

Substance Misuse and Volunteering

A project carried out by Voluntary
Action Islington and Cranstoun



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1 . Introduction

The substance misuse and volunteering project was developed by Voluntary Action Islington and Cranstoun's drug and alcohol treatment service based in Islington. The project has been funded for two years by the Henry Smith Charity. An evaluation has been an integral part of the project. The aim of the evaluation has been to learn whether and how volunteering can play a role in the overall recovery of substance misusers. It has included a questionnaire to users of the service, case studies about users of the service and volunteer involving organisations, and two focus groups facilitated by a member of staff at the Institute for Volunteering Research, based at NCVO.

Voluntary Action Islington is the membership organisation for voluntary and community groups and the accredited Volunteer Centre for Islington. It was formed by the merger of Islington Voluntary Action Council (IVAC) and Islington Volunteer Centre in 2009. IVAC had a forty year history of bringing voluntary groups together to address poverty and improve health and education in Islington. The Volunteer Centre had a strong track record of working with people who were often excluded and needed extra help to take part in volunteering. This has included work with ex-prisoners and people involved with substance misuse. These clients were referred to the centre by several different organisations.

Cranstoun is a national organisation that helps people to recover from drug and alcohol misuse. In Islington it has a structured drug and alcohol treatment service working with people who are continuing to use drugs and/or alcohol,

but are seeking to stabilise their use and work towards abstinence. The programme is based on group work and one-to-one work and includes the development of life skills and assistance with finding relevant training and employment. Prior to this project there had been some support for individuals to take part in volunteering and positive feedback from those involved about this. However, this had not been an integrated part of the overall treatment service.

**“21% of Islington adults
are engaged in
hazardous drinking”**

The London Borough of Islington is a small, densely populated, inner London Borough with a growing, diverse and relatively young population. It is a borough of stark contrasts between wealth and poverty. It is the fourteenth most deprived Local Authority in England and the fifth most deprived in London (Islington Evidence Hub, 2014). Men in Islington have the lowest life expectancy of any London Borough. High levels of substance misuse were identified as a significant issue in the 2010/11 Joint Strategic Needs Analysis which reported that there were 2760 problem drug users aged 15-64 years old, with a rate of 19.3 per 1000 adults aged 15-64 in the borough. This rate was nearly twice as high as the London rate. 21% of Islington adults are engaged in hazardous drinking. A range of problems are linked to substance misuse including risk of early death, poor physical and mental health including depression, anxiety, personality disorders and psychotic disorders, crime and poor family and social functioning.

2. Background

The substance misuse and volunteering project was developed by Voluntary Action Islington and Cranstoun as a way of integrating the opportunity to take part in volunteering with a structured drug treatment programme. For the Volunteer Centre at Voluntary Action Islington this was a different way of working from the open access approach used in previous projects. Past experience has been that many of the people involved in substance misuse who had been referred by a range of agencies had substance misuse issues that they wished to address and which the Volunteer Centre did not have the skills and expertise to deal with. Overall the feedback from the volunteers involved with previous initiatives had been positive about the experience gained. The advantage of the new project was that the Centre would be working closely with an organisation that had strong expertise in the treatment of substance misuse and where people involved would have access to a wide range of treatment and support options, including volunteering, depending on their particular needs and circumstances.

Cranstoun had previous experience of working with the Volunteer Centre and had referred people interested in volunteering to the centre. The feedback about the experience of volunteering had been positive, but this was not one of the main options within the Cranstoun programmes, where the emphasis was on employment and training outcomes as these were the outcomes external funders were interested in. Volunteering was not, therefore, an integral part of the Cranstoun service offer. However, there was also a view that many of the Cranstoun service users would face significant barriers to progressing directly to employment. For example, they often did not have relevant

experience related to the type of employment they were interested in and/or they did not have sufficient experience of the routine and disciplines of work to immediately gain employment. Volunteering was regarded as a potentially useful intermediary experience, through which Cranstoun service users could gain experience and skills for inclusion on a CV. Feedback from people who had been involved in volunteering also suggested that it could provide structure and purpose to the lives of participants, contact with the wider community and help to develop confidence to move on.



