

An evaluation of volunteer  
opportunities offered by the  
Brighton Unemployed Centre  
Family Project

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**University of Brighton**

## **FOREWORD**

This is a contribution to our series of research papers which brings work in the Health and Social Policy Research Centre (HSPRC) and the School of Applied Social Science to a wider audience. The HSPRC aims to:

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Smith, N. (2007) *Learners' Journeys. Gateway to Learning Research Project*

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Banks, L. (2007) *Evaluation of 'Safe + Sorted' Youth Centre*

MacDonald, D. (2007) *Evaluation of the Brighton and Hove ASpire Project*

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Promoting good practice  
for volunteers from  
socially excluded groups



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## 1. Executive Summary

- This report was funded by GoldStar Volunteering and Mentoring Exemplar Programme to evaluate the various volunteering opportunities on offer at the BUCFP and to explore the range of impacts and outcomes experienced by volunteers as a result of their engagement with the Centre.
- The research used qualitative approaches of semi – structured interviews and participant observation. Three rounds of interviews with current volunteers were conducted at three monthly intervals between February and October 2007.
- Key findings include very high levels of satisfaction in a wide variety of volunteering roles, with 100% of respondents summing up their experiences of the Centre in positive terms in the first and second interviews.
- Volunteers came from a diverse range of backgrounds.
- A high degree of organic progression for volunteers over time was found, with people able to progress and develop at their own pace. Goals expressed at the first interviews had invariably been achieved by the subsequent interviews.
- 91% of respondents felt more confident as a result of their engagement with the Centre.
- 84% felt that they had increased their skills.
- 78% felt that they had enhanced their future life chances
- The Centre is a non hierarchical organisation with evidence of very high levels of commitment from paid workers, relationships of trust and respect between the various stakeholders, a minimum of bureaucracy to navigate and a strong emphasis on inclusivity and service user involvement and participation.
- The Report concludes that the Centre provides a model which demonstrates a very successful approach to recruiting, supporting and retaining volunteers. Elements of this approach could be beneficial to other similar organisations and make an important contribution to the spread of good practice in this area.

## 2. An Overview of the Brighton Unemployed Family Project (BUCFP)

The BUCFP is a registered charity, founded in 1981. Its charitable objective is: *'To relieve poverty, distress and hardship amongst unemployed, unwaged and low waged people and their families living or staying in the Brighton area regardless of race, sex, age, ability or sexual orientation'*.

Today the organisation is a complex one. The Centre provides a package of practical user run services in a day centre setting, helping families and individuals to challenge the affects of poverty and disadvantage.

There are currently six main project areas:

1. **Welfare Rights Advice and Information Project** – providing high quality confidential drop - in advice sessions on benefits and social welfare issues, representation for tribunals and appeals, specialist employment advice, home visits, telephone advice, joint work with MIND and outreach. Volunteers undertake a six-month training course and, as with all the project areas at the Centre, are supported by a highly qualified, experienced part time paid worker. The project works in partnership with a wide range of other agencies, social workers and housing support workers.
2. **Education Project** – offering a wide range of computer courses and drop - in classes in yoga, art, dance, cookery and languages to name just a few. This project aims to support people often taking first steps towards new learning experiences and caters for a range of different levels of learning need. Opportunities range from activity or learning groups involving peer learning, supported by training and workshops, through to more formal, structured courses. Users can also be trained to support others, thus creating opportunities for people to become volunteer trainers, learn new skills and gain practical experience.
3. **Work with Families.** The Playroom Project provides a range of services to meet the needs of families with young children, many living in deprived circumstances. These include a free, very high quality crèche for children up to age 8, opportunities for parents/carers to get involved in the project, family support and a toy library. The playroom is run by a team of 30 volunteers who are mainly parents or carers, supported by 2 part time paid workers. Crèche volunteers receive support, supervision and access to a range of training opportunities, including Paediatric First Aid, Protective Behaviours (children feeling and keeping safe), Pre School Learning Alliance's Doorstep courses in childcare training, Understanding and Managing Behaviour, Child Protection and Storytelling / Imaginative Play. Many volunteers decide to undertake NVQ's in childcare and use the playroom as their placement, resulting in many moving on to paid employment in childcare or teaching.

4. **Temporary Housing Project** – providing advice, information, services and support for families and individuals living in insecure accommodation in Brighton and Hove. This includes those in B&B's, on friend's floors or at risk of eviction, as well as people who are street homeless. As well as advice, they can offer low cost laundry facilities, free clothes, food, bedding and equipment, equipment loans and help with sourcing furniture and equipment.
5. **Kitchen Project** – provides a daily, low cost, hot, vegan lunch for Centre users, which is planned and prepared by volunteers, and a safe, welcoming social space and play area. This project also works jointly with the participation project to provide HealthWorks, a community food project with a range of health focused groups and initiatives.
6. **Participation Project.** This projects aims to empower Centre users by providing opportunities for volunteering and participation. Volunteers can participate at different levels and are able to progress through the organisation, becoming more involved, gaining confidence, undertaking training and taking on new responsibilities. Examples of some of the groups supported include; walking, allotment, arts and crafts, film, politics, magazine and creative writing anthology. Volunteers are offered free, on – site childcare and high levels of support and training.

The Centre also has a busy office which offers volunteers a general administrative role, with duties including answering the phone, greeting people, making room bookings, booking people onto courses and managing petty cash. The Centre also houses a wholefood coop and offers a community resource and room hire.

A wide range of events, activities, outings, celebrations, festivals and debates are also organised by the Centre

One of the most striking features about the BUCFP is that it is entirely user run and managed. There is no Centre Manager. Paid workers act as day co-ordinators to deal with any urgent issues that arise. Trustees are all regular Centre users and they manage and direct the organisation on behalf of the other users. The Staffing Sub Committee manages paid workers and recruitment and the Finance and Fundraising Sub Committee advise the Management Committee on budgeting and fundraising, and authorise purchases. There is also a Building and Premises Committee.

Each project is run by a team of trained volunteers and supported by a paid part time worker. The nine paid workers are all part time and are all on the same pay scale. The paid workers and trustees get together for Quarterly Development Days to streamline communication and ensure that they are all working together on funding, new initiatives and the provision of services to meet user need. During the course of this evaluation, the researcher attended one of these Development Days, to feedback on the first stage of the research and also to raise some questions which had emerged from the interview data. The main points from this meeting are discussed later in the report.

### 3. Background to the Evaluation

#### 3.1 The role of GoldStar

In 2006 the BUCFP applied to Goldstar Volunteering and Mentoring Exemplar Programme for continued funding for its Participation Project. As previously described, this project aims to work with some of the most deprived members of the community to provide empowerment through opportunities for volunteering. The funding bid to Goldstar was successful, enabling BUCFP to commission the University of Brighton to work with them on expanding their evaluation work and to contribute towards spreading good practice. The original research idea was therefore developed by the BUCFP in their application to Goldstar. The specific groups to be included were identified by the BUCFP workers in their original proposal to Goldstar, in order to address issues of social exclusion in the wider community.

#### 3.2 Review of recent relevant research

Research suggests that members of certain groups are under - represented as volunteers in wider society, at least as far as formal volunteering is concerned. (See, for example, *'Volunteering for All?'* Institute for Volunteering Research 2004 which explores the link between volunteering and social exclusion.).

Hardill and Baines (*'Making a Difference: Voluntary Action in a Community'* 2005) comment that while an estimated 17 million people in England and Wales take part in some form of volunteering, they are not evenly distributed through the population. Statistically, most are middle aged, employed, living in affluent areas and with relatively high levels of education. As a result the government and umbrella voluntary sector groups are keen to encourage participation by members of under – represented groups.

For example, The Wildlife Trusts recently reported the findings of their 3 - year project *'Unlocking the Potential?'* ( reviewed by the Institute for Volunteering Research 2006) which aimed to recruit volunteers from a wider cross section of the population, in particular to involve more young people, members of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups, people with disabilities, unemployed people and people with mental ill health. They had, for example, discovered that 98% of their volunteers were white. They ran diversity projects, testing a range of new recruitment methods and volunteering opportunities in 10 local Trusts and developed a volunteer development function to promote good practice in volunteer management in all Trusts. This project has enabled the Wildlife Trusts to develop their capacity to engage and support volunteers, and they are now attracting a more diverse range of volunteers locally.

The benefits of volunteering for a sample of people with experience of mental ill health were reported by Volunteering England in their report, *'Volunteering for Mental Health Project'* 2003. Links between volunteering and community happiness were also reported in a study which found strong links between voluntary activity and overall life satisfaction. (Whiteley, Prof. P. et al.

