

FELTHAM COMMUNITY CHAPLAINCY TRUST

A case study of volunteering in a resettlement mentoring project

June 2016



**Valuing
volunteers
in prison**

Summary

Feltham Community Chaplaincy Trust recruit volunteers to work in two prisons in London, as resettlement mentors. This case study will be especially interesting to readers who wish to:

- recruit volunteers who come from diverse backgrounds
- integrate volunteers with the work of staff based within a prison
- adapt their service model to lessen the time demands placed on volunteers by security vetting.

Introduction

Feltham Community Chaplaincy Trust (FCCT) is a small faith-based charity seeking to help young people stay out of prison.

We aim to enable young men (aged 15 to 25), on their release from prison, to draw on the riches, wisdom and support of their faith; so that by mentoring and guidance they may be inspired and encouraged to enjoy crime-free lives and to make a positive contribution to society.

The main project we run to achieve this is a through-the-gate mentoring service, using volunteer mentors from the communities to which the young men are returning. We work in HMYOI Feltham with young men aged 15 to 21. We work with around 50 young people at any one time and 110 in total throughout the year. We have also recently started a faith-based mentoring project in HMP/YOI Isis with young men aged 18 to 25, and our target there is to work with a similar number of people per year.

The resource of faith communities

The majority of our volunteers are recruited from different faith communities across London. Members of faith communities are often keen to engage in social action, but are still looking for a route to doing so. Often more than one person within a faith community may be interested in volunteering, helping to provide momentum for an individual to see through their decision to volunteer.

Faith communities also often have a diversity of members so a young person who becomes part of that group then has access to a variety of skills and knowledge. Although they might arrive knowing just their mentor, they could soon build relationships with others and, for example, gain employment or work experience.

As we are faith-based we find that the majority of our service users have a faith. However, as a result of our relationships with other departments and interventions continuing to grow, we are getting an increasing number of service users who are of no faith. Our aim is not to work only with people of faith, but rather to make the resource of faith communities available to all young people leaving prison who want to engage with what they have to offer. Our main criteria is simply that the client wants to engage with our service.

The use of volunteers as mentors

We recruit, train and supervise volunteer mentors, who work one to one with the young men. The mentoring relationship begins before release and then continues into the community. The volunteer mentor is there to provide a holistic support and to journey with the young person as they see through their choice not to re-offend. Mentoring support is provided to complement and help the young person, to bring together all the other support they are getting around specific issues, e.g. drugs and alcohol.

Using volunteers means we can support far more young people: rather than having one of our members of staff supporting around 12 clients, a member of staff can look after up to 25 volunteers, working with 25 clients. This is a much more cost efficient way to provide one to one support.

Volunteers are a huge asset because when asked by a client why they are doing this they can simply say something along the lines of 'they are doing it because they care.' This is an all important part of communicating to a young person that they are of value, and that all is not lost. We work with young people who cannot quite understand why their mentor helped them in the first place, let alone why they still persevere with them.

Involving members of the wider community in the rehabilitation of ex-offenders also leads to a better understanding by communities of the issues faced by those who are trying to break out of a lifestyle of offending. This positions communities as a whole to support ex-offenders back into their midst more effectively. The cohesion involved also strengthens communities as they come together to solve a shared problem.

Volunteer management

Our volunteers are managed and supervised by our Community Chaplains (two in each prison). Each Community Chaplain has capacity to support 25 mentors and 25 clients.

