

HMP WHATTON & SAFER LIVING FOUNDATION

A case study of volunteer involvement in a Category C prison

June 2016



**Valuing
volunteers
in prison**

Summary

HMP Whatton is a Category C prison holding adult male prisoners who have committed sexual offences. This case study will be especially interesting to readers who wish to:

- understand how a prison can work with local organisations to develop new services
- train volunteers to a high level and integrate their work closely with prison staff
- ensure a 'whole prison' approach to managing and supervising volunteer involvement.

Introduction

HMP Whatton is a Category C prison in Nottinghamshire, with a capacity of 841 adult male prisoners. The prison is exclusively for those convicted of sexual offences. The primary focus is the delivery of Sex Offender Treatment Programmes. Although Whatton is not a designated resettlement prison, approximately 200 prisoners per year are released from the establishment. The majority of these are classed as high risk, and will come under the monitoring of the National Probation Service, with stringent licence conditions.

The Governor and Senior Management Team encourage a positive and supportive ethos. The aim is for prisoners to address their offending behaviour, and to become effective members of society upon release.

"Volunteers based at Whatton are vital to our role in the rehabilitation of people convicted of sexual offences. Prisoners and staff value their dedication, time and commitment; and it is through them that we have been able to continuously improve the services and care we provide both in custody and beyond."

(Lynn Saunders, Governor, HMP Whatton)

This underpins the prison's vision statement, 'Prevent Another Victim'. As part of this culture, volunteers from a range of organisations are welcomed into the prison to support the delivery of its core aims and objectives. Volunteers are not regarded by the prisoners as staff, thereby allowing them to interact on a more informal level. This more informal style of interaction needs to be carefully managed to mitigate any risk of conditioning or manipulation by prisoners. It is vital that all volunteers receive appropriate training and support.

In 2013, a benchmarking exercise took place in all public sector prisons. This standardised the number of staff roles across all public sector prisons, and in most areas, led to a reduction in staff numbers. This exercise did not affect the roles of volunteers at HMP Whatton, as the areas within which the volunteers operate have always been additional to the core business of the prison.

This case study is divided into three main sections. It outlines issues common to all volunteering that takes place at Whatton. It describes, in detail, the involvement of volunteers through the Safer Living Foundation, in work to reduce the risk of serious sexual offending. Finally, it gives brief descriptions of lessons learned from Whatton's partnerships with volunteers from the Shannon Trust, Samaritans, SSAFA and Fine Cell Work, which show how the prison takes a strategic approach to volunteering.

Security and keys

All volunteers go through a security vetting process. This can be complicated and time consuming.

"Prior to starting my role, there was a lot of documentation that I was required to complete. I did not find this straightforward and in parts it was quite involved and help and guidance on how to complete the task would have been of assistance"

(a volunteer at HMP Whatton)

This volunteer suggested that a short session on the security forms required would be helpful during the initial training.

One prospective volunteer found the security clearance process so invasive that she decided not to pursue volunteering any further. In this instance, she was asked to provide a full birth certificate rather than the short version. She found this request *"offensive"* as she was over retirement age and had lived in the UK all her life.

Most volunteers go on to become key-holders with access to the key Traka system.¹ Keys are issued automatically when the fingerprint is used on a print reader pad. This can cause volunteers some apprehension. The experience of giving fingerprints may be daunting to some, whilst others have concerns around data protection.

Drawing keys is a big responsibility, but it enables volunteers to move around the prison without the need for an escort. Freedom of movement around the site supports their integration into the culture of the establishment. A person who is visibly carrying keys is greeted by other staff as an equal, and is supported in their role, as any non-uniformed member of staff would be. If a volunteer is seen by staff to be independent and responsible, then the staff are more likely to see the work that the volunteer is doing as valid and credible.

However, there have been some issues. Despite passing the security training as key holders, two volunteers were deemed to be too much of a risk to continue to hold keys. Other staff reported that

¹ This is an automated biometric key access system whereby a person's fingerprint is taken and logged against certain levels of key access.

the volunteers appeared to be confused and agitated by the keys. They had issues in choosing which one to use, and were unable to deal with the locking and unlocking of gates in a quick and effective manner. This gave nearby prisoners an opportunity to have a good look at the keys, which could have resulted in a security compromise. The Traka access was withdrawn and these volunteers are now escorted to and from the gate to their place of work. This means that they are unable to move around the establishment freely and this has become an extra time consuming responsibility for the staff in that area. It has also led to some resistance to the volunteers and a questioning of their usefulness. These volunteers are not able to complete the tasks that were originally planned for them and their sessions have been reduced.

