

# Exercise Class Support Volunteer Project Evaluation Report

Hounslow and Richmond Community Healthcare NHS Trust

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*helpforce*

**NHS**

Hounslow and Richmond  
Community Healthcare

NHS Trust

# Contents

<a href="#"><u>Executive summary</u></a>	3
<a href="#"><u>Service overview</u></a>	4
<a href="#"><u>Evaluation approach</u></a>	5
<a href="#"><u>Evaluation findings</u></a>	7
<a href="#"><u>Conclusion &amp; Recommendations</u></a>	15
<a href="#"><u>Research limitations &amp; acknowledgements</u></a>	16
<a href="#"><u>Appendix</u></a>	17



# Executive summary

## The project

Hounslow and Richmond Community Healthcare NHS Trust designed and delivered the Musculoskeletal (MSK) outpatient service to provide a range of exercise and hydrotherapy classes to support patients with rehabilitation/treatment. These classes were supported by volunteers since April 2023, who ensured the smooth running of classes and motivated patients to reach their goals. Volunteer responsibilities included: welcoming and checking patients in, helping to set up the class with equipment and signposting patients to community support when required. Volunteers support allowed physiotherapists to provide one to one support to patients.

## Evaluation approach

Using its established *Insight & Impact* evaluation service, Helpforce follows a consistent methodology to determine the impact of volunteering roles on health outcomes. Target outcomes are identified across a range of beneficiaries representing the people and organisations involved, and then the necessary data is collected to prove and evidence the outcomes.

## Key findings

Patient feedback suggests that volunteers made a difference to patient wellbeing during the exercise classes. Additional benefits of volunteer support included responding to any concerns and motivating patients to participate in the exercises. Volunteers also appear to be well integrated and regarded by staff, helping staff productivity and improving their working lives. Additionally, staff reported volunteers had a positive impact on the level of service provided to patients, assisting with multiple tasks to ensure the smooth running of the classes.

## Conclusions

The findings from the evaluation of the exercise class support volunteering project demonstrate the positive impact of volunteer involvement in exercise class settings. We recommend providing supplementary training to volunteers to increase their confidence when signposting patients to community support. Training would help volunteers to feel more confident and knowledgeable when signposting patients.



# Service Overview

- It is well recognised that community MSK waiting lists were rising before the Covid pandemic, due to increasing demand as well as workforce supply issues. The MSK exercise class supports Integrated Care Systems (ICS) to reduce commissioned community MSK service waiting times, while aiming to deliver the best outcomes and experiences for patients recovering from injuries or surgery.<sup>1</sup>
- Hounslow and Richmond Community Healthcare NHS Trust are committed to delivering its Better Together Volunteering Strategy for 2023-2026 in partnership with Kingston Hospital. This strategy outlines the ambition to achieve “Right volunteer, right place, right time, every time” across 4 core areas of patient care (waiting, getting well, recovery and living well). With support from clinical teams, Helpforce and learning from Kingston Hospitals successes with similar interventions, volunteers were embedded into MSK exercise support classes to strengthen the service by supporting staff with delivery and patients with their recovery.
- Exercises classes take place at 3 sites (Centre House Sheen, Teddington Memorial Hospital and Teddington pools), are facilitated by a physiotherapist and have been assisted by volunteers since April 2023.
- The classes aid patient diagnosis, streamline referrals, and enhance the effectiveness of therapies. They assist patients in effectively managing their pain, enhancing mobility, preventing re-injury, and fostering overall health and well-being. This is accomplished through several key approaches, including boosting patients' confidence in movement, enhancing joint mobility, strengthening muscles, offering guidance on daily activities, teaching strategies for pain reduction and management, and providing education on healthy lifestyle choices and exercise techniques.<sup>2</sup>
- This evaluation focuses on exploring the impact volunteer support has had on patients and staff during the exercise classes.

<sup>1</sup> [‘An improvement framework to reduce community musculoskeletal waits while delivering best outcomes and experience’](#), NHS England.

