

Volunteer to Career Programme 2022-24: End of programme report



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Introduction

This short report summarises the operation, objectives and results of the Helpforce Volunteer to Career programme, where NHS England invested £890,400 in 28 varied healthcare organisations to run Volunteer to Career projects, with support from Helpforce.

The NHS continues to face many pressures, compounded by gaps in its workforce. This programme offered an opportunity to explore the potential of Volunteer to Career (VtC) and similar programmes supporting volunteers into employment, to play a role in relieving these pressures. As the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan puts it:

“Volunteers help improve services across the NHS, and support better outcomes for patients and the wellbeing of staff but, as seen during the pandemic, also provide additional capacity and flexibility in how services are delivered. Volunteering can also improve people’s mental and physical health, and gives them the opportunity to acquire skills that enhance their ability to gain employment.”

Key results from all **28** organisations participating in the Volunteer to Career programme confirm it delivered on this potential:

- **340** volunteers participated, with **257** completing the Volunteer to Career pathway at the time of the Helpforce evaluation.
- **72%** of volunteers completing the pathway went into further education, training or employment.¹
- **92%** of volunteers were satisfied or very satisfied with their volunteering experience and **95%** would recommend it to others.²
- **84%** of staff said volunteers on the VtC programme reduced pressure on them and allowed them to deliver better care.³
- Staff working alongside VtC volunteers had a more positive view of their organisation, with the proportion saying they’d recommend their organisation as a place to work increasing by 13% over the course of the project - from 73% before the project, to **86%** at its conclusion.⁴
- Following participation, volunteers were more appreciated by and included in organisations, with scores from pre- and post- programme surveys asking about

¹ n= 257 volunteers across 25 participating organisations who have completed the VtC pathway, of the 340 volunteers who had participated in the programme at the time of evaluation.

² n= 259 post-survey responses across 23 participating organisations.

³ n= 336 post-survey responses across 23 participating organisations.

⁴ n=485 pre-survey and 336 post-survey responses across 23 participating organisations.

‘volunteering environment and culture’ increasing by an average of 14%.⁵ And the proportion of staff who agreed volunteers were ‘embedded as a key part of their team’ increasing by 17%.⁶

And individual organisations achieved great results – for instance Mid Yorkshire Hospitals filled 100% of their health care assistant roles with people recruited via Volunteer to Career and Shrewsbury and Telford Hospitals NHS Trust have 29 volunteers signed up for a midwife degree.

[You can find more results below.](#)⁷

“Volunteers are incredibly important to our hospitals and it is a delight when their support can be used to carve out a life-long career within the NHS. What makes the Volunteer to Career (VtC) programme so special is the additional support and guidance it offers to our volunteers. We are delighted to be offering this at our Trust and look forward to watching the programme grow and expand over the coming years.” Nigel Lee, Executive Director of Strategy and Partnership, Shrewsbury and Telford Hospitals NHS Trust



⁵ n=27 participating organisations.

⁶ n=394 pre-survey and 336 post-survey responses across 23 participating organisations.

⁷ Please contact Helpforce for a copy of the full programme findings at help@helpforce.community

About Volunteer to Career

Working with health and care partners, the Volunteer to Career (VtC) approach was designed by Helpforce and first delivered in April 2021 as part of the charity's mission to accelerate the growth of volunteering in health and care.

It does two things:

1. Helps meet workforce needs by taking volunteers through a structured process that allows them to get experience and skills in a clinical setting, creating a pool of experienced potential employees with a realistic understanding of what working in health and care involves.
2. Delivers immediate volunteer support to patients and reduces pressure on staff.

Volunteer to Career is characterised by having strong clinical sponsorship and often has a 'clinical lead' working as or alongside the project lead. (See '[critical success factors](#)' below.)

The NHSE- funded Volunteer to Career programme

The programme described here was funded by NHS England. Between 2022 and 2024, NHSE invested £890,400 to enable 28 health and care organisations to participate in the programme in three cohorts. (You can find a list of all 28 organisations and of the roles they created in [the appendix](#).)