Economic and Social Research Council, 2004.) Professor Whiteley commented; '*..voluntary activity in the community is associated with better health, lower crime, improved educational performance and greater life satisfaction*'.(Wyvern Online Issue November 2004 University of Essex)

This evaluation of the volunteering experience offered by the BUCFP aims to contribute to this growing body of research aimed at improving the inclusiveness of volunteering and the recruitment, management and retention of volunteers, so that ultimately these proven benefits of volunteering may be experienced more widely across communities.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

- To carry out an evaluation of the success of the BUFCP in recruiting, managing and retaining volunteers, including those from certain target groups, chosen from the following: people from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities, those who are unemployed, lone parents and people with mental health or limiting long-term illness.
- To identify any weaknesses in recruiting, managing and retaining volunteers and how service quality could be improved
- To demonstrate how volunteering with the Centre impacts on volunteers, review and improve key performance indicators and review and improve methods of measuring these indicators.
- Dissemination: to produce a report on the findings and work with BUCFP and Goldstar to spread good practice.

The project seeks to identify and explore a range of changes and beneficial outcomes in the lives of volunteers resulting from engagement with the BUCFP. It is hoped that this final report, which contains conclusions and recommendations based on interview data, could also benefit other organisations and help spread good practice. It is recognised that the Centre already undertakes monitoring and evaluation procedures; this project aims to extend this work with primarily qualitative data.



## 5. Participants and methods

Volunteers at the Centre were made aware of the research and asked if they would like to participate. Centre workers discussed the aims of the research at Centre user meetings and details were posted on the noticeboard. As well as a verbal explanation, a Participants Information Sheet (Appendix 1) was also made available. This sheet was produced in accordance with the list of recommendations given by the Faculty Research Ethics and Governance Committee (FHREG) in their guidelines. Centre workers acted as gatekeepers initially, in selecting participants. Attempts were made to include volunteers from each of the project areas in the Centre, and to reflect the range of length of service at the Centre, so the sample was not strictly random. Members from the specified target groups were included in the sample although the sample was not drawn exclusively from these groups.

Semi - structured interviews were conducted with a maximum sample of 32 volunteers at the Centre. The majority were face to face though some later interviews were conducted by phone.

The entire first round of interviews took place at the Centre in a screened off corner of the common area, as there is a shortage of available private rooms. The interviews were not tape-recorded and the researcher was keen to keep the interviews fairly informal and relaxed. The key aim of the interviews was to track users' levels of participation in Centre activities and the extent to which they were able to follow an organic progression route, picking up new skills and experiences as they went. In designing the interview schedules attention was paid to the need for sensitivity and to avoid being overly intrusive. Confidentiality was emphasised and the identity of all respondents will remain anonymous. With regard to giving consent to be interviewed, initially Centre workers felt that asking people to sign a consent form could put them off participating in the project, as it ran the risk of formalising the interviews too much. However, in the light of the comments of the Faculty Research Ethics and Governance Committee (FREGC) a consent form was used. A sample copy of the consent form, adapted from the University of Brighton Participant Consent form is included (Appendix 2).

Ideally, each person was to be interviewed 3 times, at 3 monthly intervals to track their progress. The researcher recognised that a high level of flexibility would be needed when scheduling interviews. The interviews were conducted in two-week blocks, in March, June and September 2007; 32 interviews were conducted in March, 26 in June and 24 in September.

Participants were shown the questions in advance, where possible, so that they were clear about what they were consenting to.

It was recognised at the outset that it might not be possible to interview each participant three times, and where this was achieved it should perhaps be considered a bonus. For this reason, each interview should be able to 'stand alone' and not depend on a follow up. It was fully understood and respected that in the view of BUCFP workers, incentives were not considered to be

necessary for participation in the project. Volunteers were able to treat it as part of their volunteering and as such were entitled to the usual out of pocket expenses, free lunch and crèche places.

The researcher also undertook some participation observation at the Centre. She attended a New Volunteers Induction Session to see at first hand how the Participation Worker manages to engage people in various projects; a Volunteer Celebration Day (an annual event recognising the importance of the work of the volunteers), and a Quarterly Development Day, all of which are discussed later.

## **6. Data Analysis**

The interview data was analysed using thematic content analysis, one of the accepted procedures for qualitative data in social research studies. Interview data was stored in a locked home file in the researcher's home office. No one other than the researcher had access to this file. On completion of the research the data was returned to HSPRC and will be stored for three years in a safe archive. This is in accordance with standard procedures for research studies of this kind.

This final report contains conclusions and recommendations. It is hoped that this will benefit not only the Centre but will also be of interest to other organisations relying on volunteers and will contribute to spreading good practice. The outcomes of the research should enable the Centre to offer an increasingly responsive, varied and positive volunteering experience. These benefits will be felt by the participants and other volunteers and service users.

The report will be launched and disseminated in various ways. Copies will be sent to relevant local, regional and national organisations such as RAISE, the Volunteer Centre, Working Together Project and the Institute for Volunteering Research. It will also be made available on the web, and given publicity via a local launch. Dissemination may also include participation in workshops, seminars and conferences..



## 7. Research Findings.

### 7.1 The First Interviews. March 2007 (n = 32)

#### ***Initial Contacts***

Respondents reported hearing about the Centre in two main ways, either through verbal recommendations or non-verbal sources of information. The majority of the verbal recommendations were made by friends, but staff at agencies including the Job Centre, the Volunteer Bureau, Learning Links and a local hostel were all credited with informing respondents about the Centre. Of the non-verbal sources of information, the majority were leaflets seen by respondents either at the Job Centre or the library, and one person reported accessing the Centre via the Internet at the library.

Various factors were specifically mentioned as being the motivating force behind first visits to the Centre. The table below shows reasons which were specifically mentioned by respondents as having drawn them to Centre in the first place.

Needed benefits advice	7
Looking for volunteering opportunities	5
New to the area/ wanted to make new contacts	4
Free crèche	4
Had been feeling isolated	2
Was homeless	2
Creative writing group	2
Computer courses	2
Tai Chi classes	2

Some strong common themes emerged when people described their first impressions of the Centre. Many described it as '*warm and welcoming*', some talked about feeling immediately aware of the support available and finding it all quite '*amazing*'. One person told me that he remembers feeling picked up very quickly by workers here, and '*earthed*'. Another person described finding a '*safe, friendly, nice atmosphere and immediately wanting to get involved with the crèche*'. The crèche was singled out by several respondents as making a very strong and positive first impression. A couple of people did describe finding the Centre initially daunting, when they first walked into the general area and said they needed a bit of time to adjust to that.

Several people also mentioned that they had quickly felt a strong desire to give something back to the Centre; they didn't want to just be 'taking' and this prompted their decisions to offer to volunteer, as a form of exchange.

## ***Previous Volunteering***

19 people (59%) had done voluntary work before and 13 (41%) had not.

People had volunteered in a range of settings including drug and alcohol projects, Age Concern, at a Peace Centre, in housing advice agencies and in hostels.

Reasons given for not getting involved in volunteering in the past included the relative youth of some of the respondents, lack of time, previously being in full time work and a lack of suitable childcare.

## ***Variety of Voluntary Roles at the Centre***

The roles of the volunteers interviewed fell into 3 categories: Multiple Concurrent Roles, Single Roles and Multiple Consecutive Roles.

Multiple Concurrent Roles	15	47%
Single Roles	12	37%
Multiple Consecutive Roles	5	16%

15 respondents (47%) had multiple concurrent roles i.e. more than one role held at the same time. Various combinations of roles were described. For example, volunteering with the magazine group could be combined with involvement in the film and video group, the office, or as a Trustee. Office volunteers might also teach computer courses. Such combinations of roles were fluid and could change during the course of this research, and demonstrate the wide and flexible range of opportunities available to volunteers.

12 people in the sample (37%) had single roles, of which 4 were crèche/playroom volunteers. Crèche volunteers supervise and entertain the children, organise activities and provide a safety net for the children in their care. Some single role volunteers were based in the kitchen, involved in menu planning, food preparation and cooking healthy vegan meals, for up to 70 people at a time. Others were members of the Welfare Rights Group (WRG), one specialising in employment cases and one an experienced welfare rights adviser who also provides training to new WRG volunteers in communication skills. Another was an art group volunteer. The art group appears to run in a very unstructured way, with an emphasis on people's self esteem and creativity. There is no formal teaching in the group and only basic materials provided. It is open to everyone on a drop in basis and an exhibition of members' work is held each year. Others with single roles include some office volunteers, one of whom had only been involved with the Centre a few weeks. He described his role as being a first point of contact for visitors to the Centre. Another single role volunteer I interviewed worked as part of the Temporary Housing Project. Work in this project involves helping to sort out all the various donations that come into the Centre, in the form of clothes, toys and household goods for example. When people access the project in need of

various things, they are then helped to find what they need from their supplies. They also sort out loans of baby equipment, such as cots, car seats and buggies.

