



Off the Streets and into Work

# Homeless People and Volunteering

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May 2005



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## Introduction

According to the Home Office National Citizenship Survey 2003, 28% of the population are engaged in formal voluntary activity. Since the sixties the number of voluntary organisations has mushroomed and a significant number are reliant on volunteers. The 2003 survey found that had they been paid the national average hourly wage, volunteers would have earned £21.3 billion. Increasingly, volunteering has been seen as one of the indicators of a healthy, proactive society. Over the last ten years of Labour government, growing emphasis has been put on the importance of volunteering:

*"Voluntary activity is the cornerstone of any civilised society. It is the glue that binds people together and fosters a sense of common purpose. It is an essential building block in our work to create a more inclusive society... A strong culture of volunteering brings with it confident individuals, empowered communities which are safe and friendly places to live, better services, local and national government which is more responsive and a more vibrant economy."*  
David Blunkett, 2001

Volunteering not only helps to create stronger communities but it also helps the individuals engaged in voluntary activity. Increasingly, volunteering is seen as a route out of social exclusion; helping individuals to build confidence, form social networks, and increase employability. Over the last ten years the Government has launched schemes to promote volunteering to young people, the long-term unemployed, and older people. Many funders prioritise organisations promoting volunteering to socially excluded groups, and there is a considerable amount of research which looks at volunteering and social exclusion together. Research clearly shows that disadvantaged groups, such as people with mental health problems, people with disabilities, refugees and asylum seekers, and ex-offenders, hugely benefit from volunteering.

*"People reported that voluntary activity provides structure, direction and meaning in their lives and also reported that it increases social networks, teaches and improves both vocational and interpersonal skills, and facilitates access to employment, education and training opportunities."* Volunteering for Mental Health: A Survey of Volunteering by People with Experience of Mental Ill Health, National Centre for Volunteering, 2003

There has been no previous research looking at the benefits of volunteering for homeless people but given that many of them suffer from isolation, a lack of basic and soft skills, low confidence, and a lack of structure or direction in their lives, we can surmise that volunteering has the potential to be hugely beneficial. Yet, so far, very little work has been done to look at how volunteering can be promoted to homeless people and how they can

be supported to find and sustain voluntary opportunities. OSW's report 'No Home, No Job' (Singh, 2005) found that only 13.5% of respondents had volunteered since becoming homeless. This low figure is particularly shocking considering the same report found that 78% identified volunteering as a positive step towards resettlement. This paper is the result of the first ever piece of research to look at homeless people's experience of, and aspirations towards, volunteering. It looks at the attitudes of both volunteers and people who have never volunteered, and aims to establish what homeless people want out of volunteering, whether they find volunteering to be beneficial, what barriers homeless people face, and what they think the most effective methods of supporting people to volunteer are.

## Methodology

This piece of research came about because a gap was identified in existing research during the pilot phase of OSW's Volunteer Development Project. The project was set up to work with organisations to promote volunteering to homeless people and support them to find and sustain voluntary roles. A review of existing literature around volunteering and social exclusion found that there was nothing about homeless people and volunteering, so the project carried out the first research into homeless people's experiences of, and aspirations towards, volunteering.

The primary research comprised of:

- A survey of 60 homeless individuals carried out by a peer researcher
- A focus group of 10 workers from homelessness agencies
- Telephone interviews with staff from six Volunteer Centres.

The survey was split into two questionnaires, one for people with experience of volunteering and one for people with no experience of volunteering. The final draft of the questionnaires was completed in consultation with a focus group of peer researchers. Existing evidence was collated via desk research.

This paper is the first stage of a report into the benefits of volunteering for homeless people. The second stage will track people who have found voluntary opportunities through the Volunteer Development Project and look at their individual experiences and at what affect volunteering has had on their lives. One of the survey respondents raised the need to look at how people are managed and supported as volunteers:

*"This survey does not ask enough questions. It should look at how volunteers are treated. There seems to be a bit of abuse within the homelessness voluntary sector."*

Once the second stage of the research is completed we should have a fuller picture of both the benefits volunteering can bring and the potential problems that homeless volunteers might face.

