



Off the Streets and into Work



## Gaining Experience, Giving Time: Homeless People and Volunteering

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# Introduction, Methodology and Scope of the Report

## Introduction

This report is a companion to 'Homeless People and Volunteering' published by Off the Streets and Into Work (OSW) in 2005<sup>1</sup>. That report used a questionnaire format to look at homeless people's attitudes towards volunteering. It explored how many people were volunteering, how many wanted to volunteer, and looked at what people thought the benefits of and barriers to volunteering might be. What it did not look at in detail was people's actual experiences of volunteering. This report aims to fill that gap, looking in detail at what impact volunteering has had on people's lives, and how they have been managed and supported as volunteers. The report aims to show the benefits of volunteering for homeless people and to look at how organisations who involve volunteers can improve the way they manage people to make their opportunities more accessible and sustainable.

Both reports have been carried out by OSW's Volunteer Development Project, aiming to make volunteering more accessible to homeless people and people at risk of homelessness. In particular the report reflects the work of the EQUAL funded Active Futures project which had four workers based in Central London Volunteer Centres, making sustainable links with local agencies, and working intensively with homeless individuals to place them in volunteer opportunities. All but two of the people interviewed had found their volunteering opportunities via the Active Futures project.

## Methodology

The report looks at the experiences of twenty four individuals who were homeless or who had experienced homelessness, who are, or were, volunteers. The research took the form of a series of one to one interviews using a set of questions (Appendix 2) designed to explore people's motivations for volunteering; experience of finding a volunteer role; how they'd been managed as volunteers, and what effect volunteering had had on their lives. The research was designed to be qualitative rather than quantitative. Not every question was relevant to each person interviewed, and each interview focused on the relevant questions rather than trying to get an answer for every question.

## Terminology

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

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<sup>1</sup> Homeless People and Volunteering, OSW, 2005

## *Volunteering*

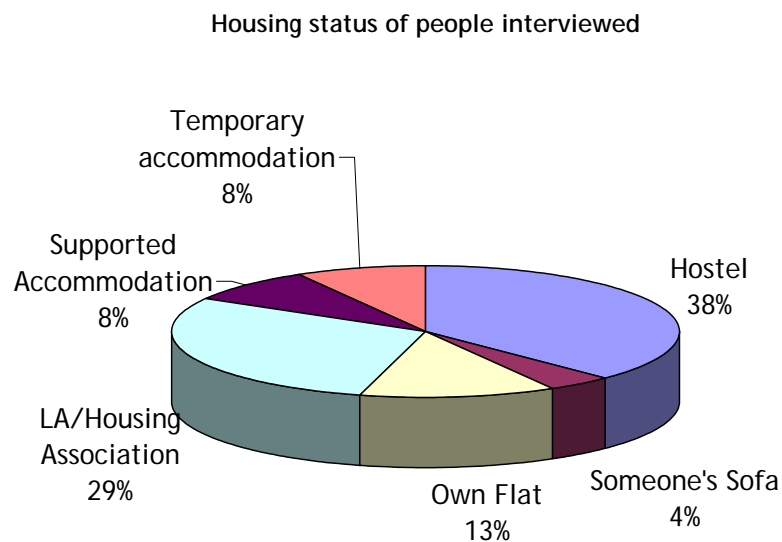
The OSW Volunteer Development Project sees volunteering as an unpaid role entered into freely to benefit other people or the environment with a charitable or voluntary body, statutory agency, self-help or community group. So not: work experience with a commercial company, or New Deal, community service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



## The Interviewees

We asked the four Volunteer Centre's involved in the Active Futures project to contact the people they had placed into volunteer roles, and ask them if they were willing to be interviewed. The people who replied were a random sample of the people who the project had worked with. They were broadly reflective of the project's participants and of OSW's client group overall (see Appendix 1 for demographic details). The people interviewed had a range of support needs, ranging from those with very low support needs who had moved on into their own accommodation and who were holding down paid jobs, through to those who had fairly severe mental health or drug and alcohol issues which meant they needed a high level of support.

There was also a wide range of different volunteer activities being carried out, (see Appendix 3 for a full list) ranging from very flexible roles with a lot of support through to highly skilled roles which were more like paid jobs. Most of the people interviewed had been volunteering for at least four months, although two people hadn't yet started, and a few people had been volunteering for a number of years, often in a variety of roles. This meant that our interviewees had a wide range of experience and had worked with a variety of different organisations, from large national charities to small community groups.

## Anonymity

We felt that it was important that the volunteers we interviewed felt free to talk about all their experiences of volunteering, good and bad. Therefore we promised them that they would remain anonymous and that we would ensure that any details that meant an organisation was identifiable would be changed. Throughout the report volunteers are referred to as Volunteer A, Volunteer B etc. and organisations are not named, but where necessary, are referred to by a broad description of what they do (i.e. 'the after school club' or 'the helpline').

## Report Structure

The aim of the report is to look at what impact volunteering has had on homeless people's lives, and what volunteer involving organisations can do to make their opportunities more accessible and sustainable. Wherever possible the report describes people's experiences and opinions in their own words, drawing these together to analyse some common trends, and make overall recommendations. The sections on volunteer management aim to cover areas included in the National Occupational Standards for Volunteer Management and in the Investing in Volunteers quality standard, so should be familiar to most people involved in volunteer management. We hope by including a range of experiences, both good and bad, it will allow organisations to reflect on

practice within their own organisations and identify both good practice and areas for improvement.

## *Section One: Motivation, Recruitment and Choosing Roles*

### **1a: What Motivates People to Volunteer?**

#### **1a i: Giving Something Back**

A lot of the people we interviewed were primarily motivated to volunteer because they wanted to give something back to the community and make a difference. Some people felt that when they had needed help, there hadn't been the people or services there to help them, and their primary reason for volunteering was to prevent other people going through what they had:

*The main reason I decided to volunteer is that I personally went through a really bad time and I didn't have anyone to support me, so I thought it would be a good idea to give something to the community. I thought that there are lots of people like I was at that particular time, who are going through a personal crisis and can't cope and need someone who's just willing to listen and be supportive and sympathetic. (Volunteer A)*

*I had a lot of upheaval towards the end of my childhood so I wanted to get into youth work so I could help people who were going through similar situations to what I went through and I thought that volunteering would be a good way to gain experience and move forward in that. (Volunteer F)*

Other people felt that they had had a lot of support from different groups in the past, and saw volunteering as a way of 'paying back' for this support:

*I regard myself as getting well again and the way the establishment, doctors, hostels, social workers etc. helped me to get back into normal living, I thought I'd put something back into the community. (Volunteer M)*

*I first sought serious help for my drinking way back in August 96. The first 18 months were really concentrating on trying to get sober, going in every day, going to every meeting. But then after that I suddenly realised I was sober, I'd been putting that much work into it I hadn't actually realised. It was from that I decided I needed something else in my life. Most of my adult life after coming out of the army I'd been taking all of the time and now I wanted to give something back. So volunteering was a good way of doing that. (Volunteer R)*

### 1a ii: Meaningful Occupation

Some of the volunteers identified boredom, and lack of anything meaningful to do with their time, as their primary reason for volunteering:

*I decided to volunteer mainly out of boredom. For health reasons I can't work, so I was bored and needed to get out of the house. (Volunteer D)*

*I wasn't working so I thought I might as well do something with my time instead of sitting round watching Tricia. (Volunteer E)*

Some people saw it as way of taking their mind of other problems in their life:

*I'm on Incapacity Benefit at the moment because of my back problems and because of the recovery process with the alcohol. Sitting at home all day doing nothing is very boring, and in the winter you need money for heating. It's OK in the summer when you can go out to the park, but in the winter time there is nothing to do and being cold and sitting at home doing nothing just drives you crazy. I just want to go out, see people, be out of the house, and forget about things. (Volunteer T)*

For other people volunteering was a way of displacing other negative activity such as drug taking or criminal activity:

*I've had a drug problem for a number of years and I'd done a years treatment, I had to find something to keep me occupied while I'm in temporary accommodation. (Volunteer P)*

### 1a iii: Employability

Unsurprisingly the most common reason people gave for wanting to volunteer was that it would increase their employability and help them find paid work.

*I thought volunteering was a way for me to get a career because I don't have any qualifications, so I know I need experience. Hopefully good experience counts for more than top marks in exams. (Volunteer G)*

*I was medically retired 15 years ago but now medication's improved and I want to get back to work. I was advised that if I did voluntary work for six months it would be a good way of getting a current work reference for prospective employers. (Volunteer O)*

*Whenever I tried to get paid work they wanted me to have experience and also I was at college and had some free time so I wanted to do something good with it. (Volunteer H)*

*I hate doing decorating but its something that I know I can do and I'm good at it. With the IT that's something I really want to take forward and I've been doing some college courses around it. I'll be 50 next week and I really want something easy where you can just sit down and work. I thought if I was doing IT at college and then doing it hands on through volunteering that would be really helpful for me. (Volunteer O)*

#### **1a iv: Dual reasons**

Quite a few people we interviewed had a range of motivations for starting to volunteer. They felt that no other activity had the multiple benefits that volunteering has. So, although they could have improved their skills and employability by going on a training course, it would not have had the dual benefit of allowing them to help the community at the same time.

