

# ATTITUDES TO VOLUNTEERING OF CARE-EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE

Research by  
Community Voices 2025-26

**Community Voices**   
Using your feedback to improve care

Norfolk & Waveney Volunteering  
for Health Programme



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# KEY FINDINGS

This report summarises research into attitudes to volunteering of care-experienced young people as part of Volunteering for Health in Norfolk and Waveney. The conversations were captured through a Community Voices project commissioned by Norfolk & Waveney Integrated Care Board and Voluntary Norfolk during autumn and winter 2025.

## Views of Volunteering

**Positive** views and experiences reported:

- A potential route to paid work.
- An opportunity to give back and help others.
- Confidence building and mental health benefits.
- Meeting new people and building social connections.
- Occupying time and providing a reason to get out of the house.

**Negative** views and experiences reported:

- Volunteering is unpaid.
- Some opportunities do not cater for care-experienced young people.
- Expectations can be unclear or unrealistic.
- Volunteers may not feel valued or respected.

## Barriers to volunteering

The main barriers to volunteering identified were::

- Paid work being prioritised over voluntary work.
- Competing priorities, such as education, hobbies and socialising.
- Practical barriers, including transport availability and cost and administrative requirements.
- Young people experiencing anxiety and a lack of confidence.
- Previous negative experiences of volunteering.
- The impact of trauma and the care-experience.
- A lack of an existing relationship with the organisation.

## Enablers to volunteering

The main enablers to volunteering identified were:

- Volunteering with a trusted organisation or person.
- Volunteering taking place in a familiar setting.
- Support from someone the young person trusts.
- The ability to volunteer alongside friends.
- A clear pathway from volunteering to employment.
- Opportunities that are individualised and co-produced.
- Organisations being informed about trauma and the care-experience.
- Opportunities that are enjoyable and aligned with the young person's interests.

## Enablers and barriers

Some aspects were identified as **both** potential barriers and enablers:

- Organisations being informed about, and understanding, the care-experience could act as an enabler by increasing sensitivity to young people's needs. However, this could also be a barrier if young people felt they were being treated differently.
- Existing trusted relationships with organisations or individuals were seen as a key enabler. However, this could also limit independence and create a reliance on support being in place.



# BACKGROUND

This report summarises the conversations captured as part of the Community Voices Looked After Children and Volunteering project during Autumn and Winter 2025. The work was undertaken as part of the Volunteering for Health Programme delivered by the Norfolk and Waveney Partnership.

Local charity, Break, were commissioned to gather the views of young people and trusted adults through one-to-one and group conversations. Discussions between Trusted Communicators from Break and participants were recorded in the Community Voices Insight Bank. Analysis was completed by Voluntary Norfolk.

## VOLUNTEERING FOR HEALTH PROGRAMME

Volunteering for Health is a £10m national programme made possible through a partnership between NHS Charities Together, NHS England, and CW+. Building on recommendations from the NHS Volunteering Taskforce, it is delivering grant funding and tailored support to fifteen local systems in England.

The Norfolk and Waveney Partnership is one of these fifteen partnerships. It is led by the Norfolk and Waveney Integrated Care Board, with Voluntary Norfolk as the lead delivery partner. The project explores new ways to extend the benefits of volunteering to everyone, particularly people who may not usually take part. The project aims to:

- Encourage more diverse volunteers
- Support existing volunteers and volunteer managers
- Help more health and social care organisations get involved

As part of this, the Get InVOLved Innovation Fund, managed by Voluntary Norfolk, provides funding and advice to help organisations explore new ways to support those who face barriers in engaging in volunteering. The focus is on groups that work with:

- Adults who have learning disabilities
- Autistic or neurodivergent adults
- Looked-after children / children leaving care

This Community Voices Project was commissioned to gather information into the specific barriers and enablers that care-experienced young people encounter when accessing volunteering opportunities. These insights will inform future work and projects supported by the Get InVOLved Innovation Fund, as well as wider initiatives.

