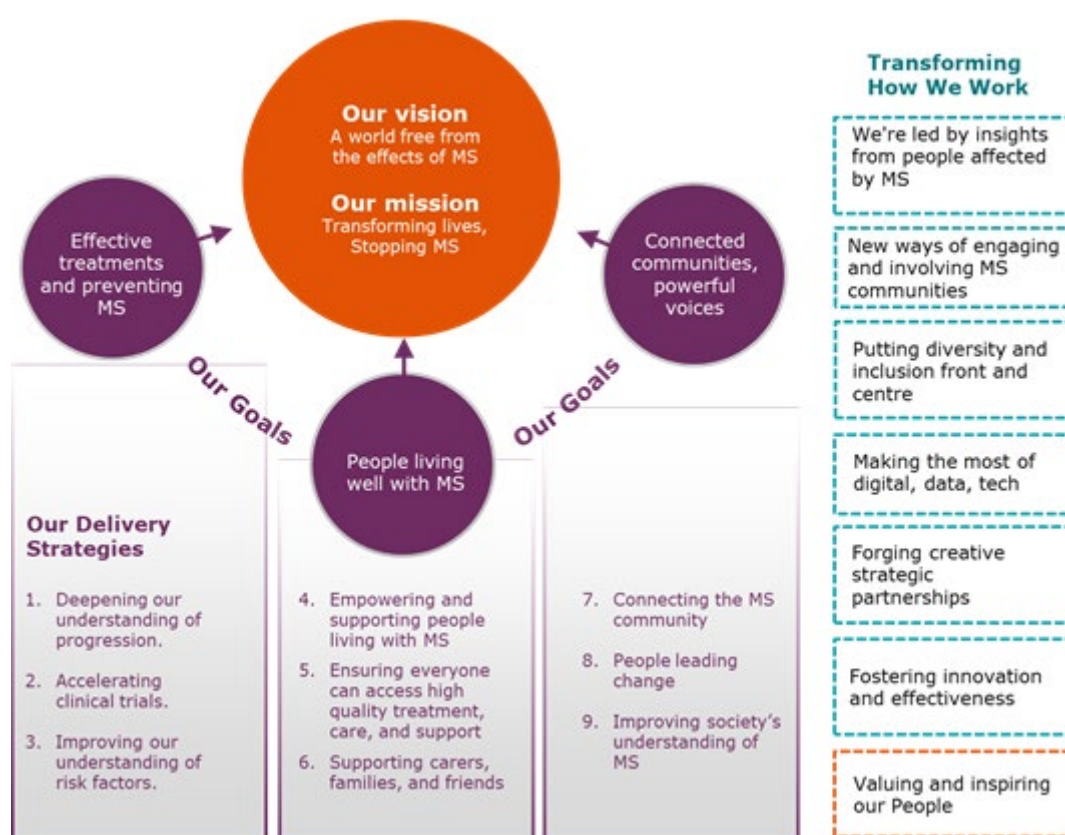


# Volunteering Strategy

January 2021 – January 2024

## 1 Introduction

- 1.1 In September 2019, the MS Society approved a new organisational strategy, 'Every MS Story' for 2020-24, which can be summarised as follows:



- 1.2 The strategy recognised the need for the MS Society to transform and adapt in six key areas including volunteering ("Valuing and inspiring our people") in order to achieve better impact.

- 1.3 The scope of this Volunteering Strategy includes all volunteers. Volunteers are defined in the MS Society Volunteer Involvement Policy as follows:

"A volunteer is anyone who, without compensation or expectation of compensation beyond reimbursement of out of pocket expenses, performs a role at the direction of and on behalf of the MS Society."

- 1.4 Volunteers are incredibly important to MS Society. They play a crucial role in leading and delivering our strategic goals, and are involved in many areas of work, including: Board of Trustees; National Councils; Community Networks (we have

250+ local groups across the UK); Helpline; Research Network; Fundraisers, Experts by Experience and Campaigners.

- 1.5 Volunteering is also important to our volunteers. With the majority affected by MS themselves, many tell us that volunteering gives them a much-needed sense of purpose, provides a way to meet others affected by MS, and gives a sense of satisfaction through being able to help others going through familiar challenges. As such, volunteering is much more than a means to an end at the MS Society.
- 1.6 The roles of volunteers are diverse, and they have varying levels of responsibility, from Trustees, through to social media campaigners.