## Terminology

The terms 'volunteering' and 'homeless' have several different meanings. For the purposes of this paper it is important to state at the outset what we mean by both terms.

### *Volunteering*

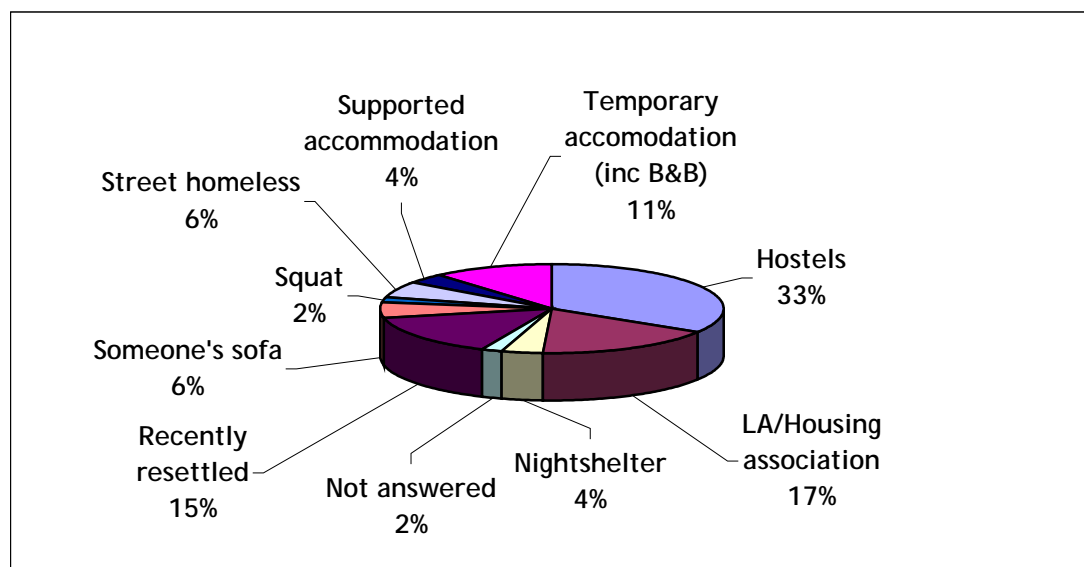
The OSW Volunteer Development Project sees volunteering as an unpaid role entered into freely to benefit other people or the environment with a charitable or voluntary body, statutory agency, self-help or community group. So not: work experience with a commercial company, or New Deal, community service or any other enforced scheme. Volunteering encompasses any activities within this definition.

It could:

- Be anything from a one-off activity to a full time residential role
- Involve working with organisations from small community groups with no paid staff through to national charities or large statutory agencies
- Be work that's practical, caring, administrative or creative
- Require very formal training or hands on training
- Have intensive support and supervision, or no support

### *Homeless*

'Homeless' does not necessarily mean street homeless - the definition is a lot wider and more complex. OSW works with a very diverse range of people, who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. This could mean that our clients are living in hostels, temporary accommodation, staying with friends, squatting, or may have even have been recently resettled and have their own flat. The chart below shows the current housing situation of the people surveyed.



## Are homeless people interested in volunteering?

There are many projects which support people from socially excluded groups to volunteer. Volunteering has become such a mainstream part of improving inclusion that it is explicitly included in government policy around reducing exclusion for refugees and people with mental health problems. However, the OSW Volunteer Development Project was only the third project in the UK specifically supporting homeless people to volunteer, and at the time of writing is currently the only one still in existence. The homelessness sector has been slow to investigate the potential benefits of volunteering for its clients. This may be partially explained by the fact that, up until recently, many homelessness agencies had policies banning homeless people from volunteering with them. This means that unlike many other sectors (i.e. disability, refugee and asylum seeker, HIV) the homelessness sector has not been able to see the benefits that volunteering brings to their clients at first hand.

