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# SUPPORTING NHS STAFF WHO ARE VOLUNTEERS

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**Volunteering  
must be a  
choice freely  
made by each  
individual**

## INTRODUCTION

Volunteers are individuals who choose to commit to spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or someone (individuals or groups). This guidance is aimed at HR teams and managers within the NHS. It:

- highlights the benefits to employers of enabling staff to volunteer
- highlights the benefits to individuals who volunteer
- signposts NHS organisations to useful information on volunteering
- gives the policy context
- looks at the impact of volunteering on an employee's terms and conditions.

## THE BUSINESS CASE AND BENEFITS

Allowing employees to volunteer can bring many benefits to both the individual and the organisation.

### Benefits to the NHS:

- improved reputation with existing and potential employees and stakeholders
- higher productivity
- improved staff engagement
- reduced sick leave
- enthusiastic and motivated employees
- greater staff retention
- meeting corporate social responsibilities
- increased engagement with your communities.

### Benefits to the employee:

- improved self-confidence
- better communication and leadership skills
- better able to use initiative
- consolidate and develop a range of skills including clinical, management, communication and teamwork
- personal satisfaction
- career development
- gain an awareness of tropical diseases and global health challenges (if volunteering internationally)
- gain a better understanding of other cultures (if volunteering overseas).

Research by the Volunteer Rights Enquiry found that successful volunteer programmes gave employers a positive profile, not only in the local community but with other businesses, customers and staff. Staff were more likely to stay with the

organisation and felt more motivated and positive about it. Read the findings on the [NCVO National Council for Voluntary Organisations \(NCVO\)](#) website.

For more information on the business case for employer-supported volunteering please visit [NCVO's](#) website.

In 2015, the government pledged to support volunteering by giving public sector workers an entitlement to take three days' paid leave to undertake volunteering.

The Department of Health's mandate to deliver high quality, effective and compassionate care<sup>1</sup> states that they will support economic growth and the NHS in global healthcare by:

*"working with stakeholders to support other charitable and volunteering activity (by health and care workers) including out of programme experience overseas and to maximise learning benefits to the NHS of such activity."*

## EMPLOYER-SUPPORTED VOLUNTEERING

Many NHS organisations support their staff volunteers or engage with voluntary bodies. Employer-supported volunteering is when employers actively support and encourage members of their organisation to volunteer in local communities or further afield.

Employer-supported volunteering programmes can mean:

- employer support for staff who are already volunteering
- developing a volunteer programme with a community partner
- creating an in-house volunteering programme for staff.

Many employers also engage in Corporate Social Responsibility programmes which enable their staff to volunteer either individually or in a group. Activities can range from helping with local community gardening projects to taking part in humanitarian efforts abroad.

## VOLUNTEERING REQUESTS

Employers are encouraged to be as open as possible about volunteering through publicising their policy on the staff intranet, by including information in induction and appraisal procedures and making staff aware of the organisation's commitment to volunteering. If a volunteering request comes from an employee, a good starting point is a conversation between the individual and their manager to find out:

- what the employee needs to take part in the opportunity – such as how much time off, reference from employers, any copies of vaccination details
- what potential benefits this will bring to both the individual and the organisation.



Managers should familiarise themselves with the organisation's volunteering policy, or visit [NVCVO's website](#) for guidance and next steps.

Depending on the length of the volunteering period this would mean different conversations between the employee, the line manager and HR.

1. *Short-term volunteering.* This could be to volunteer in community projects, assist with disaster relief operations or to help with a local charity. These requests could be managed by amending shift rotas or by granting additional unpaid leave.
2. *Long-term volunteering.* Anything from being a member of the Reserve Forces to being part of a global health partnership can be described as long-term. Many employers use a career/employment break or special leave policies to cover this absence.

