Mental Health Volunteers

Evaluation Report

Aneurin Bevan University Health Board

July 2025

helpforce

GIG CYMRU NHS WALES
Bwrdd Iechyd Prifysgol Aneurin Bevan University Health Board

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Executive summary

The Project

The Mental Health Volunteers project, launched in June 2024, has volunteers with lived experience of mental health supporting services across Aneurin Bevan University Health Board. Volunteers engage with patients through meaningful activities, offering support and connection. In addition, they also support staff while developing their own confidence and skills.

Evaluation Approach

Using its established *Insight & Impact* evaluation service, Helpforce follows a consistent methodology to determine the impact of volunteering roles on health and wellbeing 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. For this evaluation, Helpforce introduced a staff, patient and volunteer feedback survey to measure the impact the project had had.

Key Findings

18 of 18
patients agreed volunteers cheered them up / improved their mood.

18 of 18
patients reported that volunteers had a positive impact on their hospital experience.

36 of 37
staff were likely to recommend the volunteers to their colleagues.

8 of 8
volunteers agreed volunteering had allowed them to develop new skills.

Conclusions & Next Steps

Overall, the evaluation of the mental health volunteers project demonstrates the positive impact volunteers had on different beneficiaries. Patients reported that volunteers helped to improve their emotional wellbeing and hospital stay; staff suggested volunteers improved their working lives and were a key part of their team; and volunteers themselves reported gaining new skills, increased confidence and a sense of purpose.

The ambition is for this project to become fully embedded within the Health Board's core services, including mental health services, as an essential part of how care and support are provided to patients, families and staff. The vision is for this model to contribute to a culture shift across the Health Board, one in which lived experience is recognised as expertise, where volunteers are seen as equal partners in care, and where recovery, inclusion, and compassion are further embedded in everything that the organisation do.

Context: Service Overview

- This project was designed to improve volunteering opportunities within mental health settings, with a particular focus on creating inclusive roles for people with lived experience. Volunteers were active across Aneurin Bevan University Health Board (ABUHB), with sites including County Hospital, Royal Gwent Hospital, Ysbyty Aneurin Bevan, Ysbyty Ystrad Fawr, Ysbyty'r Tri Chwm, Ty Llafant and St Cadoc's Hospital. Volunteers supported adult and older adult services across community and hospital settings.
- Supported by funding from Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA), the project aimed to:
    - Recruit more volunteers with lived experience of mental health.
    - Increase number of volunteers supporting in mental health settings.
    - Promote inclusive and supportive roles for people with mental health needs.
- While volunteers with lived experience were already contributing to various roles across ABUHB, this project aimed to formalise their involvement by establishing a dedicated role.
- The Expert by Experience volunteering role was formalised and involved co-facilitating group-based support for people accessing secondary mental health services, such as welcoming patients, encouraging participation and offering emotional support. Volunteers also spent time on the wards providing meaningful activities and one-to-one interaction. As part of the role, some volunteers shared their own personal experience where appropriate, to inspire hope and belief that recovery is possible.
- All volunteers were supported through a range of mechanisms, including regular check ins, reflective practice, peer support and close communication with staff, with a particular attention to creating a safe and supportive environment for those bringing their own lived experience to the role.

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 and wellbeing 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.

The Mental Health Volunteers project aimed to achieve the following outcomes…

Patient

Improved patient / service user experience.

Reduced feelings of loneliness.

Improved emotional wellbeing, decreased feelings of anxiety / depression.

Satisfied with their volunteer support experience.

Organisation

Continuous improvement in volunteer services and projects.

Staff

Improved staff wellbeing.

Staff believe that volunteers are having a positive impact for their patients / service users.

Staff believe that volunteers are having a positive impact on their working lives.

Staff are satisfied with the support they receive from volunteers.

Time saved resulting in increased capacity to focus on other responsibilities.

Volunteer

Develop new skills that support their personal & professional development.

Improved confidence & sense of purpose.

Confidence that time spent volunteering is of benefit to staff, patients and the organisation they volunteer for.

Feel well supported in undertaking their volunteering role.

Satisfied with and happy in their role.

Evaluation Approach: Methodology

The evaluation involved three data collection methods:

- **A staff survey,** asking questions in relation to colleagues experience of working with volunteers and what difference they had made to them.
- A **patient survey**, asking questions about their feedback on the support they received from the volunteers and the impact that support had on their hospital experience.
- A **volunteer survey**, asking questions about their experience of delivering the role and the impact it had on them.

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

Between January 2025 and July 2025, we received…

37
staff responses

18
patient responses

8
volunteer responses

Insight: Volunteer Activity

At the point of evaluation, 28 volunteers expressed an interest in the role, with 17 actively volunteering. In addition, 8 volunteers are due to be inducted onto wards.

