



# Developing the mental health workforce

## The role of volunteering at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital in employability development

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January 2024



# Acknowledgements

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# Contents

<b>Executive Summary and Key Findings.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1. Context .....</b>	<b>5</b>
Research Aims	5
The Researcher	5
Volunteer Edinburgh	5
The Royal Edinburgh Hospital	5
The Volunteer Hub in the Royal Edinburgh Hospital	6
<b>2. Research Methodology and Response Rate .....</b>	<b>8</b>
Who responded?	9
Interviews	11
<b>3. Volunteer Engagement .....</b>	<b>13</b>
Volunteer Motivations	13
Volunteering Activities	14
<b>4. Volunteering Experience.....</b>	<b>15</b>
What did you enjoy most about volunteering?	15
What was most challenging about volunteering at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital?	16
<b>5. Career Benefits of Volunteering.....</b>	<b>17</b>
Contribution of Volunteer Training	17
Supporting the career development of volunteers	17
Career Destinations	20
<b>6. Wider Benefits .....</b>	<b>23</b>
Seeing people beyond their illness	23
Building Self-Worth	23
<b>7. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>APPENDIX 1 .....</b>	<b>25</b>
Royal Edinburgh Hospital: Opportunities undertaken by public volunteers	25

## > Executive Summary

A study was undertaken of the experiences and employability outcomes of individuals who had been engaged by Volunteer Edinburgh at their Volunteer Hub within the Royal Edinburgh Hospital and wished to pursue a career in mental health/or health and social care.

The study demonstrates that volunteers at the Volunteer Hub in the Royal Edinburgh Hospital gained significant employability benefits. 71% of respondents reported that it helped with their career development and 74% went on to secure employment in mental health and/or health and social care. 4% of respondents chose not to pursue a career in this field. Insights gained while volunteering in the Royal Edinburgh Hospital influenced their decision.

Respondents were predominantly under 35 years of age, British or Irish and educated to at least undergraduate degree level at time of volunteering. 56% reported that their volunteering experience supported further qualifications they went on to gain.

42% volunteered at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital for 1 to 4+ years, significant longevity for volunteers of this age and at an early stage of their career development.

67% of respondents were motivated to volunteer as a means of furthering their career. However, this was never their sole motivator. Respondents were equally motivated by the opportunity to work with people with complex mental illness, to learn new skills, experience work in the NHS environment and for personal and altruistic reasons.

Individuals with career aspirations in mental health deliberately sought out volunteering roles at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital which gave opportunity to work on a one-to-

one basis with in-patients experiencing complex and challenging mental illness. They engaged in activities which built trusting relationships and supported the recovery of in-patients. This relational engagement gave invaluable insights into the impact of complex mental illness on an individual and enabled them to see the “person beyond the diagnosis”.

Key to their experience was the robust and comprehensive training they received. This facilitated volunteers' relationships with in-patients and enabled them to understand and manage the unpredictable, and at times intimidating challenges that can arise in mental health settings. Bespoke support enabled them to reflect on their experiences, challenges and achievements. For volunteers who were students, this was an important means of transferring theory into practice and therefore supported their personal development and career progression.

Employability support from Volunteer Edinburgh staff to volunteers included careers information and advice, provision of comprehensive references to potential employers and signposting to job opportunities. Additional learning opportunities for networking with other third sector organisations and NHS departments supported the exploration of careers paths.

Respondents were overwhelmingly positive about their volunteering experiences at the REH. There were no comments on how the programme could be changed. The only suggestion for improvement was better access to information about career pathways and paid employment opportunities in the NHS.

**Key to their experience was the robust and comprehensive training they received**

## Key findings

1. Volunteering at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital has significant employability benefits for individuals wishing to work in mental health and/or wider health & social care. It is identified as an important way of developing essential skills, attitudes, behaviours and networks/contacts.
2. Volunteers with career aspirations in mental health sought out opportunities with Volunteer Edinburgh at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital to work on a one-to-one basis with in-patients experiencing complex and challenging mental illness. This was described as invaluable in developing insights into peoples' experiences, understanding their situation and seeing the "person beyond the diagnosis".
3. The volunteering experience and environment could be challenging and at times intimidating. This played a key role in individuals' decision making about career choices. For most, their aspiration to work in mental health was strengthened but a small number decided on other career options. All reported that this decision making was greatly helped by their volunteering experience.
4. The robust and comprehensive training delivered by Volunteer Edinburgh was highly praised by volunteers and described as a key element in developing their employability.
5. The range and variety of creative volunteer roles in the Royal Edinburgh Hospital is attractive to volunteers with career aspirations in mental health, psychology and wider health & social care. At a time when volunteer recruitment is reported to be in decline [Volunteer Scotland Briefing Decline in Volunteering Jan 24](#) the REH has faced no such issues.
6. Bespoke support to volunteers enabled them to reflect on their experiences, challenges and achievements. This was identified as an important means of transferring theory into practice and therefore supported their personal development and career progression.
7. Additional learning opportunities for networking (with other third sector organisations and NHS departments) supported the exploration of careers paths.
8. Employability support from Volunteer Edinburgh staff to volunteers included informed but informal careers information, advice and guidance (particularly on drafting job applications and academic personal statements) and provision of comprehensive references to potential employers. Respondents suggested that better access to job opportunities and NHS career pathways be considered.

## > Introduction

The Volunteer Hub at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital delivers a range of activities that benefit patients, staff and the wider hospital community. The service is recovery focused and is unique in engaging in-patient volunteers and volunteers drawn from the general public. Talents, skills and interests are harnessed in activities that give happiness, companionship, build confidence and connections and support progression.

Many public volunteers are motivated for employability reasons and deliberately seek out opportunities in the programme delivered by Volunteer Edinburgh at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital. As part of their engagement they receive comprehensive training, skills through experience, career guidance, interview coaching and work-specific references. This places the programme in the distinctive position of giving volunteers the opportunity to gain skills and experiences which can benefit their career and personal development.

This research looks at the impact volunteering had on volunteers in their career and provides a snapshot of the contribution volunteering programmes, such as the Volunteer Hub, can provide to the NHS and to mental health services. The research comes at an opportune moment as the government looks for examples of good practice, high quality support and innovation across the system. Maree Todd,

Scottish Government Minister for Mental Health, provided a **statement to Parliament** in November 2023 on the vision for Scotland's mental health, seeking to ensure the whole workforce is diverse, skilled, supported, sustainable and able to operate at safe levels. In highlighting the government's "Mental Health and Wellbeing Delivery Plan 2023-2025" and the "Mental Health and Workforce Action Plan 2023-2025" she referenced the whole workforce journey (including how to attract, train, employ and nurture staff), going beyond traditional university and college routes. She praised the value of volunteers in her statement along with befrienders. The Scottish Government's **Health and social care: national workforce strategy – gov. scot (www.gov.scot)** similarly highlights an increasing need to support a "pipeline" of workers through wider employability routes.

**Many public volunteers are motivated for employability reasons and deliberately seek out opportunities at the Royal Edinburgh**

The model at the Volunteer Hub contributes to the development of the future mental health workforce by providing volunteers with experience and support to learn key skills for their future careers. Volunteer programmes such as this are a vital cog in the system for developing the future workforce.

# > 1. Context

## Research Aims

The study researched the career journeys and outcomes of public volunteers engaged by Volunteer Edinburgh at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital. This included:

- > Reason(s) for choosing to volunteer at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital
- > Insights into their volunteering experience
- > How volunteering contributed to career progression
- > Career destination/outcomes

## The Researcher

Voluntary Health Scotland (VHS) is the national intermediary and network for voluntary health organisations across Scotland. It exists to create a healthier, fairer Scotland served by a thriving voluntary health sector and has a membership comprising medium and large condition-specific organisations,

smaller community organisations and social enterprises. VHS has not been involved with Volunteer Edinburgh's service at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital, so provided an independent perspective on this research. Volunteer Edinburgh commissioned VHS to undertake this research and is a member of the VHS network.

## Volunteer Edinburgh

Volunteer Edinburgh aims to build strong social connections, reduce inequalities and support vibrant communities through volunteers and volunteering activities. Volunteer Edinburgh has been at the forefront of volunteering innovation for over

forty years and has pioneered specialist services including health & wellbeing volunteering, employability development, flexible volunteer engagement and capacity building for volunteer involving organisations.

