

## HMP/YOI PARC

A case study of volunteer involvement in a project to support prisoners' families

June 2016



**Valuing  
volunteers  
in prison**

HMP/YOI Parc is a Category B local prison in South Wales. This case study will be especially interesting to readers who wish to:

- ensure that different departments within a prison work together to support volunteering
- integrate volunteers closely with the role of staff
- understand how prisons can develop infrastructure locally and further afield to support volunteer recruitment.

## Volunteer roles within Parc Supporting Families

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Parc Supporting Families (PSF) is a dedicated team of staff and community-based workers employed by the prison, who are committed to maintaining and developing relationships with both family and the community. We aim to provide support, encouragement and guidance to re-integrate prisoners and also encourage them to be effective parents.

The Parc Supporting Families (PSF) volunteer team are integral to the successes achieved in the Family Interventions Department at HMP/YOI Parc. They hold a diverse variety of roles which have evolved and will continue to develop with the introduction of innovative projects and initiatives. These roles and activities include:

**Play Area Volunteers** assist in the delivery of play services at Parc within the main visits hall. Through engagement with the children and families volunteers are able to provide support at the grassroots, creating a welcoming atmosphere in an environment that can often be extremely frightening for children. The volunteers are on hand throughout the visit to provide information, advice and support to parents/guardians of children with a loved one in prison.

**Helpdesk Volunteers** assist on a telephone helpdesk providing information, advice and guidance for families and friends of prisoners at HMP/YOI Parc. These calls are extremely varied and can range from checking arrangements for booked family visits to concern about the welfare of loved ones. The helpline is also the first point of contact for Social Services regarding contact between prisoners and their children who may be in Local Authority care, and the volunteers assist in the arrangement of Social Service contact visits. The professional visits might involve arranging official supervised contact between a prisoner and his child(ren), monitoring ongoing visiting arrangements or supervising special 'goodbye visits' where the child is in the process of being taken into care, as well as ad hoc statutory services.

Volunteers help in the delivery of our **specialised visits** including our Learning Together Club where children attend to complete their homework with an imprisoned dad, ensuring the father still feels part of the educational development of his child. Volunteers also support our Family Centred Visits where we offer a variety of activities for children and families to engage in such as face painting, cake decorating, gardening and badge making.



Volunteers also assist our staff to make our **Family Intervention Programmes** a success. This volunteer activity tends to be quite diverse, ranging from assisting in the logistical and physical preparation of family group work to actual trained delivery of family interventions. There are a number of programmes within this area that volunteers are involved in, including:

- Scouts - supporting the Scouts Wales trainer to deliver various activities.
- Parenting for Dads - delivering sessional support work alongside the facilitator.
- Safe Ground Family Man and Fathers Inside - acting as a supporter by writing four motivational letters and meeting one-to-one to assist in the completion of a Family Action Plan where the prisoner sets goals to help reduce re-offending on release.
- M-PACT – offering general support, especially emotional support, to the M-PACT intervention, as well as providing transport to and from intervention where required.
- Language and Play and Number and Play - supporting these child-centred activities, and encouraging the parents to engage positively with each other and their children, as well as assisting with the preparation before the session.

## Who do our volunteers support?

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Our volunteers have come from all sorts of backgrounds over the years, but generally speaking they fall into two camps:

- students wanting to gain experience relevant to their studies
- retired people who want to give something back to those in the community less fortunate than themselves.

The volunteers support the children and families of prisoners resident at HMP/YOI Parc, as well as their wider support network. Support is also provided to prisoners relating to the family difficulties they may have as a result of being separated from their loved ones. This support comes in a variety of forms: from emotional support, such as walking someone through the searching procedures if they are anxious, to providing practical information.

We provide positive opportunities for both families and prisoners to provide feedback through evaluation forms, face to face engagement and comments and suggestion books. This helps to ensure that the initiatives in place deliver the best service possible.

## Volunteer recruitment

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Presently we have 20 active volunteers, with another 60 at various stages of the recruitment process. Our recruitment process is well-developed and includes a number of stages.

The first stage is to advertise for volunteers. This is done in a number of ways, including local radio, local colleges and universities, local volunteer bureaus, and local community groups such as the Mothers Union. These adverts provide clear role descriptions of the opportunities available to volunteers.