*I volunteer because I wanted to give something back to my community, so it's an opportunity for me to do that and at the same time gain some work experience. Its really good for me, I'm gaining experience and by doing that I'm contributing to making someone's life better. (Volunteer B)*

*When I came to the UK I knew no English and I thought volunteering would be a good way to learn. Also in England all employers ask for a reference. Lastly I like helping people; I like to see them smile. I like to do something that makes my heart happy. (Volunteer J)*

*I wanted to volunteer to gain more experience, but also to be there for other people. I'd like an organisation that's official, with people who'll lead you in the right direction. Just because you're homeless doesn't mean you've got no skill, no ability to do things. I think volunteering is a really good thing for people who have been homeless. It helps you to try different things out. Lots of people don't know about volunteering. They say "oh no I couldn't work for no money" but I think with myself being homeless on the streets in the past volunteers have really helped me. Growing up I was in care so I've always had to go to organisations to help me. (Volunteer Q)*

*I thought it would be a good idea to support the community but also to surround myself with people who could probably support me in my life - and they did, in abundance. (Volunteer A)*

#### **1b: Finding Volunteer Roles**

##### **1b i: Volunteer Centres**

The majority of people we interviewed had found their opportunity via a

Volunteer Centre. This does not reflect how the general population finds volunteer roles, generally via word of mouth<sup>2</sup>, but is not surprising given how we advertised for interviewees. What is interesting is that most of the people we interviewed felt quite strongly that they would not have found their volunteer role, and would not be volunteering, without the support of Volunteer Centres:

*I'd have never even have known the organisation was there if she (Volunteer Centre worker) hadn't found it for me (Volunteer G)*

*I'm living in a hostel, and someone from the Volunteer Centre came in to talk to us. Then I had an interview with them and they helped me find something that suited my experience. I don't think I'd have found anything without them. (Volunteer H)*

Workers at the Volunteer Centres were able to give people support around finding volunteer roles which they found really helpful:

*The Volunteer Centre were very very helpful. I wanted to do something to do with accountancy and they explained that they didn't have anything like that but that some other roles might help me build up skills that would be useful if I wanted to be an accountant. At first they showed me things and I said 'No no' because it wasn't accountancy but they kept trying and then I thought 'maybe some office experience would be good' and now I really enjoy it. They really gave me a push which was good. (Volunteer C)*

*I'm going to a drugs service at the moment and they put me in touch with the Volunteer Centre and then they found me the charity shop. I don't think I'd have found the role without the project. What it does is, first of all it makes you feel at ease, the atmosphere is really comfortable. We went on the computer and looked at all the things I might be interested in. To be honest I wasn't quite sure, but she showed me there were lots of different options so I had a choice. I was really worried about contacting organisations but the worker made the phone call for me. (Volunteer D)*

*The Volunteer Centre worker was really helpful and she used to call me to check everything was alright which was good. I don't think I would have found my role without her, she did all the research. I can be really lazy so it was good to have her help. (Volunteer L)*

Volunteer Centre workers were also able to give people support if they ran into problems with their role:

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<sup>2</sup> National Citizenship Survey 2005

*It was good to have their (the volunteer Centre's) support because when I had the problems with the first opportunity they helped me. She was very helpful and understanding (Volunteer M)*

*I always go to the worker at the Volunteer Centre if I've got any problems. I'd always go to the worker there first because she understands who I am and where I've come from. (Volunteer P)*

One volunteer identified that Volunteer Centres without specialist projects may not always be as helpful. This does suggest that Volunteer Centres have a role beyond merely providing people with a list of opportunities, and actually need to be able to provide people with support and advice around volunteering:

*The Volunteer Centre was really good, we narrowed it down to a list of about ten organisations and then we talked about which one would be best, it was really helpful. I have been to another VC before without a special project and they just gave me this long list of opportunities, I didn't know what was what, it was just really confusing. Here they helped me make contact with the organisations. (Volunteer S)*

#### **1b ii: Advertising**

One of the questions we asked was 'what one thing could organisations do to make volunteering better/more accessible for people?' A third of our interviewees felt that the most important thing was for volunteering to be advertised more widely:

*Organisations should advertise more for volunteers. You don't see recruitment stuff that often and I think it would be good if people were used to seeing that word 'volunteer' more. People don't know about what you gain - the training, the CV, meeting people, gaining confidence. (Volunteer Q)*

*There should be more advertisements in papers like the free papers about places people can go to find volunteering roles. I don't think there's enough information out there about where to go. It would be good to have regular events for people to go to see what volunteering is and what it would be like and what you would get out of it. (Volunteer D)*

People didn't necessarily see awareness raising as the responsibility of individual volunteer involving organisations, but felt that should be general awareness raising campaigns aimed at raising the profile of volunteering overall. This is particularly remarkable as there have been a number of

campaigns to promote volunteering over the last few years (Year of the Volunteer, TimeBank, V) but no-one referred to these. Interestingly these were large national campaigns, where as our volunteers seemed to feel that the promotion of volunteering needed to be done at a local level, actually going out into the local community.

*I think more marketing should be done about volunteering and more awareness should be raised about what volunteering actually is. There needs to be a lot of awareness raised locally by local councils. I think it would be good to have a leaflet explaining to people why volunteers are special and unique and what sort of difference they make to society and I think that would make people understand. (Volunteer N)*

*There should be more advertising of volunteering, more leaflets going out. Instead of it all being hidden away in little newspapers and stuff, they should have more fliers and go around on the streets actually asking people to volunteer. If I hadn't known about the Volunteer Centre I wouldn't have done it. Community Centres and local councils should have more adverts for volunteers, and schools and colleges. (Volunteer E)*

Finally one volunteer identified the need for more schemes like Active Futures to support people into volunteering:

*The government should give more money to schemes like this, it helps people like me develop skills and that's good (Volunteer L)*

### 1b iii: Referral

Most of the people we spoke to felt that volunteering was not routinely suggested as an option for homeless people.

*I don't feel that volunteering is suggested enough as an option for people. Until November last year I didn't even know that I could volunteer. There should be more support around volunteering and how to get into it, and then how to move on from volunteering into other things. (Volunteer F)*

*Most homeless people don't know about voluntary work, there should be more access to voluntary work. The people I live with, no-one's ever told them about volunteering. Support workers and people should be offering it to you as an option. All the people who've worked with me try to push you into paid work, but you might not be ready for that. They never suggest volunteering instead. (Volunteer S)*

The majority of people said that they did not know many other homeless

people who were volunteering. This had a knock on effect of making volunteering seem like an 'odd' thing to do:

*Where I live I'm the only guy they've ever had there who's volunteered. Some people think I'm weird because they don't understand the concept of me going and working for nothing. They see that I'm knackered when I get back and say "but you don't get paid for it". (Volunteer F)*

This would definitely suggest that support workers working with homeless people need to be made more aware of the benefits of volunteering for their clients and how to signpost them to organisations who can support them to find opportunities.

## 1c: Choosing what to do

### 1c i: Making Initial contact

Generally, after meeting with the Volunteer Centre worker, people identified a couple of potential opportunities. The next stage was contacting them to find out more about volunteering for them. The reaction they got at this stage often determined whether they chose to volunteer for the organisation:

*When I first contacted them they were really helpful and very friendly. I spoke to the manager over the phone and she sounded so friendly and nice that I went down to see them straight away. (Volunteer D)*

*They were lovely, I spoke to the manager and she was like "oh yeah come along and we'll have a little chat and you can tell us what you can do and everything". They were really nice, the way she talked to me made me feel much more comfortable. (Volunteer E)*

*They were friendly, very efficient; they had all the information that I needed. They explained to me what I'd be doing and talked to me about what things I need to do if I did want to take this on and for it to be a career. The other organisations I contacted were more "this is what you have to do" not "this is what we can do together". (Volunteer F)*

Unsurprisingly volunteers appreciated organisations who were friendly, but they also welcomed being given all the information they needed when they first made contact:

*They were really friendly, when I first contacted them; they gave me a lot of information (Volunteer B)*

*I went to a couple of interviews and this organisation gave me the best background information about what they do. I felt that the children*

*there would get so much more out of me then if I went somewhere else. It was a mix of what would be the right role for me and where I could help most. (Volunteer F)*

Volunteers also appreciated the chance to go and visit the organisation to decide if they wanted to apply for the role:

*The chance to go in and see if you fit in was really useful, I went in for the day and met the kids, did some activities with them so I knew it was right for me. (Volunteer F)*

*When I went down there the stuff that they were doing was great, I saw that they had a piano and as soon as I saw that I thought 'great when can I start'. (Volunteer L)*

Two interviewees had a bad experience with the first organisation they contacted and decided not to continue with their application:

*Where I am now I just walked in off the street and said I wanted to volunteer, they seemed very happy, they made me feel appreciated and like it was good I came in. It was very different to the other place I applied for. Their manager's attitude was bad, when I went there for my second interview with them I bumped into him on the bus on the way and he just blanked me as if I didn't count. When I said I wasn't interested in volunteering for them any more he actually sounded happy and he laughed. It made me think the organisation was run badly and I didn't want to volunteer with them. (Volunteer M)*

*I phoned them up it was really difficult, it took me about a week to get through to the actual person. It was a bit off-putting, it took ages to get through and then when I finally spoke to someone and managed to leave my number they didn't get back to me, in the end I had to keep phoning them. Then they invited me in for a chat and showed me round. She seemed really busy though, it only lasted about 15 minutes and I don't really think she spoke to me enough. Now I've applied to work with a drug project I've found the people there much more helpful, they're more friendly and more warm, with the other place it was like they didn't really care. (Volunteer S)*

Another found it very difficult to make initial contact. Luckily for the organisation they were very specialised so he felt it worthwhile persevering:

*I contacted the organisation myself and left a couple of phone messages but never got any reply, so I spoke to the Volunteer Centre and she contacted them it still took her three weeks to get a reply but they did get back to her. I think if I'd just kept trying myself I wouldn't have got*

*anywhere. It did put me off a bit, particularly since I've been told by people who work for charities 'never work for a charity'. (Volunteer O)*

One volunteer wanted a very specialised role as a translator and had sent his CV out on spec to a number of organisations. The result had disheartened him:

*Finding volunteering has been really hard. I want to work as a translator. I've sent out my CV and covering letter to lots of organisations but I've not had replies from any of them. I feel disappointed, I've tried to offer my services for free and then they're like "oh we don't want him" there's been all this talk on the TV and the news about there being a shortage of male volunteers but then they don't even bother to reply to you. I would say if you've been approached by people who want to give their time and experience then contact them let them know if there's hope or no hope, give them a response. (Volunteer T)*

It should come as no surprise that volunteers favoured organisations that were friendly and efficient. Organisations, who did not return calls, were unfriendly or who did not have information to give the potential volunteer about their organisation, lost out on volunteers. People also noted that a bad reaction from one organisation was likely to put people off volunteering full stop:

*If that had been my first time volunteering then I don't think I'd have tried anywhere else, it would have really put me off. (Volunteer M)*

However the same volunteer also noted that it was worthwhile trying different organisations and persevering until you found the perfect role:

*I was really lucky and I found my ideal role the second time, but other people if they don't they have to keep on trying until they find something that doesn't feel like work, that makes them happy, where they're not looking at their watch all day. (Volunteer M)*

### **1c ii: Flexibility**

A lot of people were looking for flexible opportunities that they could fit around other things in their lives:

*It was easy for me to commute from my daughter's school, and it was flexible so I could fit it around her. There were other opportunities which looked good but they were all 9-5 and I can't do that with my daughter at school. (Volunteer E)*

Flexibility was particularly appreciated by people with health problems who could not always commit to being able to come in at set times:

*You have a choice how often you go in. Some weeks it could be 5 days other weeks it could be 2 days, you can do it to suit if you've got other appointments you can work around it, or if you're not feeling too well you can ring them up. (Volunteer M)*

People also particularly appreciated it when organisations understood that they had other priorities in their lives and were flexible once they had started volunteering:

*I have had to cut down on my voluntary work staying clean comes first I've had to cut down on things when they clash with my meetings. The organisations were great though; they've agreed to call me back, so I can go back when I'm not as busy. (Volunteer P)*

*I'm about to get my own flat and they've been really flexible, they say I can have some time off and come back when I've got myself sorted. (Volunteer G)*

One interviewee commented that the flexibility of volunteering made it particularly suitable for homeless people who had not been in paid work or had any kind of routine for a long time:

*Going from homeless to paid employment is hard, volunteering helps because it's flexible you can just do one or two days and build up until you're feeling more confident (Volunteer S)*

Another interviewee felt that the flexibility of volunteering meant you could search around until you found a role that was right for you:

*You don't have to do it. I'd always say to people if you go to one role and you don't like it you don't have to carry on, you can go on and find something else that will suit you better. (Volunteer M)*

In practice most of our volunteers had made a substantial commitment to volunteering (on average two days a week over the last four months) but they valued the fact that it could be flexible and that a role seemed flexible from the outset was often a deciding factor in choosing one opportunity over another.