<sup>2</sup> [‘Physiotherapy MSK Hounslow and Richmond’](#), NHS England.

# Evaluation approach: Outcomes

## Helpforce's approach to evaluating...

Using its established *Insight & Impact* evaluation service, Helpforce follows a consistent methodology to determine the impact of volunteering roles on health outcomes. Target outcomes are identified across a range of beneficiaries representing the people and organisations involved, and then we collect the necessary data to prove and evidence the outcomes.

Evaluation of the exercise class support volunteer project at Hounslow and Richmond Community Healthcare NHS Trust was completed using data captured from patients, volunteers and staff members.

The exercise class support volunteer aims to achieve a multitude of positive outcomes for patients, staff, and volunteers themselves...

### Patients

- Improved emotional wellbeing, decreased feelings of anxiety / depression
- Feeling motivated to participate in activities
- Improved feelings of connectiveness / reduced social isolation
- Increased engagement in activities
- Receiving one to one tailored support
- Confidence that their issues and concerns are heard and addressed
- Improved patient / service user experience
- Increased engagement in activities

### Staff

- Confidence that patients are aware of and accessing services that benefit their health
- Time saved resulting in increased capacity to focus on other responsibilities
- Staff believe that volunteers are having a positive impact on their working lives
- Staff believe that volunteers are having a positive impact for their patients / service users
- Understand, use and champion volunteer services

### Organisation

- Productivity gains through volunteer's support
- Volunteers are deployed in roles that deliver measurable benefits for the organisation
- Continuous improvement in volunteer services and projects

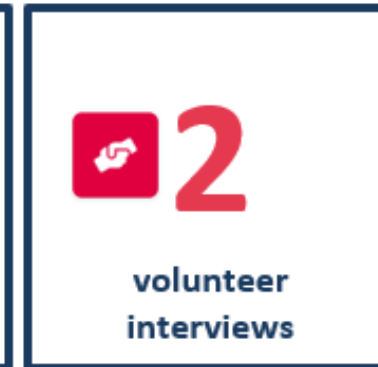
### Volunteer

- Develop new skills that supports their personal & professional development
- Satisfied with and happy in their role
- Improved self-esteem & confidence
- Confidence that time spent volunteering is of benefit to staff, patients, and their families

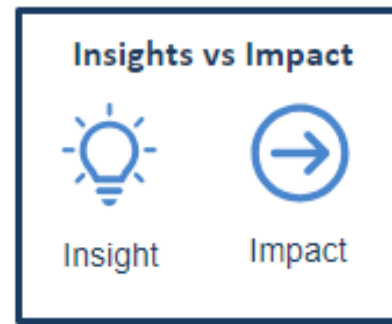
# Evaluation approach: Methodology

The pilot evaluation consisted of three different collection methods:

1. **Patient paper surveys** completed following their final exercise class support, asking questions regarding their experience of receiving support and outcomes achieved.
2. **Staff surveys** completed online as a one-off snapshot survey, asking questions about their experience of working alongside volunteers.
3. **Volunteer interviews** virtually carried out by a Helpforce Research Analyst, in which the volunteers were asked questions regarding their volunteering experience and perceived role impact.



