Special Edition on the role of the Voluntary & Community Sector within Integrated Care

The Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) incorporates a diverse range of entities, including charities, social enterprises, volunteer led groups and community organisations. Also known as the Third Sector, the VCS range from micro-enterprises which work with defined communities within local neighbourhoods to national and international organisations. Their role spans the delivery of personal and clinical health and care services, peer support and befriending, and advocacy and representation. VCS organisations can draw on multiple income sources including charitable giving, public grants, organisational sponsorship, and commercial activities. As a sector, what binds them together is their emphasis on their underpinning value and focus on generating social value not private wealth.

The contribution of the VCS to integrated care is substantial and varied. It can incorporate – leading engagement with communities and citizens to shape the vision and strategic investments, developing connections between people and families which can address loneliness and facilitate peer support, acting as a bridge between clinical services and community resources, undertaking health promotion to diverse groups within the community to address inequalities, and creating innovative responses to longstanding and emergent needs. The value of their contribution was accentuated during the COVID 19 pandemic when it was often the VCS sector which stepped in to identify those who were isolated and provide vital practical and emotional support.

Despite these substantial contributions and potential benefits, the VCS experience many challenges to being seen as equal partners within integrated care. These include – limited and uncertain funding from public bodies, contracts which restrict their role to set activities determined by funders, health and care professionals viewing them as well-meaning but unskilled, power influence and resources being maintained within traditional hierarchies, and policy developments not fully understanding their contributions and the parameters in which they operate. There is also a partial evidence base to date of their contribution to integrated care due to limited interest from researchers and funders, challenges in accessing coherent data sources which can provide individual and population insights, and the difficulties of evaluating the impact of preventative and holistic approaches.

To respond to these gaps in the evidence base, IJIC is organising a special edition to consider the role, contribution and impacts of the VCS within integrated care. We are seeking articles of all types that bring forward the empirical and theoretical knowledge of the VCS and how innovations can be effectively and sustainably embedded within a health and social care system.

Questions of interest include, but are not limited to:

* What are the impacts of the VCS within different contexts and with different communities and population groups?
* What governance and collaborative arrangement facilitate or hinder the contribution of the VCS to integrated care?
* How does the VCS lead within integrated care partnerships and represent the views of communities, including those who are often hardly reached?
* What integrated care initiatives have been developed within the VCS which could have wider relevance and impact?
* What are methodological considerations required to assess and mobilize the contributions of the VCS be studied through innovative research and evaluation methodologies?
* What practitioner knowledge gaps contribute to the engagement of the VCS and could educational approaches facilitate intersectoral collaboration?
* How can a health and social care system build in supportive infrastructure and development to enable VCS to contribute fully to integrated care?

If you are interested in submitting an article, then there is the option to send in an abstract for comment by the editorial team before **30th September 2024**. Please send this to: [susanroyer@integratedcarefoundation.org](mailto:susanroyer@integratedcarefoundation.org) .

Full articles are to be submitted by **30th November 2024**.

Special Issue Editorial Team:

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