

There is significant learning in relation to the design and support of volunteering in the NHS, including:

- the need for a breadth of volunteer roles, including ongoing substantive roles and others linked to crisis response,
- consistency of approach and better coordination, regionally and nationally - buy-in from stakeholders enabled more efficient processes for engaging volunteers into useful roles
- ways of measuring volunteering impact – without which volunteering remains ‘invisible’
- The value of wider partnerships and how to build on these - for example using the expertise of CVCs

In England, Helpforce has been supporting [Integrated approaches to volunteering](#) across local strategic partnerships. Following a recent survey of leaders from NHS, local authorities and voluntary sector organisations, a [report](#) highlights volunteers as a largely untapped resource which can create much needed resilience across regional health and care systems.

A [blog by Paddy Hanrahan](#) draws on the survey findings and argues that volunteers are involved most effectively where a strategic approach is taken by regional systems, with different partners organisations working together.

For example, cooperation between organisations enabled volunteers to be directed to where most needed. Local voluntary sector organisations tended to be more agile than statutory services and can more quickly design new volunteer roles and recruit and deploy new volunteers.

It was noted that where volunteering had previously been identified as a key element in response to a civic emergency, mobilisation in response to Covid 19 happened quickly.

A whole system approach is advocated, in which the functions needed are defined at strategic level and the recruitment, support and coordination of volunteers is managed by place-based structures, close to the communities they serve.

Looking to the future

Volunteering to support the NHS is a very broad canvas. The pandemic has accelerated some positive changes in relation to digital working, collaborative partnerships and management of risk, all of which we can build upon.

For some health boards it may be the workforce agenda that inspires investment in volunteering; the opportunity for volunteers to get a taste for a possible future career. For some it ticks the diversity and engagement agenda, by involving a wider representation of the community.

The impact of volunteers in supporting clinical outcomes, reducing staff stress or improving patient experience may be the most important rationale for volunteering, or perhaps it is volunteers' provision of low level support and preventative activities in the community which matters most, recognising how this reduces pressure on acute services. We should not forget, too, that there are well established [links between volunteering and volunteers' health and wellbeing](#).

Recent and ongoing research is revealing more and more about what works, including what needs to be in place for volunteering to be successful.

Helpforce has published the findings of its [Volunteering innovators programme](#) in which nine distinct volunteer roles were developed and piloted by NHS partners in England, including mealtime support, hospital discharge support, mobility support and end of life care. The findings identify that volunteering positively impact on patients, staff and systems. Service guides have been published for each of the nine roles, drawing upon the experience of the pilot projects.

The potential of informal community volunteering is the subject of several research programmes, including a four nation UK study on mobilising voluntary action, (for which WCVA is a co-investigator). This seeks to quantify and appraise the scope and significance of volunteers' contribution during the pandemic.

Governance issues are of concern, especially in care environments, to ensure the safety of patients and to protect volunteers too. As volunteering reverts to something more like 'normal', it is an opportune time to explore what Rob Jackson calls the [new formal](#): a lightening of bureaucracy and of the formalities of volunteer engagement; thinking afresh about what we do, when and why.

This is not about abandoning volunteering management! The WCVA/Wales TUC [Charter for volunteering and workplace relationships](#) outlines principles for maintaining harmonious workplace relationships and provides a good steer, based on the experience of volunteer managers, CVCs and trade unions in Wales.

If volunteering is the 'new alchemy' then we do well to remember the alchemists: those who champion volunteering and who co-produce and support practical volunteer initiatives. Without them, human time and talent may find expression in good deeds, but 'human gold' is unlikely.

Fiona Liddell is [Helpforce Cymru](#) Manager with Wales Council for Voluntary Action. fliddell@wcva.cymru

Helpforce is working with Third Sector Support Wales (WCVA and 19 CVCs), Welsh Government and other partners to develop the potential of volunteering to support health and social care services in Wales,

Fran Targett is Chair of Helpforce Cymru, Vice Chair of WCVA and a [Bevan Commissioner](#)