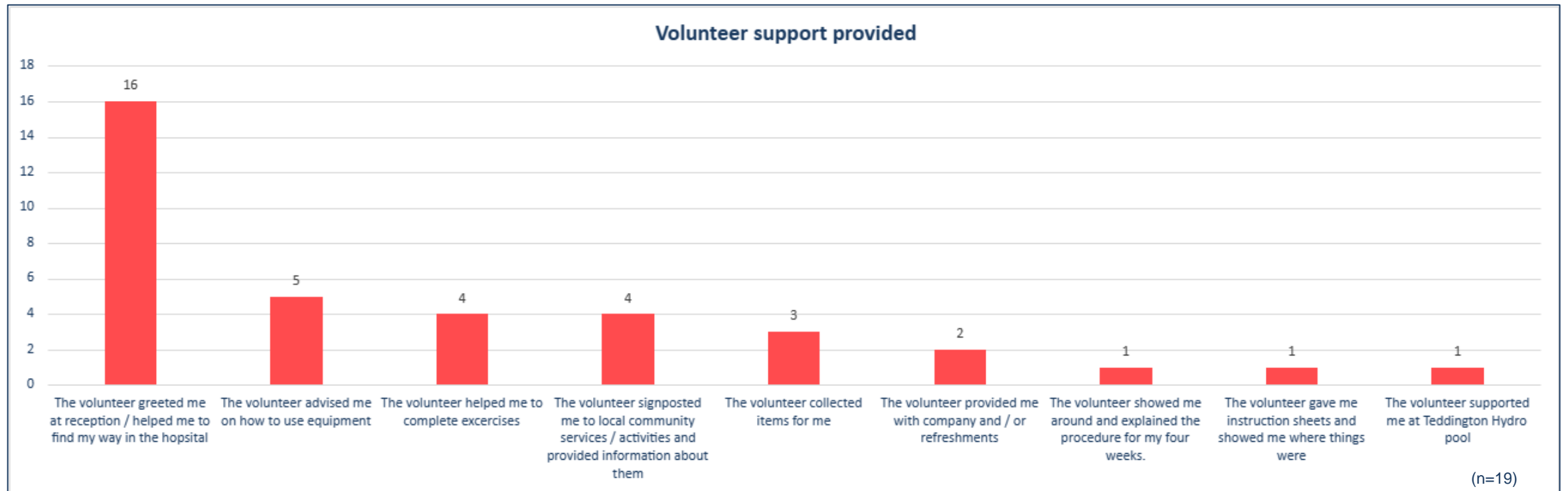
Throughout the report, data findings are linked back to the data collection method using icons at the top right-hand side of the screen. Evidence strength is also rated used icons. These icons are as follows...





# Insight: Volunteer support activities from the patient perspective

In the patient survey, respondents were prompted to specify the type of support they received from volunteers. Nearly all patient respondents were greeted by a volunteer and/or supported to find their way within the hospital. Additionally, a small number of patients suggested the volunteer helped them during the classes by either advising how to use equipment or complete exercises.