Recent emphasis by funders on the importance of service user involvement, and work by organisations such as Groundswell UK highlighting the importance of user-led solutions, has led to a surge in the number of organisations actively trying to involve their clients as volunteers, and a consequent surge in the interest shown in the benefits of volunteering. However, a lot of homelessness agency staff are still reluctant to invest their limited resources in supporting clients to volunteer. The most common reason given for this is that there are more important priorities (housing, paid employment) and that generally clients are unlikely to be interested in volunteering. Our own research (No Home, No Job: Singh, 2004) strongly contradicted this view, with 78% of people surveyed believing that volunteering is a positive step towards resettlement. So the first question that this paper sought to answer was whether homeless people are interested in volunteering and why.

Anecdotal evidence from workers in homelessness agencies suggested that a significant number of the people we interviewed who had never volunteered would also have no future plans to volunteer. However, when asked if they would ever want to volunteer not a single person answered 'never'. In fact, 71% said that they would want to volunteer at some time in the future, and 29% said they wanted to volunteer now. Interestingly, of the 71% who said they wanted to volunteer in the future, 50% stated that what was stopping them at the moment was not seeing the right sort of opportunities. So, presumably they had actively considered volunteering as an option.

*"I would volunteer if the opportunity was working with people whose problems I can relate to, and if I would be learning new things and meeting new people"*

Just 21% who were not currently volunteering said they would only volunteer if their lives became more stable, contradicting the view that

homeless people are not interested in volunteering because of it getting in the way of other priorities such as finding paid work or housing.

In fact, our research shows that most people don't see volunteering as an activity they can only start when they become more settled. - a lot of people see volunteering as part of the route to *becoming* more settled. Far from seeing volunteering as the preserve of individuals with settled lives, the survey of homeless people with experience of volunteering showed that people often started to volunteer precisely because they were homeless.

*"Volunteering helps you to keep a foothold in the mainstream and stops you from sinking further down"*

When asked what first prompted them to volunteer current volunteers said it was:

- To increase employability (15%)
- Because they were bored (25%)
- Because they wanted to give something back (55%)

Past volunteers said it was:

- To increase their employability (12%)
- Because they thought it would make them feel better about themselves (13%)
- To give something back (19%)
- Because they were bored (37%)

Those surveyed either saw the potential benefits of volunteering as a way of solving some of the problems that they faced, or felt that they had a duty to make life better for other homeless people. It was also notable that 79% of the people who were currently volunteering had not volunteered before they became homeless, and 69% of people who had volunteered in the past had started volunteering after they had become homeless. Therefore the majority of people surveyed had started volunteering after they had become homeless, implying again that the impetus to volunteer was partially due to them being homeless. This evidence suggests that not only are homeless people definitely interested in volunteering, but that many people see volunteering as a means of combating some of the problems associated with homelessness.

*"Volunteering is a chance to get out of a vicious circle. It's a positive move forward - lets you know that things aren't over"*

## What do homeless people get out of volunteering?

There has been a tendency by funders to view volunteering's primary importance for socially excluded groups as a means of increasing employability. Our research (Singh, 2005) showed that 58% of people surveyed did see volunteering as an important step towards paid work.

However this survey showed that increased employability was rarely seen as the most important thing to be gained from volunteering. Of the people who had experience of volunteering:

- Only 23% felt that the most important thing homeless people got out of volunteering was increased employability
- 66% felt that it was feeling better about themselves
- 11% felt it was the chance to give something back.

