

Youth volunteering
in Birmingham
Women's and
Children's NHS
Foundation Trust

*Briefing by a young
volunteer*

November 2021



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Introduction



Hello, my name is Beth, and I am a young volunteer at Birmingham Women's and Children's Hospital. I am writing this briefing to share the experiences and value of youth volunteering in hospitals, through my story and the story of others, for #iwillWeek 2021.

#iwill is a movement involving over 1,000 organisations and 700 young ambassadors and champions from across the UK, sharing the belief that 'all children and young people should be supported and empowered to make a positive difference on the issues that affect their lives, their communities, and broader society'. Through #iwillWeek, the movement aims to spread awareness to help young people feeling empowered, challenged, independent and included.

Through working with our Volunteer Coordinators and the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR), myself and many other young volunteers have been given a great opportunity to share why they volunteer and help spread awareness of the power of youth volunteering in hospitals.

Where my story began



My journey at Birmingham Children's Hospital (BCH) started because my brother was in and out of hospital for a few years. At the time, I don't think I hated anything more than a hospital. I was too young to fully understand; I just thought it was so scary and I was worried what could happen to him. All I knew was if he was in hospital, it was bad.

Now I walk around BCH in awe. It is such a special place where magic can happen. Once my brother was well again, I started to realise I had a passion for the healthcare system: I knew I wanted to be a nurse or paramedic, and I had so many ideas and improvements that could make the patients stay more comfortable.

Throughout the pandemic all I wanted to do was help. I felt so bad that I was at home, doing nothing but schoolwork, when I could be helping. Everywhere I contacted turned me down because I was under 18.

When I was researching about BCH, I came across their Young Person's Advisory Group (YPAG). I applied to join knowing little of what I was signing up to but joining YPAG changed my life for the better. YPAG is a youth engagement group made up of service users, siblings, or community members, who are 11-19 years old, and are passionate about the NHS. We try to make the hospital more young person centred and accessible by working with many different members of staff. Pre-pandemic, the group met up monthly at BCH, but the group has now adapted to meeting virtually every fortnight, if not more often.

The first project I was involved in was helping to make leaflets about a diabetes study more accessible for children. Now, since joining YPAG, I have become communications lead; supported the Big Build workshops, to assist in designing a new hospital; supported staff in their research; attended an orthopaedic conference as a panel member; interviewed staff, and so much more.

For me, a personal highlight was attending the Big Build workshops. I loved listening to the staff's passion when debating new ideas and developments. Every staff member brought a new angle on how the hospital could be changed for the better. I got to express a service user's voice and aid decisions. I love being part of the YPAG group. I have met many amazing young people and I have learnt so much from all of them.

Meet Fathih



Fathih is an inspiring young volunteer who co-chairs the Young Person's Advisory Group at Birmingham Children's Hospital.

Why did you join YPAG?

[To] help young people views get across. When she [YPAG's former engagement officer] came to see me and tell me about YPAG, she said I could help get young people voices heard and...help make a better impact on young people. This inspired me to join so I could help young people and it has led me to my future career path. It is a good opportunity.

What has been your favourite project?

[Completing] interviews for band 6 nurses. I think that was really good. You got to see their experiences, see their potential, and see the relationship between the different bands. I also enjoyed some of the artwork projects, like making the activity packs (for patients on the wards). Helping with the big build project was also a very good opportunity.

What does your role as co-chair of YPAG involve?

As co-chair, I assist the chair. If the chair can't attend, I step in and lead the meeting. I complete regular updates with the chair and YPAG's engagement officer. I joined YPAG three years ago and this is my first year with a lead role.

How has YPAG helped your future ambitions?

I think it has given me more self-confidence and it has given me the opportunity to see how I work with other people to improve my communication. For people looking to join, it is a really good opportunity. And it is especially good if you are looking for a career path in childcare or nursing or something medical.

Getting into more volunteer roles



Through the Youth Panel Advisory Group, I took on the opportunity to volunteer in BCH's pharmacy. The pharmacy system at BCH involves delivering bags to the nurses on wards, containing pre-ordered medication, charts, and forms. A typical shift for the job involves collecting empty bags from the wards to be used again, filling bags with dispensed medication from the pharmacists to take up to the wards and filling out paperwork.

I love the role because every delivery is different, I get to see and experience so much, from families getting good news on the wards to staff playing with the children and hearing their giggles. I also love having a quick chat to the nurses when I deliver the medication because I always feel appreciated.

The job never gets dull. My highlight has to be when I opened a door for a young boy and he said, "Let the force be with you". While a delivery I will never forget is when I had to deliver a few heavy boxes to the neonatal surgical ward (NSU). The boxes were so heavy I had to take a trolley, which was super squeaky and loud. I was trying my best not to wake all the sleeping babies.

Unfortunately, there are also sad moments, like when you return to a ward four weeks running and the same child is there. All you want is for them to be able to go home. I once saw a patient on a general ward two-weeks running. When I came up to the ICU the next week, he was very unwell on that ward. The role definitely makes you think and reflect.

I have also loved working as part of the pharmacy and volunteer team. I have met so many great people there.

Meet Debbie



Debbie Coates is the Volunteer Services Development Manager. From Debbie's interview, you can understand the importance of volunteers.

When did you first get into the role and what led you into this field?

