



Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent

Volunteering for Health Conference 2026



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Introduction

We were delighted to offer a warm welcome to volunteers, voluntary and community organisations, NHS staff, and health and care leaders to our 2026 Volunteering for Health Conference, bringing together people from across Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent's health and care community.



Our aim for the day was to share what's already working well, learn from experience and expertise, and identify practical actions we can take forward to build stronger connections across organisations and shape a shared system-wide promise for volunteering that is a valued and embedded part of how we deliver care.



The Bigger Picture

The conference was part of the national Volunteering for Health Programme; a £10 million initiative aimed at improving volunteering across health and care services. Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent is one of only 15 areas selected to take part, recognising the strong local commitment to volunteering and partnership working.

In Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent, we believe that our thriving volunteering culture is perfectly placed to support the Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Integrated Care System (ICS) to deliver high quality health and care for local people.

Why Volunteering Matters

Volunteering has huge potential to positively impact the whole health and care system; improving public health, reducing pressure on frontline services, enhancing patient experiences, and strengthening partnerships across organisations.

Volunteers can support health and care services, strengthening connections between services and local communities, improving the experiences of patients and staff and helping people explore careers in health and care.

The Volunteering for Health programme enables and celebrates the opportunity for voluntary and community organisations and public sectors to offer skills and expertise to support one another, with the overarching aim of improving the experience and outcomes of people using our health and care system.

Our vision is for volunteering to become an embedded component of health and care delivery, rather than an additional or peripheral activity.

We aim to achieve this by a focus on four core priorities:



Step Change

A step change ensuring a culture where volunteers are enabled to bring their skills and insight to support our health and care system.

Positive Experience

Ensure that all volunteers have a positive experience and receive the appropriate support to carry out, thrive, and enjoy their volunteering role.



Giving Back

Create an pathway for our health and care workforce to improve their health and wellbeing, and give back through volunteering opportunities.

Driving Force

Support leadership to think differently about volunteering, seeing the benefits it brings, and driving forward those changes.





Volunteering For Health Conference 2026

2nd June 2026 | Yarnfield Park

9:15am	Registration and Networking
10:00am	Welcome and Scene Setting with Mish Irvine
10:15am	Keynote – Rob Jackson
10:45am	Coffee and Networking
11:00am	Morning Workshops:
	Step Change: from traditional to transformative – a new model of volunteering for health
	Positive Experience: what keeps volunteers coming back?
12:30 pm	Lunch and Networking
1:30pm	National Volunteering for Health Programme Sam Hartles & Sam Caldwell, NHS Charities Together
1:45pm	National Volunteering for Health Programme Sarah Cherry, Future Workforce Lead for Volunteers, Somerset NHS Foundation Trust
2:00pm	Afternoon Workshops:
	Giving Back: why I Volunteer – stories from our healthcare workforce
	Driving Force: leading with volunteering in mind
4:00pm	Closing Remarks and Networking
4:30pm	Event Close

Keynote Speakers



Mish Irvine **Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent, Integrated Care Board**

Mish has worked in the NHS for over twenty years, and the majority of this time has been spent working within Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent. Mish brings with her a wealth of knowledge and has significant experience in HR, workforce planning and organisational development at both Trust and System level.

She has worked across the system in partnerships with local Providers, Higher Education Institutions and Health Education England, to develop collaborative and innovative workforce solutions. Along with her team, they have been instrumental in the COVID-19 response and have also won numerous awards for widening participation and innovative workforce solutions.

[Find out more about Mish Irvine](#)



Rob Jackson

Rob Jackson Consulting Ltd

Rob Jackson FRSA is Director of Rob Jackson Consulting Ltd, a consultancy and training company that helps engage and inspire people to bring about change.

Rob has over 30 years experience working in the voluntary and community sector, holding a variety of strategic development and senior management roles that have focused on leading and engaging volunteers.

Rob has run his company since 2011 working with a wide range of clients in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Europe, the USA and Canada. Rob is co-author of The Complete Volunteer Management Handbook (DSC, 2012 and 2019) and From The Top Down – UK Edition (Energize Inc., 2015).

[View Rob's Conference Presentation](#)



Sam Caldwell **NHS Charities Together**

NHS Charities Together believe that everyone should have access to the best possible healthcare.

People are living longer, with more long term and complex health conditions, and the NHS is becoming increasingly overstretched. This means that too many of us are finding it hard to access vital services and we're not getting the same opportunities to live well.

NHS Charities Together work with a network of over 220 local and specialist NHS charities across the UK to break down barriers to access, ease pressure on the NHS, and improve healthcare experiences for patients and staff.

[View Sam's Conference Presentation.](#)



Sarah Cherry **Future Workforce Lead for** **Volunteers** **Somerset NHS Foundation Trust**

The volunteer programme at Somerset NHS Foundation Trust demonstrates the significant impact that a well-coordinated volunteer service can have across a large and diverse healthcare organisation. Supported by a small but dedicated team, more than 600 volunteers contribute across a wide range of settings and services, enhancing both patient experience and staff support.