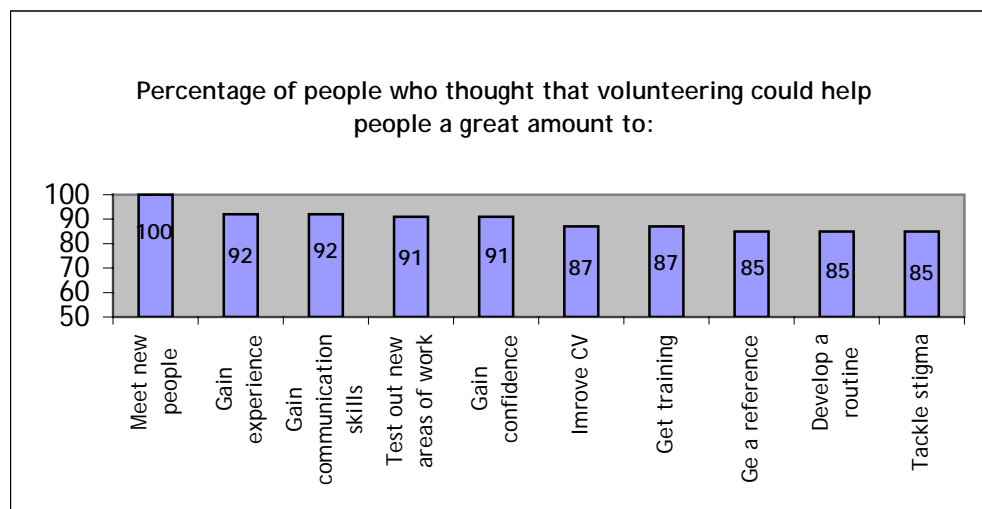
This view was also held by people with no experience of volunteering:

- 69% said the most important benefit was people feeling better about themselves
- Only 31% said increased employability was the most important factor.

Those with experience of volunteering and those who had never volunteered both felt that volunteering had a wide range of possible benefits. Given a list of ten potential benefits 85% of people surveyed thought that volunteering would be extremely useful in helping people achieve all ten. In particular:

- 100% thought that volunteering enabled homeless people to widen their social circle
- 92% felt it helped people gain experience
- 91% felt that it helped people gain confidence.

The people with experience of volunteering were marginally more likely to say that volunteering helped benefit people a great amount. This is backed up by the fact that 100% of individuals who had volunteered said that overall volunteering had been a positive experience.



It seems clear that the people surveyed saw volunteering as a way of increasing social and soft skills, and in a lot of cases saw this as more important than the employability related benefits. Most people felt that the increase in self-worth, confidence and the chance to 'give something back' were the most important benefits. However people did also feel volunteering increased employability:

- 93% thought it would help a great amount in gaining experience
- 85% thought it would help them in gaining a reference

- 86% felt that it would improve their CV.

In particular people mentioned volunteering as being useful for people who had not been employed for a long time:

*“Volunteering helps you build on your CV which is very useful if you have large gaps of time where you haven’t done anything.”*

There was also an emphasis on volunteering being a way of ‘trying out’ employment. Several people mentioned it as a way of safely testing their capabilities:

*“Volunteering is proof that I’m capable of things that I have struggled with in the past”*

It would take much longer term tracking to see what the actual effects of volunteering on employability are. Although previous research into the benefits of volunteering have universally cited volunteering as having the potential to make an individual more employable, few studies have had the scope to keep in touch with individuals past the immediate lifetime of a project, so the conclusion that volunteering has a positive effect on an individual’s long-term employment prospects is largely speculative. In fact, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) commissioned a study in 2000 into volunteering and employability, which found that far from dramatically increasing employability, volunteering had only a minimal effect on how long it took most individuals to get off the Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) register. However, it did find one group for whom volunteering seemed to increase employability, people who were socially excluded:

*“It appears that those who are most likely to benefit are those who are less likely to have well developed social networks. Volunteering, therefore, may play a role by enabling such people to develop social networks. The impact may be as much in terms of social skills and social benefits as those directly related to employment.”* Links Between Volunteering and Employability, Andy Hirst, Department for Education and Skills, 2000

This reinforces the findings of our own research, reporting that the development of soft skills are volunteering’s most important benefit. Hopefully future research carried out by OSW will be able to track individuals’ progress over a few years and draw a more informed conclusion on whether volunteering is a significant factor in people finding paid employment.