There is very little published literature about people with substance misuse issues engaging in volunteering (Drug Service Users and Volunteering – A Report for Blackburn Drug and Alcohol Action Team, 2007). The literature that is published suggests benefits, but we have not found any previous projects where the opportunity to take part in volunteering was so closely aligned with the overall substance misuse treatment programme. A report by Drugscope (Simonson, P, 2010 Pathways to employment in London: A guide for Drug and Alcohol Services: London; Drugscope/LDAN) notes that people using drug treatment services can face multiple barriers to accessing training and employment opportunities including lack of education and skills, health issues, offending backgrounds, economic and social deprivation, social stigma and low expectations and aspirations. This report identifies volunteering as offering an “important first step” to entering the world of paid employment by providing “meaningful activity” and contributing to drug dependency recovery and reintegration into the local community through developing “soft skills”. The Institute for Volunteering Research report *Volunteering for all? – exploring the link between volunteering and social exclusion* (Institute for Volunteering Research: 2004) identifies similar benefits to being involved in volunteering, but also notes that there are barriers to getting involved for socially excluded groups including lack of information about opportunities, time demands, lack of confidence, stigma, and a fear of losing welfare benefits. Practical barriers included overformal recruitment procedures, delays and lack of reimbursement of expenses. A study of volunteer-involving agencies (Drug Service Users and Volunteering – A Report for Blackburn Drug and Alcohol Action Team, 2007) found that attitudes to involving people with substance misuse issues were mixed. Some agencies were concerned about the time implications and additional support that could be required.

The requirements of CRB (Criminal Records Bureau, which preceded DBS) checks meant that it was not possible for some people with substance misuse issues to work with vulnerable groups, or there were significant administrative delays before they could do so. However, some agencies were positive about the potential of involving people who had had substance misuse issues in volunteering with their agency. This was because of the specific experiences people with substance misuse issues bring to the agency and the opportunity that this presents to organisations to develop inclusive policies and procedures, and robust systems for supervision, training and risk management. The report *A Sense of Worth – Drug Users as Community Volunteers*, (Philips and South DRUGLINK Sept/Oct 1992) reviewed a CSV volunteering scheme that offered young drug service users the opportunity of taking up a volunteering placement for 4 to 12 weeks. Over 3 years 70 substance misusers were placed in a variety of projects and of these, many went on to gain degrees and employment in caring professions. All the services referring substance misusers to the project saw the scheme as valuable and noted that for some the projects they found themselves working in were “the only drug free environments in their lifestyles, enabling them to get a sense of how they could cope with work and responsibility”.



3. Project Description

The Voluntary Action Islington/Cranstoun project engaged a part-time project worker to work with Cranstoun service users over a two year period. The worker was based at Cranstoun for about half the time and at Voluntary Action Islington for the remainder of the time. She had full access to the Volunteer Centre resources including the database of volunteering opportunities. The overall aims of the project were to:

“Support substance misusers to take part in purposeful and productive activities in their local community through volunteering”

“Enable substance misusers to develop confidence and skills that will enhance future prospects in education and employment”

The project was fully integrated with the services provided by Cranstoun, with the worker taking referrals of people potentially interested in volunteering from the key workers at Cranstoun, or the client could self-refer.

One to One Support

This would involve an initial assessment, taking into account the client’s previous work history (paid and unpaid), their hobbies and interests, short and long term goals, and the type of activity they would like to be involved in. The worker would then research appropriate opportunities, that included liaising with volunteer involving organisations to ensure the role

was available, check on the application process and enquire about travel expenses and availability of training, for example.

At a follow up appointment the worker would then discuss the opportunities with the client, assist with the application form, or help arrange an interview. The worker usually had up to five 1-1 appointments, offering additional support including CV preparation, interview techniques and general encouragement-particularly if an application had not been successful. In today’s competitive job market, it is becoming more and more common that organisations do not always respond to volunteer applications due to volume received. In these cases, the worker would help source an alternative opportunity and sometimes help with two or three applications.

Group Work

Voluntary Action Islington also participated in the Cranstoun group work programme by providing information/training sessions about volunteering including how to get involved and how to maximise the benefit from volunteering.

As Cranstoun runs a rolling programme with new people starting on a weekly basis, Voluntary Action Islington delivered regular Introduction to Volunteering training sessions to clients who were participating in the day programme.

