

INVESTING IN VOLUNTEERS FINAL REPORT



Firsthand Lothian

2025

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Summary information

liV host organisation	Volunteer Scotland
Assessment date(s)	24 th , 25 th , 26 th , 27 th , 28 th February 2025

Assessor	Selina Ross
Name of lead assessor	Sue Van Horen
1st assessment/renewal	5th Renewal
Assessment outcome	Met

About the organisation

Firsthand Lothian (FHL) exists to support children, young people with disabilities and their families, parents and carers to help improve their health and wellbeing, confidence and resilience. Established in 1992, this registered charity aims to increase resiliency and improve well-being of vulnerable, disadvantaged families and families with a child or children with a disability.

Delivered one-to-one in the family's local community, the charity provides support services, guidance, information and opportunities for parent / carers to connect. Services are funded from a variety of trust and grant sources, supplemented by fundraising activities and individual donations.

The charity is committed to developing and delivering projects which meet the increasing level of enquiries they receive from across Edinburgh. Currently this includes:

- Time-limited support for children up to 16 years of age to achieve their goals & develop confidence
- Support for children and young people to explore opportunities available to them in their local community to improve their mental health and wellbeing
- Working with parents to support them to establish routines with their children
- Support for isolated parents who have few support networks of their own

Services are delivered by both paid staff and volunteers.

How the organisation was assessed

The assessment was carried out over the equivalent of one day with all interviews taking place on a one-to-one basis by telephone and via Microsoft Teams video calls. Considerable thanks are recorded for the assistance provided by the organisation in seamlessly administering this process.

The volunteer interview sample was drawn from information supplied by the organisation and appropriately reflected volunteering roles and geographical spread. In line with the sampling guidance, care was also taken to reflect gender, age and duration of involvement. In total, 11 volunteers were interviewed for the assessment, including one trustee, and supplemented by two staff members.

Three specific pieces of evidence were submitted and reviewed alongside the organisation's self-assessment submission – the volunteer policy, the organisation's annual report and volunteer made video clips, promoting volunteering and the services offered. During the course of the assessment, the organisation's social media and web presence were also considered.

NUMBER OF SITES, BRANCHES, LOCATIONS:	1
NUMBER INCLUDED IN INTERVIEW SAMPLE:	1

NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS:	14
NUMBER INTERVIEWED:	10
NUMBER AS % OF TOTAL:	70%

NUMBER OF VOLUNTEER ROLES:	2
NUMBER OF ROLES SAMPLED BY INTERVIEW:	2
NUMBER AS % OF TOTAL:	100%

NUMBER OF STAFF:	5
NUMBER INTERVIEWED:	2
WERE TRUSTEES INTERVIEWED?	Yes

WRITTEN EVIDENCE:

Completed Self-Assessment form

Volunteer Policy

Annual report

Volunteer video clips

DURING REVIEW:

Role description

Social media

Web presence

Meeting the standard

Quality area 1: Vision for volunteering

Volunteering is embedded within the overall vision, values, culture and aims of the organisation and its impact is recognised and communicated. Organisations understand why they involve volunteers

Practice		Met
1.1	Volunteering is planned and reviewed in line with the organisation's vision, strategy, and values	Yes
1.2	Volunteering is valued as part of the culture of the organisation and the benefits of volunteering are understood and communicated	Yes
1.3	The impact of volunteering in contributing to organisation aims is understood and communicated	Yes
1.4	Volunteer involvement is reflected in management, financial and resource planning	Yes

Volunteering features prominently in the service delivery of Firsthand Lothian, clearly acknowledging the contribution volunteers make as respected members of the service team. This is underpinned by the organisation's clear reciprocal commitment to providing positive volunteering experiences.

A trustee explained, 'Volunteering is vital to all we do, providing consistency in delivery for our young people and families, but more so, the benefits to families from knowing support is there not just paid staff, but from people who have made an active choice to give up their own time to get involved is just priceless. Quotes from supervision activities are regularly fed into board meetings alongside reports on activity, so I feel there is a strong thread through the organisation.'