## The Royal Edinburgh Hospital

The Royal Edinburgh Hospital provides psychiatric and mental health services for in-patients with severe and complex conditions including schizophrenia, mood disorders, brain injury, learning disabilities, dementia, substance misuse, complex

trauma and self-harm/suicide attempts. Many have additional physical health problems and/or forensic restrictions. Services are delivered in acute and rehabilitation wards, specialist units and in secure environments.

## The Volunteer Hub in the Royal Edinburgh Hospital

The Volunteer Hub was created in September 2008 by Volunteer Edinburgh at the invitation of the hospital's management and as part of a suite of programmes developed and delivered by third sector organisations embedded within the hospital. These programmes were created to improve experiences for in-patients and improve the hospital environment, and have been celebrated for their excellence in collaborative third sector and NHS work.

The Volunteer Hub initially focused on the engagement of in-patient volunteers and in April 2013 was expanded to include volunteers from the general public. The mix of in-patients & members of the public volunteering side by side or together is unique in Scotland. Over 700 public volunteers have been involved, ranging in age from teens to 80s and drawn from 20+ nationalities.

Volunteering activities take place on wards, outdoors in the hospital's greenspace, with other third sector organisations based in the Royal Edinburgh Hospital and most commonly in the Volunteer Hub which also hosts the Patients' Library.

A "relationship model" of volunteer engagement is utilised which contributes to the recovery plans of patients and contrasts to "task based" models used in many other healthcare settings. This means all public volunteers receive comprehensive training which is person-centred, recovery focused and assets based – ensuring volunteers get to know patients as people without focus on diagnosis or problems. Volunteers build skills and compassion which enable them

to build trusting and impactful relationships with in-patients, all of whom have complex mental illnesses. Many have been in hospital for several years. In addition to core training, volunteers wishing to enter careers in health and social care have received career-focused advice, support and interview coaching.

The volunteering approach is based on recovery principles, hope and kindness. Bespoke activities are created which play to individuals' strengths and reduce barriers to participation.

Public volunteers are recruited by Volunteer Edinburgh and trained to support people dealing with delusions, hallucinations, disordered thinking, suicidal thoughts, memory problems, speech impediments, physical disabilities, high stress and anxiety, low self-esteem, poor concentration, mood swings, unpredictability, fear and distrust, amongst other issues.

Anecdotally volunteers report having a quality experience that equips them for future careers including occupational therapy, support work, nursing and clinical psychology. Many have secured employment in the NHS and other health & social care services. This research aims to paint a picture of the employment destination of volunteers and an analysis of their employability journey.

**The Volunteer Hub initially focused on the engagement of in-patient volunteers and in April 2013 was expanded to include volunteers from the general public**



# VOLUNTEER EDINBURGH'S ROYAL EDINBURGH HOSPITAL VOLUNTEER HUB



We **inspire, encourage** and **support** patient volunteers (in-patients with severe and enduring mental illness) to volunteer in the hospital and/or the wider community. This includes patients from acute admissions, rehabilitation, forensic, older peoples' services, and learning disabilities.



We **enhance** and **improve** the environment and experiences of patients by engaging volunteers from the general public.

We provide **high quality training** and experience to volunteers who wish to enter health professions, for example potential occupational therapists, nurses and psychologists.

## We create bespoke volunteering opportunities for public and patient volunteers.

We aim to be **responsive** and **creative** in all requests to engage volunteers. We work closely with clinical staff in the NHS to create volunteer opportunities for patients to engage in. Roles have included fruit and vegetable delivery, gardening, maintenance work, administration helper and various opportunities in the library.

We create **one-to-one matches** between patient and public volunteers. These matches develop and support patients' interests and skills for example: languages, computing, guitar playing, chess, astronomy, creative writing, poetry, sport and recording music.



## We use an assets based approach to our work.

Staff and public volunteers are trained to work to an ethos of **equality, mutual respect** and **kindness**. Many patient volunteers are pleased to be able to contribute and feel capable in a setting where they are more usually recipients of help.

We start with the person and create a volunteering role or activity around them, ensuring they have the greatest chance of success in following through, despite the challenges they are facing in their illness.



Since 2008 we have worked with **724 in-patient volunteers** who have contributed **8,654 hours** to the hospital.

Since 2013 we have worked with **779 public volunteers** who have contributed **35,454 hours** to the hospital.

During the Covid lockdowns of 2020/21, **56 public volunteers** provided a 'runner' service doing vital shopping for patients on **19 wards**.



## Provide high quality training and support to develop the future workforce.

We are conscious of our role in training public volunteers to be future members of the NHS workforce and we hold them to a **high standard** of attitude and behaviour. Public volunteers are **coached** and **supported** to develop their social and emotional skills in this challenging setting. This creates positive outcomes for patients and employability development for public volunteers.

We run training in mental health awareness, boundaries and confidentiality, dealing with difficult situations, dementia awareness, self-esteem and motivation and understanding recovery. We have also organised information sessions for volunteers interested in psychology and occupational therapy.



## > 2. Research Methodology and Response Rate

Evidence gathering and analysis was undertaken via an online survey on Microsoft Forms sent to 427 past and present public volunteers.

The survey received 60 responses, which represents a 14% response rate. The number of usable responses was 45, which was due to the exclusion of respondents who had retired at the time of their volunteering.<sup>1</sup>

The response rate also reflects:

- > The high number of academic email addresses no longer in use (by individuals who volunteered when students).
- > The ten-year time horizon for this research stretching back to 2013. Volunteers' willingness to engage in surveys of this nature is likely to reduce over time.

Survey questions were a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions designed to gain insights into the experience and reflections volunteers had on their volunteering and their employment journey.

Methodologically, it is important to highlight the potential for self-selection bias in surveys of this nature. Those with particularly strong positive or negative experiences are often more likely to respond. As discussed in subsequent sections, the respondents in this survey provided overwhelmingly positive responses about the Volunteer Hub and their experience with Volunteer Edinburgh. It is therefore possible that volunteers with more neutral experiences were under-represented in the sample.

All survey respondents were given the option to participate in interviews and those who agreed were contacted to schedule interviews. Semi-structured interviews were carried out on Zoom with three online survey participants who provided in-depth accounts of their experiences and career journeys. Time constraints deemed it impossible to schedule additional interviews. The three people interviewed all pursued a career in mental health; two were studying psychology at the time of their volunteering and the other was looking to change career.

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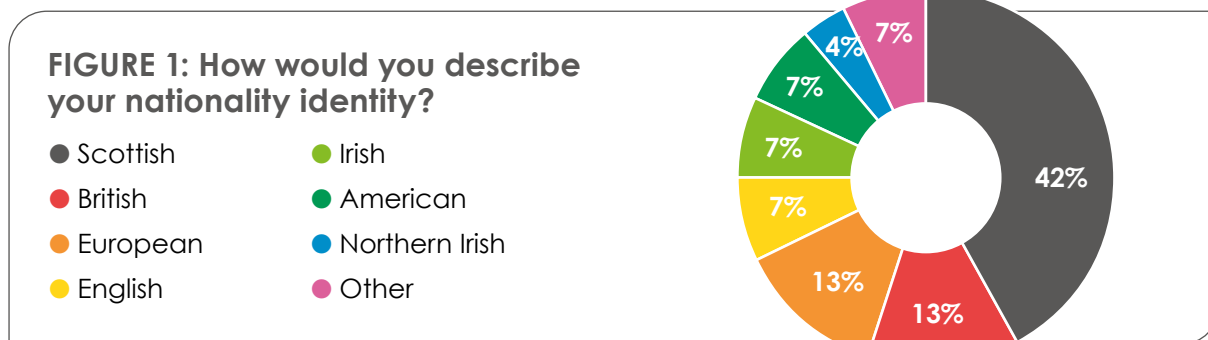
<sup>1</sup> The survey was designed to gain insights about the development of the future workforce and stated this to dissuade responses from volunteers who were retired at the time of their volunteering. In spite of this 15 responses were from retired volunteers. It is estimated that 40% of all Royal Edinburgh Hospital public volunteers are retired or were retired at their time of volunteering. The benefits of volunteering for retired volunteers are significant and will be looked at in a future piece of research by Volunteer Edinburgh.