## 2 Current position and drivers for change

- 2.1 **Volunteers are not diverse, limiting our ability to engage with the MS Community and posing barriers to participation.** The Volunteer Survey 2019 indicated that current volunteers are not very diverse, and do not reflect the wider MS community (or wider society). Most volunteers (93% of 522 survey respondents) identified themselves as White British; most (70%) were aged 55 or over, just 9% were aged 44 or below and 0% of survey respondents were aged 18-24. Most volunteers (73%) were retired/ not looking for work. 23% of volunteers were employed (12% part-time and 11% full-time work). A tiny proportion (2%) were students.
- 2.2 The majority (81%) of volunteers reported a direct connection with MS: 55% reported having MS themselves, and 26% said they had a friend or family member with MS.
- 2.3 MS or the diversity characteristics of volunteers may be closely linked with barriers to participation. In the Volunteer Survey 2019, some feedback indicated the volunteering experience could be more inclusive: "It's hard being a young person in an old person's world"; and "Remember Cornwall is far away for forums etc. MS fatigue is also a big part in all day events". However, because survey respondents were not very diverse, there remains a gap in our understanding about how inclusive the volunteering experience is, what the barriers to participation are, and therefore a need to conduct further research.
- 2.4 **We don't have enough volunteers to meet demand.** At the MS Society in 2019, we lost roughly the same amount of volunteers as we were able to attract, which means that volunteer numbers were fairly static. We started the beginning of the year with 3,241 volunteers, and ended it with slightly less: 3,219. This trend continued into 2020, and it is anticipated that overall volunteer numbers will continue to decline through 2021: many are aging (21% of current volunteers are aged 70+) and increasingly suffering ill-health. This along with a desire to shield from COVID-19 limits the ability/ desire of many to continue. Community Network volunteers report volunteer recruitment as their number one challenge. At the end of Q2 (2020), just 37 local groups (15%) were advertising vacancies through Online Recruitment, which means the vast majority are relying on word of mouth, and "fishing from the same pools", which may explain the difficulty many are experiencing in attracting new volunteers.
- 2.5 There may be untapped opportunities to attract more volunteers:

- In 2017, the Office of National Statistics (ONS) reported that generally in society, the one age group volunteering more, was the 18-24 age bracket (which currently makes up less than 2% of our volunteers).
- Online Recruitment, used in conjunction with social media, is highly likely to increase our reach, and number of applications. However, social media is not widely used to boost recruitment.
- At the time of writing, MS Society is proposing changes to our membership offer. All individuals wanting to get more involved with us will be presented with a varied range of supporter options. There is an opportunity to embed volunteering in this offer and increase applications. Our challenge will be to provide a flexible, attractive range of roles to choose from (see section 2.5 below).

## 2.6 And to increase the extent to which volunteers can achieve our goals:

- In recent months, across society, we have seen an uprising of a different type of volunteering – a groundswell of self-driven social action often facilitated via social media. For example, the many community-level Mutual Aid groups set up in response to COVID-19, Extinction Rebellion and campaigns like the #MeToo movement. We have seen from our own volunteers how agile they can be, e.g. with local groups partnering together, sharing Zoom accounts, delivering online chair yoga sessions and increasing their reach and number of beneficiaries at this time of great need. Our challenge will be to grow a culture of try-test-learn-share, empowering volunteers and removing any perceived barriers, such that successful initiatives can be scaled up and rolled out more widely.

## 2.7 **Ensuring volunteers have the skills necessary for their roles.** The current approach to developing volunteer learning solutions is to respond to those who request it, rather than to strategically focus on key learning areas. There are also significant challenges with the technology we use: our Learner Management System does not currently interface with our CRM, meaning it is not possible to easily identify which volunteers require which training course. This has resulted in gaps in the learning solutions available, or blockages in how they are rolled out. This poses risks to the quality of our service delivery. Volunteer managers play a key role in ensuring volunteers receive the correct training, but this responsibility is often unclear (see section 2.6 below). For all these reasons, it is not surprising that we receive hugely varied feedback from volunteers about the quality of training and support provided.

Many volunteers have requested more digital learning solutions. In light of COVID-19, this need only increases. There are also many volunteers requesting opportunities to come together and learn from each other, at times such as welcome and induction into MS Society.

