

**St. Martin's Centre**

# **Community Connections Volunteer Project**

**An Evaluation**

Ernest Dobson



2012

"I think St. Martin's Centre is an amazing place to volunteer. The staff are outstandingly supportive towards volunteers. I personally feel more appreciated within this establishment than I have in any paid job.

The centre has a wonderful positive atmosphere which is created by both the staff and volunteers. I couldn't highly recommend the centre enough to anyone thinking about volunteering."

*A volunteer*

## St. Martin's Volunteer Project - Evaluation Report

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*Note: There is a separate document of appendices which includes more detail on the findings of the research undertaken for the evaluation.*

## **Executive summary**

St. Martin's Centre is a community building based in Newcastle. It is a multi-agency centre providing a range of services to the communities of Byker, Walker and beyond. In May 2012, the centre commissioned an external evaluation of their *Big Lottery: Reaching Communities Fund* volunteer project. The purpose of the evaluation was to demonstrate impact and to identify learning. Evaluation methods included: interviews, surveys, focus groups, workshops, case studies, and review of documentation. The headline message is that the project is very successful and well managed. It is making a difference to volunteers, centre users, and centre staff.

Volunteers have a variety of motivations for volunteering. The most common reason is the desire to support others and give something to the community. Work experience and improving chances of getting a job is also a popular reason. An opportunity to meet people and make new friends is a common motivation. Volunteers report that their expectations have been met or exceeded. Building confidence and raising aspirations is a common benefit. For many this has led into employment and education/further training.

Centre users have benefitted in a number of ways: more activity; increased variety of services; wider range of users; advice and support from volunteers; volunteers acting as inspirational "role models"; making users more aware of the centre and its activities.

There has been benefit to centre staff. The project has supported staff development and helped the development of services. Volunteers have brought new ideas and users. It can be argued that volunteering is now an integral part of the centre's service delivery.

The project is well managed. Appropriate structures, policies and procedures are in place. The volunteer coordinator is committed and enthusiastic. Other staff are actively supportive of the project and welcome the added value brought by the volunteers. Volunteers feel very well supported. There are only a few areas of possible improvement, notably communication and informal contact between volunteers.

Lessons for success include: welcomes and thankyou's; clear written procedures and policies; committed staff; good communication; clear recruitment process; induction; careful matching of volunteers to opportunities; support and supervision including training; opportunities for progression; opportunities for volunteer feedback; commitment to continuous improvement.

The ideal model for sustainability is continuation of a dedicated coordinator, but other options, including a staff/volunteer supported project will be explored.

## **PART ONE - BACKGROUND**

### **The Evaluation**

In May 2012, St. Martin's Centre in Byker, Newcastle, commissioned an external evaluation of their volunteer project. The purpose of the evaluation was to:

demonstrate impact – what difference has the project made?

identify learning that would inform future practice within the project.

identify learning for wider dissemination.

The evaluation was conducted by an external evaluator, Ernest Dobson, who had previously supported the centre with market research and business planning. This is the first stage of the commission. The next stage will be to support the centre to identify the best way to sustain the benefits of the volunteer project.

### **2. Volunteering at St. Martin's Centre**

St. Martin's Centre is a bright new community building based in the Byker, Newcastle. It is a multi-agency centre providing a range of services to the communities of Byker, Walker and beyond. It includes a Sure Start Children's Centre and a day nursery run by Barnardos. The centre came about as a result of a partnership between St. Martin's Church, agencies such as Barnardos, and the wider community. The centre shares some space with the St. Martin's Church. St. Martin's runs a range of further services from 'Follow my Lead' (and 'Little Lead') to an 'After School Youth Club.' The centre has a reputation for responding to the needs of local people in the area, from the elderly to young people and parents.

Supported by the *Big Lottery: Reaching Communities Fund*, the St. Martin's Community Connections Volunteering Project is aimed at those who live in the postcode NE6 area of Newcastle upon Tyne. The project aims to help local residents to become more employable through volunteering at St. Martin's Centre. It is hoped that the skills, knowledge and experience gained at will improve the employability of volunteers.