Contact points

Each group of volunteers is overseen by a designated contact within their particular area. For example, the Safer Custody Officer oversees Samaritans' volunteers; the Shannon Trust volunteers are overseen by the Learning and Skills Manager and the Safer Living Foundation volunteers are overseen by the SLF co-ordinator. This helps to build effective relationships with individuals and develops their understanding of their role within the department that they will be working in.

Volunteer networking

Groups of volunteers are also encouraged to meet and discuss their experiences through organised, informal partnership meetings. Partnership Coffee mornings are a typical example, and are attended by staff from the partnership and volunteer organisations. This enables the volunteers to network with the staff working within the prison to deliver such activities as education, careers advice, healthcare and library. These gatherings also improve their understanding and knowledge regarding the work of the prison and what is on offer to the prisoners.

A recent Proud To Be In Partnership event hosted stalls from various partners such as Milton Keynes College and the National Careers Service, along with volunteer organisations such as the Shannon Trust, the Samaritans and the Safer Living Foundation. This enabled both staff and prisoners to access information and talk to the people involved. This was the first event of this kind. The feedback was very positive from staff, prisoners and the organisations themselves. The opportunity for networking resulted in The Shannon Trust volunteer making contact with the Penfriends Society. In future they will link up to put new readers in contact with the penfriend service. More of these events are planned for the future.

In 2007, collaboration started between HMP Whatton and the Sexual Offences, Crime and Misconduct Research Unit (SOCAMRU) at Nottingham Trent University (NTU). This long-standing relationship is focussed on addressing the societal problem of sexual crime. In 2014, the two organisations developed a new initiative, the Safer Living Foundation (SLF). Initiated by the Governor of HMP Whatton, who was concerned about gaps in the through the gate care for prisoners on release, the SLF was set up as the first ever prison-based Circles of Support and Accountability project (CoSA). To the best of our knowledge, the SLF is the first of its kind worldwide; a charity formed as a joint venture between senior prison staff and academics.

The vision of Whatton and SOCAMRU was to create a vehicle, the SLF charity, which could attract charitable funding. In addition, it would utilise university academic knowledge and expertise, together with the prison's practical knowledge of prison management and the prison psychologists. The intention was to conduct projects that would reduce sexual reoffending and prevent further victims of sexual crime.

The Safer Living Foundation runs Circles of Support and Accountability, which is part of the national Circles framework. Using the Circles UK model, each area runs their Circle in slightly different ways. Volunteers from the Safer Living Foundation support ex-sex-offenders who are preparing for release. These ex-offenders must be released to Nottinghamshire or Derbyshire in order for us to be able to place them in a Circle. This support can start after release, or within the prison prior to release. This is the only UK based Circles project that offers this.

Volunteers working for the SLF also collaborate with the offender management structure, including liaising with Probation services, Offender Managers, the Police, MAPPA, MOSOVO, mental health and housing charities.

The role of the SLF Coordinator

The SLF employs a coordinator. Their role includes the recruitment, training and management of the volunteers, and the running of up to 8 Circles at any one time. Regular reviews are held with the Circles volunteers to make sure that they are coping, and any help or advice needed is offered. The coordinator also assesses referrals to the SLF from ex-offenders who wish to go onto a Circle, both whilst in prison or after release. The coordinator will assign volunteers to a Circle, making sure to take into account any of the volunteer's preferences for type of offence, location and time of meetings, as well as regularly leading Circles themselves. They always lead the first six Circles meetings of every group. The coordinator updates and maintains all records and databases, and

liaises with internal and external agencies to ascertain risk and suitability of ex-offenders for a Circle.

The composition of a Circle

The core member

The core member is the ex-offender who has been, or who will be, released into Nottinghamshire or Derbyshire. He will be at high, or very high, risk of sexually re-offending and will have very little, or more commonly no, support from others apart from professional agencies. Whatton also specialises in working in the prison with older clients and those with an Intellectual Disability (ID).