## THE IMPACT OF VOLUNTEERING ON AN EMPLOYEE'S TERMS AND CONDITIONS

Volunteering can have an impact on the employee's terms and conditions, details of which can be found in the following handbooks:

- *NHS terms and conditions of service handbook*, sections 34, 35 and 36 (*Agenda for change*<sup>2</sup>).
- *Terms and Conditions of Service NHS Medical and Dental Staff (England) 2002*, temporary appendix VI(ii) (Junior doctors<sup>3</sup>).
- *Terms and conditions of service for specialty doctors – England (2008)*, schedule 22 (Staff, Specialty and Associate Specialist (SAS) doctors<sup>4</sup>).
- *Terms and Conditions – Consultants (England) 2003*, schedule 25 (Consultants<sup>5</sup>).

### Flexible working arrangements

"NHS employers, in partnership with staff organisations, will develop positive flexible working arrangements which allow people to balance work responsibilities with other aspects of their lives." *NHS terms and conditions of service handbook – section 34.1.*

### Balancing work and personal life

"NHS employers should provide employees with access to leave arrangements which support them in balancing their work responsibilities with their personal commitments. This form of leave should cover a wide range of needs including, but not limited to, parental responsibilities, genuine domestic emergencies and bereavement, and should take into account all religion or belief obligations and associated activities. All forms of leave should have regard to legal requirements and the need to ensure equity of access across all equality strands." *NHS terms and conditions of service handbook – section 35.1.*

### Employment break scheme

"The scheme should be viewed with other sections in the handbook, particularly those relating to flexible working, balancing work and personal life and provisions for carers,

as part of the commitment to arrangements which enable employees to balance paid work with their other commitments and responsibilities.”

“The scheme should explicitly cover the main reasons for which employment breaks can be used, including childcare, eldercare, care for another dependant, training, study leave or work abroad. It should also indicate that other reasons will be considered on their merits.” *NHS terms and conditions of service handbook – section 36.3.*

## Pensions

If you are granted an employment or career break in order to volunteer abroad, your current employer will enable you, on request, to remain within the NHS Pension Scheme during your absence, within set time limits, but you will need to pay your own employee contributions, as well as employer contributions beyond the first six months of absence. Provided that the employee and employer contributions are paid continuously during your career break, your membership to the NHS Pension Scheme can continue for a maximum period of two years. If your career break continues after the two year period, your membership to the scheme will end and the normal rules on eligibility will apply on re-joining the scheme from that point forward.

## SUPPORTING INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERING IN THE HEALTH SECTOR

NHS staff may volunteer for overseas projects to gain new skills and knowledge, to put something back into the community they came from, and sometimes to offer help in a time of crisis.

The government recognises the value of NHS staff participating in international health projects and has sought to evidence the benefits to the partner organisation/country, and to the individual and the UK healthcare sector. Often individuals return to the NHS with fresh perspectives and new skills and approaches to their work.

The publication *Engaging in global health* provides information and advice about the opportunities and benefits of international volunteering. The information is aimed at health employees and employers. *Engaging in global health – The framework for voluntary engagement in global health by the UK health sector* can be found on [Gov.uk's website](#).

The Tropical Health and Education Trust (THET) produced a video featuring UK health professionals sharing the benefits to them and the NHS from volunteering internationally. Watch the video on [THET's website](#).

## Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust

*Jim Mackay, Chief Executive, Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust:*

“Northumbria Healthcare is proud of the contribution we have made to advancing healthcare in our partner organisations overseas. We have worked with Kilimanjaro Christian Medical Centre in Tanzania for 17 years and during that time it has become clear that our staff gain much from the experience of teaching and training in a diverse global setting. They come back with a different mind-set, are motivated to make changes that benefit our trust and the NHS.

As one of the top performing trusts in the UK, we see the international programme as one that develops our staff whilst also fulfilling our ethical contribution to global social responsibility. It seems right to support staff to do this work and by providing up to five days’ study leave we match their equal commitment from annual leave.”