## COMMUNITY VOICES

Community Voices is a programme delivered by NHS Norfolk and Waveney ICB who work with District Councils and the local Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector. It aims to listen to communities and better understand their experiences and opinions of accessing healthcare. Initially established during the COVID-19 pandemic to explore vaccine uptake, the programme has

since covered a range of services including bowel cancer screening and stopping smoking.

The programme works with trusted communicators to engage communities who may not typically interact with the NHS or other statutory bodies. Insights gathered are used to shape how the ICB and partner organisations engage with communities and deliver services.

## BREAK

Break Charity delivers care and support for children in care and leaving care in East Anglia, with nearly 60 years' experience of working as a child-centred organisation. Break runs children's homes, respite support and foster placements for children in care, as well as Staying Close Staying Connected (SCSC), an innovative leaving care service provided in partnership with the Department for Education and local councils.

Break is aspirational for the young people they work with and, through their work with care leavers in particular, understand the

importance of having positive relationships, healthy social networks and positive mental health. They have seen first-hand the impact volunteering can have on these parts of a young person's life.

As an organisation, Break has a strategic commitment to amplifying young people's voices, supporting them to influence the world around them for the better. Their involvement in the Community Voices project ensures that the views and experiences of care-experienced young people help shape future volunteering opportunities.

# CONVERSATIONS & QUESTIONS

## CONVERSATIONS

The phrase 'Trusted Communicator' is used throughout as a way of describing people who lead the Community Voices conversations and is not intended to reflect a specific role.

Participants in the conversations with Trusted Communicators included:

- Break foster carers in a group conversation.
- Professionals working at Break in various roles supporting young people, in a group conversation.
- Young people who have been part of Break services and shape and co-produce their work, in a group conversation.
- Young people in the leaving care service forum, in a group conversation.
- Ten individual conversations with care leavers.

## QUESTIONS

Of the full set of questions asked by the trusted communicators the following provide the relevant information for this analysis:

Q49. The individual/s identified what their own barriers to volunteering are. *This question included options to select, and an 'other' option (Q49.15) to record barriers discussed in the conversation.*

Q50. What did you find to be the enablers or solutions for the individual/s in accessing volunteering that was discussed? *This question included options to select, and an 'other' option (Q50.14) to record enablers/solutions discussed in the conversation.*

Q52. Is there anything else you would like to add about your conversation that the above questions do not cover?

Q82. Inequalities: content  
What was raised in your conversation which you consider to have an impact on the persons health and wellbeing in its widest sense?

Q85. Inequalities: action  
What action was taken at the time/as a result of your conversation

# ANALYSIS

This report is structured into different sections which mirror the themes of the discussions:

1. Definition and views on volunteering (Q52 and Q82)
2. Barriers to volunteering (Q49, Q52 and Q82)
3. Enablers or solutions to accessing volunteering (Q50, Q52 and Q82)
4. Aspects that could be considered both a barrier and an enabler (Q49, Q50, Q52 and Q82)

## DEFINITION OF VOLUNTEERING

There were varying levels of understanding from the young people about what they consider volunteering to be. There was an overall understanding that volunteering was unpaid with one young person describing it as “something that felt like work but wasn’t paid”.

Other definitions discussed included:

- That its primary purpose is a means to getting paid work. “The consensus in the group was that volunteering was a route to paid employment”.
- That it is optional and you have more choice in what you could do when volunteering compared to paid work.
- That it is about giving back to the community; “Doing something good” or “doing something helpful”.

During some of the conversations it became apparent that several of the young people already participated in volunteering, however did not consider it as this themselves. This highlights that some had quite fixed views of what constitutes volunteering.

*“The young person does volunteer with Break but didn’t initially consider this in the conversation until prompted”*

*“They realised that they actually do volunteer at the sports club they play at but hadn’t considered it volunteering before.”*



## POSITIVE VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES

The possible benefits of volunteering or positive experiences young people had had were discussed.