## **Section 1: Recommendations**

### **Finding Volunteer Roles**

- A lot of homeless people need one to one specialist support in order to start volunteering. Volunteer Centres need funding for workers who have

the time, as well as the appropriate skills and experience, to work one to one with people with multiple support needs.

- Both the concept of volunteering and individual volunteering opportunities need to be marketed at a local level. Volunteer Centres should be more proactive around going out into the community and promoting volunteering.
- Workers in homelessness agencies need to be made aware of the potential benefits of volunteering for their clients and how to effectively support and signpost them to find volunteering opportunities.
- Volunteering should be suggested as a potential option to homeless people more often, and should not be seen as lower priority than hard outcomes such as paid jobs and education.

### Choosing Volunteer Roles

- Volunteer involving organisations (VIO's) need to get back to potential volunteers promptly to give them all the information they need.
- VIO's need to deal with potential volunteers in a friendly and welcoming way, if possible they should invite people in to have a look at the organisation before they decide whether to apply for the role.
- If VIO's do not have any appropriate roles, or definitely cannot take someone on, they should let them know straight away.
- VIO's need to be as flexible as possible around the level of commitment they need people to make, and when and how often they need people to come in. They should offer people breaks in their volunteering if they need time off due to poor health, or important life events such as moving house.

## *Section Two: Volunteer Management: Making Volunteering Accessible and Sustainable*

### 2a: Selection Procedures

Not every volunteer is suitable for every volunteer role, and organisations have to have procedures in place to ensure that they are taking on someone who is right for them, particularly if they are working with vulnerable people. However some organisations have selection procedures which place huge barriers in the way of people who would potentially be suitable volunteers. Our volunteers saw the need for selection:

*I understood they needed to ask those questions because I would be working with vulnerable people. (Volunteer R)*

They identified the application process as a way of checking that the skills and motivations of the volunteer matched the opportunity:

*Organisations should find out what skills the person has and make sure that those are the same skills that they need. Then if those two match you will both be happy. (Volunteer H)*

However the sometimes felt that the procedures in place were overly complicated and unnecessary:

*It's too much. I'm not applying for a job, I'm volunteering. (Volunteer B)*

*I think organisations should make it simpler to volunteer. Just one interview, not too many forms, and to get back to you in a couple of weeks. Not 'oh come back in six weeks' and then always changing the dates and dragging their feet. If someone decides to volunteer I think they should try and get them into something within a month. Explain to them it will take a while and you have to do the forms and everything but I think unless you can get people into something within a month it will put them off. People who need volunteers, they should be pleased to see you when you walk through the door. (Volunteer M)*

## 2a i: Application Forms

The volunteers generally did not mind having to fill out an application form but felt that sometimes organisations had forms that were too long and complex:

*I had to fill out this application form with a supporting statement saying why I was right for the role, just like for a normal job, it felt a bit much for volunteering. (Volunteer B)*

*A lot of organisations have forms that are very easy to handle, comfortable to deal with. They were well worded, very clear and simple. Where I've been for roles and the forms are very complicated that has put me off because it's made me feel like I'm going for a full time job, and I'm not, I'm volunteering. (Volunteer N)*

One volunteer also noted that application forms would have been a huge barrier to her if she hadn't had support:

*I had to fill out an application form which I couldn't do because my English wasn't good enough. I was lucky and had a friend who helped me, but if he hadn't been able to help me then I wouldn't have been able to volunteer. (Volunteer J)*

## 2a ii: Interviews

Again, unsurprisingly, volunteers described the interviews procedure that

worked best for them as being one that was relaxed and informal:

*They sat me down with a cup of coffee and chatted to me. It was a very good atmosphere. (Volunteer J)*

One volunteer who has worked in a variety of roles over the last twenty years described how he felt an interview should be held:

*I would hope that in an interview they would try and understand where I'm coming from, that's important. I like to feel comfortable, it's not so good when you're sitting there and they're just saying 'well you'll have to do this and you'll have to do that' telling you stuff rather than asking about you. (Volunteer N)*

He contrasted this with previous experiences:

*There have been some places where I've been for an interview and then just not gone back. They've made it seem like its full time employment and you have to make the same kind of commitment as you would with a job and I don't think that's fair or appropriate. (Volunteer N)*

One volunteer talked about how being able to prepare for the interview was important to him:

*The interview was very casual I felt at ease, they asked me what I wanted to get out of volunteering, I felt quite relaxed. Organisations should give out more information before the interview. Mine gave out background information about the project and why it exists, information about the client group and the problems they might have, so I didn't just feel like I was thrown in at the deep end on the interview. I felt like I knew what I was letting myself in for. (Volunteer F)*

### **2a iii: CRB check**

Although some of our volunteers did have a criminal record, most had been charged with fairly minor offences which did not suggest they were a particular risk to vulnerable people. Generally people did not mind having to be checked and understood that it was necessary if they wanted to work with vulnerable groups. However one interviewee had been put off volunteering because she believed all roles would be CRB checked:

*When I first contact an organisation I always worry about my past, about CRB checks and stuff. I thought that because I'd been in trouble with the law nobody would want me. (Volunteer Q)*

After being given advice by a Volunteer Centre worker she realised that some roles didn't need to be checked and decided that she would prefer to apply for those roles:

*But now I've been to the Volunteer Centre I've realised it doesn't matter for the sort of things I want to do. Its not that I've done anything very bad, but I don't want to be checked and have everything brought up again. (Volunteer Q)*

Generally the volunteers were quite open if they had past convictions. Most organisations seemed to handle this well and were happy to give people the chance to explain their situation:

*They wanted to know things like I hadn't been in trouble, been in prison, but I had, so when I went for the interview I had another interview after that to answer that sort of question. They dealt with that well though, there was no problem. (Volunteer R)*

Worryingly CRB checks seemed to be a barrier not because people did not want to have them done, or because they had a record that would make them unsuitable, but because they took a long time to come through, and because organisations dealt with this badly:

*I wanted to volunteer with a homeless walk-in centre, but I applied two months ago and nothing's happened. I've filled out my CRB forms and I'm just waiting for all that stuff to come back. To be honest they didn't give me all that much information about the CRB check, she just gave me the form to fill out. They said it would be about 6 to 8 weeks something like that, but since I filled it in they haven't rung me back and that's 2 months ago. I would like to still volunteer for them, but before I said I'd work 2 or 3 days a week but now I'm thinking I only want to give a day or so. I offered to help them out, and it's just been so long without a phone call or anything. If they'd rung me to say what was happening I'd feel much better about it. The organisation I've applied to volunteer with now is much better, they will phone me up and ask me how I'm doing, and I've already been in and done some training. (Volunteer S)*

*I filled all the forms in, background references and everything but in the meantime I moved so then I had to go and fill in all the forms again. Then the manager was on holiday so I had to go in and see his receptionist and when I went in she knew nothing about it, she hadn't been left a message or anything, so she asked me to come back on Monday, I came back on Monday and they couldn't find my forms. Then when he was back off holiday I went in and he said I had to fill out the CRB form with all my past addresses all over again. I couldn't remember*

*all my past details so I asked if I could have the forms I'd already filled in so I could copy them and he said 'do you want me to get them for you' like it was a lot of trouble, and I said yes because I can't remember all the dates properly. So he said again 'so I've got to get it for you' like it was a big deal. Then he just reached into the drawer next to him, and it was there right next to him, no trouble at all. It made me feel like I was being a pain. I was trying to offer my time but it was just creating work for him. It put me off. In the end it had been four months and I decided I was happy sticking with just the one opportunity I was doing so I phoned them up and told them I didn't want to go forward with working there because of all the aggravation, they'd put so many hurdles in my way. (Volunteer M)*

Volunteers who faced a long wait with no contact from their organisation lost heart and often went elsewhere to volunteer. Organisations who kept in contact with the volunteer, started training them, or even started with close supervision, fared much better:

*They were able to put me on the courses and settle me in while I was waiting for my CRB check. (Volunteer G)*

*I applied in December and it (the CRB check) didn't come through until May so they took me on before it came through properly. (Volunteer F)*

It should be noted that whilst most of the volunteers had to wait a long time for their CRB check to come through, this was not always the case:

*The CRB check came through really quick it only took a couple of weeks. (Volunteer L)*

#### **2a iv: Disclosing your background**

Nearly all our volunteers who were still living in hostels or temporary housing had felt able to tell the organisation they were volunteering at about their background.