Between December 2024 and June 2025, those active volunteers undertook a significant amount of activity, completing 450 patient contacts and 1,200 hours of volunteering activity.

Via the volunteer survey, volunteers reported on their volunteering activity and commitment.

- The majority of the volunteers (7 of 8) reported volunteering at least once a week, with one volunteering less frequently.
- Each individual volunteered on **18 hours on average per month**. However, the number of hours spent volunteering each month ranged from 1 to 60.
- Length of time in volunteer role varied among volunteers in the project. Three volunteers had been in their role for less than 6 months, while 2 had been volunteering for over 5 years. It therefore appears that a mix of newer and more experienced volunteers delivered the role.

Impact: Patient wellbeing and experience

Patients who received support from volunteers were asked to provide feedback on the difference their support had made to them.

Positive responses were seen across all questions, with all patients agreeing that mental health volunteers had a positive impact on their emotional wellbeing as well as their overall hospital experience.

These findings illustrate the positive role volunteers can have in supporting patients in hospital settings, further substantiated by the additional feedback patients provided…

"They make the ward a more friendly and happy place."

"Very good at making me feel at home."

"The volunteer helps me a lot and makes me feel safe."

Of the patients who participated in the survey...

18 of 18 agreed or strongly agreed the volunteer cheered them up / **improved their mood**, 16 of whom strongly agreed.

18 of 18 agreed or strongly agreed the volunteer helped them to **feel less anxious**, 12 of whom strongly agreed.

18 of 18 agreed or strongly agreed the volunteer helped them to **feel less lonely**, 12 of whom strongly agreed.

17 of 18 reported they were **very satisfied with the support** received from volunteers, with the remaining patient being satisfied.

18 of 18 believed volunteer support had resulted in them having more or much more **positive views about the care organisation.**

18 of 18 reported volunteers had had a **positive impact on their hospital experience.**

Impact: Staff Wellbeing and Care Delivery

Staff who worked alongside mental health volunteers were first asked about the perceived difference volunteers made in delivering patient care.

- Over 4 in 5 staff respondents agreed volunteers had a positive impact on care delivery.
- One participant did strongly disagree with the statement – however, this may have been in error, as they left positive feedback about the volunteer support overall.
- The remaining respondents were unsure or neutral.

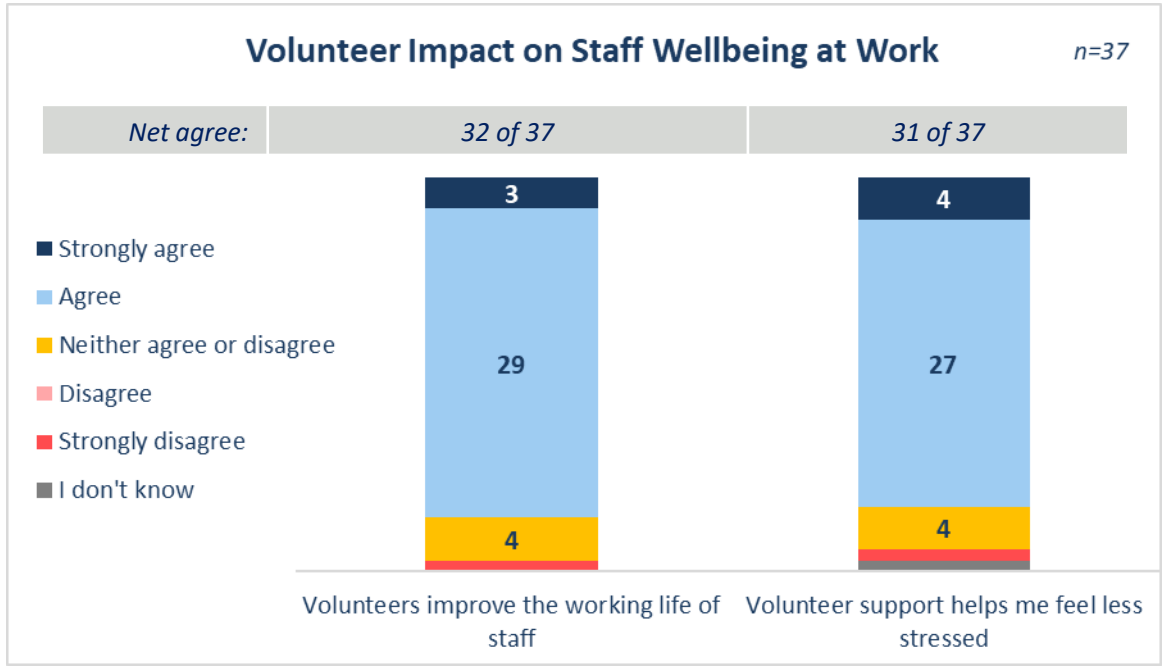
Next, staff were asked to reflect upon the difference volunteers made to their own wellbeing whilst at work. Of the 37 respondents…

- 32 staff reported that volunteers improve their working lives.
- 31 staff agreed that volunteers have helped to improve the quality of the service.
- Again, one person strongly disagreed with both statements, but this may have been selected in error.

