

RCN Policy Unit

Policy Briefing 08/2008

Towards a strategy to support Volunteering in health and social care

Consultation by Department of Health to
form their future strategy on supporting
volunteers in health and social care

June 2008

Introduction

On 3rd June 2008 the Department of Health launched a consultation to recognise, encourage and improve support for volunteers in the NHS, social care and third sector within England. It aims to improve the volunteering opportunities available.

The consultation will run until 30 September 2008, with the Department of Health setting out a final strategy and implementation plan early in 2009.

At the launch of the consultation document Alan Johnson stated that “volunteers do an amazing job, they are vital to the lifeblood of the NHS and social care services.... There is a long established tradition of volunteering across the full range of health and social care settings”.

What does the consultation document propose?

The consultation document proposes a long-term strategy to support volunteering in health and social care.

The strategy intended to articulate the key actions needed to address the perceived obstacles to making a refreshed vision for volunteering in health and social care a reality. Informed by the consultation process, the proposed strategy will provide a framework through which to pursue long-term organisational and culture change across the whole system to support volunteering more effectively, in relation to:

- individual volunteers;
- effective management within organisations;
- commissioning environment and infrastructure; and
- promoting partnership and leadership across the public and third sectors.

One of the core themes is greater coherence and strategic direction for the voluntary sector.

The strategy will build on existing best practice and build partnerships for sustained involvement of volunteers through an increasingly diverse range of services in statutory and non-statutory settings. It will provide the basis for more coherent national investment by the Department of Health, to improve the strategic impact of volunteering, for the benefit

of patients, carers and service users. The consultation is intended to build on an earlier review conducted by Baroness Julia Neuberger as the Government's volunteering champion.

The RCN Policy Unit will be leading the response to this consultation and briefings and further information will be made available to members as soon as possible.

What is the role of the voluntary sector in health and social care

The contribution of volunteers to the NHS and wider social care services is now being recognised in the development of this national strategy for Volunteering in Health and Social Care.

The role of in supporting health and social care services within the UK cannot be underestimated. It is a significant development that the Government has so publicly acknowledged the vital role volunteers play and has committed itself to enhancing the support they receive.

However this can sometimes be a potentially emotive area, especially in relation to perceived and actual risks in using volunteers to support potentially vulnerable people. Studies have regularly demonstrated the powerful and positive impact that volunteer support has on individuals' health, independence and overall quality of life. But in addition to these studies there have been accusations that support provided by some volunteers includes some aspects of personal care which should in fact be provided by a health or social care professionals. Examples include helping give ear and eye drops for people with chronic long-term conditions, wound care/applying dressings, incontinence care and giving oral medication. Studies have widely acknowledged that there is some crossover between social care work undertaken by volunteers and nursing care with boundaries potentially becoming blurred between these areas.

Funding for volunteer services in health and social care has also frequently been short term and precarious. This has often resulted in a great deal of anxiety for all involved including the recipient of the care. Commissioning practices have not always supported the longer term development of volunteer services, especially those run by smaller organisations who may at times be best placed to deliver services in a particular area or to meet a particular need.

Why does the Government now need a strategy when everyone agrees that volunteers are important?

The Government strongly believes that volunteers deserve more visible recognition across the health and social care system.

The purpose is to establish a central strategy that will:

- Enhance current arrangements made by individual NHS Trusts and will support the dissemination of good practice nationally and the collection and application of robust and standardised data;
- Recognise the important role of managers of volunteers and the need to support the development of their skills;
- Emphasise that volunteering isn't completely cost free;
- Provide support to volunteers through providing relevant training and support and ensuring their expenses are covered;
- Raise awareness of the benefits volunteering can have on their wider strategic objectives such as enhancing care for patients and other service users and reducing health inequalities.

How is this linked to other consultations?

The RCN believe that this consultation is fundamentally linked with the wider consultation debate on social care. On 12th May the Government launched a consultation to create a social care vision for all adults including older people, younger adults, people who are frail, and people with a disability or mental health problems. A separate briefing on this consultation is available on the RCN web site. The range of social care needs for the population presents a challenge and the RCN acknowledges that volunteers have played a key role in providing support for the elderly and those with long term conditions.

Are there likely to be significant changes in volunteering over the next few years?

The charities that represent volunteers have largely welcomed the consultation and the proposals are unlikely to result in significant changes in the short term. The key emphasis is to create a national structure to recognise the role of volunteers and ensure there is an effective strategy in place to maximise the value of the millions of unpaid people who provide support in the health and social care sector on a day to day basis.

How can nurses get involved with the debate?

This consultation presents the opportunity for the nursing profession to actively engage and participate in an open debate on the role of volunteering. One of the key principles likely to be stated by the RCN is that volunteers play a key role in complementing care in this sector rather than duplicating or replacing essential paid staff capacity and skill. The following questions have been formulated by the RCN Policy Unit to develop discussion and gain feedback from members during the consultation document. This is not a comprehensive guide to the issues raised in the consultation and is a guide only.

- What should volunteers do/not do in terms of providing care?
- Should the Department of Health be producing a central strategy when so much volunteering work is in fact provided at a local level on an ad hoc basis?
- How should the Government strengthen partnerships between volunteer services and public services?
- How important is 'personal care' and can it sometimes be considered as medical/nursing care?
- What are the risks of a reliance on volunteers?
- How should we support volunteers' and make their role easier?

- Are the definitions of what constitutes volunteering sufficiently clear?

RCN policy development- your Policy Debate

The RCN is seeking views from members about the consultation paper. Members are encouraged to send their thoughts and views to the RCN by clicking here at policycontacts@rcn.org.uk and to check the website pages at <http://www.rcn.org.uk/aboutus/policy/projects> for updates on the policy debate. The RCN Policy Unit will be conducting further analysis of the content of the consultation document in the context of the wider debate on social care. Your comments and the issues raised will be used to inform RCN position statements and influence wider RCN policy.