The volunteer project operates within the context of the overall centre mission statement: *St. Martin's is a place to grow, learn and worship for everyone and is in the heart of the community. We are passionate about believing that every person matters and we are dedicated to help all local people to enjoy happy, healthy and safe lives and to help everyone to reach their full potential.*

The centre also has a statement about the volunteer project:

*We believe that volunteers help to build stronger, more active communities in which people have a better quality of life and ability to shape their own future. We recognise that there are many different reasons for becoming a volunteer and that for some it is a good opportunity to have fun, meet new people, learn new skills and share their knowledge. We aim to aid people's future employability skills through these volunteering experiences.*

The project operates within a wider policy context which encourages volunteering. St. Martin's Church brings both a traditional ethos of service to those in need and a more modern theology of wider community engagement. Both are underpinned by volunteering.

There is general consensus amongst political parties that volunteering benefits civil society in a number of ways:

- Promotes active citizenship – most recently labelled as the “Big Society”.
- Develops and sustains community spirit and activity
- Supports charities and voluntary organisations to deliver services
- Reduces social exclusion and isolation
- Improves employability

There is less consensus about the nature and level of support required for volunteers. Some argue that volunteering should be a spontaneous activity which requires very little, if any, support, whilst others argue that a volunteer support structure is vital, especially in disadvantaged areas where individual and community resources are limited. The model employed by St. Martin's aims to be flexible, offering a high quality basic level of support to all volunteers, plus a range of additional support mechanisms geared to both the needs of the volunteer and the service.

Though not the subject of this evaluation, it is worth noting that the trustees of the centre are volunteers. They are local workers or residents who support the ethos of the centre, including the commitment to volunteering.

### **3. Evaluation Methods**

A variety of methods were used, both quantitative and qualitative. This allowed for an inclusive approach whereby participants had more than one opportunity to contribute. The variety also allowed for data to be cross checked and verified. Participants were given the opportunity to check and influence the main findings prior to drafting of the report. Much of the primary research was based on the perceptions and experience of staff, volunteers, service users, and trustees.

Summary of evaluation activities:

- Review of documentation - mainly volunteer project documents, but also some external documents
- Web based research into volunteering generally and the practice of other projects
- Five one-to-one interviews with the volunteer coordinator, centre staff and a trustee
- Focus group with other centre staff and the local Barnardos volunteer coordinator

- Focus group with volunteers
- Focus group with trustees
- A self-completion survey of volunteers: online and paper versions. 20 respondents.
- A self-completion survey of centre users: online and paper versions. 40 respondents.
- Three "personal stories" of volunteers based on one-to-one interviews
- Three interviews with members of external organisations: Barnardos Day Nursery @ St. Martin's; Newcastle Volunteer Centre, a Citizens Advice Bureau.
- A feedback session on the surveys with centre users. 12 participants.
- An interactive workshop with staff, volunteers and trustees to check the headline findings. 10 participants.
- Draft and final reports
- Inception and review meetings with a project team made up of St. Martin's Chief Officer, the Volunteer Coordinator, a trustee, and the evaluator

## PART TWO - IMPACT

### 4. Volunteers

Volunteers have a variety of motivations for volunteering. The most common reason is the desire to support others and give something to the community. Work experience and improving chances of getting a job is also a popular reason. An opportunity to meet people and make new friends is a common motivation. The research into local needs conducted for the centre in 2009 identified social isolation as a barrier health and well being.

**Figure 1 - Volunteer survey: reasons for becoming a volunteer**

| Reason  | 10% | 20% | 30% | 40% | 50% | 60% |
|---|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Meet people/make friends                                |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Something to do   |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Give something to the community/other people            |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Build my confidence                                     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Improve skills/get training                             |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Improve chances of getting a job - work experience      |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Improve chances of accessing further education/training |     |     |     |     |     |     |

For some volunteers, finding a "new purpose" in life is an important benefit. There are several examples of changes in personal circumstances where volunteers have been seeking a new role. For example: children have gone to school; a parent they were caring for has died; a partner has died. Typically such volunteers say that if they were not in the centre, they would be "stuck at home", on their own, with nothing to do.