Most people were volunteering outside of the homelessness sector, but some felt happier remaining in the sector because they thought they would be better accepted there:

*I'm a bit worried about how other workers might see me, but when I've been in everyone's been really friendly and nice so I'm OK with that now. I chose organisations that work with homeless people because I knew they'd understand when I told them about my past. I wouldn't have felt comfortable telling another organisation. And I want to help*

*people who've been in a similar situation to me, it's important to give something back and help others. (Volunteer S)*

The one volunteer living in a hostel who had not felt comfortable disclosing her background explained that she was worried that the stigma attached to homelessness would mean that her organisation did not trust her:

*They really trust me here; they let me take all the money to the bank at the end of the day. I am scared that if they knew I lived in a hostel they would think that I might steal it or spend it on drugs. (Volunteer U)*

To an extent, this fear of being stigmatised may have been unfounded; all the volunteers who had disclosed their backgrounds had been supported:

*I was a bit worried because I had to get a reference from my key worker and I was embarrassed because it's a drug and alcohol centre but none of that came up they treated me like a normal human being, they never questioned anything and they made me feel at home. (Volunteer D)*

However this may be partly because they had made initial contact via the Active Futures project, so organisations often knew they were homeless before they spoke to them for the first time. Active Future workers reported that there was some 'gate keeping' by organisations and that often when workers rang up on a client's behalf the organisation would say they didn't want to take on someone who was homeless, assuming that they would have high support needs or a criminal record. Therefore by the time contact details were passed on to volunteers, organisations who didn't want 'homeless volunteers' had already been weeded out.

The Active Futures workers felt that there was a huge stigma attached to being homeless, and that often, organisations said that they could not take on a volunteer without trying to find out anything further about them. Some workers also reported that they felt that sometimes organisations didn't say outright that they did not want to take someone on because they were homeless, but then made it very difficult for the individual to start volunteering with them (for example by not returning phone calls) in the hope that the individual would give up. Whilst there is no particular reason that people need to disclose their background to organisations they want to volunteer with, it is awkward for individuals if they feel they have to hide their circumstances. The time, commitment, skills and experience all 24 of our interviewees have given to the community should attest to the fact that people who are, or have been homeless, have a lot to offer. Hopefully their work, together with the publication of reports like this, will help tackle the prejudices and assumptions.

One volunteer described how he thought his experiences of homelessness meant that he had more to offer as a volunteer:

*I think the experiences I've had make me a better volunteer. I can relate to some of the stuff that the children there are going through in a way that someone who hasn't been there couldn't. I'm very open with the children; if they ask me something then I give them an honest answer. They see the similarities when they ask me what it was like for me as a kid, and how it is for them, and there's not such a big gap between us age wise, so I think that helps as well. I think I've had to put up with a certain amount of stuff in my life and I think that helped with my patience. Just the general idea that I believe that there's always someone worse off than you, so sitting here feeling sorry for yourself isn't going to help. I think a lot of the kids have picked that up from me. They've asked me about my past and they don't really understand the concept of not having a house to go back to, and they've asked me to try and explain it to them which I've done, and a lot of them have thought about it and they're say they didn't know anything about it until they spoke to me and now they know a bit more. (Volunteer F)*

Some volunteers were happy to talk about their circumstances and background, but others only wanted to tell people who they felt needed to know. People appreciated it when organisations respected their confidentiality:

*When I first started, bearing in mind it was early days of recovery for me, I didn't want people in the centre knowing that I was a recovering alcoholic. Only my line manager and the Centre manager knew. Now I'm not bothered because I've been in recovery a long time, but that was the early stages. (Volunteer R)*

## 2a v: Volunteering for Homelessness Organisations

Traditionally in London homelessness organisations have banned people who are currently homeless from volunteering with them. A lot of organisations had a rule saying that anyone who had accessed homelessness services in any organisation over the last two years could not volunteer. The rationale behind this ban was that involving current or ex-service users as volunteers would cause huge problems around confidentiality and boundaries. Over the last few years this rationale has been challenged, it has been pointed out that other sectors routinely involve their clients as volunteers and that the benefits of involving peer volunteers far outweigh the potential problems. Gradually most organisations have overturned their bans, and many are now actively looking at ways that they can get their service users more involved in service delivery.

Some of our volunteers were currently volunteering for homelessness services with no problems; however one volunteer pointed out that the ban was still in

place in some organisations:

*I think organisations should waive some of the pointless rules that they've got, if it's a homeless organisation allow homeless people to volunteer. Look hard at these rules and think whether they are right. If you have a blanket rule everybody's lumped into the same category. When I first started doing something about my recovery, the services that I used then, they shoved you all into one category. It should be different for each person, we're all different. Some people might need that amount of time, but other people might be fine and if they prove themselves then they should be allowed to. They're categorising people before they've met them. (Volunteer R)*

The volunteers who were working in homelessness organisations felt that their experiences made them better volunteers:

*I can offer advice because I've been through the homeless thing, I can offer a little bit of hope I suppose. I needed hope and people offered me hope. I actually think I'm a good role model. (Volunteer P)*

*I think if you're helped by someone from a homeless background that's better because you know they've been through it. I don't think people really understand drugs or homelessness until they've been through it. (Volunteer S)*

*I've got involved with projects where I've been a service user getting user involvement off the ground, it wasn't really volunteering but getting involved in that side of the organisation, getting the client involvement thing off the ground. That led on to the stuff I'm doing now. When I first started I was really interested in people who were still living on the streets, especially street drinkers. I was very involved in getting wet day centres started. With my first organisation I was involved in getting user involvement started, I've gone a step further now and I train organisations in getting user involvement on the agenda. (Volunteer R)*

## **2b: Starting to Volunteer**

How volunteers were treated when they first started, and whether they were given the training to carry out their roles well, had a major effect on whether they stayed with the organisation. Understandably people were nervous about going into a new organisation for the first time:

*I was worried about lots of things before I started. I've never worked because I've bought up my family, so this was my first time going into a work environment, so I was very shy, my confidence wasn't all that.*

*(Volunteer D)*

Particularly because of the stigma attached to homelessness:

*I do worry that there might be someone with a bad attitude towards you. That people might look down on you because you're homeless, or you're just a volunteer. Some people stigmatise that. If someone asked I'd say I was homeless, I don't think it should be a barrier.*  
*(Volunteer Q)*

## **2b i: Induction**

The majority of people we spoke to had had a positive experience when they first started volunteering and were pleased with how they had been treated. People really appreciated being made to feel welcome and small things like being offered a cup of tea really made a difference:

*It's all about the people, but they're lovely there so I'm alright. It's quite daunting to go into somewhere new and not know how people are going to treat you. When I first started they offered me loads of cups of tea, invited me out to lunch and they were helping me and stuff, they were just really welcoming.* *(Volunteer E)*

*When I first started they introduced me to everybody and told me there would always be someone there to help if I had any problems.*  
*(Volunteer C)*

*They did a lot to make me feel comfortable. They offered me food and drink and introduced me to everyone. They got me involved straight away as well and invited me to events. It made me feel like I was part of the organisation.* *(Volunteer K)*

Volunteers really appreciated people taking the time to show them around and settle them in:

*The first week with an organisation has worked very differently with all the organisations that I've been with. One organisation, a day centre, I went in and they showed me round, said for 15 minutes this is what you need to do and then said get on with it. That's not really on, they need to show you round properly and then make sure you know what you are doing. Where it's worked and it's gone well they've showed me clearly what I have to do and introduced things like health and safety, shown me the fire exits made me feel comfortable. They're small things but they really matter.* *(Volunteer N)*

Some volunteers had quite negative experiences on their first day:

*On my first day the person who was meant to be my supervisor wasn't there so there was nobody to really show me what to do; I just had to use my past knowledge. There was a call for the director and I didn't know how to transfer it to him or how to put it on hold or anything and he came up and said "Don't you know how to do this "I felt really stupid. (Volunteer B)*

*When I first started they gave me this huge folder and said 'read through this' and I thought 'oh my god'. They did sit down with me as well but it was very brief because they had so much on. (Volunteer G)*

Volunteers who had a bad first week often went on to have a bad overall experience:

*Organisations should make you feel welcome, they should introduce the organisation properly, and they should let you know exactly what you'd be doing with them. Its bad when they make you feel not wanted if you're offering time as a volunteer and you don't feel wanted you're not going to feel comfortable there. (Volunteer S)*

## 2b ii: Roles

Generally volunteers felt more comfortable starting at an organisation when they were clear about what their role was going to be:

*It would be good to have a clear role; you could be more geared up and ready for it. I'd already know what I'd be doing, and I'd be able to keep going over it in my head. (Volunteer Q)*

*It's important to know before you start what you'll be doing. You need that information about what's required from you. And you need stuff to be clear like when your lunch breaks are, what time you need to be there and what time you can leave. (Volunteer P)*

One person who volunteered for a 'general' volunteer role without a role description found that the organisation was taking on volunteers without actually having any work for them to do:

*It was a small organisation where everyone was a volunteer and they didn't have a lot of jobs to do. When I went in sometimes there was nothing for me to do, it was boring. I think before they took on volunteers they should have arranged what they wanted people to do. It made me feel it was a waste of time and I wanted to leave. (Volunteer H)*

Another felt that not having clear roles meant that volunteer's time was not being used as effectively as it could be:

*It would be good for there to be more structure so that people knew exactly what they were meant to be doing. It's good when things become more formal, it means people aren't so confused and that we all know what we should be doing. (Volunteer K)*

Sometimes role descriptions were beefed up to make roles look more exciting than they actually were:

*The job descriptions said project support officer and PA, but they have not really been honest about what they actually wanted you to do. When I got there on the first day they said 'you'll do this you'll do that, we'll teach you how to do this, we'll teach you how to do payroll', but now I've been with them two months and we've not done anything like that. I would love to continue with them if I was doing what they said I was going to do, they said they'd teach me about business, about accounting, so it's a professional thing that I wanted to do, it was a good opportunity for me. At the interview they asked me why I wanted to volunteer and I told them it was to gain work experience and the director even said he'd introduce me to some companies who might be able to help me, but I've not seen any of that. I feel they treat me badly and it does make me want to quit. It puts me off volunteering, I've volunteered in two places now and they have both been bad. I've spoken to other people who are volunteering and it's the same. It's not really a good thing. If you are giving out they should be giving back to you as well. (Volunteer B)*

Volunteers appreciated honest role descriptions that accurately described what they would be doing and how their work fitted into the organisation. However they also really appreciated the chance to develop their role and take on new areas of work:

*I thought it was just going to be basic admin, like filing and photocopying but now I'm making up forms for them and they're including me in their meetings. I feel like I'm learning more about them and developing myself. (Volunteer E)*

*They let me develop my role and try out new skills, working with children. What I gained at the end was something I'd never experienced before, it really taught me just because they're kids you don't have to treat them like that, they were so talented I was amazed at what they could do. It taught me so much. (Volunteer L)*