Purely focusing on employability denies us the full picture of the benefits of volunteering. As a lot of funding for move-on services in homelessness agencies is dependent on hard outcomes (e.g. jobs, qualifications), there is a tendency to emphasise employability over other personal outcomes. It seems clear from this survey that a lot of homeless people see volunteering as way of helping them achieve ‘soft outcomes’ (e.g. improved confidence,



self esteem). Because soft outcomes are hard to measure and are rarely linked to funding they can be seen as less desirable. But it's interesting to note that the people we surveyed generally ranked soft outcomes as being more important to them than hard outcomes. Many respondents mentioned the reciprocity of volunteering as being important:

*"You feel that you are giving something back to the community but you are also getting something in return"*

*"With volunteering I can contribute something to society whilst developing my skills and experience"*

The fact that volunteering was a way of helping other people was an extremely important motivator. 11% of people with experience of volunteering said it was the single most important thing someone could get out of volunteering, and many people mentioned it alongside other benefits. It's in this sense of reciprocal benefit that the unique advantage of volunteering lays. Volunteering is more than just a meaningful activity, it is the experience of actively choosing to help someone that increases self worth and helps people to recover their self-esteem, something that this survey's respondents attached more importance too than gaining references or improving their CV.

*"Homeless people should not be given the stigma of being useless. The most important thing I get out of volunteering is a sense of pride."*

One of the findings of the DfES survey was that people who volunteered were fussier about what jobs they would take. The raising of expectations and aspirations is perhaps one of the most important benefits that volunteering can bring. The difference between what funders and government identify as the primary benefits of volunteering, and the primary benefits the homeless people surveyed identified, supports the findings of the Institute of Volunteering's research into volunteering and social exclusion:

*"The Government's emphasis has been too strongly on the link between volunteering and employability... The narrow focus on employability has meant that the true potential of volunteering for showing people a way out of social exclusion - beyond a route to employment that is - has been neglected."* Volunteering for All? Exploring the Link Between Volunteering and Social Exclusion, Institute for Volunteering Research, 2003

Employability is an important benefit, but for our client group it seems it is not the most important benefit.

## What sort of voluntary roles are homeless people interested in?

The overwhelming majority of people surveyed identified their ideal role as one within an agency that helped homeless people. Where people showed an interest in working in other sectors it was generally linked with past experience of accessing services in those sectors. Of the current volunteers:

- 85% volunteered for a homelessness agency
- 10% volunteered for other services where they had been clients (drug and alcohol, mental health and youth groups)
- 5% volunteered for completely external agencies.

Of the people with no experience of volunteering:

- 53% said that they would like to volunteer for a homelessness agency
- 24% said that they would like to volunteer for another service where they had been a client
- 23% said that they would like to volunteer for an external agency.

Individuals wanted to volunteer in organisations similar to those that had helped them because they wanted to give something back:

*"You've been helped so you help back"*

People also felt that their past experience would give them the knowledge and understanding to do the work well:

*"Because you've experienced homelessness you may relate to the people you work with better and you'll get more job satisfaction."*

These findings are particularly interesting when one considers that many homelessness agencies operate a blanket ban on homeless people volunteering for them. In effect this means that many homeless people are banned from precisely the opportunities that they are most interested in. Blanket bans on clients volunteering are slowly becoming a thing of the past, but until that happens there is a significant group of people who would volunteer if the right role came up but may well remain non-volunteers. This is particularly worrying when we consider volunteering as an expression of active citizenship. Volunteering is not just about helping others - it is also about playing an active role in shaping the community in which you live. The chance to 'give something back' is as much about having input into how services are run as it is about giving time to do more practical tasks. Several of the volunteers we questioned were engaged in roles where they felt they were representing the views of their peers and helping to change how services viewed clients:

*"I started volunteering because I thought that it was really important to communicate service users needs."*

In order to enable homeless people to gain the full range of benefits of volunteering, including having an input into their local community, blanket bans need to be lifted.

