**Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, Ms Shona Robison MSP**

**Keynote Address**

I am delighted to join you here today at your conference on Volunteering: The Golden Thread in Health.

It seems particularly appropriate that we are meeting here today at Clydebank, next to the Golden Jubilee National Hospital. The hospital has supported volunteering for the past 13 years and has received Investors in Volunteers accreditation three times, one of the few UK organisations to do so.

**Scottish Government Supporting Volunteering**

Let me start by paying tribute to all those who give their time freely to their families, to their communities, and to society as a whole, without fanfare or reward, because they believe in a fair society. This is a belief, and a vision, that is shared by this Government – and one that sits at the heart of our Programme for Government.

The First Minister has committed through the Programme for Government to be bold in realising our vision for volunteering and the role volunteers can play in shaping the lives of their communities.

Over the coming period we will do more to support groups currently facing barriers to engaging in their communities, including disabled people, older people and people out of work – and we will build on positive trends for youth volunteering.

This is because we know that volunteering is transformational – for the volunteer, for the beneficiary, and for communities.

Volunteering empowers people and communities, enables people to build new skills, and enhances employability. But more than that, volunteering helps to tackle social isolation and loneliness, and can improve physical and mental wellbeing.

**The Tradition of Volunteering in NHS Scotland**

Within health settings in particular, everyone here is well aware of the proud tradition of volunteering, which goes back many years – and in some cases pre-dates the NHS.

The Scottish Government strongly supports the development of volunteering in health. Since 2011 we have funded the Scottish Health Council’s Volunteering in NHSScotland Programme, which supports NHS Boards across Scotland to further develop their own volunteer programmes.

Volunteers engaged by charities and other voluntary health organisations have a long tradition of involvement in hospitals. Royal Voluntary Service volunteers, for example, are a familiar sight in hospital shops and cafes throughout Scotland.

And there are so many other good examples of volunteering making a real difference, all across the country. In Dundee, Edinburgh, and Glasgow for instance, the Butterfly Trust, a national Cystic Fibrosis charity, utilises professionally trained volunteers to provide relaxing reflexology and aromatherapy for Cystic Fibrosis sufferers.

In Aberdeen, Kilmarnock, and Dunfermline, people with facial disfigurements are being assisted by the national charity Changing Faces. Their fully trained Skin Camouflage Practitioner Volunteers support people who have scars, marks or dermatological conditions.

And all across Scotland, ‘Therapets’ and their owners promote the therapeutic value of dogs to patients or others isolated from the normal association with pets. Working with the Canine Concern Scotland Trust, volunteers regularly visit hospitals, day centres and nursing homes, and special needs schools. Their pets provide four-legged therapy and companionship to animal lovers who aren’t able to care for a pet full-time.

Volunteers such as these are an inspiration to people who are receiving care in hospital, and to their communities. Their efforts support people’s recovery and help to reconnect them with wider society and community life.

**Voluntary Health Scotland’s Clear Pathway Project**

The Scottish Government is supporting Voluntary Health Scotland’s **Clear Pathway** project to engage with a wide range of stakeholders – including NHS Boards, NHS staff and third sector organisations – to explore the current state of third-sector volunteering in NHS settings.

We are committed to ensuring patient safety and the safety of staff and volunteers who work within, and for, the NHS in Scotland. Clear Pathway is considering the *opportunities*, but also the *risks* associated with third sector volunteering in health settings, and looking at how those risks can be managed so that third sector volunteering in health settings is always safe, effective and person-centred.

Clear Pathway is developing resources and guidance for NHS Boards in relation to third sector volunteering in NHS settings, and identifying examples of good practice that have the potential to be shared across Scotland.

In **Greater Glasgow and Clyde**, for example, the NHS Board has developed a partnership agreement process for all future arrangements with third sector organisations, which requires volunteer providers to ensure that their processes for recruiting and deploying volunteers mirror the Board’s own systems.