*It was go down and help out on a Tuesday afternoon, call bingo, socialise with people, more or less the same with a Friday, but then that suddenly changed, which I was quite happy about, really I initiated it. The people who used to come in on a Friday morning, I'd cook dinner for them, and then Friday afternoon I'd run a card school. They let me adapt the role to fit in with my skills and what I enjoyed doing. There was no pressure to do things if you don't want to and there was supervision every so often to make sure things were going well. (Volunteer R)*

Roles where there was no room for development were not found to be as rewarding:

*Last week I spoke with the director and said 'I'm bored' I need something to do, he told me to go and meet with the project support officer and share some of his job. He just said all those documents over there just sort them out, and that's what I did all day but it was really boring. All I do is open their mail, enter things on to their database- and that's it. What they do is they go out there and say they want people to volunteer to do interesting things, but they only want you to do the boring jobs, that doesn't contribute that much to your life. (Volunteer B)*

However people did recognise that what they could do as a volunteer was constrained by what the organisation actually needed doing:

*My role is a bit boring I would like to do something a bit more challenging but I haven't told them that because I think when you're volunteering you do have to do the things they need you to do. You have to do it really because you are there to help. (Volunteer C)*

Generally people felt that the roles they had were appropriate, but one volunteer voiced concerns about volunteers being asked to do things which really should be paid roles:

*Sometimes I don't think the roles are appropriate, for instance working with people with mental health issues I can sit down with someone and have a cup of tea, but I'm not a trained psychiatrist, a trained counsellor, so it's not fair to ask me to do that. (Volunteer N)*

One person who was about to start volunteering was worried about being taken for granted and being given low status jobs:

*I'd hope that they wouldn't take liberties. Like just because you're not getting paid for it they're giving you the crappy jobs. I'd want to be respected for what I was doing. (Volunteer Q)*

## 2b iii: Training

The training that the volunteers received depended very much on what type of role they were going into. However most people felt that all volunteers needed some kind of training:

*I think volunteers need to be properly trained even if they've been selected for their skills and experience; it's a totally new environment. (Volunteer N)*

*It's a very small organisation so I've had to train myself. I think they should really be organising training for their volunteers. Training is very important otherwise you're just being thrown in at the deep end. (Volunteer K)*

Some people really appreciated the chance to do formal training and attend courses:

*They've offered to let me go on all the courses that their staff go on and that's really important to me because it lets me get further into their work. (Volunteer E)*

*I like the fact that I get to go on courses, I've been on lots of one day courses and I get certificates at the end. When I look at all the certificates I've got I can really see myself building my skills and that will really help. (Volunteer G)*

However it was noted by other volunteers that training was not the same as actually getting out there and doing the work:

*I think the training was good but it's great to get out and start doing the work because they can give you loads and loads of training but it's never quite the same as actually doing it. Particularly with people, they'll train you to do something one way but then as soon as you're actually working with a person everything's a bit different. (Volunteer M)*

*The training was quite stressful, particularly the role plays. For me to get up and do a role play in front of 30 people, that's really stressful. It was a relief to finish the training and get on the phonedines. Being on the phone on my own I could just be myself (Volunteer A)*

Many of the volunteers felt that they were learning 'on the job':

*It's not easy to deal with young people when they are moody but I feel*

*like I am getting better. It's been a learning curve for me, I feel like I'm learning about myself, and it helps me learn about people. People shouldn't be so judgemental or so insecure. You are who you are. In life there are going to be people who don't like you, that's just how it is, but always show them a smile. It's not easy but I'm trying. (Volunteer G)*

Space to try out new things and expand on existing skills was really appreciated:

*I mainly learnt by working with the kids. They knew I had that experience before so they let me use my own initiative and improvise things a bit which was great. (Volunteer L)*

One volunteer commented that there was a need for better training as volunteer roles became more complex:

*When I started volunteering in the 80's it was like just standing in a soup kitchen doling out soup and that was all you were doing but the voluntary sector has grown so much and there's so much more you can do now as a volunteer that organisations really do need to give you proper training, and I think most of them do. (Volunteer N)*

## 2c: Support and Recognition

### 2c i: Support

Being supported was really important to the volunteers we spoke to. They valued having friendly approachable managers who they could go to at any time:

*You know that any time you have a problem you can just go and talk to them. That's really important. (Volunteer J)*

*It's a really friendly bunch, even the manager doesn't make you feel like she's the manager, and we're all one big family there. I don't feel like I'm at work when I'm there because that's how friendly people are. If I've got a problem I know I can go and ask someone and they'll show me right away. It feels like you're really important. (Volunteer D)*

*I've got one person managing me but if I have a problem everyone is friendly so I can just ask whoever is next to me. (Volunteer C)*

It was important to them that managers took the time to check that they were okay and ask how they were doing:

*They always come to me and ask me how I'm feeling and if everything is*

*fine with me. (Volunteer C)*

*I had one manager who looked after me and told me what I needed to do. When she told me what to do she'd ask me if I was OK with it or if it was too much. They didn't force me to do anything I didn't want to do or wasn't comfortable. I was able to do things at my own pace. (Volunteer L)*

The form supervision took depended on what the volunteer was doing. Some volunteers valued formal one to one supervision:

*I do think supervision is really important, people should have supervision. It's your time to check in and it's as much help for you as it is them. It works two ways. It keeps your feet on the ground and you can make sure you're not taking too much on, because in the early stages I took too much on. Supervision helps you work out that you're not taking too much on and that you can actually cope with what you are doing. Supervision can help you keep a handle on whether you're taking too much on. (Volunteer R)*

Whereas others felt they had enough support informally:

*The two managers are really friendly, really helpful, I always feel happy to talk to them. I come in a bit early in the morning and then we can have a cup of tea together and have a chat, so there's no need to do 'can you come in on Friday for half an hour for a meeting' because we just cover everything as and when. (Volunteer M)*

Generally all the volunteers we spoke to valued having one main supervisor who looked after them, managed their work, and who they could go to if they had any problems:

*I have a manager and she sorts out what work there is for me to do. If anyone else needs anything done they ask her and then she sorts it out and tells me what needs to be done. She'll give me a task and talk me through it and then I can tell her if I have any problems with it. I can talk to her and go to her with any problems. (Volunteer E)*

Some of the volunteers we spoke to had quite high support needs and needed quite a lot of support to be able to do their role. However many of them found that once they had settled into their role the amount of support they needed decreased:

*I know that what ever I say or do is not wrong. They will direct me, point me in the direction, but what I say isn't wrong, that makes me feel much more confident. They will push me and if I need help I can*

*get it. There is going to be a point over time that I'm not going to need their help so much, but I know at the moment that anything I'm stuck with or need to know more about then I can go to them. (Volunteer G)*

*They told me that if I needed any help or advice then I could speak to them but then they pretty much left me to do what I wanted to do. Now I don't need that much support, but when I first started if they could see there was something I wasn't that sure about they'd come over. But I felt a lot of the time they'd wait to see how I handled the situation rather than jumping straight in and bailing me out, because if they kept rescuing me then I'd never be able to deal with situations myself. I felt that support is probably more useful. Like now I can take a whole group by myself and take them downstairs to play football. It took me a couple of months to say "well I think we should be doing this with this child" but now I'm more hands on and confident. So if I need any advice I can talk to them, if not I can get on with what I'm doing, I've got a good working relationship with everybody there. (Volunteer F)*

However one volunteer did note that ongoing support was extremely important, in his case, to make sure he didn't take on too much:

*I have had difficult managers where they've been 'I haven't got time for you because you're just a volunteer' sort of thing but most of the time people are extremely professional and they've recognised the fact that volunteers need good support. Where its been really useful has been when I've been under too much pressure and I've gone to my supervisor and they've pulled me back and given me time to chill out. (Volunteer N)*

Generally the volunteers seemed to be happy to ask for the support they needed, however one volunteer felt that asking for too much support distracted from the good work he was doing:

*I don't feel that comfortable asking for support around my disability, I feel like I don't want to concentrate on my negative points, for me it's more about the positive stuff, how I can offer my time and energy, enthusiasm. (Volunteer P)*

## 2c ii: Recognition

The volunteers all identified feeling that their work was recognised and appreciated as being important:

*We all get e-mails from the director, quite nice individual personal messages thanking us for our time and efforts. Little things like that make a difference. Feeling that I'm appreciated and valued that's all I*

*want really. (Volunteer A)*

For many of them it was important to feel that they were really part of the organisation and that their ideas and input mattered:

*They're open to my ideas and everything when they have meetings they always ask if there's anything I'd like to put in. That's important to me because I'm part of their team, even though I'm just volunteering I'm still part of the team and equal to everyone else. (Volunteer E)*

*I definitely feel like I'm part of the organisation. They don't mock me because of my age. I feel really comfortable there. (Volunteer G)*

*We have volunteer meetings twice a week where we talk about how we can offer a better service, discuss things that patients have said they'd like us to do. We all feel like we're a proper part of the organisation and that what we are doing is good. (Volunteer J)*

*I have felt as if I've become part of a team, as if I've become responsible, it's hard to say goodbye. (Volunteer N)*

It was important that they could see that the work they were doing was making a real difference:

*I feel the work I do is important because I know the old people might not see other people during the week, they might not get out otherwise. It doesn't just cheer up their day, it makes me feel good. I feel since I've come to this borough I've been helped so much by so many different people, it's just good to put something back, it's my way of saying thank you. (Volunteer M)*

*I feel I'm making a real difference there, I've been told by the children that I am and by the workers that I am. I feel like the organisation takes on board my ideas because I have a good connection with the kids. (Volunteer F)*

For some volunteers it was also important that their experience and skills were recognised and valued as much as a paid member of staff's would be:

*I'm a volunteer here but at times I don't feel like a volunteer because I know my opinion is as well respected as anyone else's. The most important thing has been having supervision and team meetings and you're actually part of that team meeting, so they go around and when it comes to you you're not a volunteer you're you, you're actually part of that team. (Volunteer R)*

*The feedback they gave me was so good, I was told that any time I wanted to come back I was always welcome. I feel like I played a big part in the summer school, I felt like I was like a proper member of staff and I was able to get involved in everything. Even though I wasn't getting paid that didn't come in to it, I was enjoying it so much I forgot. (Volunteer L)*

However some volunteers did not feel that their views and opinions were respected:

*Sometimes the management committee don't want to hear your ideas because they see you as just a volunteer. It can be very hierarchical. It means that sometimes what all the volunteers are doing can be very separate and we don't learn from each other. (Volunteer K)*

One volunteer felt that she was not respected at all and described how that made her feel:

*They think because you are a volunteer you don't know anything, I feel second class. It makes me feel really bad like I'm worth nothing. But I know I'm worth more. Once I have the work experience I'll get a paid job. Organisations should always appreciate the people who volunteer for them; they should make them feel they are important, as important as the paid staff. Just because you are a volunteer doesn't mean you are not important. If you are not there then there is no one else who is going to do the work. Volunteers should know that without them you would not be able to do the work. (Volunteer B)*

One volunteer had had bad experiences with staff who resented volunteers. However, interestingly, he felt that the way staff worked alongside volunteers was improving:

*The worst thing about volunteering is when staff look down on you because you're only a volunteer. It knocks you off balance. I've heard staff bitching about me and saying 'who does he think he is, he's acting like a member of staff' they've actually taunted me and said 'well how much are you getting paid to do this then?' I'm quite tough but for some people that would be really upsetting, really disturbing. It should be about supporting each other and getting together to make things work for the client. Things are better now than they were five ten years go I think now staff are told that volunteers are important and the should treat them well, and I think that's really good. (Volunteer N)*

## **2d: Barriers to Volunteering**

On the whole most of our volunteers did not encounter any major barriers to

becoming a volunteer. However some people did report barriers around financial issues.

