

Volunteering is Needed for Successful Implementation and Sustainability of NHS Neighbourhoods Health

Recommended Best Practice Approach
July 2026

Overview

The NHS 10-year plan states, ‘volunteers can play an important role in supporting neighbourhood services’ and this document explains why and outlines recommended best practice approaches and considerations for involving volunteering to implement and sustain the new NHS’s Neighbourhood health framework. It has been produced by volunteer infrastructure experts in North Central London after consulting health stakeholders across the country.

The key message to take away is ***volunteering should be viewed as a strategic asset that needs to be thought about and planned at the beginning of implementing neighbourhoods and not at the end of the process.***

Think about Volunteering Differently

Supporting volunteering is not the same as VCSE Commissioning

Volunteering is predominantly thought of, within health and NHS Neighbourhood planning, as a mechanism to support the delivery of a health service or to help awareness of specific health issues or programmes. There is a belief or inference that volunteering will be achieved through commissioning VCSE organisations and/or is organised by those delivering the service. This approach, unfortunately, limits by unintentional design the impact that volunteering can achieve to support long-term health outcomes and objectives.

NHS Neighbourhoods are a different way of health delivery and therefore this is a perfect time to start thinking about volunteering differently. It is time to think of volunteering as a strategic asset rather than a simple delivery mechanism.

It is well documented and evidenced that the act of volunteering, even if nothing to do with delivering a health service, brings health benefits to the person volunteering, for example, reducing social isolation, stress and blood pressure.

Although volunteering benefits people of all ages, studies suggest that the greatest health impact of volunteering is for older people. A ten-year UK household longitudinal study concluded in 2022, *‘that participating in volunteering is associated with higher levels of health-related quality of life and that the association can be found across neighbourhoods, regardless of deprivation. ... It is particularly encouraging that older volunteers are experiencing the positive impacts through volunteering as this suggests that promoting volunteer work to older adults could help the UK population to age healthily.’*¹

Therefore, increasing levels of volunteering in a NHS Neighbourhood, and indeed across a whole system, will help provide significant long-term sustainable health outcomes, regardless of future health priorities and focus. Areas that have prevention or social isolation as priorities, to take just two examples, should be seriously considering volunteering as a strategic investment.

Why Volunteering needs to be prioritised in Neighbourhoods

“As we focus on delivering the ambitions of the 10-Year Health Plan, well-designed volunteering initiatives can make a powerful contribution to what we’ve got to achieve and certainly shouldn’t be an after-thought.”

Sir Jim Mackey, NHS England CEO (May 2026)

Volunteering should not be limited to initiatives, as the section above argues, but seen as a cross-cutting strategic asset that can support all and changing health objectives in an NHS Neighbourhood or system.

If resourced, volunteering will be a key strategic driver for long-term impact in NHS Neighbourhoods:

- (i) *Increasing number of people of volunteering*
Multiple and changing health priorities and objectives will be supported through increasing the number of people volunteering.
- (ii) *Volunteering initiatives*
Rather than piecemeal individual volunteering initiatives and programmes, a strategic co-ordinated approach to volunteering will be more efficient, effective and sustainable. It will utilise and harness successful models and approaches for new programmes, objectives and priorities.

¹ *‘Relationships between Volunteering, Neighbourhood Deprivation and Mental Wellbeing across Four British Birth Cohorts: Evidence from 10 Years of the UK Household Longitudinal Study’ (2022)*

Our Recommended Approach

These recommendations outline an effective approach, in full or in part, that will help to maximise the level and impact of volunteering in NHS Neighbourhoods (and systems) in a long-term sustainable manner.

1 *Take a strategic approach to volunteering*

In the simplest terms, this means volunteering needs to be considered in detail at the beginning and planning stages, particularly about what resources and investment is needed, not at the end of the process.

Too often volunteering is only thought about when the main work or delivery has been planned and resourced which leads to minimal and low impact volunteering support. This approach limits, by unintentional design, the level, impact and sustainability volunteering can have to support health priorities. Through considering the role volunteers can play at the beginning Neighbourhood health can maximise the support of volunteers and ensure they are tailored to local priorities and goals.

Rather than establishing a single or multiple separate volunteering initiatives after a service has been designed and implemented, it is far more efficient and effective to plan for these at the beginning. This enables the potential of sharing of resources (tools, people, spaces etc.), volunteering management and coordination, communications that will also enable volunteer programmes to be sustainable and adapt to new priorities and programmes.

