

HACRO AND HMP THE MOUNT

A case study of a local volunteering partnership

June 2016



**Valuing
volunteers
in prison**

Summary

HMP The Mount is a category C training and resettlement prison. HACRO is a local charity that helps recruit volunteers to posts identified by the prison. This case study will be especially interesting to readers who wish to:

- understand how prisons can identify and promote volunteering throughout the establishment
- understand how prisons can build local volunteer recruitment infrastructure
- understand barriers to volunteer involvement and how some have been overcome.

Introduction

HACRO's vision is a world in which everyone on the wrong side of the law has the chance to turn their lives around and lead a life fully contributing to society. Its mission is to offer support for offenders, potential offenders and their families to manage positive change in their lives; to engage with influential partners in the community of Hertfordshire and neighbouring counties; and work to establish a range of educational and training initiatives with a focus on gaps in provision.

HACRO originated as a voluntary sector initiative with the aim of finding accommodation for a few young offenders. Established in 1974, the charity has always had representation from local organisations and Criminal Justice System officials on its Management Board. HACRO undertakes a variety of initiatives, including small resettlement grants to offenders in the community, the provision of services for visitors to HMP The Mount and runs programmes to assist offenders with their educational and development needs. The charity is having to evolve quickly to respond to the pressures of the new criminal justice climate.

HMP The Mount is a Category C training and resettlement prison with an operational capacity of 1028 adult males. Training is provided for 75% of the population, with the remaining 25% receiving a 'through the gate' resettlement service provided by St Giles Trust. The resettlement service is for prisoners within the last 6 months of their sentence. The other prisoners could be at any point in their sentence and all will be serving over 12 months. There are also approximately 180 foreign national prisoners subject to deportation..

A diverse range of volunteers at HMP The Mount

"I think The Mount is rather unique in its approach to volunteers as evidenced by the sheer number who attend here. Not only do we value the support of volunteers, the culture of this prison is one where volunteers are not seen as a threat to staff job security (which can often be a barrier to

engagement). I think this is mainly due to the fact that we are clear to publicise the added value this extra resource brings.

We are careful to ensure that volunteers feel included, for example I met a volunteer who was surprised to have been invited to the Governor's coffee morning, and felt empowered by the fact that her views were sought on wider prison policy.

As the service continues to evolve I expect a more varied approach to business as usual, within which our success with volunteers will play a strong role. This will be particularly pertinent as Governors achieve more autonomy from the centre allowing better local links and engaging the prison as a strong force in the local community."

(Acting Deputy Governor, HMP The Mount)

Volunteering has always played a huge part at The Mount and volunteers are valued members of the prison team. Volunteers support and complement the work carried out by staff, but are not there to do the work of staff. The volunteers share new skills and perspectives with prisoners and increase their contact with the local community.

Historically, the volunteers were managed through the prison's chaplaincy. More recently, the volunteers have been overseen by the prison's Business and Community Engagement Manager with support from the (paid) Volunteer Coordinator. These roles have enabled the expansion of The Mount's volunteer programme and supported working with new voluntary organisations.

The roles and locations of the volunteers within the prison are very varied. Volunteers are drawn from a range of organisations. Consistent oversight of the programme is key to its success.

Currently there are 129 volunteers working in 15 different areas in the prison:

Area	Number	Roles covered	Recruitment Route
Chaplaincy	31	Faith ministers and supporters, admin	Direct contact, via local churches and HACRO
Counsellors	10	Professional counsellors	Direct contact, professional counselling contacts and HACRO
Reducing Re-offending Unit	3	Administration, courses, workshop	Direct contact and HACRO
Official Prison Visitors	2	Visiting prisoners	Direct contact and HACRO
Visitor's centre	13	Tea bar rota, mini bus driver	Direct contact and HACRO plus via Community Action Dacorum (drivers only)
Play area in visits hall	15	Play area supervisors	Direct contact and HACRO
Blast Foundation	20	Tutor and mentors	Blast only
Library	4	Storybook Dads	Direct contact and HACRO
Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)	1	Delivering AA programme	AA only
Samaritans	8	Support and training for prisoners	Samaritans only

Education	10	Classroom assistants, business mentors, administration	Direct contact and HACRO
RAPt	1	Administration	RAPt only
IMB	9	Independent Monitoring Board	IMB only
Visits hall coffee bar	1	Barista training	Direct contact and HACRO
Workshops	1	Skills training support	Direct contact and HACRO
Total	129		

Most organisations working within The Mount manage their own volunteer recruitment. Some use HACRO's Step Inside programme to recruit.