Volunteers

Volunteers are central to the Circles programme. A group of volunteers is recruited to work with the core member, who they meet regularly. Volunteers receive training and liaise with relevant criminal justice agencies, but their primary role is to ensure that core members are supported and held accountable. They ensure that any risky behaviours or attitudes disclosed in meetings are reported and dealt with.

Volunteer recruitment

There are currently 50 trained volunteers working with the SLF, with numbers due to expand as more recruitment and training cycles are planned.

Whatton and SLF aim to recruit volunteers from a wide selection of different ages and backgrounds. A lot of applications are received from criminal or forensic psychology students, making up probably 50% of the applications. Students volunteer to get experience of working with ex-offenders, or because they are interested in the rehabilitation process. Typically, applications are also received from retired ministers, probation workers and mature students who are working in the areas of social care.

SLF advertise for volunteers on their website and at college campus recruitment days. They also receive a lot of word of mouth enquiries, as existing volunteers are enthusiastic advocates for the work they do.

Once interest has been registered, potential volunteers receive an application form; this is the first line of vetting. SLF have, on occasion, asked some younger candidates to reapply in a year. The management team and the coordinators acknowledge that a certain amount of life experience is necessary for the position of a Circles volunteer. Volunteers need to be able to draw on their own

knowledge and life experiences in order to support core members who may experience issues with reintegration after years of prison life.

Candidates are invited for interview at HMP Whatton. This is conducted by one of the two Circles coordinators and takes the form of a semi-structured interview. The candidates are asked about

- their views and opinions of people who have committed a sexual offence
- their relevant experience
- what they feel they will bring to a Circle
- what they think they will get out of a Circle.

SLF are also interested in how potential volunteers feel about media portrayal of people who have committed a sexual offence, and whether they think people can change.

An open-minded attitude, based on assessment of someone rather than judgment of him, is essential. Any volunteer harbouring negative or hostile views towards ex-sex offenders would not be able to work empathically or therapeutically with them.

Volunteers are asked to commit to 18 months of meetings. It is important to have this continuity to enable the core member to get to know and trust his volunteers. Finally, they are asked what support they have, and how they would feel about being supervised by the coordinator. One volunteer commented that

“What particularly draws me to Circles, however, is the joint emphasis on support and accountability. We are dealing here with particularly vulnerable people who have committed serious offences. Volunteers have the time and motivation to offer that support. That said, at the same time, we are dealing with folk who are statistically at the high end risk of repeat offending in situations likely to lead to serious consequences for any potential victim. There is, therefore, the need for a robust system of accountability running alongside the offer of support. That Circles provide this dual role is, for me, the primary motivating factor behind my involvement.”

(a Safer Living Foundation volunteer)

Volunteer training

If, after interview, both sides want to continue the process, the candidate attends three days of training at Whatton. CRB checks take place, something they are made aware of at the very first stages of contact with them. This vetting process is thorough and required for anyone who comes into a prison on more than 3 occasions. Even if a volunteer states a preference for working on community Circles only, they are still vetted so that we have a consistent approach. They may also decide they want to work within the prison on a Circle at a later date. During training, the volunteers are escorted from the gates to the training room by the Coordinator.

Figure 1: A Circles training meeting in the prison



The training at HMP Whatton consists of three consecutive days. Wednesday and Thursday evening sessions of three hours each, and a full day on a Saturday. The training is led by the coordinators and consists of 17 modules. Topics covered include the life cycle of a Circle, the qualities of a good volunteer, personal boundaries and wellbeing, and managing risk in the community.

The training also covers:

- the history of Circles UK and the SLF
- how a Circle works
- what constitutes a sexual offence
- the available treatment programmes
- how to work with an elderly person or someone with an Intellectual Disability
- how to be safe.

Experienced role-players from HMP Whatton's Programmes Department work with the volunteers.² These role players attend the training and portray a typical core member. This enables volunteers to practice working with the client group. The coordinators and role-players give real-time feedback on a volunteer's skills and abilities. The volunteer is able to build their confidence before meeting an ex-offender, either within Whatton or in the community.