5 respondents (16%) had multiple consecutive roles. For instance one had been a crèche volunteer for several years, left for a while, but then came back to help co-ordinate the creative writing group. Another person described how they had moved, over time, from the crèche, to involvement with the toy library, to becoming a Trustee. Another person had started off as an office volunteer and had then progressed to becoming an adviser in the Welfare Rights Group. This particular route of progression is not uncommon in the Centre and appears to be an important incentive for some office volunteers.

### ***Frequency of Volunteering***

Once a week	7	(22%)
Twice a week	18	(56%)
Three times a week	5	(16%)
Four times a week	1	(3%)
Five times a week	1	(3%)

12 people (37%) said that they felt their current level of involvement was right for them and they were happy with it. Three people specifically mentioned that they would ideally like to do more volunteering but they had to balance it with part time jobs. One person said she particularly valued the way she could fit her volunteering around her child's school day and another said it was important that she could fit it round her other volunteering commitments.

Some respondents pointed out that they also came to the Centre as service users or to help out at other times during the week.

### ***Benefits of Volunteering at the Centre***

Most respondents liked lots of things about volunteering at the Centre. Their responses to this question could be broken down into 8 main categories:

#### **General social interaction**

The opportunity for social interaction was highlighted by 12 respondents (37%) as one of the best things about volunteering at the Centre. Within this category, comments included;

*Meeting people from all different walks of life*

*Meeting other mums in the same situation*

*Meeting like - minded souls who you can have proper conversations with*

*Making important friends*

*I really value the outings and kids Christmas parties.*

### **Psychological benefits / Mental well being**

14 people (44%) mentioned this type of beneficial outcome.  
Comments included;

*I find it stimulating*

*I get to use my initiative*

*It's good to have a routine. When you are not working you can lose track, get in a rut... So it's good to have a regular commitment to come here.*

*I like the way it makes my life consistent and the regular routine of coming in once a week.*

*It gives you a real sense of working*

*I enjoy feeling I'm helping people*

*This place is a root, an earth; it grounds you and gives a point of contact.*

*It gives me a reality check and makes me realise how fortunate I really am.*

*It's rewarding as I feel I'm improving myself as well as helping others.*

*I feel I have learned greater compassion and patience from the people here.*

### **Promoting a sense of community / inclusion**

11 respondents (34%) felt that one of the best things about volunteering at the Centre was the feeling of well being they got from being part of a wider community and the sense of social inclusion that brings.  
Some of the responses include:

*It really feels like a family centre, like a family or a tribe.*

*The feeling that you belong to something.*

*A sense of belonging – it's like a family*

*A lot of people in general feel that their lives have become rootless, pointless, people have lost their roles, particularly men, I feel. This place gives you a point of contact.*

*It's a safehouse – it doesn't matter where you are from, what language you speak, how you dress, it's a safe place.*

### **Practical benefits**

4 people singled out the free vegan meal as one of the best things

*The food is brilliant!*

4 specifically mentioned that getting a reference to help them back into paid work was a major benefit.

The extensive range of courses available and the quality of teaching were also highlighted, as were the crèche places, the opportunities for information exchange, and the IT facilities.

*Excellent IT facilities – at 30p an hour it's cheaper than most Internet cafes and the library, and the software is far better than you would expect, with AdobePhotoshop, Dreamweaver, InDesign publishing software.*

### **Learning opportunities**

14 people (44%) picked up on learning opportunities as one of the best things about their volunteering experience. One person told me;

*It's the fact that I have learned so much about children whilst volunteering in the crèche – about child psychology, abuse and safety issues.... It's helped me an unbelievable amount with my own children, for example, in understanding the importance of play.*

Another described it as; *Excellent on the job training.*

An office volunteer explained that they had; *...picked up lots of useful admin experience and skills which have made it possible for me to get back into work. I had been out of work for a year previously.*

Others cited childcare training; *The crèche is fantastic. Judy is inspirational in showing how to look after toddlers;* IT training, language courses, Food Hygiene training, and also learning *people skills and learning about communication and tact.*

## **Lack of Judgmentalism**

6 people (19%) raised this as one of their favourite things about the Centre. Comments included;

*If you are feeling bad, people will just leave you alone, they understand. It's in the nature of the place that people don't judge you, which makes me feel in control.*

*No one here is judgmental – you can just be quiet if you want to.*

*No one will judge you if you come in when you are having a bad day.*

*You can come in, even if you are feeling rotten, and you get nurtured too, not just the children.*

*People are very accepting here.*

## **Informality / Non – hierarchical structure**

This was a benefit cited by 10 respondents (31%). For instance;

*It's informal here and very accessible.*

*The fact that there is no bureaucracy.*

*It's very democratic.*

*It's easy going, no pressure, we can discuss everything.*

*There is a very welcoming open door policy.*

## **Attitudes of the Paid Workers**

Finally, 10 respondents (31%) felt that one of the things they appreciated most was the way in which the paid workers interacted with them.

*The thing I like best about volunteering here are the paid workers; they are very welcoming and always making sure that needs are met. They show lots of interest in new people and are very inclusive.*

*The level of support you get from the paid workers.*

One respondent told me that he believes the success of the Centre is all down to good management. He said that he had;

*...deep respect for paid workers who have wide knowledge and experience, have worked for a long time in their field and empower people. He added that he feels; valued, recognised and appreciated.*

*The workers here have fantastic conflict resolution skills – in the 2 years I have been coming here I've never seen one unresolved conflict.*

*There is very good peer support here (within the WRG).*

*When I first started I couldn't tell the paid workers from the volunteers or users, as there is no hierarchy like that here.*

*Workers here show compassion in all different situations and they have energy here for all of us.*

*The compassion I have seen displayed here by workers has bowled me over and I have learned greater patience and compassion from them.*

### **Any Dislikes / Suggested Improvements**

14 respondents (44%) said there was nothing they didn't like about the Centre.

*Personally I can't fault it. Everything seems fine to me.*

*It's a great place, I can't fault it!*

*No. The whole thing is brilliant, for the community feeling it gives. Culturally too, there's people here from all over the world, all made to feel welcome.*

*I wouldn't want any changes at the expense of losing what they already have. I am very happy with the way it is. The slower pace here means that it is a very relaxed place to be. I wouldn't want to lose the magic of the place.*

*No, nothing comes to mind. It's a charity and does the best it can. I wouldn't want to knock it.*

*No. So much self - evaluation goes on here anyway, that if something isn't working it gets sorted out before it can become a big problem.*

*Nothing big. The point is any problems can be raised at regular meetings and will get sorted out quickly.*

*No, it's an absolute joy to come here.*

*No, I think it's lovely the way it is. It's an amazing place.*

6 respondents (19%) mentioned the physical or structural shortcomings of the building in response to this question. Comments included;

*Better disabled facilities, such as a lift are a high priority. Also shower facilities for centre users.*

*Better physical access would be an improvement.*

*Physically, the crèche could be bigger but the work they do there is miraculous, given the size.*

*Limited resources in terms of interview rooms and nowhere separate to do admin. Also the building is difficult to access physically, both in terms of geographic location and the stairs within. I'd like to see investment in a more appropriate building.*

4 respondents (12%) mentioned that the behaviour of other service users could be off - putting at times.

*From time to time you do get rude people coming in, but the day co-ordinator will always sort those situations out.*

*It's the nature of the place that sometimes there will be people who come here with problems who are difficult. It's not a complaint though, it's the nature of the place. If I really wanted to raise an issue, the processes are there for me to follow, but I'd need to feel very strongly about it.*

There were also some miscellaneous comments (25% of responses), though none were major criticisms. For instance;

*Not really, nothing I don't like, but it is very liberal here and I sometimes think it needs a bit more control over the readily available things, such as the books.*

*Occasionally communication in the office doesn't work but I think that is the nature of having so many office volunteers.*

*When I first came I didn't find it that welcoming, but maybe it's better now.*

*My one complaint was the smoking inside, but now that has stopped.*

***Do you feel any of the following have changed for the better since you started volunteering here?***

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>A little</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Other</b>
<b>Confidence</b>	29 (91%)	3	0	0
<b>Social Life</b>	19 (59%)	3	9 (28%)	1 ('yes & no')
<b>Job Prospects</b>	23 (72%)	0	9 (28%)	
<b>Skills</b>	27 (84%)	0	5 (16%)	0
<b>Health/ eating patterns</b>	19 (59%)	1	12 (37%)	0
<b>Housing situation</b>	19 ( 59%)	1	9 (28%)	3 (Indirectly')
<b>Future life chances</b>	25 (78%)	0	5 (16%)	2 (I can't see why not'; 'sort of')

( rounded to nearest whole percent)

The improvement reported by the largest number of respondents was increased confidence. One person summed it up like this:

*I am more confident because I am doing something I enjoy, all the workers and trustees give me time and support and I've got the confidence to believe in myself.*

The second highest improvement was individual skill levels. A wide range of skills were reported, including admin, IT, parenting, people skills, communication, cooking, creative writing, web design, welfare rights knowledge, maths, patience, conflict resolution, minute taking and chairing meetings. One person commented that; *...it's given me a breathing space and allowed me to re-find skills I knew I had but which needed bringing out.*

The third highest improvement was in future life chances. Most people felt that more doors would be open to them in future, with several describing the Centre as an important stepping stone. In the words of one respondent;

*This place acts as a catalyst for other things to happen and to get me moving in a new direction.*

Better job prospects were the fourth highest improvement reported, with one respondent commenting that he felt his would be *astronomically good* after volunteering at the Centre, with all that he had learned there.

