

Strong foundations

Reviewing Crisis' volunteering programme

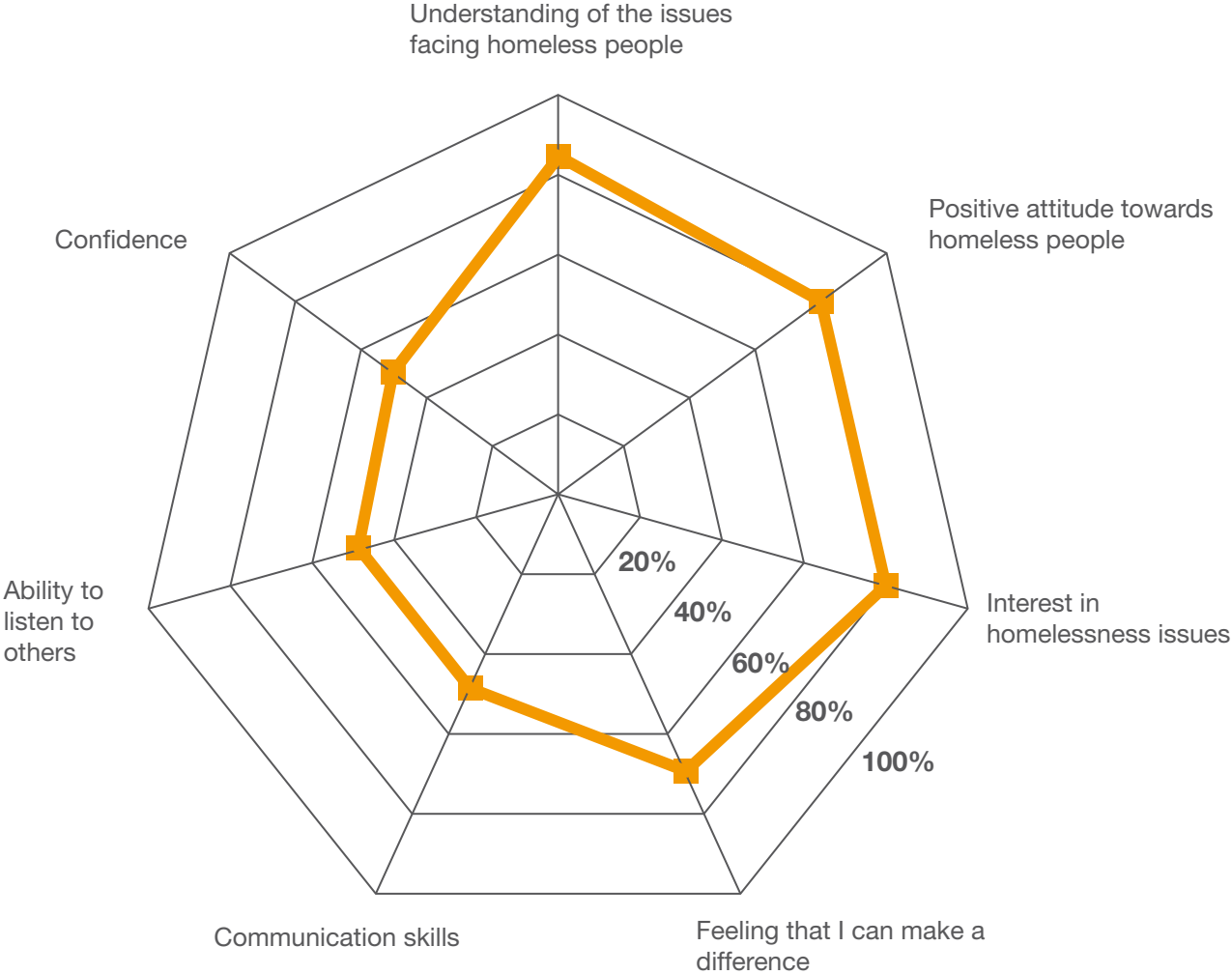
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This research explores the difference volunteers make to Crisis, its clients and volunteers. The Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) undertook a review of Crisis' volunteering programme during 2008/9. Volunteers, Crisis' clients and staff shared their experiences and perspectives on volunteering in a series of focus groups, interviews and surveys. This summary highlights the key findings from the review and areas for development for the volunteering programme.

