

SAMARITANS

A case study of volunteering supporting the Listeners scheme

June 2016



**Valuing
volunteers
in prison**

Summary

Samaritans is a national charity which aims to ensure that fewer people die by suicide. Samaritans volunteers train prisoners to act as Listeners, who support other prisoners who are struggling to cope. This case study will be especially interesting to readers who wish to:

- structure a large-scale volunteering programme to work in partnership with prisons
- develop clear procedures to work with prison staff and to resolve problems
- establish and manage a service operating in multiple prisons.

Background and overview

At a joint NOMS, Samaritans, and Listeners conference in October 2015, the Minister for Prisons, Probation and Rehabilitation said:

“Listeners and Samaritans volunteers do fantastic work across the prison system by providing valuable skills training for prisoners, and support for those struggling in jail.”

(Andrew Selous MP)

Samaritans volunteers have been supporting prisons for at least 30 years. For the past 25 years we have provided the Listener scheme. Specially trained prisoners, Listeners, offer confidential emotional support to their peers who may be struggling to cope or have suicidal feelings. Our volunteers use the skills and knowledge they have gained as Samaritans volunteers on the outside, to enable a volunteering programme to exist in prison.

The aim of the Listener scheme is to help reduce suicide and self-harm in prison. In the UK, prisoners are between five and 10 times more likely to die by suicide than a member of the general public. Listeners give prisoners who are having a tough time 24/7 access to someone they can confide in, without fear of being judged or reported. This helps alleviate feelings that could lead to suicide and self-harm. It is a highly respected and valued service. In 2014, Listeners responded to more than 86,000 requests for support.

We have two distinct sets of service users. The Listeners themselves who are recruited, trained and supported by Samaritans volunteers and the end users, prisoners who need emotional support to help them get through a difficult time. This aspect of our programme is possibly unique among the many prison volunteering programmes that exist.

Almost every prison in the UK and Republic of Ireland has a Listener scheme. This means that around 700 Samaritans volunteers are involved in supporting their local prison. In England and Wales, NOMS centrally commissions Samaritans to run Listener schemes in every public sector prison that requests one.

Introduction

This case study will examine how our prison volunteering programme is structured and organised. It will look at the volunteer experience and the impact on, and involvement of, service users.

It will also reflect on what we have learned as an organisation over the past 25 years about the key elements that help to make volunteering in prison a success. It highlights the things that can get in the way and effect not only the day to day operation of the service, but also the commitment and enthusiasm of volunteers. Finally, the case study will consider the value that volunteers bring and what needs to be done to better support volunteers and encourage more to get involved.

The role of the Samaritans prison support volunteer

This role is varied, and consists of a number of different elements. It requires a range of different skills, from chairing and facilitating meetings to providing emotional support:

- **Recruiting and selecting potential Listeners.**

This involves working with Safer Custody staff to review Listener application forms before deciding which applicants can go forward to a Samaritans selection event. The selection event aims to assess who has the right qualities and skills to become a Listener and therefore who is likely to complete the training course.

- **Training Listeners.**

The comprehensive Listener training course comprises eight sessions run over a period of between three and eight weeks. At least one of the training team will have attended the Samaritans Training for Trainers course. In addition to the core training, volunteers also deliver smaller, bite-sized chunks of training to make sure Listeners' skills are maintained and developed.

- **Supervising and supporting Listeners.**

A vital aspect of volunteering with Samaritans, given the nature of the service, is the support structure that enables every volunteer to offload after difficult calls, to share the burden and

release their own emotions. Volunteers meet regularly with Listeners so they receive the same level of support as any Samaritans volunteer. They also manage any Listener performance issues through Samaritans' established procedures, and use their best endeavours to monitor and maintain a quality of service to the end user.

- **Contributing to the prison's Safer Custody programme through working in partnership with the Safer Custody team.**

Volunteers meet with Safer Custody staff, usually through monthly Safer Custody meetings, to discuss suicide prevention strategy and to review the Listener scheme, highlighting any areas where best practice is not being followed.

- **Raising awareness of Samaritans and the Listener scheme amongst prison staff.**

Talking about suicide risk and the role played by Samaritans and Listeners in helping to reduce this risk.