The investment enabled project leads to participate in the programme over a 12-month period, while Helpforce worked with each site to develop their VtC pathway. Support from Helpforce included:

- One-to-one support for organisations and steering groups to develop and test VtC career pathways. (See '[critical success measures](#)' below for more about career pathways.)
- Online learning modules, linked to career pathways, for instance covering project management, the NHSE care certificate programme, and entry-level training for healthcare assistants.
- Peer support and networking.
- VtC evaluation framework, supporting each organisation to assess the impact of their VtC project as well as the overarching impact of the programme (see [overarching results for the 28 organisations below](#)).
- VtC Self Assessment Tool (SAT) which uses pre- and post- project surveys to measure the impact of the programme on integrating volunteering within the organisation and its strategy and operations, and also the impact on staff perceptions of the organisation and of volunteering.

The programme's aims were to:

- Support the development of well-designed and managed volunteer to career pathways.
- Increase the number of volunteers considering a career in the NHS.
- Increase the profile of volunteering in health and care organisations.

Widening participation

Although not one of the original goals of the programme, Volunteer to Career attracted a diverse range of volunteers and so supported NHS England's work to widen access and participation.

Volunteer to Career involved volunteers going through a career pathway, with training and support from clinical and volunteering teams, while retaining the flexibility of volunteering. Helpforce believes that this flexibility, along with volunteering's intrinsic connection to local communities, contributed to the diversity of VtC volunteers ([see below](#)) so Volunteer to Career is likely to open up healthcare careers to potential employees who might not be reached through other routes.

"Previously lacking in confidence due to a prolonged period of illness, this invaluable [volunteering] experience has been restorative in getting me confidently back into the workplace. [Volunteering] training and tasks undertaken have been offered at just the right pace, giving me a basic grounding, understanding and appreciation of working in a healthcare setting." Volunteer, North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Foundation Trust



How Volunteer to Career operates – Critical success factors

Each project within the programme took 12 months to complete, with Helpforce supporting the Volunteer to Career project lead to take each organisation through development, delivery and sustainment phases.

Helpforce Volunteer to Career develops and delivers against five critical success factors:

1. **Clinical sponsored and dedicated project lead:** Senior clinical and/or operational sponsorship for VtC projects mean they gain buy-in at an organisational level, secure support to work through any local barriers to success, and to develop a strong career pathway and related training. This sponsorship also supports the appointment of a dedicated project lead – often with a clinical background.

“Engaging with the Matron has opened doors to work with other stakeholders and gave me the confidence to say the programme needs to be like this. It also gives other stakeholders the assurance that we have worked with a senior clinician.” (Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust)

2. **Tailored to the organisation:** During development, VtC is aligned with the organisation’s workforce needs along with other core strategic priorities, such as the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan, Core20PLUS5, or becoming an anchor organisation. This integrates VtC in the organisation, contributing to increases in the perceived value of volunteering and high rates of sustainment, beyond the initial funding envelope.

“[Our] priorities were about delivering our workforce plan and building our own recruitment pipeline. And ... involving communities.” (Shrewsbury and Telford Hospitals NHS Trust)

3. **Strong stakeholder engagement and governance:** Engaging with senior workforce, clinical and other leads through the project steering group and relevant organisational structures increases VtC project integration and buy-in to support delivery and future sustainment.

For example, to engage key stakeholders, Moorfields NHS Foundation Trust formed a VtC steering group of the hospital charity’s CEO, Patient Experience Co-ordinator, HR Resourcing Lead, Associate Director of HR Operations and Apprenticeships Lead. The group met every fortnight to allocate, agree and follow up on actions.

4. **Robust career pathways:** Each VtC project develops a staged career pathway that will support the volunteer to help patients and staff, while building pre-employment skills and understanding about particular careers. This contributes to the strong training and employment outcomes for VtC volunteers. ([See the result section below](#)).

“Midwifery is a competitive profession to get into, and volunteering within this setting can help individuals gain the experience and understanding of what working in the NHS ...is truly like... It's been my pleasure to offer volunteers advice and guidance about the role of a midwife.” (Liverpool Women's NHS Foundation Trust)

- 5. Effective community engagement:** Community engagement leads to new partnerships and helps attract volunteers from diverse demographics – one of the successes of the programme.