In **NHS Lothian, Volunteer Edinburgh** delivers The Volunteer Hub at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital. This gives guidance, support, and advice to patients who wish to volunteer, both within the hospital and in the community. Since April 2013, Volunteer Edinburgh has also managed the wider public volunteer programme within the hospital.

In this time, Volunteer Edinburgh has worked with 417 patients with complex mental health problems, addictions or forensic histories, and additional support needs. Over two hundred of these people have successfully moved into volunteering in community settings. Close relationships with NHS colleagues and other third sector organisations has been fundamental to the success of this programme.

This is a great example of volunteering helping people develop new skills, gain structure and routine in their lives, and become more empowered, more involved in the community, and less at risk of social isolation and loneliness.

**Social Isolation and Loneliness**

A stay in hospital can be a lonely experience for many people, particularly if they aren’t able to receive regular visits from family and friends.

As you know, people of all ages and in all communities across Scotland can experience social isolation and loneliness, both at home and in hospital settings. This is something that as a Government we take seriously – and I know you do too.

We know that reducing social isolation and loneliness is a big challenge, and will involve all sectors of society – especially the third sector. That’s why last year we invested £500,000 through the Social Isolation and Loneliness Fund to support 36 community-based projects tackling social isolation and its impact.

We are also working with our partners on developing a National Strategy to address social isolation and loneliness. This Strategy will recognise the important role that volunteering plays in helping to respond to loneliness and social isolation.

I appreciate that some of you in this room have already provided input into that Strategy, not least Voluntary Health Scotland, who have coordinated and contributed the views and experience of the voluntary health sector throughout this process. The Strategy will be published for consultation in the autumn and I hope you will take time to contribute.

**Health and Social Care Integration**

Of course, the health and social care landscape changed significantly last April when Health and Social Care Partnerships formally took up their responsibilities in planning and managing health, community care and social care services.

Integration continues our commitment to provide health and social care services that are centred on the needs of the individual and the community, that are often preventative in nature, and that people can co-produce to ensure that local needs are identified and met.

The role of the third sector is significant in integration. It is formally recognised in legislation and, in practice, we are supporting partnerships to recognise and support the role and potential of third sector partners locally. There are enormous opportunities for effective working across the third and public sectors in meeting the needs of people who need care.

The tradition of volunteering in hospitals will remain important, but I also recognise the opportunities around integration for supporting organisations who work in the community using volunteers to help keep people well, connected, befriended, and able to stay happily in their own homes for longer.

Integration is about recognising that we need to talk to people about what they want from their care as well as what they need; about making joint decisions; about care provided locally; and about flexibility of care. These are areas where many third sector organisations have a wealth of experience and where volunteers can have a significant impact in helping to support individuals and communities.

Partnerships are already investing in third sector organisations who support the kind of care that keeps people where they want to be – at home. I want to see this continue.

And I hope that you have all had the opportunity, today, to think about how you and your organisations can best contribute to the health and wellbeing of the people of Scotland in this new landscape.

**Conclusion and Thanks**

With thousands of volunteers supporting health and care services across Scotland at any given time, volunteers have an absolutely fundamental role in enhancing the quality of care that people receive right across Scotland, over a range of services.

You know – and I can see – that patients, their families and carers, benefit from the emotional support and attention given by volunteers. Staff too, benefit as they are free to concentrate on their key skills, whilst the volunteers themselves gain in confidence through the important contribution they are making.

Positive, safe, and person-centred outcomes are being delivered by volunteers, either working directly with Boards, partnerships or with third sector organisations, right across NHS Scotland. This is the **Golden Thread** that runs through our services, our families, and our communities – giving pace to innovation and transformational change, supporting the people of Scotland to live longer, healthier lives, and enabling them to bring their own skills, expertise and compassion to bear in contributing to the wellbeing of others.

I trust that you have all had very productive discussions over the course of the day, and that new working relationships has been forged today that will bear fruit in future.

Thank you.