It is unsurprising that homeless people want to help people in similar situations to themselves; a similar survey of volunteers in a cancer charity would quite possibly reveal that many of them had in some way been affected by cancer. However, this could partially reflect their experience of seeing other people volunteer. Whilst it is undeniably true that many people would choose opportunities within the homelessness sector anyway, for some people this choice may partially be being made because this is where they can most easily find opportunities. When asked how they would go about finding an opportunity:

- 41% of people said that they would approach a known organisation or ask around within services they were currently accessing
- 54% of people with experience of volunteering had found their opportunity through being a service user at an organisation
- 5% had been asked by an acquaintance to start volunteering
- 23% had found their volunteering opportunity by support workers in homelessness agencies

Bearing these statistics in mind it is possible that some people are not fully aware of the range of opportunities that exist outside the homelessness sector. Whilst it is important to make sure that people are able to use their skills and experience to volunteer within the homelessness sector if they choose, it is also important that people are making an informed choice and know about the full range of opportunities available. Given that only 6% of people mentioned Volunteer Centres it would seem that a lot of work needs to be done to promote the range of opportunities Volunteer Centres have and the support they can offer.

82% of respondents said they would prefer part time opportunities because they had other commitments in their life. People felt that part-time volunteering could fit in alongside training, looking for paid work and caring responsibilities. None of the people who were currently volunteering were working full time. Although 50% of people who had volunteered in the past had been full time, the reason they stopped in every case was due to other commitments. Given that very few volunteering opportunities are full time, this would suggest that the amount of time that the people we surveyed were willing to give fits in with the needs of most volunteer involving organisations. It also emphasises the fact that volunteering is an activity that people can fit in alongside other things. For most people it is seen as part of a programme of move-on activities.

88% of respondents said they would like the opportunity to take part in one-off opportunities. They felt that these would be a good way to 'try out' volunteering:

*"It would only be a small commitment and then I could build from that"*

*“ It would be good to try things out and see what they're like”.*

At present there are few one-off voluntary opportunities available. Community service Volunteers runs the Go scheme which enables people to turn up and take part in a one day task and British Trust for Conservation Volunteers will take on one day environmental volunteers. The level of interest in one-off opportunities would suggest that it is worthwhile making links between homelessness agencies and these existing schemes, and that it may be worthwhile looking at the development of other one-off opportunities.

## **What are the barriers to homeless people volunteering?**

Three quarters of respondents felt that homeless people faced barriers to volunteering. Of the people who had experience of volunteering 81% felt that homeless people faced barriers, where as only 65% of the people who had never volunteered thought so. This is interesting because we can presume that the people who had volunteered were speaking from personal knowledge, and therefore in actuality there are even more barriers than someone who has never volunteered might initially perceive. Of the people who had volunteered:

- 37% identified stigma as a barrier
- 33% identified people's own attitudes (particularly a lack of confidence) as a barrier
- 27% identified practical barriers such as having no fixed contact address

Of the non-volunteers:

- 40% identified people's own attitudes (particularly a lack of confidence) as a barrier
- 30% identified practical barriers such as poor appearance and not having a fixed address as potential barriers
- 20% identified stigma as a barrier

Both groups identified people's attitudes as a bigger problem than more practical considerations. Both groups perceived lack of confidence and the feeling that they had nothing to offer as a major barrier to homeless people offering time. This problem was also noted by the Institute of Volunteering research in their 2003 study into socially excluded groups and volunteering:

*“Lack of confidence was found to be a key barrier. It was exacerbated for individuals who had experienced exclusion in other areas of life .... the perception (rightly or wrongly) that organisations would not welcome them puts some people off volunteering.”*

Volunteering for All? Exploring the Link Between Volunteering and Social Exclusion, Institute for Volunteering Research, 2003