Between 14 and 18 clients would attend the sessions as a structured aspect of the abstinence programme. At these sessions Voluntary Action Islington

- Held a discussion about the different types of volunteering roles available
- Brainstormed the benefits of volunteering as a meaningful ‘next step’

- Invited a Cranstoun volunteer to talk about their experiences
- Gave details about the rules on volunteering and welfare benefits
- Provided information about volunteering and DBS/CRB
- Advised clients about the Voluntary Action Islington service at Cranstoun, that included one to one support and assistance with application forms
- A question and answer session

These sessions were generally well received, as many clients had not previously considered volunteering as something they could realistically get involved in. The sessions invariably led to increased interest in accessing the service.

The project also took part in Cranstoun events such as fun days and bazaars. A stall was held at the Islington Recovery Convention in May 2013, which was attended by over two hundred people.

Voluntary Action Islington regularly attended monthly service users meetings and liaised with Service User Representatives to promote the service.

During the two years of the project the plan was to introduce 50 Cranstoun service users to volunteering with 30 taking up volunteering opportunities in at least 8 local voluntary organisations. To date, 86 people have engaged with the project, finding out about volunteering as an option for them. 35 are volunteering with 14 different organisations. In addition one person who applied to become a volunteer was invited, and got a position as an apprentice.

The role of the Project Worker has been to support both individual volunteers and the organisations that they volunteer with.



As noted earlier, many people from excluded groups face barriers to getting involved in volunteering including lack of information about opportunities, lack of confidence, stigma, and fears about losing welfare benefits and the process of DBS checks. There can also be problems liaising with voluntary organisations providing opportunities. The Project Worker discussed with volunteers the range of opportunities available and how these are relevant to their personal development and interests. The Project Worker provides information about expenses provided by organisations, the type of support a volunteer can expect, and information about welfare benefits and the system of DBS checks. She liaises with organisations and provides appropriate support to individuals prior to being interviewed by organisations and before and immediately after they start volunteering.

She provides organisations with information about the programme at Cranstoun and the stage that volunteers are likely to have reached in their recovery.

She also provides organisations with information about the benefits of having a volunteer who has had substance misuse issues and about the type of support they should be aiming to provide to volunteers who have had substance misuse issues.

4. The Evaluation

Our intention has always been to evaluate this project and to share the findings with other agencies, with the intention of contributing to the development of volunteering as an integral part of substance misuse treatment services. Our evaluation has had 4 components – a questionnaire to all those who took part in the project, focus groups with service users at Cranstoun, case studies from individuals who took part in the project, and case studies of volunteer involving organisations.

Questionnaire to Service Users

Over 50% of the questionnaires distributed to people who took part in the project were returned. Initially the rate of return was about a third, but this increased to almost 90% when we changed the timing of sending out questionnaires so that this was within one month of work being completed.

In total, 17 people completed questionnaires. All but 3 had started volunteering and of the 3 who had not, one was intending to do so and 2 had relapsed in their treatment programme. Participants were volunteering with at least 8 different organisations.

All rated the service good (3/17) or excellent (14/17). All said they would recommend the service to others. Feedback included that it was really important to have been introduced to the project worker at Cranstoun so that they had the confidence to contact her again later. One person said that the service was perfect for their needs. In terms of service improvements one person said they would have preferred less email and one suggested more advertising about the service. Everybody valued the

information sessions and said they were provided with relevant information.

The questionnaire asked what was the most useful aspect of the service, and respondents referred to help with finding out about, and being put in contact with volunteering opportunities, the consistency and passion of the Project Worker, the way the service was delivered, confidence gained as a result of using the service, and help with developing a CV.

“The help was given in a great way!”

“Finding voluntary roles and help with the applications. I would not have found it by myself.”

“Help with my CV and one-to-one help very useful.”

The questionnaire asked whether volunteering had helped participants with their personal development. All said that taking part in volunteering increased their confidence, with half saying confidence increased greatly as a result of volunteering.

10 people said that their self-esteem increased as a result of taking part in the project with 4 of these people saying it increased greatly. Questions were included about helping people to develop work-based skills. 7 people referred to IT skills development as a result of volunteering. Of these, 3 people said it increased greatly. 12 people said that their organisational skills increased as a result of taking part in the project and of these, 5 said these skills increased greatly. 13 people said that teamwork skills increased and of these, 5 said they increased greatly.