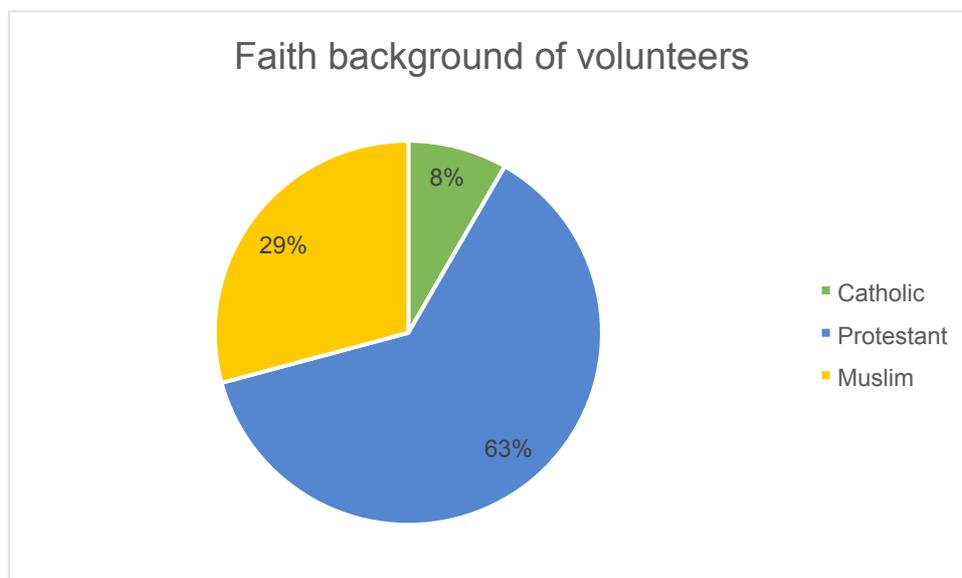
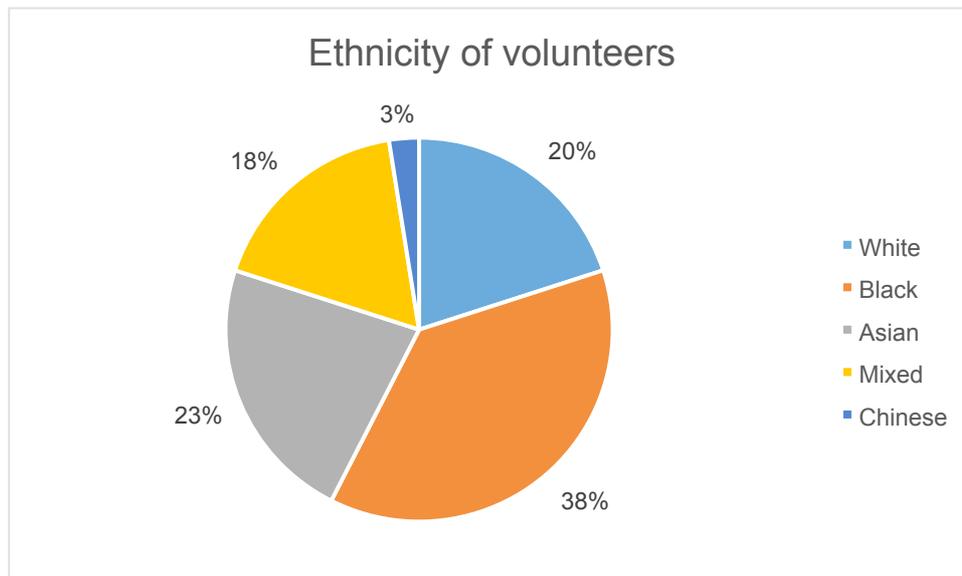
The Community Chaplains deal with the pastoral needs of the volunteers, holding supervisions with them on a regular basis. The Community Chaplain is the first point of contact for the volunteer, dealing with practical queries (e.g. what they can and cannot ask a prisoner) and helping them to process what they see as they support the prisoners and ex-prisoners. The Community Chaplains' primary responsibility is to the volunteer rather than the client. The idea is that if we provide quality support to the volunteer then they are in a strong position to support the client to a similar standard.