Among those who responded neutrally, two staff mentioned that they do not work regularly with volunteers, whilst others suggested that more volunteer support would be helpful and commented positively on the support they provide.

30 of 37

agreed or strongly agreed volunteers helped to improve the quality of the service provided.

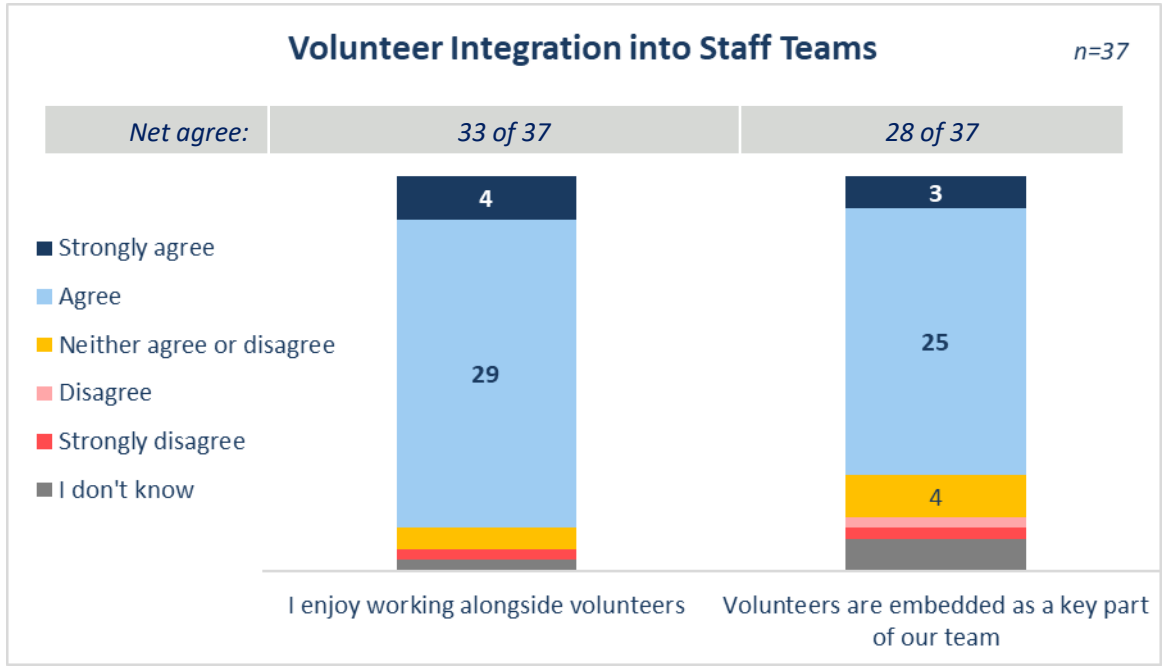


Please note: Responses below 4 were removed from the chart above to increase readability.

Impact: Volunteer Integration and Staff Productivity

35 of 37

staff reported volunteers had freed up some time for them.



Please note: Responses below 4 were removed from the chart above to increase readability.

Staff were next asked to reflect upon whether volunteers had an impact on their available time during a typical day.

- All but 2 staff respondents agreed volunteers had a **positive impact on their available time.**
- The remaining respondents responded they were unsure.
- When asked what they were able to do with this time, most staff (25 out of 35) said they were **able to support more patients**. Others reported volunteer support allowed them to **focus on patients with higher needs, complete admin or clinical tasks, or feel less rushed.**

Next, staff were asked to reflect upon how well integrated they felt volunteers were into their teams.

- 33 staff said they **enjoy working alongside volunteers.**
- Additionally, over three quarters of staff agreed or strongly agreed that volunteers are **embedded as a key part of their team**.
- A small number of respondents who felt neutral further commented that more integration from volunteers would be helpful.
- Of those disagreed, one staff gave no further comment, while the other shared positive feedback about volunteers, suggesting their response may have been an error.