Social life, health / eating patterns and housing situation were all ranked 5<sup>th</sup> in the improvements table. Regarding social life, several people commented that this was beneficial not just for them but for their children too.

The vegan meal at lunch time was valued not just because it was healthy, but also for some people who found there was often not enough time for them to cook an evening meal. The fact that it was vegan food was appreciated as it is open to all and doesn't exclude anyone. One respondent made another interesting point. She commented;

*I particularly value the meal as an informal part of team building with my colleagues. It's important that we have a trusting rapport as a team, and sharing a meal together can contribute to that.*

Regular Tai Chi classes and involvement with a healthy walks initiative were also mentioned in relation to health benefits.

The majority of those who reported improvements with their housing situation attributed this to having received housing advice from the Welfare Rights Group or the Temporary Housing project, which they had found invaluable.

### ***Ambitions for the Coming Year***

Four respondents said that they had no specific ambitions for the coming year. The remaining 28 offered a variety of personal hopes and ambitions in the first interviews. These ambitions are revisited in the subsequent follow - up interviews, to see to what extent they had been realised.

A few examples of aims expressed in the first interviews are given below;

*My ambitions include developing the magazine and video groups, to produce more things of a reasonable standard. To help make these groups really work. Also to continue with my language courses.*

*To try and raise funds for structural improvements to the building.*

*To carry on attending meetings and making my own suggestions. For instance I'd like us to hold a jumble sale.*

*I'd love to help organise a giant BUCFP festival, with loads of bands and circus acts etc. I'd love to see that happen.*

*I'm still getting to know what goes on – my real ambition is to get some paid work.*

*I am considering talking to the welfare rights people, as I know they do train volunteers. I may do something about it this year.*

One person told me that she had approached the temporary housing co-ordinator about trying to get some funding from a particular charity to improve

the clothes storage area, with more shelving and better lighting. She plans to work with the Centre Fundraiser on this.

*I'd like to get involved with the new allotment project*

*To do more courses – like First Aid or whatever else is available.*

One kitchen volunteer said he would like to see some changes in the kitchen, more cupboards or wooden racks, to improve food storage.

*I want to complete Level 2 NVQ in childcare.*

One of the members of the magazine group told me that he is ambitious for the magazine and this year hopes to use grant money to increase circulation to a wider audience, and introduce colour. Also by the end of the year he hopes they may attract advertising from small local businesses.

High levels of support were reported, with no – one saying that they felt unsupported. The firm impression given was that volunteers can take as much or as little support from workers as they need. While some respondents were happy to work relatively autonomously, others were grateful for a higher level of support from paid workers. There appears to be enough flexibility in the organisation to allow for this. Importantly, workers at the Centre recognise the varying needs of different individuals and allow for this in the volunteering experiences offered.

### **Overall Feelings about the Centre**

100% of respondents summed up their feelings about the Centre in a positive way. Examples include:

*A lifeline for a lot of people.*

*The Centre offers a high level of ambition in what it offers to people – and I was surprised by the high standards of the courses.*

*Everyone should have one! These days, as society gets more and more segregated it's really important to have a place like this where you can get a sense of community, talk to people, and have real conversations. Whether you just come in for a coffee or you're here all day every day, it can be for everyone.*

*A very warm and welcoming place to work, a 'hub' with such a wide range of people using the centre.*

*It caters for everyone – it's like a family. Everyone has to get on with each other, to make it work.*

*It's multi cultural, has good ethical qualities, like the vegan food, and being very inclusive, people with special needs often work here. It's open to all.*

*It's a focus of energies – daily energies. It's pretty indispensable for a lot of people, and in many ways. From clothes, to advice, food, it helps across the board.*

*It's a home from home, run by decent, kind people.*

*As well as offering an on going supportive community, this place is also a haven for anyone going through a crisis.*

*It's a fantastic stepping-stone – it has got me back into society. I love coming here. I feel needed here and appreciated.*

*A port in a storm for some people...It offers purpose and direction to all users.*

*It's invaluable. Socially, for the community it serves. It's so helpful for people with difficulties in the local area. For parents the crèche is very important. It's a healing place. People seem to get stronger here; you see it around you, it's not just the kids in the crèche who are developing, it's the adults too who are growing. It's very satisfying to see that.*

*It's a great place, especially for single parents or people with mental health problems. It's a safe place to be. There is a strong ethic of care here, connecting up all the different areas.*

*A positive foundation for my life to get better – a foundation for my future. A framework for a bigger picture.*

*I feel very privileged to be part of it, very grateful to the centre, and very loyal to it.*

## 7.2

A member of the creative writing group gave me permission to reproduce a piece of his writing describing his first impressions of the Centre.

### **'Belonging'**

*I'd walked up a steep hill, sweating, tired. The building was nondescript. I went into a grubby lobby. To the right were steep stairs with a roughly written notice "Brighton Unemployed Centre". I stood at the bottom to get my breath back.*

*I wasn't sure I wanted to join, but made myself climb up to the first landing. A small office led off. A friendly voice said, "Can I help you?" I felt more relaxed: "I'm interested in being a volunteer". "Can you go up to the next floor and speak to Sheila? She'll be in the big room". I tightened up. I don't like walking into rooms full of people I don't know.*

*However, I climbed up and opened the door. Unseen voices were singing quietly. A young child crawled around. He smelt of sick. There was a faint odour of cooking and coffee. People sat at tables, drinking and talking. Across the room a young man was curled up on a sofa, fast asleep, hood over his head. People were painting glasses. Another older man was staring at a wall, lost in thought.*

*The room was welcoming. Everyone seemed as though they belonged there. That's the word: 'belonging'. Someone pointed out Sheila to me and I introduced myself. She said she was in the middle of her Art Group and a tutor was about to talk about their new project. I was welcome to sit and listen. That was nice. I felt included. Afterwards Sheila gave me a Volunteer Application Form and information leaflet. I said I would join her writing group in the morning. I went downstairs feeling happy. The next morning I handed in my completed form at the office. A different person, but the same friendly response.*

*I had read the leaflet and the building felt more open to me now. There was a welfare rights room where you could get help from a trained worker. A computer room offering cheap courses and access to the Internet. The crèche was down that corridor, the kitchen over there. A room for courses and meetings. Somewhere downstairs was the laundry. The big room was busy.*

*I recognised a couple of faces from yesterday – Centre users, volunteers, paid workers. No one was labelled – just everyone working for the benefit of all. A smiling face approached and introduced itself as Charles.*

*I had a warm feeling of belonging.*

### **7.3 The Second Interviews. 3 months later - June 2007 (n = 26)**

#### ***Current Levels of Participation at the Centre***

Of the original 32 respondents:

18 (56%) were still involved at the Centre with the same level of participation and were still happy the amount of volunteering they were doing.

4 (12.5%) were still involved at the Centre but with a reduced rate of participation. Different reasons were given for the reduction in participation. One person cited increased demands of college work and exams. Another explained that she had backed off a bit recently, as she had found herself doing a large amount of work as a Trustee and felt that she was becoming a bit too reliant on the Centre and it was becoming too reliant on her. She had realised that she needed to reduce her hours, and felt happier now that she is coming in less. We discussed how it can be quite complicated for people such as herself who have multiple roles at the Centre. Another respondent explained that he has reduced his participation from twice a week to once a week as he is now a fully inducted volunteer; when we first spoke he was still being trained so came in more regularly. Finally, another person had reduced their participation, due to needing more of a balance with outside commitments. They all appreciated the fact that it is possible to vary the amount you volunteer at the Centre. Once again this demonstrates the flexibility of the organisation, enabling people to participate at whatever is the right level for them, depending on individual circumstances, and recognising that these may change over time.

5 people (16%) were no longer involved as they had moved on to paid employment since they spoke to me last time. All 5 mentioned that they had been sorry to leave the Centre in some respects and that it had been an important stepping stone for them back into paid work.

A final 5 (16%) were not available for a full second interview.

#### ***Changes Noticed at the Centre.***

Of the 26 people who took part in a full second interview:

17 (65%) replied that they had been aware of some changes in the past 3 months. 9 (35%) said they were not aware of any changes.