### **Work Experience**

Volunteering being a way to gain experience and skills for future employment. One young person had gained work as a result of a volunteering opportunity and described how *“they had to work hard to make the opportunities work and turn them into paid work”*.

### **Helping the community**

Volunteering is a way of giving something back and helping others. One young person described how *“they just felt it was the right thing to do”* and another that they *“felt good about helping”*. It is important to note that not all agreed with this being the primary reason for volunteering. It was often seen as a secondary outcome and some required prompting to cite it as a benefit.

### **Health benefits**

While it was recognised that volunteering can have a positive impact on health, and in particular mental health, there were differences in the levels this was recognised and the importance placed on it. Some young people immediately recognised this is a benefit; *“they felt that it was primarily for their health, that it positively impacted them”*.

In contrast, others had to be prompted to see this, with one group who *“didn’t make the link for some time until a young person highlighted that meeting new people and getting out of the house is good for mental health, there was agreement at this point that it can be good for health.”*

### **Build social connections**

A cited benefit was that volunteering helps young people to meet new people, make new friends and develop connections and relationships. One young person described that as a result of volunteering *“they had better social networks”*.

### **Occupies time**

A common theme from the young people was of volunteering being something to occupy people’s time. It is *“something to do”* and an activity to *“get you out of the house”*, especially if you were not working.

### **Improved confidence**

A benefit discussed was that volunteering can help to overcome anxiety and improve confidence. This was especially noted in terms of being able to form new relationships. *“The interactions at the club helped them feel more confident.”*

## NEGATIVE VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES

The negative views of volunteering and experiences young people had had were discussed.

### Unpaid

While there was a consensus that volunteering is unpaid, several of the young people felt that this was the main negative aspect. Two young people referred to volunteering as “exploitative” and therefore not something they would consider. “There was some scepticism as to why it wouldn’t be paid from the start.”

### Not for care-experienced young people

One group of young people had negative views of existing opportunities, with the perception that “existing opportunities do not cater for care experienced young people”. This was not expanded on, however the particular barriers faced by those with care-experience was common across many conversations.

### Not valued

Several of the examples given from previous volunteering experiences mentioned the young people not feeling valued or feeling “they were treated like an unpaid employee”. It seemed that several of these negative experiences came down to individual relationship breakdowns, with managers being described as “insensitive” and “bossy”.

### Unclear expectations

Previous negative experiences also referenced the lack of clarity in the roles and in what was expected of the young people, with too high or unrealistic expectations being placed on them. This, alongside inflexibility in tasks and time, led the young people to be reluctant to seek further opportunities as previous people had “expected too much of them”.



## BARRIERS TO VOLUNTEERING

Figure 1 – Quantitative responses for 10 conversations with individual care leavers for Q49. The individual/s identified what their own barriers to volunteering are



### ANALYSIS OF TEXT RESPONSES (Q49, Q52 AND Q82)

From fourteen conversations which were a mix of individual and group discussions.

#### Paid work is a priority

Paid employment and having a job was identified as a priority for many young people. The need to earn money was their focus. This meant they felt they had limited, or no, time available for volunteering or had not even considered volunteering as an alternative option for them.

*“The person was not motivated to volunteer, they were focussed on earning money and offering time without money didn't seem an option to them.”*

*“They summed up that ultimately they want to give back and be helpful but that getting a job was more important.”*

If the young person was interested in volunteering, a related barrier would be if the opportunity did not provide a clear route for employment.

#### Competing priorities

Alongside paid work, young people identified education, hobbies, and socialising as higher priorities than volunteering, meaning they often lacked the time and motivation to take up volunteering opportunities.

*“The young person is focused on starting at college and so felt that once that happens they wouldn't have time and that the benefits of volunteering would be achieved through college.”*

One young person *“works full time and so felt that they did not have the time to volunteer, in their spare time outside of work they have other hobbies.”*

Break staff also spoke of *“other areas of life being too chaotic”* suggesting that young people often do not have the time or space to consider volunteering.