Through the development of a broad portfolio of clinical and non-clinical volunteering opportunities, the Trust has successfully engaged a diverse volunteer population and increased participation across its services. This inclusive approach has strengthened the contribution volunteers make to the organisation and highlights the value of volunteering as an integral part of delivering compassionate, patient-centred care.

[View Sarah's Video Presentation](#)

Workshops Overview

Alongside our fantastic line-up of speakers were four workshops, each linked to our shared priorities.



Despite different focuses, several common messages emerged: volunteering should be more flexible, skills-based, inclusive, strategically planned, and recognised as a key contributor to health and care outcomes.

Workshop 1: Step Change – From traditional to transformative

Workshop led by Rob Jackson, Director, Rob Jackson Consulting Ltd

[View Rob's Workshop Presentation](#)

Participants explored how volunteering could move beyond traditional task-based models towards approaches that make better use of volunteers' professional skills, lived experience, and community knowledge.

Workshop 1: Step Change – From traditional to transformative

Key opportunities identified included:

- Skills matching volunteers to organisational needs and workforce gaps.
- Expanding the use of peer support and lived experience volunteers.
- Creating more flexible and open volunteer roles.
- Developing volunteer passports to enable movement between organisations and departments.
- Strengthening volunteering as a pathway into employment and careers in health and care.

Participants also highlighted several barriers:

- Lengthy recruitment, DBS and induction processes.
- Organisational bureaucracy and governance requirements.
- Staff resistance and misconceptions about volunteer roles.
- Difficulty identifying and matching volunteers' skills and interests.
- Concerns about distinguishing volunteer roles from paid positions.

Workshop 1: Step Change – From traditional to transformative

Recommendations:

- Design volunteering opportunities around skills and interests rather than predefined tasks and build flexibility into volunteering from the outset.
- Review onboarding and training processes to reduce unnecessary barriers.
- Involve staff in identifying new volunteer opportunities within services.



"The biggest shift required is cultural. Organisations need to move from asking what volunteers can do for existing services to asking what skills, experience, and insight volunteers can bring to improve services."



Workshop 2: Positive Experience – What keeps volunteers coming back?

Workshop led by VAST and included presentations by North Staffordshire Combined Healthcare Trust and University Hospitals of North Midlands' volunteering teams.

[View Presentations from this workshop.](#)

Discussions centred on what creates a positive volunteer experience and encourages retention. Four core themes emerged:

Belonging

Volunteers thrive when they feel valued, included, connected to organisational values, and part of a team. Networking opportunities, friendships and meaningful involvement were all identified as important contributors to belonging.

Flexibility

Participants stressed the importance of flexible schedules, reasonable adjustments, remote opportunities where appropriate and understanding individual needs and circumstances.

Workshop 2: Positive Experience – What keeps volunteers coming back?

Support

Volunteers require clear communication, regular feedback, supportive managers and mentors, emotional support when needed and opportunities for personal development.

Recognition

Recognition was considered essential; saying thank you, positive feedback, celebration events, volunteer stories and newsletters and regular check-ins and acknowledgement of achievements.

Key Recommendations

- **Improve communication throughout the volunteer journey.**
- **Introduce more consistent volunteer recognition mechanisms.**
- **Encourage managers and teams to actively engage with volunteers.**
- **Focus on understanding individual volunteers and adapting roles to their skills and needs.**

“***Volunteers do not simply give their time; they choose to be part of an organisation. The quality of that relationship determines whether they stay.***”

Workshop 3: Giving Back – Why I Volunteer

Workshop led by VAST with personal insights from Ruth Beard, Outreach & Inclusion Manager, Sophie Barber, Lead Educator for NMAHP Inclusion, and Jennie Collier, Managing Director, Staffordshire & Stoke-on-Trent Care Group, MPFT.

View Presentations from this workshop.

This session explored the wellbeing and professional benefits of volunteering through real stories from health and care staff.

Individual Benefits – Participants identified volunteering as contributing to:

- Improved wellbeing and mental health.
- Increased confidence and self-esteem.
- Social connection and reduced loneliness.
- Skills development and employability.
- A sense of purpose and fulfilment.
- Opportunities for learning and personal growth.

Workshop 3: Giving Back – Why I Volunteer

Organisational Benefits – Volunteering was seen as creating value through:

- Bringing lived experience into services.
- Supporting innovation and improvement.
- Reducing pressure on services.
- Increasing diversity of perspectives.
- Creating stronger community connections.
- Enhancing workforce wellbeing.

Enabling Staff Volunteering – Suggested actions included:

- Embedding volunteering discussions within appraisal processes.
- Promoting corporate volunteering days.
- Increasing awareness of local volunteering opportunities.
- Providing flexibility within working arrangements.
- Using case studies and storytelling to demonstrate impact

Recommendations

- **Develop organisational policies that support staff volunteering.**
- **Increase visibility of volunteering opportunities.**
- **Promote volunteering as a wellbeing and workforce development activity.**

“*The benefits of volunteering extend beyond service delivery. Volunteering supports wellbeing, personal growth, workforce development, and stronger community connections.*”

Workshop 4: Driving Force— Leading with volunteering in mind.

