



University of Brighton

**Community
University
Partnership
Programme**

Volunteering Opportunities at the Brighton Unemployed Centre Families Project

Examples of Innovation and Good Practice

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October 2008

Foreword

This report is a follow up to *'An evaluation of volunteer opportunities offered by the Brighton Unemployed Centre Families Project'* published in January 2008 by the Health and Social Policy Research Centre at the University of Brighton. Many of the participants from the earlier study were re – interviewed to track how their volunteering was progressing, whether they had acquired any new skills, training or additional roles, and generally to see if there had been any changes to their overall views of volunteering at the Centre. The two studies together cover a period of fifteen months. The aim of the research was to see what developments had taken place for individual volunteers during this period. This report focuses in particular on evidence of examples of good practice and innovation, as reported by volunteers.

Acknowledgements

Very grateful thanks to GoldStar Volunteering and Mentoring Exemplar Programme who funded the entire research. Many thanks also to the Community University Partnership Programme (CUPP), in particular David Wolff and Polly Rodriguez who ensured the University's continued involvement with this project; to Professor Peter Ambrose who supervised the research, to all the Trustees and paid workers at the BUCFP for their input and support, in particular to Ellie Moulton, and finally to all the volunteers who took part and made it all possible.



Contents

1. Executive Summary	1
2. Participants and Methods	2
3. Research Findings	
3.1 Range of Volunteering Activities	3
3.2 Progression Pathways	4
3.3 Training and New Skills	6
3.4 Benefits of Volunteering	7
3.5 Changes to Feelings about the Centre.	8
4. A Case Study	10
5. Conclusions	11
Appendices	
Safe Centre Policy	12
Interview Questions	13

Executive Summary

- The Centre continues to offer a wide and responsive range of volunteering opportunities with flexible support arrangements for individual volunteers.
- There is clear evidence of progression in terms of expanded voluntary roles, moves into paid employment and personal development. For example, 29% of the sample have taken on some paid work since the last interviews, nine months earlier.
- Volunteers continue to access valuable training opportunities and acquire new skills. The Centre is committed to reducing barriers to training and 71% of those interviewed had either completed new training or acquired new skills in the last nine months.
- Volunteers reported many and varied personal benefits resulting from their engagement with the Centre. These benefits reflect the effectiveness of the Centre in engaging with volunteers as individuals and in creating an environment where people become self – motivated.
- Very high levels of consistency in feelings about the Centre were reported. 100% stood by the positive comments made in previous interviews. There was no evidence of any drop off in support for the Centre, over time.
- The report concludes that the Centre continues to provide numerous examples of good practice and is also innovative in its approach to volunteering.

Participants and Methods

There were 17 participants in this follow up study. Of these 15 were actively involved in volunteering and 2 were no longer regular volunteers but were still regularly attending the Centre. 16 of the participants had been interviewed previously, for the earlier study and one was new to the research.

As before, semi – structured face to face interviews were conducted at the Centre. A Participant's Information Sheet and Consent Forms were used, following the guidelines and recommendations of the Faculty Research Ethics and Governance Committee.

Again, as before, the interview data was then analysed using thematic content analysis. The particular focus this time has been twofold; identifying progression pathways, both formal and informal, and identifying areas of good practice and innovation, which should be of beneficial interest to those involved in the Centre and also to other organisations which rely on volunteers.

Research Findings

1. Range of volunteering activities reported

The 15 participants currently volunteering reflected a wide range of volunteering opportunities. These included;

- crèche / playroom work
- office work
- welfare rights and employment advice
- work with the temporary housing project
- language teaching
- IT teaching
- work with the creative writing group
- art group co-ordinating
- health walk leading
- cookery club co-ordinating
- magazine group work
- trustee duties
- training other volunteers
- film and video teaching
- work as part of the allotment group
- running relaxation classes.

Some had single roles but many others combined volunteering in different project areas. It was clear from the interviews that volunteers felt very free to increase their volunteering, or to reduce it, depending on their individual circumstances at the time, without fear of being judged or criticised.