“We work closely with a social inclusion officer. He speaks with people within areas of deprivation, visits refugees and other hard to reach communities... It's provided us with a diverse demographic of individuals that we might not necessarily have attracted to the trust.” (Shrewsbury and Telford Hospitals NHS Trust)



Volunteer cohort at East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust

The results

Helpforce always embeds robust evaluation in its volunteering development model. The established VtC evaluation framework assessed the impact of each VtC project as well as of the programme as a whole on a number of volunteer, staff and organisational outcomes.^{8 9}

For staff

Statistically significant increases in indicators of:

- Volunteer integration into staff teams – from 56% of staff agreeing that ‘volunteers are embedded as a key part of our team’ at the start of the project, to **73%** agreeing at its close.¹⁰
- **90%** said volunteers improved the quality of service they could provide - an increase from 76% before the VtC project began.¹¹
- **84%** said it reduced pressure, giving them the time to deliver good care and **82%** said volunteers improved their working lives.¹²
- High levels of satisfaction, with **96%** reporting that volunteer support met or exceeded their expectations, and **89%** being satisfied or very satisfied with volunteer support.¹³

"Having volunteers alongside staff has been a really positive and rewarding initiative for us as a team and a service. It feels like a real enhancement of our service and the staff have embraced it... Even though, initially, we need to do additional work at inducting and supporting our volunteers into the roles they choose to help us with, the pay back is immense. I am now really excited to be part of working on the volunteer to [career] pathway the trust has embraced, as we can see how enriching volunteers can be and how we can use this to support our vacancy shortage and staffing challenges." Clinical team manager from Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust

For volunteers

- **72%** got into employment, training or education at the end of the programme (of those who completed the pathway).¹⁴

⁸ Please contact Helpforce for a copy of the full programme findings and evaluation results at help@helpforce.community

⁹ Note about surveys. Surveys were completed by groups of staff or volunteers before and after the programme. For staff, surveys were not necessarily completed by the same people, in part to ensure we surveyed staff who had and had not worked with volunteers. For volunteers, both the pre- and post-surveys were completed by the same individuals, with volunteer reference numbers being used to ensure responses were matched

¹⁰ n=394 pre-survey and 336 post-survey responses across 23 participating organisations.

¹¹ n=394 pre-survey and 336 post-survey responses across 23 participating organisations.

¹² n=336 post-survey responses across 23 participating organisations.

¹³ n=336 post-survey responses across 23 participating organisations.

¹⁴ n= 257 volunteers across 25 participating organisations who have completed the VtC pathway, of the 340 volunteers who had participated in the programme at the time of evaluation.

- The VtC pathway appears to confirm career aspirations for many volunteers, building confidence in achieving those ambitions. For some it appears to have given them the opportunity to decide a career in health and care is not for them.
- For some individuals, participating in VtC increased their emotional wellbeing.
- Participating increased their levels of agreement that they had the right skills to get a job after VtC.
- High levels of satisfaction with their experience:
 - **91%** said it met or exceeded expectations;
 - **92%** were satisfied or very satisfied with their volunteering role; and
 - **95%** were likely or very likely to recommend the role to others.¹⁵

“Everyone at the hospital is wonderful. The staff are so friendly and always willing to help. I am absolutely certain that being on the VtC programme has helped me gain a place at university.” Volunteer, Liverpool Women’s NHS Foundation Trust

For the organisation

- Using the VtC self-assessment tool (SAT) all measures of how volunteering was viewed by and integrated within the organisation improved over the course of the programme:
 - The score given by leadership and project sponsors for how engaged, involved and interested clinical and non-clinical staff are in volunteering initiatives increased from 66% to **89%** at the end of the project, demonstrating increased support and advocacy for volunteering amongst health and care leaders.
 - Volunteering became more embedded in organisational strategies, with the score for whether the volunteering agenda was integrated in HR and workforce strategies and how well those strategies were implemented increasing from 51% to **65%**.
 - And the positive score for the organisation’s environment and culture as it affected volunteers increased from 76% to **90%**, indicating that volunteers were more valued as well as improved integration of volunteering into the organisation.¹⁶
- **86%** of staff members agreed or strongly agreed they would ‘recommend my organisation as a place to work’, compared to 73% from staff surveyed before the project started.¹⁷

¹⁵ n=259 post-survey responses across 23 participating organisations.

¹⁶ n= 27 participating organisations.