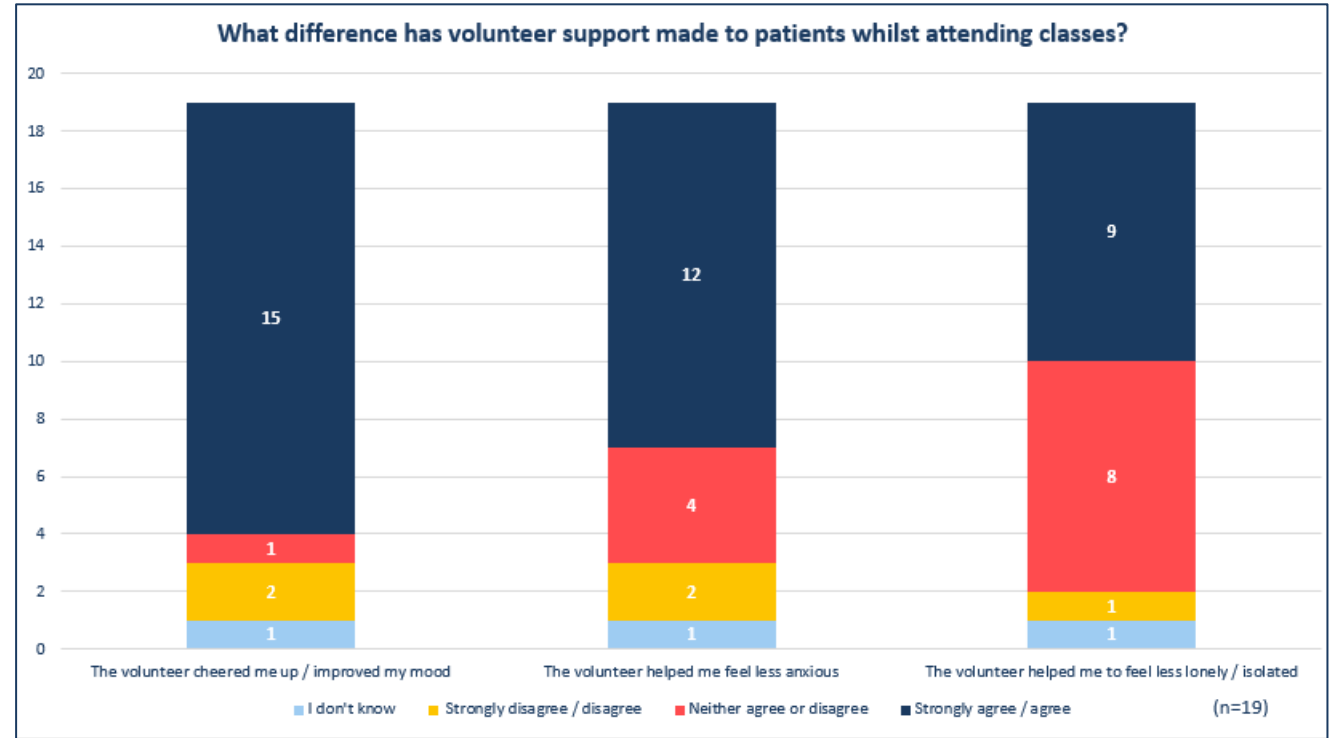
# Impact: Patient wellbeing



Patients were requested to reflect on the difference volunteer support had made to elements of their emotional wellbeing...

- Volunteers appear to have had a positive impact on patients' emotional wellbeing, with the majority of patients agreeing or strongly agreeing that volunteers **improved their mood** and **helped them to feel less anxious**.
- Two patients **strongly disagreed with these statements**, however, did not provide any further context as to why they felt this way, and indeed one individual selected that they were satisfied with the support they had received from volunteers. Therefore, whilst we cannot say conclusively, it may be that these respondents selected these options in error.
- Less than half of patients **felt volunteers impacted upon feelings of loneliness or isolation**, perhaps suggesting this was not a concern for them when attending the groups or was not felt to be an element of the support volunteers provided. Researchers recommend further investigation to determine if this is not a required outcome of volunteer support, or if more can be done to reduce patient feelings of isolation.

Additional feedback provided by patients further illustrates the difference exercise class support volunteers made to patients...



*"Both volunteers are friendly and helpful and help people relax and feel welcome."*