We asked about how volunteering had affected participants' social links. 11 people said they had made new friends as a result of taking part in the project. 8 had increased their trust in others, 11 had increased participation in local activities and 10 had made new social contacts.

“12 people identified positive effects on health as a result of taking part in the project.”



“I now have a lot more confidence in myself. I get a lot from helping others.”

Focus groups

A member of staff at the Institute for Volunteering Research, based at NCVO, conducted 2 focus groups as part of our evaluation. 1 of the focus groups was with people who had not taken part in the project, although some intended to do so.

However, a few of the people in this group had some experience of volunteering including negative experiences.

Feedback from the first focus group

Volunteer involving organisation
being indiscreet during
the interview

Gaining training

Perception that “you’re just making
someone rich by volunteering”

Gaining eventual employment

Not hearing back from enquiries
about volunteering

Improving well-being

Not gaining skills from a
volunteering placement nor
having direct contact with service
users

Helping recovery

It is worth looking at these in more detail. One person had a bad experience when applying for a volunteering role, as well as having reservations about providing a service voluntarily for which the organisation got paid:

“They were asking my criminal convictions in front of people I don’t even know, okay? So that wasn’t too bad, but I heard they still charged money to do the jobs. You know, it is about 20% less than a normal builder would charge you, [and] you would get nothing. I’m just thinking “you’re just making someone rich”, really, that’s my view.”

Another had applied for a placement twice and never heard back. He was reassured that it is not unusual to hear, similar to applying for a job. But this was framed in terms of a blow to confidence; whereas knockbacks from jobs might be expected, perceived rejection from volunteering can be demoralising.

Others had poor experience with previous volunteering:

“For three months washing pots and pans, and I had very little contact with the service users. I got sick and tired of it, sick of the smell of grease.”

Another felt underused on a volunteering placement where he sat around all day drinking tea.

As the session progressed, others spoke about more positive volunteering experiences. For example, this participant had had a really good experience in the past:

“It was a really good placement. We did have contact with clients. [I] did my training, went in three days a week. The qualification that I got is nationally

recognised and was free. And all of us [volunteers] had employment within a year. So it can be a really positive thing.”

As an ex-offender and substance misuser, he saw it as a bridge:

“It was a very, very positive thing. It was really good to me because I tried to go straight back to paid work and it was a bit too much; it’s not as intense, voluntary work, so if you’re a bit wobbly about going back to work...”

Barriers to volunteering

The barriers included concerns around volunteering affecting benefits, and volunteering affecting recovery. There was great concern in the group that volunteering would in some way affect their benefits. For some this was based on experience.

“I was with [a charity] two years ago, and the Job Centre took me off it. And [the charity] were training me up to be a counsellor, so although it was voluntary work I was getting trained to eventually be in full-time work. But the Job Centre said “we didn’t put you in that voluntary position so you’ve got to leave it, because you’re spending too much time doing voluntary work and not enough time looking for work””

“And I felt I left myself open to the employment services. I get extra help because I have a severe disability. I’m just a bit worried it leaves us, myself, open to the employment services to get back to work.

And I don’t know how it affects your money, your benefits.”

The group discussed the different types of benefits (DLA, ESA, etc.) and whether you had to declare volunteering to the Job Centre.

Volunteering and recovery

There were some participants who feared that volunteering might potentially interfere with their recovery in some way:

“It’s the weird dilemma of doing volunteering whilst doing here [recovery]. So if you could just get here out of the way then do the voluntary work after here without the worrying about benefits, then ease into work.”

Another applied to volunteer, but couldn’t do certain days because he was in treatment on those days. He didn’t want to tell the organisation he was in recovery. However, others were more positive about potentially volunteering as part of their recovery, especially later on:

“I’m in my fifth week and things take time and it would be nice to know that I’ve got something lined up. I’m starting college tonight, an evening course. It would just be nice to have something lined up when I leave here.”

Volunteering was seen as a really positive experience and a part of their recovery by another participant:

“I [volunteer] in a homeless drop-in on Wednesday mornings...it’s my favourite three hours of the week. And people say to me...”do you not find it hard to be in recovery with people drinking around you?” And I’m like “it does the opposite, it really helps because they can talk to me because they know I’m in AA, they know I’ve been there, we have a banter about how many cans of special brew I can drink.” We have a laugh, a connection. And I love my time there.”