¹⁷ n=485 pre-survey and 336 post-survey responses across 23 participating organisations. NHS staff survey data taken from [NHS staff survey dashboard, NHS survey](#), 2023 results, data accessed 08/10/2024. n=678,676 responses for national average data.

- Attracting a more diverse pool of potential employees: with **41%** of VtC volunteers being from ethnic minority groups (compared with 18% of the general UK population)¹⁸ and **28%** living in the 20% most deprived localities (compared with 20% of the England and Wales population).¹⁹

“Through the VtC [project] we have made links with the refugee resettlement team and employment inclusion team. We have also been able to roll out a partnership with our local job centre and are focusing on supporting clients with long-term medical conditions and the older generation. Our VtC programme allows us to provide more support to these volunteers to grow and develop and guides them onto a journey into employment in the health and social care sector.” Annelore Hill-Verhaegen, VtC project lead, Royal United Hospitals Bath NHS Foundation Trust.

Sustainment

From the 28 participating organisations, 23 have continued beyond the year of investment by NHSE. A further four have paused their VtC project, with a view to considering restarting at a later date and one is in the process of making the case for further funding.

Sustaining volunteering projects is often a challenge, particularly when budgets are tight, so this number of projects continuing beyond their initial funding is, in itself, a strong indicator of the success of the overarching programme and the VtC approach.

It was outside the scope of the programme’s evaluation to identify the specific factors affecting whether a project was sustained. We believe – from feedback, observation and comparison with other volunteering programmes Helpforce supports – the level of sustainment is the result of VtC’s role in meeting a clear organisational challenge (workforce), combined with the critical success factors defining its approach.

“Being part of the Volunteer to Career programme has elevated the status of the volunteer service at Moorfields... We are being approached by different departments wanting to engage with volunteers and develop new volunteer roles.” Angela Smith, Chief Executive, Friends of Moorfields.

¹⁸ n= 157 across 21 participating organisations. Total responses to survey was 259, so responses representative of ~61% of volunteers. 2021 UK Census reported people from White British ethnic groups made up the largest percentage of the population at 74.4%.

¹⁹ n= 138 across 21 participating organisations. Total responses to survey was 259, so responses representative of ~53% of volunteers. Deciles are calculated by ranking the 32,844 LSOAs in England from most deprived to least deprived and dividing them into 10 equal groups. LSOAs in decile 1 fall within the most deprived 10% of LSOAs nationally and LSOAs in decile 10 fall within the least deprived 10% of LSOAs nationally.

Conclusions – Success in meeting the programme’s aims

Support the development of well-designed and managed volunteer to career pathways.

The final employment and training outcomes for volunteers, the range of career pathways and roles created ([see appendix](#)), and the levels of sustainment demonstrate that the VtC programme successfully supported organisations in developing pathways to careers for this group of volunteers.

Increase the profile of volunteering in health and care organisations.

There was a significant improvement in all measures of how organisations viewed volunteering and how well it was integrated strategically and operationally. This establishes a positive foundation for boosting volunteers’ roles generally, as well as within workforce initiatives like VtC.

Increase the number of volunteers considering a career in the NHS.

Given the scope of the programme, volunteer recruitment was targeted towards people who were interested in pursuing a career in health and care.

97% of VtC volunteers were very or partially interested in a career in the NHS or social care, suggesting that the programme successfully attracted volunteers with a stronger interest in a career than other, ‘mainstream’ volunteering services. (Helpforce has data from non-VtC services, which indicate that, on average, 68% agree or strongly agree that they have an interest in a health or care career.²⁰)

93% of participants were **very interested** in an NHS or social care career at the start of the programme, and this figure declined slightly (by 6%) after their participation. Rather than detracting from the objective of increasing the volumes of volunteers considering a career in the NHS, this is a positive result if it means VtC allowed potential employees to discount an NHS career as an option, based on their experience in a volunteering role, so avoiding wasted investment by the individual and employer in recruitment, onboarding and training.²¹

In addition to meeting its original aims, the programme succeeded in **widening access** to volunteers from lower socio-economic backgrounds and deprived areas. Analysis of VtC volunteer demographics, alongside feedback from participating organisations, demonstrates the programme has successfully attracted volunteers from a range of backgrounds and circumstances. Indeed, a higher proportion of people living in areas of high deprivation were recruited compared with national proportions, suggesting the VtC programme can be a positive way to attract a wider pool of potential employees, helping to reduce barriers to education and employment.

