

TRAILBLAZERS MENTORING

A case study of volunteering in a resettlement mentoring project

June 2016



**Valuing
volunteers
in prison**

Summary

Trailblazers Mentoring supports young men aged 18-25 using volunteer mentors who work with service users before and after release. This case study will be especially interesting to readers who wish to:

- build close working relationships with prison staff
- establish robust volunteer recruitment and training procedures
- enable volunteers to operate flexibly and independently within the prison.

Background

Trailblazers Mentoring is a small national charity delivering a volunteer-led mentoring service to male offenders aged 18-25 in custody and upon release to support them to desist from reoffending. Our head office is at HMYOI Aylesbury, with five further projects in HMP/YOI Wandsworth, HMP/YOI Isis, HMP/YOI Rochester, HMP/YOI Swinfen Hall and HMP/YOI Brinsford. We support offenders for between six and nine months pre-release, and up to 12 months post-release.

The charity uses one-to-one volunteer mentoring to:

- reduce the likelihood of re-offending and the seriousness of offending by preparing offenders for release
- ease the difficult period of transition for offenders back into society following release from prison
- empower young people to make positive choices by developing their self-esteem, confidence, education and knowledge of opportunities
- enhance the resettlement services offered by prisons and other agencies by using volunteer mentors to support offenders on release.

Project structure

One-to-one mentoring is delivered by carefully recruited volunteer mentors. Mentors, supported by our project managers, empower mentees to change their attitudes, thinking and behaviour, address debt and financial issues, access education, training, employment and volunteering and maintain or re-establish links with their family and local community.

Each of our projects is overseen by a full-time, prison-based project manager, which enables us to develop strong working relationships with prison staff and governors. Our project managers are able to discuss the benefits of our mentoring programme directly with prison staff who often promote our service to potential mentees. This also enables our project managers to engage with prison staff, our mentees and mentors on a regular basis, to ensure that their relationships are effective and any problems or questions are dealt with promptly. Project managers are kept informed about current issues or challenges so the mentoring programme can be tailored to mentees' practical and emotional needs.

Our project managers work in close collaboration with other support agencies both within the prison and outside in the community, including probation services, housing services and drug and rehabilitation units. At a local level, we develop relationships with local and specialist voluntary sector providers to establish referral pathways for mentors and enable mentees to effectively resettle in the community. Establishing relationships with other agencies and organisations allows us to access further support and information for our mentees. For example, housing upon release can be a particular concern, and our relationship with housing services means our mentors can advise and advocate on our mentees' behalf. Project managers also build relationships with probation services and can therefore introduce them to volunteer mentors and explain the benefits of the mentoring relationship continuing in the community.

The volunteers

We currently have around 200 active volunteers from diverse backgrounds including business leaders, students and retirees. We actively seek volunteers who reflect the background and cultural diversity of the young offenders we support. Many of our mentors come from colleges or universities where they are training for a career in the Criminal Justice System and wish to gain valuable experience in a prison environment. We have two peer mentors involved in our Rochester project who are current offenders who help to promote the mentoring programme to new offenders, and we are recruiting further peer mentors across our other projects.

The majority of our volunteers are mentors who work directly with young offenders, and we have approximately five volunteers who help with administration, marketing, research and fundraising, who are based in prison and at home.

Volunteer recruitment

Our project managers are responsible for mentor recruitment, training and on-going support. They

advertise roles on www.do-it.org and social media as well as through Team London, Job Centres, volunteering agencies and local press.

Potential volunteer mentors must complete an application form which is reviewed by the project manager nearest to their location. Should their application prove to be of interest, they are invited to a two-hour information evening where they are provided with more details about the programme, its challenges and rewards and its time commitment, discuss the role with an experienced mentor, and meet the project manager. On some occasions, project managers will decide to meet an applicant prior to this information evening in order to gain a greater understanding of why the volunteer is interested in the role. There are occasions where a project manager may decide that the role is not appropriate for the volunteer, which might be because of a lack of life experience, or because of experiences in the volunteer's life that may make them vulnerable. In this instance they might suggest an alternative volunteering role, or that the volunteer reapplies at another time.

Volunteer training

Following the information evening, if the project manager and volunteer feel the role is suitable for them, the volunteer will be invited to attend a three-day two-part training programme:

- A two-day Trailblazer's training session covering expectations, challenges, health and safety, safe-guarding and a role-play of possible scenarios. Volunteers are briefed on the Trailblazers Mentoring toolsets covering issues mentees may need help, support and guidance with; including financial issues, finding and applying for work or training opportunities, and building better relationships with family and friends.
- A one-day training session run by the prison, covering self-defence, hostage situations and safeguarding.

Security vetting

Once the volunteer begins their training, we will take up references and ask the relevant prison to commence vetting checks. The vetting process can be time-consuming and we find that starting it at the earliest possible opportunity is beneficial to avoid delays in matching mentors to mentees. The length of time it takes to gain security clearance for volunteers can be challenging, as due to the workload within prisons, this can take anywhere between a few weeks to a couple of months. During this time project managers will keep in regular contact with the person managing the

vetting process on behalf of the prison, as well as with the volunteer to ensure that we keep them engaged with the organisation.