A staff member further voiced their appreciation for, and understanding of, the value volunteers bring to the organisation saying, 'Our volunteers are critical to our team and how we deliver our services. We could not operate without them. They are valued colleagues.'

These views mirrored the comments of volunteers, who stated, 'I knew the kind of volunteering I wanted to do, and when I looked into it, Firsthand just seemed the right fit for me. From the first email I just got a good feeling about them and how they work,' 'I volunteer elsewhere too, but this is where I feel my contribution is most valued' and 'A friend who knew the organisation suggested them to me and I am so glad they did. I really like that Firsthand is a small charity because I feel that you can see more clearly just how much your contribution is valued by the organisation and the impact it has on the families.'

Another volunteer added, 'I wasn't sure what to expect but I have been pleasantly surprised how much they value volunteers and look after us. I feel they have really committed to involving volunteers and have invested in us.' A staff member confirmed the inclusion of volunteer expenses in funding applications.

Quality area 2. Planning for volunteers

People, policies, and procedures have been put in place to ensure volunteering is well-managed

Practice		Met
2.1	There are specific and proportionate systems and processes for volunteer involvement that are regularly reviewed	Yes
2.2	Relevant people in the organisation are aware of systems and processes relating to volunteering and why they are important	Yes
2.3	There are designated people responsible for volunteers and volunteering that have experiences, competencies and attributes for the role	Yes
2.4	Systems are in place to ensure the management of risk, safeguarding, health and wellbeing and protection of volunteers, the organisation, and others	Yes
2.5	There are problem solving procedures to deal with issues raised by or about volunteers	Yes
2.6	Records of volunteer involvement are maintained in line with data protection	Yes

Most people-focussed policies include reference to both volunteers and paid staff, and both staff and volunteers attend the same induction training. These, alongside the organisation's volunteer policy, are reviewed regularly.

A trustee expressed confidence in the volunteering programme saying, 'I was previously a volunteer with the service, so now on the board I feel positive that strong foundations are in place. As a board we have regular updates on volunteer activity.' A staff member, who was able to relate considerable experience in volunteer support, concurred stating, 'It's important to everyone in the organisation that our volunteers feel well supported and we work hard to do everything we can to make that happen. It doesn't matter who a volunteer goes to in the organisation, they will get the support and advice they need. All staff know this is an important part of their role.' Staff are supported to access ongoing volunteer management training.

Risk assessments are conducted around each volunteer/service user match, with volunteers informed of appropriate safeguarding procedures. A staff member said, 'Keeping everyone safe is hugely important to us. At training and when we are matching people we are clear around boundaries and how to raise concerns.'

A volunteer said, 'I feel very safe in my volunteering and I really welcomed the focus on boundaries. I volunteer somewhere else too and I wish their training had the same focus that First-Hand has.' Another volunteer added, 'We are given a list of possible places and activities when we start. I found it really useful in the beginning while I was getting to know my match.'

Knowledge of the organisation's approach to volunteer problem solving was widely known. All volunteers were comfortable to challenge any request or task felt to be inappropriate to their role or experience. One volunteer said, 'At the training, they told us that it was important that if we ever felt unsure about anything we should say. I don't think it would happen, but if I ever did feel uncomfortable in any way, I wouldn't hesitate to contact Evie.'

The organisation maintains individual volunteer personal record folders on a password protected drive, with access limited to appropriate staff members. Information is held and destroyed in accordance with GDPR requirements.

Quality area 3. Volunteer inclusion

There is a positive approach to inclusion, equity and diversity and a proactive approach to making volunteering accessible

Practice		Met
3.1	The organisation is inclusive and managed in a way that encourages the involvement of and is welcoming to a wide range of people	Yes
3.2	There is a proactive approach to increasing volunteer diversity, addressing under-representation, and including targeted groups as part of the organisation's inclusion, equity and diversity aims	Yes
3.3	Information about volunteering opportunities is made as widely available as possible using a range of methods and there is active engagement with a diverse range of people	Yes
3.4	Where possible there is a wide range of accessible opportunities that can be adapted throughout the volunteer's journey	Yes

Volunteers felt that the profile of the volunteering team generally represented a wide range of ages, backgrounds and experiences. Images used across communication and recruitment materials appear to support this. Comments received included, 'I think the mix of people involved is good' and 'For me I would say the organisation is open to everyone who wants to get involved.'