Summary

The focus group discussion ended up being much more about the barriers the participants faced in potentially volunteering rather than evaluating the project itself. It highlighted the challenges that any volunteering programme might have. These issues and potential solutions can be summarised as:

Clarifying with any potential participant that volunteering won’t affect their benefits. This is complicated by the fact that some service users are on benefits which potentially can be affected by volunteering whilst other participants were not. The Cranstoun staff were knowledgeable about this distinction.

Some of the focus group participants had bad experiences of volunteering in the past. This included doing roles entailing mundane tasks with little contact with service users or scope for skills development. Being clear what they want from a volunteering placement and what organisations can offer would be advantageous.

Making clear that rejection from volunteering roles should not be taken personally. Some participants appear to find rejections/not hearing back about volunteer placements very demoralising – it is not like a job, what does it say about you if they won’t even take you on as a volunteer? It should be made clear that, whilst this is bad practice on part of the organisations, it is not uncommon.

Participants were divided about whether it was too much to take on volunteering during recovery. Some felt this was the case whilst others saw volunteering as a positive part of their recovery, or thought that it could potentially be useful in their recovery, especially later on.

Feedback from the second focus group

The second focus group considered the role of the project. Four service users and one staff member were present. The main findings from the second focus group are presented below.

Benefits of volunteering

It is worth briefly summarising what the service users get out of volunteering. Benefits cited include:

Having structure in their lives

Therapeutic value

Receiving training

Improved self-confidence and
well-being

Having something to put on a CV

Demonstrating their worth,
especially if you have an offending
background

Potentially leading to work/
entrance into a new career
path

But it was also felt to be important that volunteers were not exploited and that everything about the role was clear from the beginning. For example, it was not a problem in itself if there was not a potential job at the end of the volunteering, but this should be made clear from the outset.

The project

The focus group consisted of two people who had directly engaged in the project as well as those who had not, but were aware of the service. As for those who had received help from the project lead, they found her very supportive, a “constant source of support” as one put it. This support included identifying suitable volunteer opportunities, such as:

- Volunteer roles that can lead directly to employment
- Volunteer roles that have training
- Helping to write appropriate letters/applications, especially for those out of practice

Having a person to help in this, rather than navigating everything themselves, was seen as key

“Having a person rather than a computer screen makes all the difference.” – Service user

The project lead was also mentioned in the context of the importance of an intermediary, or a “middle person” between the service user and the volunteer involving organisation.

As well as the project lead’s support being commended, the fact she was regularly based in the service was seen as being important.

For example, a staff member observed:

“[It is important to have] the information and the person here rather than having to go out to other services, out in the community, which is not going to happen in my experience. If someone’s here, people can make that next step. It’s not too far.” – Staff member

The distance factor came up more than once, in relation to the needs of the service users and how far they are normally prepared to travel.

The project lead was not only personally seen as approachable, but also as someone who “put herself on show”. This visibility in the service, for example attending the monthly service user meetings to outline opportunities, was seen as vital.

Conclusion

The benefits of volunteering were emphasised, especially as part of treatment and recovery. The project was seen as important in facilitating volunteering. This was due to the support offered by someone based in the service who is helpful and approachable.

Case studies from individuals

Six case studies of individuals who have taken part in the project have been completed. The case studies demonstrate how the project is an integral part of the work of Cranstoun. Individual names have been changed.

Alice Case Study

Alice is a woman in her forties who was working as a medical secretary for approximately ten years. Alice used to

drink with colleagues after work, but following a relationship breakdown this increased to more regular drinking.

Alice started to be bullied at work, and left her job, which led to a period of unemployment for nine years, during which time she was drinking heavily.

Alice managed to do a few weeks at a time sober, but would then relapse. She realised she needed professional support to achieve abstinence, so following a few weeks of being sober last year, she approached Cranstoun and joined the abstinent programme. Alice wanted to return to paid work at some point, but felt unconfident around applying due to the gap in her employment history and lack of confidence at interviews.

