

## Case study: Cornwall – According parity of esteem to volunteers

The Penwith Pioneer project is part of the county-wide Living Well programme, aiming to support people who are socially isolated and highly dependent on health and social care services. There are 67 volunteers recruited by Age UK and Volunteer Cornwall, which carries out disclosure and barring checking and makes connections with local voluntary organisations such as British Red Cross and Penwith Community Development Trust. In fact, the total number of volunteers involved in this approach is actually much more than 67. It is difficult to quantify the whole time equivalent number as volunteers offer their time alongside other commitment, such as caring roles. The time given would cost £1.7m at minimum wage. In many cases people supported by the project have become volunteers themselves, either formally (through an agency like Age UK) or informally (offering regular support to someone who needs it).

Potential volunteers who show an interest start by having a conversation with the team leader or a member of staff at their GP practice, to get a better feel for the role. There is a formal recruitment and induction process managed by Volunteer Cornwall. The interview process draws out the sorts of skills that a volunteer has to offer and they can be matched to a range of opportunities, including Living Well.

Each volunteer is under the supervision of the co-ordinator assigned to the GP practice. There are volunteer team meetings, plus regular contact and feedback. At the moment the support is offered by volunteers Monday to Friday during office hours. Some volunteers, however, give their time outside of those hours. Their expenses are reimbursed.

The volunteer involvement is not intended to be a cheaper version of services that already exist, nor is it an add-on service to refer to. It involves a fundamental change in practice by every member of the care team, in which the volunteer worker is an equal partner and each member has skills and expertise to offer. It is not about shifting jobs from one team to another, but about creating unique support for each individual, based on what matters most to them. What volunteers do depends entirely on what the person they support identifies, through a guided conversation, as the things they want to achieve, the things that matter most to them. Below are the words of one volunteer which give an indication of the range of issues that need to be addressed and the commitment of the volunteers.

*“The co-ordinator introduced me to a lady with severely ulcerated legs who may have had gangrene – there was a question about whether her foot or toes should be amputated. She’d been rushed to hospital previously. She’d got in trouble for non-payment of council tax and her house needed deep cleaning. We managed to get her a bank account established and her bills are being paid. She is beginning to take an interest. She had cancelled 2 operations in the past because she couldn’t find anyone to look after her cats. I took her to hospital because she was asked to be there at 7.30 in the morning. I went and got her and took her in. It took an hour and a half for someone to come and talk to her. Then they wouldn’t do the op because she hadn’t arranged for someone to look after her overnight, so I took her home again.*”

*She's now got another date – this time she's agreed to stay in overnight because we've found a way to look after her cats and I've arranged a relief carer for my wife so that I can take her in again. The co-ordinator arranged for an advocate to deal with her council tax – she had had bailiffs around several times but they'd gone again because there was nothing there of any value. The forms to fill in to claim exemption due to her depression were 42 pages long. The form itself frightens her, it literally frightens her. Her hands are trembling – that's why she doesn't open her post. She is now worried that the GP will not sign the form because the form says 'severe mental impairment', but she doesn't want to say that she is severely mentally impaired because she's worried that they will put her away somewhere. We're trying to be the catalyst to connect bits of the system around her, to deal with the council and get the operation done. No-one was otherwise helping her in a way that would help her deal with all those problems, and she couldn't deal with them herself."*

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