The Community Chaplains are based in the prison, but they spend about half their time in the community. The benefit of having the Community Chaplains based in the prison is that when they are there, they are non-uniformed staff with access to a prison email address and internal telephones. It means that if a situation arises that requires them to contact a member of the prison staff or go and see them, they will be listened to because they are staff rather than just a 'random person' from a charity based in the community. We are keen to keep the demands made on prison staff by our volunteers to a minimum.



Volunteer recruitment

Our volunteers come from across London. Most are recruited when one of our staff members speaks at a community event about the work we do. Our staff speak at mosques, churches and conferences, and we have found this to be very productive. At present the demographic composition of our volunteers is as follows:



We also get quite a few students asking to volunteer with us as part of their studies, often in Criminology or Practical Theology. Our experience here is quite mixed. We have had students who are obviously just trying to meet a requirement of their course and as a result they will sign up with us, but for practical reasons never actually mentor anyone. However, more recently, we have also had students who make themselves very available. It seems to depend on the student and if they are really motivated to make it happen.

Before beginning mentoring, volunteers attend a training course facilitated by FCCT staff.



Evolving arrangements for mentoring meetings

Our arrangements for how and where volunteers meet prisoners have changed over time, and it has been important to weigh up the benefits of different ways of working. Because volunteers are giving up their time to attend a visit in the prison, it can be particularly disappointing for their time to be wasted if a prisoner is unavailable.

Historically, our staff escorted volunteers on to wings to meet with prisoners, or in some cases arranged a pass for them to visit prisoners by themselves. We found this was very time-consuming and a drain on our staff resource, as well as meaning all our volunteers were being vetted through the prison, which meant delays in getting volunteers started with their roles.

We have now negotiated instead for our volunteers to meet with prisoners through legal visits. Legal visits take priority over any other appointment, so this is a good way to ensure the prisoner is actually available for the meeting, whereas we have had situations in the past where a volunteer turned up to see a young person only to find they are busy doing something else.

It has also meant that since volunteers are not coming into the main prison, they no longer need to obtain NOMS security clearance, but instead only an enhanced DBS (eDBS). If they have a

valid eDBS from another organisation then we can accept that and they can start mentoring (through legal visits and in the community) as soon as they are trained. If they do not have an eDBS then we still put them through prison vetting. This can take a long time because of bureaucracy, but it costs us nothing and is therefore an appealing option.

There have been some disadvantages to this arrangement, compared to how visits took place previously. If a volunteer actually goes in to the main part of the prison and meets a prisoner either on their unit or in the Chaplaincy, then there is definitely a greater opportunity for the volunteer to better understand the prisoner's situation, and perhaps for the prisoner to feel like the volunteer really is reaching out. A legal visit can feel quite 'official' for prisoners, and although the volunteer is giving up their time free of charge, some service users may associate our volunteers with the solicitors who would be their main other experience of legal visits.

We also considered the possibility of arranging mentoring meetings through social visits, but we are keen not to use up the limited number of social visits that prisoners get each month. Volunteers meet with prisoners up to six times (in certain cases more), so as prisoners are allowed limitless legal visits, sending our volunteers in that way does not impact on family and friends visiting.

Booking meetings

One of our Community Chaplains is present for the first meeting between mentor and service user. Assuming the meeting goes well, it is just the volunteer and the client at subsequent meetings. FCCT arranges the first meeting and subsequently the volunteer contacts the prison themselves to arrange a legal visit.

We have found that briefing the volunteer about possible problems has been really helpful to ensure they can successfully arrange the meeting. The main problem we come across is if the officer taking the call has not dealt with a volunteer mentor from Community Chaplaincy before, and is not familiar with the arrangement that has been made where volunteers can book legal visits. In some situations the volunteer has had to call us and we have then called up on their behalf to resolve the situation, but this has not usually been necessary.

Volunteers have actually ended up having more autonomy by using legal visits because previously there were only a very small number who were able to move freely around the prison, most had to be escorted.

