

## PACT

A case study of volunteer involvement in work with prisoners' families

June 2016



# Valuing volunteers in prison

## Summary

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Pact is a national charity working with families affected by imprisonment, and uses volunteers in many aspects of its work. This case study will be especially interesting to readers who wish to:

- recruit volunteers who come from diverse backgrounds
- build working relationships with prison staff to support volunteer involvement
- enable progression into new roles by more experienced volunteers.

## Background

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Pact is a national charity working with families affected by imprisonment and is committed to using volunteers in many aspects of its work, valuing the skills that they bring and the added impact they have in supporting service users. Last year, Pact supported 565 volunteers to give 36,743 hours of support to prisoners and families across over 50 projects involving 35 prisons.

Within prisons, volunteers take on a variety of roles in a range of services, from serving in prison visiting area tea bars to co-delivering courses and interventions, supervising visits hall play areas, and working alongside prison-based Family Engagement Workers with their own caseload.



## Volunteers

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Volunteers are recruited for the organisation through a variety of routes, including word of mouth, engagement at events, talks at various groups and courses, and taster sessions or open evenings. Some also respond to advertisements for volunteers online or at their local Council for Voluntary Service or Volunteer Centre. Pact's biggest source of volunteers currently comes from local Volunteer Centres and from website enquiries, including from external websites such as Volunteer Wales. Generally speaking, we find that volunteer motivation falls in to one of three categories:

- those wanting to improve their CV and consequently their job prospects (particularly those wanting a career in the criminal justice field)
- those with a personal reason for wanting to volunteer in this line of work, with some understanding of the issues and a desire to help others
- those who have been directed to volunteer as part of a qualification or by the Jobcentre as part of their benefits criteria.

Currently our cohort of volunteers ranges from retired professionals such as teachers and therapists, through to students, usually studying Criminology. We also have volunteers who are self-employed, parents with school-aged children, and those who work part time looking to give something back in their spare time. We also support a small number of volunteers with additional needs to improve their confidence and access to other opportunities.

## Volunteer recruitment

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Following receipt of an application, volunteers are invited to an informal interview, where they can learn more about the role and have the opportunity to ask questions and get an idea of the working environment. This initial interview allows us to establish their motivations, what skills they feel they could bring to the role and what they wish to gain from the experience. We also assess their availability, flexibility and potential for long-term commitment. Pact's general expectation is that they will volunteer for at least eight hours per month, for a period of six months or more. We establish clear expectations about this from the start to avoid misunderstandings further down the line.

Those who are unsuitable for the role are signposted to further, more suitable opportunities provided by other local organisations. If at initial interview stage both co-ordinator and volunteer are happy to progress, their DBS check and prison vetting will be completed and two references requested.

## Volunteer training and induction

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When all of the required checks have been returned, volunteers complete mandatory training before commencing their role. This differs depending on the role, but will usually involve safeguarding, professional boundaries, personal safety, and other modules related to their volunteering activity (for example, mentoring or play training) and prison-related training such as security briefings.



In most prisons, volunteers receive the same induction training as prison staff. In other cases, a member of prison staff will meet with a group of volunteers specifically to deliver the training. It usually takes some experimentation to achieve the right balance. At HMP Cardiff it was found that the full staff induction day was unnecessary due to the depth in which issues were covered, which led to volunteers becoming bored and uninterested. This resulted in the prison offering to hold specific volunteer sessions tailored to the needs of the role, but there were not consistently enough volunteers ready to organise the training at specific intervals – we tend to work with small groups of volunteers but the prisons require more in order to organise the training. This has now reverted to volunteers joining in with scheduled sessions, however they are now only required to stay for half of the day.

We have found that prison training works best when there is a designated point of contact with whom a relationship has been built so that they are aware of the work being carried out. Prisons are also generally appreciative of our understanding of the importance of prison security, which allows

us to work closely with the mutual aims of safety and positive outcomes for all. The key to building and maintaining these relationships has been working flexibly to fit in with the way that each prison works, hence the diversity of approaches across prison sites. However, it is clear that it is easier to facilitate in the prisons where we have a full-time presence providing services; this means that volunteering is embedded in the prison regime, rather than being a bolt-on activity in an establishment where there is little footprint. While training in prisons where we have a presence has been particularly positive, tensions can arise when volunteers cancel at short notice or do not turn up for sessions, meaning that spaces in demand by other prison personnel are booked out and left unused.

After successfully completing the mandatory training required to undertake their role, volunteers attend a second interview. During this, a volunteer agreement is signed, setting out expectations for both parties, and other required paperwork is completed. The volunteer is assigned a buddy, either an existing member of staff or an experienced volunteer, who becomes their main point of contact for their time at Pact and is responsible for carrying out supervision. This ensures that there is a personal connection between staff and volunteers.

