



European Year of Volunteering 2011

Volunteering, prisoners and ex-offenders

Summary of discussion with Carol Davis, Prison Volunteer Programme Coordinator at [Sue Ryder](#).

Carol Davis is one of 3 coordinators running the Prison Volunteer Programme Coordinator at Sue Ryder. Sue Ryder is a healthcare charity supporting those with complex neurological conditions and providing end of life care.

The [prison volunteer programme](#) has been in place since 2006, supporting currently serving offenders in their rehabilitation, with the provision of volunteering placements in the organisation's shops, offices, warehouse and care centres (although not in direct contact with service-users).

In the light of current research, that shows mainstream volunteering organisations are reticent to engage with prisoners and ex-offenders, this is a pioneering programme, with much to teach and inspire the wider volunteer-involving community.

Following the riots in the Summer of 2011, there was a recognition amongst many in the voluntary and community sector of a shared responsibility of a broader community remit, beyond the specific aims and objectives of their organisations. However few mainstream volunteer-involving organisations have the skills and confidence to consider engaging with prisoners and ex-offenders. Resources are stretched, skills and experience are limited, and a fear of negative public perception is a real 'blocking' factor.

With this in mind, Carol was asked to share some insights into why the programme had worked, and her responses are presented to reflect the management issues listed below:

1. When this programme conceived, how was management support obtained?
2. How has this programme been profiled to the public?
3. How is the support of staff and volunteers obtained?
4. What additional training/support is provided to those who need it, and how is this resourced?
5. How is the success of the programme measured and celebrated?
6. What advice would you give to a small local charity that was thinking to get involved in this work?

Her responses were as follows:

1. When this programme conceived, how was management support obtained?

It was a bold decision to commence this work, particularly as the primary purpose of Sue Ryder was not to support the rehabilitation of offenders. The initial discussions between the volunteering manager, senior management and trustees were critical in clarifying how this programme could support the organisation's vision, mission and aims. Without this work the initiative would have been short-lived, if it had started at all.

It was agreed to undertake a pilot project, which entailed liaising with [The Inside Out Trust](#) and a few '[open prisons](#)' (where prisoners are trusted to serve their sentences with minimal supervision) to facilitate suitable placements. We then developed close working relationships with the prisons, and they undertook risk-assessments of suitable prisoners, who were then granted 'Release on Temporary Licence' (ROTL). The prison staff were aware of the placements we were proposing, and were able to make targeted risk-assessments on this basis.

The learning from the pilot programme and the development of risk management processes secured management support, and the decision was taken to roll this programme out in other locations. Management support was enhanced when we were successful in securing funds from charitable trusts to support the roll-out.

2. How has this programme been profiled to the public?

There was some concern that customers and donors may object to the initiative, however in reality that there hasn't been any negative reaction or a negative impact on donations. We have proactively promoted the programme with press and television coverage – recently being shortlisted in [Personnel Today 2011 Corporate Social Responsibility awards](#) for our work with prisoners and ex-offenders and also winning the [2011 Business in the Community Right Step award](#).

There has been some negative press however focusing on well-known prisoners that obtain volunteering placements. One tabloid newspaper printed a story highlighting how inappropriate this was considering the nature of the individual's crime, but there was no criticism directed at us as a charity for working with offenders.

We're also aware that problems can arise at any time in placements and can be unpredictable in nature, which could leave us vulnerable to public criticism. Our press team keep a close eye on the impact of various stories and have found that the follow-up discussions (on twitter etc.) include a balanced range of views – many supporting the second chance being given to the individual. In practice the 'bad news' stories appear to dissipate quite quickly, and this is helped by the fact that our PR team are fully aware of our Prison Volunteer Programme, and equipped to make a swift response to any issue that may attract attention from the public.

3. How is the support of staff and volunteers obtained?

It was critical to ensure local managers and volunteers understood the reasons for programme, how it would work in practice and the potential benefits for all involved.