The volunteers also meet with the clients in the community. This takes place in locations such as coffee shops. We try not to dictate too much about where they can and cannot meet, but we do require it to be a public place and for the volunteer to report to us before and after.

Keeping a good relationship with the volunteers

We are keen to make a community available for our volunteers who wish to engage in it, though we also recognise that not every volunteer will have the time to do this. We run quarterly mentor forums where volunteers have the opportunity to gather together to share ideas, best practice and to provide encouragement for each other.

When it comes to vetting, or anything that takes a lot of time and involves bureaucracy, it is important that mentors are treated as volunteers rather than just being treated the same as paid members of staff. For example, it is acceptable to put demands on paid staff members to attend multiple appointments about their vetting forms, but it is not so easy for a volunteer to find the time to do this, or to accept it as 'just the way it is'. Our biggest barrier to volunteers getting on with their role is if they require security vetting, which can take up to three months to get through. This has to be balanced with the obvious requirement to ensure that all volunteers are thoroughly vetted to ensure their safety and the safety of the mentees, but it is still a barrier that can lead to volunteers losing interest or finding other opportunities for volunteering.

However, when it comes to the volunteer actually executing their role then they need to be treated just like a staff member who is trying to do their job. They have been trained and vetted, and they have a valuable contribution to make to the rehabilitation of a particular prisoner.

Keeping a good relationship with the prison

One of the strengths of FCCT is the relationship it has with the prison, which is ultimately founded on formal arrangements. Part of the constitution of FCCT states that there has to be a Governor's representative from Feltham on the Board of Trustees, usually the Head of Reducing Reoffending. We are currently negotiating with HMP/YOI Isis to have a representative from there as well. The prison's Muslim, Church of England and Roman Catholic chaplains are also required to be on the Board. When issues are raised with the Head of Reducing Reoffending they are usually resolved quickly and always with their full attention, because we have invested time in building a good relationship.

Our volunteers would be very welcome at prison staff meetings and others such as reducing re-offending meetings. However, our volunteers would generally not have the time to do this, so we

adopt the approach where one or more of our staff represents us at these meetings and the relevant information is then passed to the volunteers by their Community Chaplain or via our newsletter.

Barriers and challenges to volunteering

A big barrier to good volunteers doing quality work is that by their very nature their time is in high demand. HMYOI Feltham and HMP/YOI Isis are both quite difficult to get to by public transport, Feltham particularly so. It makes those initial visits to the prison, where the important trust is formed between the prisoner and the volunteer, quite difficult to facilitate. We have a budget to pay travel expenses for our volunteers, but many volunteers do not claim their expenses, seeing this as a way to make donations to the charity. This is perhaps an indication of the motivation of our volunteers.

Although the move towards mentoring meetings taking place through legal visits has lessened some of the problems we encountered with cancelled meetings, we still face the reality that prisons are unpredictable places and sometimes appointments have to be delayed or cancelled at the last minute. If a volunteer has taken the afternoon off work to visit a prisoner then this can be very inconvenient, and make them less inclined to make the time again.

We deal with this throughout the recruitment and training process, by trying to ensure volunteers understand that they are going to need to be patient and persistent as they interact with their mentee. The role can be frustrating, but that is simply the nature of the clients we are working with and the situations they come from.

We still feel we could do more as a charity to make sure volunteers are made fully aware at an early stage of the time commitment involved in mentoring, so they know what to expect. We do get a small proportion of volunteers who drop out having being trained but before they actually meet with their first mentee. Although we have warned them about the time commitment involved, for some it is not until that point that they realise the time they will have to invest. It would help if employees had a legal right to take time out to volunteer, rather than individual companies (usually the large ones) deciding whether they want to facilitate it.

As the work is not essential to their livelihood the volunteer might not always be entirely focused on volunteering with us. We have had a number of volunteers who have encountered a significant life event and it is their volunteering with us that has had to stop as they look to reduce their commitments. This is of course understandable, but it does impact on our work.

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