The partnership between HACRO and the prison has resulted in far more local volunteers than would otherwise be possible.

HACRO's Step Inside programme

HACRO has been supplying volunteers to HMP The Mount since 1996. Since the start of a formal agreement in 2002, HACRO refers an average of 15 volunteers a year. By July 2015 there were 41 HACRO volunteers involved in several areas at the prison.

HACRO's main duties under the Service Level Agreement for the Step Inside programme are:

- to advertise for volunteers via local volunteer centres and other relevant organisations, and to do outreach work with local community groups
- to interview prospective volunteers to assess their suitability for volunteering in a prison environment
- to brief the applicant during the assessment interview on the expectations of their role, and the challenges that can be involved
- to forward a volunteer interview report to the Business and Community Engagement Manager and recommend whether recruitment should proceed
- to keep records of all volunteers referred to HMP The Mount
- to report to the prison on activities under the SLA annually.

Interviews with prospective volunteers are carried out by one of three Step Inside Interviewers, who are HACRO members with considerable experience of the Criminal Justice System, knowledge of the prison environment and of HMP The Mount. This system enables the prison to extend its reach in the local community and to advertise volunteer roles more widely than it otherwise could. It also means that the prison can be assured that volunteers are interviewed and screened to ensure that they are suitable before they take up a role in the prison.

Although most volunteer referrals come through HACRO, some volunteers approach the prison directly. Those who do are referred back to HACRO for screening, unless they are already known to a member of staff at the prison.¹

Step Inside volunteer recruitment procedure

Under the Step Inside programme HACRO provides a screening and initial interview service for a number of roles within the prison, as described in Stages 1 to 7 below.

Stage	Description	Notes
1	Initial enquiry to HACRO from volunteer or via a local volunteer centre	
2	Initial response by HACRO to the volunteer	
3	HACRO checks basic information, provides information regarding essential criteria, answers any questions, and sends information pack to the volunteer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location and whether they have access to their own transport • whether they need travel expenses • reason for wanting to volunteer and the particular role(s) they are interested in • their professional and other background • whether they have any necessary experience / qualifications identified for that role.
4	Volunteer completes application form	
5	HACRO reviews the application, arranges an interview and discusses any concerns or missing information	<p>Concerns might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • unsuitable offending history • distance from the prison/transport issues • experience/qualifications • unrealistic expectations regarding roles.
6	Step Inside personnel (who are volunteers) interview the applicant, usually at the volunteer's home. Interviewer will decide at the interview whether they will be recommending the volunteer to the prison	<p>Interview is to find out about the volunteer and their motivation, but also to outline some specific aspects of volunteering in prison and what this involves</p> <p>Volunteers who are not happy with the outcome are referred back to HACRO office</p>
7	Interviewer emails report on the interview to the Business and Community Engagement Manager at the prison, with copy to the HACRO office	HACRO office maintains records of volunteer numbers, both those who are not accepted and those who are. This can be shared annually with The Mount and relevant volunteer centres

¹ If the volunteer is personally known by a member of staff then the view taken is that the additional expense and time involved in the Step Inside process is not needed. Members of staff at the prison have some knowledge of the work that is carried out by volunteers, and are sufficiently informed to be able to make a judgement on whether an individual known to them would be suitable.

Stage	Description	Notes
8	The Business and Community Engagement Manager interviews the volunteer at the prison. The volunteer provides completed vetting forms and supporting documents. The vetting process starts	Volunteers who are known to existing staff members, or have made an enquiry direct to the prison, enter the recruitment process at this point For volunteers recruited by HACRO the interview report from HACRO forms the basis of this meeting

Security vetting

Like employees, every volunteer must go through National Offender Management Service (NOMS) security vetting. Security vetting is a series of checks that ascertains the suitability of individuals to carry out work within NOMS.

Information gathered includes employment/education history and addresses. Any failure to disclose information can result in the applicant failing the vetting process.

Security vetting is often the aspect of a volunteer's recruitment that causes the most problems (as described under '**Barriers to Volunteering**' below).

Volunteer induction and training

Once volunteers recruited through Step Inside have been screened by HACRO and selected by the prison to take up a role, the prison supplies all volunteer training. The following mandatory training must be completed before any volunteer can take up their role:

- security training
- health and safety
- personal safety training
- key training is given to volunteers who will draw keys²
- Safer Custody training.