Though lack of confidence is not a prime motivation for many volunteers, virtually all volunteers report that building confidence and raising aspirations has been a significant benefit. This has been an important stepping stone to achievement and progression. There are numerous examples of volunteers now believing they can progress into further training and employment. For many, this had been translated into actual achievement. Because of the range of opportunities offered by the centre, this achievement takes many forms. Most volunteers achieve by taking on new responsibilities such as answering the phone, dealing with personal callers, planning activities, or supporting parents to play with their children. Many enhance this achievement by securing qualifications in subjects such as health and safety, food hygiene, and working with children. Some have acquired their first ever accredited qualifications. Some have progressed on to further education and training and/or employment.



The opportunity to gain work experience/qualifications and contribute to the work of the centre is not the only important ingredient in the process of building confidence. Volunteers report that they feel trusted and valued - that they are an essential part of the centre. Volunteers feel there is a good balance between support and being allowed to get on with their work. They also appreciate that they are always thanked. One volunteer contrasted her experience with another centre where she was not thanked and felt taken for granted.

Regardless of confidence levels, all volunteers benefit from work experience and training. Typically this leads to increased confidence, skills and knowledge, which ultimately improves employability. However, not all volunteers are currently seeking employment. For some, their aim is personal fulfilment.

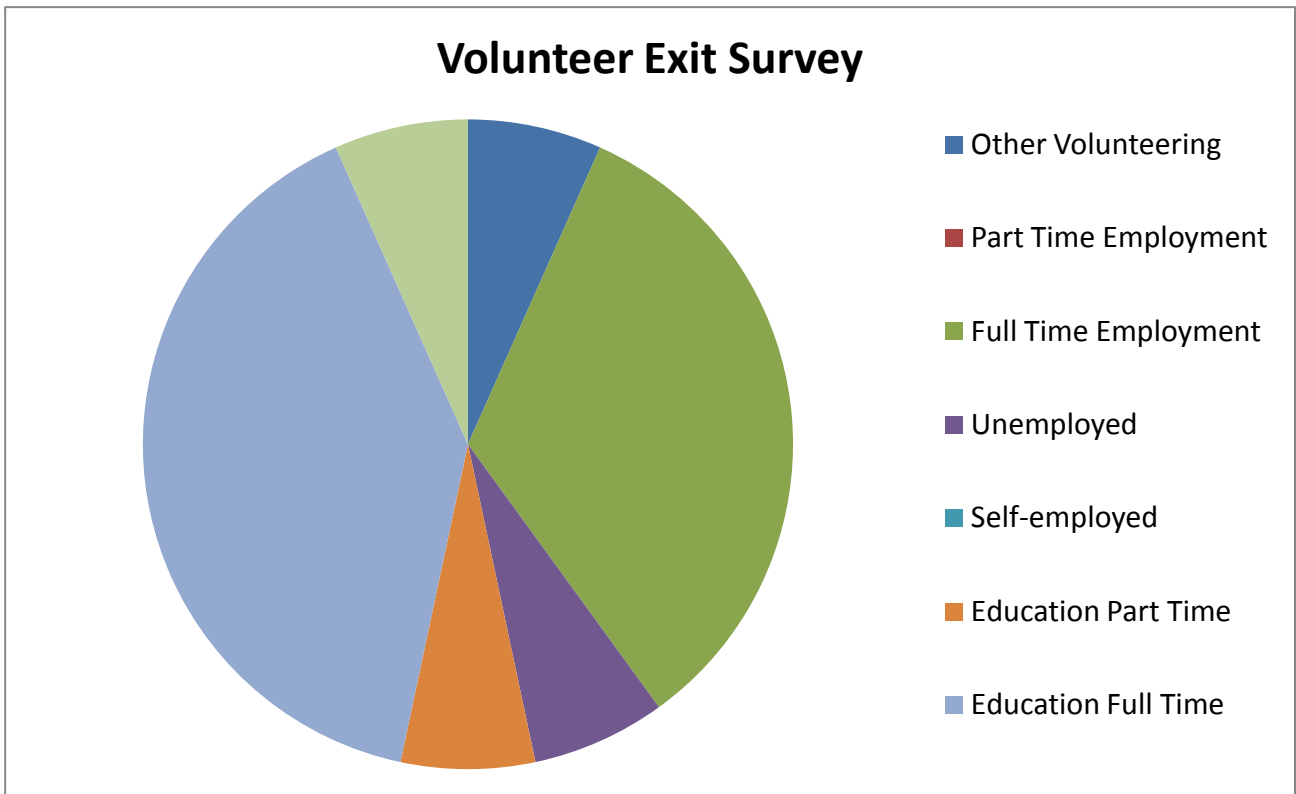
Volunteers particularly appreciate the opportunity to organise their own groups and activities. Benefits of this reported by volunteers:

- Makes volunteers feel an integral part of the centre
- Improves organisational and leadership skills
- Demonstrates that volunteers can take on positions of responsibility - important for volunteer employability and for sustainability of the project.

