

A balancing act

Youth volunteering in hospitals, in the context of Covid-19

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Introduction

IVAR is the 'learning partner' for the Pears Foundation's #iwill Match Fund, which supports the growth of inclusive, high-quality youth social action opportunities through 30 NHS Trusts and their respective charities. This briefing offers some initial reflections on the network's response to Covid-19.

We facilitated two peer support sessions on 2 and 7 April 2020 for Volunteer Coordinators from 11 NHS Trusts. The sessions provided an opportunity for the Pears #iwill Peers – a group of hospital volunteer coordinators – to come together to share experiences, dilemmas and concerns in the current context, in order to: maintain connections; offer each other support; and generate and share ideas across the network.

We summarise the main content of the discussions that took place, and share insights from the Pears Foundation on each Trust's response to Covid-19 along with thoughts from #iwill ambassadors and NHS England and NHS Improvement.

Alongside this briefing, we are publishing resources to support young volunteer programmes in hospitals, developed and shared by the Pears #iwill Peers. These can be accessed at www.ivar.org.uk/youth-volunteering-in-hospitals

What has been happening since the Covid-19 outbreak?

A lot has already happened, and even changed, in the two weeks between the UK declaring 'lockdown' (23rd March 2020) and the peer support sessions. Some of the initial '*adrenaline fuelled and panicky*' response is beginning to subside, allowing for creative and measured adaption to take place, albeit within a consistently unpredictable environment:

'Everyone's head was spinning for two weeks. Now there's some order and a chance to see what's happening locally and what the hospitals need.'

'Things are starting to feel a little more settled now. We're now stopping and rethinking.'

Initially, **things came to a 'shuddering halt'**, with usual practices and priorities shifting overnight: *'It felt as if you'd been running on a fast train and suddenly you had to stop.'* Since then, volunteer coordinators and their teams have been adjusting to new daily demands being placed on them - such as supporting their Trust's redeployment responses, amending volunteer recruitment priorities and processes, and identifying safe and innovative ways to continue to engage with, and involve, their volunteers.

The day-to-day **working environment has changed** for many. Some Peers have shifted to working from home for the majority of their time; this has included adjusting to virtual means of communication such as Zoom or Webex. Others are continuing to work in the (much altered) hospital environment:

'It feels very strange and eerie. Everything that the hospital can stop doing, they've stopped. Wards are emptying... All non-essential appointments have been cancelled. It's a lot quieter.'

Throughout, volunteer coordinators have been very mindful of the **balancing act they need to strike** between: responsiveness and maintaining safe and professional procedures; previous priorities and new demands; and the welfare of patients, volunteers and their own staff teams. For example, 60% of one Trust's volunteers are over 70 years old and therefore have their own support needs to attend to during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some have also been focusing on supporting their own staff teams adapt to new ways of working, providing reassurance and motivation where needed.

Managing expectations has been an important part of all of this – from the Trust's expectations about how fast they can recruit and redeploy their volunteers, to those of volunteers about the types of volunteering opportunities that are currently appropriate. **Communicating and keeping in touch with their volunteer base** has also been a priority, ensuring that the relationships they have been built up are protected and maintained, and that 'youth voice' is protected within their Trusts. Safe-guarding vulnerable young volunteers is seen as essential, ensuring that their mental health and wellbeing is not neglected during the current crisis. Some volunteers see the hospital as a 'safe space' outside of their home environment – volunteering plays a core part of their self-care.

It **continues to be a changing picture** however, with Peers '*playing it day-by-day*'. For some, it is not yet clear how the NHS Volunteer Responder scheme will intersect with their current volunteer strategy, with concerns being raised about duplication of effort as well as the potential loss of current volunteers who may feel they are being replaced. In other cases, there is felt to be a clear separation between a Trust's usual volunteer programme and the NHS Responder Scheme, given that the latter is not patient-facing.

What is happening to youth volunteering in particular?