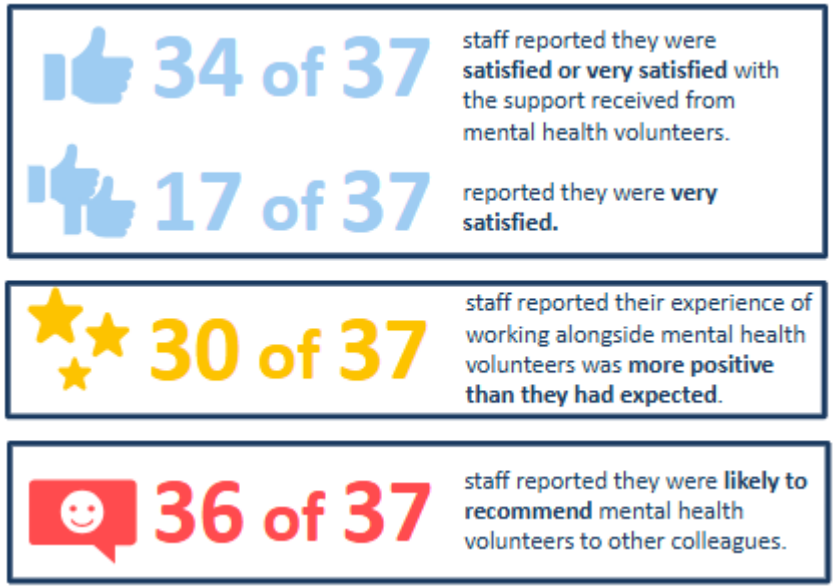
Impact: Staff Satisfaction

And finally, staff were asked about their overall satisfaction with the support received from mental health volunteers.

As illustrated in the infographics, staff were positive about their overall experience with mental health volunteers.

- 34 in 37 staff were **satisfied with their experience**.
- Two staff members who were neutral about their level of satisfaction, explaining that they work with volunteers on an irregular basis. One negative response was accompanied by a positive comment, suggesting it may have been selected in error.
- Over four in five staff members said their experience with volunteers had been **more positive than expected.**
- All but one staff member reported they were **likely to recommend** volunteers to colleagues.

Overall, the feedback received from staff highlights that the Mental Health Volunteers project has been successful in meeting its anticipated outcomes for staff – as well as high levels of satisfaction with the support received, the analysis shows the volunteer's support has resulted in positive impact on staff emotional wellbeing and working lives, as well as a perceived benefit for the quality of care delivered to patients.



"Volunteers working within mental health teams often have lived experience, which is so helpful in clients feeling validated and hopeful that change is possible."

Allied Health Professional

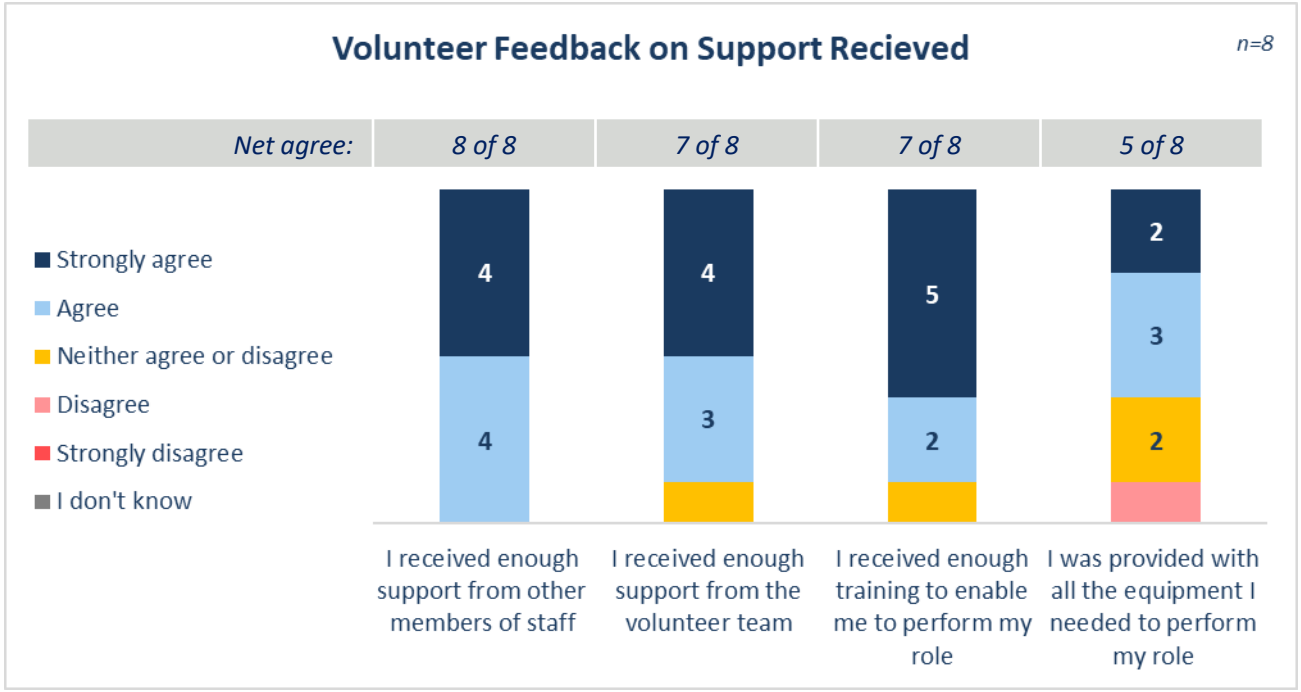
Impact: Volunteer Feedback on the Support Received