2 *Engage VCSE Partners using good practice approach*

The Neighbourhood approach to healthcare is new to the NHS and will necessitate the involvement of VCSE organisations and volunteering support to be successful. To enable effective strategic volunteering planning it will often be necessary to engage and partner VCSE volunteering experts and other stakeholders to ensure that volunteering within Neighbourhoods supports local priorities and is sustainable.

To obtain meaningful engagement and partnership it must be recognised the way VCSE organisations are funded, e.g. often via short-term restricted income projects, is different to public sector organisations. If VCSE organisations are invited to participate to be part of service design or their input is sought due to their expertise they should be recognised as equal partners, valuing their time and contribution in the same way as clinical/health staff.

We know of public bodies who are using Institute of Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) principles as good practice, e.g. operating with reciprocity and respect, in this area. For example, where the expertise of VCSE organisations is sought or

needed to produce or input into a plan or design a service, their time should be compensated.

‘Operating with reciprocity and respect – recognising that individual and charity participants bring knowledge and expertise that we don’t have and finding ways to recognise this. We take a range of approaches to this, including financial compensation.’

Institute of Voluntary Action Research (IVAR)

There are lots of excellent guidance freely available about how to co-produce in a meaningful and respectful way. We would like to highlight the [co-production ladder of involvement](#) which is a helpful framework that illustrates the varying degrees of stakeholder and citizen participation in the design, delivery, and evaluation of services, policies, or research. It highlights the progression from passive, tokenistic involvement to equal power-sharing and collaboration.

3 Investment in Volunteering (Strategic Alignment with Local Authorities)

‘Volunteering doesn’t happen automatically. It needs infrastructure and investment.’ [IAVE Call to Action](#)

Although the individual act of volunteering is given for free, to enable volunteering to take place in an organised, focused and sustained way requires infrastructure and resources, i.e. investment. However, the investment demands are relatively small, and it has been demonstrated that investment in volunteering yields large ‘multiplier’ returns both economic and social whilst improving Neighbourhood healthcare in the long-term. In addition, the investment in volunteering does not necessarily need to be carried out by a health system in isolation as there is large potential to work with other stakeholders and partners.

Strategic Alignment of Volunteering Investment

The majority of Councils already invest in volunteering infrastructure in some way but expenditure in this area has been significantly squeezed due to long-term pressure on local authority budgets. This creates an opportunity for Neighbourhoods, and health systems more generally, to align their strategic investment in volunteering with local authorities to help achieve objectives and priorities.

For both the NHS and local authorities, the small levels of investment needed to increase the number of people volunteering bring huge returns. More socially active communities are more cohesive and resilient, but also create clear demonstrable physical and mental health impacts that support Neighbourhood and system health and wellbeing:

- Reduce social isolation/loneliness
- Lower blood pressure
- Reduced stress and cortisol
- Reduced depression
- Sharper brain function and slower cognitive decline
- Increased physical activity
- Better self-reported physical health

To examine just one of these health benefits more closely, the cost and impact of social isolation/loneliness on the NHS is significant and strategic approaches (i.e. prevention) to reducing this, e.g. volunteering, will both create savings and free up capacity for the NHS. A recent study by the University of Exeter, using data from over 23,000 adults, concluded that loneliness leads to an extra cost to the NHS of £850 per person per year.²

‘When we invest in purposeful volunteering by aligning roles with real community needs, funding engagement practices, and fostering reflection and reciprocity, we unlock benefits that extend far beyond any single project. Individuals develop a deeper sense of belonging and agency, organizations and institutions become more responsive and resilient, and communities grow stronger and more connected. These outcomes are not isolated; they reinforce one another over time, creating a compounding effect across individual, community, and societal levels.’

Points of Light (2026) ‘Toward Purposeful Volunteerism: A Theory of Change’

4 Volunteering is an enabler for a wide range of health priorities

Across the spectrum of care and wellbeing from prevention to recovery to end of life care, volunteering can add significant and valuable support and capacity. From creating awareness and sharing health messages to working alongside health practitioners, volunteering enables more efficient and effective medical care.

For every health initiative and programme, it is important to think about how volunteers could be involved to enhance the service and increase capacity. Deploying tailored volunteering strategies will enhance every Neighbourhood, from individual projects targeting local priorities to wider programmes enabling more systematic and embedded work.

² [Loneliness and the cost to the NHS](#) (May 2026)

5 Importance of flexible volunteering

To maximise the level and impact of volunteering, adopting and implementing approaches which allow for flexible volunteering is essential. The way people want to volunteer has fundamentally changed³ and to involve volunteers it is needed to design programmes that enable and support people to volunteer in a more flexible way.