## 2.8 **Making volunteering easier and more fun.** Many volunteers say they would like less “red tape” in their volunteering experience where it is not necessary. One place red tape is applied inconsistently is upon recruitment. For example, interviews for role, or checks and balances such as references, occur inconsistently across the MS Society. The risk is to the quality of the volunteering experience, and the quality of the service we offer through volunteers. We need to make sure we are applying checks and balances upon recruitment where they are required, to ensure we are welcoming people with the right skills and attributes into our organisation. However, many volunteer roles have lower levels of responsibility, such as Marathon Cheerers.

Where these checks and balances are not required, they should not be applied, making the “volunteer journey” as easy as possible.

- 2.9 External evidence shows a rise in demand for easy access, low commitment volunteering roles, and/ or micro volunteering opportunities – dip-in, dip-out activities which can often be completed online, and fit around busy lifestyles (NCVO, 2013). There may be opportunities to restructure current roles to attract more applicants. Group Coordinators, for example, often report their role to be stressful: *“My problem is my condition has deteriorated and I only struggle on because there is no one else willing to take it on just now but I'm sure it's not helping me in any way anymore”*.
- 2.10 Further, considering the impact of COVID-19 and the need to deliver more services digitally, there may be more opportunities to A. develop more digital/ remote volunteering opportunities (which may be easier to access) and B. manage volunteers more efficiently and easily, at either central or regional level. This may provide a more attractive offer to those who are less keen on the traditional local group structure.
- 2.11 **Weaknesses in volunteer management capacity and skill damages the volunteer experience.** Volunteer managers play the hugely important roles of recruiting, welcoming and inducting volunteers, giving feedback and thanks, motivating and improving performance of volunteers. They are the point of contact for support and the person who can step in if things go wrong. Consistent application of policies and procedures is impossible without volunteer managers. At an organisational level, volunteer managers can also be great champions of change, and can help to build a culture of “Together”. There is external evidence to show that the number 1 reason people quit volunteering is “the volunteer leader who doesn’t know how to lead” (McKee, T.W. 2017).
- 2.12 Yet, responsibilities of this role, and who the volunteer managers are (whether staff or volunteers) is often unclear. This makes performance of the role difficult: *“could (there) be more clarity on who is a Volunteer Manager...If Group coordinator is the person then maybe volunteers should be aware of what the Coordinator's role entails, which may stop negative feedback i.e. well you're just a volunteer too”* (feedback from a Group Coordinator).
- 2.13 Further, many volunteers say they would like more feedback about how they are doing in their roles: *“I (get) no real constructive critique of what I do, I basically just get on with it”* and, as discussed in section 2.6, request more recognition/ thanks for their contribution. Finally, we lack clear guidance on how volunteer managers should check in with volunteers such as through one-to-one sessions/ reviews, and the training and support we provide for volunteer managers is limited.
- 2.14 **We need to improve volunteer engagement and satisfaction.** In order to ensure we have enough volunteers to meet demand, we must focus on retaining them, as well as increasing applications upon recruitment. We must build a volunteer experience which is rewarding and motivating, and encourages volunteers to stay with us for longer. Many volunteers say they do not feel respected, trusted or listened to, which can lead to them disengaging with MS Society, a lack of motivation, and in some cases, leaving their roles altogether: *Staff want volunteers to do what they are told and not to ask questions.”* There is also a sense of

disconnect between MS National Centre and volunteers: *"The average volunteer or Group Member never meets a MSNC representative"*, which can hinder how "Together" staff and volunteers feel, ultimately damaging the quality of the services we are able to offer through volunteers. Finally, some volunteers tell us they would like improvements in how we reward and recognise them: *"A thank you from HQ would be nice. I don't think they know I exist"* and *"I do not need national recognition but occasional local thanks would be nice!"*