The project collects a variety of data to measure the impact on volunteers:

- Confidence level data. At the start of their placement volunteers are asked to rate themselves, using a range of indicators, as to how confident they feel. The exercise is repeated after a period of volunteering. 33 volunteers have taken part in this exercise. All report some increase in confidence levels. For many, the increase has been significant.
- On-line self completion survey covering questions on level of satisfaction and difference made. All volunteers report an improvement in confidence and skills. In some cases the change is significant.
- Outcomes exit survey – showing what volunteers do after they complete their placement. Results of the most recent survey (Figure 2) of 15 leavers illustrate a high level of positive outcomes. 33% went into full time employment and 40% went into full time education or training. The high proportion that went onto to education and training contrasts with the 10% of volunteers who specified this as a reason for volunteering. This suggests that volunteers were either made aware of opportunities and/or had their aspirations raised as a result of volunteering.
- Case Studies. These illustrate the difference made to individuals. Three of the case studies included in the evaluation are new, but two have been provided by the project. *See next page for extracts from case studies.*

**Figure 2**



The difference made to volunteers can be illustrated by this selection of volunteer stories:

**Barbara**

Barbara’s main reason for volunteering was to improve her skills and her chances of getting back into paid work after bringing up children. She feels volunteering at the centre has more than met her expectations. It has provided the experience she was looking for and she has taken part in numerous training opportunities provided by the centre. She has gained a Level 2 qualification in working with children. In addition, Barbara has made new friends and feels her confidence has been given a boost. She’s shared experiences of bringing up children and now has more understanding of how to encourage her own children to develop. She thinks her experience at the centre will “open doors” for her. It’s helped her realise that she could go back to college. She’s doing as much training as she can now at the centre, but once her children are a little older, she’d like to do an HEFC at college in sociology or psychology. Because she has young children, being able to access work experience and training on her doorstep is really important to Barbara.

*“I probably would have gone back to work, but might have ended up in a job I hated. I’m hoping that volunteering at the centre will help me get a job that I want to do.”*

### **Wendy**

Volunteering has made a big difference to Wendy's life. She feels it has met her expectations by giving her the opportunity to do something constructive and meet people. In addition, she lost confidence after her mum died, but volunteering at the centre has helped her feel a lot more confident. She "gets out more", feels healthier and enjoys meeting new people all the time. She's developed her knowledge and skills, not only through experience, but also by taking part in training. She's taken part in away day training for volunteers and has certificates in Food Hygiene and Health and Safety. *"If this had not come along, I would have been more and more depressed"*.

### **Dianne – written by herself**

I had been out of paid work for 18 years before I became a volunteer at the centre. Being a volunteer meant that I was put forward for lots of courses and it made me realise that even I could take new things in and learn. With this in mind I signed up to level 2 courses, to work within the childcare sector and to work as a Learning Support Assistant in a Primary School. While I was doing my courses I was lucky I was taken on as a supply LSA and have just been through the interview process and landed a job as a LSA with special needs children full time in September at a local Primary School. I do believe I would not have done any of this had it not been for the help and support I got while I was a volunteer at St Martin's Centre from the coordinator and the rest of the staff. I would recommend this to anyone even if it's just to while away a couple of hours a week. It leaves you with a sense of self worth and pride in yourself. So a BIG thank you to the volunteer coordinator and the staff xxx

### **Isaac**

Isaac is a full time carer for his mother. Isaac's main reason for being a volunteer is to give something to the local community. Isaac "hates sitting doing nothing". He wants to do things and get out of the house. Being a volunteer at the centre is important to Isaac because not only does it give him something to do, but also he's been able to meet people and make new friends. Because he is a carer for his mother, at the moment he's not looking to progress onto other things. He's content to volunteer at the centre and the church. *"I get a lot of satisfaction from helping others"*