²⁰ n= 420 responses across 19 health and care organisations.

²¹ n= 259 pre- and post-survey responses across 23 participating organisations.

Recommendations

ICBs and systems to embed volunteering in their long-term workforce plan for 2025 and beyond as set out in the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan to “embrace volunteering as part of their overall workforce plan, giving due consideration to programmes that support volunteering as a route into the workforce, such as NHS Cadets and Volunteer to Career.”

NHSE to encourage ICBs and systems to incorporate the lessons from VtC and similar programmes in developing regional skills training and employment pathways.

NHSE to consider the potential to incorporate volunteering into organisational strategies and priorities, for example: long term workforce planning, reducing health inequalities and improving health and wellbeing.

NHSE to review the learning from the VtC funded programmes and develop guidance, tools and resources to support the development and implementation of programmes supporting volunteering routes into the workforce.

National government to consider volunteering initiatives as a potential means for people and communities to develop skills, confidence and find a route into employment.

NHSE to develop a community of practice for volunteering and workforce and share learning from the VtC programme by summer 2025.

ICBs and systems to explore the benefits of integrating volunteering into organisational systems and planning identified by the VtC programme and consider embedding as part of wider employment pathways.



Volunteers from the VtC project at Liverpool Women's NHS Foundation Trust, where they supported women who have high risk conditions

Appendix: The organisations involved and roles created

	Organisation	Volunteer to Career role(s) created during the programme
1	Bradford District and Craven Health and Care Partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doula
2	Cambridge and Peterborough NHS Foundation Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrative Assistant Volunteer • Individual Placement Support Volunteer • Occupational Therapy Assistant • Ward Assistant Volunteer
3	Central London Community Healthcare NHS Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrative Assistant • Befriender Volunteer
4	Cheshire and Wirral Partnership NHS Foundation Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Therapeutic Activities Volunteer • Inpatient Ward Volunteer • Physiotherapist Volunteer • Fitness and Wellbeing Volunteer • Community Mental Health Volunteer • Administration and Feedback Volunteer
5	County Durham and Darlington Foundation Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ward Helper • Befriender Roles
6	East Lancashire Hospitals Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer Ward Role
7	East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community First Responders
8	East Kent Health and Care Partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NHS Health Checks Outreach Volunteer
9	Friends of Moorfields Hospital NHS Foundation Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theatre (Hand Holding) • Pharmacy • Clinical and Non-clinical
10	Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient and Staff Enhancement (PASE)
11	Lewisham and Greenwich NHS Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maternity Based role
12	Lincolnshire Community Health Services NHS Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Hospital Ward volunteers
13	Liverpool Women's NHS Foundation Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maternity Base Bay volunteers

14	Mid Cheshire Hospitals Foundation Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer Ward Assistant
15	Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ward Helpers
16	North Cumbria Integrated Care NHS Foundation Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ward Support Volunteer • Administrative Support Volunteer
17	Norfolk and Waveney Integrated Care Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer to Career in Primary Care
18	North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Foundation Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ward Helper Role
19	Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eating Disorder Support Role
20	Portsmouth Hospitals University NHS Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ward Companion volunteers (Midwife focus)
21	Royal United Hospitals Bath NHS Foundation Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ophthalmology Volunteer
22	Shrewsbury and Telford Hospitals NHS Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maternity Ward Support volunteers
23	Somerset NHS Foundation Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neighbourhood Responder role
24	South Central Ambulance Charity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community First Responders
25	St Oswald's Hospice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lymphedema Service Volunteer • Ward Helpers
26	Suffolk and North East Essex ICB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ward Assistant • Ward Clerk
27	Torbay and South Devon NHS Foundation Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ward Buddy • Mealtime Companions
28	University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inpatient Support volunteers

About Helpforce

Helpforce is a national charity focused on high impact volunteering in health and care. With NHS, care and community partners, it has built unrivalled experience and evidence of the contribution volunteering makes to the wellbeing of patients, staff and volunteers themselves.

To find out more about Helpforce, visit our website: www.helpforce.community

Thank you to our partners

Thank you to the 28 organisations who participated in the programme described in this report and to NHS England who invested in the programme, allowing the Helpforce Volunteer to Career approach to be tested at scale.