



Strategic Partnership Guide:

VCSE organisations working with Integrated Care Systems

A toolkit for making volunteering a strategic priority through **effective collaboration**

Created by

helpforce

Funded by



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INTRODUCTION

This guide provides voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations with a framework for positioning volunteering as a strategic priority that delivers measurable value across health and care agendas.

For VCSE organisations, strategic engagement with Integrated Care Systems enables the opportunity to:

- Amplify impact: Access larger or more targeted populations and more resources to deliver community-based support
- Secure sustainable funding and organisational resilience: Position volunteering within core health budgets and part of long-term partnerships to provide stability in an uncertain funding environment and reduce reliance on short-term grants
- Shape system design: Influence how health services are delivered in communities, ensuring they reflect local needs and utilise local assets
- Demonstrate sector value: Elevate the VCSE sector's role as an essential partner improving the population health, not just a service provider

ICSs are mandated to work with VCSE partners and recognise that achieving their strategic objectives, particularly around prevention, health inequalities, and community-based care—requires collaboration with organisations that already have trust, reach, and expertise in local communities.

We hope you will find this guide useful.



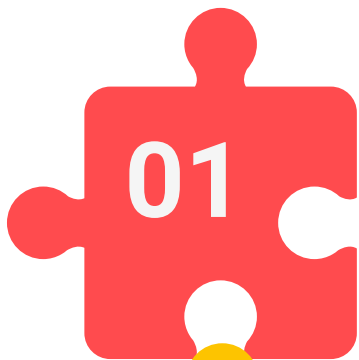
1

FINDING THE RIGHT STRATEGIC HOME

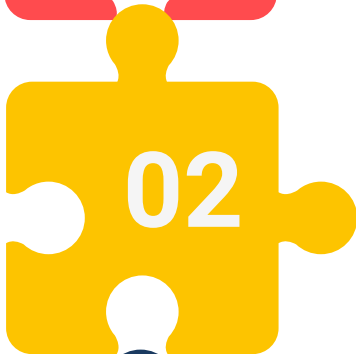
Strategic integration ensures the volunteering initiatives gains the necessary support, resources, and organisational alignment to gain sustainable impact - rather than operating in isolation struggling to survive or scale.

Embedding within existing priorities

Be able to clearly articulate how your work aligns with top-level strategic plans such as the NHS 10-year plan, local Joint Strategic Needs Assessments, and ICB 5-year plans. For the NHS 10-year plan specifically, there are three fundamental shifts to align your volunteering interventions with:



**Hospital to
Community**



**Sickness to
Prevention**



Analogue to Digital

1

FINDING THE RIGHT STRATEGIC HOME (CONT'D)

Embedding within existing priorities (Cont'd)

Hospital to Community:

The shift from hospital-centric care to community-based services creates opportunities for volunteers to:

- Support hospital discharge and prevent readmissions through home-based support
- Provide community-based befriending and practical assistance that keeps people well at home
- Enable "care closer to home" through volunteer-supported clinics and community health hubs

Sickness to Prevention:

Moving from treating illness to preventing it requires community engagement at scale, where the relatable face and capacity of volunteers is crucial as they provide:

- Culturally sensitive health promotion and early intervention in community settings
- Peer support for behaviour change (physical activity, healthy eating, smoking cessation)
- Identification of people at risk and connection to preventive services



1

FINDING THE RIGHT STRATEGIC HOME (CONT'D)

Embedding within existing priorities (Cont'd)

Analogue to Digital:

With the priority to streamline processes and increase the NHS digital health offer to patients, volunteers can play a helpful bridging role during this transformation to ultimately improve access to care and reduce digital exclusion by:

- Increasing patients' awareness and use of smart tech, digital health monitoring tools and wearable devices
- Access virtual appointments and navigate patient portals
- Provide wellbeing support through online platforms

Locally, make it easy for healthcare organisations to recognise how your work enhances their existing strategic programmes rather than seeking to create or offer standalone volunteering initiatives. This could include identifying alignment with:

- Discharge transformation programmes
- Core20 Plus initiatives that are addressing health inequalities, for example by reaching underserved communities and addressing social determinants of health such as social isolation and digital exclusion
- Neighbourhood Health Models, Population Health and Prevention initiatives
- Workforce and Organisation development streams
- Digital inclusion and innovation projects



1

FINDING THE RIGHT STRATEGIC HOME (CONT'D)

Avoiding tunnel vision

Consistently ask:

"What other business goals are relevant to this programme?" and demonstrate how volunteering can serve multiple strategic streams simultaneously, maximising return on investment and reducing competition for resources.