Patient



*"The volunteer was helpful and kind. Encouraging me when I was nervous."*

Patient

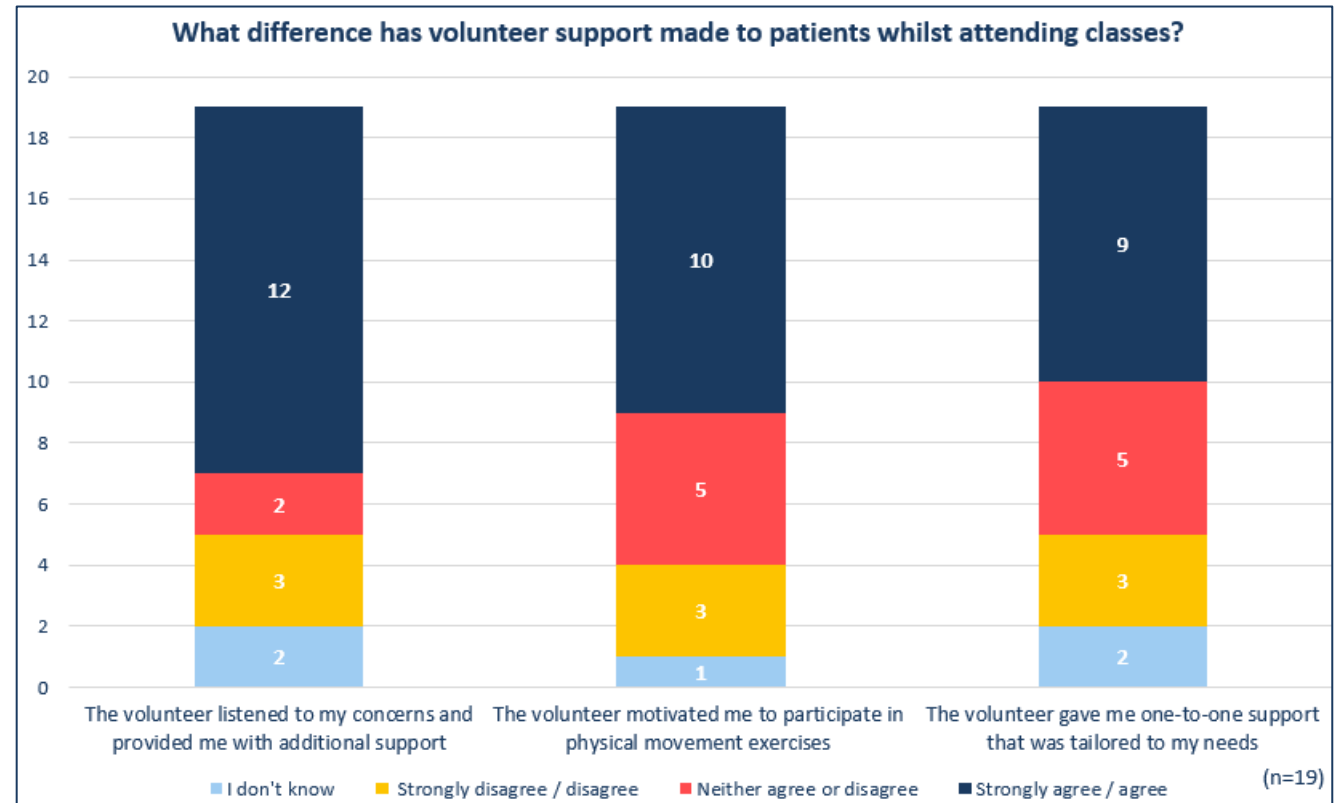


# Impact: Patient experience



Patients were requested to reflect on the difference volunteer support had made to their exercise class support experience...

- For the majority of patients, volunteer supported them by **listening to their concerns, providing them with additional support** to enable them to participate in the exercises. Additionally, volunteers helped to **motivate them to participate in physical movement exercises**. This shows that volunteers had a positive impact on patients experience during the exercise classes.
- Three patients **strongly disagreed with these statements**. However, they did not offer any further explanation for their perspective. Interestingly, these patients indicated they were very satisfied with the support received from volunteers, with two of them even providing positive feedback about the volunteers' assistance. This discrepancy suggests that these respondents might have mistakenly chosen these options.
- Just under half of patients agreed that **volunteers were able to provide support tailored to their needs**, suggesting a proportion of patients may not have needed one-to-one support. Researchers propose further investigation to assess whether one-to-one support was required by more patients but unable to be offered, perhaps due to a limited number of volunteers, or whether this support was effectively provided to those patients who did indeed require it.