Volunteers were first asked for their feedback on the support they received to undertake their role.

Most volunteers reported feeling well supported in their role.

- All volunteer respondents agreed or strongly agreed they had received enough **support from the wider staff team**.
- 7 of 8 agreed they received enough **support from the volunteer team** and **sufficient training** to perform their role.
- Views were slightly more mixed in relation to equipment provided. 5 volunteers agreed they were provided with all the equipment they needed, whilst 2 were neutral.
- One respondent disagreed they had sufficient equipment, but their feedback was more so in relation to the communication they received. They explained: *"I think it's very important to have contact with the ward on the days of visit as to let me know if there's been an incident on the ward and I'm able to attend."*

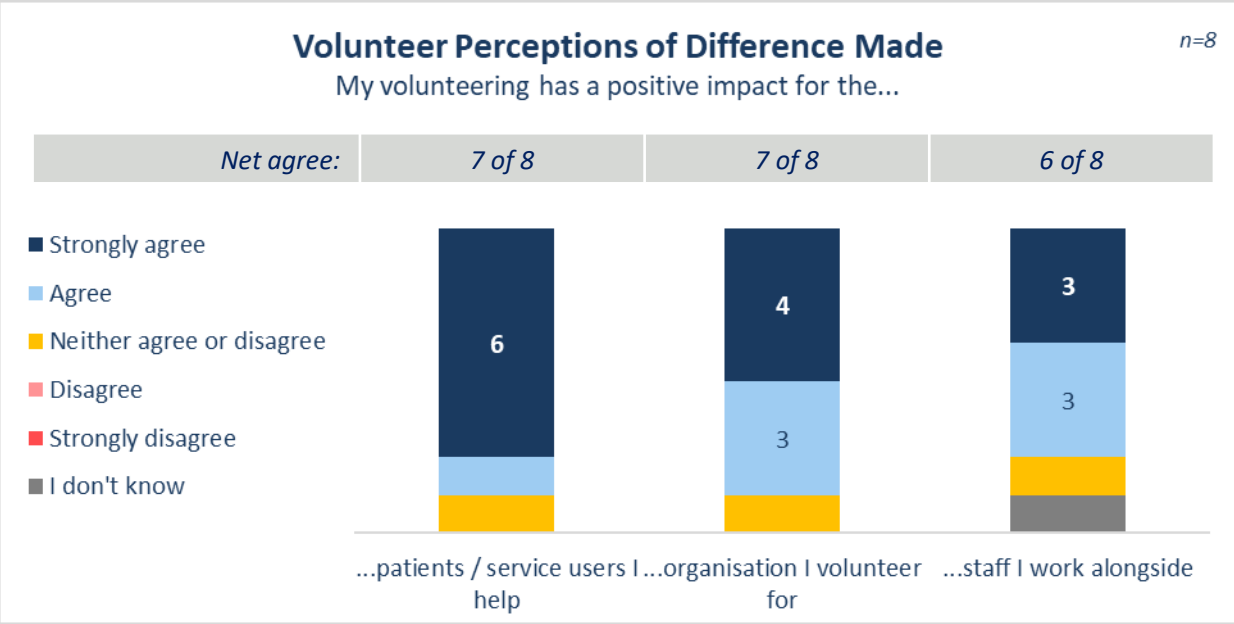
Overall, feedback suggests that volunteers feel well supported by both the staff and volunteer team. While most were satisfied with the equipment provided, communication and coordination on the day of incidents stands out as an area worth exploring further.



Please note: Responses below 2 were removed from the chart above to increase readability.

Impact: Volunteer's Perceived Impact on Others

Volunteers were then asked to reflect on the difference the felt their role had on the people they provided support to.