## Who responded?

38 volunteers identified as female, 6 male and one preferred not to say. More females than males volunteer at the Hub, but not to the extent of this difference.

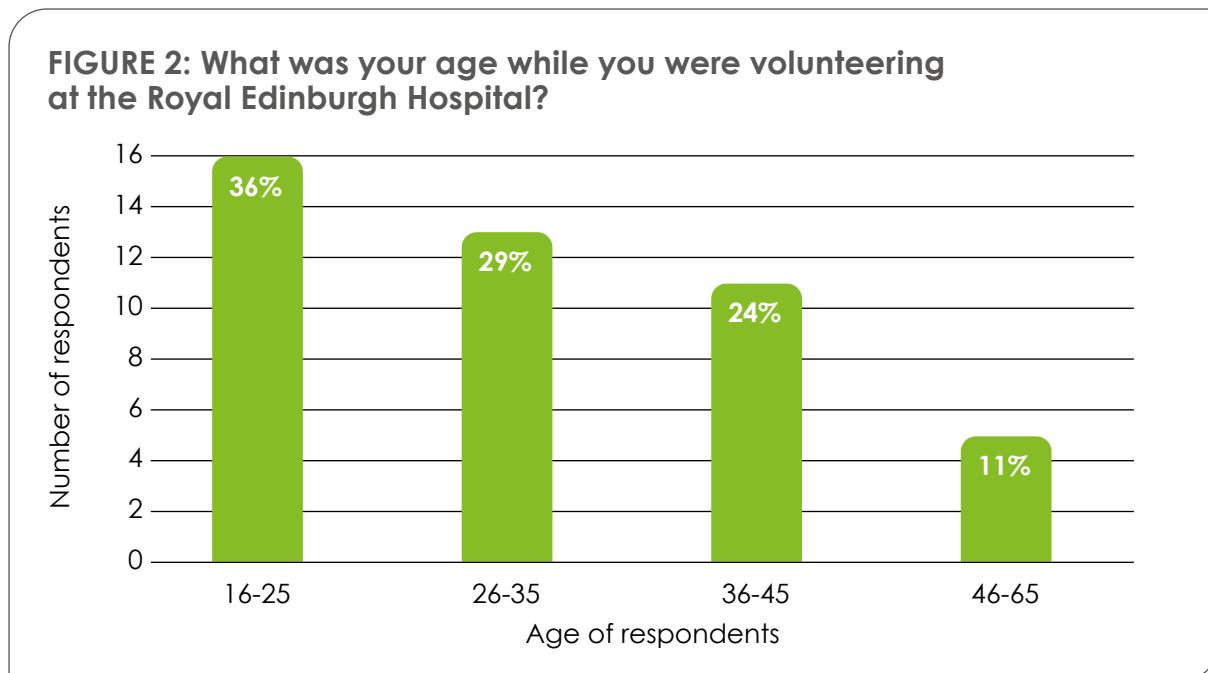
There was a mix of nationalities among the volunteers who responded: 42% identified

as Scottish, 13% British, 7% English and a mix of European nationalities such as Swedish and German (Figure 1). Volunteer Edinburgh staff report that the number of nationalities volunteering in the hospital has significantly decreased in the years following the pandemic and Brexit.



We asked what age respondents were when they volunteered (Figure 2). There was a broad mix of ages but, as expected, a higher

proportion were aged 16-35 (nearly two-thirds), which reflects the career motivations of volunteers.

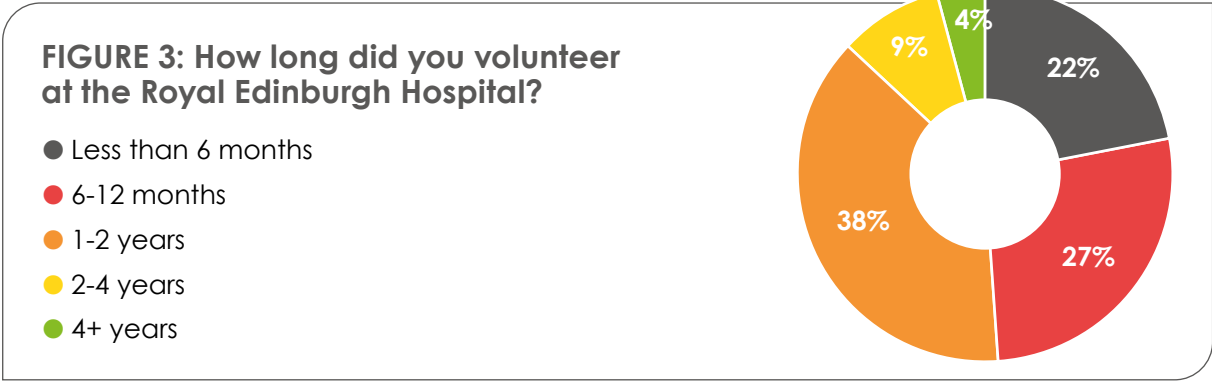


Respondents were asked how long they volunteered for at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital. 38% volunteered for 1-2 years, 27% for 6-12 months and 22% for less than

six months (Figure 3). Upwards of a year is a significant amount of time for volunteers to stay with a service, especially for those in the early stages of their career.

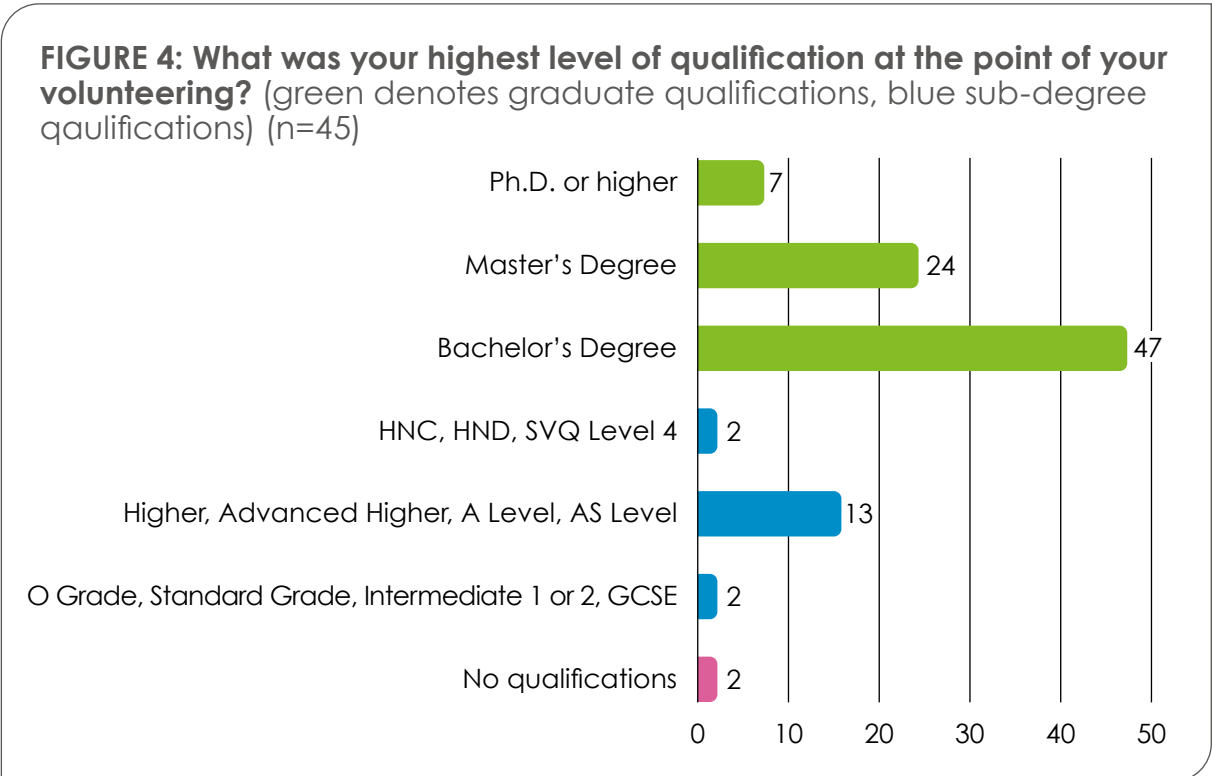
Volunteer Edinburgh staff report that a minimum eight-month commitment is requested of public volunteers in view of the high volume of “early career” applications

and the time required for their induction, training and support. It is noted that their motivation, commitment and eagerness to learn yields significant benefits for in-patients.