We know our volunteers are motivated to make a difference, reducing incidents of suicide and addressing emotional distress. Volunteering in prison allows Samaritans volunteers to do what they do best and apply their skills, knowledge and abilities in a setting where incidents of suicide are high.

"Working in the prison team can be particularly rewarding for a Samaritans volunteer ... we need to be a combination of listening volunteer, coach, confidant, leader, trainer, mentor, ambassador and diplomat. The Listener scheme provides vulnerable people with someone to trust or turn to. We have considerable respect for the prisoners that decide to become Listeners, and I feel privileged to be allowed into their environment."

(Branch Prison Support Officer team leader for Samaritans support at HMP Brixton)

The prison volunteering structure

Samaritans' volunteering in prisons is carried out within a robust structure of volunteer support, relationship management, national guidelines, expertise and partnership work.

Every prison with an active Listener scheme is supported by a team of volunteers, known as the branch prison support team, ranging in size from four to 20 and drawn from the local Samaritans branch. The team is coordinated and led by a volunteer Branch Prison Support Officer (BPSO), in turn supported by a volunteer Regional Prison Support Officer (RPSO). There are 13 RPSOs representing regions in England and Wales, as well as each of the nations, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland (ROI).

The RPSOs are supported by the Functional Lead for Prison Support (FLPS), a volunteer role. They meet four times a year, often in a prison, to share best practice from across their respective regions, discuss challenges and review procedures and guidance.

The RPSOs and the Functional Lead will all be experienced prison support volunteers and are recruited through a regional (RPSO) and organisation-wide¹ (FLPS) selection process.

All of our lead prison volunteer roles (BPSO, RPSO and FLPS) have a term of office of three years. This protects the volunteer from overload and helps to ensure sustained levels of energy, enthusiasm and vision, in what can be demanding roles. This role rotation can be challenging to maintain, even with a pool of several hundred volunteers. It requires careful and proactive succession planning, supported by Samaritans' staff and volunteer leadership team. We have a structured induction process for the RPSO role, including the offer of an experienced RPSO mentor for ongoing support.

The volunteer structure is supported by a small and experienced staff team of two full-time posts, plus contributions from a range of specialist functions such as press and PR, marketing, volunteer development and support. The staff team works closely with the Functional Lead and RPSO team to deliver improvements to the scheme, provide advice and support, and make sure there are comprehensive procedures and guidance in place for all aspects of running a Listener scheme. The staff team are available to the entire organisation to offer expertise in prison-related matters. They also play a key role in managing the relationship with NOMS and the nations' prison services.

This overall structure is designed to make sure that all of our prison support volunteers feel involved, supported and part of the bigger picture of Samaritans' support for people in prison. It offers a channel through which communications can flow, from the Functional Lead through to the branch volunteers and vice versa. Critically, it enables volunteers to manage local relationships and adapt to local delivery needs, but at the same time be sensitive to national outcomes.

"Knowing there is an overall support structure enables me to carry out the role in confidence, there is always a procedure to follow or someone to contact for advice and support."

(The RPSO for the South West)

We believe we have a best practice volunteering structure that can be replicated with confidence. It empowers volunteers to support their local prison, giving them a sense of community, pride and ownership, all of which transfer directly to the Listeners.

¹ Samaritans operates in 5 nations; England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the ROI. We use the term 'organisational' when we are referring to all 5 nations.

Recruiting, selecting and training Samaritans prison support volunteers

All prison volunteers are fully trained Samaritans volunteers. They are given a Volunteer Agreement that explains what Samaritans will provide, and what is expected from them. Neither party signs the Agreement as it is binding in honour only. It is not intended to be a legally binding contract of employment between the two parties.

Recruitment to the prison team can be done in a number of ways. Existing members of the branch prison support team may approach individuals they think will be interested. The branch may hold information evenings that may include a talk from a released or serving Listener.

Any volunteer can apply to join their branch prison support team, and will initially be interviewed by the Branch Director². All applicants will be experienced at providing emotional support to people struggling to cope. They may also have carried out other roles within their branch such as fundraising, publicity or training. The Director will discuss the significant differences that exist between volunteering in a branch and volunteering in a prison and the skills required, covering topics such as:

- the prison environment
- ability to handle potential hostility
- facilitation
- mentoring
- de-briefing
- giving feedback.