Changes reported include:

*It's getting better and better. I think it's just an increasingly cheerful place to be.*

*The place is always changing – some of the main developments have been the new HealthWorks initiatives, new cooking classes have started which are important because everybody eats, and the Health Walks, which are another new development. These things are positive for mental health as well as physical health. We have also got some funding to employ a facilitator to come in and overview the Centre and see where we might make improvements, which feels very positive.*

Several people mentioned that they had noticed smallish changes, mainly procedural modifications or new courses starting up, such as the new cookery classes. Awareness of new funding applications was also reported.

One person mentioned a drop off in numbers on all the courses run by the Education project this term and that they needed to advertise the courses on offer more widely. Another commented that they felt the level of cleanliness had declined, especially around the toilet areas.

4 people specifically mentioned the difference the start of summer and the good weather was having, with *'More colour about the place.'*

A couple of people commented that they felt that new ideas were coming through and being acted upon quite quickly, such as the forthcoming jumble sale.

3 people specifically mentioned that they had a sense of things generally moving forward, and of; *Things getting done.*

A crèche volunteer commented that there had been some recent small changes in the crèche arising out of the annual review which they hold, giving everyone the chance to make suggestions and have some input. Another crèche volunteer made the point that in a sense it was always changing, in response to changes in legislation and beliefs about childcare. As this crèche volunteer put it; *Its practice is never static.*

## ***Changes to Volunteering Roles***

Of the 26 people interviewed:

10 (38%) said that there had been no changes to their role in the past 3 months

16 (62%) did identify some changes to their roles.

These changes included:

- Reduced participation
- Additional responsibilities
- Greater awareness of responsibilities and understanding of role
- Greater commitment to their role

- Extra workload with additional challenges
- Greater ability to be versatile and creative within role, as confidence and trust in them grows
- Greater progression within role
- Broadening of role to take up new initiatives.

To illustrate;

When we first spoke one respondent had only just started up the film group; this has now been developing well. He explained that he was given a free rein from the outset. He has had to adapt his previous teaching style, as this is a drop in group, with many different usages. He commented that he is learning new skills in co-ordination, as he had never started up a group from scratch like this before, and felt this was a valuable experience for him.

Another respondent told me that although his role is still the same, his workload is steadily increasing. He is currently the only free specialist employment adviser in the City. Due to funding cuts and generally limited resources, specialist employment advice and access to tribunal representation have decreased locally, thus making his role as a volunteer at the Centre all the more vital.

Another explained that his role had changed in the sense that he is now a fully inducted volunteer and so he is now actually cooking food. He has also been working on the new menus and is creating a database with food of different themes. The new menus are on their way. This is a very good project for him, he feels, as it allows him to be both versatile and creative.

Another respondent, who had only recently started when we first spoke, has progressed very quickly in the last 3 months. His work in the kitchen began with helping out, washing up, making salads, and chopping vegetables. He is now one of the main chefs. He felt that this route of progression was made readily available to him and he believes it is available to anyone who wants it. He made the important point that people can progress at their own speed, but if they don't want to, that's fine too.

Another respondent described how his role has broadened recently. He has become increasingly involved with the Health Walks initiative, which he had mentioned in the first interview. He also hopes to organise some training for centre users to become leaders of health walks and he has been having meetings with the council officer involved in the initiative. He is adding this voluntary work with the Centre to his existing roles.

### ***New Skills and Training***

Of the 26 people interviewed:

15 (58%) had either undertaken some training, attended courses or strongly felt they had developed new interpersonal skills in the past 3 months.

11 said no, but of these, 3 said they would have liked to but simply had no extra time and a further one said they would be keen to if the right course came up.

New training and skills that had been achieved in the past 3 months include:

- Child care courses in child protection and paediatric first aid
- Attending a conference on well being in children
- Developing teaching skills
- A range of IT skills including Access, Excel and InDesign
- Communication skills
- Trustee training skills
- Exponential growth in confidence
- Knowledge of health and safety procedures
- Kitchen skills, including certificated knowledge of Food Hygiene
- Interpersonal skills such as learning how to be less hard on yourself and to be better at taking compliments and accepting praise for your work.

One person told me that by keeping her skills alive, through the voluntary work she does at the Centre, she was prevented from feeling like she was at the bottom of the heap – and that, she emphasised, is not to be taken lightly.

### ***Progress with any Particular Aims***

Of the 26 people interviewed:

24 (92%) said yes, they were well on track to achieving the goals/aims/targets they had mentioned in the first interviews.

Of the 2 who said no, one explained that she hadn't taken on any additional volunteer roles, a possible aim expressed in her first interview, because she was now pregnant and so not in a position to take on any more work. The other person had been clear in his first interview that he had no specific ambitions as he wasn't structured in that way and didn't really think like that, but was very happy with the way things were.

Goals expressed in the first interviews, which had been resoundingly achieved 3 months later included:

- To continue to volunteer and develop my role
- To continue to learn
- To accept new responsibilities
- To continue to work for the structural repairs of the building
- To maintain the balance between completing (college) work and volunteering, without having to give one up.
- To continue to provide a high quality service to those who most need it
- To complete certificated courses and continue to progress.

Specific examples include the completion of a volunteer database and the magazine now having a wider circulation and a colour front page. Though the allotments projects had not yet got off the ground, one of the respondents who had expressed interest in this the first time round is now involved in setting up a herb garden at the Centre, for use in the kitchen. A jumble sale, which was the aim of one respondent, was held in June and the kitchen had undergone some changes with the introduction of additional shelving, which was a need highlighted by another.

### ***Overall Feelings about the Centre***

Of the 26 people interviewed;

26 (100%) stood by their earlier positive comments in summarising how they feel about the Centre – no one had changed their mind about the Centre in the past 3 months. Some of the additional comments include:

*The Centre sustains people – it offers sustained support for as long as someone needs it.*

That there is very little bureaucracy to navigate when setting up a new group – this respondent was able to get the film and video group off the ground quickly and feels this lack of red tape is a real strength of the Centre.

One respondent said he still feels the same about the Centre adding that he truly believes in the Centre and in his view it is the embodiment of the '*group in action*'.

Finally, one respondent who had just secured a new (paid) job explained:

*A person can come to the centre as an adult feeling absolutely unemployable and leave as an extremely employable person.*

#### 7.4 The Third Interviews September 2007 (n = 24)

24 of the original 32 respondents were available for a third and final interview, though 26 of the original 32 were still volunteering regularly at the Centre.

#### ***Changes to Volunteering Role***

Still the same	Reduced involvement	Increased involvement
8 (33%)	9 (37%)	7 (29%)

8 people (33%) said that their role was still the same and all were happy with this.

9 people (37%) reported that their role had changed. Either in the sense that they had reduced their involvement partially, or in 4 cases they had stopped or were about to stop volunteering at the Centre completely. Of the 4 who had stopped, 2 had done so in order to take up paid work, one was expecting a baby soon and the other was unsure whether they would be staying in Brighton and so was unable to commit at that time.

Of the remaining 5, 2 were standing down from roles as Trustees but continuing with their other voluntary roles at the Centre and 3 were cutting down on the amount of time they gave to the Centre in order to achieve a greater balance with their other outside commitments.

Finally, 7 people (29%) reported other changes to their role. 3 people had got involved with the allotment project, which is now up and running, combining this with their existing roles. The Centre allotment is a large plot and requires a lot of commitment and hard work. Hopefully the produce will be used in the kitchen at the Centre. One of these respondents commented that he felt a lot fitter as a result of working on the allotment, and that he had noticed this health benefit quite quickly.

2 respondents were very enthusiastic about an exciting new creative project they are both involved with; a forthcoming creative writing anthology, to be published by the Centre. Entitled 'Salt and Vinegar' this paperback anthology will contain original writing by members of the creative writing group as well as being open to service users who have never done any creative writing before. A major launch of the publication is planned for March 2008 at the Jubilee Library in Brighton. There has already been press interest in this event and it looks set to be a high profile achievement for all involved. (For examples of some of work submitted so far visit Salt and Vinegar at [www.bucfp.org](http://www.bucfp.org))

A further 2 respondents mentioned that they had taken on some additional responsibilities since we last spoke. One was now involved in the design and production of the forthcoming Annual Report and the other was now regularly co-ordinating in the playroom.

## ***Views on Volunteering Generally***

Of the 24 respondents to this question, 15 (62 %) said that they would be more likely to volunteer again in the future as a result of their experience as a volunteer at the Centre. 8 (33%) said that they already had positive views on volunteering before they came here and that these had stayed the same. No one felt that they had been put off volunteering as a result of their experience at the centre.

## ***Progress with Aims***

23 of the 24 felt they were 'on track' with previously expressed aims. One explained that since she was now expecting a baby her aims and priorities have understandably changed direction.

For some people their aim had been to either continue volunteering or to make important decisions about how volunteering fitted in with their future plans and achieve the right balance. Others had expressed more concrete aims, such as getting new flooring for the Centre, taking a First Aid course, helping to organising a jumble sale, researching and setting up a new menu database and getting the Centre newsletter out to more locations. All of these aims have been successfully realised in the past 3 months.