Several people mentioned that they had reduced their levels of participation since the last interviews, for various reasons, and all felt that this had been a relatively straightforward process.

Examples of good practice

The data here amply demonstrates the very wide range of volunteering opportunities on offer. Over 17 distinct volunteering roles are represented within a small sample of 15 volunteers. The above list is by no means exhaustive; many other opportunities are available. The Centre is innovative in the sheer number of opportunities it offers, but also in the highly responsive way it works. For example, one interviewee told me about a recent occasion when a service user happened to mention that they had an interest in screen-printing. Ellie, the Participation Worker, acted immediately and now they have set up a screen-printing group.

The data here also shows that the Centre is extremely flexible in its approach to volunteering and the amount of time volunteers are expected to put in. This demonstrates recognition that for volunteering to be attractive to a wide range

of people, and to retain volunteers, there needs to be an understanding of people's changing circumstances over time. The interview data highlighted a good deal of open-mindedness and non-judgementalism as characteristic of Centre's approach.

2. Progression Pathways

The interviews revealed a significant amount of progression within the last 9 months. This was reported in terms of progression within roles as volunteers and also in terms of progression to paid work and personal development.

Progression in volunteering.

Some of the volunteers had added to their roles. For example one had added digital photography to the subjects he teaches and also become a Health Walks leader. Another had taken on the additional responsibility of becoming a Trustee and the Treasurer of the organisation. Another described how, as her confidence was gradually restored, she became more and more involved in Centre activities, and has now set up a Saturday morning cookery club. This is particularly innovative, as the Centre was previously unused on Saturdays. Another volunteer described how he had been involved in the recent successful creative writing anthology 'Salt and Vinegar'. This was a published collection of work by the creative writing group. As a result of its success he has now taken on the additional administration work related to the sale and distribution of the book.

Many of the volunteers described progression in terms of a steady increase in confidence and self-belief as a result of their involvement with the Centre. One person who works as a volunteer in the crèche / playroom and has been furthering his childcare NVQ studies explained that he was

'...happy to be progressing at a pace I can handle and that feels right for me'.

Progression to paid work

5 members of the sample, (29%) have added paid work to their activities in the last 9 months. One now has paid work as a playroom co-ordinator at the Centre, alongside her volunteering. Another now has 5 hours a week as a sessional paid worker in the office as well as her voluntary role. In earlier interviews she had expressed getting some paid work as a definite goal, so achieving this is a positive outcome for her. Another now has some paid work as an equal opportunities trainer for trainee welfare rights advisers in the Welfare Rights Group, as well as her existing voluntary role. Another member of the sample, an ex-volunteer, has since set up his own business and another has secured paid work in a local crèche as a direct result of volunteering in the playroom.

Examples of good practice

The interview data suggests that one of the strengths of the Centre is the way it actively encourages individuals to progress at whatever pace is appropriate for them. Volunteers are not put under pressure but are offered plenty of encouragement to develop their roles, according to their particular skills and interests. One example is the way volunteers are encouraged to stand as Trustees. It is another instance of the informal yet innovative approach of the Centre that the Trustee Board is virtually wholly comprised of service users. One member of the sample who is involved in various activities at the Centre has also recently become a Trustee, which she described as an important 'springboard' for her future.

The Centre has evolved an ethos which is striking in its positivity and 'can do' approach. This undoubtedly has an effect on the self - belief of volunteers working within it. Great efforts are made to remove any barriers to progression and paid workers appear to be highly skilled at developing untapped skills and abilities of volunteers and service users and fostering an atmosphere of self empowerment.

The crèche /playroom deserves a special mention with regard to progression to paid work. The volunteers are able to undertake in-house training in a range of childcare subjects and work towards National Vocational Qualifications. Some are then able to progress to paid work within the community. Such employment opportunities are a direct result of the highly regarded training and work experience gained with the support of the much respected Playroom Workers. As one member of sample told me, she was delighted to have had

“ ...fantastic training, leading to a great reference which has now led me to a paid job.”