This prevents departmental silos and identifies opportunities for volunteering programmes to contribute to multiple strategic priorities, such as:

- Quality improvement through enhanced patient experience
- Workforce sustainability by supporting staff wellbeing and retention, and generating a future pipeline
- Community integration strengthening population health approaches
- Innovation through volunteer-led service improvements

Securing visibility and governance

Identify existing governance structures your programme can be supported by. This includes:

- Representing the programme at relevant Trust boards and place-based partnership boards to create shared accountability
- Aligning with Programme Management Office (PMO) structures for reporting and monitoring
- Securing sponsorship from executive-level champions who can drive vision and remove barriers



2

UNDERSTANDING THE ICS LANDSCAPE AND COMPLEXITY

Deep understanding of the ICS environment and healthcare pressures builds credibility and trust with key stakeholders, enabling more effective partnership formation and reducing the risk of misaligned or poorly received volunteering initiatives

Understanding healthcare pressures

Build trust with healthcare leaders by empathising with their challenges:

- Regulatory pressures and compliance requirements
- Resource constraints and competing priorities
- Clinical governance and patient safety imperatives
- Political and media scrutiny of healthcare performance

This foundational understanding enables more credible conversations and shows commitment to working within existing constraints and polarities.

Share your own organisations experience of tackling these issues and evidence how your organisations skills and capabilities are valuable in this climate.



Mapping infrastructure and relationships

Develop comprehensive knowledge of the ICS footprint in relation to the forums where volunteering has previously been, or is currently, a considered element in decision-making and service delivery, and prioritise engagement with the most mature structures.

Explore:

- VCSE umbrella organisations representing a range of local charities and CICs
- Integrated Neighbourhood Teams delivering coordinated care in defined geographic areas
- Primary Care Networks (PCNs) delivering social prescribing and preventive services working alongside community teams
- Neighbourhood Health Models focussing on empowering communities to improve their own health through local partnerships
- Historical context of previous partnerships, successes, and challenges
- Formal and informal influencing networks



Embracing turbulence

Healthcare systems operate in constant change and functioning well in this environment requires partners to:

- Remain flexible as priorities and leadership change
- Acknowledge discomfort, show empathy and validate concerns without being derailed by them
- Maintain momentum through organisational turbulence
- Adapt quickly to new opportunities and constraints
- Provide stability as a consistent external partner
- Forming a cross-organisation steering group can be a helpful way to maintain engagement during periods of uncertainty, as they provide a structure for regular communication and protected space for people to collaborate on creating solutions.



3

IDENTIFYING KEY ROLES AND INFLUENCE

Comprehensive stakeholder mapping and layered engagement strategies ensure volunteering initiatives gain buy-in from both formal decision-makers and informal influencers, creating the multi-level support necessary for successful implementation and sustainability.

Mapping stakeholders for cross-organisational representation

Develop a comprehensive stakeholder map that reflects a cross-section of the organisation/s involved and identify alignment opportunities across multiple teams/divisions in order to create a sense of shared accountability.

Consider:

- Senior leaders to reinforce the initiatives strategic importance
- Clinical leaders who understand operational challenges and opportunities
- Programme managers overseeing transformation and change programmes
- Community engagement teams with established local networks
- Finance and commissioning teams who can quantify value, influence, and sustainability

Recognising informal influence

Senior positions don't always equate to implementation power. Identify and cultivate relationships with:

- Clinicians who influence colleague attitudes
- Experienced managers who understand practical challenges
- Change champions with track records of successful innovation



3

IDENTIFYING KEY ROLES AND INFLUENCE (CONT'D)

Layered engagement strategy

Effective engagement plans will identify multiple stakeholder levels; ranging from senior roles, who provide important sponsorship and governance for the programme, through to front line staff who manage delivery:

1 - Strategic tier

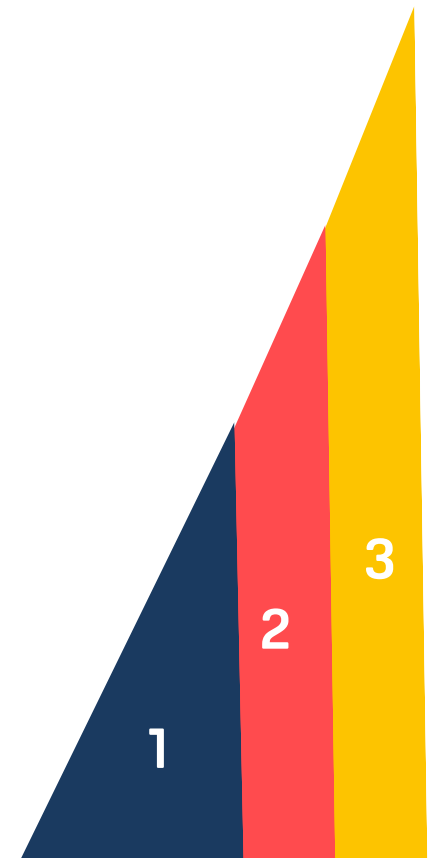
Board-level sponsors to act as executive champions, such as the Chief Nurse who will provide clinical leadership and professional credibility, and the Chief Strategy Officer who will ensure strategic alignment and board-level advocacy.

2 - Operational tier

Service managers, VCSE leads and frontline leaders responsible for shaping the programme, setting priorities, overseeing delivery and sustaining momentum.

3 - Delivery tier

Frontline staff who will be directly supporting volunteers and patients during day to day implementation of programme.



3

IDENTIFYING KEY ROLES AND INFLUENCE (CONT'D)

Layered engagement strategy (Con'td)

Planning touchpoints

Plan touchpoints and communication channels for each layer, ensuring key messages are tailored to their priorities and decision-making authority.

Depending on the size of the programme, it may be appropriate to meet with delivery stakeholders on a daily basis or multiple times a week, host fortnightly oversight meetings with identified operational leads and provide monthly written updates to board-level sponsors.

Monitor the engagement

Once engagement channels are established, monitor if stakeholder engagement is going well by considering:

- Are meetings well attended with people actively participating?
- Is communication flowing both ways and updates being shared regularly?
- Are people reading and responding to emails?
- Is interest in the programme spreading?



4

DATA-DRIVEN VALUE PROPOSITION

Evidence-based propositions that connect volunteering outcomes to local healthcare challenges and priorities create compelling business cases that resonate with stakeholders' immediate concerns and demonstrate tangible value rather than abstract benefits.

Leveraging existing impact evidence

Present compelling evidence to your stakeholders of the impact realised elsewhere and the potential to replicate or maximise it:

- Quantitative outcomes: Patient satisfaction scores, length of stay reductions, readmission rates, volunteers progressing into paid roles
- Qualitative insights: Staff testimonials, patient stories, volunteer feedback
- Comparative analysis: Benchmarking volunteer services against similar health systems

Dig deep with early adopters

When someone shows early interest and support for your volunteering ambitions, invest significant time in understanding their perspective:

- Explore their definition of success and how they would measure impact
- Identify potential conflicts with existing priorities or resource constraints
- Understand their influencing style and network within the organisation
- Develop strategies together for winning hearts and minds among sceptical colleagues