The Director will assess the volunteer's motivation and reasons for wanting to join the prison team. It is important to make sure that applicants appreciate the values of the Listener scheme. Volunteers will be supporting the Listeners, rather than individual prisoners. Therefore applicants need to show a genuine interest in enabling and empowering Listeners to provide the emotional support. They also need to be aware that volunteering duties at the prison are usually in addition to the duties they are expected to do at the branch.

What happens next depends on the branch. There is material available for branches to run induction and preparation events for small groups of potential prison volunteers.

Most often, new prison volunteers receive on the job training from other experienced prison volunteers. Before starting their role they should visit the local prison to get an appreciation for the

² The Branch Director is the volunteer responsible for the running of his or her branch; in Scotland this role is known as the Chair.

overall environment, as well as to meet the Listener team. This familiarisation visit must be agreed and facilitated by the prison. In most cases, prisons are willing to do this as they appreciate the need for ongoing recruitment to the Samaritans prison support team.

For the majority of volunteers this visit will either confirm that this is the right choice for them or not. Those who decide not to continue usually give similar reasons:

- feeling claustrophobic, intimidated or trapped
- discomfort with the level of noise, shouting, swearing and so on
- the sound of locks and doors closing.

For some, it's the realisation that there is a lot of waiting around and unproductive time.

Those who do continue are better able to deal with the environment. They are also often deeply affected when they meet the Listeners, and realise they are just ordinary people doing something quite extraordinary. Any preconceptions about what a typical prisoner is like to quickly disappear.

We recognise that the prison support volunteer role is both complex and demanding. On the job training doesn't always go far enough to fully prepare volunteers for the many facets of the role, particularly the nature of their relationship with Listeners. At different times their role can vary hugely from line manager, fellow volunteer to the volunteer offering support to a caller. This is an area that Samaritans is keen to review, and possibly develop improved training for, so that our prison support volunteers are better equipped to manage the varying demands of the role.

How it works in practice

All prison volunteers are already enhanced DBS checked by Samaritans. They must also go through the prison's security clearance process before becoming a full member of the team. Most prisons are prepared to organise temporary clearance for occasional or familiarisation visits, but for regular attendance the volunteer must go through NOMS security vetting.

In almost all cases, once they have attended the relevant security training, prison volunteers draw keys and are able to move freely about the prison without staff supervision. Whilst this can mean that there is less interaction with prison staff, the overwhelming consensus is that it makes life easier.

"We had been reluctant to draw keys in the two prisons that we supported. Having the Safer Custody Officer meet us at the gate and accompany us to meetings was seen to be a big advantage of not having keys. It allowed us to catch up face-to-face and to have time for an informal chat on the way to and from meetings."

However, personnel changed, the full time role of Safer Custody officer disappeared and we had to rely on the good will of 'random' officers to accompany us to meetings. It soon became necessary for us to draw keys to ensure that we could get to meetings on time.

Looking back we can see that having the facility to draw keys has made life so much easier in both prisons. We can go and find members of the Safer Custody team if there are issues to follow up on and we are far more independent within the prison."

(The BPSO leading the support for HMPs Send and Coldingley)

Volunteers train potential Listeners and meet current Listeners without staff present, usually in a training room. The volunteers' time with both trainees and Listeners is private and, on the whole, is respected by prison staff. A support meeting typically lasts for between one and two hours and each training session runs for at least two hours.

Prison staff are usually responsible for bringing trainees and Listeners from their normal location to the meeting room. In some prisons, subject to appropriate risk assessments, the volunteers will go to the wings to collect the Listeners if they are already unlocked. Scheduling of support meetings and training courses is a matter of negotiation and agreement between the volunteers and prison staff. The timing should, as far as possible, accommodate both parties' needs.

Responsibility for the operational effectiveness of the Listener scheme rests with whoever is responsible for Safer Custody in the prison. Ideally there will be a named staff member, or members, who are the main contacts for Samaritans. This might be the Safer Custody Manager or a Safer Custody Officer. This relationship is critical.