3. Training and New Skills

71% of the sample reported that they had either completed training or gained new skills in the last 9 months.

These included;

- performance workshops
- accountancy skills
- new set of people skills involving tact and sensitivity
- child protection courses
 - 1st aid courses
- parenting classes
- welfare rights courses
- courses and conferences related to employment law.
- new skills in public speaking
- learning about health and safety assessments

An interesting suggestion was made by one participant. She highlighted the amount of creative energy and talent amongst Centre users, which she felt should ensure its importance in the City. It was suggested that this creative energy could perhaps be directed into some more practical training. For example, performance artists might be able to put on workshops that could be useful for people wishing to attend job interviews, to help with communication skills and confidence. Other respondents also mentioned that it might be good to offer some more motivational job – finding or interview skills, for those that want them.

Examples of good practice

Training, supervision and support for volunteers are offered in each of the project areas at the Centre. There is clearly an understanding of the need to address barriers to training in order to ensure all volunteers can access training if they wish. The main way in which barriers are addressed is through the provision of free crèche places for the children of volunteers undergoing training. For IT and English courses a crèche place is guaranteed and for other courses places are made available where possible.

Volunteers are also able to access accredited training at the Centre, in childcare and welfare rights. This type of training can be an important step towards paid employment as well as being personally rewarding.

Another thing that the Centre appears to be very good at is empowering volunteers to re-find and utilise existing skills, which may have been lying dormant for some time. For example, one person told me that the Centre had;

'...allowed me to utilise my skills as a Reiki teacher and channel my energies much more positively'

Another commented that volunteering allowed him to;

'...continually sharpen my skills'.

4. Benefits of Volunteering

All the participants reported benefits to volunteering at the Centre. Some were very specific, such as the acquisition of new skills to put on a CV, and the opportunities for some paid work, teaching experience and networking opportunities.

Others were more general and included confidence boosting, a broader social life, stability and a sense of security during a period of change and the experience of seeing how an organisation like the Centre works.

One participant reported health benefits, both mentally and physically as a result of working on the allotment project. One participant also mentioned that this project fitted in well with his existing interest in and knowledge of history and archaeology, as the allotments are on the historic site of Whitehawk Hill. Involvement with the Health Walks was also mentioned in relation to improved levels of fitness.

Another participant who had previously cited the inclusiveness of the staff as her favourite thing about the Centre, told me that she had *'... broadened her appreciation of what the Centre offers, over time.'* She has come to see the value of other things, such as the wide range of courses available and the benefits of the free meal for volunteers.

One participant mentioned that a benefit to him had come about as a result of his volunteering experience in the office. He explained that he was now *'...more organised and efficient at home, with my own paperwork etc.'* He attributed this to his experience of learning office systems and procedures at the Centre.

Another benefit mentioned by one respondent was the opportunity to go on a residential weekend break to Knowles Tooth, with her child, an experience they had both greatly enjoyed.

A couple of respondents also mentioned enjoying the annual Volunteer Celebration Day held at the Centre.

Participants were asked to rate the importance of the Centre, to them, on the following scale:

Not important	0
Quite important	6 (35%)
Very important	7 (41%)
Vitally important	4 (24%)

Examples of Good Practice

The interview data relating to benefits of volunteering highlights the effectiveness of the Centre in motivating and engaging with volunteers. By offering opportunities for volunteers to develop their personal interests, acquire new personal skills or take part in new experiences it is able to achieve high levels of retention amongst the volunteer base. It demonstrates a clear understanding of the individual needs and motivations of different volunteers.

The annual Volunteer Celebration day is also a good example of the way in which the Centre recognises the efforts of volunteers.

5. Changes to feelings about the Centre

The point of this question was to try and see if there had been any 'falling off' in overall views of the Centre, as time passed. However, everyone interviewed still felt positive about the Centre and stood by their previous remarks about their overall feelings, which were full of praise and discussed in full in the earlier report.