Please note: Responses below 2 were removed from the chart above to increase readability.

Overall, it appears that volunteers generally feel their role is valued across different areas, including patient experience, staff support and the wider organisation.

- 7 out of 8 agreed that their volunteering has a **positive impact for the patients** they help and the **organisation** they volunteer for, whilst one volunteer remained neutral for both statements.
- Three quarters of volunteers also agreed their volunteering support had positive benefits for staff. One person was unsure, and one responded neutrally. However, these volunteers did not provide further context as to why they felt this way.

One volunteer provided further comment as to the difference they felt their support to participate in crafts made to patients…

> *"Seeing the joy on their faces when they have completed a craft task, and that is a challenge for some."*

Impact: Volunteer Outcomes and Satisfaction

Finally, volunteers were asked about the difference their role has made to them and their overall satisfaction with their volunteering experience.

Impact of volunteering for themselves

8 of 8 agreed or strongly agreed volunteering provided them with a **sense of purpose**, 6 of whom strongly agreed.

8 of 8 agreed or strongly agreed volunteering allowed them to **develop new skills**, 5 of whom strongly agreed.

5 of 8 agreed or strongly agreed the volunteering **increased their confidence**, 2 of whom strongly agreed.

"It has given me confidence and strength and interaction with the patients and a sense of purpose."

"I love it and enjoyed it so far, I am just looking forward to learn more with skills and experience."

"Having lived experience helps understand the needs of the patients and what they like to do."

Satisfaction with volunteering experience

7 of 8 reported the mental health volunteer role had **met or exceeded their expectations**, 5 of whom said they were exceeded.

8 of 8 were **very satisfied** with their volunteering experience, with **7 of 8** respondents reporting having their own **lived experience had a positive impact** on their volunteering.

8 of 8 reported they were **likely to recommend** their role to others.

- The role appears to have been successful in providing volunteers with a **sense of purpose** and an opportunity to **develop new skills**. A small proportion of volunteers were neutral with regards to the volunteering role **increasing their confidence** but did not provide further context.
- Satisfaction with the volunteering experience appears high, with volunteers reporting the role had **met or exceeded their expectations** and being **likely to recommend** the role to others**.** Further, the majority of volunteers agreed that having **lived experience** had positively impacted on their volunteering experience.

Taking all the feedback from volunteers into account, it appears the mental health volunteering role not only resulted in positive benefits in their own personal development but generally provided a positive experience and an opportunity for volunteers to feel they were making a difference.

Volunteer Case Study

Please note: The image used is for illustrative purposes only.
Case study is not a direct quote and has been edited for reporting purposes.

*I was primarily drawn to this role by a deep **desire to transform my personal challenges into a positive contribution for others**. I recognised that sharing my journey with others going through similar situations can provide a profound sense of hope and connection that clinical care alone might not always achieve. **My own journey allows me to offer not just theoretical understanding but genuine empathy** and a unique perspective that can normalize their feelings.*

*What I enjoy most is witnessing **moments of genuine connection** and progress in patients. It's incredibly rewarding to see someone's initial apprehension or despair gradually shift towards engagement and a renewed sense of hope.*

***Volunteering has had a profoundly positive impact on my own wellbeing.** It provides a strong sense of purpose and meaning. This regular engagement in a supportive, empathetic environment contributes significantly to my mental and emotional health, providing a fulfilling counterpoint to daily life. The role has also **significantly honed several key skills and reinforced my existing strengths,** including my active listening and empathetic communication skills. I've also developed greater resilience and emotional intelligence, learning how to navigate sensitive conversations and support others while maintaining my own wellbeing.*

*This volunteering experience has profoundly influenced my future plans and solidified my career aspirations. **It has reinforced my passion for working in a supportive capacity within the health or mental health sector**. I am now actively researching career paths where I can further contribute to a more person-centred approach to care.*

*I believe that **lived experience volunteers are an invaluable asset to any healthcare setting**. Our unique position allows us to bridge a crucial gap between clinical expertise and the patients personal journey, fostering an environment of greater understanding, trust and shared humanity. My experience has reinforced my conviction that integrating lived experiences voices at all levels, from direct patient support to policy development, is fundamental to creating truly holistic, compassionate, and effective healthcare systems.*

***I would highly recommend this volunteering role to anyone with lived experience.** It's a chance to be a part of a compassionate community and to contribute to a more understanding and effective healthcare system, proving that lived experience is not just a personal story, but a valuable asset.*

Volunteer Case Studies

I suffer with mental health issues myself, and after completing an online course for OCD, and having 12 one to one sessions with a psychologist, we felt I could use my experience and the things I learnt to help others like myself.