One person explained that he wanted to continue to find ways of linking the film group with groups of service users. For instance, by using animation to link with the art group and using documentary making to link with the creative writing group. He sees this as an important way in which the film group can develop. He felt that since we last spoke more and more people have become aware of the group and it is becoming more established.

No one I spoke to felt that on a personal level they were failing to achieve their aims within their roles at the centre.

## ***Views on Volunteer Engagement and Role of Trustees and Paid Workers***

Although the overall view was that the paid workers and Trustees do a very good job, a number of suggestions were made to improve participation and engagement.

- Several respondents suggested more training, both for trustees and volunteers.
- A more regular newsletter, perhaps fortnightly.
- A quiet room for adults

- Develop user meetings, make the Wednesday meeting stronger if possible, or maybe hold meetings on days other than Wednesdays so more people can attend.
- More interaction with volunteers – perhaps introduce a regular surgery where volunteers can meet with paid workers and raise any ideas and issues. It was commented that it is not always easy to raise things with the person directly responsible for co-ordinating your own area of work.
- Raise awareness of the Centre, maybe get a slot on Radio Reverb (a community radio station) or; *have a go ourselves with Internet radio.*
- Encourage more people to take part in Maintenance Week; *a great form of team building.*
- Carry out exit interviews
- Maybe the odd questionnaire that you could take away and email your answers.
- Ensure that respect is shown to volunteers at all times. Implement honesty, awareness and responsibility towards volunteers.
- Maybe do more to engage with people on a personal level, by offering advice, making sure that they feel on track and steering them along if necessary.

Some positive ways in which respondents felt engaged with the Centre are highlighted below.

For one respondent the free lunch was key. She compared it with her paid work in an organisation, which also relies on volunteers and also provides them with a free meal. She feels one of the main ways to involve and engage people is with nice food and for that reason the Centre was really getting it right by ensuring a free hot meal for all its volunteers.

Another respondent pointed to the work being carried out to improve engagement, as part of the Tudor Trust Organisational Review currently taking place at the Centre. An experienced facilitator has been recruited to carry out a 12 – 18 month review of every aspect of the work of the Centre with a view to strengthening the organisation and securing its future. A key element is to involve service users in this review process, and one of the aims is to hold an Engagement Day and set up a representative steering group of volunteers to work with the facilitator.

Another respondent specifically mentioned the Volunteer Celebration Day, and said that as a volunteer it had really helped to make her feel valued.

### ***Views on Volunteering and Paid Work***

6 people (25%) said that their volunteering went alongside paid work for them and that it was a case of maintaining a balance between the two.

A further 6 saw their volunteering as something quite separate to any paid employment they might have. For some it was about developing personal interests, for instance supporting healthy eating, or learning about what is involved in being a Trustee. For others it offered work that was more meaningful than their paid employment. One person explained that their voluntary work was completely different to their paid job, in that as a volunteer they felt what they did was more meaningful.

For 4 respondents, volunteering was a substitute for paid work, either following retirement, a period of ill health or being unable to work for some other reason. It was commented that for some, volunteering can be a very positive and creative alternative to paid work.

6 people (25%) felt that for them, volunteering was preparation for returning to paid work. One explained that volunteering at the Centre had supported his return to full time paid work, even though he is now working in a very different capacity to his voluntary role. Volunteering enabled him to develop extra skills, stopped him from stagnating and built up his confidence, all of which has enabled him to get back into paid work.

It was very interesting to hear the variety of responses to this question. The fact that different people were able to access volunteering from a range of different circumstances shows once again just how flexible the Centre is in the opportunities it offers people.

### ***Involvement in Decision Making at the Centre***

11 respondents (46%) were very satisfied with their overall level of involvement in decision making. They felt they were as involved as they wanted to be and had no complaints. 7 respondents (29%) felt that their involvement in decision making was very strong in their individual work areas, and that was the main thing for them. The crèche/playroom rated particularly highly in this respect, with all of the volunteers working in this area emphasising how inclusive and democratically organised it is and how their involvement is positively encouraged.

5 respondents told me that they were not really interested in that side of things and it just wasn't an issue for them. However, one person felt strongly that they had been let down in this respect and had felt poorly served when attempting to become more involved in wider decision making. This person did emphasise however that within their own individual area of work they felt very involved in decision making, had great respect for their colleagues and had no complaints.

Another person suggested that the Centre could do more to raise awareness of how to become a Member of the Centre and exactly what this entitles you to.

### ***Views on Mentoring / Supporting New Volunteers***

In response to this question, 9 people (37%) replied that they felt they did this anyway as part of their role. For example a member of the WRG explained that it is standard practice for new people to sit in with more experienced advisers. They further commented that when they have someone sitting in they will always involve them, asking them what thoughts may be occurring to them and generally try to make them feel as comfortable as possible. A number of office volunteers also particularly commented that this was how new office volunteers were inducted.

A further 9 respondents said they would not be interested in an additional mentoring role as they were already fully committed. 4 respondents expressed interest in principle, although they all said it would obviously depend on what was involved.

## **7.5 Case Studies**

### A Playroom Volunteer

He started coming to the Centre when he was unemployed and a friend who was using the crèche told him about it. This friend knew that he had an interest in working with children and suggested he come up and offer to volunteer at the crèche. He immediately found the place very accepting and felt it offered him a breathing space and allowed him to re – find skills that he had lost sight of. He began volunteering and is now training to be a childcare practitioner. At our first interview he was working on Level 2 NVQ in childcare and told me he felt he'd found a positive foundation for his life to get better. By our next meeting he had completed Level 2 and was really pleased to have it under his belt. He also felt he was being given more responsibility in the playroom and felt increasingly trusted. He also felt he was developing the confidence to draw more from his own experiences. He had begun Level 3 and described it as challenging, however he felt he was constantly honing his skills and really enjoying working with children. He also found he was getting better at accepting praise for his work, something he had found difficult in the past. By our final meeting he was well on track with Level 3 and his confidence had grown with his increasing responsibility. He felt very involved in decision making within the crèche and felt he could now both offer and receive constructive criticism. He was now preparing to begin working part time in local crèches and playgroups as a temp and even felt that once he has attained Level 3 he might be able to consider taking on a mentoring role at the Centre. He feels that as a result of his involvement with the Centre, and the crèche in particular, his future life chances were absolutely changed for the better and his job prospects would be greatly improved.

### An Office Volunteer and Trustee

She first came to the Centre some 4 years ago. She was off work sick and came initially for some benefits advice. She found it very helpful and returned a few years later for some more help with forms, and this time she felt she wanted to offer to volunteer. At our first meeting she was working both as an

office volunteer, twice a week, and also as a Trustee, sitting on the Buildings and Premises and Staffing Sub Committees. She explained that she had been approached and asked if she would like to be nominated as a Trustee, and had felt flattered to be asked. She had developed considerable new skills in both her roles, including office administration, IT and also people skills. She recognised that as a Trustee she was in a position of responsibility and described the Centre as a fantastic stepping-stone for her, that was getting her back into society and giving her some control back over her future. By our second meeting she had achieved certain aims including setting up a volunteer database, making good the Health and Safety regulations and continuing to develop and sharpen her communication skills. She also felt she had learned how to listen to herself a bit more, and perhaps to put herself first a little more easily than in the past, which was a positive move for her. By our final meeting she had completed a year as a Trustee, which was what she had hoped to do and was preparing to stand down. She is planning to move back into paid work but intends to keep up one session a week in the office as a volunteer. Overall she feels the Centre has offered her a flexible, non-judgmental environment allowing her to develop her skills, at her own pace, and prepare her for a return to the world of paid work.

## **7.6 Participant Observation at the Centre**

During the course of this project the researcher also attended three events at the Centre, as a participant observer. The intention was to gain additional insights into how the Centre interacts with volunteers, through observation, and so give additional rigour to the overall research design and extra validity to the research findings.

### **1. New Volunteers Induction Session**

The first event was a New Volunteers Induction session, held in January 2007. This was led by the paid Participation Worker and involved a group of approximately 6 potential volunteers. These were either existing service users, or in some cases people who were completely new to the Centre and had come along specifically looking for volunteering opportunities.

The Participation Worker ensured that various documents were available for inspection, including The Constitution, Equal Opportunities Policy, Complaints Policy, Health and Safety Policy, Safe Centre Policy, Annual Report and Staffing and Management Structure. She gave an outline explanation of the Centre, including its charitable status and the way it is structured. She then gave a detailed explanation of the various work areas, explaining what type of volunteer opportunities existed in each.

Members of the group were able to express interest in and ask further questions about the various options. After explaining the various health and safety issues to the group, we were then given a tour of the building. Finally, the Participation Worker explained the rights and responsibilities of volunteers, informed us of the regular Wednesday Meeting, open to all centre

users, and invited any further questions. All members of the Induction Group were then invited to stay to lunch at the Centre.