- 2.15 **Weaknesses in our supporter/ volunteer engagement strategy:** The MS Society involves volunteers in many different areas, as noted in 1.4. However, a fragmented approach to communication, engagement and management of volunteer data; means opportunities are missed to help volunteers feel part of a single team, working and volunteering together transform lives and stop MS. This hinders engagement: we have seen from initiatives like the Olympics how motivated volunteers can feel when they all feel connected to a movement that is larger than their own direct work. If our volunteers were more informed about different ways to get involved in our work, they may want to contribute more time through alternative volunteering opportunities, take part in fundraising events, or make direct financial donations. This may lead to a stronger, longer commitment to the MS Society. We may also be missing opportunities to facilitate peer support/ sharing of ideas, and to diversify our volunteers (e.g. those who volunteer in more flexible ways from home, such as the Helpline, have a younger average age than those who volunteer in more traditional roles).
- 2.16 **Volunteer data is inaccurate and incomplete.** We hold data on volunteers on various platforms, which do not interface with each other. For example, our Online Recruitment system, and Learner management system, do not interface with our Customer Relationship Management (CRM) database. This means the data we have on volunteers is vulnerable to human error, is inaccurate and incomplete. This limits our ability to understand how many volunteers we have, or what their diversity characteristics or learning needs are. It means we miss opportunities to measure the impact of volunteers accurately, or recognise long service. When we communicate with individuals, we do it in silos – not recognising different supporter actions, which can be demotivating. A single sign-on function, whereby volunteers don't have multiple systems to log into and multiple log in details to recall, along with a self-service data function, would lead to more effective use and more accurate/ complete data.

### 3 Vision statement

- 3.1 A strong and diverse community of volunteers in flexible roles; transforming the lives of people affected by MS

### 4 Outcomes and objectives

- 4.1 Linked to the drivers for change, we have identified 4 outcomes we will achieve through this strategy:
- Increased diversity and inclusion amongst volunteers
  - Increased volunteer capacity, at individual and organisational level
  - More engaged and satisfied volunteers
  - Volunteer data is more accurate and complete



The objectives we will pursue to achieve these outcomes are as follows:

4.2 **Equality, diversity and inclusion:** We aim to increase the diversity of our volunteers, and build a more inclusive volunteering culture. We will deepen our understanding of the barriers to participation faced by minority groups, in particular, those from ethnic minority groups and younger people. We will do this through further qualitative and quantitative research, including purposeful conversations, with volunteers and members of the public from these groups. We will collaborate with the HR team to develop an organisation-wide EDI Strategy, seeking to build a greater sense of Togetherness and inclusion across staff and volunteers. Deliverables within the strategy may include courageous conversations to tackle prejudice; building capacity of volunteer managers to recruit and retain more diverse volunteers; embedding a systematic approach to monitoring diversity characteristics, and sharing success stories.

4.3 **Volunteer numbers and capacity:** we aim to increase volunteer numbers and capacity, such that vacancies are filled quickly, and demand is met. We will pilot an improved approach to Online Recruitment, which we hope will yield higher numbers and more diverse volunteers. The pilot will include the testing of a new volunteer role(s), based within e.g. local groups, dedicated to volunteer recruitment; building the capacity of volunteer managers to use social media and local networks to attract new volunteers, and a strong element of coproduction. We will use the learning from this pilot to develop a Recruitment and Selection Policy, which will help to embed consistent good practice and ensure we recruit volunteers with the right skills for their roles.

We will perform research to enhance our understanding of the audiences more likely to volunteer with us (including different segments within the MS community), enabling us to develop a more successful marketing plan.

If planned changes to our membership offer go ahead, we will embed volunteering in our engagement offer as a key supporter action.

4.4 **Volunteering is more flexible and fun, and volunteers are more engaged and satisfied:** we will transform and build a modernised, positive volunteering culture, experience and offer. We will create a range of flexible, accessible volunteer roles across service provision, digital, campaigns, research and volunteer management/support, pushing ourselves to consider opportunities in new areas e.g. analytics. We will embed the MS Society values across and between groups of volunteers and develop flexible volunteer journeys, from recruitment to retention and exit, proportionate to the risk in the role. We will communicate using straightforward, concise language, and ensure red tape is kept to a minimum. We'll increase volunteer engagement and empowerment through a UK-wide Volunteer Forum, strengthening a sense of Togetherness across all volunteers, and staff. We'll also embed volunteering in an organisational-wide supporter engagement strategy. We'll refresh our reward and recognition offer, and share volunteer success stories often and widely.