Key findings

- Volunteers have a significant impact on Crisis and the services it is able to deliver to homeless people. Over 10,000 volunteers are involved in the organisation every year, contributing well over a quarter of a million (266,860) hours of their time. In economic terms, the value of this time in 2008/9 is estimated to be worth over £3.7 million, the equivalent of 139 full-time members of staff. These already impressive figures do not include the many thousands of volunteers who take part in fundraising events or support Crisis' campaigns.
- Crisis' clients reflected positively on the contact they had with Crisis volunteers. They highlighted the many ways volunteers helped them and the specific qualities they valued amongst those who provide them with support. Particularly important for clients was the willingness of volunteers to give up their free time, unpaid, to help them and others. Clients valued having volunteers to talk to and confide in with confidence. They were also a source of inspiration, helping to encourage clients to think positively about their own lives.
- Volunteers are motivated to get involved with Crisis for a host of different reasons. Most commonly, they want to do something worthwhile and to help those who are homeless. There are, however, differences between groups and individuals. Those aged between 18 and 24, for example, are more likely to get involved in volunteering with Crisis to learn new skills and to get on in their career compared to other age groups.
- The most significant impact reported by Crisis volunteers was the difference volunteering made to their understanding of, and interest in, homelessness issues. Eight out of ten volunteers (83%) said that volunteering with Crisis increased their understanding of homelessness issues. Their experiences also helped individuals to rethink their ideas about who homeless people were and the causes of homelessness, as well as helping to counter their reservations about engaging with them.
- For most volunteers, their involvement with Crisis has helped them to feel that they are able to make a contribution and difference to other people. Over two in three volunteers (71%) said that their sense that they could make a difference had increased as a result of their volunteering experiences with Crisis.
- Clients who volunteer with Crisis highlighted the ways volunteering improved their self esteem and gave them the opportunity to give something back to Crisis. Volunteering brought new opportunities to clients, helped them to develop skills and provided structure to their lives.

Figure 1: Key areas of positive change reported by Crisis volunteers



Background

Crisis has a long history of volunteer involvement. Since the first twenty volunteers set up Crisis Open Christmas almost 40 years ago, the volunteering programme has developed and expanded. In 2008/9, over 10,000 volunteers were actively involved across a wide range of roles, playing an integral part in Crisis' work in providing support and services to single homeless people.

Once focused almost entirely on the Crisis Christmas event (which is run, supported and led by over 9,000 volunteers), the programme now involves volunteers in the Head Office and Skylight centres all year round as tutors and learning assistants, mentors, and community ambassadors, as well as in office roles and events. Crisis also runs a specific client volunteering programme – recognition of the part volunteering can play in building self-esteem, confidence and work-related skills in supporting clients' progression out of homelessness. As Crisis opens new Skylight learning centres, this will also bring another dimension to the profile of volunteering in Crisis.

With these developments, Crisis has adopted a more formal and structured approach to involving and supporting their volunteers. Role descriptions are now provided, accreditation offered and a popular volunteers' awards scheme run. Volunteers are responding well to these support structures; this represents a solid foundation from which the programme can further develop.

The volunteering programme is, however, highly complex. The sheer number of volunteers recruited for Crisis Christmas, all of whom are managed and supported by other volunteers during the week, makes this inevitable. The involvement of Crisis clients in volunteering also brings its own challenges.

The organisation's most recent strategic plan highlights the need to 'invest in volunteers' and to bring them to the 'centre of the organisation' (Crisis Strategic Plan 2008 to 2013, p.1). This review's aim was to help inform this work by exploring the difference volunteers make to Crisis and its clients and to suggest the ways volunteers can be brought closer to the heart of the organisation.

The difference volunteering makes to volunteers

Most volunteers would like to continue to volunteer with Crisis in the future and spoke of the ways in which the experience enabled them to help others and the benefits that this brought to them personally:

"I felt that volunteering was a genuine win-win. I made a positive contribution to others and felt personally enriched through the process. That doesn't happen often."

"[Volunteering was] a really useful experience. I was overwhelmed by the gratitude of the clients and Crisis as an organisation. I felt I made a difference to those less fortunate in life."