Samaritans has a national agreement with NOMS to deliver the Listener scheme in every prison that requests one. It is worth noting that Listener schemes aren't mandatory, but almost every prison chooses to have one. Staff and volunteers use an operational manual called the 'Guide to the Listener Scheme'. This contains best practice, policies and procedures for running Listener schemes. The Guide acknowledges the diversity of the estate and aims to provide a flexible approach, without losing sight of the need to promote consistency in the way the scheme operates. The Guide was written by Samaritans in consultation with NOMS. It is also referenced in 'Prison Service Instruction (PSI) 64/2011: Management of prisoners at risk of harm to self, to others and from others'.

Most of the day-to-day practices of operating a Listener scheme are well established and have been in place for many years. The existence of a national agreement means that there is no need for individual SLAs to be in place between each prison and Samaritans branch. Not only does this make life easier for the volunteers but it means the volunteering arrangement should be consistent across all prisons. There is a checklist that details the key responsibilities of each party. This can be

used as a basis for discussion at a review meeting, which should take place annually between the Governor and the Samaritans Branch Director.

Samaritans volunteers are also invited to attend the monthly Safer Custody meetings where they contribute to discussions about suicide and self-harm prevention, as well as sharing how the Listener scheme is operating. This is really important from the volunteers' perspective as it means they feel involved, valued and respected.

Within their own branch, the prison support team meet regularly to make sure they are up to date with any issues relating to the operation of the Listener scheme, as well as to receive any communications from the BPSO. They also carry out an annual self-evaluation of their work to recognise what they are doing well and to identify areas where they may wish to make some improvements. The results of the annual review process are shared with the RPSOs and the Functional Lead so that an organisation-wide status report can be compiled, highlighting the main challenges and helping to establish priorities for the following year.

Success factors

Having volunteered in prisons for more than 30 years, Samaritans has learned a great deal both about what makes the volunteering experience a positive one for the volunteers themselves, as well as what makes the overall volunteering programme a success.

The nature of our service

NOMS is committed to reducing suicide in prison. Suicide was a major issue when the Listener scheme started and it remains an ever-present risk. The prison population contains a high proportion of very vulnerable individuals, many of whom have experienced negative life events that increase the likelihood of them harming themselves. The need for our service, the fact that we support NOMS' aim for prisons to be safe and decent places, and our reputation and expertise in the field of suicide prevention, gives our volunteering programme a solid foundation on which to succeed.

Our volunteers have a unique opportunity to use their experience to enable and empower Listeners to deliver the same service in prison as volunteers do in the outside world. It's a hugely unselfish role, and whilst the same can probably be said of all volunteer roles, it is especially true for a volunteer who has undergone intense training to provide emotional support directly, and yet is willing to take a step back and empower someone else to take on that role and offer support to some of the most vulnerable people in society.

A particularly rewarding aspect of the role is knowing that their volunteering means prisoners who are struggling to cope can have 24/7 access to Listeners.

Volunteers often speak of the great satisfaction that comes from watching a Listener develop over time. They describe feeling humbled by the Listeners' commitment to what is a far more difficult role than that of a Samaritans volunteer. Seeing Listeners grow in skill and confidence gives volunteers a very tangible reward for their commitment and hard work.

"The role can be challenging but is also very rewarding - you see Listeners developing their knowledge and skills, increasing in confidence, working as a team and, above all, supporting vulnerable prisoners."

(A prison support volunteer from Central London Samaritans)

Service user involvement

There is much anecdotal evidence that suggests the new skills Listeners gain, along with what for many is the first real sense of responsibility they have had in their lives (and for some the first time they have been taken seriously), has a profound effect on them, their relationships, their perspective on the world and in some cases, the choices they make when they leave prison.

"I enjoyed the training – in a place where it seems like there is no hope, if there's something that gives you the capability to help people, then that's fantastic. It makes you feel useful, gives you a purpose, and there is nothing more powerful than being there for people who have massive problems. My values changed in prison and both this, and being a Listener, made me view things differently."

(Peter, a former Listener from HMP Wandsworth)

The opportunity to become a Listener is open to every prisoner, regardless of offence or status. Applicants are risk-assessed by the prison. When their applications have been reviewed by Samaritans, they attend a selection event run by Samaritans volunteers before commencing an intense training course. The inclusive approach to recruitment and selection means that Listener schemes operate in every category of prison, from the open estate through to high security.