## BARRIERS TO VOLUNTEERING

### **Practical barriers**

The most frequently mentioned practical barrier was difficulty accessing transport to reach volunteering opportunities. This was linked to rural locations and many young people not driving, alongside concerns about the cost of travel. Break staff *“pointed out that transport is a barrier and that in our volunteering opportunities, working with young people to solve this has been successful.”*

The foster carers also noted that the level of administration involved in volunteering could act as a barrier as well as the additional complications that come with finding suitable work experience or volunteering opportunities for under 18 year olds.

### **Anxiety and lack of confidence**

Discussions around anxiety and lack of confidence focused on the fear of the unknown, low self-esteem and a *“fear of failure”*.

The group of foster carers spoke about how *“the young people they care for may have low self esteem, fear failure and how that may reaffirm their beliefs about themselves, anxiety may impact their ability to consistently turn up and how difficult new relationships can be.”*

Many of the young people spoke of anxiety about meeting new people and going to new places and that this would be a significant barrier to them taking up new opportunities. One young person said *“Volunteering with strangers feels too difficult”*. Other comments included: *“new or additional volunteering felt unlikely because of their confidence to go somewhere new with new people.”* or *“they find leaving the house very difficult due to anxiety and so struggled to envisage themselves volunteering”*.

### **Previous negative experiences**

Several of the young people discussed previous negative experiences of volunteering, which made them feel less likely to participate in future opportunities. These experiences included there being unrealistic or unclear expectations, not feeling valued, and being treated like a paid employee. Several focused on the difficult relationships they had with those providing the opportunity. In a group conversation the examples of young people who have had perceived negative experiences of volunteering *“often came down to individual relationships breakdowns”*.

## FURTHER BARRIERS TO VOLUNTEERING

### Trauma and the care-experience

A lack of understanding among organisations about the care-experience and the impact of trauma was identified as a potential barrier. Without this awareness, young people may struggle to access volunteering opportunities or be adequately supported in them. These young people face specific barriers due to their experience of being in care.

Break staff spoke about *“the impact of developmental trauma on care-experienced young people’s experience of the world and how this impacts their ability to volunteer. We know that trauma can impact people’s ability to - maintain relationships, feel safe with new people and experiences, manage mood, organise tasks - all things that are likely needed to volunteer.”*

One young person described how *“they felt that most people don’t understand what it is like to live in ‘the bubble’ (their term for care and leaving care) and the impact ‘the bubble’ has on people.”* Another, when discussing how the symptoms of trauma can impact on them day to day, said *“some days it probably won’t feel possible to turn up”*.

### Lack of relationships

Not having an existing relationship with the organisation providing the volunteering opportunity, or

knowing someone already working or volunteering there, was cited as a main barrier.

For one young person, *“when asked whether they would have done the same opportunity if Break weren’t involved they said “probably not”*”.

Another, when asked about volunteering opportunities outside of their college environment said *“it felt more difficult, mainly because they wouldn’t have people they know”*.

### Other barriers

Other barriers mentioned included:

- Volunteering opportunities not being accessible to everyone, for example environments *“having bright lights.”*
- Apathy towards the topic and an unwillingness to engage, including, as Break staff said, *“a more teenage apathy towards the idea of ‘giving back’”*
- Not knowing what opportunities exist or how to select one as it *“could be difficult to choose”*.
- Not knowing anyone who volunteers and therefore having no examples.
- Not having a clear understanding of the benefits of volunteering; *“a cited barrier was opportunities where the benefits weren’t obvious.”*

## ENABLERS OR SOLUTIONS TO ACCESSING VOLUNTEERING

Figure 2 – Quantitative responses for 10 conversations with individual care leavers for Q50. What did you find to be the enablers or solutions for the individual/s in accessing volunteering that was discussed?



### ANALYSIS OF TEXT RESPONSES (Q50, Q52 AND Q82)

from fourteen conversations which were a mix of individual and group discussions.

#### Trusted relationships

A key enabler discussed is if the young person already has a trusted relationship with the organisation they are volunteering with, or with someone working or volunteering there. This was seen to reduce anxiety, particularly as many young people described meeting new people and building new relationships as difficult.