Respondents were asked about their highest level of qualification at the point of their volunteering\* (Figure 4) providing an insight into their educational attainment. 78% of respondents were educated to at least undergraduate degree level, 16% had school level qualifications and one respondent had no qualifications.

Interestingly, 56% of respondents said their volunteering experience supported further qualifications they went on to gain. This illustrates that volunteers felt their experience and upskilling supported them to further their educational attainment.



\* Many respondents reported all qualifications rather than solely identifying their highest

## Interviews

Three semi-structured interviews were undertaken with volunteers on Zoom who responded to the survey. Brief case studies of their experiences are included below.

Identifying characteristics and names have been changed for anonymity. All three of the interviewees pursued or are pursuing a role in mental health.

**VOLUNTEER 1** volunteered for two years while studying psychology. She led wellbeing group sessions for patients which provided a different volunteering experience from one-to-one patient support. It was her first experience in a clinical setting, and she found it challenging to hear the stories from patients of everything they had been through.

She volunteered in different wards. This gave her insight into how she was best able to support patients and what clinical areas were too emotionally challenging. She learnt over time how to establish boundaries with patients and focus together on activities. She felt the environment could be difficult at times but welcomed this challenge and learning opportunity.

She knew before volunteering that she wanted to work in health psychology, not clinical psychology. Her volunteering experience confirmed this for her. She emphasised it was a hugely rewarding experience and that she had *"never done anything more challenging and rewarding"* as volunteering at the Volunteer Hub.

She reflected that the training volunteers received was very helpful, especially the presentations on schizophrenia and psychosis. She noted that additional training was provided on how to handle challenging situations with patients after she experienced an escalating situation on the ward. She relayed that this had been very scary and at the time she felt she hadn't been trained in what to do when patients were being potentially violent. Following this incident, she spoke with Volunteer Edinburgh staff and additional training was provided to volunteers, which she felt was very positive.

She stressed that she did always feel safe and supported despite these challenging situations and said, *"the volunteer was always put first and supported by staff"*. The whole experience had been a real eye opener for her. She learned patience, compassion and how to take a person-centred approach, and she felt the whole experience had made her a better person.

This volunteer is still volunteering at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital while she continues her psychology studies.



**VOLUNTEER 2** volunteered for almost four years and was looking to change career at the time of his volunteering. Having worked in the arts for years, he was interested in moving into mental health and sought the opportunity to volunteer at the Hub.

He had some initial reservations about the ward environment and questions about safety and support, but quickly familiarised to it. He said this was partly due to the excellent work of the staff at the Hub who were good at liaising with volunteers.

The befriending experience was pivotal for him and confirmed his desire to pursue a career in counselling. He was reassured by a member of staff about the difference his one-to-one befriending was making with a patient, which he found very rewarding.

He went on to work as a carer initially. He reported that he took with him a lot of the learning from his volunteering about one-to-one support and handling challenging situations. He then became a counsellor and the training he had received at the from Volunteer Edinburgh boosted his confidence in applying for roles in mental health.

He felt he wouldn't have volunteered for so long had it not been such a positive and rewarding experience.



**VOLUNTEER 3** volunteered for two years while studying psychology at university. He helped with activities on the wards and in the library supported drop-in sessions helping patients read, learn music and study philosophy, all great interests of his own. He had already been volunteering in a care setting but was seeking a more structured volunteering experience. The Volunteering Hub at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital offered this.

He knew he wanted to work in mental health before volunteering, but the Royal Edinburgh Hospital was his first experience of a clinical setting. He spoke about the initial intimidation of secure wards, but that he quickly got used to this and the sometimes unpredictability of patients. He said the experience "cutting his teeth" with Volunteer Edinburgh in the Royal Edinburgh Hospital removed any intimidation he might have felt in future professional and voluntary roles.

He described his experience at the Volunteer Hub by saying: *"It's more than just CV experience, it teaches you how to connect."* He spoke of how the opportunity allowed him to see beyond the theoretical and abstract nature of his psychology course and learn what that theory meant in practice. He learned to communicate with different people from different walks of life. He explained that learning a new skill together with patients put the patient and volunteer on an equal level, each learning from the other.

On graduating he sought a role as a support worker for a mental health charity providing support in the community. He now works part time in a school and part time for a charity which supports adults with disabilities.



## > 3. Volunteer Engagement

### Volunteer Motivations

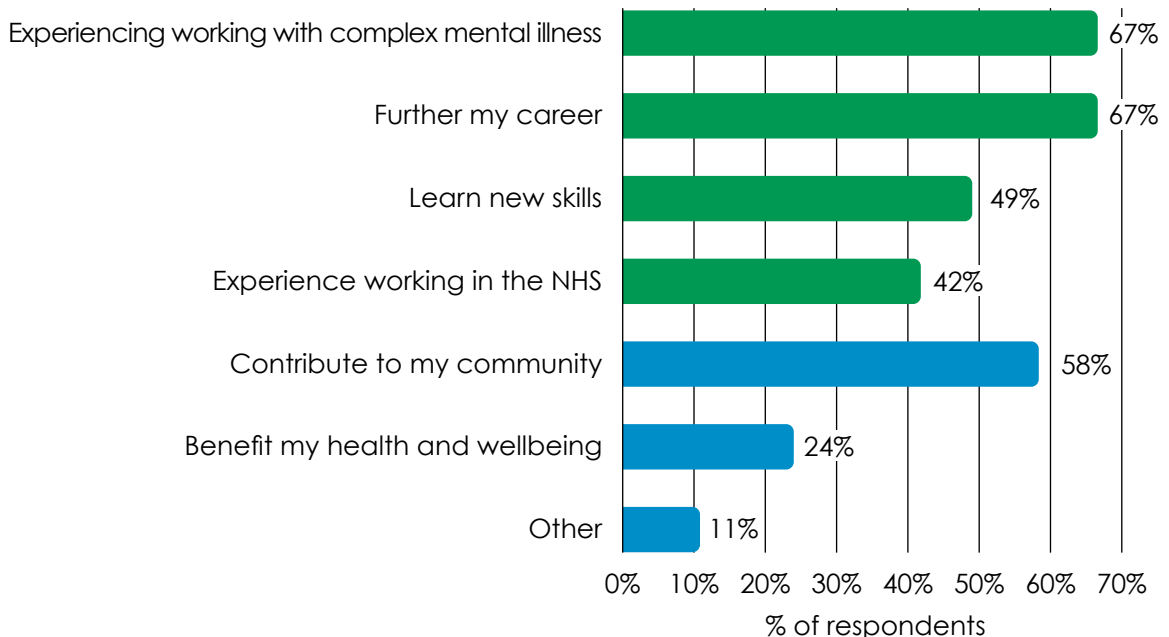
Many respondents found out about volunteering opportunities at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital through Volunteer Edinburgh (27%) or word of mouth (22%). 11% found out through their university and 7% through the NHS. One respondent was directed via a career advice service.

Respondents listed multiple 'main motivations' for volunteering but as Figure 5 illustrates 67% of respondents were motivated by furthering their career. This was never their sole motivation and notably respondents were equally motivated by the opportunity to experience working with complex mental illness. This demonstrated that when seeking the opportunity to volunteer, many were thinking about the experience they would gain in terms of upskilling for future work, possibly in mental health. 'Learning new

skills' and 'experiencing working in the NHS' were also motivations for around half of the respondents. One respondent noted that they needed a relevant reference and volunteering at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital would provide this.

It is worth highlighting that 58% of respondents were also motivated by contributing to their community. This research is focused on developing the future workforce, but the impact of volunteering on the community and on volunteers themselves is significant. Some volunteers were motivated by the specific programmes offered at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital. One wanted to help during the COVID-19 pandemic and another was motivated by experience of mental illness in their family.