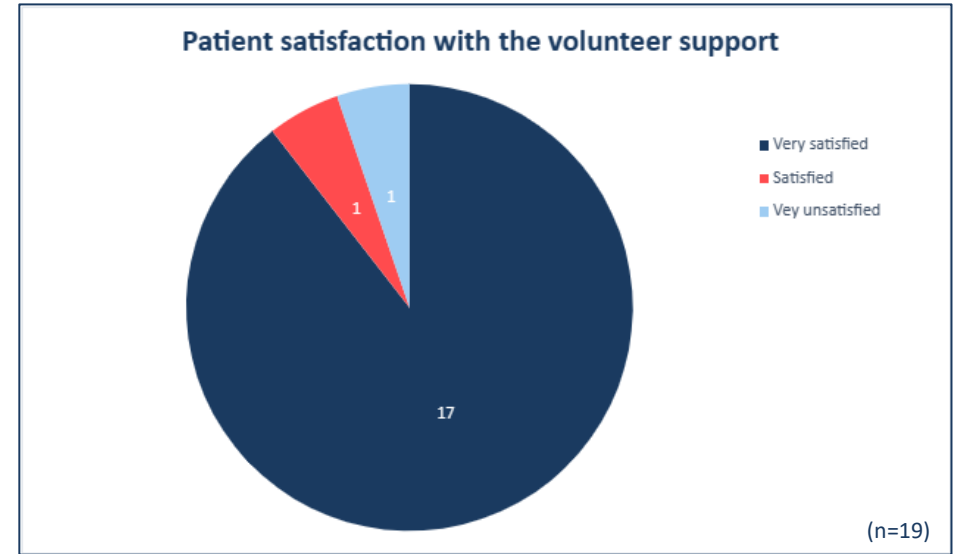


# Impact: Patient satisfaction

Patients were asked to reflect upon their satisfaction with the volunteer's support....

- Out of 19 patients surveyed, **18 were satisfied or very satisfied with the volunteer support they received.** One respondent reported being very unsatisfied, but upon reviewing their feedback, it appears they may have mistakenly selected this option. They provided additional feedback indicating the volunteer supported them at the hydro pool. This suggests that overall, all patients were satisfied with the support provided by the volunteer.
- Future researcher examining the impact of volunteer support should consider incorporating additional qualitative patient feedback questions. Specifically, patients should be questioned about any improvements or suggestions regarding the support provided by volunteers. This approach allows patients the opportunity to reflect on potential enhancements to optimise the effectiveness of volunteer support.

Patients also provided some additional feedback on their experience...



*"They have always been very helpful and cheerful."*

**Patient**



*"Friendly, welcoming, chatty and overall brilliant."*

**Patient**



*"Very helpful and informative. Very friendly and put me at ease."*

**Patient**



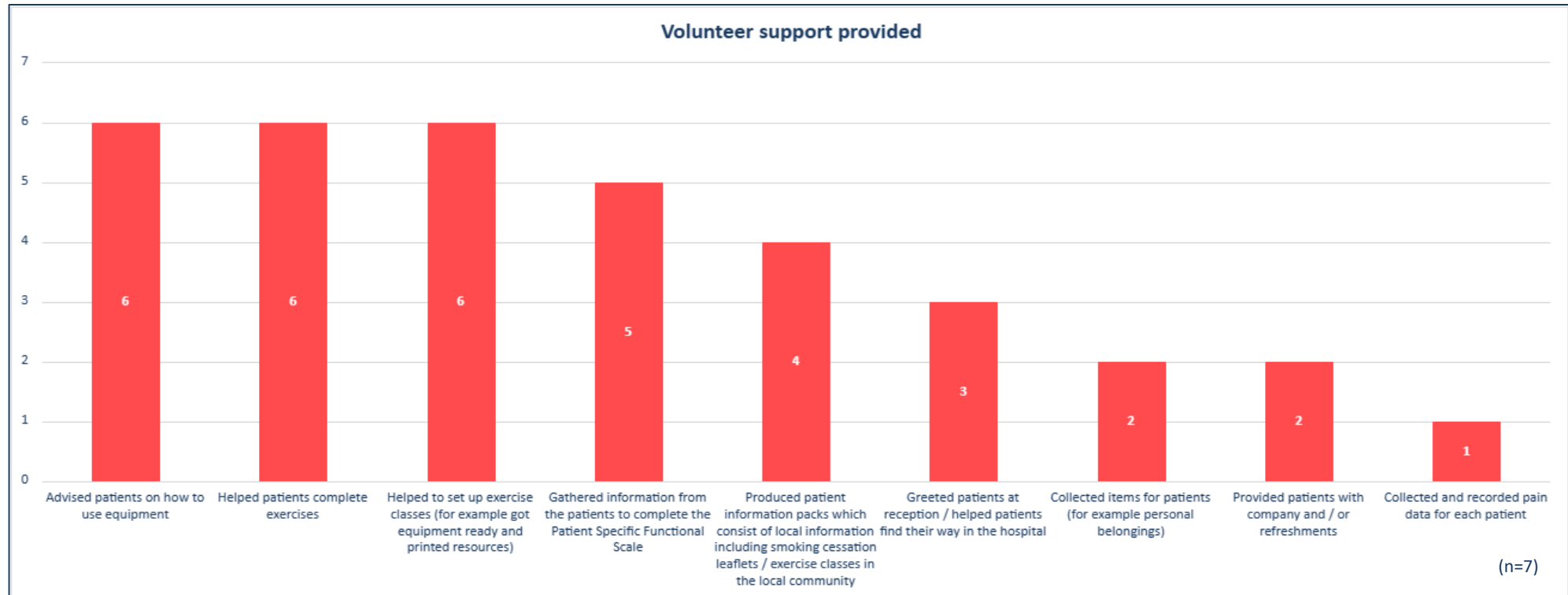
*"They are worth their weight in gold."*