Therefore, we made sure that all staff and volunteers involved were aware that we were giving prisoners and ex-offenders a genuine opportunity. We would provide training in customer skills and retail, from basic skills up to assistant manager standard. Those on the programme were to be treated as part of the team and not to just be given menial tasks at the back of the shop. We were determined to avoid the culture of “we think you’re worth a second chance, but we’re not going to give you a proper chance”.

However, many paid staff were somewhat alarmed by the proposals, and we took a number of steps to explore their concerns and worked with them to address these. The initial pilot was important. This was undertaken with managers committed to the fundamental principles of engaging with prisoners and ex-offenders, and who were keen to develop systems that promoted a positive outcome for all involved – staff, volunteers and other stakeholders, including the individuals engaged as volunteers. Once the time for roll-out approached, we talked to managers in the area meetings and visited shops that were well-placed to engage in the programme. It has to be said however, that this consultation focused on the processes of implementation rather than whether this programme was going ahead.

There are occasional instances where volunteers have expressed concerns – disagreeing in principle with the Prison Volunteer Programme. In reality such situations have really been the exception. In nearly all cases staff and volunteers have enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to engage with this programme.

On the rare occasions where some resistance is encountered, we as an organisation communicate a clear message that we are not only committed to this programme, but to the values and culture that it expressed – to staff, volunteers and the wider community.

4. What additional training/support is provided to those who need it, and how is this resourced?

Training is provided for shop staff (paid and unpaid), and one of the most useful aspects of this is organising a prison visit, where staff and volunteers are able to absorb some of the culture of prison life. This really helps to allay concerns about the programme, and is invaluable in communicating both its potential benefits and that it is safe. The visit is supplemented with some training materials and DVDs, and on-going support is provided by regional prison volunteer coordinators, who advise local managers both on managing problems and celebrating successes. However, it must be said that most problems are dealt with via normal problems resolution procedures – as they would for any volunteer.

For new staff, the Prisons Volunteer Programme is communicated both in the recruitment and induction processes, and we are finding that the programme is receiving more and more internal support and time goes on.

5. How is the success of the programme measured and celebrated?

Once the programme started, it was clear that local managers valued the opportunity to gain the services of a full-time volunteer, and over time it was evident that this positively influenced shop income.

However there have been other benefits to us as an organisation. We have been recognised both in the press and media as an organisation that is willing to think and act creatively to show its commitment to local communities. In addition many of our staff tell us the opportunity to support people as they try to turn their lives around is really rewarding, and that it has been an unexpected source of job-satisfaction. There is also evidence that local managers have developed their own management skills as a result of being engaged with the Prison Volunteer Programme.

One other important contribution to our organisational capacity is that in some instances, we have been able to recruit ex-offenders as paid staff. This is obviously based on regular recruitment processes – where the best candidate is offered the post – however the fact is that this programme has enabled us to find talented and committed people that would otherwise have been missed. Interestingly, our volunteers have expressed no concerns about being managed by an ex-offender – the values of engagement have been truly embedded.

6. What advice would you give to a small local charity that was thinking to get involved in this work?

The first thing I would say is that whilst Sue Ryder is a national charity, our prison volunteering initiatives are very localised. They involve a local manager and volunteers, a local prison (or probation service), and a local shop.

If a small charity was thinking about getting involved I would suggest that they try to talk to someone involved in a similar initiative, and also undertake some preliminary discussions with their local prison or probation service – finding who is the right person to talk to and exploring the possibilities and supporting processes. Prisons and probation service can vary in their approach to volunteering. There may be a ROTL officer or resettlement unit, and the key thing is to find the right person to talk to.

Then it would be of utmost importance to get people on board before doing anything further. I would advise they don't launch into a significant initiative, but just try to place one prisoner or ex-offender in one location – making sure that the volunteer is hand-picked by the prison or probation service, and supported by a 'Memorandum of Understanding' or similar, which the service will be keen to develop with the charity. People will accept problems later on, if they have first seen the value of a successful placement.