Staff generally agreed with this, while recognising that ensuring inclusion would be an ongoing area of focus. A staff member stated, 'I would say that our volunteers reflect a wide range of backgrounds and experiences and it's important to us that we recruit as diverse a group of volunteers as we can. We need that to be able to properly match up our families.'

A trustee added, 'At service level, I think our volunteers reflect well the diversity of our community. Perhaps we could do more at trustee level.'

The organisation routinely recruits widely via links with universities, the local volunteer centre, website, social media channels, word of mouth and outreach sessions. A number of volunteers described finding the opportunity through an

internet search. One volunteer said, 'I looked online and Firsthand came up on the search. When I read into it, it just looked exactly what I was looking for.' Another volunteer said, 'My flatmate knew I was looking for an opportunity to help with my studies and told me about the organisation. They had contact with them in the past and were really positive about them. I am so glad they did.'

The nature of the role requires a defined role description and level of commitment be asked for; however the organisation looks to offer flexibility where it can. One volunteer said, 'I was about to start a new match, but I've had to take a break away because of a family issue. They have been just amazingly understanding and have kept in touch with me, just to see how I am. I can't tell you how amazing that is.'

Quality area 4. Recruiting and welcoming volunteers

It is easy for people to find out about opportunities, explore whether they are right for them, and get involved

Practice		Met
4.1	People are clear about the opportunities available and the process to become involved	Yes
4.2	Recruitment processes and checks are timely, fair, consistent, straightforward and appropriate	Yes
4.3	Recruitment is a two-way process for volunteers to find out more and that considers how individual and organisational needs can be met	Yes
4.4	Volunteers are provided with any necessary information, introductions and training for their role	Yes

The Firsthand Lothian website clearly lays out the process of getting involved. All volunteers agreed the process was straightforward and progressed promptly. Comments included, 'I completed the form online, was interviewed and completed my PVG application. It was an easy quick process' and 'For a small organisation, they communicate very well. They responded to my application quickly and were always on hand to answer any questions.'

Volunteers confirmed that prior to formally applying, they were offered the opportunity of an informal discussion to chat through the role and their personal motivations for wanting to sign-up. One volunteer said, 'I was pleasantly surprised that they seemed as interested in helping me meet my goals as I was in helping them.' The volunteer role description outlines the details of the role, time commitment, and the training and support offered. Another volunteer said, 'They were willing to be flexible and accommodate my schedule. I am working and studying so I valued this.'

In addition to the shared induction, volunteers are required to complete the mandatory training programme. Volunteers were complimentary describing the training as 'more thorough than I thought it would be but that's a positive, not a

criticism,' 'well-paced' and 'comprehensive and well-delivered.' One volunteer said, 'The training covered everything to prepare you for the role and the ideas they gave around places to go and things to do was perfectly pitched.' All volunteers stated that they felt supported both during and after the sessions. They reassured us that we would never be left unsupported and the have kept to that. No matter what time your match meetings are, there is always someone available to get in touch with if you need to.'

Onboarding and induction processes also gained positive comments including, 'It feels like I have been here for ever and I'm part of a special family. Everyone has been so welcoming and approachable.'

Quality area 5. Supporting volunteers

Volunteers feel supported at all times, that they are a part of the organisation and that their contribution makes a difference

Practice		Met
5.1	Volunteers feel appropriately supported in their role and able to discuss all aspects of their volunteering	Yes
5.2	Volunteers and everyone in the organisation who comes into contact with volunteers are clear about the scope of volunteer roles and what volunteers can expect from the organisation	Yes
5.3	Volunteers have the opportunity to discuss how they are doing	Yes
5.4	Volunteers have opportunities to express their views and ideas and to be involved in relevant decision making	Yes
5.5	Volunteers feel there is good communication between themselves and the organisation	Yes
5.6	There are systems for volunteers to have a positive and managed exit	Yes

Reflecting of the nature of the role, staff are available at all times to offer volunteer support and/or the opportunity to debrief. Volunteers may also request an individual one-to-one session where they feel this would better suit the circumstances. Comments gained during assessment included, 'I feel well supported. I can contact the staff whenever I need them, and I know they will be there for me' and 'I can't speak highly enough of the team. Nothing seems too much for them.'