Some people had received incorrect information about how volunteering would affect their benefits:

*I was on JSA so I was worried. I knew this was what I want to do, but it seems that in the hostel every time I get to a point where I know what I want to do the Job Centre says no. This time they said it was OK but I couldn't do more than 16 hours a week and what the job centre says has to go doesn't it. (Volunteer L)*

*I was worried about was that my benefits might be cut, but the Volunteer Centre Worker explained about all that. Some people in the Job Centre said I couldn't volunteer and some said I could so it was a bit confusing. I talked to 3 or 4 people and nobody gave me a straight answer. (Volunteer S)*

Most of our volunteers did have their expenses reimbursed but not being reimbursed for your travel was identified as a potential barrier:

*Money is very short for me; I can't travel without money, so if someone doesn't pay for my travel I can't volunteer for them. (Volunteer J)*

One volunteer was not receiving any travel expenses and said that potentially this could have been a problem:

*They couldn't pay travel expenses which was fine because I was only a bus ride away and I enjoyed it so much it was worth it, but if it had been further and it had been a tube ride away it would have meant I couldn't have done it. (Volunteer L)*

## Section 2: Recommendations

### Selection

- VIO's need to explain to potential volunteers why they have a selection procedure in place, how it works, and how long it will take.
- Application forms should be as short as possible and be clear and simple. Support should be given to volunteers who have literacy problems or are not comfortable communicating in English.
- Interviews need to be relaxed and informal. They should be a two way process where as well as the organisation finding out whether the volunteer is right for the role, the volunteer can also find out whether the role is right for them. Volunteers should be given information about the

role, client group and organisation prior to the interview so they feel fully prepared.

- VIO's need to explain why they need to do CRB checks and how the system works.
- People need to be given the chance to 'explain' past offences. Disclosure of past offences needs to be dealt with sensitively and confidentially.
- VIO's need to keep people engaged whilst they wait for CRB checks to come through. They need to keep them informed of progress but could also consider giving them training or starting them under close supervision.
- Assumptions about homelessness need to be tackled via training and awareness raising.
- VIO's need to select each individual on their merits rather than making assumptions about their abilities because they are homeless, have mental health issues etc.
- VIO's should respect the confidentiality of volunteers and only pass on personal information with permission on a need to know basis.
- Homelessness organisations should not have blanket bans on clients volunteering but instead should look at each case individually.

### Induction and Training

- VIO's need to ensure that time is set aside to work with a volunteer when they first start. They need a lot of support and encouragement until they find their feet.
- Small things like people taking the time to say hello to them, or being invited to have lunch with the team, were very important to new volunteers.
- VIO's need to develop clear roles that are interesting and appropriate to volunteers.
- VIO's need to be careful not to exaggerate the benefits or scope of a role in order to make it more attractive. Role descriptions need to be accurate so that the volunteer can make an informed decision about whether the role is right for them.
- Roles should not be set in stone. There should be scope for the roles to develop in line with the volunteer's skills and interests. However this can only be done within the scope of what the organisation actually needs to be done, sometimes it may be more appropriate for an organisation to support the volunteer to move to another organisation.
- VIO's need to develop appropriate training which give volunteers the skills and knowledge they need to be able to carry out their role effectively and safely.

- Wherever possible further training, including access to staff training, should be open to all volunteers, but there needs to be an understanding that not all volunteers are interested in attending extra training.
- Learning on the job is an extremely important way for volunteers to develop their skills, and staff time needs to be set aside to support them to do this.

### **Support and Recognition**

- VIO's should make sure that all volunteers have someone who is supporting them and who they can go to with any problems. It is important that the volunteer can easily speak to this person and has regular contact with them.
- Volunteers should get regular feedback about their work and be given the chance to raise any concerns or problems. Whether this is done formally in one to one sessions, or informally through regular chats, is dependent on the needs of the role and the preferences of the individual volunteer.
- Volunteer's support needs change as their skills and experience develop. VIO's need to be aware of this and structure appropriate support accordingly.
- VIO's should recognise the work that volunteers are doing and let them know that it's appreciated. Small things such as saying thank you and giving good feedback make a difference.
- Volunteers want to see that their work makes a difference. VIO's should take care to show how their work fits in with the wider work of the organisation and pass on positive feedback, reports about achievements, information around outputs and outcomes etc.
- VIO's should try and involve volunteers in decision making and give them the chance to input their ideas and experiences. They should not be made to feel inferior to paid staff.
- Care should be taken to make sure that volunteers feel that they are part of the team. This can be done by seeking their opinions, inviting them to team meetings, and including them in social events.

### **Barriers to Volunteering**

- Jobcentre Plus staff need to be trained around volunteering so that they give people the correct advice.
- VIO's should reimburse all out of pocket expenses that volunteers incur.

## *Section 3: Does Volunteering Have a Positive Impact on People's Lives?*

### **3a: Benefits of volunteering**

All the volunteers felt that volunteering had improved their lives. Interestingly even those whose experience had not been completely positive still identified benefits, and all of them said that they would recommend volunteering to other people. Most of them identified a range of different benefits, some of these were very personal to the individual, but there were some common themes.

Some people mentioned that volunteering had widened their social circle and allowed them to meet new people:

*The best thing about it is the people I talk to, and things like events where all of us go there and help together. Anything that's going on in the office I'm a part of. I'll really miss it when I get a job. (Volunteer C)*

*The best thing about volunteering has been meeting new friends, meeting people from all walks of life that I wouldn't normally meet up with. (Volunteer A)*

Several mentioned that volunteering had increased their self-esteem and helped them gain confidence:

*It's boosted my confidence, I severely lacked confidence when I first started, in fact I was almost a gibbering wreck, and now I'm not. (Volunteer A)*

*Volunteering gave me my self respect back, and confidence, and my self-esteem increased and increased. It was so long I'd been drinking I'd just become an institutionalised person and from my army service to coming out of the army, finishing up on the streets, in and out of prison, I'd just become institutionalised. And what this has done is it's given me a voice, it's definitely given me my self-respect back. Your self-esteem just grows. I think that's unique to volunteering and becoming involved in user involvement, you don't always realise with that that you are volunteering, but you are, because you're giving your time. Volunteering is about life, its dealing with life situations. Its important that you chose to do it, you don't have to. (Volunteer R)*

For some people finding something meaningful and interesting to do with their time was really important:

*Volunteering helps pass the time, it makes the day go quicker and I really enjoy meeting the clients. (Volunteer M)*

*I've always been a person who starts something and doesn't finish it, I haven't got the discipline of sticking to stuff, but this role, because it's something I want to do, it's keeping me consistent and that's really rewarding. It's really challenging, there's always something to do, I don't like a job where there's gaps. As soon as there are gaps I've got no interest. (Volunteer G)*

Several people identified the biggest benefit of volunteering as being able to see their work changing other people's lives:

*I enjoy seeing the kids faces light up when I'm there, I enjoy the fact that they take on board what I say to them. A lot of them wanted to learn how to do football skills and I used to play, so I was able to help them with that. I like the fact that they enjoy themselves when I'm there and if I go in and I've missed a week they'll say "why weren't you here last week we've missed you". It makes me feel good. I feel like I've learnt a lot since I've been there, I feel like I've learnt stuff about myself that I didn't know. I feel like its making me a better person. I feel like I'm getting the chance to help where the help wasn't there for me. I think doing this was one of the best ideas I ever had. (Volunteer F)*

*I like it, people are not aggressive and they are smiling because we are doing something good, it makes me feel good. (Volunteer J)*

*It's very satisfying to see the children happy. It's good to know that I'm able to help. It gives me a lot of personal satisfaction. (Volunteer K)*

Feeling that he was doing something worthwhile was particularly important for one volunteer with a criminal record:

*The thing I like most is the fact that I'm giving something back to the community. I feel that I've done something for the community that I've taken things out of in the past. It's all about me being able to give back. I can go home at the end of the day and say "yeah I've done a good days work here", which I haven't done for years. More people should volunteer because voluntary work gives you a sense of achievement. It sets you out there, gives you a chance to meet people. It gives you an interest. (Volunteer P)*

One volunteer talked about how his volunteering helped him to do things and meet people in a way that would have been impossible if he wasn't volunteering:

*I really enjoy voluntary work. What I get out of it is the fact that I learn a lot, I get to see what others cannot see. When you're a volunteer people take you for who you are, they trust you and being trusted is a lovely feeling. I've found a lot of understanding and had a lot of support; it has helped me with my personal issues. I don't think people are fully aware what voluntary work is. I think it's sold as a way to get a reference or whatever and that's true but what's more important is the personal experience you get from it, that's something that you carry with you for the rest of your life. I think 100% that people benefit from volunteering whether you're homeless or you're a multi-millionaire you will benefit. Getting to meet new people who might have been homeless, have drug and alcohol problems, mental health issues, and to be sitting with them and for them to be telling you their problems it's a privilege. (Volunteer N)*

For lots of people volunteering represented the chance to be part of 'society' again:

*I felt like I was reborn again. You get up in the morning, have a shower, have a shave, get changed, and get the bus with everyone else; it reminded me of going to work. (Volunteer T)*