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## Volunteer progression

Once in post, volunteers are supported and offered similar training opportunities to paid staff, as far as is possible. Many Pact services operate a 'graduation' scheme, where volunteers start in some roles and progress to others once they have learned more about the service, become more familiar with the prison environment and displayed the required attitude and skills. This approach developed organically in order to reassure volunteers, staff and prisons that volunteers were being deployed into appropriate roles based on their readiness and understanding of prison and family issues. At HMP Cardiff for example, volunteers are asked to start their journey in the tea bar or play area, services which are vital and essential to the wellbeing of visitors, and a relatively safe environment which allows them to develop a sound understanding of issues faced by families. Pact seeks to develop the skills of volunteers during this time, whilst looking for the required values for effective work deeper within the prison (e.g. casework and one-to-one support on prison wings), such as reliability, passion, and an appreciation of prison security.

Volunteers who display these characteristics and who are keen to progress may then be invited to attend family days, courses or projects where they work alongside staff, assisting with the smooth running of the group and working their way to co-facilitation. In some cases, the volunteer performs so well and proves to be so reliable that they are then gradually given responsibility for the running

of that service, with staff support. This has been the case with HMP Cardiff Baby Group, which is now totally volunteer-led.

Volunteers may then also progress to working alongside prison-based Pact staff and taking on their own caseload of family support clients, closely supported by staff. This has also led on one occasion to a volunteer being successful in gaining paid employment with Pact where a related post was advertised.

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## Volunteer management

Pact is a people-focused organisation with a commitment to participation and continual improvement, and so welcomes feedback from service users, staff and volunteers. We gather this through supervisions, case studies, focus groups and ongoing conversations and informal feedback. In terms of achieving volunteer feedback, Pact has found that this works well when individuals feel like part of the team and are involved in team activities. Allocating volunteers into small teams led by a single point of contact has helped to facilitate a relationship with volunteers which encourages honest feedback. We also invite volunteers to team meetings and social events such as coffee mornings, to encourage them to feel involved in the organisation. This process is constantly under review and requires all staff to be on board and understand the value of the contributions that volunteers make. Pact are currently working on how to hold more regular supervisions, improving communication and finding the best ways to thank volunteers for their contribution.

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## Relations with prison staff

In the main, Pact has found that prison officers have a positive attitude to the use of volunteers, and treat them as they would any other member of Pact staff. This has again been down to relationships built within the prison and appears to be particularly successful where volunteers are friendly, open and confident. Front line prison staff who work with Pact on a day-to-day basis understand that some of the activities provided can only take place due to the support given to the services by volunteers. They also see and hear first-hand about the experiences of prisoners and the positive effects of them undertaking activities such as Storybook Dads and Baby Groups that help them to keep in touch with their families. In general terms, senior staff are more likely to be engaged through positive relationship building rather than awareness of our work, as they are further removed from the effects of our work. However, positive endorsements from operational staff go a long way in promoting these relationships.

As mentioned above, our good relationships with prisons allow us to book volunteers onto routine prison training in most cases. In cases where this is not possible, prison staff have given up their

spare time to deliver an extra training session for volunteers (they are not detailed by the prison to provide this). Our training is most successful where relationships between Pact staff and the prison are strong, where the service is embedded, and where prison staff are aware of the roles and contributions of the volunteers.

There is an understandable reluctance in some prisons to allow volunteers to draw sets of keys. This appears to be limited to volunteers, and does not affect Pact staff. Pact have to work hard to tackle the perception that issuing keys to volunteers is pointless due to high volunteer turnover. The aforementioned graduation scheme is a way of assuring prison staff that volunteers are a dedicated part of the service, and once volunteers' are familiar to prison staff it is easier to make the case for them to be allocated keys. This initial barrier does mean that some volunteers who work within the prison rather than in the visitor centres, such as tea bar and play volunteers, require staff to supervise and escort them. However, as these roles usually take place within the visits area, volunteers can usually arrive with visitors, minimising the time required from both prison and Pact staff. Where volunteers progress to other roles, they are always accompanied by staff. Volunteers who undertake a role requiring keys need to be with Pact for some time, meaning they have a good understanding of requirements for drawing keys and making it easier to make the case to the prison for allocating keys.

There are rarely local written agreements with prisons with regards to accommodating Pact volunteers, however the requirement for volunteer support is written into the contract for Family Engagement Workers, which gives us leverage to encourage prisons to view volunteers positively and value their contribution.

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## Challenges & benefits

Using volunteers to support aspects of prison-based work can be costly in terms of time and resources. Navigating an individual through the application, interview, training, vetting and induction processes requires commitment from staff and a collaborative attitude from prisons.