Because most of the volunteers we surveyed were working in settings where they had also been clients, it is difficult to assess the level of stigma a homeless volunteer might face if they volunteered in a different type of agency. Interestingly, everyone who had volunteered with other types of agency since becoming homeless had chosen not to disclose that they were or had been homeless. This strongly suggests that people had concerns about being stigmatised or treated differently. It is difficult to tell whether stigma is real or perceived. Over the last year 60 organisations from outside the homelessness sector have chosen to attend OSW training on making their volunteer programmes more accessible to homeless people, suggesting that a lot of organisations are more than willing to take homeless people on as volunteers. However, it is almost certainly the case that there are many organisations out there that would balk at the idea of taking on a homeless person as a volunteer. It is worth noting that most of the volunteers we surveyed had experience of volunteering within the homelessness sector. Therefore, and perhaps somewhat paradoxically, when they spoke about stigma and being made to feel unwelcome a lot of people were talking about the homelessness sector rather than more mainstream volunteer involving organisations. Given that a lot of homelessness organisations have a blanket ban on homeless people volunteering this may partly explain why people felt that they would not be welcome as potential volunteers. However, further research is needed to look at individual experiences to see how far the stigma attached to homelessness affects homeless volunteers.

Conceptual barriers are extremely difficult to overcome. Our results suggest that for homeless people to have equal access to voluntary roles we need to change the perceptions of both homeless people and volunteer involving organisations. The only way to do this is to support more homeless people to volunteer. The more people see their peers volunteering, the more the perception that homeless people can't volunteer will be tackled. And the more homeless people volunteer, the more organisations will realise that homeless people have something to offer. By facilitating this support, tracking individuals' progress, and publicising the project's work the Volunteer Development Project can help tackle people's prejudices and assumptions. However, it needs more than one project to overturn ingrained thinking. If real progress is to be made then more resources need to be directed towards supporting homeless people to volunteer, both within homelessness agencies and externally by volunteer development agencies.

Of the more practical barriers the biggest was the perception that volunteering would affect benefits. 35% thought that volunteering could result in them losing welfare benefits. 80% (28% of people questioned overall) of these people had got this information from the benefits office. This is particularly unfortunate because volunteering shouldn't have any affect on welfare benefits as long as the only money that the volunteer receives is a reimbursement of expenses. This survey highlights that Jobcentre Plus staff are routinely advising people incorrectly, negating the reality that one of the major advantages of volunteering for people living in hostels and other forms of temporary or supported accommodation is that it

does not affect their housing benefit. This is not the first piece of research to highlight this completely avoidable barrier.

*“Many respondents feared losing their welfare benefits if they volunteered. Although the regulations state the most benefits claimants can volunteer for an unlimited amount of hours... in many cases the message was not getting through to potential volunteers, so they were too fearful to volunteer. In other cases the message was not getting through to benefits staff, resulting in people being threatened with the withdrawal of their benefits.”* Volunteering for All? Exploring the Link Between Volunteering and Social Exclusion, Institute for Volunteering Research, 2003

## What is the best way to support homeless people to volunteer?

Of the volunteers surveyed, everyone who had started volunteering since becoming homeless had been given some kind of support by staff in homelessness agencies. The most popular first port of call for finding out about volunteering was homelessness agency staff. Therefore it seems likely that the best way of supporting homeless people to volunteer is to build the capacity of staff to advise people about volunteering. This fits in with the findings of Volunteering England's survey of people with mental health issues which found:

*“66% of respondents indicated that the best way to provide information was to do so via key-workers.”* Volunteering for Mental Health: A Survey of Volunteering by People with Experience of Mental Ill Health, National Centre for Volunteering, 2003

However, as previously stated, many homelessness sector staff assume that volunteering is not worth expending limited resources on. Work needs to be carried out to educate staff about the potential benefits of volunteering. 83% of people surveyed thought that more training around volunteering for workers in homelessness agencies would be useful. Given that most barriers to people volunteering seem to be to with perceptions, often based on assumptions rather than reality, it is important that people have access to information about all aspects of volunteering. 83% of people surveyed thought that written information on benefits, police checks etc. would be really useful.

The focus group of workers felt that whilst it would be useful to give people better advice and know where to sign post them to, they lacked the time to give people the intensive support they needed to start and maintain a volunteer role. This was also the case with the Volunteer Centres who found that, without dedicated staff, it was hard to stay in touch with people and keep them motivated. 89% of homeless people surveyed felt that special mentors to support people to find and sustain opportunities would be very useful. It would seem that this level of intensive support is needed

if multiply disadvantaged people are to be helped to volunteer. There needs to be more resources for support workers in homelessness agencies or Volunteer Centres, and existing projects that provide people with intensive support to find paid work need to be extended to support people into volunteer roles as well.