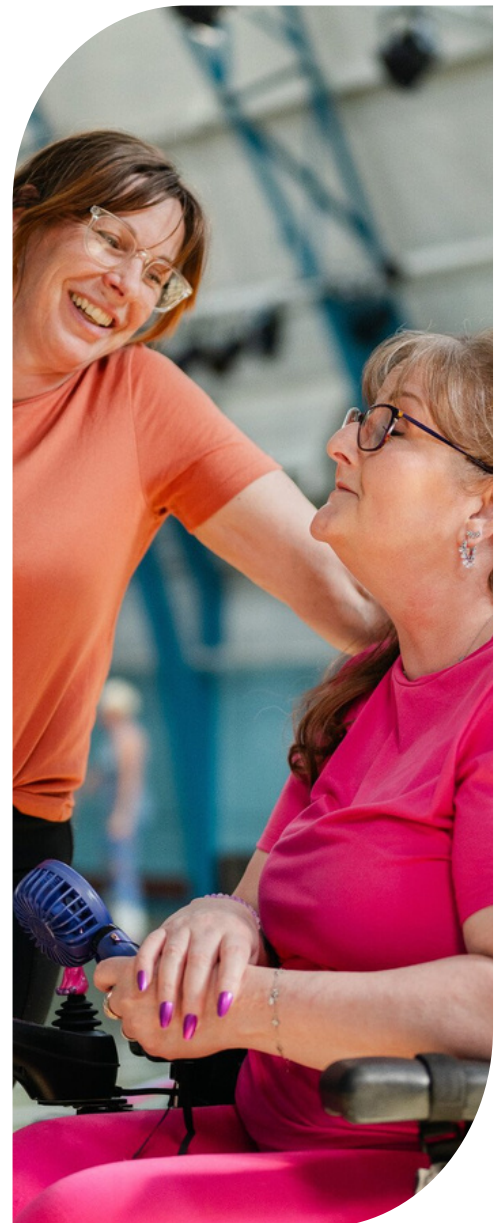


Connecting to local challenges

Request and analyse data that ICS leaders readily have available:

- Population health needs assessments; identifying community gaps volunteering programmes could address
- Workforce plans; showing where volunteers could support capacity challenges
- Operational performance (e.g. number of people waiting and for how long, delayed discharges, appointment non-attendance) to evidence a need for intervention and volunteering opportunities that can have a direct impact
- Patient experience feedback; highlighting areas where volunteer support could improve satisfaction
- Financial pressures; where volunteering could provide cost-effective solutions

- Create clear connections between your proposed volunteering solution and their documented challenges, removing guesswork and elements that are open to interpretation.



5

VALUING DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

Treating resistance as valuable insight, rather than an obstacle, creates collaborative solutions that address legitimate concerns, build stronger stakeholder relationships, and result in more robust volunteering programs that work for everyone involved.

Addressing resistance and concerns

Acknowledge that healthcare leaders face competing priorities and resource pressures. When mobilising and implementing initiatives this can present as resistance. Work collaboratively to:

- Unpick the insight and wisdom behind resistance, using it to inform design and delivery
- Identify common ground between your planned volunteering outcomes and their strategic objectives
- Address concerns about volunteer management, governance, and quality assurance
- Demonstrate how volunteers can enhance and improve service, not complicate or burden them



6

DEMONSTRATING EXPERTISE AND CRITICAL PARTNERSHIP

Establishing yourself as a credible expert and critical friend builds trust and influence with healthcare partners, enabling you to provide valuable challenge and guidance that improves outcomes, rather than being seen as merely a service provider.

Acting as a critical friend

Successful partnerships find a balance of support and challenge:

- Honest assessment of critical success factors and potential barriers
- Confident challenge of the 'norm' or proposed approaches if they may not achieve desired outcomes
- Evidence-based recommendations drawing from experience with similar organisations
- Transparent communication about risks, dependencies, and resource requirements

Creating gravitas

Build credibility through:

- Demonstrable expertise in volunteer management and healthcare partnerships
- Sharing your track record of successful implementations in similar contexts
- Professional and collaborative approach to programme design, evaluation, and reporting
- Thought leadership contributing to sector knowledge and best practice



7

FACILITATION AND CONNECTION

Acting as a connector and capability builder creates sustainable internal ownership and expertise, ensuring volunteering programs continue to thrive and evolve beyond external support while maximising organisational learning and collaboration.

Internal networking

As a catalyst for internal connections within the ICS:

- Identify synergies between different departments and programmes
- Facilitate introductions between potential collaborators
- Share insights from other parts of the organisation
- Create forums for cross-functional dialogue and learning

Knowledge brokering

Leverage your external perspective to:

- Spot opportunities that internal teams might miss
- Translate between different professional languages and priorities
- Import best practice from other health systems
- Challenge assumptions that may limit innovative approaches

Empowering operational leadership

Build internal capacity and capability rather than positioning yourself as the primary delivery agent; focus on:

- Developing internal champions who can sustain the programme
- Building capability within existing teams
- Creating systems that don't depend on external support
- Providing ongoing mentorship rather than direct delivery

Support operational leads to engage confidently with senior stakeholders:

- Provide evidence and data to support their presentations
- Practice messaging and response to potential challenges
- Offer strategic coaching on navigating organisational dynamics
- Celebrate successes and share learning from their experiences

8

CANDID EVALUATION AND LEARNING

Honest evaluation and neutral facilitation builds long-term trust and organisational learning by creating safe spaces for difficult conversations, ensuring that both successes and failures generate valuable insights that improve future decision-making and system-wide practice.