### **3b: Employability**

A lot of people felt that volunteering had led to greater employability for them. They felt that increased confidence, skills and experience made it more likely that they would be able to get paid employment:

*I do hope that eventually it might lead to a job, I did have problems which meant I couldn't work, but I'm much stronger now, and this is the thing that's got me there. (Volunteer A)*

*It will help me get a job because it's got me used to the office environment, I feel much more positive now. (Volunteer C)*

*I've learnt a lot through volunteering that I can take on into future work, for instance working in a group, improvising, using your own initiative, being creative and imaginative. I developed all those kind of skills. (Volunteer L)*

They saw volunteering as something that could be fitted alongside other employment support:

*If anyone wants to get back into paid work I'd say that volunteering is a really good thing for them to do, even if they only do it for a month or*

*so because it will really increase their confidence. You're not tied to it, you can do it alongside college or what ever and it's a step in the right direction to get a person started again. (Volunteer M)*

And many felt that it was valuable that they were getting hands on experience:

*I hope to be learning something through my volunteering, that way it goes on my CV, and it looks good. It's important that it's not just like a course, I'm actually doing it and I'm learning on the job. (Volunteer Q)*

Several people had gone into volunteering as a way of improving their employability and saw it primarily as a means to an end. However once they started they found that they really enjoyed it. They commented that they never knew 'work' could be this rewarding. For several volunteers it had changed their attitude to paid work. The fact that they had found roles which they enjoyed meant that they now aspired to develop their skills and get paid work in those areas:

*I enjoy my role very much if anything I'd actually like to do more hours if I could. I'm really happy where I am which is quite rare in a job. I didn't think I'd enjoy it but I actually am really enjoying it. The best thing is I feel like I'm helping the community in some way, I'm part of the community and I can help. They need plenty of volunteers out there and there's not that many going around so it's good to do something. (Volunteer E)*

*I really didn't think I'd enjoy it this much but I really do. I don't mind at all getting up in the morning to go there. I feel more mature, more like an adult, and I feel this is what I want to do. I feel like I've got a voice, I feel like I'm getting the best out of my life. I like the fact that I'm helping people, I'm giving, and it's a fresh start. (Volunteer G)*

*With my volunteering it doesn't actually feel like work. You wake up in the morning and it's not like 'oh no I have to go to work today you actually look forward to doing it. It's more like going in to do a hobby than work, that's how it seems to me. After a few months volunteering I looked back at when I used to work and thought I really don't want to go back to doing that sort of thing anymore. Before when I was working I'd wake up and think 'I don't want to go to work', but doing this volunteering I don't look at it as work, I enjoy it. (Volunteer M)*

Other people felt that volunteering had helped them see what they were capable of:

*This role has given me the confidence to move on and do something more challenging. You get a lot of people and they've bought up a*

*family and they might be a bit nervous of going out to work, volunteering does help you to get on that road. (Volunteer D)*

*My ideas of what I can go on and do in the future have changed, I thought I'd just be doing admin but now they've convinced me I can do more than that. (Volunteer E)*

Some of the volunteers felt that volunteering did lead towards employment but that it led to more than just a low skilled job:

*I don't just see this leading to a job; I see it leading to a career. (Volunteer G)*

*It will help me be in a job where I'm happy. It's no good working somewhere and you're unhappy. (Volunteer Q)*

*Being the 'Youth Co-ordinator' it was a big challenge. It feels nice, not the fact that it's a big word but the fact that it feels like a career path. If someone asks me 'what are you doing' it will feel good to be able to say that. (Volunteer G)*

Some volunteers had a very clear idea of how volunteering fitted into their future careers:

*One of the workers is going to sit down with me soon and talk to me about what I need to do if I want to do this as a career. He's going to try and help me get a summer job working with kids; they've already said they'd give me good references. Everything feels like its moving in the right direction. I want to be where I am for another year so I can get some experience behind me before I go on a youth work course. I need to get some paid work, but that's going to have to be around my volunteering. (Volunteer F)*

One volunteer felt that volunteering had been a good way of trying out the area he wanted to go into before committing to a lengthy course:

*It's been good to try out the work before I commit to it, now I know it's definitely what I want to do. I've known people who've been on courses for years and years and then they find out they don't actually like the work and I didn't want to go through that. (Volunteer F)*

Several people stated that volunteering had become such an important part of their lives that they would still continue to volunteer when they became employed:

*I'll always do voluntary work now; even if I was working I'd do a little bit of voluntary work. It gives me a big sense of achievement. If you spoke to me in two years time I'd like to tell you that I had a full time paid job but that I was still doing voluntary work. (Volunteer P)*

Whilst employability was an important factor for many of our volunteers, there were some people who were not intending to go back into paid employment. For them volunteering was something they chose to do because, in terms of inclusion and meaningful activity, it has many of the same benefits as paid work:

*I'm happy in what I'm doing and I'm happy volunteering because I get a chance to do what's close to me, helping other people who have been in the same situation as me. If I'm honest I've never looked at volunteering as a means to future work, it's only a personal thing, but I'm too old to worry about ever working again, and with my past record nobody would employ me. So volunteering is actually filling the gap for me, its giving me a worthwhile something to do. (Volunteer R)*

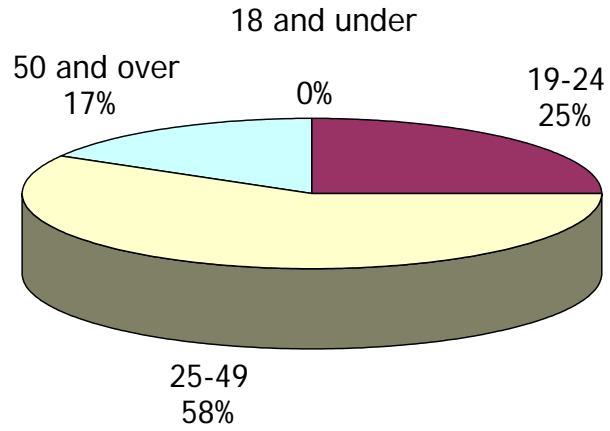
## Conclusion and Overall Recommendations

It is clear from this report that homeless people have tremendous skills, experience, and commitment to offer as volunteers. It is also clear that the volunteers we spoke to had benefited a lot from volunteering, and had felt that volunteering had had a positive impact on their lives. Most volunteers had been well managed and supported, and had found volunteering both accessible and sustainable. However there are definite areas for improvement:

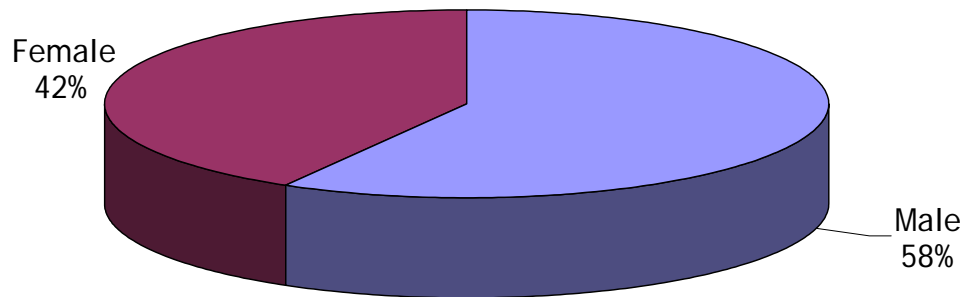
- Volunteering has massive benefits for homeless people and should be routinely suggested as an option. Staff in homelessness organisations need to be given the training to give accurate information about volunteering and signpost appropriately.
- Multiply disadvantaged people need specialised support to find and start volunteer roles. Volunteer Centres need funding for staff with the skills and time to work with people intensively. Without this intermediary, fewer people will be able to benefit from volunteering.
- Volunteer involving organisations need to have clear roles and appropriate selection procedures. They need to have the resources to induct, train and support volunteers, and need to recognise their work and include them as part of the organisation. This can only be achieved if organisations have dedicated volunteer management staff (either full time or as part of another role) who are properly trained and supported to carry out their work.

## Appendix one: demographics of interviewees

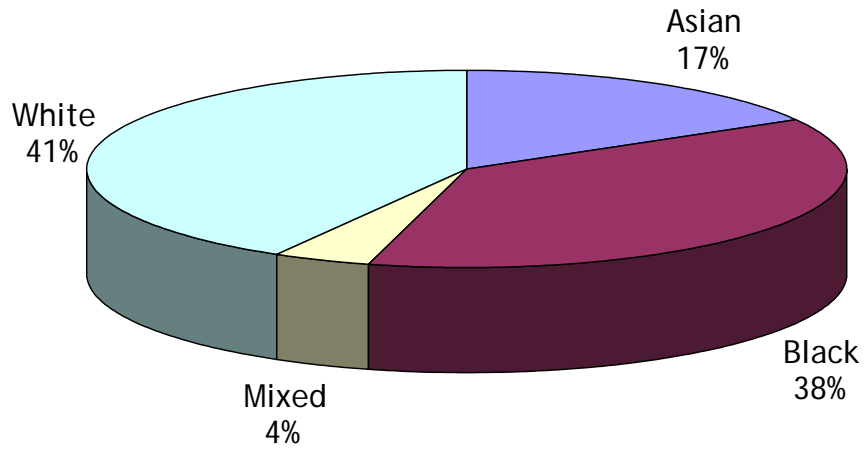
### Age of people interviewed



### Gender of people interviewed



### Racial origin of people interviewed



## Appendix Two: Research Questions

### Research Questions

- Where are you volunteering/did you volunteer?
- What organisation are you volunteering at - tell me a little bit about it?
- What are you doing there?
- Why did you decide to volunteer?
- Do you think volunteering is suggested often enough as an option for homeless people?
- How did you find your role? What sort of support did you get, did you look at more than one organisation?
- Why did you choose the role you did - was it because of the type of work, the type of organisation or something else?
- Before you started volunteering was there anything that you were worried about, or was putting you off?
- When you contacted the organisation how were they - were they helpful, did they get back to you straight away, did they make you feel comfortable?
- Did you apply for a set role or did you just apply as a general volunteer?
- What sort of selection process did you go through - did the process seem fair, did you find any of it difficult?
- What were your feelings before you started, were you apprehensive - why?
- How did your first week go - what was good, what was bad - do you think there's anything they should have done differently?
- Have you received training to do your role, what was it like?
- Will you have a chance to do more training?
- Do you think you should have more training?
- Do you have one person managing you? What do they do that is good, what do you think they could do better?
- Do you get enough support to do your role properly? What kind of support do you get? What works well, what could they do better?
- Overall do you enjoy your role? What do you get out of it? Is there anything you'd like to change about it?
- Thinking back to why you started volunteering, does your role actually help you with that?
- How much do you feel part of the organisation that you are volunteering at? Do you feel like part of the team? Are you able to input ideas and suggestions? Do you get on with other volunteers/staff members?
- Does your organisation know that you are/have been homeless? Why did/didn't you tell them? Do you think they're open to taking on homeless people as volunteers?
- How does your volunteering fit in with your future plans?
- What's been the best part about volunteering/what's been the worst?