There is not, unfortunately, a one-size-fits-all approach for flexible volunteering programmes which further emphasises the need to think and plan about volunteering at the beginning of the process and not at the end (see point 1 above). VCSE volunteering experts will be able to help and advise on tailored approaches and strategies for flexible volunteering in your Neighbourhood or system.

6 Establish or support an infrastructure for health volunteering

Whether for individual or multiple Neighbourhoods, establishing a volunteer infrastructure will help establish and sustain high levels of volunteering to meet current and future priorities. By infrastructure we mean having the following:

- (i) *Centralised Health Volunteering Opportunities*
Information about volunteering opportunities within health are typically located across a range of disparate websites and platforms making them difficult to find. By creating and promoting a mechanism (e.g. web page(s) or platform) that brings these opportunities together will help increase the level and diversity of volunteering.
- (ii) *Volunteer Management Good Practice*
Support, tools and mechanisms to enable consistent good practice standards of volunteer management. For example, as Volunteering Together 4 Health has on its [website](#). This will increase levels of volunteer retention as well as diversity of volunteering.
- (iii) *Promoting & Celebrating Volunteering*
On-going work to promote volunteering (e.g. opportunities, benefits of volunteering) as well as celebrating and recognising the great work that volunteers do (e.g. volunteer case studies, awards).
- (iv) *Strategic Development of Volunteering*
Gathering analysis and intelligence on volunteering and taking actions to address issues and gaps as well as implementing work needed for new priorities and initiatives.

³ 'What if everyone stopped volunteering?' Report (2025), p.18

7 *Keep volunteering voluntary*

Volunteering means people independently choosing to give their time freely to help others and make the world a better place. It is therefore essential in designing and managing volunteer programmes that the involvement of volunteers is carried out in a way that is the person's free choice to participate. Attempts to obligate or coerce people to give their time means they are not actually volunteers.

8 *Importance of Volunteer Management*

The Volunteer Manager or Coordinator role is an essential element in volunteering and without them the majority of volunteering would never take place. *'In contrast to the importance of this critical role, the volunteer manager position is arguably one of the most undervalued and under-appreciated in the voluntary and community sector.'*⁴

Therefore, a critical element in planning for volunteering to support your Neighbourhood (or system) is ensuring there is enough resources for volunteer management and coordination to be carried out effectively, which includes the volunteer manager role being recognised as a profession and remunerated accordingly.

9 *Be open to innovation and trialling new approaches*

NHS Neighbourhoods are a very new way of delivering healthcare and no one is (yet) an expert at it. Although VCSE organisations are experts in their communities and in volunteering, Neighbourhoods is still a new concept and so it is important to remain open to new approaches and trialling new ideas. Alongside this, sharing successes, failures, enablers and barriers across Neighbourhoods and systems will be very important.

Your Next Steps

If not doing so already, then we recommend the following as next steps:

- (i) Engage with your local lead volunteer infrastructure organisation (if you are not sure who that is, we can help connect you)
- (ii) Start planning now, in a strategic way, how volunteering can support your Neighbourhood or system

⁴ 'London Vision for Volunteering' (2025), p.46

About Volunteering Together 4 Health

We are partnership of volunteering experts strategically developing health volunteering in North Central London to maximise the level, diversity and impact of volunteers. Whether looking for volunteering advice and guidance at a system wider or local level, you will find dedicated and expert support.

At our website (www.volunteeringtogether4health.org) you will find the following free support:

- A suite of [volunteer management good practice tools and resources](#) (e.g. Recruitment, Onboarding, Volunteer Management, Reward and Recognition, Flexible Volunteering, Policies)
- [Volunteer Management Network meeting information](#) – a tailored network for the health sector so volunteer managers in North Central London can discuss topics that they want to talk about as well as a chance to learn, share and network with peers.
- [Volunteering to Career useful information](#) such as wrap-around-support in each borough and a Volunteering to Employment Charter for Employers
- [NCL Volunteering Network meeting information](#) – A network for all and any stakeholders interested in health volunteering across North Central London (NHS, VCSE, volunteers). The network is an opportunity for those involved in volunteering to share good practice, develop new collaborations, and work together to improve and increase volunteering opportunities in health.
- [Neighbourhoods](#) – expert support and advice for involving volunteers in NHS Neighbourhood health

We are currently funded through the national [volunteering for health programme](#).