**Patient**



# Insight: Volunteer support activities from the staff perspective

All staff respondents were physiotherapists who were responsible for leading the classes. They were asked about the support provided by volunteers. Almost all physiotherapists mentioned that volunteers assisted patients in equipment usage, guided them through exercises, and helped set up exercise classes. When comparing the responses of physiotherapists with those of patients, it becomes evident that physiotherapists identified more volunteer activities than patients did. These findings suggest that patients might not have been aware of or able to identify all of the support they received from volunteers.



# Impact: Benefits for staff



Staff were requested to reflect on the difference volunteer support had made to them in their delivery of the exercise classes...

 **7 of 7**

**staff members agreed or strongly agreed...**



Volunteers helped **improve the quality of care/service**.



Volunteer support helped them to feel **less stressed**.



Volunteers **improve the working lives of staff**.



Volunteer support **freed up some time** for them.

- All staff respondents agreed that volunteers had a positive impact for patients attending the classes, helping to improve the quality of care/service provided.
- Additionally, staff noted positive benefits for themselves from volunteer support. All staff members strongly agreed / agreed that volunteers **helped them to feel less stressed and improved their working lives**.
- And finally, all seven staff members acknowledged that **volunteer support had freed up some time for them**. When asked how they utilised this extra time, the majority reported that they could **support more patients** (4 of 7 respondents) and **attend to administrative tasks** (2 of 7). Additionally, one staff member suggested they were able to use this time to both support more patients during the class as well as undertake clerical tasks such as completing patient notes.
- These findings suggest that staff members acknowledge the significant contribution volunteers make in exercise support classes. Despite the small sample size, these results could support the case for recruiting volunteers in all exercise support classes to benefit both patients and staff.


# Impact: Integration and staff satisfaction



Staff members were asked to reflect on their experience of gaining volunteers support, including how well they were integrated into their teams and their satisfaction with the support received.


- Hounslow and Richmond Community Healthcare Trust is an excellent example of **integrating volunteers seamlessly** into the team. Every staff member surveyed strongly agreed or agreed that volunteers are integral members of the team. Furthermore, all staff members expressed **enjoyment in working alongside volunteers**.
- Additionally, there were **high levels of satisfaction with the volunteer support** staff had received. Overall, these findings suggest that the tasks performed by volunteers were felt to be valuable to staff members, illustrating the positive impact volunteers can have in supporting the delivery of MSK exercise classes.
- In terms of areas for improvement, one staff member requested that volunteers had a formal way to contact members of staff to inform them if they were unable to support a class.

Staff members provided additional feedback....




*"Very good to have experienced volunteers."*

Staff



*"Having volunteers help with the exercise classes make a huge (positive) difference – always smoother and well run with their help."*

Staff



*"The volunteer who works in the MSK Physiotherapy is a hero."*

Staff



**7 of 7**

**staff members agreed or strongly agreed...**



**They enjoy working alongside volunteers.**



Volunteers are **embedded as a key part of the team.**

**and...**



were **very satisfied with the volunteer support** they had received..