Towards the end of the programme, Alice met with the project lead from Voluntary Action Islington, when she expressed interest in Admin/Reception roles. The worker assisted Alice in completing an application to be an Admin/Reception volunteer at an Islington based complimentary therapy service.

Alice was successfully recruited to volunteer one day a week and started at the beginning of April. Wanting something more regular, and in liaison with her keyworker, Alice also began volunteering on reception at Cranstoun on two additional days a week.

Alice says, *“Volunteering after so many years of being unemployed has given me a new lease of life. It has helped my self-esteem, I feel less isolated and my confidence has grown too.”*

I'm really enjoying it and it is also helping with my recovery."

John Case Study

John was working full time as a Teacher of English as a Foreign Language until he retired in 2005 due to physical and mental ill health, along with excessive drinking. This escalated over the years, until he was drinking 30 units a day.

John realised he needed to reduce his intake, and joined Cranstoun's stabilisation day programme in 2011. Here he learned to control his drinking to manageable levels. Once he had completed the programme, he acknowledged that in order to keep his drinking down he needed to keep busy. However, he wanted to volunteer in a supportive environment.

With a keen interest in bees and nature, and through Voluntary Action Islington's liaison with Cranstoun Management, John began to volunteer in Cranstoun's large and unkempt garden. Volunteering for five days a week, he transformed the space, clearing rubble, introducing wildflowers and vegetables and encouraging different species of bumblebees.



As a qualified teacher, John then devised a Gardening for Beginners course. In addition to his regular volunteering, he

now runs this course regularly for Cranstoun service users.

John says, "Volunteering here at Cranstoun means I'm constantly in touch with people using the programme and keeps me aware of my addiction."

"Volunteering has undoubtedly helped me reduce my intake. In addition, it's therapeutic and acts as a form of CBT. Getting a hot meal every day is helping me physically as I have an eating disorder."

Julie Case Study

Julie is a woman in her forties, who worked in a position of responsibility in the Government. As it was a stressful job, Julie began having a glass of wine at home, but this escalated to quite a lot of wine each evening. Julie's employers became concerned, but due to her previous good record and years of service, they agreed to voluntary redundancy instead of outright dismissal. Julie's drinking increased even more and she was drinking heavily for four years before she accessed rehab and became sober.

Once discharged, Julie secured employment in a local authority, but the stress soon built up, and almost a replica of her previous experience occurred, resulting in her employers giving her voluntary redundancy.

This time however, with time on her hands, she approached Islington's alcohol team, and was referred to Cranstoun's abstinent programme.

Julie was introduced to the Project Lead from Voluntary Action Islington, but she already had a volunteer role once a fortnight at a social enterprise.

However, when she finished the abstinence programme, she found she once again had too much time on her hands, so she approached the Project Lead for help finding an administrative role. The Project Lead put Julie in touch with a local school in Islington, where she was successfully recruited as an Administrator/PA.

Julie says: *“I enjoy using my skills to help other people. I do not want the stress of a paid job just yet. Having a commitment to attend somewhere and be responsible gives me the incentive to stay well and sober.”*

Cliff Case Study

Cliff is a male in his forties who worked professionally as a drug and alcohol worker, but gradually developed a problem himself with heroin and alcohol, though he believed he could handle it. However, Cliff soon became unemployed, and although he managed to stop taking heroin, his drinking was out of control, so he sought help at Cranstoun. Whilst on the abstinence programme, Cliff approached the project lead from Voluntary Action Islington, to apply for roles working with homeless people. Cliff began volunteering at a homeless day centre in Camden, welcoming guests, befriending and helping distribute food.

Cliff says: *“I really love my work at the day centre. Volunteering has given me more confidence and I feel more self-assured. I enjoy helping people.”*

Joe Case Study

Joe is in his fifties, and has a varied work history that included being a careers advisor, a delivery driver and labourer. Joe drank regularly with his colleagues after work, and also took cocaine at the weekends, but didn't feel it was a problem.

Joe was married with two children. He started taking crack cocaine more and more regularly, which led to a relationship breakdown with his wife.

Joe formed a new relationship, and he and his partner used drugs together – drink, crack, and ecstasy. Joe began to steal to feed his habit, and he got in trouble with the police on a number of occasions.