After completing mandatory training, volunteers are asked to sign a volunteer compact outlining their responsibilities. All volunteers are issued with an ID card, with a green lanyard to denote their volunteer status; prison staff have blue lanyards. The coloured lanyards enable staff and prisoners to easily identify volunteers.

² About half of the volunteers who work within the prison are given keys. Some roles require the volunteer to move freely around the prison. In other cases, keys are issued so that volunteers can get to their area of work without being escorted by staff, which is helpful where there is a limited staff resource.

The Mount also offers volunteers an optional training programme. Efforts are made to hold this training at different times each time it is run, to facilitate access by volunteers who have other commitments. The training includes:

- sentencing and release procedures
- a day in the life of a prisoner
- Home Office Immigration Enforcement – Immigration at The Mount
- resettlement support services.

These optional sessions help volunteers to better understand the life of the prison and support them to answer any questions prisoners may ask. Sessions also help them to appreciate any anxieties prisoners may have and how to access support for them.

Volunteers can also attend staff training.

Volunteers will also receive induction training within the departments that they support so that they can develop their skills and knowledge and work effectively within their team.

Diversity and equality

The Mount does not monitor volunteers for equality. Although the volunteers are diverse, minority ethnic groups are not represented in large numbers. Most volunteers are drawn from two main groups: retired women and women who are at home with children at school.

Recently, increasing numbers of volunteers have been interested in the potential of volunteering to develop their career. They see a volunteering as work experience and a step on their CV. These volunteers are often skilled and have high levels of awareness of the Criminal Justice System. However, there are a limited number of roles for volunteers wanting prisoner-facing work. In addition, they can find it difficult to complete the minimum commitment of 12 months that HACRO and the prison ask for.

Recognising volunteers' contribution

We recognise that showing we value our volunteers, and encouraging a healthy team spirit, is vital to maintaining their continued support.

The annual carol service and the HACRO-organised Christmas lunch for its volunteers, are both valuable 'thank you' events.

The Mount has recognised individual volunteers who go above and beyond in the support they provide to prisoners by putting them forward for a Butler Trust Award. The prison has also nominated volunteers to attend the Queen's garden party at Buckingham Palace and via HACRO,

volunteers receive the annual invitation from the local MP for the Queen's Christmas celebration at the House of Commons.

For some volunteers who are interested in gaining experience for career reasons, the prospect of continuing into paid employment in the Criminal Justice System is also a powerful motivator. Many volunteers have gone on to apply for a permanent paid role within the prison, for example becoming Programme Facilitators or gaining employment in education.

Communication with volunteers

It is important to communicate clearly with volunteers and keep them informed. Volunteers should be kept up to date by prison staff about any changes affecting them. The prison does this by encouraging volunteers to attend department meetings, full staff meetings and monthly Governor's coffee mornings. Volunteers are also invited to departmental meetings, wellbeing days and one off events such as visiting author presentations in the library.

The prison produces a quarterly volunteer newsletter with updates and information from different areas within the prison, circulated via the volunteer contact list, which is updated yearly and includes information on individual volunteer's skills.

Both HACRO and the Mount have found that, while volunteers are happy to perform their regular role, many have other commitments that prevent them getting involved in additional meetings and training.

It is important to have ways of gathering feedback and ideas from volunteers who do not attend events and meetings. An annual volunteer survey is sent out covering:

- training – feedback on mandatory and optional training
- level of communication by the prison
- safety
- support
- enjoyment
- areas for improvement.

The results are compiled and a report made available to volunteers. This has been a useful means to collect information and has informed changes made to the optional volunteer training.

HACRO also invites volunteers to its AGM/conference and keeps in touch via a newsletter.

Ongoing support and supervision

Before they start, new volunteers are introduced to the managers of the area that they will be supporting. They are provided with an information pack that supports the training that they have already completed and provides further information specific to The Mount, including general prison policies. Volunteers wish to know who the manager is in the area that they are working and feel able to approach them if they have any issues. This is seen as a key factor in successful volunteering.

The prison's Business and Community Engagement Manager and Volunteer Coordinator retain overall responsibility for volunteering within the prison.