A range of positive changes were reported by volunteers, including skills development (figure 1) but the most significant impact was in terms of volunteers' understanding of, and attitudes towards, homelessness. Eight out of ten volunteers said that helping out at Crisis increased their understanding of homelessness issues:

"[I] learnt a lot about homelessness, [it] opened my eyes to a lot that I didn't know and I very much enjoyed talking to the guests. I learned about the differences between the guests and threw away some preconceived ideas about the 'type' of people that are homeless."

For many, volunteering helped to challenge and enhance individuals' attitudes towards homeless people. The experience enabled volunteers to re-evaluate their ideas and perceptions about who homeless people were and how they became homeless:

"Crisis was an amazing experience and by far the most beneficial and perhaps most understated result of working with Crisis was the effect it had on my preconceptions about the homeless."

"I volunteered for Crisis Christmas thinking I could do something for others. Having met and talked with guests, heard their stories, laughed and played with them I realise that many preconceptions I had about homelessness have been completely shattered."

Figure 2: Positive reflections from clients about Crisis volunteers



The difference volunteering makes to Crisis

Over 266,860 hours of time were contributed by Crisis volunteers during 2008/9. Crisis Christmas alone, which is entirely run by volunteers, provided over 190,000 hours of support to around 1,500 clients in 2008.

The contribution of volunteers was recognised by Crisis staff who described them as ‘vital’, ‘integral’ and ‘essential’ to the work, culture and ethos of the organisation. It was widely acknowledged that Crisis would not be able to deliver the services it does without the involvement of volunteers. Staff felt that volunteers enhanced what Crisis was able to offer homeless people, bringing ‘passion’, ‘skills’, ‘ideas’, ‘commitment’, ‘enthusiasm’, ‘motivation’, ‘knowledge’, ‘diversity’, ‘greater understanding’ and ‘dedication to the cause’:

“[Volunteering] brings in extra skills, capacity and enthusiasm, it keeps us rooted to ordinary people and the general public, it provides an opportunity for others to give back, learn more and get involved.”

“Involvement of volunteers (especially member volunteers) guarantees constant feedback from our target group, which is essential for the success of the organisation and constant improvement of services.”

Volunteers also brought different perspectives and skills to the organisation, challenging the attitudes and thinking of the teams that involved them:

“It brings another dimension to my role, provides a great amount of job satisfaction and variety. It can be hard work. Generally, I think I work well with the volunteers who support me in my role but there is certainly room for improvement! The value of volunteers cannot be emphasised enough!”

That is not to say, however, that involving volunteers is without its challenges. Some staff lacked the knowledge, skills and capacity to support and manage them. This was particularly true for clients involved in volunteering, who often require additional support. Staff indicated that they would welcome training and further support, for example, through the sharing of good practice in working with volunteers.



Client volunteer Rob promoting Crisis' year-round services at a Crisis Christmas centre

The difference volunteering makes to Crisis' clients

Crisis' clients were highly positive about the help and services they received from the organisation, many of which were run or supported by volunteers. Classes in Skylight, for example, had a positive impact on clients' mental health, bringing new opportunities and helping them to develop new skills.

Clients highlighted various qualities they valued in Crisis volunteers (see figure 2). The willingness of volunteers to give up their free time, unpaid to help them and others was particularly appreciated:

"Yeah, the volunteers are very helpful, they're very lovely. You've gotta understand as well that the volunteers have given up their Christmas to spend time with us and if anyone can do that it's a blessing. They didn't have to do it, but they did it". (Client at the Rough Sleepers Centre at Crisis Christmas 2008)

Some clients found volunteers to be inspirational, helping to encourage them to think positively about what they could achieve in their own lives:

"For me personally, they give me inspiration, they give me a bit of insight into the real world because I have been out of it for so long. It is a comfort thing, just speaking to someone who is impartial...I see in others that it can be done. There are a couple of volunteers I speak to that have just finished or they are at uni. It sort of gives me hope that if they can do it so can I". (Client involved in a mosaics class)

The experience of volunteering was regarded as particularly beneficial for client volunteers, especially in terms of increasing their self esteem and sense of wellbeing. They felt that volunteering in, for example, the office, the café or at Crisis Christmas gave them the opportunity to 'give something back' to Crisis:

"I just thought it would be nice to give something back, get my hands dirty. It was good fun, they had to pull me away I was enjoying it that much". (Former Crisis Christmas volunteer)

"I felt a wee bit better about myself because I volunteered. Crisis put a lot into me in the early years.....a lot of ex-people who used to come here volunteer". (Former Crisis Christmas volunteer)

ISSUE	RECOMMENDATION
<i>Achieving consistency of support for volunteers</i>	Move towards a more consistent level of support for all volunteers by raising awareness of the importance of effective management and support for volunteers amongst staff, improve access to training in working with volunteers and increase the sharing of good practice in volunteer management between departments, teams and Crisis Christmas Centres.
<i>Enhancing opportunities for volunteers to influence development and improving communication with volunteers</i>	<p>Improve communication channels between staff and volunteers to ensure they are involved in, and informed of, issues and changes in the organisation.</p> <p>Improve the mechanisms for volunteers to feed in their ideas for the development of services and wider activities, as well as for feeding back their experiences of volunteering.</p>
<i>Developing progression routes for volunteers and improving the 'post volunteering experience'</i>	<p>Provide further support to volunteers, in particular clients who volunteer, to help them develop and progress through their volunteering. This includes providing them with opportunities to reflect on their volunteering experiences.</p> <p>Explore ways of keeping Crisis Christmas volunteers engaged with Crisis and homelessness issues through regular e-newsletters and volunteer days.</p>

Developing the Crisis volunteering programme

The overall picture of volunteering within Crisis is very positive and the foundations on which to build are strong. In order to take this work forward and strengthen the volunteering programme further, consideration should be given to a number of organisation-wide developments. Although aimed specifically at Crisis, our experience tells us that they will be relevant to other organisations (see above).

Beyond these operational issues, the review also highlighted some broader tensions for consideration. Firstly, Crisis currently operates a mix of different models and approaches to volunteering. In one way, volunteers are helping to deliver and support Crisis' work with homeless people and volunteering can be seen as a means to an end in the delivery of services. In another, volunteering is a means through which individuals and communities can be empowered and engaged; here, volunteering can be seen as an end in itself.

Currently, there is an emphasis within Crisis on the former, although the latter is recognised as

important. Crisis should explore the possibility of moving more towards an engagement and empowerment model of volunteering. Improving the self esteem, skills and motivation of homeless people is at the heart of Crisis' mission; the involvement of more clients as volunteers could play a key role in fulfilling it.

Secondly, there is a tension within Crisis between its impressive ability to recruit volunteers and the consequent demand for the limited number of opportunities available. The organisation is looking to engage volunteers in 'new roles with new responsibilities' and this initiative will be key to developing the volunteering programme and a deeper level of engagement with volunteers and supporters. This work could be undertaken in partnership with others, through involving volunteers across organisations and establishing a 'community' of homelessness volunteers. Such an approach could play a potentially vital role in helping Crisis and other organisations meet their wider commitment to raising awareness about homelessness amongst the general public.

About this project

This bulletin has been written by Joanna Stuart from the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR). It is based on research undertaken by the author, Georgina Brewis and Jennifer Russell from IVR and by Tom Say and Lúgia Teixeira from Crisis.

The research involved an online survey completed by 3,203 volunteers, three focus groups with volunteers, an online survey completed by 69 staff members, interviews with nine Crisis staff members and interviews with twenty clients (including ten Crisis Christmas guests and ten clients who attended Crisis classes or workshops). The study also included a review of related documents from Crisis and the volunteering team.

For more information

The full report, *Strong foundations: Reviewing Crisis' volunteering programme*, by Joanna Stuart, is published by Crisis. It is available as a free download from www.crisis.org.uk and www.ivr.org.uk

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About Crisis

Crisis is the national charity for single homeless people. We are dedicated to ending homelessness by delivering life-changing services and campaigning for change.

The Institute for Volunteering Research

IVR is a specialist research and consultancy agency focusing on volunteering. IVR is an initiative of Volunteering England and the University of East London. It was set up in 1997 in response to the increased demand for research on volunteering. Over the past twelve years IVR has carried out a wide variety of research, consultancy and evaluation projects on many different aspects of volunteering. It has completed four national surveys of volunteering. www.ivr.org.uk.

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