It is amazing to be able to give others hope, and support. I LOVE making patients smile and reminiscing with them - which they love. They never want me to leave and will always start chatting about something to keep me with them longer.

It is also benefiting and helping me. Volunteering has helped my confidence. It has also allowed me to developed lots of patience and knowing the right words, and an ability showing positivity around our conversations and their concerns.

I wish I had done this when I was younger. I am thrilled I have the opportunity to make a difference to people.

Volunteering as someone with lived experience of mental health challenges allows recognition of how people react differently to what we may perceive as normal and being able to adapt accordingly.

I would recommend the mental health volunteer role, especially if you're not able to work a regular job. If volunteering, whether it be a few minutes to a few hours each month, makes a difference to one or more people, then it's truly worthwhile.

Please note: The image used is for illustrative purposes only. Case studies are not a direct quotes and have been edited for reporting purposes.

Impact: Organisational success factors

Several key factors have contributed to the success and progress of the lived experience volunteering project. These include strong partnerships, organisational commitment, and a values-based approach to volunteering.

1. Strategic Partnerships

The project's development and sustainability have been significantly supported by collaborative partnerships at both a local and national level:

- Third sector organisations, including community groups, mental health charities, and service user forums, have played a vital role in helping identify, engage, and support individuals with lived experience. These organisations often act as trusted bridges between people and the Health Board, helping to reduce barriers to participation.

Key partners include: WCVA Cymru, Torfaen Voluntary Alliance (TVA), Gwent Association of Voluntary Organisations (GAVO), Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA), Welsh Refugee Council, Platform, Disability Cando and Coleg Gwent.

2. Internal Collaboration

Cross-departmental collaboration within Aneurin Bevan University Health Board has been critical. The Patient Experience and Involvement Team has worked closely with:

- Clinical and ward staff, who have welcomed volunteers onto wards, nurtured their development, and recognised their contribution to patient care.
- Patient Experience and Engagement teams, who share the commitment to co-production and amplifying lived experience across the system.

This internal alignment has helped embed the project within broader priorities such as compassionate care, staff wellbeing, and community inclusion.

3. Leadership and Organisational Support

Having visible support from senior leaders has been instrumental in building momentum and removing barriers. The Health Board's commitment to inclusive volunteering and lived experience leadership has helped integrate the programme into the organisation's wider values and strategic plans.

4. Volunteer-Centred Design

The project's success has also been driven by a commitment to designing around the needs of the volunteers themselves. This includes offering:

- Flexible, trauma-informed support;
- Tailored training and development; and
- A safe environment where volunteers feel heard, respected, and valued.

By creating a culture where volunteers are not just participants but active contributors, the project has nurtured high levels of motivation, engagement, and impact.

5. Continuous Learning and Reflection

The use of feedback loops, reflective practice, and peer support, including regular check-ins, testimonials, and learning sessions, has allowed the programme to grow responsively and adapt to emerging needs.

Together, these factors have created the conditions for the project to thrive, helping to unlock the potential of lived experience, build bridges between services and communities, and support volunteers on meaningful journeys of contribution and growth.

Staff member case study

Across the Health Board, there was a clear commitment to person-centred care, with an increasing emphasis on co-production and meaningful involvement of patients, carers, and service users. This aligned with wider NHS and Welsh Government priorities around inclusion and service user voice.

The impact of our lived experience volunteers has been felt across patients, staff, and the overall ward environment in powerful and meaningful ways. For patients, the presence of someone who has 'been there' offers a unique sense of understanding and reassurance. Volunteers with lived experience bring empathy that goes beyond training. They offer a relatable human connection, which helps build trust and encourages patients to open up. In both one-to-one interactions and group settings, patients often feel safer and more understood, knowing that the volunteer truly 'gets it'. This has been particularly impactful in mental health and recovery-based settings, where peer-led insight can help patients feel less isolated and more hopeful about their own journey.

For staff, volunteers have become a valued and trusted part of the care team. By spending dedicated, meaningful time with patients – listening, offering companionship, or simply being present – volunteers help to alleviate pressure on staff, particularly during busy periods. Their contribution allows staff to focus on clinical tasks while knowing that patients continue to receive compassionate attention.

The impact on the volunteers has been both profound and deeply meaningful. For many, this opportunity represents far more than simply 'giving back' - it marks a significant step forward in their own personal journey of recovery, healing, and growth. Volunteering with lived experience has allowed individuals to reclaim their sense of identity and purpose after periods of illness, loss, or disconnection from the workforce or wider community. It has offered a space to rediscover their strengths, contribute to others in a meaningful way, and feel a renewed sense of self-worth.