4.5 **Volunteer management and leadership capacity is improved:** we aim to clarify understanding and increase awareness across the MS Society of the role and responsibilities of volunteer managers, such that volunteer managers give volunteers a more consistent experience, wherever they are at the MS Society. We will review the leadership and management structure for all volunteers, potentially developing

new roles if gaps are identified or the “management load” needs to be spread. We’ll support volunteer managers across all aspects, including recruitment, data monitoring, welcome and induction, policy implementation, ongoing support and supervision / performance improvement, reward and recognition, resolving volunteer issues, and exit. We’ll develop opportunities for peer support/ learning; provide an excellent Advice and Support Service and develop/ improve policies, procedures and guidance for volunteer managers, including Recruitment and Selection; Resolving Volunteer Issues and Disclosure policies.

- 4.6 **Volunteers’ skill and knowledge to do their role is increased:** we aim to develop a more strategic, effective and efficient approach to volunteering learning and development. We will increase volunteers’ skills and knowledge required for them to effectively carry out their roles, in crucial learning areas such as Data Protection; Health and Safety; Equality, Diversity and Inclusion; Financial management and Volunteer Management. We will improve the Induction experience, and deliver quarterly online welcome events to all new volunteers.
- 4.7 **Volunteer data is more accurate and complete:** we aim to ensure that integration of volunteer data is central to plans and developments on the new data platform, such that accuracy and completeness of data is improved, and key systems such as Online Recruitment and the LMS interface with each other. We will perform research to measure performance, compliance and impact of volunteers, and improve the data and insights we have on volunteers through the Volunteer Survey, Exit Survey and qualitative research.

## 5 Enablers

- 5.1 A number of specific enablers will support the delivery of this strategy.
- 5.2 **Technology that enables automated interfacing between volunteer data sources;** volunteer management and accuracy and completeness of data. A data platform that we interface with the Learner Management System and Online Recruitment System will be essential to ensure all volunteers can access the training/ learning they need to do their roles, and have easier, higher quality volunteer journeys. A self-service function will support the achievement of accurate and complete volunteer data. Technology which enables peer learning and sharing of success stories between volunteers and recognition mechanisms such as thumbs up, will help to strengthen volunteer management capacity across the organisation.
- 5.3 **Recruiting volunteers with the right skills:** digital mechanisms are increasingly being used to e.g. recruit and communicate with volunteers, support volunteer learning and to ensure data protection. We will need to ensure the new volunteers we bring into MS Society are comfortable using digital methods (or willing to learn) and have the necessary equipment.
- 5.4 **Collaboration and cross-team objectives** will be central to the success of this strategy. We will not, for example, have success in rolling out mandatory learning solutions, or Online Recruitment, without close collaboration and shared objectives with the Community Networks Team.
- 5.5 **Coproduction with current and potential volunteers and volunteer managers** will be necessary if we are to develop solutions that will work for current volunteers (and achieve their buy in), as well as attract new volunteers.

- 5.6 **Excellent routes of communication** will be necessary to ensure we are engaging with volunteers, enabling them to influence and bringing them along with us.
- 5.7 **Leaders of change:** we will need to identify and work in partnership with volunteers who can champion change, roll out key messages, identify successes, help us to problem solve and adapt our approach along the way.

## 6 Risk and mitigations

There are several risks to the successful implementation of this strategy, as follows:

- 6.1 The ongoing prevalence of COVID-19, and absence (at the time of writing) of a vaccine, poses several significant risks. Currently, 21% of MS Society volunteers are over the age of 70, and 86% are affected by MS. It is likely that many of them will continue to shield from the virus and may therefore choose not to continue volunteering. COVID-19 may also discourage those who might otherwise have applied to volunteer with us. We will mitigate this risk by stepping up our efforts to identify ways for volunteers to continue in role remotely, without the need for face-to-face interaction, and by promoting these roles widely externally.
- 6.2 If a data platform is chosen which does not enable interfacing between key sources of volunteer data including the Learner Management and Online Recruitment systems, this will severely hinder our ability to e.g. ensure that all volunteers receive the training they need to do their roles, or that all new volunteers receive an appropriate welcome and induction. This poses associated risks to legal compliance and the safety of volunteers and beneficiaries. The quality of the whole volunteer journey will suffer which is likely to lead to further disengagement and churn. We will mitigate this risk by using every opportunity to communicate the importance of these issues and ensure they are considered during the development phase of the new data platform.
- 6.3 As noted in this strategy, volunteer engagement has areas for improvement, and may have been further damaged by the restructure in 2020. It is of crucial importance that strong relationships are forged and maintained with all volunteers, building trust and a sense of "Togetherness" with the staff team. If we do not, it is unlikely that we will be successful in gaining buy-in from volunteers in the roll out of new initiatives, and worse, many may decide to stop volunteering altogether. We will mitigate this risk through working collaboratively across volunteer-involving teams, seeking to develop shared priorities for improving volunteer engagement and embedding volunteer management/ relationship building skills across the MS Society.
- 6.4 This is a strategy for volunteering for MS Society as a whole, it requires buy-in from all volunteer involving teams, and delivery of objectives is often dependent on the work of other teams. For example, development of training courses requires the support of subject matter experts, and completion requires the support of the Community Networks Team to roll them out. We will mitigate this risk by involving all key volunteer-involving teams in the development of this strategy, and through continued communication with key stakeholders through mechanisms such as working groups, and/ or "volunteering champions" within teams.