## **Sue**

Sue started as a volunteer in June 2011, initially as a gardener and then helping out with planning the new coffee morning, supporting childcare groups and taking part in the monthly over 55s 'Soup and Stottie' event. Sue lacked self-esteem and confidence after being made redundant in her former job and was eager to gain employment. She completed accredited training in Level 2 Working with Children, Level 2 Health and Safety, and Drugs Awareness. She used her volunteer experience and training to brush up her skills and designed a new CV with support from the Volunteer Coordinator. Recently Sue gained full time employment with a social care company providing support to vulnerable older adults. Sue is a keen supporter of volunteering and says she is remarkably different from the person who started at the centre.

### *Other volunteer comments*

*The project made me believe in myself... I have much more confidence and am now going to university - I would not have dreamt of that before...*

*It has made me a lot more confident in myself and has shown me that I can be whoever I want to be and that I can achieve whatever I set out to do.*

*Volunteering gives me something worthwhile to do, and gets me out of the house so has made a big difference to me.*

## **5. Centre users**

Volunteers make a significant contribution to the services delivered by the centre. A major benefit to centre users is the scale of activity. There is a universal consensus that the support provided by volunteers has allowed the centre to offer much more to users, both in terms of the number and range of activities. Virtually all the centre's activities are supported by volunteers. Many group sessions are typically led by a paid member of staff plus one or two volunteers. There are numerous activities which are either volunteer led, or probably would not happen without the support of volunteers. These include: Parent and Toddler; Coffee Mornings; Community Lunch; Youth Club; Pub Quiz night. Volunteers also make a significant contribution to events. Other volunteer roles include marketing, gardening and reception. Alongside the activities provided by paid staff and partners, this creates an atmosphere of a busy, well-used centre, with lots going on.

As well as an increase in the sheer numbers of new users, volunteers have supported the centre to achieve its ambition to offer services to a wider age range. Though the centre has offered some services to older people and teenagers in the past, the focus was primarily on young children and their parents. The new services that have been introduced since the start of the volunteer project have provided more opportunities for young people, adults,

and older people as well as young children and parents. There are also more men using the centre e.g. Pub quiz.

The added value of volunteers is not confined to the scale and variety of activity. Many of the volunteers are local residents and they help to inspire centre users by acting as role models of what can be achieved. Raising aspirations is now universally accepted as an essential stage in the progression of those furthest from the labour market towards employability.

Volunteers also play an important role in promoting the centre in the local community and encouraging new users to access services. This is particularly valuable since the centre uses word of mouth as a key method for attracting new users. It is one of the characteristics which distinguishes the centre from statutory services. The success of the centre in attracting so called "hard to reach" users is widely acknowledged and valued by other agencies. Some of the users introduced to the centre by volunteers have complex needs which have not been previously expressed to support agencies.

Feedback from centre users has been very positive. A survey of centre users was carried out during July and August 2012. 40 surveys were completed. The key messages from the survey are:

- Most centre users are aware that volunteers support activities in the centre
- Centre users feel that they are made very welcome by volunteers
- Most centre users find it easy to approach volunteers
- Centre users feel that they (or their child) benefit from volunteers
- All centre users think that the centre as a whole benefits a lot from volunteers. Asked to rate the level of benefit out of a maximum of 5, the average score is 4.9.

**Figure 3 – Centre users’ survey**

Centre users were asked to rate volunteers on a scale from 1 to 5:

| Volunteers are...        | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|--------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| Welcoming                |   |   |   |   |   |
| Approachable             |   |   |   |   |   |
| Beneficial to Me         |   |   |   |   |   |
| Beneficial to the Centre |   |   |   |   |   |

### Centre users' comments

*I did not realise that many of the groups were supported by volunteers. It is very helpful that they are, as the groups can go ahead regularly.*

*Volunteers are a great asset to the organisation and are worth their weight in gold.*

*Volunteers are a welcome asset to the centre. They are willing to help out.*

*Volunteers are an invaluable resource, making the place run smoothly.*

*The volunteers are needed and easy to approach. Friendly and very helpful.*

## 6. Centre Staff

The most obvious benefit is additional capacity to respond to local need by increasing the scale of activity. This in turn helps to make the workload of paid staff more manageable. As well as an extra pair of hands, volunteers bring skills, local knowledge, and ideas. This has contributed to the development of new services and activities. Staff report that they have benefitted from the perspectives and the local knowledge that volunteers bring.