Balanced reporting

Maintain credibility through honest assessment of progress:

- Acknowledge challenges and setbacks as learning opportunities
- Share both positive and negative outcomes with appropriate context
- Identify systemic issues that may require strategic attention
- Recommend adjustments based on evidence and experience

Neutral facilitation

Use your position as an external partner to:

- Facilitate difficult conversations about programme challenges
- Provide safe spaces for honest feedback and reflection
- Mediate between different stakeholder perspectives
- Extract learning that can benefit the wider system



A strong network of community support in Cornwall

The Community Gateway and Community Hubs provide critical place-based, personalised support for the people of Cornwall. This services aim to support individuals from the local community to live healthier and independent for longer; move through and out of the healthcare system swiftly, enabling prompt discharge; aid rehabilitation and reablement within the community and their homes; and prevent unnecessary hospital admission or re-admission.

Working in close collaboration with NHS Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, the CGHN is a partnership between more than 50 voluntary and community sector organisations. The VCSE partnership organisations include:

- Age UK Cornwall,
- Volunteer Cornwall,
- Pentreath,
- The CHAOS Group,
- Cornwall Rural Community Charity (CRCC),
- Cornwall Neighbourhoods for Change (CN4C), and
- Cornwall Voluntary Sector Forum (VSF).

The Community Gateway:

The Gateway service, hosted by Age UK Cornwall, operates daily from 8am to 8pm, 365 days a year. Assistance is available to anyone aged 18 and over living in Cornwall, as well as providing support to families who live outside Cornwall with a caring role to a family member living within Cornwall.

Users of the Gateway are guided by a ‘what matters most to you’ conversation, followed by signposting to a wide range of professional and voluntary sector support and services that are tailored to their individual needs, including the Community Hubs.

Between April 2024 – March 2025, the Gateway delivered 54,814 contacts with or on behalf of Gateway users, developing 5,274 personalised support plans.



CASE STUDY (CONT'D)

Community hubs:

The Community Hub network, part-funded by Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly ICB and overseen by Volunteer Cornwall, now stands at over 50 hubs, covering much of the geography. The network aims to support people to 'start well, live well, and age well in their communities.' The hubs offer safe spaces for people from the local community to come together, find help and advice, participate in local activities, and get help to return home from hospital.

Support is provided across the four wellbeing pillars – physical, emotional, financial and social health. Services range from pain and cancer cafes, to frailty and falls prevention, practical and emotional support, outdoor gardening and walking groups, meals on wheels and hospital to home support.

Between April 2024 – March 2025, they reported 339,951 service users had visited the hub.



CASE STUDY (CONT'D)

Helpforce evaluation:

Helpforce started working with Cornwall over three years ago, undertaking an evaluation of the Community Hubs - a network of diverse voluntary sector organisations that act as a central point of support for communities. The resulting evaluation report demonstrated the positive impact that the hubs make on local people's wellbeing and ability to manage their own health.

- The most common reason for using hubs was for emotional health and wellbeing support (77%), and physical health (37%).
- If the hubs did not exist, 50% of users said they would have approached a healthcare provider for support.
- Users feeling confident they could manage their own health increased from 59% to 76%.

“If I had not come here when I did, I would not have gone to rehab and not be at the point where I might be able to get my son back. This has taken five years of coaching commitment to support my journey.”

Hub user





CONCLUSION

Successful strategic partnerships between VCSE organisations and integrated care systems require patience, expertise, and genuine commitment to mutual benefit.

By following this framework, VCSE organisations can position volunteering as a strategic priority that delivers measurable value across healthcare transformation agendas.

The key to success lies in understanding that healthcare leaders are not primarily interested in volunteering per se, but in achieving their strategic objectives.

When volunteering becomes a valuable tool for delivering their priorities, it naturally becomes a strategic priority itself.

Thank you

www.helpforce.community

help@helpforce.community

Helpforce is the only independent UK charity focused exclusively on establishing high impact volunteering services across the health system. Its team of experts:

- Co-create innovative volunteering solutions with health and care organisations.
- Enable organisations to maximise the potential of volunteering to improve outcomes for people and services.
- Connect the people leading volunteers to improve quality together.

Founded in 2017, the charity works with NHS trusts, hospices, local authorities, and voluntary and community organisations – directly and indirectly supporting hundreds of thousands of people.

Please note: All images used in this toolkit are for illustrative purposes only.