*“A ‘dream’ volunteering opportunity was with someone sensitive and caring or with people they already knew.”*

When asked about their current volunteering, one young person said *“They felt the key reason that it worked was because it is with Break and so they already know, like and trust the people involved, both the staff and the other young people volunteering.”* Foster carers also gave examples of existing trusting relationships being utilised; *“one young person had volunteered because his running club had organised it and there was safety built into the relationships with people at the running club”.*

## ENABLERS OR SOLUTIONS TO ACCESSING VOLUNTEERING

### Familiar spaces

Linked to having trusted relationships, being familiar with the space where the volunteering took place was important. Break staff spoke about *“volunteering opportunities within a setting/organisation/space where there is already trust”* and attributed the success of their in-house volunteering programmes to this. They *“felt the best way to encourage volunteering was opportunities to be with already trusted people in an already trusted space”*.

One young person who volunteers at a sports club they already attend said *“they felt it being already a natural part of something they already do and enjoy to be the main enabler, it already felt comfortable.”*

### Support

Having support to access volunteering opportunities was something that could be an enabler for some young people. Break staff spoke about how *“some success had been experienced by having a trusted person accompany the young person to opportunities with a clear plan to taper that support.”* Young people also identified that *“having a worker or someone they trust accompanying them initially would help”*.

Support could also come in the form of other trusted organisations, such as one young person noting that they would consider volunteering if it was supported through their college as *“this would be a motivation for them and make it easier as they'd have support.”*



## ENABLERS OR SOLUTIONS TO ACCESSING VOLUNTEERING

### **Volunteer with friends**

Being able to volunteer with their friends was both a motivation and an enabler for young people. It was felt that this would make the experience more enjoyable and reduce anxiety.

*“A positive factor they identified was initially volunteering with a friend, this helped make them feel comfortable and made it more fun.”*

One young person said that “new or additional volunteering felt unlikely because of their confidence to go somewhere new with new people” but that being able to go with friends “might help with this.”

### **A pathway towards employment**

As previously noted, paid work was seen as a priority for many of the young people. Therefore, an enabler would be having a clear way of demonstrating how the volunteering opportunity could lead to paid employment, either directly as a trial for a job or by helping the young person build skills and experience for their CV.

*“A pathway towards employment from the start - if not a commitment to paid employment then clarity on how it will get them closer and support along the way”.*

*“The immediate sense from the group was that the biggest enabler would be opportunities leading to direct employment with the group/organisation” and “a sense that shadowing voluntarily initially followed by contracted work would make it worthwhile.”*



## ENABLERS OR SOLUTIONS TO ACCESSING VOLUNTEERING

### **Individualised and co-produced opportunities**

An enabler would be if the opportunities were individualised. Young people spoke about how “every person is different” and therefore organisations need to be willing to listen and to adapt to individual needs, being responsive and understanding.

An example given was one young person saying “it could be difficult for them to always be on time and that sometimes meeting and building relationships with new people can be difficult” and that these needs should be considered.

Alongside this was the notion of co-production and that involving the young people from the outset in the design of the opportunity would enable them to feel involved and heard. One group of young people discussed how there should be “a space for the individual and the volunteering provider to meet and understand each other, that way they can agree how it can best work for both”.

Foster carers noted that “co-production with young people can help ensure the opportunities are set up to succeed for everyone.

### **Understanding of trauma and the care-experience**

Many conversations highlighted that an understanding of the care-experience, and the impact of trauma, would be key in enabling young people to feel able to volunteer and to succeed. This should be considered from the outset “in the design of the volunteering opportunity, how the symptoms of trauma impact on how care experienced people experience the world day to day.”

“A specific enabler identified as part of this discussion was to know that the organisation/group would be sensitive of the needs of care leavers and understand a bit about their experiences and what they might mean for them.”

During a conversation, one young person spoke about how they “felt a better understanding of this and flexibility would help ensure opportunities were responsive to those with care experience.”