The volunteer project has created new opportunities for staff development, including the opportunity to develop or enhance skills in supervision of people. This is particularly the case for front line staff that might not otherwise have the opportunity to supervise other workers. Staff feel more skilled and confident.

Volunteers have encouraged a culture of continuous improvement amongst centre staff. Staff:

- are aware of the need to consistently demonstrate good practice
- have developed their listening and review skills
- have made suggestions for improvements to the volunteer project. e.g. role specific training

### Centre staff comments

*Volunteers have been a tremendous help....Volunteers help create energy and buzz around the centre.... It's been really useful to have a fresh pair of eyes.....Supporting volunteers has been really useful for my own learning - it's helped me be more patient.*

*Volunteers can be a hindrance if the placement is not suitable. There has been a particular problem with reception. However, things have improved since we've started trial periods.*

*There was an issue of lack of communication at the start, but it's much better now. I feel I can speak my mind and I am listened to.*

## **7. Service Delivery Model**

Some agencies use volunteers as an “add on” to their existing services or to substitute for paid staff. Other agencies, such as Citizens Advice Bureau, have a business model which is dependent upon volunteers. A question raised during the evaluation was how important is volunteering to the centre as a whole? Could the centre survive without volunteers? The original ambition for the centre assumed many of the services would be volunteer-led. This was quickly modified once services began to develop when it was realised that paid staff would be needed. The centre has always had some volunteers, but never on the scale of the current project.

Given that the centre has paid staff, it would, of course, be possible to provide some services without volunteers. However, it is probably fair to say that the business model that has developed over the last couple of years is highly dependent upon volunteers. The centre has now probably passed the stage of volunteers providing a helping hand. It can now be argued that volunteering is integral to the service delivery model of the centre. This is not only because of the scale of activity, but the added value volunteers bring, as highlighted in Sections 5 and 6. Though the evaluation research uncovered differing views, the balance of opinion is that volunteering is now an integral part of service delivery at the centre.

## **PART THREE – Management**

### **8. Project Management**

The key ingredients of a well managed project are in place:

- Lead responsibility held by a named coordinator, with an appropriate accountability mechanism.
- A clear recruitment process for volunteers. Advertising material includes specific volunteer roles. There are several routes to advertising opportunities including word of mouth, highly visible leaflets and posters in the centre, Newcastle Volunteer Centre.
- A comprehensive set of policies on topics such as equal opportunities, confidentiality, and health and safety.
- A system for carefully matching volunteers to opportunities.
- A robust induction process.
- Appropriate in service training, both general and specific to roles. For example, any volunteer involved with food preparation is given food hygiene training. Volunteers are briefed about their role. Where possible, volunteers are involved in planning and review of activities, but this does not happen consistently due to time constraints of staff or volunteers.
- A very comprehensive volunteer handbook which includes policies and procedures. The handbook sets out the framework for volunteering at the centre. It has been recently updated.
- All staff contribute to the support and supervision of volunteers. This is particularly valuable when the volunteer coordinator is not available. Volunteers report that staff are approachable and supportive.

Care is taken to match volunteers' interests and abilities to specific opportunities and roles. This normally works well, but there have been occasions when the match did not work. To help manage this better, the project introduced a trial period followed by a review. If either the project or the volunteer feel the placement is not working, then the volunteer is offered an alternative role.

There is a widespread consensus that the enthusiasm and skills of the volunteer coordinator has made a real difference to the success of the project. Not only has the project been well managed, but the coordinator's enthusiasm has inspired others.



## **9. Support for volunteers**

All volunteers go through a six week induction process which covers:

- Their work and role for the organisation
- The organisation's philosophies and policies
- Code of conduct
- Professional boundaries and safeguarding
- Equality and diversity
- Health and safety
- Introductions to other volunteers and staff

Supervision is provided by the coordinator, though this is normally in small groups. The coordinator does not have time to provide regular one-to-one supervision.