**FIGURE 5: What were your main motivations for volunteering at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital?** (green denotes career motivations and blue is wider motivations) (n=45)





## Volunteering Activities

The Volunteer Hub at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital delivers a range of activities to benefit patients, staff and the wider hospital community. Volunteers provide a pool of talents in activities ranging in diversity from computer coding and languages to horticulture and music. **See Appendix 1.** Respondents provided a rich insight into the activities they undertook as volunteers. Some also mentioned the pleasure of sharing their existing interests with patients or even learning new skills together.

It is also worth highlighting how challenging some volunteer roles can be. It is a demanding environment and volunteers quickly learn, through experience and detailed training and support from Volunteer Edinburgh staff, how to best approach this. This is outlined in more detail in Section 8.

Figure 6 illustrates volunteer engagement in different roles. The most popular were supporting library drop-in sessions (53% of

volunteers), befriending and chatting (44%) and helping activities on a ward (40%). Volunteers also supported patients to study or learn a new skill, sometimes learning along with the patient. Respondents noted the opportunity this volunteering gave them to support someone with complex mental illness and experience working on a ward.

Some individuals noted specific experiences, for example of working with occupational therapists to facilitate the 're-motivation' process of supporting transitions between acute and rehabilitation wards. This provided continuity for patients and also gave volunteers an insight into patients' experiences of moving between services.

In the "other" option in Figure 6, respondents highlighted individual activities they undertook such as chess or creative writing. It's worth also noting a couple of volunteers did shopping and COVID-19 pandemic specific activities.

**FIGURE 6: What activities did you do as a volunteer? (n=45)**





## > 4. Volunteering Experience

### What did you enjoy most about volunteering?

A sense of community spirit and enjoyment shone through in responses to this question. This was summed up by one respondent who said:

*"I enjoyed everything about my experience of volunteering at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital, but the part that stands out as most enjoyable has been meeting so many funny, intelligent, interesting people who I would have been unlikely to meet otherwise. I really enjoyed learning alongside someone on a level footing (we both learned some Arabic together as complete beginners) and I found it incredibly rewarding to be able to see the people I supported in study sessions developing and gaining in confidence as they began to realise their skills and potential..."*

All 45 respondents were asked an open question about what they enjoyed most when volunteering. By far the most cited response was building relationships with patients (40% of respondents) and meeting people from different walks of life. This was closely followed by high praise for Volunteer Edinburgh staff at the Hub (24%) and the opportunity to experience working in an NHS setting (11%).

20% of respondents cited the insights they gained working with people who have complex mental health conditions. One said "[volunteering] strengthened my desire to work with mental health services." The ability to learn about people "beyond their health condition" was also a key theme in the responses. These experiences and insights stayed with some respondents into their professional careers.

As well as experience, respondents also mentioned the training they received from Volunteer Edinburgh and the skills they developed while volunteering at the hospital:

- > *"The experience of volunteering in a hospital, as a student, provided me with useful skills and knowledge which I have continued to use in my professional career."*
- > *"I enjoyed the enabling and collegial atmosphere in the library, the insight I got into mental health and the valuable experience I could then bring to the workforce post-qualifying."*
- > *"It felt like a nice way to experience what working in the NHS would be like. I got to meet lovely people and find out where my skills were best suited in working with complex mental health conditions."*

The Volunteer Hub at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital provided volunteers with a safe, flexible and encouraging environment to learn new skills and experience working in mental health in a supportive way. This provided a strong foundation for many of the volunteers who went on to work in mental health, the NHS or in other careers.

## What was most challenging about volunteering at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital?

Not everyone responded to this question (73% responded) and 11% of those who did said they didn't find anything challenging/wouldn't change anything. 7% cited issues about accessibility (getting lost or inaccessible kerbs in Morningside) which are out with the scope of this research. Of those who did respond, most reported that learning to work with people with complex mental health conditions on their bad days as the most challenging part of the experience. A few respondents said it was hard to witness patients struggling or having difficulty on a particular day. However, one respondent explained:

*"When I was volunteering on a ward there were times when (inevitably due to the nature of the environment) I would encounter people at their most unwell, which left a deep impression on me. I would say, however, that this only made me realise more clearly how important it was that people staying in REH were able to access the services and kind, relaxed, non-clinical setting offered by the Volunteering Hub and this left me feeling further committed to my volunteering role."*

Seven respondents said that the environment or setting of the wards was intimidating at times. For one respondent this was due to their own experience of accessing mental health services. For most others it was the initial intimidation of the environment which was challenging. However, some noted they felt supported and managed easier each time they volunteered. One respondent highlighted the challenges of seeing the impact NHS staff shortages and cutbacks had on patients in the wards. For example, when patients couldn't be brought to activities because there weren't enough staff members to facilitate this.

The unpredictability of some patients was highlighted as something which was

challenging for some volunteers. However, almost all those who found the environment to be challenging said they felt safe, supported and learned a huge amount from their experience.

Overall, several of the responses to this question again highlighted an experience or challenge they overcame by volunteering in the hospital. One respondent noted it was a challenge, but they learned to communicate effectively with individuals with severe dementia. These skills and experiences will have been invaluable for those who chose to pursue a career in mental health. Many respondents said ending their volunteering in the hospital was the most challenging part of it. A few said they would have continued volunteering had it not been for their demanding work schedule.

Respondents were also asked how the volunteering experience could have been improved. Most respondents took this opportunity to voice how fantastic the team at the Hub had been and how valuable the experience was to them. Many said they would not change a thing about the service. A typical comment was:

*"I have only positive memories of my overall volunteering experience and can't think of anything within Volunteer Edinburgh's control that could have improved this experience for me. [Volunteer Edinburgh staff] were friendly, kind, encouraging, and ever so supportive, helping me to realise where my skills lay and offering guidance and support whenever it was needed or asked for. The whole experience really was not only positive, but pivotal for me."*

Seven percent voiced that they would have loved more time with the patients and to have been more involved in their care. One respondent wanted more training about how to connect with patients.

## > 5. Career Benefits of Volunteering

### Contribution of Volunteer Training

Volunteer Edinburgh provides a comprehensive suite of training for volunteers engaged in the Royal Edinburgh Hospital. This includes mental health awareness, working in a mental health environment, boundaries and confidentiality, making small talk, dealing with challenging situations with additional workshops on depression, anxiety and suicide, psychosis, principles of recovery and trauma informed approaches. Workshops delivered by clinical psychologists gave specific information on career options and routes in this specialist field of work.

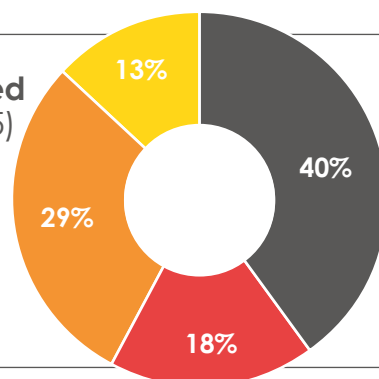
Volunteers were asked if the training they received was beneficial to their personal

development. Figure 8 shows that most respondents felt it was of benefit, varying from major (40%), to significant (18%) or some benefit (29%). Only 13% of respondents felt it was of limited benefit and none felt it was of no benefit.

Throughout the responses the training provided by Volunteer Edinburgh was mentioned. This was overwhelmingly positive, with a few respondents expressing that they would have wanted more of it. One respondent felt they did not receive enough training about how to connect with patients.

**FIGURE 7: Was the volunteer training you received beneficial to your personal development? (n=45)**

- It was of major benefit
- It was of significant benefit
- It was of some benefit
- It was of limited benefit



One of the interview participants said the training they received in specific mental health conditions was especially valuable alongside training on dealing with challenging

situations. Being required to undertake training as part of their further psychology qualifications, this experience prepared them well for the next step in their career.

### Supporting the career development of volunteers

We asked respondents how volunteering benefited them, listing a number of transferable skills, skills related to working in mental health and career support services. Respondents were able to select all which applied, Figures 8-10 outline responses by category.