Matching mentors to mentees

Project managers will then meet mentors and mentees in order to match them based on their personalities, experience and preferences (for example some mentees may want to have a male or female mentor). If all parties are happy to continue then the mentoring relationship will begin. Both the mentor and mentee have the right to decide that they would prefer to work with someone else, although in practice this rarely happens as project managers are careful to find out as much as possible about both parties before the relationship begins.

Providing support in prison

All of our mentors draw keys and so are able to operate within the prison independently and without escort which we feel is imperative to facilitate the smooth running of the programme. Mentors arrange the day and time of visits directly with the mentees to ensure that this fits around the prison schedule. Mentoring sessions are normally held at the same time every week so that rooms can be booked in advance. Project managers notify the prison staff of this commitment so that nothing else is expected of them during this time. Mentoring sessions need to be rearranged if the prison is on lock-down.

Each volunteer mentor dedicates, on average, 10 hours per month to their individual young person. Mentoring is provided on a weekly basis in custody, and weekly or fortnightly on release, depending on each mentee's individual needs and barriers to resettlement. There are some common themes that mentees struggle to deal with – feelings of isolation, starting again, making amends with family and friends and more practical issues such as training and employment, and mentors can offer advice and support on how to best support mentees through these challenges.

Mentoring is delivered in custody to prepare mentees for release, through-the-gate to support the high-risk transition period, and post-release as they resettle and reintegrate into their communities. Long-term one-to-one support from a highly-trained mentor enables them to build a positive, trusting relationship.

They agree a mutual and natural end to their mentoring relationship, typically between six and 12 months post-release, at which point mentees will have been supported to develop both formal and informal networks with friends/family and community organisations. Mentors will work with

mentees to create a tailored 'Move on Plan', and will support mentees to access services for education, training and employment for mentees upon their release.

We have a Service Level Agreement in place with each of the prisons we work with. This enables us to set out what we expect from each other, and includes how we will overcome any challenges we face. Each project manager has a named person within the prison, usually in the prison's Senior Management Team, who they can approach for advice or support. Each prison we work with allows us office space and printing services within the prisons, as well as covering the cost of security vetting and key training.

Ongoing volunteer supervision

Project managers meet with volunteers every four to six weeks to discuss their mentee relationship and identify any additional needs. Project managers provide support and supervision, helping to signpost possible organisations and avenues for them to research, for example helping them access financial support for their mentees. Where a mentor is concerned about a mentees' mental or physical health, or there are safety concerns, they can help mentors get support from prison staff. We facilitate quarterly group meetings to give mentors the opportunity to network and share best practice.

Our Project Managers regularly meet with a named contact within the prison, usually a member of the Senior Management Team, to gain insight into how the programme is working. Any issues that the prison has regarding individual volunteers are flagged up by the prison to the project manager immediately. In most cases these are minor, for instance concerns over dress code, and can be dealt with quickly and tactfully.

Promoting the service

In order to promote the service, our project managers attend induction meetings for new offenders and put posters in the common areas. In some prisons, a system is in place where project managers can advertise the programme. Mentees from within the prison who are interested in the programme can self-refer by making direct contact with the project manager, or be referred via another agency or their personal officer. Following an initial risk and needs assessment by the project manager, offenders are matched to an appropriate mentor. Project managers have access to P-NOMIS (the prison database containing prisoner records) in order to make an informed risk-assessment, but good relationships with prison officers also greatly help this process.

Outcomes

Trailblazers Mentoring is proven to reduce reoffending. We use P-NOMIS to measure re-offending rates and can evidence that, on average, 19% of our mentees commit a further offence and return to prison against the national average of 56%, representing an improvement of 41%.

Furthermore, 51% enter education, training or employment upon release, well above the national average of 36%; and 100% report improved attitude, thinking and behaviour.

Many of the prison officers with whom we work say they notice an improvement in the offenders' behaviour and attitude whilst they are enrolled in the programme.

Stakeholder feedback

Trailblazers Mentoring regularly consults beneficiaries and stakeholders to ensure the continued value of and need for our service.

All of our mentees are consulted at the end of their relationship with Trailblazers Mentoring to understand their experience of working with us and their perception of 'distance travelled' during the mentoring relationship. This information, including direct quotes from our mentees, is recorded on our database and used to inform and guide our programme provision and explain and evidence our services to prison staff, funders and future mentees and mentors.

"We can see the impact that Trailblazers have on the young offenders they work with here in Isis. The mentoring really prepares the offenders for the challenges they will face when returning to the community and provides them with the skills not only to get a job or enter education, but to desist from re-offending. Trailblazers plays an integral part in the successful resettlement of many young offenders".

(Amy Dixon, Head of Reducing Reoffending, HMP/YOI Isis)

Overall, as an organisation we have had very few issues concerning the use of volunteers within a prison environment and we believe that this is mainly due to the extensive training provided by both ourselves and the prison service, as well as a recognition of the benefits of the mentoring programme and a commitment to working together. Employing a full-time project manager working within each prison is key to the programme's success.

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