A training calendar is produced with a list of introductory courses for the year ahead. Typically there are one or two courses per month. Topic areas for 2012 include:

- Children and Young people
- Health, Social and Well Being
- Culture and Equality Awareness
- Customer Service
- IT
- CV writing

Volunteers are actively encouraged to access the training provision. However, not all courses run if there is insufficient demand. Volunteers can also access accredited training e.g. Level 2 working with children.

The project is very aware of the need to strike a balance between creating opportunities for progression, whilst not pushing volunteers too hard. The project aims to focus on the needs and interests of the individual volunteer as well as supporting them in the role they play in the centre. The project promotes a "can do" culture, but also recognises that volunteers have differing aspirations when it comes to progression. Some have a clear idea that they want to move on to further opportunities, whilst others are content with the role they play in the centre. More typical is the volunteer who is unsure about how, and if, they want to progress. The project supports volunteers by an appropriate level of encouragement and makes them aware of opportunities to progress.

Volunteers have a number of opportunities to give feedback: informal; via email; activity reviews; training evaluations; supervision; survey. A volunteer self completion form is used

in supervision as a tool for measuring progress and for giving feedback on satisfaction the support provided.

Feedback from volunteers for this evaluation has been overwhelmingly positive. There is a consistent message from the volunteer survey, one-to-one interviews, and the volunteer focus group: that the support they receive is either very good or excellent. Only one volunteer felt the support offered could be better.

**Figure 4 - Volunteer survey feedback**

Volunteers were asked to rate their experience of the centre on a scale from 1 to 5

| Volunteer experience                    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Expectations met                        |   |   |   |   |   |
| Difference made to volunteer            |   |   |   |   |   |
| Support from volunteer coordinator      |   |   |   |   |   |
| Support from other staff                |   |   |   |   |   |
| Support to look for other opportunities |   |   |   |   |   |
| Benefit to centre from volunteers       |   |   |   |   |   |

*Typical volunteer comments*

*Staff treat you as equal.....you feel like you fit in.....staff are not always over your shoulder....you are always thanked.*

*The coordinator is always there when you need him. He has helped me to complete my UCAS form, given me references, supported me in my volunteering role and given me the confidence to try out new things. He is always supportive and his "can do" attitude is infectious, couldn't have done any of this without him.*

*If it wasn't for volunteering and the advice and support, I'd never have progressed to higher education. I have also completed other training courses which have led to further qualifications.*

*All the staff are friendly and always willing to help.*

**10. Areas for improvement**

A small number areas for improvement have been highlighted during the evaluation research. These should be considered within a context of very good performance overall.

The main issue identified was communication. Overall communication is viewed as very good. There is an abundance of written material, news is circulated by email, and there are occasional volunteer meetings. However, some volunteers felt they could be better

informed and, if possible, would like more notice of changes to the training calendar. Email is a common tool for sharing information. The small number of volunteers who make little use of email feel they may be missing out. Partner agencies also said they sometimes felt out of the loop. The project is already responding to this and is considering a volunteer newsletter.

Volunteers would like more opportunities to meet each other informally. There have been attempts to do this in the past outside of the centre. There appears to be a preference to meet in the centre where volunteers feel more comfortable. The project is already considering creating more informal meeting opportunities.

A question has been raised as to whether the project is a victim of its own success. Currently there are over 40 volunteers, of whom 28 are active every week. Whilst this is an excellent achievement, there is some concern that the capacity of the project is being exceeded. Most volunteers rate the support they receive very highly, but a small number have questioned the consistency of support.

Ideally the project would like to offer more training and support, but constraints on volunteer and staff time may make it difficult to deliver these on a consistent basis.

Desired improvements include more:

- role/group specific training
- accredited training
- attention to progression routes

## **PART FOUR – THE FUTURE**

### **11. Lessons specific to St. Martin's**

The project has a proven commitment to continuous improvement. There is willingness to learn and make changes: "if it's not working, we'll try to understand why, and change it if necessary". For example, placing volunteers on reception has sometimes been difficult. This is a busy centre and reception can be very demanding. Typically personal callers will be seeking help and information at the same time as the phone is ringing, at the same time as volunteers are asking for information. The role therefore requires a fair degree of confidence, skill, and knowledge. It is probably fair to say that in the past this was not fully appreciated by the project and some placements ran into difficulties. The project is now much more aware of the challenges faced by those on reception and takes this into account when matching volunteers to this role and provision of support. An additional benefit has been raised awareness generally within the centre of the importance of reception and the challenges associated with this function.