#### Insights into mental health and the NHS

The insights gained from working in an NHS environment and in mental health were most often cited as of benefit to volunteers

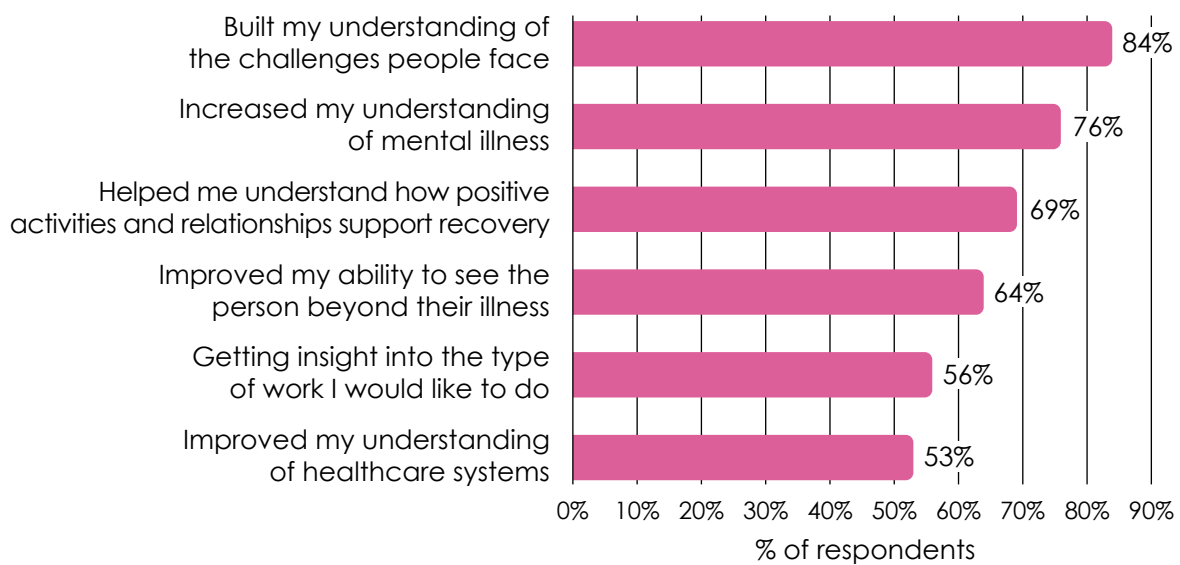
(Figure 8). Notably, 84% of respondents felt volunteering built their understanding of the challenges people face, which was something mentioned organically throughout the survey responses. Additionally, 76% of respondents said it increased their understanding of mental illness and 64% said it improved their ability to see the person beyond their illness. An important aspect of engagement at the Volunteer Hub was the relational approach to support.

69% of respondents said the experience helped them understand how positive activities and relationships support recovery.

A significant proportion of respondents (56%) said they gained insight into the type of work they would like to do. **Case study 1** explained that it helped her establish boundaries and identify where she wanted to work in mental

health. Although her experience had been incredibly rewarding, she did not want to pursue a career in clinical psychology due to the high intensity of being on the wards every day. This is an important insight to gain at the early stages of a career as it allows people to train in the areas of psychology which are best suited to them.

**FIGURE 8: Insights specific to working in the NHS and mental health (n=45)**



**Other feedback from respondents about the volunteering experience and the impact it had on them:**

*"It is very hard to find hands-on experience with patients and this was a little treasure that I will never forget. I am very grateful for the opportunities that I had."*



*"Honestly, it's been lifechanging. Volunteering enabled me to find purpose, work out where my strengths and interests lay, and helped me realise how I could play an active role in trying to improve life for people in my community."*



*"It opened my eyes to what a career in mental health would be like and gave me opportunities to learn where my skills were best suited. There were great training opportunities too."*



*"The volunteering opportunities were well thought through and managed and there were excellent training opportunities provided. This experience helped me to move onto paid employment within clinical psychology as well as providing me with a good insight into inpatient experiences. Invaluable!"*



*"It felt like a nice way to experience what working in the NHS would be like. I got to meet lovely people and find out where my skills were best suited in working with complex mental health conditions. (Volunteer Edinburgh staff member) was fantastic and made me feel like my skills were useful to others. I got to go outside of my comfort zone and that has massively helped me in my career in clinical psychology."*



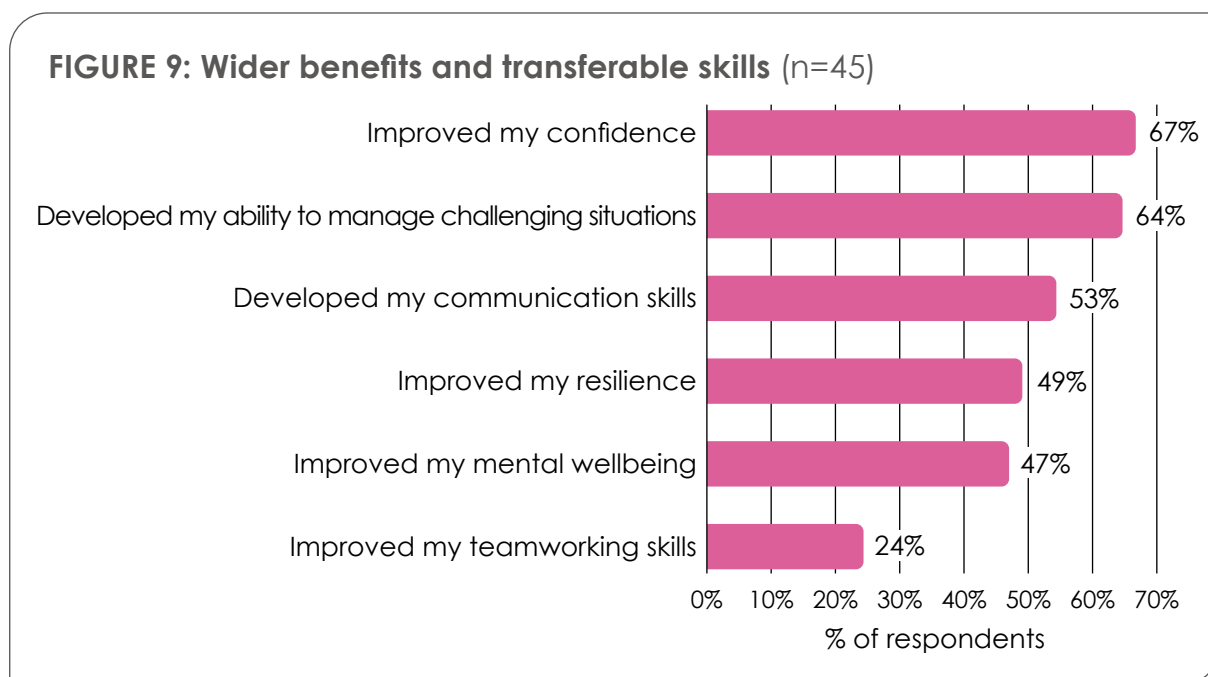
### Finding the right path

When asked if volunteering helped with their career development 71% of respondents said it did. Moreover, 64% of respondents said they pursued a job in health and social care. 4% said they didn't end up pursuing a career in health and social care because of the insights they gained while volunteering. This is a considerable benefit to volunteers, universities and the NHS as it shows the advantage of experiencing working in this environment before pursuing a career which involves years of training and support. It allows volunteers to determine whether this is

the right career path for them and provides a valuable insight into working in mental health.

### Transferable skills and career support

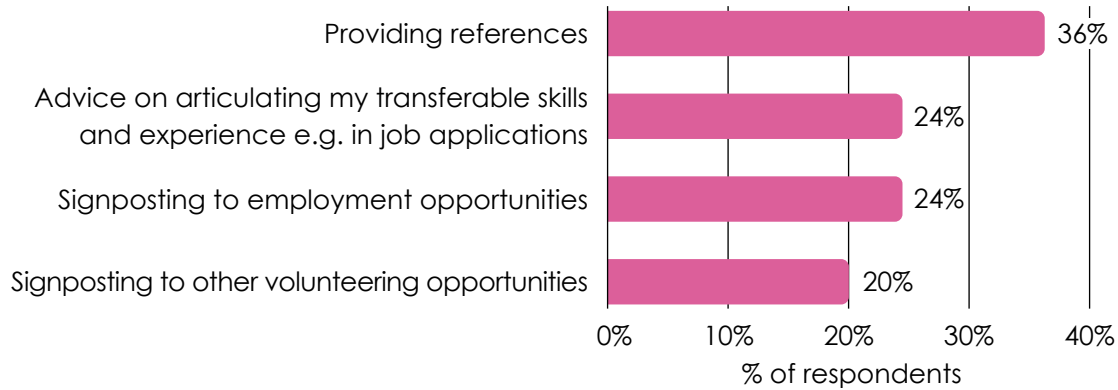
Many respondents also gained transferable skills such as the ability to manage challenging situations and communication. Notably, 67% of respondents said volunteering built their confidence and 49% their resilience. One of the interviewees also said the experience improved their patience, not something that had been asked in the survey. Figure 9 shows the wider benefits and transferable skills cited.