Once trained, Listeners meet with Samaritans volunteers, usually every week or fortnight. This provides an opportunity to de-brief, talk about difficult calls, receive further training and talk about how the scheme is running. They can also contact Samaritans by phone if there is something more urgent they need to talk about. In many prisons, Listeners are also invited to attend part of the monthly Safer Custody meetings.

We endeavour to make sure that Listeners benefit from the same volunteer management processes as all Samaritans volunteers. Last year we produced a Listener handbook, which includes a role description, a Listener agreement, guidance about what to do if things aren't working out and a

variety of other relevant information. Feedback from Listeners suggests that they really appreciated receiving the handbook. The fact that someone had gone to the trouble of producing a publication like this, specifically for them, made them feel valued.

Other ways that we involve Listeners:

- we consult with them when, for example, we are revising procedures, developing new publicity material, etc.
- we recently carried out a survey for NOMS to find out how well the Listener scheme is running. Approximately 300 Listeners were invited to complete the survey and we received responses from 260
- where ROTL conditions allow, Samaritans branches invite Listeners to speak at their AGMs or to help with the induction of new prison support volunteers
- we hold a bi-annual conference with NOMS to which Listeners are invited. Their participation in workshops and plenary sessions is valuable and enlightening.

This kind of Listener involvement is vital to the success of the scheme. It gives Listeners the opportunity to share their views on what's working well and what isn't. This helps them to feel valued and respected. They feel part of something they can make a meaningful contribution to, and have shared ownership of.

"Thank you so much for giving me a chance in life. Being a Listener is very important to me, and it's given me another way of thinking, and putting other people first. And all of the tools you have given me will never go away. Thank you so much for all of the support I've had over the years."

(A Listener from HMP Peterborough)

Volunteer/prison staff relationship

Our prison volunteers would acknowledge that the single most important factor that can make or break the success of a Listener scheme is recognition by both the prison and by Samaritans that they are working in partnership. A prison can't have a Listener scheme without the help of Samaritans, and Samaritans volunteers can't train and support Listeners without the help of the prison.

"As the Safer Custody Manager in a large prison for women in the London area, I draw on the expertise and professionalism of the Samaritans to deliver an excellent service to the women and staff in the prison. The Samaritans volunteers regularly visit the prison and in so doing provide support to the Listener team and engage well with the staff of the prison too. In my opinion it would not be possible to call this jail safe without the excellent support and engagement we have from the Samaritans."

(A Safer Custody Manager from a prison with a strong relationship with Samaritans)

Understanding each other's roles, open communication and mutual respect deliver a strong partnership and an effective working relationship. Experience has shown us that it is the level of engagement and support from the No.1 Governor that ultimately dictates the level of staff support for what Samaritans and Listeners do. There are also some simple, yet effective, actions that can help to build and sustain this relationship:

- Offering and accepting invitations to speak to each other's teams or wider groups of staff and volunteers, to educate them about either the role of the Listener scheme or the role of a Safer Custody officer as appropriate.
- Being open about challenges and competing priorities, but recognising that both parties are working towards the same goal.
- Having named points of contact, including deputies, and contact details.
- Raising any concerns at an early stage and setting aside time to talk them through.
- Finding out the full facts of a situation and listening to the other person's point of view before judging a situation.
- Involving each other and recognising the contribution that each can make. For example, inviting volunteers to attend Safer Custody meetings or inviting a Safer Custody officer to visit a Samaritans branch and speak to non-prison volunteers about the difficulties faced by prisoners and their need for emotional support.
- Doing whatever has been promised, following through with agreed actions, within agreed timescales. Where this isn't possible, keeping the other party informed.

Volunteers give up considerable amounts of time, and often travel considerable distances, to visit prisons. Many have demanding careers and/or family commitments to juggle, in addition to their volunteering role. The extent to which these factors are respected and acknowledged by prison staff makes an enormous difference to how volunteers feel about their work in the prison. The level of staff commitment to making sure the Listener scheme works well sends a very important message to the Listeners that what they are doing is valued.

Respect and acknowledgement can be evidenced in a number of ways:

- flexibility with the timing of Listener support meetings and training courses
- giving adequate notice when meetings are cancelled or changed
- facilitating prisoner contacts with Listeners when they ask for support
- organising and attending Listener certificate presentations.