*Peter Smith, Critical Care Outreach Practitioner, Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust:*

“Volunteering in Tanzania has taught me so much about the importance of team work and I am very proud to call my Tanzanian counterparts my colleagues and indeed, my friends. In KCMC we work as an ‘international team’ which means respecting everyone’s views.

This reminds you that no one person is any more important than the next and it has taught me that friendliness creates happiness which, in turn, improves effectiveness. Working in partnership, whoever your colleagues are, and building relationships achieves results. This is something that I always strive to apply to my role in the UK.”

*Lorraine Jackson, Community Matron, Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust:*

“My experience in Tanzania was very special. It was challenging on so many levels. In my role, I was privileged to have the opportunity to work out in the community and visit people in their homes, just as I do in my role in the UK.

I visited lots of local villages nearby KCMC hospital and met many inspirational people, seeing first-hand the complex circumstances and very difficult health issues that many were living with. To be able to deliver nursing care effectively in this part of the world, I applied my skills and experience acquired from many years of community nursing across Northumberland, which is a large, wide-spread and diverse geographical area. However, without things like top of the range equipment and appropriate medication readily to hand in Tanzania, I had to think creatively and use my initiative to find ways to deliver quality care. It was fantastic to work with staff at KCMC to develop solutions and help improve care in the community.

Since returning to the UK, the experience helps to motivate me and in turn, helps me to also motivate the community nursing team to endeavour to serve our patients in the safest, most appropriate and effective way possible. Tanzania has instilled in me that we should always try and find a solution to a problem, no matter what the circumstances, where we are, or what the barriers we face might be. This is something that I strive to share amongst our team and I aim to ensure that each community nurse values the importance of their role in the wider healthcare service and recognises the significant impact they can have on a patient’s life.”



**Peter Smith**



**Lorraine Jackson**

## Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

Addenbrooke's Abroad was established in 2006 in response to increasing recognition within the NHS and at the trust that engaging with global health has benefits for patients and healthcare workers both overseas and in the UK.

The main aim of Addenbrooke's Abroad is to support positive, sustainable change in healthcare by facilitating international partnerships with hospitals and health organisations in the developing world. To achieve this the trust supports staff and students of Cambridge University Hospitals and the local health community to make practical contributions to global health by volunteering.

Addenbrooke's Abroad is a charity and most overseas volunteers pay their own costs – they do not receive funding from NHS resources. To make a real difference to global healthcare the trust depends on volunteers both overseas and in the UK.

*Evelyn Brealey, Project Manager, Addenbrooke's Abroad:*

“Before joining Addenbrooke's Abroad, I'd spent several years working overseas in resource-poor countries. I know how stimulating a challenge like this can be. You'll return to the UK with new skills and a valuable new perspective – essential in these turbulent times!”

For more information please visit [Addenbrooke's Abroad's website](#).

## DOCTORS AS VOLUNTEERS

This initiative by the British Medical Association (BMA) is looking to build the evidence base on the benefits of medical volunteering through:

- promoting the positive values of volunteering within the health profession
- recognising the voluntary effort that contributes to health and wellbeing, and to public health and care services in the UK and abroad
- embedding a deeper understanding of volunteering and its benefits across all of health, public health and social care.

For more information visit [BMA's website](#).

## FINANCIAL SUPPORT – HUMANITARIAN FUND

The British Medical Association's (BMA) Humanitarian Fund is designed to support and encourage the development of new and existing humanitarian initiatives within developing countries and for societies in transition. There are a number of challenges that professionals face in securing initiatives overseas, such as additional expenditure including travel and accommodation. The fund is open to all NHS healthcare staff and offers financial assistance towards incidental costs. For more information visit [BMA's website](#).



## VIRTUAL VOLUNTEERING

Virtual volunteering describes a volunteer who completes their role remotely from the providing organisation. They can use the internet via computers or other internet-connected devices such as a smartphone. Volunteering to provide support or mentoring services to individuals over the phone, via web chat services or online forums through charities such as Samaritans, RNIB and ChildLine is a popular avenue for virtual volunteering.