Workshop led by Garry Jones, Support Staffordshire with a presentation by Amanda Shannon, MPFT.

View Presentations from this workshop.

This workshop explored volunteering from a leadership and system perspective, focusing on how we embed volunteering as a core part of how we plan and deliver services. Participants considered whether leaders would notice if volunteering disappeared.

Discussions highlighted impacts on:

- **Patient experience.**
- **Staff morale and wellbeing.**
- **Community engagement.**
- **Service capacity.**
- **Organisational costs and operational effectiveness.**

Workshop 4: Driving Force– Leading with volunteering in mind.

Strategic Priorities Identified – Participants stressed the need for:

- Greater organisational infrastructure for volunteering.
- Leadership ownership and accountability.
- Better volunteer coordination and support.
- Improved governance arrangements.
- Skills and gap analysis linked to workforce planning.

Measuring Impact – A significant theme was the need to move beyond simply measuring volunteer numbers and hours. Participants suggested focusing on:

- Outcomes and impact.
- Volunteer, patient and staff experience.
- Stories and case studies that demonstrate value.

Recommendations

- **Treat volunteering as a strategic asset rather than an operational add-on.**
- **Invest in volunteer infrastructure and leadership capacity.**
- **Develop meaningful measures of impact and outcomes.**
- **Ensure volunteer roles are purposeful, inclusive and designed around community needs.**

“*If volunteering is to be treated as a strategic asset, organisations must measure what matters—not simply what is easiest to count.*”

Cross-Cutting Conference Themes

Across all workshops, five key themes consistently emerged:

1. Flexibility and Inclusion

Volunteering opportunities need to be designed around people's lives, skills, experiences, motivations and circumstances. Traditional one-size-fits-all approaches are no longer sufficient.

2. Skills-Based Volunteering

There is significant untapped potential within communities. Organisations should focus on matching volunteer skills and lived experience to service needs and workforce gaps.

3. Leadership and Culture

The success of volunteering depends heavily on leadership commitment, staff attitudes and organisational culture. Leaders play a critical role in creating environments where volunteers are welcomed and valued.

4. Volunteer Experience

Retention is driven by belonging, purpose, support, flexibility and recognition. Organisations that invest in the volunteer experience are more likely to build sustainable volunteer programmes.

5. Measuring What Matters

Participants strongly advocated moving beyond counting volunteer hours towards measuring impact on people, services, communities and systems. Stories, outcomes and lived experiences should sit alongside quantitative measures.

What We Learned

The workshops demonstrated strong consensus that volunteering has the potential to make a much greater contribution to health and care across Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent. Realising this potential will require stronger leadership, more inclusive and flexible approaches, improved partnership working with the VCSE sector, and a greater focus on the outcomes and impact that volunteers create for individuals, services and communities.

Eyes down for Volunteering for Health Bingo!

	I see how volunteering supports patient experience	I have identified where volunteers can add value	People shared honest challenges	I heard a powerful volunteer story
I learned how volunteering builds skills	I reflected on why people volunteer	I understand the wellbeing aspects of volunteering	I learned the value of trustee roles	I see volunteering offers developmental opportunities
I made a useful connection	I feel inspired by today	I heard something I can apply in my role	I noticed strong collaboration across teams	I felt today was useful and informative

Mark-off what you experience during our conference and leave your completed card in the box before you leave



We invited people to take part in our 'Feedback Bingo' to help capture what attendees had experienced throughout the day. We were delighted to find attendees reported positive results in all categories.

Key Question

We asked attendees: ***If money were no object, would we still need volunteers?*** Delegates gave a resounding "Yes. Absolutely.", with one attendee going even further: "Absolutely, if not more!"

Discussions revealed that volunteers bring far more than additional capacity. Delegates described them as providing "lived experience", offering "different perspectives, expertise and validation", and being simply "invaluable". Others highlighted how volunteers "offer a connection to our community", "help community", and "give people purpose". One attendee also reflected that volunteers are valuable because "they are the ones who choose to be here because they have an interest."

Discover why health and care leaders believe volunteers contribute something uniquely human that funding alone can never replace, and read the [full article](#) to explore the insights in greater depth.

What Next

To learn more about the Volunteering for Health project and find out how you can get involved visit our [website](#).

We have a number of networks and forums that take place throughout the year. Some are more strategic in nature, others are simply a place for like-minded staff and volunteers to come together and share information, skills, and know-how. Find out more about our Networks and Forums [here](#).



Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent

Thank you!

Thank you to those who attended the Volunteering for Health Conference.

It was fantastic to see so many partners from across the VCSE sector and health system for a day of learning, discussion and networking.

Through our agenda, including expert keynote speakers, shared lived experience stories and workshops, we covered a range of areas which will help to shape the future of volunteering across Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent's Health Care System.

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