SLF endeavour to make the training interesting and interactive. Trainees take part in a lot of role-play and team games to help their understanding. Grooming and conditioning modules are also included. These explain how our client group can be highly manipulative. Training covers

² The Programmes Department delivers several accredited sex offender treatment programmes for medium- to high-risk men who have committed a sexual offence. They also deliver programmes for men with I.D and those who are deaf or hearing impaired.

awareness of the possibility that the core member could play one volunteer off against another. It also alerts them to the risk of becoming conditioned to expect certain behaviours, which could lull them into a false sense of security, to the point where the volunteer gives out private information that may compromise their safety.

Training includes

- sexual offending
- sexual terms and terminology
- the media attitudes towards people who have committed a sexual offence.

Volunteers in a Circle will almost certainly be talking about the core member's explicit sexual thoughts, feeling and behaviours. SLF need to ensure that volunteers will be comfortable doing this. The training is also in the process of being accredited, after which volunteers will be able to include this on a CV.

"I have been impressed with both the training and the systems in place to ensure ongoing support of volunteers together with the necessary processes to provide both support and accountability for the core member on release. It has been good to see the variety of volunteers putting themselves forward for the work including a surprising number of young people – indeed, if there is a lack of balance, it is perhaps a lack of more mature volunteers with a broader experience of life behind them. The training could perhaps usefully include a little more input on the vulnerabilities of many core members and the importance of commitment to the Circle"

(a Safer Living Foundation volunteer)

In addition, SLF provides ongoing training for the volunteers, which can be completed at any time during the year after they have finished their induction. This training comprises two separate training days, held every three months at Whatton, and covers:

- volunteer co-working and working with difficult core members
- working with core members who have personality disorders or suicidal tendencies.

The ongoing progression of the volunteers is very important as it helps to build and develop their skills and confidence.

Volunteer support and supervision

As soon as possible after successful completion of the initial training the volunteers are assigned a Circle. Decisions about which Circle to connect a volunteer with are based on the personality mix, preference for the type of offender they would like to work with, and geographical location so they will be easily able to attend the meetings. Flexibility to accommodate the volunteers preferences is

really important, as it makes them feel valued, and in addition, that they are not being asked to do something that they would find difficult to commit to.

The Coordinator will attend the first meeting in the prison and the first six meetings in the community to help with the structure of the sessions and group cohesion. Regular contact is maintained with the volunteers through review sessions, where discussion takes place about how they are feeling about the group, any concerns they may have or what they would like to see done differently.

Before meeting their Circles core member, the volunteers will meet with their coordinator and perhaps the core member's offender manager and/or probation worker to discuss the core member's areas of risk and concern, offending history and license conditions.

Guidance is given to the volunteers on how to support the core member manage his risks, where the meetings should take place and when, and contact details for all relevant parties. They are also given a risk management sheet specific to the core member with a set of risky behaviours that they may exhibit, graded from green to red. This sheet also contains guidance on who to contact if certain behaviours are seen in the meeting, and the time scales within which the volunteers should take action. Volunteers get to know the core member very well and see the person as a whole and not just someone who has committed the offence, so they need to be confident that they are doing all they can to support them.

This obligation of the volunteers to report specific risky behaviours is something the core member will be fully aware of right from the outset. Everything is transparent in a Circle. The core members know that the volunteers are aware of their offending history and specific risks. The volunteers know that they are required to forward this information on. Most core members will have completed some form of sex offender treatment programme. These programmes emphasise being open, honest and collaborative with each other and the facilitators when talking about offending and risk. If the volunteers feel that they have to report a risky behaviour or have a concern, the core member will understand why they have to do this, as he is held accountable for his own actions. The core member understands that people other than the volunteers will deal with any sanctions that result from the reporting of risky behaviours. This maintains the essential trusting and therapeutic relationship between the core member and volunteers that is so important to a Circle.

The volunteers are also each given a pay-as-you-go mobile phone. This is to enable the core member to have a point of contact with the volunteers at agreed times, but without the volunteer revealing personal contact details. They usually formulate a rota during the week. For example, between 6pm and 7pm they will switch on one of the phones and the core member can contact

them if he is feeling worried, stressed, or even if he's had a good day and wants to tell someone about it.

It has been fed back by many volunteers that the culture of care and support through the SLF at HMP Whatton has been most welcome, and has even led to volunteers feeling able to take on more than one Circle at a time.