## EMPLOYING MEMBERS OF THE RESERVE FORCES

Members of the Reserve Forces are often classed as volunteers, although some receive payment for their time so are not volunteers in the correct sense of the term. Reservists undergo specialist military training, developing many transferable skills, such as leadership and team building, which can be of direct benefit to their role in the NHS workplace. They have the ability to work under the utmost pressure and also have a great deal of experience in dealing with a diverse range of people of all ranks, nationalities and cultures.

It is useful to know if you employ reservists, what their commitments are, what the procedures are for mobilisation and the support available to you as their employer. You can find more information including a model policy example on employing reservists on [NHS Employers' website](#).

## REFLECTING ON EXPERIENCE

In April 2015, Health Education England (HEE) published a toolkit *Developing people for health and healthcare*. The toolkit aims to provide staff and employers with a framework for recording their skills and competencies achieved when they volunteer abroad specifically and to reflect on how these can be best applied when they return to work, also forming part of an individual's appraisal. It enables staff and employers to learn from each other's experiences from across the globe and strengthen local engagement in the future.

Although this toolkit focuses on volunteering abroad, it could be used to collect skills and knowledge evidence for placements in the UK. The toolkit can be accessed on the [Health Education England \(HEE\) website](#).

## USEFUL LINKS

**National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)** – provides practical support on a wide range of topics for volunteer-involving organisations from creating your volunteering policy to supporting staff who are volunteers. They can also provide training and consultancy to help you develop your approach. Visit [NCVO's website](#).

**Tropical Health and Education Trust (THET)** – is a global health organisation that trains and supports health workers through health partnerships, enabling people in low and middle income countries to access essential healthcare. Their projects include health workforce capacity development in Zambia and Somaliland.

Their website features useful case studies and blogs from participants of global health initiatives. Visit [THET's website](#).

**Health Education England (HEE)** – the mandate to HEE for April 2015 to March 2016 has specific points dedicated to supporting volunteers within the NHS workforce. HEE has also produced a resource for recording experiences from volunteering abroad which can be included in appraisal discussions. Visit [HEE's website](#).

**British Medical Association (BMA)** – further information on support for volunteering through the Doctors as Volunteers and the Humanitarian Fund projects can be found on the BMA's website. Visit [BMA's website](#).

**Employing reservists in the NHS** – members of the Reserve Forces can be classed as taking part in voluntary activity outside of the NHS role. NHS Employers has a wealth of information to support employers of reservists from a model policy to the NHS Reserve Forces Champion scheme. Visit [NHS Employers' website](#).

## REFERENCES

1. Department of Health, 2015, [Delivering high quality, effective, compassionate care: Developing the right people with the right skills and the right values – A mandate from the Government of Health Education England: April 2015 to March 2016](#)
2. NHS Staff Council, 2015, [NHS terms and conditions of service handbook](#)
3. NHS Employers, [Junior doctors, dentists and GP registrars](#)
4. NHS Employers, [Speciality, associate speciality and staff grade doctors](#)
5. NHS Employers, 2014, [Consultant and dental consultants](#)

## NHS Employers

The NHS Employers organisation is the voice of employers in the NHS, supporting them to put patients first. Our vision is to be the authoritative voice of workforce leaders, experts in HR, negotiating fairly to get the best deal for patients.

We help employers make sense of current and emerging healthcare issues to ensure that their voice is front and centre of health policy and practice. We keep them up to date with the latest workforce thinking and expert opinion, providing practical advice and information, and generating opportunities to network and share knowledge and best practice.

We work with employers in the NHS to reflect their views and act on their behalf in four priority areas:

- pay and negotiations
- recruitment and planning the workforce
- healthy and productive workplaces
- employment policy and practice.

The NHS Employers organisation is part of the NHS Confederation.

## Contact us

For more information on how to get involved in our work,  
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