Joe and his new partner now had a child, and their drug use came to the attention of Social Services. Unless they sought help for their drug use, their daughter would be put into care. This prompted Joe to access treatment, and he got himself admitted to a detox and rehab.

Joe began attending AA and NA meetings regularly, and was introduced to Cranstoun services. Joe started volunteering for Family Drug and Alcohol Court, but this was only for 8 hours per week, and he wanted something more regular that would provide him with a daily structure. Cranstoun's worker referred Joe to Voluntary Action Islington.

Joe is completely abstinent and actively works on the 12 step programme. At an appointment Voluntary Action Islington identified a role as a volunteer 12 step mentor at RAPT (Rehabilitation of Addicted Prisoners Trust).

Joe telephoned RAPT to enquire about the role, and during the interview he was encouraged to apply for a different role – a paid apprenticeship.

Joe was successful in his application, and started in February 2014 as an apprentice drug and alcohol worker.

Joe says *“Volunteering has undoubtedly normalised my life. Having volunteering experience gave me the edge when applying for the apprenticeship. Before, I had a chaotic lifestyle, but now I have more self-esteem because I have responsibility towards others.”*

“Being offered the apprenticeship was the icing on the cake. Without Voluntary Action Islington I would never have heard of the opportunity. I am now being paid to help others with drug and alcohol problems – it’s an ideal situation.”

Paulo Case Study

Paulo is a male in his thirties, who has a history of substance misuse. He wrote to the Project Lead following the help he had been given to find a volunteering opportunity over the Christmas period.

“Just thought I would write to you and thank you for all the help in finding volunteer work over the festive season. As you know my family all live abroad and

Christmas is a particularly challenging period for me. It was very important for me to find something meaningful to partake in over this period.

I volunteered for Centre Point’s annual Christmas talent show. It was a truly moving experience seeing their youth, who have had challenging upbringings, shine. The evening was full of laughter and joy. The show was very special and there was a lot of young talent.

I helped all round with food service and also managed to set up new volunteering opportunities for the future.

I think the role you fill at Cranstoun is truly valuable. Volunteering has helped keep me sober and rebuild my confidence. It is wonderful to give back as I feel truly supported by Cranstoun and by you.

Thank you for all the hard work.”

Case Studies of Organisations

One of the findings from the project has been that many of the project participants are keen to volunteer with organisations that have helped them, or organisations involved with similar work. This has to be handled quite carefully, as there are roles within organisations providing help to people with substance misuse issues where the risks of somebody taking on this role very soon after completing a treatment programme are too high for them and/or the service.

However, there are many roles within these organisations including service user groups and representation and practical tasks such as gardening, cooking, administration and reception that can be taken on by people who are involved in, or completing recovery programmes. These roles can provide essential first steps for people interested in volunteering.



As illustrated previously in the case studies of individuals, the volunteer roles that project participants took on went well beyond substance misuse services. However, some organisations in the wider voluntary sector were reluctant to work with volunteers who were completing a substance misuse recovery programme, and some organisations were hesitant about stating that they had volunteers who were in this position because of concerns about potential impact on reputation.

Case Study – The Eagle Recovery Project

The Eagle Project, a peer led therapeutic support group, was set up in July 2011 by an ex-Cranstoun client. It has since become a recognised community organisation. It aims to achieve charitable status in 2014.

The support group is held every week, and is open to anyone affected by drugs or alcohol. However, clients must be abstinent on the day to attend.

The group offers alternative therapies, sandwiches, and social activities like

bingo and quizzes. The aim of the group is to provide a fun, safe environment for people to get together and support each other in a drug and alcohol-free setting.

The Secretary says:

“This project would not exist without the volunteers, who help with all sorts of activities, like calling bingo, setting quiz questions, making sandwiches and creating publicity posters.”

“Many of the volunteers have come through Islington drug and alcohol services, and it helps them to work as a team and build trust. They help each other, to prevent isolation. It reinforces the idea that sobriety is fun and not a punishment.”

Case Study – Cranstoun

Cranstoun Drug Service is a reputable clinical and community drug treatment provider, with over forty years' experience. Cranstoun have long recognised the potential role of voluntary work as a valuable stage in supporting people affected by drug and alcohol misuse in their journey towards both employment and continued recovery.