The Institute of Volunteering Research's social exclusion survey found that:

*"Evidence suggests that word of mouth is the most common route into volunteering, but for people who are excluded from other areas of society the reality is that they are unlikely to be connected to the networks that do the asking."* Volunteering for All? Exploring the Link Between Volunteering and Social Exclusion, Institute for Volunteering Research, 2003.

That so many of the people who were not volunteering stated that they would if the right opportunity presented itself, suggests that this is also the case for homeless people. A major part of making volunteering more accessible to homeless people is connecting them to the *"networks that do the asking"*. 81% of people surveyed thought that events where they could meet people from volunteer involving organisations would be really useful. This could be in the form of regular sessions with advisors from the local Volunteer Centre, or large volunteer promotion events with several organisations represented.

## Conclusions

- Many homeless people are interested in volunteering and see it as a means of tackling some of the problems they face as a result of homelessness. For the majority of people who were not currently volunteering the major factor stopping them was not having come across right opportunity.
- There is a wide range of potential benefits that homeless people can gain from volunteering. Although the people surveyed clearly saw volunteering as a way of increasing employability, they attached more importance to 'soft' benefits such as raising confidence and increasing self-worth. The reciprocity of volunteering is unique and means that it offers a unique range of benefits.
- Most people surveyed were primarily interested in volunteering within the homelessness sector. However, blanket bans on clients volunteering in many homelessness agencies mean that opportunities can be limited.
- There may be an element of people identifying roles within homelessness agencies because they are less well informed of other voluntary opportunities. Work needs to be done to ensure that people are aware of the full range of opportunities, so that they can make an informed choice about which volunteer role is right for them.

- The barriers that homeless people face are largely attitudinal - either their own perception that they have nothing to give and would not be welcomed as volunteers, or the perception of volunteer involving organisations that homeless people would not make good volunteers.
- The biggest practical barrier was the fear that volunteering would affect people's benefits. One root of this fear is people being given wrong information by Jobcentre Plus staff.
- The most effective way to support homeless people to volunteer is via agencies that are already supporting them. Homeless people need to be connected with the networks that actively recruit volunteers.

## Recommendations

- Volunteering should be widely promoted as an option for homeless people; it needs to be seen not as a second best outcome to paid employment, but as an important outcome in its own right.
- Homelessness agency staff need more knowledge of the potential benefits volunteering can bring and need to think beyond volunteering as just a way of 'practicing' paid work.
- Homelessness agency staff need to be given the training and support to give clients accurate advice about volunteering and signpost them to agencies where they can find voluntary opportunities.
- Work should be done to link up homelessness agencies with volunteering brokerage agencies (such as Volunteer Centres) to ensure that people are aware of the full range of opportunities, so that they can make an informed choice about which volunteer role is right for them.
- Support needs to be available to help people find opportunities that fit their individual needs and help them to meet their goals.
- More resources need to be made available to develop specialist staff or extend existing schemes to offer support around volunteering.
- Homelessness organisations need to drop blanket bans on clients volunteering and to actively encourage their clients to volunteer. The homelessness sector needs to be aware that when it refuses to take on its own clients as volunteers it is sending out a very negative message.
- People were very interested in the possibility of one-off opportunities so links need to be strengthened between homelessness agencies and organisations running one-off volunteering schemes.



- The attitudinal barriers that homeless people face to volunteering need to be tackled by raising awareness, and by increasing the number of homeless people volunteering.
- More research needs to be done to look at whether stigma actually does stop mainstream organisations from involving homeless people or whether this is just an assumption.
- The biggest practical barrier was the fear that volunteering would affect people's benefits. The problem can be minimised by ensuring that homeless people have access to the correct information, but Jobcentre Plus also need to ensure that staff are correctly trained around volunteering and benefits.

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