We then invite our prospective volunteers to an information session where we provide further details about volunteer roles, the recruitment process and our expectations of volunteers. As well as providing information, these sessions give us a chance to see how prospective volunteers engage in a group setting. It is also important to find out what expectations volunteers themselves may have. Over the years, a number of volunteers have come to us looking for a career within prisons, and indeed some of our volunteers have gone on to gain employment both within our department and other departments. However, it is important at this stage to set expectations, and we have to emphasise that we cannot guarantee volunteering with us will lead to employment.

After the information sessions those interested in continuing complete an application form, giving us more information about their skills, values and motivations. These are further explored in an informal interview, which provides the opportunity to get to know the individual on a one-to-one level and means we can match the skills and interests of the volunteers to suitable roles.

At this stage, we put volunteers forward for a DBS disclosure and security vetting. These are conducted by our Human Resources department, as volunteers are cleared to the same level as staff members. This stage of the process is the most difficult in terms of the amount of information volunteers need to provide and the length of the forms, and we do see some volunteer drop-out at this stage of the process. However, having one designated person dealing with these clearances in HR has been an efficient and successful approach to minimising this. Volunteers are able to contact the designated individual if they have any questions or need assistance with the completion of these forms.

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## Volunteer training

Our initial Parc Supporting Families training, delivered by departmental staff, covers many elements for the volunteer roles such as confidentiality and boundaries, child protection, self-harm and suicide awareness, and communication and listening skills. This training is compulsory for all volunteers to complete before they start their volunteering. Training is organised four times a year and it is very important to give the date of the next planned sessions at an early stage of recruitment (usually at the information session) so that volunteers can put the date in their diary.

In addition, prison awareness training is delivered by our training department and covers subjects such as security awareness, diversity awareness, and personal protection. This encompasses everything that the volunteers require for their position and mirrors the training that new staff members complete.

Finally, volunteers receive a formal induction so that they can complete paperwork such as a Volunteer Agreement. They also receive a tour of the prison.

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## Ongoing volunteer supervision

Volunteers are supported throughout their volunteering experience and offered regular supervision sessions to ensure their experience is a positive one. This is managed by the Family Interventions Coordinator, who is responsible for the volunteer programme at Parc. Volunteers are supported by staff members who work alongside them on a daily basis, and more formally during one-to-one supervision meetings throughout the year.

We also organise quarterly volunteer meetings with a clear agenda, ensuring volunteers are aware of anything within the prison environment that affects them or the people they are supporting. Additionally, these meetings provide volunteers with a chance to meet other volunteers and give them an opportunity to voice any issues or concerns they might have, as well as putting forward any ideas for the department. All volunteers are invited to attend these meetings, as are the staff they work with and the department's management team. Additionally, we invite outside partner organisations such as Barnardo's to talk about the support services they provide within the criminal justice field. This gives volunteers the opportunity to access any ongoing training needs they may have. The agenda often mirrors topics discussed in staff meetings, as well as new opportunities available to volunteers such as upcoming programmes.

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## Partnerships with educational institutions

In addition to our generic recruitment strategy, we have also created links with the following organisations, allowing us to recruit volunteers on student placements:

- Atlantic College – students complete an International Baccalaureate and as part of this qualification they complete a variety of different services within their community. As part of their social service they can volunteer with the PSF team. This group of volunteers are able to provide unique support to foreign national prisoners as they are from all over the world and speak a wide variety of languages. This partnership is now in its sixth year.
- Hanze University – This Dutch university sends students for five month placements with the PSF team and we will shortly start our fourth placement of this kind.

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## Recognising and rewarding volunteers

In order for volunteers to feel committed to their role it is important that they feel empowered in their roles, are recognised for their achievements and feel part of a successful team. There are a number of ways we recognise the importance of our volunteers.

- Volunteer meetings – at the quarterly volunteer meetings (see '**Ongoing volunteer supervision**' above) we also give length of service awards to our volunteers.
- Creating a team that appreciates volunteers – in order for volunteers to feel welcome and valued it is important that the staff who are working directly with the volunteers have a clear understanding of their roles and how they benefit from the volunteers' work. We also

have a designated person, the Family Interventions Co-ordinator, who volunteers can go to if any issues should arise.

