The national intermediary and network for voluntary health organisations in Scotland

Consultation Response

vhs voluntary health scotland

# Disclosure Scotland Fees Consultation – Voluntary Health Scotland Response

May 2024

## Do you agree with the proposal to move to a fee discount for volunteers in Qualifying Voluntary Organisations?

No.

## What information do you think we need to consider when proposing moving to a fee discount for volunteers in Qualifying Voluntary Organisations?

Voluntary Health Scotland does not agree with this proposal.

Currently, Disclosure Scotland waives fees for any applications to join the Protecting Vulnerable Groups (PVG) scheme and all subsequent disclosure records when people are doing regulated work in a voluntary and unpaid capacity for a Qualifying Voluntary Organisation (QVO). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that this proposal refers to the introduction of a new fee rather than a 'fee discount.'

Whilst we are supportive of the proposed discounts for people in receipt of benefits and care experienced young people, we do not believe that these new discounts should be funded through the introduction of a new fee for those volunteering through a QVO.

### Positive Impact of Volunteering on Individuals

Volunteering has proven health benefits. Research carried out by Volunteer Scotland illustrates the positive impact volunteering has on volunteers, including:

- Improved physical health;
- Improved mental health;
- Reduced social isolation and loneliness;

- And improved life expectancy.

This is reinforced by research carried out by the University of Stirling on behalf of Volunteer Scotland which measured the impact of volunteering on four health and wellbeing outcomes:

- General health;
- Mental health;
- Social capital;
- And economic and employment outlook.

This research found that the health of a volunteer, on average, will be better than the health of a non-volunteer across each of these outcomes.

**Value of Volunteering for the Scottish Economy**

In 2022/2023, the value of non-chargeable disclosures provided to volunteers amounted to £2.318 million. Additionally, it is estimated that replacing the current fee waiver for volunteers with a 60% fee discount would save Disclosure Scotland £869,988 a year.

Given the annual value of volunteering in Scotland is estimated to be £2.26 billion, serious consideration should be given to the financial merit of this proposal, as the relatively modest financial benefit of introducing this additional fee would place the overall economic benefit of volunteering at risk. This saving would be vastly outweighed by the value provided by volunteers in Scotland.

**Contribution to Workforce Development**

Volunteering also contributes to the development of the Scottish workforce. Voluntary Health Scotland's recent Developing the Mental Health Workforce report explored the impact volunteering had on volunteers in their career. It also provided a snapshot of the important role volunteering programmes, such as the Volunteer Hub, can provide to the NHS and to mental health services. The report found that:

- Volunteering at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital had significant employability benefits for individuals wishing to work in mental health and/or the wider health and social care sector. It was identified as an important way of developing essential skills, attitudes, behaviours, networks and contacts.
- 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.'
- 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.
- The robust and comprehensive training delivered by Volunteer Edinburgh was highly praised by volunteers and described as a key element in developing their employability.

**Pressure on Qualifying Voluntary Organisations**

This proposal has the potential to apply additional pressure to the voluntary sector at a time when many organisations are already struggling financially.

Volunteer Edinburgh recently engaged with 13 organisations on this proposal. Each of the QVOs consulted by Volunteer Edinburgh stated strongly that they felt it would be inappropriate to ask volunteers to cover this cost. However, none of the QVOs consulted currently have a budget for processing PVG fees for volunteers. This could force QVOs to reduce their volunteer numbers or remove their volunteer programmes altogether, which would be catastrophic for the many vulnerable people in Scotland who rely on the support of volunteers.

Each of the QVOs consulted by Volunteer Edinburgh is dependent on volunteers to deliver their services. This proposal makes them feel pessimistic about their ability to deliver quality services for people who are the most vulnerable, experience the greatest health inequalities and are at most risk of harm.

Some QVOs reported that their very existence is threatened by these proposals. Small organisations and those completely volunteer run may be forced to close.

**Volunteer Numbers in Scotland**

Recent analysis by Volunteer Scotland of the Scottish Household Survey found that the percentage of adults in Scotland volunteering for an organisation or community group has dropped from 26% in 2019 to 22% in 2022. Furthermore, the number of adults in Scotland volunteering for an organisation or community group has fallen below one million for the first time in 15 years.

With this in mind, any new financial barriers to volunteering in Scotland are not welcome. There is a serious risk that this proposal could hinder volunteer recruitment and reduce these numbers further.