### **Security vetting**

Vetting is a key area of difficulty, especially for volunteers who don't have a current passport, or certain forms of identification. This especially affects volunteers from other countries. A high level of support is also required for lower levels of IT literacy, those with limited access to the required software, and those with additional literacy needs, to complete vetting forms. This is easier to achieve where there is a dedicated member of staff whose role this clearly falls into, such as a Volunteer Co-ordinator. Despite our best efforts, however, the amount of time and effort required to

complete the vetting process is still a significant factor in volunteer drop-out. It is also essential for us to manage expectations at this point; many volunteers who approach us full of enthusiasm can become disheartened with this process, feeling as though they aren't being offered enough opportunities. This has led us to be increasingly creative in how we utilise the skills and interests of volunteers, for example, involving those from an education background in literacy projects and those with a theatre background in drama projects.

We have minimised the length of time of the vetting process by training Pact staff as NOMS vetting contact points, which allows us to process our own volunteer applications. To rely on the prison to undertake this would be a large ask in terms of time for prison staff and would result in a much more lengthy process for volunteers and the service.

### **Volunteer motivation and retention**

Pact also suffers from issues with volunteer retention, particularly with those for whom volunteering is primarily a means to gain paid employment or pass a course. Pact receive a high number of applications from students, most of which are due to their course requirements. This differs from formal student placement opportunities where there are local agreements with universities to take students from social work courses. Due to our capacity, Pact are selective about which students we take. We look particularly for those with motivations beyond enhancing their CV and for those with a genuine desire to work with our client group and with Pact particularly. Pact have successfully recruited and trained many volunteers from the student population and even though they are only available for certain parts of the year, they have made a valuable contribution to our work. Once they have finished their studies, some volunteers then go on to volunteer with Pact in other parts of the country, expanding their experience and sharing their skills with other teams.

Identifying the right motivations in volunteers is another challenge. Some are more attracted to the environment of the prison and the novelty factor associated with this, rather than the service we provide. It has been found through exit interviews, for example, that many who apply are keen to work directly with prisoners, ideally on prison wings, and decide to leave the organisation once they realise that the role is broader than this. Whilst volunteering mainly in prison is possible with Pact, it is not something that we open to all volunteers and we strive to be clear about this at the initial interview stage. By using a 'graduation' scheme, Pact is able to assist those with genuine passion and interest to gain valuable experience and maintain the focus on providing a client-led, compassionate service within the restrictions of the secure environment.



## Role allocation

Pact also take into account people's flexibility when allocating roles and sites. We understand that volunteers have other commitments, such as students going home over the summer and parents only able to volunteer in term-time. Because we know about this in advance, we are able to compensate for this by using volunteers with other backgrounds, such as those who are retired, or long-term unemployed to provide flexible cover. We also take this into account when allocating roles and attempt as far as possible to place volunteers in roles which suit their circumstances. Having a variety of roles available means that people can be matched according to background experience, and potential commitment.

Pact strives to recruit a diverse range of volunteers and has volunteers from a broad set of circumstances, including those who are retired, those who are looking to change their career, those who work full time and those who have encountered the system themselves. This is reflected in the advertising of roles, although communications with different faith groups have had limited responses. Our current range of ethnic backgrounds range from white British to Iraqi, Norwegian and Romanian, and many more.

*"We work closely with partners such as Pact to provide opportunities for individuals to volunteer within the prison environment. We acknowledge the positive impact that well trained and appropriately managed volunteers have not only on the capacity of the service and the wide skill set they offer, but also the effect on the prisoners and families with whom they work. They provide a unique service to those who are the most vulnerable in society in providing support simply because they want to, which is a demonstration of their belief in change and an encouraging social role model for others to follow".*

*(John Tossell, Head of Reducing Reoffending, HMP Swansea)*

*"I started volunteering with Pact when I felt I wanted to gain some new skills and experiences in a different field of work. I saw the work Pact were doing and thought it would be rewarding to be part of the organisation, supporting people who were in need.*

*I enjoy the variety of opportunities that are available to me and have been involved in working in the play-area, baby group, mentoring family members and facilitating courses. I found some of these experiences quite challenging for me but so rewarding.*

*I love how I have been directly able to help support someone. For example, a service user I was mentoring presented complex issues. After meeting with her we devised an action plan including attending meetings with her, advocacy and making referrals. A lot of the work was offering emotional support. My mentee did not have any family support and felt she had no one to talk to. It became clear she was in an abusive relationship; I was able to encourage her to talk about her relationship through careful questioning and signposted her to other agencies where she could access specialist support. The mentee received intensive support and the need for me to be her mentor was no longer required. Three months later I received a text from my mentee saying 'thank you' for support and that she has recently left her abusive relationship. She recognised that she had been really unwell when the mentoring had begun and was in a much more positive place now. It made my day to hear she is doing so well now."*

*(Rachel, Pact Volunteer, HMP Cardiff)*

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