HTSI stands for Highland Third Sector Interface. We have an agreement with the government to provide support around third sector development, governance, things around social enterprise, promoting that, and getting people to think about different enterprising strands of income. As well looking at supporting the third sector to engage with the community planning partnership, with health and social care integration and we do that slightly differently highland from the rest of Scotland. So HTSI works with a number of organisations that it funds to deliver services out and about throughout highland, in different localities, so that hopefully people aren't too far away from some local support.

So, historically, I’ve have had a number of different volunteer roles. I think the very first time I volunteered was probably in a Blue Peter bring and buy sale when I was about 8 or something like that. So I’ve had various different roles managing charity bookshops, befriending, teaching English as a Second Language abroad. More recently I've been involved, almost inevitably, on the board of a local third sector organisation. So in this instance it was Ross-shire woman’s aid. I’ve also been a children's panel member. Most recently I’ve been involved in, and am still involved with Inverness soup

So volunteers that I’ve worked with and supervised in the past carried out a wide range of different activities. Most recently we’ve been involved with volunteers who have been supporting the refugee Syrian families resettling into highland but I've also worked with volunteers who have been advisors with the Citizens Advice Bureau, with people who have been befriending, with people who have been teaching English as a Second Language as well. So quite a wide range of different experiences of working with volunteers.

With any volunteering role it is essential to offer some form of training. I think it comes in two or three different parts. First and foremost you need to make sure that the Volunteer really understands what their roll is, how they should undertake that, make sure they are supported to be able to, sort of, Induction themselves into that process. I also believe it’s exactly the same as with staff, you have a responsibility to make sure that a volunteer is given every opportunity to develop as an individual, to grow in that role and to grow their own confidence because I really do think it's important that a volunteer is given a chance to develop beyond perhaps that initial volunteering responsibility.

I think people volunteer for a wide range of reasons. So, the people I've come across, they Volunteer because they got that sense of responsibility to the community. Some people volunteer because they want to learn or have experiences, which I think is a great reason to get involved. Some people are looking to develop them as an individual, maybe for work. Either they are in work and they want to move forward or maybe they haven't been in work for a while and want to go back into workplace. So they want to get , sort of, those skills built back up. Some people volunteer because they're lonely and they want to be feeling part of a group. Some people get involved because somebody has asked them to, the great word of mouth thing as well. So it's really a wide range of reasons as to why people get involved in volunteering.

I think volunteers are the backbone of absolutely everything that happens. Not just in the Highlands, I mean through the whole Scotland and probably well beyond. I do you think that volunteers aren’t necessarily always recognised for the important role that they have and it's really interesting that the Syrian families who started to resettle into Highland didn't really understand the concept of volunteering because it wasn't something they has ever really come across before. But the value that our volunteers have is phenomenal so they support families who are really at crisis point, they support individuals who have absolutely no where else to go or don't feel that they do. They also do a lot of day-to-day functions, you know, from whether it's your Britain In Bloom competitions to your lunch clubs, your charity shop staffing, it doesn't matter it's a huge range. We’ve got people going into prisons befriending individuals who are really looking to rehabilitate their lives. We’ve people supporting victims who are going to court to give witness statements. They are the backbone. They are everywhere without necessarily always being visible.

Volunteering 100-percent leads to employment. I have no doubt about that in my mind. It’s not necessarily why everybody is motivated to be a volunteer but it’s absolutely critical in terms of your own development pathway into becoming employed and the more that you get involved in volunteering, the more skill sets that develop within yourself, especially when you are younger, the better placed you are to become an ideal candidate for an employer. I know that, as an employer, I expect to see not just those who have come forward with a good background of experience, not that experience can come from paid employment without a doubt, but I like to see somebody who's got a volunteering experience and that's of course important for our sector but I think it's shows somebody who's well-rounded, who’s thought about the environment they are in, what they want to achieve and how they want to engage with the world around them.

So if you're a student or young person looking to get involved in volunteering there are two or three things that you can do. First of all the Highland third sector interface website has a volunteering search facility on it. So you can find out what's on there. You can get involved by going along to one of the local organisation that the HTSI funds and they will be able to provide you with information. You’ll find sometimes that there are volunteering fairs going on or you might have an interest in a particular area of activity or a charity, so for some people it might be around in a particular disability or it could be connected to the community, youth work, possibly around women's rights or the rights about people in LGBT background. So there's a lot of opportunity there. Contact the organisations directly and see what potentially is up and available for them to get involved with.