Handling any issues in an effective and timely fashion is essential to the success of volunteering in the prison. There needs to be clear and open dialogue between the prison management and the volunteer when a problem arises. Prison staff also need to understand that a volunteer's role is different to that of a staff member and that, in spite of their training, they are unlikely to have as much awareness of the prison environment. The volunteer must be given the opportunity to explain themselves when a situation arises and, where at all possible, to be allowed to continue volunteering following further relevant training and a period of non-activity and (if necessary) allocation to a different role.

The ability to resolve volunteer issues in a sensitive fashion is well illustrated by the following example. A very dedicated Official Prison Visitor was accused by staff in the Visits Area of holding hands with the prisoner she was visiting and also of receiving a Get Well card from the prisoner for her mother who was unwell. The volunteer's explanation was that the prisoner had talked so softly, and the Visits Hall was so noisy, that she had to lean close to hear him. She belatedly realised that she had gone against prison rules in accepting and taking the card with her. It was clear that the relationship had become too personal and that action was needed. However, the volunteer was devastated when she received a letter terminating her role, as it came from The Mount without any consultation or warning. Despite intervention from HACRO, the prison remained committed to its action and an excellent volunteer was lost.

The introduction of the Business and Community Engagement Manager role should now mean that a situation like this would be handled differently. The role is key to supervising volunteers. Having someone within the prison, who is familiar both with them and their roles and able to speak with staff on their behalf, is invaluable in addressing any issues.

Since the creation of the Step Inside programme, a number of barriers to volunteering have been identified. These are described below, along with steps that we have taken to lessen their impact.

Delays in recruitment caused by the need for a screening process

It is not a quick or easy process to become a volunteer at The Mount or any prison. The process is required to protect the safety of volunteers, staff, prisoners and visitors and can take up to six months. It is important to set volunteers' expectations from the start and we advise new applicants to expect that things will take at least three months from start to finish. We stress that this depends on their prompt response to the vetting process, as well as their availability for the prison interview and mandatory training.

The dropout rate from first enquiry to eventual interview and referral to the prison is significant. In each of the last 4 years, HACRO's experience has been a maximum referral rate of 25% with a similar fall out rate following referral. A number of people make initial enquiries with HACRO while also applying for roles with other organisations. Volunteers will email several charities at the same time, have a wide range of potential areas of interest and want a quick route into volunteering. The length and complexity of recruitment for custodial volunteering does not lend itself to this type of volunteer. HACRO can lose good candidates to other local volunteer schemes working in the community. Dropout can also be caused by the volunteer's circumstances changing, a change of heart, or frustration over the time lag between referral and eventual volunteering.

Recent improvements in administration and follow-up by The Mount, particularly with the introduction of the Volunteer Coordinator, means applicants are processed more quickly and increased the successful outcome of referrals once they have applied and attended the HACRO interview.

Restrictions on volunteer eligibility

Experienced volunteers cannot be recruited from certain roles in the community, e.g. magistrates. HACRO has a close relationship with the local magistracy (4 of HACRO's trustees are Justice of the peace) and has declined some volunteers because of their work role.

Until very recently there was also a restriction preventing volunteers from working in roles outside and inside the prison wall. For example, this prevented some volunteers working in the Visitor Centre Tea Bar from volunteering within the prison because they wanted to continue in their role in the Visitor Centre. The rule has recently been lifted and now one of our regular education volunteers is also working once a week in the Tea Bar.

Communications and maintaining relationships

Communication and maintaining a relationship with volunteers once they are working within the prison can be a challenge. It is not uncommon for a volunteer to leave without informing HACRO or the volunteer coordinator at The Mount. This means we miss the opportunity to resolve any prison-based issues that may allow a volunteer to carry on their role. Equally, we don't always know if a volunteer leaves due to a change in their personal circumstances rather than any issues within the prison.

The HACRO office is staffed by a part-time worker and it is not always possible to reply to volunteers' enquiries immediately.

Volunteers also need to be aware that, there may be occasions they turn up and are not able to carry out their volunteering role, for example if the prison is closed due to a lockdown or the prisoner they are working with is not available. It is important to manage volunteers' expectations and let them know that this can happen from time to time, but it also underlines the importance of good communication.

In our experience, volunteers who are patient and accept fallow periods are the ones most likely to stay the whole course of the recruitment, security checking and training process. Those who expect a quick response can often become frustrated by the slow workings of the prison environment. This situation has become easier for some roles since the recruitment of the Volunteer Coordinator at the prison and HACRO's Tea Bar Supervisor in the Visitor Centre.