One participant mentioned that she was very pleased that disabled access had improved since we last spoke, with the introduction of a downstairs classroom and toilet available to welfare rights group service users. Another specifically mentioned how safe she felt at the Centre, and was one of several who highlighted the importance to them of the Safe Centre policy. One person even described this policy as the 'golden key' to the Centre. Another mentioned how well the Centre responds to the changing needs of members, and commented that though he had travelled extensively round the world, he had;

'...never come across a place like it.'

One respondent emphasised that it was the '*consistency of approach*' that continues to be such an important aspect of volunteering for him. He works as part of the Education project, and explained that the Education Worker strives to keep things regular and consistent, which allows the project to develop

organically, with all involved having a shared desire for it to succeed. This, in turn, he feels is crucial to keeping courses at a consistently high standard and makes volunteering in the Education project such a positive experience.

Another person reiterated their earlier comments about feeling very supported in his work by the paid workers, and added that more broadly he would see it as a 'tragedy' for Brighton if they were ever to lose the Centre. He posed a rhetorical question; if the Centre didn't exist, where would its users go? This highlights what I believe to be one of the most important points about the Centre i.e. its unique position in Brighton and Hove. There is nowhere else that offers the whole wide - ranging package of support, services and opportunities to individuals and families and the impact of its loss would undoubtedly be immense.

5 people specifically mentioned a recent period of financial instability due to a funding shortfall at the Centre, and how that had affected them and other Centre users. All 5 clearly felt that the Centre had 'weathered the storm' and settled down again. One person said that although it had been an unsettling period, it could also be viewed as positive in the way paid workers and Trustees dealt with the situation. Another commented that it was testament to the skills and commitment of paid workers that things remained so calm during this period. He felt that the more turbulent times had had a minimal impact on service users, thanks largely to the efforts of paid workers to keep things going. This point was echoed by another respondent, who said that the longer they volunteered at the Centre, the more aware they became that it is not always straightforward, which only increases their admiration for the paid workers.

Overall, there was a high degree of consistency in feelings about the Centre, over time. None of the participants had lost any regard or respect for the Centre or its staff, or appear to have dented their enthusiasm for the place, even during the recent period of difficulty.

Examples of good practice

The Centre has an excellent example of clear policies and procedures in its Safe Centre Policy (Appendix 1). This document is determined by service users and regularly re-visited. It has been mentioned time and again in the course of these and earlier interviews with volunteers as pivotal to their engagement with the Centre.

There is also clear evidence from the interviews to show that the Centre has flexible support arrangements in place and effective communication with volunteers. Paid workers in each project area offer support to volunteers at whatever level is appropriate to each individual, which is clearly an approach valued by those interviewed. Effective two – way communication appears to have greatly helped keep the atmosphere calm during the recent period of financial insecurity. Volunteers do not appear to feel that they had been kept in the dark, but rather that there was honesty and transparency in the way paid workers dealt with situation.

A Case Study of a Volunteer

Her current role at the Centre is very varied. She is a Trustee and Company Secretary. She also helps to co-ordinate the Art Group and has recently set up a Saturday morning cookery club. This club is open to all, but aims to reduce social isolation and so is particularly valuable to people who live alone who want to learn new skills and meet other people. She also runs a relaxation group, utilising her skills as a Reiki teacher, and has been involved as a member of the creative writing group. More recently she has been involved in setting up an arts collective at the Centre, providing a space for a range of creative arts.

In general terms she describes the Centre as having provided her with a lifeline, a place where she has felt unconditionally accepted and able to re-build her confidence. She first came to the Centre, following a personal tragedy and a period of mental ill health. The mental health charity MIND recommended that she try the Centre. Soon after arriving she felt that her energies were being channelled much more positively, and gradually she became more and more involved in Centre activities. She is very aware of the ability of paid workers to ensure that she, and others, don't take on too much at the Centre and keep their participation at a level which is manageable and appropriate for them. She also praised the Safe Centre Policy (Appendix 1) describing it as the '*golden key*' to the successful running of the Centre.