Barriers to successful volunteering

Timetabling

The main problem that has been experienced is with organising the volunteers to be in the same place at the same time for interviews and training and the Circles themselves. Logistically, it can be very difficult to accommodate everyone's preferences. It can be challenging to match up people's schedules so that a Circle can run at a regular time. Mindful that we are working with volunteers, we try to be as flexible as possible. Unfortunately, there are occasions when volunteers may have to be reassigned due to insurmountable scheduling difficulties. This is always done collaboratively with the volunteer concerned. The volunteers are flexible and try to help, but it is an ongoing challenge.

Security vetting

The NOMS security vetting checks for each volunteer also present challenges. The NOMS checks are very in-depth, and take quite a while to complete. This can make it hard to recruit volunteers in the first place, and causes some volunteers difficulties.

Volunteer co-working and working with difficult core members

There have been some personality clashes within groups, which volunteers have addressed with the coordinator. The upcoming training about working together on a group should pre-empt any group dynamic issues before they arise.

Summary

The use of volunteers in delivering Circles of Support and Accountability is fundamental. The voluntary nature of the Circle is important to the core members. It underpins the person centred approach of a Circle. Many core members have not experienced someone wanting to help them because they choose to, and not because it's part of their job role. Many core members have had less than happy experiences with professional bodies, and working with volunteers can reassure those who may find it difficult to trust those they see as professionals.

Volunteers also report positive results from working on a Circle. They develop new skills and find the challenge of working in a prison environment rewarding and interesting.

Lessons learned from wider Whatton volunteering: Shannon Trust

In 2013 there was a national agreement between NOMS and the Shannon trust to support the Shannon Trust Reading Plan in all public prisons. This peer to peer scheme is open to any prisoner with a low level of reading ability. Prior to this national agreement, HMP Whatton had been delivering the reading plan through an instructional officer.

The formal agreement states that the volunteer should be overseen by an officer using facility time. It also states that each establishment should have a senior manager responsible for championing the reading plan. At HMP Whatton, the arrangement uses instructional officer time, rather than uniformed officer time. Following a discussion at national meetings and local agreement between the Shannon Trust and the Governor, this has been allowed to continue. This arrangement allows more consistent support and liaison to be available, rather than the volunteer trying to contact an officer who may be on shift work, on nights or leave.

The Shannon Trust prisoner mentor coordinators are based in the Multi Media workshop and one of the workshop instructors is the contact point. He is able to offer practical support in terms of arranging meetings and training sessions for the mentors, and is able to develop an overview of the Shannon Trust prisoner coordinators role in order to support and inform the volunteer.

The Learning and Skills Manager is the appointed champion and ensures that Shannon Trust data is included in senior management reports, and that the Shannon Trust volunteer is included in all relevant information sharing and discussions. The volunteer always advises when he is planning to visit the establishment to make sure his visit can be facilitated by the workshop. He also checks in with the Learning and Skills department so that staff members are aware that he is in the prison and can communicate any relevant issues or information to him.

“From my first day I have found the help and support that I have received invaluable. I know that if I have any questions on how to approach something within my role at the prison, X is always ready to give me the necessary help and advice. X is always forthcoming on any matters of security and will very quickly put me right about them, which I appreciate.”

Shannon Trust volunteer, HMP Whatton

The Shannon Trust appointed the current volunteer, through their own recruitment processes, to coordinate the delivery of the Reading Plan. The volunteer coordinates and trains the prisoner mentors to work with other prisoners to help them to learn to read.

The volunteer attends national Shannon Trust training sessions around the delivery of the Reading Scheme and how to train the mentors. The volunteer and Reading Plan champion are invited to Shannon Trust's quarterly regional meetings. These meetings are an opportunity to discuss and share good practice and encourage and support partnership working. The prison coordinator is also invited by the Shannon Trust to attend training sessions on resources, and Shannon Trust representatives attend regional meetings to discuss Ofsted requirements.

The Whatton volunteer also works at another prison. He reports a very different volunteering experience there, with barriers regarding the drawing of keys, staff support and involvement, and difficulty in accessing the learners.

Figure 2: A Shannon trust peer to peer Reading Plan meeting



Lessons learned from wider Whatton volunteering: the prison Library

Library volunteers also come under the Learning and Skills remit, but this area of volunteering is less structured. The volunteers are not connected to an outside organisation, but instead volunteer directly for the prison, resulting in few expectations of them, or training in place for them. Library volunteers express an interest in volunteering and visit to look around the establishment. They progress through the vetting process and the key training and discuss the role of the volunteer within the Library delivery.