## 7 Impact Assessment Plan and Key Performance Indicators

Recognising that COVID-19 has and is likely to continue to have a huge impact on overall volunteer numbers, we will focus some of our KPIs on the new volunteers we are attracting to MS Society, rather than overall numbers

| Outcome  | Indicator   | Monitoring and Evaluation plan   | 2020 baseline                           | 2024 target                                   |
|--|---|--|---|---|
| Diversity and inclusion amongst volunteers is increased                | Number of incoming volunteers reporting a non-White-British ethnicity           | Information obtained upon recruitment<br><br>Qualitative and quantitative research such as interviews and the Volunteering Survey.   | 7% (of Volunteering Survey respondents) | 14% (to align with UK population)             |
|  | The average age of brand new volunteers joining MS Society                      |  | 53                                      | 47  |
| Volunteer capacity is increased at individual and organisational level | Number of brand new volunteers joining the MS Society p/ year                   | Number of incoming volunteers will be recorded on the CRM by the Community Networks Team. This will be monitored and analysed once p/ quarter.   | 500                                     | 1000  |
|  | Number of volunteers who have completed mandatory learning areas for their role | The Learner Management System (LMS) will be used to monitor the numbers of volunteers undertaking training in mandatory learning areas. We will use surveys and interviews to further assess extent of learning and satisfaction with training provided. | GDPR: 77% of all key roles              | 100%  |
|  | Number of local groups that use Online Recruitment                              | Number of local groups using Online Recruitment to recruit volunteers will be monitored through REACH – our Online Recruitment system.   | 37 (15%)                                | 250 (100%)                                    |
| Volunteers are more engaged and satisfied                              | Composite volunteer engagement score  | A composite score obtained through a set of questions asked in the Volunteering Survey. We will also measure engagement in the UK Volunteer Forum, and consider qualitative feedback received through the Volunteering Survey.                           | 77                                      | 82 (bringing the score into the “good” range) |

In addition to the above measures/ KPIs, we will:

- Assess the extent to which we have built a culture of Togetherness and Inclusivity across staff and volunteers via the Staff and Volunteer Surveys
- Assess how flexible, fun and satisfying the volunteering experience has become by:
  - Reporting on the number of flexible and accessible/ micro roles created, and number of applications to these roles
  - Assessing satisfaction levels of volunteers through the Volunteering survey (qualitative and quantitative feedback)
  - Celebrating the achievement of milestones, such as flexible, proportionate volunteer journeys set-up and running
- Assess our success in strengthening volunteer management and leadership capacity by:
  - Obtaining feedback from volunteer managers about what they see as their role and how confident they are in applying key policies and procedures, through mechanisms like interviews, focus groups and/ or surveys
  - Seeking feedback from volunteers generally about how they feel about the feedback they are receiving in their roles, through the Volunteering Survey
  - Celebrating the achievement of milestones, such as a widely accepted definition of “volunteer manager”, and updated role descriptions of volunteer managers to clarify responsibilities/ expectations.
- Assess the extent to which volunteer data is more accurate and complete, and systems are interfacing with each other, through:
  - A random sample of phone interviews with e.g. Group Coordinators, cross referencing their list of current volunteers with that which is on our CRM
  - By monitoring and reporting on the number of systems (where volunteer data is held) which are amalgamated or enabled to interface with each other