53% of respondents said the experience improved their communication skills – a vital skill for working in the field of mental health. **Case study 3** described his need to work out different ways of communicating with different patients. He felt he gained the ability to talk to “*anyone from any walk of life*” – something he took forward in his professional career in mental health.

As illustrated in Figure 10, fewer of the respondents cited that they had received career support services directly. About a quarter of respondents received advice on articulating transferable skills and received signposting to other volunteering or employment opportunities. However, 36% of respondents were provided with a reference for future employment opportunities.

**FIGURE 10: Career advice, guidance and support (n=45)**



### Removing Intimidation

Volunteers gained a broad range of skills which helped them overcome the intimidation of mental health work through, for example, increasing their confidence and improving their resilience. Many described the initial intimidation and challenging environment of the wards, and how this got easier with everyday volunteering. Volunteers welcomed the challenge and gained invaluable insights and skills as a result. The support they received as volunteers from the team helped remove this initial intimidation and manage the everyday challenges on the wards.

### Suggested improvements

Respondents were asked if there was anything else that could have supported their future career path in terms of the volunteering experience. Some respondents

made suggestions such as being made aware of paid employment opportunities, more training, and information about career pathways into the NHS. Seven percent of respondents suggested the opportunity to speak to clinical psychologists on the ward. Some suggested more opportunities to support patients such as shadowing informal counselling sessions. However, they appreciated that issues with confidentiality may limit these opportunities.

Many took the opportunity to say there was nothing more Volunteer Edinburgh could have done, and it was a great start to their career. One respondent said:

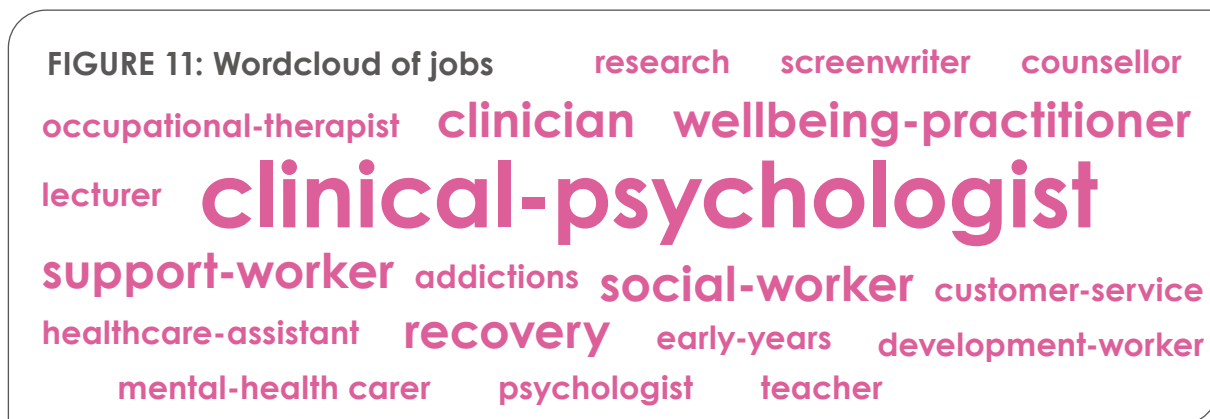
*“The support and guidance I received, along with the experience I gained were invaluable in terms of my future career path, despite the fact that I had not gone into volunteering with this in mind at all.”*

### Career Destinations

Respondents were asked what their job was at the time of the survey if they were employed. Figure 11 illustrates the trends and diversity of roles, with the more common

responses appearing in bigger text. For example, five respondents were clinical psychologists while two were support workers.

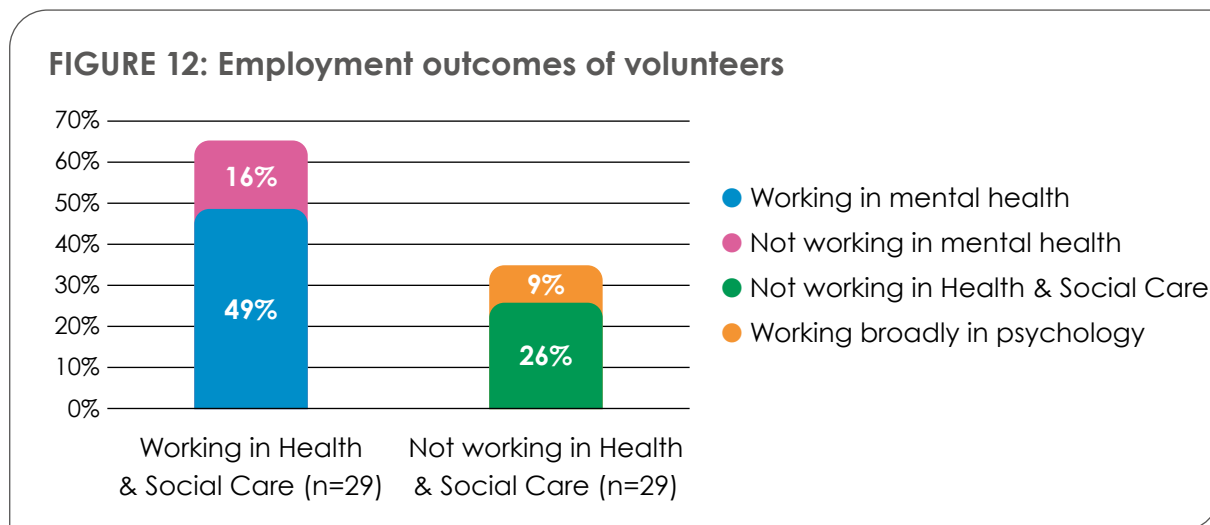




**A path to health and social care**

Of the 45 people who responded to the survey, 29 pursued a job in health and social care, 64% of respondents. Notably, 86% of the 29 respondents who progressed to employment in health and social care were motivated by the opportunity to 'experience

working with complex mental illness.' The Volunteer Hub at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital was clearly seen as an opportunity to gain an insight into complex mental illness, especially for those pursuing a role in health and social care.



Of the 29 respondents who pursued a job in health and social care, 76% of them listed 'furthering their career' as a main motivation for volunteering. Most of those who didn't mention this listed 'working with complex mental illness' as a main motivation. Ninety-three percent of these respondents who pursued a role in health and social care felt it helped their career development. Only two respondents who pursued a role in health and social care felt that volunteering didn't help with their career development. This confirmed that respondents who wanted to work in health and social care recognised

this service as an opportunity to further their career, and for the vast majority of them this was the case.

**A step towards working in mental health**

Of the 29 respondents who pursued a career in health and social care after volunteering, 76% had pursued a role in mental health. These respondents were working in a range of roles, mostly clinical psychology but also support work, social work, counselling, Child and Adolescent Mental Health and in the third sector.

Fourteen percent of these respondents were working in the wider health service, including in drug and alcohol services. Two respondents sought roles in education and early years, noting that this involved working with families from challenging backgrounds.

Additionally, four respondents who said they didn't pursue a career in health and social care were working in psychology more broadly or studying. One of these respondents had become a psychology teacher, another an organisational psychologist and the other two were psychology students at the time of the survey.

**From this we could conclude that 74% of respondents were pursuing a career in mental health or other areas of psychology.**

There is a strong link and clear path between universities and Volunteer Edinburgh's service at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital. Many volunteers are psychology students which led them to volunteer roles in the hospital. Respondents were asked to provide a brief outline of their career path to help map the impact volunteering had on their journey. For 29% of respondents their volunteering experience was the very first step in their journey towards working in mental health. Notably for three of the respondents their volunteering experience convinced them to change sector and pursue a role in mental health. One respondent who was studying to become a mental health nurse stated that they would like to work at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital when they qualify.