Similarly, prison staff face considerable pressure in their roles. Risk management, operational emergencies and competing priorities are features of daily life. It is important that volunteers recognise and appreciate that running a Listener scheme cannot always be the top priority. There is almost always a need for compromise between both parties and their willingness to work together in that context is critical.

“We have recently been negotiating a change of Listener support meeting. It was clear that our Saturday morning meetings were not working for the Listeners and the branch team agreed a couple of alternative times with the Listeners that would be convenient for both parties. Once we had agreed these potentially suitable slots we approached the safer Custody team with the different options. Initially neither time slot suited the prison in terms of impact on work time and free flow movement. The prison then suggested times that would have made it very difficult for Samaritan volunteers to attend. Eventually a suitable compromise was worked out and all three parties are willing to give it a try. It is important that we all work together to get a workable solution as if one party sticks their heels in then the scheme suffers.”

(The BPSO for a prison in the South East)

However, this is not the experience of all volunteers in all prisons:

“It often feels like an uphill battle even getting the Listeners to meetings/training. HMP xxxx could not facilitate a Listener support meeting for several weeks recently due to staff shortages.”

(The RPSO for the South West speaking of difficulties scheduling meetings with prisons in that region)

Regional and national support for problem-solving

Whilst the local Samaritans and prison relationship is key to the success of the Listener scheme, there are inevitably times when this relationship falters, usually as a result of one or more of the recommended approaches not being followed. The underlying issue is almost always related to an ongoing and unresolved concern about a particular aspect of how the Listener scheme is operating, often where Listener safety may be at risk. An example would be where Listeners are left in cells for several hours after an emotional support session with a prisoner has come to an end. This is a hugely uncomfortable, unacceptable and potentially damaging experience for both parties.

When the relationship reaches a point that it might break down completely, it's important that both parties can call on the support of others to help resolve issues as quickly as possible. The longer problems are left, the more difficult it is to restore good relations.

We have established with NOMS an agreed escalation process. This means that, if local issues can't be resolved within one month, then the respective regional leads, Samaritans Regional Prison Support Officers and NOMS Regional Safer Custody Leads, will be consulted and asked to mediate.

These regional leads have good operational knowledge of the Listener scheme, as well as an understanding of the bigger picture. They have a vested interest in making sure the Listener scheme works well and can bring both objectivity and expertise to the situation. In most cases, their intervention will lead to a positive outcome. This not only rectifies the immediate issues, but also puts the local relationship back on a stronger footing, with an agreed way forward that will avoid recurrence of similar issues.

We have seen this kind of escalation and intervention work particularly well in a prison in the East Midlands. The Listener scheme came close to being suspended, due to issues of misunderstanding, inflexibility and lack of cooperation. The respective regional leads were able to more clearly see what the real sticking points were, and what needed to happen to move things forward in a positive way. Together they agreed an action plan and acted as mediators between the Samaritans branch and the prison, helping each party to understand the other's position. It wasn't an overnight fix, but on each side there was improved understanding and more respect for the other's position. The Listener scheme wasn't suspended and continues to grow in strength.

Rarely, regional intervention doesn't achieve the desired results. On those occasions the matter is escalated to a national level. Samaritans and NOMS work together through a Partnership Board. This board has representation from Samaritans' staff and volunteer leadership and NOMS Safer Custody and Learning Team. The board meets four times a year to review the operation of the Listener scheme, discuss what's happening in the broader context of suicide prevention strategy, review Samaritans' progress with new developments and initiatives and agree priorities. It can also play a role in supporting resolution of local difficulties where a Listener scheme may be at risk.

The barriers and challenges

Since its inception, Samaritans has faced a number of barriers and challenges to establishing the Listener scheme in prisons.

Barriers to volunteers becoming involved

Our prison support work is a vital element of our service delivery so it's critical that we're able to recruit new members to our branch prison support teams. We recognise that volunteering in prison doesn't suit everyone, but even for those who are interested there are barriers, both real and perceived, that can get in the way.

In 2012, we carried out a volunteer survey to find out what the main barriers were to joining the branch prison support team. This identified perceived problems with security vetting, the time commitments involved and worries about the prison environment.

68% of respondents thought the security and vetting process took too long and/or was too complicated.