- Can you think of one thing that you think organisations should be doing (or should stop doing) to make volunteering better?

## Appendix 3: Volunteer Roles

- Personal assistant for a BME business group
- Administration work for a Volunteer Centre
- Work on a community radio station
- Running activities sessions at an after-school club
- Youth co-ordinator for a training and education project
- General maintenance work for a theatre
- Delivering food to homeless people
- Doing floral arrangements for patients in hospital
- Running classes at an Indian youth organisation
- Running music workshops at a children's summer scheme
- Helping elderly people with shopping
- Organising events
- Managing research projects
- Serving drinks and chatting to people at a drop-in centre for homeless people
- Working on a telephone helpline
- Working in a charity shop
- Photographing antique documents in a museum
- Decorating for older people and people with disabilities
- Refurbishing computers
- Football training
- Training organisations around service user involvement
- Translation
- Support work for people with drug misuse problems

## *Appendix 4: Summary of Findings and Recommendations*

### Section 1: Motivation, Recruitment and Choosing Roles

#### Summary

- People had a variety of motivations for volunteering the most common being: the chance to give something back to the community and the chance to increase their employability.
- A lot of people wanted to volunteer because it had multiple benefits i.e. they could get skills and experience at the same time as helping other people.
- The majority of interviewees felt that they would not have found their role without the support of a Volunteer Centre.
- People needed one to one support to identify appropriate roles, make contact with organisations, and navigate any problems they had with volunteering.
- A lot of interviewees felt that it was very important that volunteering should be advertised more widely; both individual opportunities as well as the 'concept' of volunteering. They felt that this should be done at a local level and that responsibility for this should lie with local councils.
- Volunteering is still not routinely being suggested as an option for homeless people.
- How they were treated when they first contacted an organisation was a deciding factor in which organisations people eventually chose to volunteer for.
- People preferred organisations who got back to them straight away, were friendly, and who gave them all the information they needed to decide whether the organisation and the role were right for them.
- Volunteers welcomed flexibility so they could fit volunteering around other priorities. This was often a deciding factor when choosing a role.

#### Recommendations

##### Finding Volunteer Roles

- A lot of homeless people need one to one specialist support in order to start volunteering. Volunteer Centres need funding for workers who have the time, as well as the appropriate skills and experience, to work one to one with people with multiple support needs.
- Both the concept of volunteering and individual volunteering opportunities need to be marketed at a local level. Volunteer Centres should be more proactive around going out into the community and promoting volunteering.

- Workers in homelessness agencies need to be made aware of the potential benefits of volunteering for their clients and how to effectively support and signpost them to find volunteering opportunities.
- Volunteering should be suggested as a potential option to homeless people more often, and should not be seen as lower priority than hard outcomes such as paid jobs and education.

### Choosing Volunteer Roles

- Volunteer involving organisations (VIO's) need to get back to potential volunteers promptly to give them all the information they need.
- VIO's need to deal with potential volunteers in a friendly and welcoming way, if possible they should invite people in to have a look at the organisation before they decide whether to apply for the role.
- If VIO's do not have any appropriate roles, or definitely cannot take someone on, they should let them know straight away.
- VIO's need to be as flexible as possible around the level of commitment they need people to make, and when and how often they need people to come in. They should offer people breaks in their volunteering if they need time off due to poor health, or important life events such as moving house.

## Section 2: Volunteer Management: Making Volunteering Accessible and Sustainable

### Summary

- People understood the need for selection, both to check that a role was right for someone and to safeguard vulnerable people. However they felt that selection procedures were often overly complex and too formal.
- Most people were not put off by having to be police checked but people did appreciate information around police checking so they knew whether they would be checked or not.
- There were no problems with people being checked because they were homeless, however checks sometimes took a long time to come through and volunteers sometimes lost interest if organisations did not bother to keep them informed.
- Most of the interviewees did not encounter any prejudices from organisation on account of their homelessness. However Volunteer Centre workers did feel that organisations made assumptions about homeless people and that the stigma attached to homelessness did act as a barrier.
- Although most homelessness organisations have overturned their ban on clients volunteering some still have it in place. People felt that, having experienced homelessness, they had a considerable amount to offer as volunteers in the homelessness sector.

- Generally people had a positive experience during their first week of volunteering. Small things like people being friendly and being offered a cup of tea made a big difference.
- Volunteers wanted to have clear role descriptions so they knew what they would be doing. It was important that role descriptions were accurate and didn't make the role sound more appealing than it actually was.
- People wanted roles to be well thought through so that their time was used well, and it was important to them that they were not just given the work that no-one else wanted to do, and they were not given roles that should really be taken on by paid staff.
- Volunteers welcomed the chance to develop and extend roles in line with their skills and interests.
- All the volunteers felt it was important to be given enough training to do their job effectively, however, how they wanted to be trained was dependent on the individual and the role. Some people wanted formal training where as others were happy to learn on the job.
- The volunteers valued regular and ongoing support from a member of staff who they could talk to whenever they had a problem. It was important that they had regular feedback about their role and the chance to raise any concerns.
- People did not identify many barriers to volunteering, but receiving incorrect advice about how volunteering would effect their benefits, and not being reimbursed travel expenses, were mentioned by some people.

## Recommendations

### Selection

- VIO's need to explain to potential volunteers why they have a selection procedure in place, how it works, and how long it will take.
- Application forms should be as short as possible and be clear and simple. Support should be given to volunteers who have literacy problems or are not comfortable communicating in English.
- Interviews need to be relaxed and informal. They should be a two way process where as well as the organisation finding out whether the volunteer is right for the role, the volunteer can also find out whether the role is right for them. Volunteers should be given information about the role, client group and organisation prior to the interview so they feel fully prepared.
- VIO's need to explain why they need to do CRB checks and how the system works.
- People need to be given the chance to 'explain' past offences. Disclosure of past offences needs to be dealt with sensitively and confidentially.
- VIO's need to keep people engaged whilst they wait for CRB checks to come through. They need to keep them informed of progress but could

also consider giving them training or starting them under close supervision.

- Assumptions about homelessness need to be tackled via training and awareness raising.
- VIO's need to select each individual on their merits rather than making assumptions about their abilities because they are homeless, have mental health issues etc.
- VIO's should respect the confidentiality of volunteers and only pass on personal information with permission on a need to know basis.
- Homelessness organisations should not have blanket bans on clients volunteering but instead should look at each case individually.

### Induction and Training

- VIO's need to ensure that time is set aside to work with a volunteer when they first start. They need a lot of support and encouragement until they find their feet.
- Small things like people taking the time to say hello to them, or being invited to have lunch with the team, were very important to new volunteers.
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- Wherever possible further training, including access to staff training, should be open to all volunteers, but there needs to be an understanding that not all volunteers are interested in attending extra training.
- Learning on the job is an extremely important way for volunteers to develop their skills, and staff time needs to be set aside to support them to do this.

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- Volunteers should get regular feedback about their work and be given the chance to raise any concerns or problems. Whether this is done formally in one to one sessions, or informally through regular chats, is dependent on the needs of the role and the preferences of the individual volunteer.
- Volunteer's support needs change as their skills and experience develop. VIO's need to be aware of this and structure appropriate support accordingly.
- VIO's should recognise the work that volunteers are doing and let them know that it's appreciated. Small things such as saying thank you and giving good feedback make a difference.
- Volunteers want to see that their work makes a difference. VIO's should take care to show how their work fits in with the wider work of the organisation and pass on positive feedback, reports about achievements, information around outputs and outcomes etc.
- VIO's should try and involve volunteers in decision making and give them the chance to input their ideas and experiences. They should not be made to feel inferior to paid staff.
- Care should be taken to make sure that volunteers feel that they are part of the team. This can be done by seeking their opinions, inviting them to team meetings, and including them in social events.

## Barriers to Volunteering

- Jobcentre Plus staff need to be trained around volunteering so that they give people the correct advice.
- VIO's should reimburse all out of pocket expenses that volunteers incur.

## Section 3: Does Volunteering Have a Positive Impact on People's Lives?

### Summary

- All the volunteers felt that volunteering had had a positive effect on their lives.
- Specific benefits included widening their social circle, increasing their confidence and self-esteem, having something meaningful to do with their time, and increased employability.

- Most of the volunteers felt that the skills and experience they'd gained through volunteering had made it more likely that they would get a paid job in the future.
- Several of the volunteers said that volunteering had changed their attitude to paid work and made them aspire to go into a job that they enjoyed and that they found rewarding. Some of the volunteers felt that volunteering had shown that they were capable of things they hadn't previously thought they were.
  - A lot of people felt that volunteering would lead to a career rather than just to a low skilled job.
  - Volunteers welcomed the fact that volunteering was a way of trying out areas of work before committing to training.
  - For several volunteers volunteering had become an important part of their lives that they wanted to continue even when they did go into paid employment.

## Conclusion and Overall Recommendations

It is clear from this report that homeless people have tremendous skills, experience, and commitment to offer as volunteers. It is also clear that the volunteers we spoke to had benefited a lot from volunteering, and had felt that volunteering had had a positive impact on their lives. Most volunteers had been well managed and supported, and had found volunteering both accessible and sustainable. However there are definite areas for improvement:

- Volunteering has massive benefits for homeless people and should be routinely suggested as an option. Staff in homelessness organisations need to be given the training to give accurate information about volunteering and signpost appropriately.
- Multiply disadvantaged people need specialised support to find and start volunteer roles. Volunteer Centres need funding for staff with the skills and time to work with people intensively. Without this intermediary, fewer people will be able to benefit from volunteering.
- Volunteer involving organisations need to have clear roles and appropriate selection procedures. They need to have the resources to induct, train and support volunteers, and need to recognise their work and include them as part of the organisation. This can only be achieved if organisations have dedicated volunteer management staff (either full time or as part of another role) who are properly trained and supported to carry out their work.

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