Beyond direct care, the presence of lived experience volunteers has helped foster a more open, inclusive, and person-centred culture across the wards. At a wider organisational level, the inclusion of lived experience volunteers has contributed to cultural change – challenging assumptions, enhancing team morale, and demonstrating the tangible value of co-production in practice. In many ways, their contribution is not only about what they do but about who they are: a living example of recovery, resilience, and the healing power of human connection.

Tanya Strange, Head of Nursing Patient Experience and Involvement Team

Kathryn Thomas, Senior Programme Manager

Conclusions

- Patients shared positive feedback on the support they received from volunteers, with the evidence gathered illustrating volunteers helped them with their emotional wellbeing and supported them to have a more positive hospital experience.
- Staff members reported that volunteers supported their wellbeing, working lives and helped to improve the quality of care they are able to provide. Many described positive experiences and felt that volunteers were a key part of the team.
- Volunteers also reported benefits to themselves following participation in the mental health role, including increased confidence, development of new skills and an improved sense of purpose.
- From the evidence gathered, therefore, it is clear that the mental health volunteers project has led to a multitude of positive outcomes for patients, staff and volunteers. Going forward, continuing to support volunteers in their role, improving communication and looking how lived experience volunteers can be more consistently integrated into teams could build on what is already working well.

Next Steps

The ambition is for this project to become fully embedded within the Health Board's core services, including mental health services, not as an add-on but as an essential part of how care and support are provided to patients, families and staff. Volunteering with lived experience will continue to be a respected, inclusive, and accessible opportunity. Further, links will be strengthened between volunteers and specific clinical areas, including inpatient wards, community mental health teams, and crisis services.

ABUHB's ambition is to scale up in both reach and depth:

- **Increase the number and diversity of volunteers**, with a focus on involving people from underrepresented groups and communities who may not have traditionally accessed volunteering opportunities.
- **Expand the roles** lived experience volunteers can play.

Looking further ahead, ABUHB envision this model contributing to a culture shift across the Health Board, one in which lived experience is recognised as expertise, where volunteers are seen as equal partners in care, and where recovery, inclusion, and compassion are further embedded in everything what the organisation do.

Ultimately, this project is not just about volunteering - it's about redefining how people with lived experience can shape, lead and strengthen the future of mental health services.

Data limitations

- Although the number of responses was small for both patient and volunteers, the findings were representative.
- In addition, in mental health wards, patients often stay longer. This means volunteers usually support fewer people but over a longer period of time.
- Staff who respondent to the staff survey but reported that they never work with volunteers were excluded from the analysis. However, some staff who said they did work with volunteers later commented that this was on irregular basis. These staff mostly responded neutrally to the agreement statements about the volunteers. Their responses were included in the analysis and any of their further comments were reflected in the report where available.

Acknowledgements

Helpforce would like to pass on our thanks to Tanya Strange, Head of Nursing Patient Experience and Involvement Team; Kathryn Thomas, Senior Programme Manager; Alys Key, Administrator; and the Volunteer team at Aneurin Bevan University Health Board.

We would also like to thank Lynne Connolly and Fiona Liddell at WCVA.

Finally, we would also like to pass on our thanks to the participating patients, staff and volunteers for providing their insights and feedback - without them, this evaluation would not have been possible.

Appendix: About the Helpforce Insight and Impact Service

What is it?

- The I&I Service is an online tool to help you easily and effectively evaluate your voluntary project or initiative.
- It guides you on a simple 4-step process, from designing outcomes for your beneficiaries through to what data we will need to collect - how, when, and from whom.
- Resulting in an evaluation report that our team produces for you, showing evidence of impact made against the outcomes and insights around how the project is working.

A guide to some key terms we use

Insights provide an understanding of a situation or problem. They help us to share valuable information around what is working well, and what is not working so well, so that we can advise on potential service improvements and developments.

Impact relates to evidence of lasting and sustainable changes. Impact data helps us to understand the value and difference being made as a result of the project.

Evidence is reviewed against the following criteria to determine if it is compelling, promising, or limited:

- Is the sample size / response rate reliable and robust?
- Is the data direct or a proxy measure?
- Is there a causal link between the evidence and the outcome?
- Is there a control group or comparative data set?
- How was the evidence gathered – directly from participants, or via a third party?
- Was the survey question well designed, or has there been signs of misunderstanding by participants?

How the service is making a difference

We have worked with many NHS and VCS organisations over the last 3 years to collect data on over 100 high-impact voluntary projects. We have produced evidenced findings against a broad range health and care outcome measures, that have helped to scale up volunteering services and unlock additional funding for our partners.

helpforce

Thank you

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