More recent feedback suggests that volunteers are generally comfortable with completing the forms on a computer, and we do have examples of where the overall process has worked really well, including in the high security estate. However, it's far from perfect. The main pinch points seem to be at the prison stage. Paperwork can be mislaid or lost by the Vetting Contact Point. Volunteers arrive with their documents to have their forms checked at an agreed time, only to find that there is no one to meet with them. This is a particular concern and area of risk for us, as there are many other areas in Samaritans that need additional volunteers. If applicants have to wait too long for clearance, or if their initial interactions with the prison aren't positive, they will give up and get involved in another activity.

84% of respondents indicated worries about the time commitment involved in the role, saying that visits to the prison had to be done at a time that was either impossible or very inconvenient.

Many Samaritans volunteers work during the day so if the prison is not willing or able to accommodate this, the prospect of joining the branch prison support team is not possible. Although this survey was carried out a few years ago, feedback suggests that the situation hasn't greatly improved and may even be worse due to changes to the core day, earlier lock-up, etc., some of which have been brought about as a result of reduced staffing levels. There appear to be enormous variations between prisons in their willingness to accommodate volunteers' requests to visit the prison in the evening. There is usually and unsurprisingly a direct correlation between the degree of cooperation and the extent to which the Listener scheme is understood and valued by staff, especially the senior management team.

87% of respondents felt that prison would be an intimidating environment and/or they would be in danger.

This is a common and understandable perception. The only way for potential prison support volunteers to see what it's really like and make an informed decision, is if they have an introductory visit. For the most part, prisons seem happy to organise one-off clearance for this type of familiarisation visit, but others say that it's not possible, or too much effort. It is a great shame if we lose potential volunteers simply because they've not been given an opportunity to experience the reality of training and supporting Listeners.

Barriers to the success of volunteers who are already involved

The majority of our prison support volunteers are very understanding. They appreciate the pressures on prison staff and recognise that the very nature of the prison environment means there will be

times when things don't go according to plan. They are deeply committed to the Listener scheme and will go to great lengths to make sure it works well.

Whilst challenges are to be expected, there is a limit to a volunteer's tolerance when the same issues crop up time and again and/or they appear to be things which could quite easily be avoided, or have been successfully resolved in other prisons.

The most reported concerns are usually one or more of the following:

- **Expired clearance**

Volunteers arrive at the prison to be told that their clearance has expired and they can't come in. They won't have been given any notice about this. It's not clear to Samaritans what systems are in place (if any) to flag when clearance is due to expire. For a volunteer who may have had to leave work early, organise childcare, etc., this can be really frustrating. For the Listeners, who were expecting to have a support meeting with Samaritans, the impact can be devastating, particularly if the message doesn't get through to them that the Samaritans volunteers did arrive but weren't permitted entry.

- **Short notice cancellation of training sessions, support meetings and Safer Custody meetings.**

All volunteers understand that incidents occur and operational emergencies are unavoidable. What they are less able to understand, is when a long standing arrangement is cancelled because a training room hasn't been booked, or when a decision was taken the previous week to move the date of a meeting but nobody thought to let them know. They can feel undervalued and disrespected.

- **Resistance to scheduling the timing of Listener support meetings and training courses to accommodate volunteers who are working or have childcare commitments.**

As has happened, established patterns of evening visits made by existing volunteers are stopped, often with no good explanation. As there is no local SLA, each individual Samaritans-prison relationship develops based on mutually agreed expectations, aligned with the overall spirit of the national agreement. Where those expectations aren't met, or promises are perceived to be broken, this can have a negative impact both on the volunteers and the overall relationship. Sometimes it is possible to reach a compromise where for example, an arrangement involving alternating weekend, evening and daytime visits can be organised. An intransigent position can be a source of tension and conflict between Samaritans and the prison and put the relationship at risk and the viability of the scheme in jeopardy.

- **The staff member nominated as a point of contact is difficult to track down or meet with.** It is important that there is a named member of staff as the prison contact. It is also important that the point of contact is accessible and available, or at least informs the volunteers when they will be. Regular, open communication and feedback is a critical success factor of the relationship. If the point of contact is never available when Samaritans volunteers visit the prison, it is likely that a relatively small, easily resolved matter will escalate into something much bigger.