# Insights: the volunteer experience

Detailed within an interview with one of the exercise class volunteers, the volunteer's role enjoyment and positive impact experienced through volunteering was evident.



*NB: The image is used for illustrative purposes only.*

*“Since graduating from university, I have been passionate about using my learnt skills to make an impact on patients. This motivated me to apply for this volunteering position, as I would have the opportunity to contribute to the holistic wellbeing of patients in terms of their health, fitness, and overall wellness.*

*Over the past five months, this volunteering experience has not only provided me with a sense of purpose but has also been instrumental in learning new skills such as exercise and communication skills. In turn, this volunteering opportunity has helped me to decide my future next steps.*

*My motivation to continue volunteering is witnessing the direct appreciation from patients. Patients are always so bubbly, talkative and energetic when I engage in conversations with them and provide support. Moreover, the acknowledgement from staff members even appreciate the smaller tasks I do such as setting up the activities before the class, printing out sheets and packing away any equipment.*

*My biggest achievement in my volunteering journey was being offered a paid assistant physiotherapy position. This was a great achievement as I do want pursue a career in physiotherapy.*

*I am grateful for the support and guidance I've received throughout this experience, and I would like to extend heartfelt appreciation to the staff for their warm welcome and ongoing encouragement. This journey has not only enriched my professional skills but has also reaffirmed my commitment to making a meaningful difference to patients.”*

**Volunteer – Hounslow and Richmond Community NHS Trust**

# Conclusions and recommendations

The exercise class support volunteer role is an excellent example of where volunteers can make a positive difference to patients and staff. This evaluation illustrates that volunteer support can result in positive outcomes for patients, staff and the volunteers themselves. Both staff and patients appeared very satisfied with their volunteer support experience.

Patient feedback suggests that, for the majority, volunteers made a difference to the patient's mood and helped patients to feel less anxious during the exercise classes. Additionally, there were some tangible benefits noted in supporting patients to participate in the groups by providing additional support in response to any concerns and motivating patients to participate in the exercises. Whilst fewer respondents agreed, there is some emerging evidence that volunteers were also able to reduce patient feelings of loneliness and offer one-to-one support where needed. However, **further investigation should be undertaken to ensure these are both appropriate outcomes that are relevant to / necessary for the patient population.**

Volunteers also appear to be well integrated and regarded by staff. Many benefits to having volunteers support with the group were acknowledged, including indications that volunteers had helped staff productivity and improved their working lives. Additionally, staff reported volunteers had a positive impact on the level of service provided to patients, assisting with multiple tasks to ensure the smooth running of the classes.

Overall, these findings, whilst limited in scale, provide an insight into the difference volunteers can make within MSK exercise class settings. **We recommend providing supplementary training to volunteers to increase their confidence when signposting patients to community support. Training would help volunteers to feel more confident and knowledgeable when signposting patients. Signposting patients to community supports would benefit patients for several reasons such as access to support, reduced isolation and improved health outcomes.**

# Research Limitations

Due to the nature of this evaluation, there are limitations to the strength of conclusions this evaluation can draw. Low response numbers, although representative of staff and patients within the groups, do mean that the findings should not be attributed to a wider population. Additionally, following this evaluation, researchers suggest further investigation may be helpful to find out some further detail behind the findings. For example, to assess whether one-to-one support was effectively provided to those who needed it, if a reduction in social isolation is a necessary outcome, and gathering further qualitative insights from patients and staff about improvements or suggestions regarding the volunteer support.

Researchers encourage the volunteering team at Hounslow and Richmond Community Healthcare NHS Trust to continue data collection from both patients and staff members. These findings could be used to further showcase the impact this project is having on patients, staff and volunteers, and also continually improve service delivery.

# Acknowledgements

Helpforce would like to pass on our thanks to **Hounslow and Richmond Community NHS Trust**, and in particular to Rosie Hooper-Smith, Volunteering Service Manager, and Elizabeth Dalton, Volunteer Services Co-Ordinator. We also share our appreciation to the patients, staff and volunteers who participated in providing their feedback.



# helpforce

## Thank you

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