- Awards – We nominate volunteers for local and national volunteering awards, and over the past 8 years the volunteers have been awarded a variety of awards including:
  - WCVA Volunteer of the Year Award – Highly Commended – PSF volunteer team
  - High Sheriff of West Glamorgan – in recognition of great and valuable services to the community
  - HMP/YOI Parc Award – PSF volunteer team
  - WCVA Under 25 Volunteer awards
  - WCVA Over 25 Volunteer awards.



## The benefits of involving volunteers

Involving volunteers in the Parc Supporting Families team provides benefits for the volunteers, staff and the people we support. Volunteers as a group are diverse and bring a wealth of experience and knowledge. Their involvement helps enhance our services, increases the flexibility of the department, supports staff to provide more services and brings new perspectives to the team.

## Barriers faced in establishing volunteering at Parc

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In order to have a successful volunteer team, the department has had to invest a great deal of time and effort into creating a strategic approach to coordinating and managing volunteers. This has developed dramatically over the last eight years. It is important to have a strategy for the coordination and management of volunteers. There were a number of challenges in the early days such as the concerns of staff that volunteers would replace their positions. We also had to work with other departments including Human Resources and Training to remove barriers to volunteering.

The initial reason for involving volunteers was to help the Parc Supporting Families team develop using a wealth of knowledge and skills present within our community. Additionally, support provided by volunteers would give staff more time to develop programmes and interventions. However, there were a number of challenges in the early days of the volunteer programme's development. The first of these was engaging with the community and breaking down the fears and myths of being in a prison environment. In the early days we also had to address the concerns of staff who were apprehensive about the involvement of volunteers and the security of their own jobs. However, by engaging with staff and explaining the benefits for them, the department and the children and families, the staff felt more comfortable with this development. Volunteers are now an integral part of PSF.

Another challenge faced was creating positive cross-departmental relationships with departments such as Human Resources and Training Departments, who we relied on in order to make the volunteer programme a successful one. In the early days, other departments were less flexible and required volunteers to integrate into the arrangements they already had in place. However, by forging positive relationships with these departments and through them gaining an understanding of the benefit of involving volunteers for the prison as a whole, these departments have become more flexible in accommodating the needs of volunteers. It was necessary to spend time with the individuals concerned in order to make the volunteering project a success, and to discuss the benefits of engaging and working alongside volunteers. There is now a clear strategy for recruitment, selection, monitoring and development.

We have also found that it was necessary to have staff capacity to recruit, train, motivate and retain volunteers, which is not always an easy task. Over the years we have had many volunteers who have been extremely reliable and committed. However, we have also invested time and effort in others who have completed very little volunteering, perhaps because of a change in their circumstances (new job, change in family commitments) or sometimes simply because of a lack

of commitment. We have found it important to make clear what we ask of volunteers and to communicate honestly about what is involved. For example, we hold the information sessions mentioned above.

Another more positive difficulty we have faced in terms of retaining volunteers is the success rate we have with our volunteers gaining employment within the prison, both in our department and others. In the past year alone we have seen 8 volunteers successfully gaining paid employment within the prison.

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## Conclusion

Ultimately, the biggest challenge for establishing volunteers in a custodial setting is one of cultural shift. It can take time and tenacity to get individuals, then groups of staff at all levels, and finally the prison as a whole to accept that volunteers are a rich asset to be embraced, who can bring betterment to the prison setting in terms of their expertise, dedication, enthusiasm and ambition. Once this tipping point is reached, the prison has to work hard to maintain that balance; if the prison becomes complacent that the cultural shift is 'sorted', in time the old suspicions and resistance will inevitably creep back in. So maintaining the reputation, credibility, and usefulness of volunteers requires a constant and steady hand.

Over the past 8 years we have made dramatic changes in the recruitment, training and support of volunteers. We have had the opportunity to work alongside many inspirational volunteers, and we still have a few volunteers that joined the project at the very beginning who continue to remain passionate about their role. The volunteers are inspirational and highly valued by the people they support, as well as the staff they work alongside.

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