None of the difficulties described in this section are insurmountable. We are very aware that some things take time and considerable effort to put in place so that everyone is happy. But there is a danger that, if left unresolved, these issues can result in volunteers choosing to leave the prison support team and offer their services to one of the many other volunteering opportunities that Samaritans offers.

It comes down to whether or not everyone in the prison, not just those staff who directly liaise with Samaritans, understands and values what the volunteers can bring, and whether both parties are willing to really work together to reduce suicide in prison. None of this is easy but we know, without doubt, that it can work incredibly well. We regularly receive positive feedback from volunteers and prison staff about the strength of the relationship and the degree of flexibility of both parties.

“Samaritans provide a superb service. Their work is valued by staff and offenders alike. Listeners operate on a daily basis and a significant number of offenders have been supported by them.”

(Dave Crawford, Head of Residence and Safety at HMP Exeter - quoted in ‘This is the West Country’, 8 November 2014)

Summary

As part of the 2012 volunteer survey, we set up a discussion page on our intranet ‘Volunteering in prison: why bother?’

The volunteer responses were that, despite challenges and barriers, it is a rewarding, fulfilling, humbling and unique volunteering experience. This is at the heart of why Samaritans volunteers have been supporting prisons for more than 30 years and why they are currently supporting nearly every prison in the UK and ROI.

“Volunteering in a prison is by far the best thing I have done since joining Samaritans and maybe in my life, ever.”

(Samaritans Functional Lead for Prison Support)

The commitment and dedication of volunteers is only part of the story. To understand why volunteering in prisons is a success it's important to consider the broader value that volunteers bring. They bring a diversity of skills, knowledge and experience way beyond what could be achieved through staff recruitment. They bring a powerful message to prisoners that people outside do care. They give up their own time to do something they have chosen to do, for the benefit of people that large parts of society has either given up on or doesn't care about. This is an equally important message for prison staff who are doing a difficult job in a challenging environment; an understanding that there are other people in the community who really care about the well-being of prisoners and want to do something tangible to help staff in their efforts to reduce suicide and self-harm. Not only do they want to help, but they are willing to do it without pay. In 2014 we estimated that if our prison support volunteers were paid at the ONS median gross hourly rate of £13.08, their time alone would have cost almost £1m. Calculated at a more appropriate rate commensurate with the role they undertake, the figure would be considerably higher.

It's this broader value of volunteering that perhaps isn't always understood or appreciated by all prison staff, and why there sometimes seems to be unnecessary barriers to volunteering. We don't believe that anyone wants to truly stand in the way of volunteers whose intention is to make an effective contribution to a reduction in the numbers of people taking their own life whilst in custody. But equally, we understand for staff who don't really understand what volunteers are doing in the prison, they can be seen as a hindrance and intrusion to the working day. Volunteers require some degree of supervision, they have to be security cleared and key trained.

Given that our prison support volunteers are very clear, that the single most important factor that can make or break the success of what they are trying to achieve is the relationship with staff, it's critical that staff work in a culture that understands and values volunteers. Volunteers must be treated with the same respect as anyone else working in the prison and recognised for the contribution they make, not the extra work they cause.

Voluntary sector organisations have a responsibility to educate and inform as wide an audience of prison staff as possible about the work they do and how it supports the prison to achieve its goals. Equally, the Ministry of Justice has a responsibility to make sure that a culture of truly valuing volunteering is embedded within every prison, not just some of them.

Some of the steps than can help achieve this:

- Include some discussion during prison officer entry level training about the role of volunteers. Explain how they are an integral part of the strategy to make prisons a place of

rehabilitation and encourage new recruits to find out more about the organisations that operate in their establishments.

- Share best practice. There are numerous examples of prisons where Listener schemes operate very effectively. It's important to share anything they are doing that others aren't.

Without a culture that values volunteers, there is a risk that some of the fantastic and important work carried out, not only by Samaritans, but by many other voluntary sector organisations, could stop. This would have an enormous impact on everyone in the Criminal Justice System, not least the 85,000 prisoners who should not be seen as *“simply liabilities to be managed, but instead as potential assets to be harnessed³.”*

Volunteers have a tremendous role to play in helping to harness that potential.

³ David Cameron. 8th February 2016.

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