A staff member added, 'Especially in the early stages of the match, I always make sure I am available for any issues that may have cropped up. If for any reason I'm not, the volunteers all have a second contact point. As a small team, it's important we work together.' A volunteer added, 'In the beginning I had some issues with my match because of some of the behavioural issues of the child, and the staff were amazing. I felt like I was emailing all the time, but they were really supportive and reassuring, so I persevered and I am so glad that I did.'

The value of team working was strongly reinforced, with a staff member noting, 'Boundaries are important in this type of work, between our families and volunteers, and between staff and volunteers but that doesn't take away from the value of our team.' Volunteers agreed with one saying, 'I think the volunteers and staff work well together here. That hasn't always been my experience in other volunteering roles.'

Volunteer views on their ability to engage with the organisation were equally positive including, 'I have found them to be really encouraging feedback and comments, regularly checking in with us about how we feel about things and looking for suggestions on how to improve things.' A trustee confirmed this saying, 'We welcome and encourage our people to get involved in all aspects of the organisation. As an example, our parent/carer forum presented to the last AGM. It was fabulous for us to hear their views being expressed so confidently.'

Volunteers leaving the organisation are invited to attend an exit meeting, affording the opportunity to review their experience, and receive a thank you email from the Chief Executive. Volunteers for whom the opportunity proves unsuitable are supported to engage with the local volunteer centre to seek an alternative volunteering option.

Quality area 6: Valuing and developing volunteers

Volunteers are valued and there are opportunities for volunteers to develop and grow through their experience

Practice	Met
6.1 Volunteers feel their contribution is meaningful and rewarding	Yes
6.2 Volunteers feel valued by and a part of the organisation	Yes
6.3 The experiences, attributes and competencies that volunteers bring are recognised and they have opportunities to develop them	Yes
6.4 Volunteers have the opportunity for connecting with and learning from other volunteers where appropriate	Yes
6.5 Volunteers' future aspirations are supported where appropriate	Yes

First-Hand Lothian acknowledges the contribution of its volunteers in a number of ways including a personal 'thank-you' after each contribution, thank you cards and emails, and invitations to social occasions, twice a year. One volunteer said, 'It was Valentine's Day recently and I received a lovely card from them.'

The importance of recognising the contribution of volunteers was highlighted by everyone interviewed. A trustee said, 'Our volunteers are a fantastic group of people, and we want to do all we can to acknowledge and celebrate them and all

they do.’ A staff member added, ‘I hope our volunteers understand how much we appreciate all they do for the organisation and for our families.’ Volunteer comments included, ‘I feel extremely valued here, ‘I’m not looking for thanks, I get enough from knowing that I am making a difference.,’ ‘I find my volunteering very satisfying. To turn to another person and see they have a smile on their face from our time together is everything to me. It makes me feel valued and you can’t put a price tag on that’ and ‘My volunteering time is my me-time. Some people like retail therapy, this is my therapy.’

A range of reasons were given for volunteering with First Hand Lothian including looking to make positive use of lived experience and professional skills, to support a programme of study and as a chance to give back. One volunteer said, ‘I know so many people don’t share my positive life experience and I believe if I can help in anyway then I want to do that.’ Volunteers confirmed that references were provided on request, after a reasonable period of engagement.

All volunteers felt their experiences and attributes were recognised and that their development needs were explored and supported. One volunteer said, ‘One thing I have learned from volunteering is never to judge a book by its cover.’

Future Plans

As noted in the last annual report, the organisation strategic plan runs until 2027 and commits the organisation to:

- Continuing to build our services to meet the changing needs of parent/ carers, children, young people and their families
- Working with relevant agencies to increase awareness of the challenges facing families who have one or more child with disability and to secure appropriate resources
- Securing sustainable funding, including strengthening our partnership work with other agencies
- Maintaining and developing the high quality of our provision through co-production with parent / carers, children and young people, staff and volunteers
- Developing a broader range of volunteering opportunities across all our services, particularly for parent/carers
- Responding to the changing trends in social care.

