



HSTAR Scotland: The importance and impact of Volunteering

#VolunteersWeek

Karoline Syrek, Operation Manager at HSTAR Scotland took the time to answer questions from the SVE, giving her insights on the current volunteer landscape. HSTAR Scotland provide trauma-sensitive, person-centred support to female survivors across Scotland, with a special focus on the Forth Valley.

Tell us about your volunteers at HSTAR Scotland.

At HSTAR Scotland SCIO, volunteering is not an adjunct to our work - it is the work. Our community is made up of trainee therapists, experienced practitioners, admin support, mental health and wellbeing supporters, and individuals who step forward at exactly the right moment - often quietly, often informally - to support others when it matters most. Their collective impact is both measurable and deeply human.

What impact have your volunteers made?

Our volunteers extend our reach far beyond what a small organisation could achieve alone. Trainee therapists gain structured, supervised opportunities to build clinical confidence while directly supporting individuals navigating trauma, stress, and life transitions. Admin volunteers ensure that our services remain accessible and responsive, removing barriers that often prevent people from seeking help. Equally important are the less visible contributions: peer supporters, community members, and those who engage with us during moments of need. These interactions create a network of mutual care where support is not one-directional but shared. The result is a resilient, trauma-informed ecosystem where people feel seen, heard, and held.

What problem should volunteering be solving in 10 years?

In the next decade, volunteering should address systemic gaps in access, particularly in mental health and wellbeing. The goal should not be to rely on the volunteering support due to the shortages and to replace professional services, but to complement them by reducing isolation, increasing early intervention, and strengthening community-based support networks. We also believe volunteering should help dismantle stigma: around mental health, around asking for help, and around the reality of volunteering to make a

difference. A future-focused volunteering model should value lived experience alongside formal training, and encourage the government and employers to create a sustainable system where people can actively volunteer in their communities without choosing between financial stability and impact outcomes.

How can small organisations compete for volunteers in a crowded landscape?

Small organisations shouldn't try to compete on scale; they should differentiate on meaning. Volunteers are increasingly looking for purposeful, values-driven engagement where they can see the direct impact of their contribution. At HSTAR, we prioritise:

- Clear pathways for development (especially for trainee therapists and any volunteers on their undergrad or postgrad psychology journey)
- Supportive supervision and reflective practice
- Flexibility and understanding of real-life commitments
- A culture of appreciation and inclusion
- Authenticity and relational connection are our strongest assets. People stay where they feel valued.

What's something the sector doesn't talk about enough when it comes to volunteering?

The emotional labour of volunteering, especially in mental health spaces, is often under-discussed. Supporting others can be deeply rewarding, but it also requires boundaries, supervision, and ongoing wellbeing support for volunteers themselves. There's also a tendency to overlook informal or episodic volunteering, the individuals who step in during a crisis, attend a single session, or engage briefly but meaningfully. These contributions matter and should be recognised as part of the wider volunteering landscape.

What would you say to someone who doesn't think volunteering is for them?

Volunteering isn't a single mould, it's a spectrum. It doesn't have to mean long-term commitments or formal roles. Sometimes it's about showing up once, sharing a skill, offering a listening ear, or simply being part of a supportive space. If you've ever supported someone, encouraged a friend, or taken part in a community conversation, you've already contributed. There is space for you, exactly as you are. At HSTAR we are continually reminded that volunteering is not just about giving time. It's about building connection, fostering growth, and creating spaces where people can both support and be supported. That is the impact we celebrate this Volunteers' Week.