She had previously gained a Masters in Applied Psychology and Learning Disability, and had followed a career in social work. She told me that one of the things she appreciates now about working with service users at the Centre, is that she is able to work within more natural boundaries than in her previous career. Though she observes clear boundaries in her work in many respects, the relative lack of red tape and bureaucracy make it easier to forge friendships with people. In particular she feels she is able to develop friendships with people with learning difficulties more easily than she could in her previous career, which she clearly values strongly.

She sums up her feelings about the Centre as a 'springboard' which she has been able to use as a testing ground, throughout her recovery. Getting involved in creative writing has been an important part of that recovery and she now has long term plans to do a PhD and also to use the therapies she has trained in to help others who may be at a low ebb, as she once was. Overall, she told me, '*it is the acceptance you encounter when you get involved with the Centre that makes it somewhere people such as myself can turn their lives around.*'

Conclusion.

All but one of the participants in this research have been interviewed four times over a period of 15 months (March 07 – June 08). They have had time to reflect on their earlier responses and add to or modify their views. During this period the Centre has also undergone a testing time with a funding shortfall and the difficulties that accompanied it. It is striking therefore to see how much consistency was expressed in these final interviews, with such high levels of loyalty and commitment from the volunteers.

Throughout the report I have looked for evidence of good practice and innovation to mesh in with the categories for good practice suggested by GoldStar, the project funders. (See www.goldstar.org.uk/practice_guides.html) There are numerous examples cited of ways in which the Centre is successfully meeting these goals. It is hoped that these will stimulate interest and may benefit other organisations.

Overall, the data from these interviews supports the conclusions drawn in the earlier report. Volunteers at the Centre are offered a diverse, exciting and responsive range of opportunities, flexible support and training, and are able to accrue valuable personal benefits and follow appropriate progression pathways, as a result of their engagement.

Appendix 1.

Brighton Unemployed Centre Families Project

SAFE CENTRE POLICY

Everyone is to be treated with respect – regardless of difference.

Everyone is responsible for keeping a safe and welcoming environment for all who use the Centre – be aware of those around you, including children.

Alcohol and recreational drugs are not to be brought onto or consumed on the premises – People under the influence of these are not allowed in the Centre.

Violence is unacceptable in ALL circumstances.

No weapons are to be brought into the Centre in any circumstances.

No animals are to be brought into the Centre; (except guide dogs), as some people are uncomfortable around them.

There is a 'No Smacking' policy in all parts of the Centre – We also work to a Child Protection Policy which is available for all to read on request.

Peanuts are not allowed on the premises because of people with allergies.

Anyone who is found to be intimidating, aggressive, disturbing to others or breaching the Safe Centre policy will be asked to stop and may be asked to leave the Centre – police assistance will be sought if necessary.

If you know/suspect that you or one of your children has a highly **infectious/contagious condition** please seek medical advice before coming to the Centre.

Report all hazards and incidents to the Day Co-ordinator (whose name is on the blackboard in the Main Area) as soon as possible. The Co-ordinator is responsible for upholding the Safe Centre Policy.

Please keep your valuables with you as BUCFP cannot be held responsible for any losses.

Appendix 2

Interview Questions

1. Are you still involved with the Centre? If yes, what is your current role?
2. Have you completed any recent training or gained any new skills here, in the past 9 months since we last spoke?
3. Have there been any recent changes in your feelings about the Centre?
4. Last time you mentioned specific positive benefits, as a result of volunteering here. Do you still feel these benefits? Have they developed or led you into any new directions?
5. Have you been involved in any of the Health Works initiatives?
6. Can you think of any other benefits that volunteering here has given you?
7. Last time you summed up your feelings about the Centre as ... Do you still feel the same?
8. Can you rate the importance of the Centre to you on this scale?:

Not important / quite important / very important / vitally important