The foster carers felt that it would be useful for host organisations to have support “to understand the impacts of trauma, how this might manifest and techniques to effectively manage it.”

## ENABLERS OR SOLUTIONS TO ACCESSING VOLUNTEERING

### Enjoyable and aligned with interests

Enjoyment was a cited benefit of volunteering, and therefore an enabler would be opportunities that were clearly fun and enjoyable.

When describing a dream volunteer opportunity, one young person said *“the focus of the opportunity would be on everyone involved being happy and enjoying themselves rather than getting work done.”*

Another enabler to choosing a volunteering opportunity was alignment with the young person’s interests and whether it *“helps develops skills that are of interest.”*

It was felt they would be more likely to volunteer *“in a field or subject that aligns with their passions”*.

Examples included sports clubs, working outdoors, and animal care.

### Other enablers

Other enablers mentioned included:

- Volunteer opportunity being outdoors - *“something that helps them feel calm and that gets them out of the house. The physical nature of the volunteering was better than something sat down.”*
- Acceptance that failure is a possibility and *“to consider how it can be managed in a way to not feel like failure.”*
- Young people feeling valued, with rewards for volunteering such as a certificate of achievement or an award.
- Clear and realistic expectations being set out for young people.
- A positive and kind organisational culture, with young people expressing a desire for environments that were *“flexible, friendly and reasonable”*.
- Clear expectations of what the volunteering role involved, and the role between the manager and the volunteer.



## ASPECTS THAT COULD BE CONSIDERED BOTH A BARRIER AND AN ENABLER

### ANALYSIS OF TEXT RESPONSES (Q49, Q50, Q52 AND Q82)

From fourteen conversations which were a mix of individual and group discussions.

#### Care informed

There were contrasting views from both foster carers and young people about the volunteer providing organisations being informed about, and have an understanding of, the care experience. While it was felt this could be a positive, it could also create additional barriers.

It was viewed by many as an enabler, as it would allow organisations to be sensitive to the needs of the young people and make appropriate accommodations. However, it was seen as a potential barrier if young people felt they were being treated differently. One group of young people commented that *“it shouldn't be different for care experienced young people, that ultimately not everyone in life will understand and be sensitive and so it doesn't prepare you for future.”*

Foster Carers also discussed this concept in relation to the proposed idea of a 'care friendly' mark for organisations; *“some felt it was a good idea, others felt it would unnecessarily mark out those in care as needing more support and could actually create a barrier.”*

#### Familiarity

A theme across conversations was that existing trusted relationships with organisations and individuals are a key enabler for young people in accessing volunteering opportunities. *“It was felt the best way to encourage volunteering was opportunities to be with already trusted people in an already trusted space.”* However, familiarity was also discussed as a potential barrier as *“it could create a reliance and negatively impact independence.”* Feeling safe within existing relationships could limit young people in accessing new opportunities and experiences.



# NEXT STEPS

An action taken during the conversations was to signpost young people and foster carers to the Get InVOLved Norfolk website, where they would be able to search for and apply for volunteering opportunities. Information about the platform was shared in seven of the ten one-to-one discussions. Volunteering opportunities available with Break were also discussed.

Several of the young people expressed interest in exploring the platform:

- “Get Involved was discussed and the young person was interested in looking through opportunities.”

# FURTHER INFORMATION

## LINKS

National Volunteering for Health Programme - [Volunteering for Health - CW+](#)  
Norfolk Volunteering for Health Project - [Volunteering for Health | Get Involved Skills](#)  
Community Voices - [Community Voices - Norfolk and Waveney ICS](#)  
Norfolk Integrated Care System - [Norfolk and Waveney Integrated Care System \(ICS\)](#)  
Voluntary Norfolk - [Volunteer Services, Support & Community Work | Voluntary Norfolk](#)  
Get InVOLved Norfolk - [Volunteering opportunities in Norfolk | Get InVOLved Norfolk](#)  
Break - [Changing young lives in East Anglia - Break](#)

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