**Recruitment and Training of Volunteers**

Members of Voluntary Health Scotland have told us that a ‘huge amount of innovation’ has taken place since the COVID-19 pandemic to restore volunteer numbers to their previous levels. This has come at a cost to organisations, both in terms of the cost of learning and implementing new recruitment strategies.

One member of Voluntary Health Scotland which is dependent on the support of volunteers shared with us that, if the current fee waiver for volunteers is replaced with a 60% fee discount, the cost of this to their organisation will be equal to that of their entire recruitment and training budgets. This organisation has calculated that taking on the cost of their volunteers' Disclosure Scotland fees would amount to £3,892 a year. In comparison, this organisation currently spends £4,000 a year on volunteer recruitment, retention and training. This allows the organisation to recruit, retain and train a network of volunteers who make an immense contribution to the reduction of social isolation and loneliness in Scotland.

Voluntary organisations cannot afford to take on the additional cost of this new fee at a time when funding is being reduced across the sector. With this additional financial burden, budgets for the recruitment, retention and training of volunteers may be put at risk, which could have a real impact on the quality and safety of volunteer-led services. As a result, the introduction of this new fee would need to be offset by additional funding or grants, which would simply shift this cost elsewhere.

**Safety**

Members of Voluntary Health Scotland have serious concerns about the impact of this proposal on the safety of volunteer-led services.

When engaging with our membership, concerns were raised that some organisations may reevaluate the need for their volunteers to have a PVG check. It was suggested that, to avoid the need for a PVG check, some organisations may change their volunteer role descriptions or choose to work with less vulnerable people. Both scenarios place vulnerable people experiencing health inequalities in Scotland at greater risk.

Any safety concerns could also place the reputation of voluntary organisations at risk, negatively impacting upon people's willingness to access voluntary services or volunteer themselves.

Furthermore, any unmet need, caused by voluntary organisations' inability to offer support or individuals' reluctance to access that support, would not simply disappear. Instead, it would shift elsewhere in the system, placing statutory services under greater pressure.

**Conclusion**

Replacing the current fee waiver for volunteers with a 60% fee discount would have a profound impact on Voluntary Health's Scotland's members, as well as the vulnerable people that they support.

The Scottish Government's Volunteering Action Plan aimed to 'create a Scotland where everyone can volunteer, more often, and throughout their lives.' This proposal contradicts this aim, instead introducing a new financial barrier to volunteering in Scotland.

If individuals were to meet this cost, we are concerned that this could deter volunteers at a time when volunteer numbers are already falling across Scotland. Alternatively, if organisations were to meet this cost, this would place additional financial pressure on QVOs at a time when funding for voluntary organisations is being reduced across the sector. This would severely impact upon organisations' ability to recruit, retain and train their volunteers, as well as the quality and safety of volunteer-led services.

When reviewing this proposal, Voluntary Health Scotland would urge that far greater consideration is given to the positive impact of volunteering on individuals, communities, the economy and workforce development in Scotland. It is our view that the relatively modest financial benefit of introducing this additional fee is not worth the risk to the benefits that volunteering brings.

We would strongly recommend that the current fee waiver for volunteers is kept in place. This works well for both volunteers and organisations which depend on volunteers.

## What information do we need to consider for the Equality Impact Assessment?

Voluntary Health Scotland exists to create a healthier, fairer Scotland served by a thriving voluntary health sector. Alongside our members, we work to raise awareness of both the causes and effects of health inequalities. As such, we would recommend that the Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) evaluates the potential impact of this proposal on health inequalities in Scotland before any decision is taken.

Furthermore, Voluntary Health Scotland would recommend that the EQIA also considers the potential impact of this proposal on both volunteers and organisations which depend on volunteers. In particular, this should assess the impact of this proposal on the diversity of volunteers in Scotland. Members of Voluntary Health Scotland have shared their fears that this may lead to organisations becoming more selective when recruiting volunteers, forcing organisations who are facing significant financial pressure to assess if some candidates are 'less worthy of the cost of a PVG check.' Our members are concerned that this may also lead to cases of discrimination, if someone was perceived to be less worthy of this cost as a result of a protected characteristic such as age, disability or pregnancy, for example.

## About Voluntary Health Scotland

We are the national voice, intermediary and network for voluntary health organisations in Scotland. We're passionate about what the voluntary health sector can achieve for people's health and wellbeing. We work with our members and others to address health inequalities, to improve health related policy, systems and partnership working, and to help people and communities to live healthier and fairer lives. Join us now.

## Contact

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