When it comes to youth volunteering, **the majority of ward-based activity within hospitals has been temporarily suspended, particularly when it comes to the involvement of under 18s – however the situation remains fluid and is evolving rapidly**. Many of the Peers are being asked to support the general voluntary services within their Trust, leaving less time to commit to their youth volunteering programmes. Some Trusts have also had to **postpone their forthcoming recruitment** of youth volunteers. This has been a source of real disappointment for the Peers, given the amount of energy and effort they have put into their youth volunteering programmes and the relationships they have built with the volunteers to date.

Following an initial hiatus of activity, most Trusts are now thinking carefully about the types of **remote volunteering opportunities** that may be appropriate for their current volunteers, as some of them are still keen to help and be involved in the relief effort: '*We haven't stood them down, we've stood them by*'. Young peoples' enthusiasm to help is striking – one Trust has 170 new volunteers, 60 of which are young people (16-25 year olds) who applied to volunteer through the Trusts' website to help the response to Covid-19. However, this needs to be balanced with the reality that '*it really isn't the best time for them to come into the hospital*'.

Some young volunteers have experience of acute healthcare, either personally or within their families. This is often a motivating factor for volunteering in healthcare settings, but places them in the vulnerable category in the current climate. Investing time and effort in **ongoing communication and dialogue** with young people has therefore been the immediate priority. This includes asking young

people what they might want to do, as well as putting volunteers into teams and informing them if there are any opportunities to volunteer on a particular day.

Overall, there is **real concern** both for the welfare of the young volunteers who have invested so much in their roles up to this point, as well as the impact that this **'loss of momentum' may have on future activity**. In one case, for example, it seems likely that the Trust will no longer sign off plans to continue funding the post of volunteer coordinator following the Pears #iwill funding. As such, many of the #iwill Peers are thinking not only about the immediate impact, but the future impact as well:

'We have to look beyond when this crisis is over, as well as what we're doing now. We need to hit the ground running when the crisis is over...we need to maintain that relationship and keep one eye on what the future will bring... we don't want to start from scratch.'

'We're letting them know they've not been forgotten and that we'll be ready to go after this.'

In what ways are Trusts currently adapting?

Trusts are demonstrating great imagination and ingenuity, and are adapting in a number of ways, including:

- Offering remote volunteering opportunities such as:
 - Pen pal volunteering - including both writing to patients and enabling the exchange of messages between patients and their families
 - Telephone befriending
 - Creating activity packs (e.g. crafts, crosswords, themed quizzes, care bundles) that can be distributed to patients
 - Making wellbeing packs for staff and patients
 - Encouraging volunteers to make things that can be distributed to patients
 - Engaging young volunteers as remote 'technical advisors' for patients and visitors to communicate virtually – for example, talking patients through the set-up of hospital-loaned tablets and helping patients access music.
- Offering out roles to their more experienced volunteers. One young person has taken on the role of Senior Volunteer in a Trust, supporting new volunteers of all ages, and has been *'outstanding'* according to this Trusts' Volunteer Coordinator.
- Training new cohorts of 'Response Volunteers'. One Trust ran a training day for 19 people, 11 of which are Young Volunteers, who are now covering 75% of the available shifts at this Trust.
- Diverting volunteers to other, local volunteering opportunities (e.g. helping neighbours with shopping or having phone calls with vulnerable members of their community).
- Redeploying volunteers to other internal opportunities, for example: Referring volunteers who drive to their estates department; distributing donations and surgical masks (with strict guidelines about distribution onto the wards); supplying food and drink for staff in isolation wards.

- Setting up WhatsApp groups to help volunteers stay connected.
- Implementing fast track recruitment processes: One Trust recruited four Chaplains in a week; another Trust has created a fast track system and are managing to process volunteers as quickly as 2 to 3 weeks, including a police check.
- Assigning people roles on the day based on need – for example, one Trust’s volunteers are helping with a ‘rainbow trolley’ which distributes toiletries to patients around the hospital.
- Re-initiating relationships with previous cohorts of young volunteers.
- Preparing for the recruitment of young volunteers when things return to normal, especially as the return of older volunteers is likely to be much slower.