My observations of this session strongly support the evidence from the interviews. The Participation Worker, though professional, was warm and engaging, and very adept at dealing with the range of people in the group, all of whom appeared to have differing backgrounds and learning needs. She was very inclusive and strongly conveyed the inclusive, flexible and non-judgmental nature of the Centre as a place to volunteer. She stressed that people could take on as much or as little as they felt able to, and that it was up to them at what pace they became involved.

Overall, my experience as a member of this Induction group is consistent with the strong impressions given by the subsequent interviews. The Centre is open to all, non-hierarchical, non-judgmental and offers a very diverse range of volunteering opportunities for people to take up at whatever level is right for them. It was also made clear that supervision and support would always be on hand when needed, which was also borne out by the subsequent interviews.

## 2. Workers Development Day

The second event I attended was the Workers Development Day in April 2007. These are held 4 times a year for paid workers and Trustees only, the Centre being closed to the public. It is an all day session and each person brings in a dish of food so they can all eat lunch together. I had asked to attend in order to feedback on the first stage of the project and raise a few questions that had come out of the first set of interview data. I was also able to observe, to some extent, how the workers and trustees interacted with each other as they discussed the various issues I raised.

At this stage, 32 volunteers had been interviewed and one question in particular, "*What do you like best about volunteering at the Centre?*" had generated some powerful data, including very high praise for the workers. This included praise for the level of support given; the lack of conflict within the organisation, the workers inclusiveness, nurturing skills, energy, patience and compassion. In the light of this data, I was keen to ask workers how *they* felt they achieved this. An aim of this research project is to spread good practice, and any insights into how they achieve such positive results could be of great value to the report and could benefit other organisations.

With regard to paid workers recruitment it was explained that though there is a robust selection procedure, it is made very clear at the interview stage how the Centre works and that people will need to be able to work autonomously, without supervision but within a supportive and flexible environment. In this sense, the workers group appears to be self-selecting, as not everyone would be happy to work in this way. People who prefer more management and a more top-down style would be less likely to thrive here. Turnover is low. Lengths of service, round the table were; 4 years, 9.5 years, 3.5 years, 5

years, 15 years, 9 months (with a predecessor of 9 years), 7 years involvement with 4 paid, 3.5 years and 8.5 years.

Everyone is part time and on the same pay scale. Some workers commented that being part time can lead to communication problems though these seem to be addressed by a structure of regular worker's meetings where information is shared and any issues can be raised and picked up early before they can become too entrenched. Another comment was that there is a high degree of co-operation between workers, maybe more than you find elsewhere.

I asked specifically about conflict resolution. One explanation offered was that they all have different skills in this area, which the various workers recognise in one another. So, if an incident occurs or is developing, they can usually entrust it to the most suitable worker, with the best expertise in that area. Workers meetings were also cited as important for dealing with issues of conflict resolution. All incidents are reported in the incident book and raised at meetings. Another comment was that perhaps the reason conflict resolution was so successful is because of the relationships of trust built up with service users.

The Safe Centre Policy was cited as one of the most important tools in dealing with conflict, and importantly, the fact that it is re-visited again and again. Service users developed this policy, and another comment attributes some of the success of the Centre to the fact that it is a member – led organisation.

The lack of bureaucracy was also raised as one of the strengths of the Centre, not least for making it easier for people to access.

Another interesting point made by a Trustee, was that the Centre seems able to absorb some of the best practices from outside, including from the private sector. People bring different skills and experiences in with them, and the best elements can be incorporated into the way the Centre works. The point was made that the Centre is not a static organisation, but is always evolving. For example with policies being re –visited and Trustees regularly changing. The fact that Trustees are nearly always volunteers and very involved in the Centre was also mentioned as important for building up trust relationships, as well as being an important route of progression for volunteers.

I found attending this session very valuable as a way of getting more information about some of the themes that had emerged from the first round of interviews. I was more participant than observer, and I could not stay for the whole session as they had confidential matters to discuss, but my limited observations once again support the interview data. There does appear to be a shared ethos among the workers, all of whom often work for more hours than they are paid and demonstrate very high levels of commitment to the Centre and Centre users. It is evident that there is great deal of respect between the various stakeholders at the Centre and that the workers and Trustees get to know the other users well and can build up important relationships of trust with them.

Having attended this session and had the opportunity to put some pertinent questions forward enabled me to really consider the 'spreading good practice' element of this research project. The workers and Trustees responses, in conjunction with the interview data, will enable me to make suggestions for spreading good practice to other organisations in the conclusion of this report.

### 3. Volunteer Celebration Day

The third event I attended as a participant observer was the annual Volunteer Celebration Day, held as part of National Volunteer Celebration week in June 2007. This was fantastic event, well attended by volunteers, paid workers, trustees, Centre users and their family members. It provided opportunities for various groups of volunteers and Centre users to showcase their achievements. For example, there were demonstrations by the Yoga group, the Egyptian Dance group and the Creative Writing group. The Art Group had an exhibition on display, live music was provided by volunteers, crèche games were taking place, the film group were making a video of the day, and a delicious free lunch was laid on by volunteers.

My observations of the day once again support the overall impression I've gained of the Centre as a place of great diversity, colour, inclusiveness and imagination. There appears to be a genuine culture of sharing and embracing the achievements of others and a real sense of people being able to express themselves with confidence.

## 8. Conclusions

### The Research Design

One of the strengths of the design of this piece of research has been that it has been possible to track the progress and views of the participants over the course of nine months. Rather than simply providing a snapshot, I hope that what this report offers is a fuller exploration of the range of impacts, changes and beneficial outcomes experienced by volunteers, as a result of their engagement with the BUCFP.

Participants have had the opportunity to revisit their earlier responses in subsequent interviews and to consider their volunteering in a broader context. Indeed, many commented at the end that it had been very useful for them to look back over their earlier interviews and to see the consistency of their views and the progress they had made.

To conclude this evaluation I will now return to the 4 original purposes of the research, as set out at the beginning of the report.

1. To carry out an evaluation of the success of the BUCFP in recruiting, managing and retaining volunteers, including those from certain target groups, chosen from the following: people from BME communities, those who are unemployed, lone parents and people with mental health or limiting long term illness.

All of the above groups were represented by participants in the research, although the sample was not drawn exclusively from these target groups. Respondents were not asked explicitly if they identified themselves in any of the specified groups. This was in part due to the ethical constraints of this research project and the need to avoid being overly intrusive when interviewing.

A key finding of the research is that inclusivity is a genuine and fundamental cornerstone of the organisation and that a diverse and flexible range of volunteering opportunities are open to all. Offering the opposite of a 'one size fits all' approach, the Centre provides extreme flexibility to its volunteers. People can move between the different work areas, in different roles, either concurrently or consecutively. They can work as few or as many hours as suits them, fitting them around childcare, the school day, other work or any other outside commitments. They can take breaks from volunteering and return with no one making judgements about their commitment and they can progress at whatever level is most appropriate for them. A diverse range of opportunities are available to volunteers and creativity is highly valued, allowing groups and individuals to develop new ideas, with a minimum of bureaucracy to navigate.

All the volunteers I spoke to felt supported and motivated by paid workers and felt above all that they were listened to. As a way of retaining and managing

people, this would appear to be a crucial ingredient for success. It is also apparent that the paid workers recognise that varying levels of support are required and act accordingly. It became clear, the more time I spent at the Centre, that there is a huge amount of trust and respect within it, between all its stakeholders, and this is a fundamental feature of the volunteering experience. Paid workers demonstrate very high levels of commitment to the Centre and place great importance on the involvement of service users in the development of policies.

The fact that the Trustees are all current or previous service users means that there is a real depth of understanding about what is relevant to service users and I saw very little evidence of hierarchy or major distinctions being made between people. As a result it feels very democratic and inclusive and the interview evidence strongly supports this impression.

2. To identify any weaknesses in recruiting, managing and retaining volunteers and how service quality could be improved.

Part of the remit of this evaluation is to identify any weaknesses in recruiting, managing and retaining volunteers. The overwhelming impression gained, on the basis of a total of 82 interviews and a substantial amount of time spent at the centre over the past 9 months, is very positive. The organisation has clearly evolved over time to reach a stage where it is very responsive to the needs of volunteers and very successful in retaining them. There was a very high degree of loyalty to the Centre expressed in the interviews

There are only a few areas where the evidence suggests there is room for improvement. The first, and most important of these is the physical access to the building. Lack of adequate physical access was the most common criticism made of the Centre in the course of the interviews. There is no question that workers and trustees are well aware of this problem, and are attempting to raise funds to improve the situation, but as it stands the Centre is simply not accessible to anyone in a wheelchair or with mobility problems. Obviously, for an organisation so defined by an ethos of inclusivity, this is a significant weakness. Installing a lift, or moving to more suitable premises should surely be a top priority for the Centre.