However, they had very specific, and often unrealistic, ideas about what they wished to do. Their reliability varied, both in terms of days and times. Following some issues with keys and gates, the Traka key access was withdrawn. These volunteers now need escorting to and from the gate. Their lack of training means they lack the knowledge and skills to create the proper boundaries with prisoners. This has created additional monitoring work for other staff. All this has impacted negatively on the attitude to volunteers in this part of the prison. The role of these volunteers is currently under review.

In future, it will important to ensure that prospective volunteers, and the staff working in that area, have a very clear understanding of the volunteer's role. This includes an understanding of the limitations of that role in terms of security. It will also be important to have prospective volunteers in for whole sessions, rather than just a short visit. This will make sure that they are able to interact with prisoners at an appropriate level, before going through the whole vetting process.

Lessons learned from other Whatton volunteering: Samaritans

Samaritans volunteers visit the prison to train and support prisoners, who themselves volunteer as listeners within the prison. There are currently three regular Samaritan volunteers, who visit fortnightly, and 36 listeners. The listeners support any prisoner who is feeling low in mood or has anxieties that may lead to self-harm or thoughts of suicide. The listeners provide the face-to-face support for their peers. The Samaritans provide the same de-briefing support to listeners as they do to all their volunteers. The Samaritans volunteers are also here for staff, and they are available following any incident. This role is especially important after a death in custody, as the branches may receive a higher volume of calls from the prisoners and staff.

These volunteers are coordinated through the Safer Custody department and the Samaritan coordinator also attends, and reports in to, the monthly Safer Prisons meeting.

Lessons learned from wider Whatton volunteering: Fine Cell Work

Fine Cell Work volunteers work with groups of prisoners to produce sewn craft work for sale through FCW outlets. These volunteers can feel quite isolated as they visit at weekends when non-uniformed staff are not in the prison and when staff on the wings are busier.

However, the areas where the groups meet have been identified as easily accessible and open to staff and well controlled by passing officer presence. As the groups meet regularly in the same place at the weekend, the uniformed staff are aware of them and can react to any incidents quickly. The prisoners accessing the Fine Cell Work sessions are also thoroughly risk assessed prior to joining

the group to ensure that engagement in the activity is appropriate for them. If the group ran during the week the risk assessment for the prisoners could be lowered, as there would be more staff around to monitor and control.

The FCW volunteers can experience difficulties in addressing and reporting inappropriate behaviour. Recent contact has been made with the volunteers to offer them support through the Learning and Skills Department, but this support can only be offered at a distance due to the weekend working. The FCW volunteers are supported by contact with FCW staff, who are aware of the environment they are working in. They are mature and professional in their dealings with the prisoners, which over the years, has resulted in an attitude of trust, support and cooperation towards them. These volunteers are working people who are unable to visit during the week, so in order to maintain the delivery of FCW the establishment accepts the weekend sessions.

FCW is very important to the self-esteem and the progress of some of the prisoners here. They develop skills through FCW that help them cope and keep themselves occupied after release.

Lessons learned from wider Whatton volunteering: SSAFA and Age UK

One volunteer works for two organisations – SSAFA and the Safer Living Foundation. In his SSAFA work, he is proactive in seeking out ex-forces prisoners who are in need of support, and runs activities for SSAFA within the Older Prisoners Activities and Learning group (OPAL) run by Age UK.

This volunteer is ex-armed forces. He is able to interact with prisoners to support them, but also adept at maintaining an appropriate distance. He is knowledgeable about the issues facing ex-offenders and realistic about their opportunities. He has a serious and responsible attitude and is well respected by both prisoners and staff.

Conclusions

Volunteers make a positive contribution to HMP Whatton. They need to be willing to commit time and effort and, in return, gain valuable experiences from their role.

Various departments like Counselling and Programmes are pro-active in volunteer recruitment, using their excellent relationships with local universities. The volunteering opportunities in these areas of the prison offer students a unique opportunity to enhance their CV and gain experience. Other departments like Learning and Skills and Safer Custody actively engage in partnership working to encourage and support volunteers.

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