Strengths

A number of strengths were identified during the assessment, these are detailed below. The numbers in brackets refer to the quality area and specific practice of the Investing in Volunteers standard.

The organisation's volunteering programme is well-constructed, robust and underpinned by a suite of proportionate policies, procedures, and guidance. A volunteer said, *'I've found volunteering here to be a rewarding experience. Every question I could have had seemed to be covered in the induction and training, without it seeming too much to take in.'* **(Vision for Volunteering, 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4; Planning for Volunteering, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4; Supporting Volunteers, 5.2)**

Volunteers and staff interviewed highlighted the importance of the support role to the success of the programme and reflected positively on the energy, passion and commitment of the staff. A volunteer said, *'The staff are always offering support and encouragement without being in your face about it. I really think they have the right people on board and are amazing advocates for the ethos of the service.'* **(Vision for Volunteering, 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4; Planning for Volunteering, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4; Valuing and Developing Volunteers, 6.2, 6.4)**

Continuous development and improvement

Suggestions for continuous development and improvement are offered to help the organisation be even better than it already is in relation to involving volunteers. The adoption of these suggestions and progress against them will be followed up on and more fully explored during the renewal assessment in three years' time. The numbers in brackets refer to the quality area and specific practice of the Investing in Volunteers standard.

All volunteers spoke highly of the training offered by Firsthand Lothian, recognising the breadth of content. Several volunteers felt that while the online delivery was comprehensive and accessible, an element of in-person training would add to its value. One volunteer said, 'The training over Zoom was fine, but my personal preference would be for some in-person training. The dynamic is just different and it's always good to learn more directly from other volunteers.'

Development: Given the importance of inter-personal engagement in the roles, the organisation may wish to consider whether a mixed delivery model could be developed, either within the core programme or supplementary training.
(**Recruiting and Welcoming Volunteers**, 4.4)

During assessment, volunteers considered the organisation to be open and responsive to feedback. While this is welcome, it is suggested that the organisation may wish to consider the adoption of more pro-active means of seeking volunteer views and monitoring the volunteering experience.

Development: The organisation has intimated a desire to review and simplify its paperwork relating to recording of sessions for volunteers so that it is easier to complete and capture additional useful feedback information. Consideration is also being given to adapting paperwork so it can be completed more easily by volunteers with literacy challenges or for whom English is not a first language. Both actions are supported by the assessor. (**Supporting Volunteers**, 5.1, 5.4)

A significant number of volunteers identified as students during the assessment. Almost all had found the opportunity using an online service. While each felt that after reading into the opportunity it perfectly met their needs, they felt that perhaps more could be done to promote the opportunity more directly to students. One volunteer said, 'As well as giving so much to the families, the work of First-Hand Lothian is great experience for students like me, but it seemed a bit niche to find. I think they could maybe do more to get students involved and make a bigger impact. That would benefit everyone.'

Development: The organisation may wish to talk to colleges and universities to consider how best they could promote the opportunity to the relevant cohorts. This may help increase volunteer numbers and reduce processing time, helping the

organisation make an even greater impact. Existing student volunteers may be engaged to co-deliver these sessions. (**Volunteer Inclusion**, 3.3)

All volunteers were positive around the support offered by staff. Several volunteers suggested that given the 'self-navigation' nature of the role, it may be useful to increase the opportunity for volunteers to participate in buddying/sharing opportunities. Representative of those who commented, one volunteer said, 'They are great and give you lots of information and they are always there, but I think we might benefit from just talking to each other more. I know it might be difficult to arrange when everyone is so busy, but it might be worth exploring'

Development: Acknowledging the challenges faced by small organisations at this time, it is suggested that the organisation explore whether this would be a possible addition to the support offering. (**Supporting Volunteers**, 5.3)

Interviews with volunteers underlined the organisation adopts a problem-solving approach to any issues or complaints which arise. However, the Volunteer Policy refers to the more employment focussed language of grievance.

Development: It is recommended that the organisation revise the language of the policy to reflect the volunteering context (**Planning for Volunteers**, 2.5)