How are trusts managing risk?

NHS England and NHS Improvement’s [advice on youth volunteering](#) is:

Many NHS trusts across England run specific youth volunteering programmes, enabling young people to give back to their communities and increase their skills, confidence, wellbeing and career opportunities in the process. NHS Trusts are encouraged to continue with Youth Volunteering Programmes where possible and where this can be done so safely, managing any risks in line with local business continuity plans and trust policy. Trusts should consider building in additional resilience support and check-ins for any continuing hospital-based activity and should highlight sources of support young volunteers can access.

Trusts are currently managing risks in the following ways:

- Training – examples include 2-3 hours online training via zoom or face-to-face (with social distancing). One volunteer is supporting the pharmacy with home deliveries and had local induction training alongside the hospital’s standard volunteer training.
- Volunteers are always briefed at the beginning of their shift as things continue to change on a daily basis.
- Debriefing at the end of shifts for feedback and a welfare check.
- Buddying up new volunteers with someone who has done at least a few shifts, usually a senior volunteer or someone with experience.
- Keeping all roles non-patient-facing for the moment; introducing a ‘mealtime and video call’ role with volunteers after a successful trial.
- Guidance and briefing sheets ensure volunteer safety and infection prevention – including wearing masks in clinical areas.

What is needed next?

Looking ahead, #iwill Peers highlighted four distinct but related things that would support their work.

1. Guidance

Clear and unambiguous guidance on what they should and shouldn't be doing regarding their youth volunteering offer, particularly if and how they can continue to work with under 18s.

2. Sharing of resources and ideas

Sharing of resources and ideas across the peer network including:

- Generic volunteering role descriptions to help with fast track recruitment
- Remote volunteering tasks that are working well with young people
- Ideas for how to involve under 18s
- Ideas for how to support older, vulnerable volunteers
- A Buddying scheme between Trusts so that they can reference each other when putting forward ideas.

3. Support for volunteer project managers

A support system (e.g. zoom calls) for volunteer project managers to connect and share concerns and ideas, and provide an opportunity to celebrate successes/things people are proud of across the network.

4. Funding extension

A six-month funding extension to support the current cohort of young volunteers to carry on their volunteering placements.

Conclusions and final reflections

As 'learning partner' to the Pears #iwill Fund, we can offer some reflections based on what we have heard from Volunteer Coordinators about their responses to the Covid-19 crisis.

First, it is clear that Covid-19 is having an immediate impact on NHS Trust's youth volunteering programmes, particularly in relation to the involvement of under 18s, as well as the types of roles available for young people. As a result, there is a real concern about how this will impact on the future momentum of the programme.

However, from our conversations, we believe there is much for Pears #iwill Peers to be reassured by, particularly given that so many of the volunteers want to continue to be involved in some way, and that *'departments are seeing volunteers as a bright shining light in all of this: 'It has been an incredibly moving experience seeing how young people have responded, adapted and grown in this unfamiliar world we are currently in.'*

This is testament to the value of volunteering in many people's lives, and the importance of their contributions, as well as the work of volunteer coordinators. And it provides some encouragement for the future prospects of the programmes.

Second, this period highlights to us the increasingly vital task of supporting the network to demonstrate and evidence the benefits and outcomes of the Pears #iwill Fund, in order to protect the future sustainability of youth volunteering programmes. Articulation of the collective impact of the network could minimise the risk of youth volunteering falling off Trusts' future priorities. As part of this effort, the current work of Youth Volunteer Coordinators across this network - supporting their Trusts' wider relief efforts, while at the same time continuing to design and provide opportunities for young people to stay engaged, connected and, above all, safe - will need to be highlighted.

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