Cranstoun Change @28B offers a structured programme including keywork, group therapy, and employment, training and education. Voluntary Action Islington works in partnership with this programme, working on a one-to-one basis to identify appropriate volunteering opportunities.

Cranstoun offers a wide range of volunteering opportunities to people who have completed the programme. These include gardening, reception/admin, catering, alternative therapy roles, and service user rep opportunities.

A Senior Project Worker says:

“Volunteering plays a major part in supporting clients to reengage as a constructive member of society. Volunteering is invaluable in helping our clients maintain long term recovery from substance misuse.”

CASE Study – SHP (Single Homeless Project)

“Preventing homelessness and promoting social inclusion”

SHP provides a range of accommodation and support services to vulnerable people across London. One of their services focusses on minimising harm from substance misuse. The Recovery Peer Project utilises volunteers to promote recovery throughout Camden. As peers, the volunteers have been through substance/alcohol misuse issues themselves, and are in successful recovery.

TJ was interested in pursuing a career in the drug and alcohol field once he had completed the abstinence programme, but was concerned about his criminal record.

Voluntary Action Islington sourced SHP's Recovery Peer Project as an ideal opportunity to turn TJ's experiences with the criminal justice system to an advantage, and assisted with his application form. PL also wanted to pursue this career route, but had no direct experience in the field. Again, this role was identified as a perfect stepping stone to working in the field. Both were successful in their applications, and having taken part in comprehensive induction training, they take an active role at recovery meetings, advise on different services available and act as role models and mentors to people still struggling with addiction.

The Senior Recovery Co-Ordinator, says:

“The volunteers bring masses of enthusiasm and have huge insight into the issues involved.

They have fresh ideas and a different perspective than paid workers, putting the service users at the heart of everything they do and a willingness to get involved.”



5.

Recommendations and conclusions

a) Volunteering should be an integral part of drug treatment services

One of the themes emerging from the evaluation is that there is a very high value in having the worker who is leading on supporting service users to take part in volunteering based for some time at the substance misuse recovery service. This means that service users get to know the worker and have confidence to make use of the service in a way that they would not have if it had been expected that they should travel to another venue. It is also worth noting that for many service users, being able to take up volunteering within the service they were using – for example as a service users representative or by helping with practical tasks at the service – was a valuable first step in terms of confidence building.

b) Taking part in volunteering has clear benefits for people completing a substance misuse recovery programme

Those taking part in the project who had taken up volunteering opportunities identified benefits from involvement including providing structure and purpose to their lives; building confidence and self-esteem; gaining skills, particularly in organisation and team work; providing

social contacts and providing experience that can be included on a CV.

Volunteering can provide a valuable intermediary experience for people who may not have the confidence or experience to go straight into employment.

c) It is important to provide information and guidance to people completing substance misuse recovery programmes, about volunteering opportunities

The focus group with people who had not engaged with the project indicated that there were some people who had bad experiences of volunteering when this was approached in an ad hoc manner. There was positive feedback about the information sessions provided by the Project Worker from all the project participants. This provided people with information about the range of opportunities available and then helped them to find the best opportunity for them. This is essential if people are to maximise the benefits from volunteering and also maximise their contribution to volunteer involving organisations. The people who used the project's services also valued the help in liaising with organisations, including help with completing applications for specific roles. Providing information about effects on benefits, the role and process of DSB checks, and volunteer involving organisations' policies and procedures in relation to out of pocket expenses, supervision, training and support are also important if anxieties about volunteering are to be addressed, and if the benefits of the experience are to be maximised.

d) Volunteer involving organisations should commit to developing and improving practice in work with volunteers from socially excluded groups

When resources are stretched it can be difficult for voluntary organisations to provide the necessary levels of support to engage volunteers who may need extra help. In this context it is important that organisations have links with agencies that can provide help to volunteers if and when problems arise.

It is also important that voluntary organisations do not adopt the wider stereotypes and stigma that exist in wider society when considering volunteers from socially excluded groups. If both the volunteer and the organisation are to realise the benefits of involving people from socially excluded groups in volunteering then attention must be given to being clear about the volunteering roles available, providing good supervision and training, planning the involvement of volunteers from socially excluded groups, ensuring that there is good communication with volunteers and that there are progression routes so that people can move to new volunteering roles and/or employment either within the organisation or with other services.



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