The enthusiasm and commitment of the volunteer coordinator has made a difference to the success of the project.

Perhaps the number of active volunteers is stretching the capacity of the project and is sometimes making it difficult to deliver consistency.

### **12. General lessons which for wider dissemination**

#### *Success factors*

Commitment from paid staff is a key success factor in volunteer projects where paid staff and volunteers work alongside each other. One of the striking features of this project is the universal commitment from trustees and staff at all levels to the volunteer project. There appear to be several reasons for this:

- The volunteer coordinator has established close working relationships with other staff. This included development of an understanding of the capacity and support needs of individual members of staff.
- The Chief Officer was strongly committed from the start. Her previous roles within the centre included volunteer support.
- The ethos and business model of the centre included volunteers from the beginning.
- There are clear, written, roles for each volunteer opportunity. This helps to define the distinct responsibilities of staff and volunteers.

### *Other lessons for success:*

- Written rules and procedures covering the general conduct of volunteers and the support they can expect.
- Volunteers appreciate a simple expression of thanks. Volunteer feedback shows that a simple "thank you" makes them feel more valued. Conversely, the absence of thanks makes them feel undervalued.
- A thorough and robust induction process can make a big difference to the success of a volunteer placement.
- Regular support and supervision, plus other opportunities to give feedback or, if necessary, to make a complaint.
- A personal development plan for each volunteer.
- Specific written roles which explain precisely what is required for each job
- Consistent, accessible, and ongoing support
- The centre has a genuine welcoming, supportive, inclusive, ethos. This extends to volunteers as well as centre users.
- A system for expenses which ensures that no volunteer is out of pocket or has to wait too long for reimbursement.
- Though there are clear policies and procedures, the project aims to operate in an informal way with a personal touch.
- Ideally there should be support available from staff other than the volunteer coordinator

### **13. Sustainability – an introduction**

The next phase of this commission will look at options for sustainability. However, some key messages have already emerged:

- There is a consensus that volunteering must continue within the centre. The benefits to volunteers, centre users, and the staff are such that the loss of volunteers would have a serious detrimental effect on the centre's ability to fulfill its mission
- The ideal scenario is that funding is secured to continue with the volunteer coordinator role.
- If such funding is not secured, then alternative models need to be considered. At this stage, the most likely option is a model that combines a mixture of support from other staff combined with volunteers taking on more responsibility. However, the feasibility of all options will be explored.
- It is likely that a model which relies on other staff and volunteers will not be able to support the current numbers of volunteers.

## 14. Conclusions

The project is very successful and is well managed. It is making a difference to volunteers, centre users, and centre staff. Volunteers report that their expectations have been met or exceeded. Building confidence and raising aspirations is a common benefit. For many this has led into employment and education/further training. Centre users have benefitted from volunteer support and a wider range of activities. The project has supported staff development and helped the development of services. Volunteers have brought new ideas and users. It can be argued that volunteering is now an integral part of the centre's service delivery. The project is well managed and volunteers feel very well supported. There are only a few areas of possible improvement, notably communication and informal contact between volunteers.

Lessons for success include: welcomes and thankyou's; clear written procedures and policies; committed staff; good communication; clear recruitment process; induction; careful matching of volunteers to opportunities; support and supervision including training; opportunities for progression; opportunities for volunteer feedback; commitment to continuous improvement. The ideal model for sustainability is continuation of a dedicated coordinator, but other options, including a staff/volunteer supported project will be explored.

Last words from a volunteer...

*I had not worked for 18 years and after having raised my family, I did not know where to start. The volunteer coordinator picked me up and put me down on the right track and supported me well along the way. I'm now back working again.*

Ernest Dobson

October 2012

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### Notes

*Thanks are due to all those staff, trustees, volunteers, and other agencies who gave their time freely for this evaluation.*

*The findings are a reflection of the available documentation and opinions of contributors. They do not necessarily represent the views of any individual, the client, evaluator, or any other organisation involved in the evaluation. Every attempt has been made to ensure that factual information is accurate, but we apologise for any errors. The names used in this report have been changed to protect the confidentiality of individuals.*