I've had associations with the Women's Hospital since 2003, as part of a team of antenatal teachers. And then in November 2015, the manager of the Volunteer Service was standing down and I applied. I ended up getting that job. The following year the merge plans started, because up until that point, we were just the Women's Hospital - the smallest Trust in the country. Then the merge with the Children's Hospital started, which formalised in 2017.

The manager of the Volunteer Service at the Children's Hospital became the manager overall. I did a couple of days here at the Women's Hospital and a day over at the Children's. Fundraising was a large part of the volunteer team workload because our fundraising team, here at the Women's Hospital, was one woman. At the Children's Hospital, it's much bigger, and so that additional support has been a very positive thing for the Women's Hospital.

What does your role involve?

I think about, and I work on, anything that will enhance and develop volunteers. If you're going to look for a positive that's come from the pandemic, it's that it gave us an opportunity to stop, regroup and to look at how we could better deliver services.

It gave me a huge amount of time to research, to go on courses, webinars, etc. to see what I could do to develop the volunteers and their roles. The main thing that I felt that we needed was that the volunteers needed more training.

I spent quite a long time putting together new training packages, like communications, self-care and mental health training, and I put together a refresher training and a new starter training. I also rewrote and reviewed the Trust induction training, so you could say my role has been training.

I have recently set up reviews so that once volunteers are in the system, you've now got an opportunity to feedback in a more regulated way. I've also been working on the play pilot and bringing volunteers back into the wards.

What has been your career highlight?

My career highlight is easy. The Junior Volunteer Programme ran from July 2018, we approached schools in areas of deprivation in Birmingham to come in and learn about an aspect of the NHS, think about it in a different way and think about it as a career. We were keen that we didn't just say come and be a doctor or a nurse, it was more about look at all these other things that you can do, so we tried to work with other departments.

We decided to 'go large' in September 2019, and we had 50 children in for one day. The big thing they were going to look at was inappropriate attendance at Emergency Department (ED) because that's been a major problem. They would spend the day doing workshops, learning about other options and they would go in an ambulance. Their volunteering was that they made up posters to go up in the community, and they had to do a school assembly. The message was: "You can call 111, go to a pharmacy, GP or out of hours clinic". All the different places you could have gone other than come to ED unless it's an emergency. It was a success!

We were going to repeat it in March 2020; I had another 40 children that were going to come in, but it never happened due to Covid. I just think the impact was brilliant, that's what I'm passionate about. I'm passionate about making a difference, making a difference to a family's life. One family turns up who needs to be in Emergency Department, and they get seen faster and another family doesn't turn up and gets appropriate care in the community rather than coming into the hospital. And so, everybody wins.

We had #iwill and Pears Foundation funding to set up the junior volunteering, and we won our Helpforce award for innovation in volunteering.

What other big changes have there been?

Covid has been huge obviously. Volunteers were not able to come in and staff had to adjust quickly to the various needs and be prepared to just throw themselves into whatever needed doing. I became a switchboard operator for about 2 months.

Everybody threw themselves into the new roles. For example, staff from Genetics were put on the front door to do screening. It was a period of massive change; it was a horrible time, but it was brilliant to see the way everybody pulled together and worked together.

What has been the biggest challenges you've had to overcome with the role?

Covid, it's obviously been massive, and, at the moment, my job is quite hard just because it's quite frustrating. We've got volunteers in theory, but it's very difficult to get them to come back and restart volunteering.

We've got these numbers on a screen and then we're looking at the physical people in the building, and the two are not matching. Hopefully now things are properly starting to get back to normal, more people will come forward. I think people have to understand that it's never going to completely go away. We've got to learn to live with it.

Meet Ben



Ben Francis, the CEO of Gym Shark, has recently become the Patron for BWC.

He will work with the charity to achieve its mission to improve the lives of women, babies, children, and families – regionally, nationally, and internationally. Ben has a desire to help those in need as well as share his love and enthusiasm to promote Birmingham to the world. He inspires the young generation to get involved.

My future



My journey continues at Birmingham Children's Hospital. I have recently started to study children's nursing; I hope to have placements at BCH and maybe even a job at the end of the course.

Volunteering has given me more confidence; better communication, and I have learnt about the hospital system. If anyone is thinking about getting involved or has the opportunity, give it a go.

Hospitals are truly a magical place.

To read more young people's volunteering stories across the Pears #iwillFund NHS network, please visit: <https://www.ivar.org.uk/youth-volunteering-in-hospitals/>

Authorship and acknowledgements

This briefing was written by Beth, a young [volunteer at Birmingham Women's and Children's Hospital NHS Foundation Trust](#). Birmingham Women's and Children's Hospital are one of 32 NHS Trusts, and their respective charities, funded by the [Pears #iwillFund](#) to run youth volunteering programmes. IVAR are the learning partner to the Pears #iwillFund NHS Trusts.

Beth was supported by Volunteer Services Manager Gursharan Kaur at the Trust, and IVAR researcher Annie Caffyn to produce this briefing. The briefing forms part of youth-led content to share the value and experiences of young volunteers in hospitals for #iwillWeek 2021.

Thanks to everyone involved for sharing their time and thoughts to showcase the value of youth volunteering, with a special mention to Beth for all her hard work and enthusiasm throughout the process.

We are also grateful to Pears Foundation; the Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport; The National Lottery Community Fund; and the #iwill movement, who support the Pears #iwillFund NHS Trusts, as well as additional support from NHS England and Improvement.