Volunteer expectations and role matching

Many volunteers are only interested in direct prisoner-facing work and as a result, it can be difficult to find volunteers for the Visitors Centre Tea Bar, compounded by its early opening hours. HACRO has also found that volunteers who are happy to work in the Visitor Centre (which is outside the prison walls) do not wish to go through the full process of gaining security clearance and being trained by the prison to volunteer within the walls. We compete with much less demanding volunteer environments and so miss out on a valuable pool of volunteers.

Suitable roles cannot always be found for the volunteers. Some volunteers go through the training and vetting process knowing which role they are to be offered, but then decide that they would like a more hands-on role with face-to-face contact with prisoners. We cannot accommodate this and would need to question the motives behind the change of mind. Other volunteers show an interest but then drop out as the roles aren't as expected, this usually happens prior to vetting.

Unfortunately, any dropouts after the interview process do still result in a cost to the prison.

Reducing the amount of mandatory training for Tea Bar volunteers has made these roles more accessible, though they are still expected to attend three sessions of training.

Location and volunteer transport to the prison

The Mount's location is a factor, as volunteers need their own transport. The local bus service is hourly and is poorly aligned with the prison core day and there is limited funding for volunteer travel expenses. Other than the SLA fee of £35 per volunteer interview, HACRO receives no direct funding for the Step Inside programme or to support volunteers recruited to The Mount. Prison rules do not oblige Governors to pay volunteer expenses. We are fortunate that few volunteers claim expenses. The income from the Tea Bar covers those volunteers and HACRO has to pay other expenses out of its general unrestricted fund. We make a small provision each year to fund travel expenses as this can affect whether a volunteer's application proceeds. The local volunteer centres have an expectation about organisations covering volunteer expenses and one volunteer centre now refuses to refer to HACRO as a result of the issue with expenses payments.

Distance from the prison can be an issue. We can negotiate a reduced rate of expenses paid for volunteers who are more distant but have on occasion had to turn away volunteers who would not be able to meet substantial travel costs from more distant locations.

Difficulties with security vetting

The vetting process is not user-friendly and volunteers encounter a number of difficulties:

- the vetting form is long and asks for a lot of historic information, which volunteers may not have to hand
- some volunteers lack the IT skills or hardware necessary to complete the form electronically.

Several volunteers have pulled out because of these barriers.

We have supported some volunteers through the vetting process by arranging for a member of staff to go through the form with them in the prison. This has proved effective and we are now developing

this process further. We may create a volunteer role focussed on supporting individuals through the application process.

The Mount has created a condensed version of the guidance documents issued with the forms so that volunteers have a clear and easily-understood list of what information and documents they must bring with them to their vetting appointment. It has proved helpful to arrange vetting appointments on the same day as the volunteer's interview at the prison thus reducing the number of visits a volunteer has to make to the prison. This change has been very positively received.

Difficulties caused by the scheduling of volunteer training

The prison currently provides mandatory volunteer training on a Wednesday morning only, with a restricted regime operating in the prison to accommodate this. Some applicants cannot make a Wednesday morning to attend the training, which in some cases means that they cannot proceed.

The Mount has occasionally been able to facilitate mandatory training sessions on a Saturday, but only when a sufficient number of volunteers are being recruited to make arranging the training worthwhile.

The changing face of our volunteer base

Historically we have drawn our volunteers from mainly retired people and housewives. In both groups, their time can be limited due to childcare commitments. Increasingly, older people have more active lives and outside interests and often take long holidays. We also compete with other charities for the same volunteers, with many offering more flexibility and a smoother and faster induction to their volunteering opportunities.

Future developments – the need for a volunteering strategy

It has been recognised by the Business and Community Engagement Manager at The Mount that an overarching local volunteer strategy should be put in place, with a view to improving the volunteer experience and reducing delays with the recruitment process. Although much work is being done to support the prison's volunteers, it has not been formalised as a policy or strategy. A strategy will give the programme structure and ensure continuous review and improvement.

Our further ideas for encouraging effective volunteering schemes in prisons are:

- **Prison** – It would be useful for prisons to have more opportunities to share best practice in volunteering.

- **Other partners** – It is important to ensure that outside organisations' volunteers are included in prison communications and don't become isolated. A good relationship with prison staff needs to be established and retained, remembering that prison rules, regime and safety are paramount and must be considered at all times.
- **Government** – It would be useful for funding to be available to support effective volunteering programmes in prisons. This money could be used to support volunteer travel expenses and provide flexibility and refreshments for volunteer events.

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