**A pivotal experience**

One respondent who pursued a career in health and social care was initially volunteering to contribute to their community and because of their experience with mental illness in their family. This person said volunteering was of major benefit to their personal development and described the experience as "pivotal". They had not gone into volunteering with their career path in mind, but it ended up being an "invaluable experience" leading them to switch sector into health and social care. They now work for the third sector in a role directly linked to promoting volunteering within a mental health context.

Respondents were all asked to provide a brief description of their career path to ascertain the impact volunteering had on their insights, decisions and/or outcomes. Below are a few examples of the paths respondents took. For anonymity some identifying details were removed:

*"Following volunteering I was able to get a job as a wellbeing worker for [a charity] where I ran support groups, I then got a job as an assistant psychologist in a psychological therapies service. Following this I was accepted onto doctorate in clinical psychology where I am currently a **trainee clinical psychologist.**"*

*"I'm **studying Mental Health Nursing.** Volunteering at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital gave me experience supporting people with activities on the wards and in the volunteer library. I have started a part time post with the NHS since volunteering in the hospital and have recently applied for another. I would like to work as a newly qualified nurse at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital when I qualify."*

*"Volunteered at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital and that helped me get a role as a volunteer [supporting families]. Then those voluntary roles helped me become an employee with a third sector service delivering support to people experiencing challenges with their mental health. Signposted to **honorary assistant psychology positions,** secured two of these, which are supporting my application to become a clinical psychologist."*

**Other career paths**

Sixteen respondents (36%) didn't pursue a career in health and social care. As discussed, one became a psychology teacher, another an organisational psychologist and a further two were psychology students at the time of the survey. All four of these respondents credited volunteering in the hospital with Volunteer Edinburgh as having helped their careers. The remaining 12 respondents were working in a variety of fields such as the arts, community development, research and teaching.

Two of the respondents who didn't pursue a career in health and social care said this was due to the insights they gained while volunteering. As already highlighted, this was of benefit to the volunteers and the wider NHS. One of the respondents said this was because they felt they could not cope with the lack of resources available to people suffering from mental illness. The other was disheartened by their personal experience as a volunteer working with paid hospital employees. This volunteer felt their contribution was not appreciated by paid staff and this was an experience they had in other voluntary roles.



## > 6. Wider Benefits

It is clear from the results of the survey and interviews that volunteers derive great value from their experience beyond the volunteer training. The experience they gain supporting patients in often very unique ways is invaluable and had had a pivotal impact on many respondents. These wider benefits read across to the career benefits in the previous section, as the personal development volunteers experience will undoubtedly stay with them through their working lives.

**Case study 3** explained that the experience broke down many subconscious prejudices he held about the interests and abilities some patients might have. His assumptions about people with such complex mental health issues might have limited interest or engagement in learning a language or studying philosophy, were quickly thwarted. This could be described as seeing people beyond their illness. This stayed with Case study 3 into his future career in mental health.

### Seeing people beyond their illness

64% of respondents said that volunteering enabled them to 'see people beyond their illness'. **Case study 3** provided an insightful description of what this meant to him. He explained this was about 'seeing beyond the clinical appraisal of someone'. He described psychology as theoretical and abstract, making it difficult to see the humanity behind the theories. However volunteering gave him a chance to see people's stories and learn about who they were as a person. They were able to bond over shared interests and ambitions to learn new skills together, such as music. Of all the skills volunteers gained from

their experience, this was the most significant and one which stayed with this particular volunteer into their later career in mental health.

Interestingly **Case study 2** felt that seeing the person beyond their illness was an approach he already took before volunteering. This indicates that some volunteers may have already felt they held this skill. He said this was nothing new and was already his approach to life. He explained he would not have stayed volunteering for so long had it not been for the positive environment and this approach to supporting patients.

### Building Self-Worth

It is worth noting the example of a respondent who was employed in research in the public sector. They started volunteering while on long-term sick leave due to their mental health. They said volunteering helped rebuild their confidence and develop their self-worth so much so that they were able to return to work.

There were clear benefits to volunteers from their experience at the Volunteer Hub beyond upskilling. The personal skills volunteers develop are significant, such as resilience, self-worth and confidence, as illustrated in Figure 9. These are valuable traits that have a tangible impact on the future workforce, and in this case can be directly linked to someone returning to work.

## > 7. Conclusion

The evidence from this report highlights the invaluable role that volunteering can play in supporting people who wish to pursue a career in mental health. Volunteer Edinburgh provides individuals with unique volunteering opportunities to support people with complex mental health conditions while enabling them to see the person beyond their illness. Volunteers are empowered to channel their own personal interests and skills in developing activities which allow them to connect with patients on an equal level.

The insights volunteers gained into working in the NHS and in mental health were at the foremost in value, followed by the transferable skills gained and then career support services. This experience is an essential step in progressing from psychology studies to work within mental health. Volunteer Edinburgh's programme at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital encourages this through a person-centred lens.

Crucially, 67% of respondents were motivated to volunteer by the opportunity to further their career. When asked if volunteering helped with their career development 71% of respondents said it did. 49% of respondents secured employment in mental health; a further 25% in other areas of health, social care and psychology. 56% of respondents said their volunteering experience supported further qualifications they went on to gain.

The Volunteer Hub at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital is not only vital for patients, but invaluable for volunteers and significant in the development of the future workforce in mental health. The Hub plays a significant role in upskilling volunteers and teaching them the importance of seeing the person beyond their illness, which equips them with skills, compassion and resilience to work in mental health. It also helps volunteers establish what area of employment they might wish to pursue, which can be of equal value to those who choose not to pursue a job in mental health. For those that do go on to work in mental health it provides them with a steer as to what role they may wish to pursue.

**The Volunteer Hub at the REH is not only vital for patients, but invaluable for volunteers and significant in the development of the future workforce in mental health**

This research has not identified the economic value of staff time, training and support which was identified by volunteers as invaluable in helping them develop the skills essential for this area of work. Each respondent reported an individualised volunteering experience at the Hub due to the flexibility and diversity of the roles and activities available, robust training and bespoke support. The value that volunteers gained, personally and professionally, from their experience cannot be overstated.

# > APPENDIX 1

## Royal Edinburgh Hospital: Opportunities undertaken by public volunteers

Locations of volunteering includes Patients' Library/Volunteer Hub, on wards, in hospital grounds, other third sector sites in the hospital (e.g. glasshouses, community garden), local community resources (e.g. tennis centre)

### One-to-one opportunities with in-patients

- "Study buddies" learning Arabic, Spanish, Latin, engineering, computer coding, philosophy, ecology, Scottish folklore, Japanese, beauty theory, birdsong, astronomy, HR theory, basic literacy, John Muir Award, nature studies

*Study buddy volunteers are skilled in adapting online courses to the in-patients they study alongside or create their own study programme and materials to match the pair's interests and study styles.*

- Gardening/plant care
- Doing crosswords together
- Music – playing together/listening
- Beauty session
- Therapet walk
- Knitting
- Guitar lesson
- Playing tennis
- Manicure session
- Playing pool
- Basic literacy
- Reading together
- Outing/walk in hospital grounds
- Creative writing
- Writing poetry together
- Crafts
- Playing chess

*All one-to-one engagements are befriending relationships centred on a shared interest or activity*

### Opportunities with groups of in-patients

- Gardening & conservation
- Music - playing together/performing
- Music Jam session
- Beauty session
- Therapet visit to ward
- Sports group
- Playing pool
- Open games group
- Making and fitting bird nest boxes in hospital grounds (fitted with camera to enable birdwatching from Volunteer Hub)

### Volunteer roles primarily undertaken by in-patients but supported by public volunteers when required

- Creation of Playlists for Life
- Processing library books
- Admin tasks
- Plant watering
- Filling birdfeeders in hospital grounds

### Other

- Library support – organising of books, CDs and DVDs
- Admin support
- Organisation of "Library of Things" (donated musical instruments, cooking accessories, art equipment etc.) – available for in-patients and staff to borrow