A second area, highlighted by some interviewees, and backed up to some extent by my own observations, is that more could be done to raise the profile of the Centre across Brighton and Hove. Possibly because there is no single Manager of the Centre to fulfil this public role, it may be that many people who could undoubtedly benefit from becoming service users simply are not aware of it, and the Centre does not get the full recognition it deserves. One interviewee suggested making better use of community radio, and maybe a group of interested service users / volunteers could be set up to develop ways of promoting it. Having said that, the Newsletter is an effective publicity tool, which has widened its circulation significantly in recent months.

A third suggestion is that better use could be made of exit interviews, to enable workers and trustees to assess the effectiveness of its volunteering

programme. In particular, these interviews could be a way of centrally recording all the individual training that volunteers undertake during their time at the Centre. Everyone I interviewed had either undergone or were intending to take up training opportunities, relating to their areas of work. Yet there does not appear to be a central record of training across the organisation and this to some extent undersells the achievements of the Centre. If they were to review training and begin to record and collate all courses completed this would surely be a very useful performance indicator. Such a role would also be an interesting opportunity for an office volunteer/s wishing to become more specialised.

3. To demonstrate how volunteering with the Centre impacts on volunteers, review and improve key performance indicators and review and improve methods of measuring these indicators.

The positive impacts of volunteering at the Centre have been amply demonstrated by the interview data. For example, 91% feeling more confident, 84% believing they are now more skilled and 78% believing they have improved their future life chances. The overwhelming impression gained from the interviews was that all respondents felt they had benefited positively from their engagement with the Centre.

One particular aspect of the volunteering experience was particularly interesting and unexpected. The longer I spent at the Centre, talking to people, the more aware I became of the centrality of food and sharing meals. The hot vegan lunch, free to volunteers, low cost to others, is highly valued and very popular. The fact that it is vegan means it is open to everyone, in keeping with the ethos of inclusivity. It is prepared and cooked by volunteers, who are able to develop their culinary skills over time, at their own speed. The children from the crèche and playroom come out and join the adults for a communal lunch each day, adding to 'family' feeling highlighted by many interviewees. Colleagues eat together, and the meal forms an important part of informal team building. Volunteers on the allotment project are growing herbs and eventually other produce for the 'pot'. When workers and Trustees have their quarterly meetings, they each bring a dish to share, and on the Volunteer Celebration Day a fantastic free meal was available to all. There are now cookery courses at the Centre; discounted wholefoods are available from the wholefood co-op and Healthy Eating initiatives are being developed.

At the outset of this research it would never have occurred to me that food could play such a significant part in the cohesiveness of an organisation. Now I am convinced that if other organisations were to incorporate these kind of ideas around the preparing and sharing of food, they would reap many positive benefits in terms of morale, team building and trust.

With regard to other performance indicators, the Centre is already effectively recording a wide range of annual outputs for each project area. For example, the number of meals provided, numbers of user contacts, new and existing volunteers, and numbers of child spaces and children registered in the crèche / playroom. They also record numbers of families supported by the Temporary

Housing project, numbers of people accessing the welfare rights services, numbers of people taking places on courses run by the Education project and so on.

Suggestions coming out of this research to improve measurement of performance include; developing an overall record of training, making better use of exit interview data and perhaps creating more opportunities for workers interaction with volunteers through regular surgeries or questionnaires.

4. Dissemination: to produce a report on the findings and work with BUCFP and Goldstar to spread good practice.

The report will be published and disseminated utilising the University's links as well as those of the BUCFP. This will include being made available on the web, publicising through relevant local and regional organisations ( RAISE, Volunteer Centre, Working Together Project, etc), running an event to launch the report, and may also include participation in seminars, workshops and conferences.

The Centre will be able to incorporate the report's findings into their strategic planning cycle, organisational review and Evaluation Report. It is anticipated that journal articles may also be submitted, to relevant journals.

Coming into the BUCFP for the first time 9 months ago, with very little prior knowledge of the organisation, I was unsure what to expect from the interviews. The experience has been revelatory and has led me to question some of my previously held assumptions about how organisations work. I have witnessed at first hand the integrity, creativity, trust and diversity that combine to make the place so special, so very important to those that use it and such an inspiration. It is anticipated that other organisations will indeed be able to share elements of good practice evidenced in this report and that people from disadvantaged groups within the community may long continue to benefit from the volunteering opportunities it offers.

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## Appendix 1

University of Brighton / BUCFP Research Project  
Participant Information Sheet

### INFORMATION SHEET

This is a new research project looking at the experiences of volunteers at the Centre. It is a joint project between the Centre and the University of Brighton.

The Researcher, Julia, is interviewing volunteers about what volunteering here means to them and the impact it may have had on their lives.

The questions she will be asking are attached; it's up to you how much or how little detail you want to give. Ideally, Julia would like to interview you 3 times, once in March, then again in July and finally in November to track any changes or progress you make. However, even if you only commit to one interview it will still be very helpful.

The interviews will be written up in a Final Report at the end of the project. This should be very useful for the Centre in showing our funders and others, how worthwhile volunteering here can be. Centre users and volunteers could also benefit from any improvements made as a result of your suggestions. It's a good opportunity for you to have your say.

Any participation is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw from the project at any time without giving a reason. Your confidentiality will be respected at all times, no names will be given in the Final Report and some personal details may be changed to protect identity if needed.

*THANK YOU FOR AGREEING TO TAKE PART*

## Appendix 2

University of Brighton / BUCFP Evaluation  
Participant Consent Form

### Participant Consent Form

- I agree to take part in this research which is to evaluate the success of the BUCFP in recruiting, managing and retaining volunteers, to identify any weaknesses in how this is done and to look at the impact that volunteering at the BUCFP has on the lives of volunteers.
- The Researcher has explained to my satisfaction the purpose of the study and the possible risks involved
- I have read, or been read, the Participant Information sheet and understand it.
- I am aware that the researcher will be asking me questions and I have seen the questions in advance.
- I understand that any confidential information will be made anonymous in the Final Report.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from the interview at any time without giving a reason.

Name (please print)

.....

Signed.....

Date.....

## **Appendix 3**

### BUFCP Evaluation

#### **1<sup>st</sup> Interview Questions**

1. How did you first hear about the Centre? Do you remember your first visit and how you felt?
2. Have ever done any voluntary work before? If not, what kind of things do you think might have put you off in the past?
3. Can you describe your role as a volunteer at the Centre?
4. How often do you volunteer? Would you like to do more? If yes, what do you think is stopping you?
5. What do you like best about volunteering at the Centre?
6. Any things you don't like or feel could be improved?
7. Do you feel that any of the following have changed for better or worse since you started volunteering here; your confidence, your social life, your job prospects, your skills, your health and eating patterns, your housing situation, your future life chances? Anything else?
8. What do you hope to achieve this year with your work at the Centre? Do you feel supported in these ambitions?
9. How would you sum up your feelings about the Centre overall?

*Thank You Very Much For Taking Part*

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview Questions

1. Are you still involved with the Centre as a volunteer? *If yes*; Are you still coming in x times a week or has this increased / decreased? Are you happy with your current level of participation?
2. Since we last spoke, 3 months ago, have you noticed any changes at the Centre, in general? *If yes*; Please describe.
3. Have there been any changes to your role as a volunteer in this time? *If yes*; Please describe.
4. Have you done any training, started any new courses or gained any other new experiences, skills or benefits since we last spoke?
5. *(If applicable)* You mentioned last time that you were interested in .... Any progress?
6. Last time we spoke you summed up your overall feelings about the Centre as .... Do you have any further overall comments to add to this?

Thank you very much.

### **Third Interview Questions**

1. Have there been any changes to your volunteering role at the Centre since we last spoke?
2. Do you think that engagement with the Centre has affected your views on volunteering generally? For example, are you more or less likely to volunteer elsewhere in the future?
3. You previously mentioned certain aims for this year in terms of volunteering here ( remind them what they were, if applicable). Do you feel you are still on track?
4. What, in your view, are the most important ways to keep volunteers engaged with the Centre. Do you feel that there is more that staff and Trustees could do to keep people involved?
5. How do you think your involvement with the Centre fits in with your connection to the paid labour market?
6. I'd like to ask your views on decision making at the Centre. Do you feel involved in the decision making process? Do you have any ideas or suggestions for ways that volunteers could become more involved?
7. Would you be interested in the possibility of a mentoring role at the Centre ie using your experience to support a new, more inexperienced volunteer?
8. It has been very useful for me to be able to interview you 3 times over the past 9 months. Can we now go through your responses to all 3 interviews to ensure that you are happy with what I have recorded. Do you have any comments or concerns about being part of the research?
9. Finally, if, at a later stage, funding became available to do a follow up interview, in say one years time, would you be willing for me to contact you again?

**Thank You Very Much**