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Literature Scan: The transition from beneficiary to volunteer in crisis support

About the Help through Crisis programme

Help through Crisis (HtC) is a £33 million National Lottery funded programme set up by the National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF), the largest funder of community activity in the UK. It supports 69 partnerships across England which help people who are experiencing or at risk of hardship crisis to overcome the difficulties they are facing to plan for their futures. The partnerships receiving National Lottery funding through the HtC programme bring together small voluntary groups and established charities to work together locally. Working together, they offer people advice, advocacy and support which matches their personal circumstances. The aim is to look at the issues people face, and the underlying causes, from their basic needs, to their physical and mental health, to skills and employment. People are supported to draw on their personal experiences to build on their skills and strengths so they are ready to seize the opportunities and challenges ahead.

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Literature Scan: The transition from Beneficiary to Volunteer in Crisis Support

Introduction

The purpose of this literature scan is to synthesise and present contemporary research and good practice on the topic of the transition from beneficiary to volunteer in crisis support. While there is a wide body of work around volunteering in general, this literature scan focuses specifically on volunteering in the crisis support sector. The literature scan addresses the following three research questions:

- What are the contemporary trends around the transition of beneficiaries to volunteers in crisis support and in the wider voluntary sector?
- In what ways does the transition of beneficiaries to volunteers affect the support people receive?
- What are some of the good practice examples of supporting beneficiaries transitioning to volunteers? How have beneficiaries been supported to overcome challenges during this transition?

This literature scan will inform the Learning, Support and Evaluation (LSE) team's forthcoming policy commentary on the beneficiary to volunteer transition in the crisis support sector and complement previous work around staff wellbeing and trauma informed approaches. It will also support HtC partnerships working (or planning on working) with volunteers.

In addition, this literature scan builds on the prior series of literature scans and policy commentaries addressing staff support and wellbeing, and trauma informed approaches in the crisis support sector. Together, the staff wellbeing, trauma informed approaches and transition from beneficiary to volunteer literature scans and policy commentaries provide a platform for discussing wellbeing in the crisis support sector. They explore the evidence around how *everyone* involved in a project, including paid staff and unpaid volunteers, can be supported to enable them to effectively support those in crisis.

Context

As the TNLCF (2019a) [staff wellbeing](#) literature scan and policy commentary highlighted, there are increased pressures on frontline crisis support workers due to resource constraints, increased demand for support and greater complexity of issues. This increased demand and complexity is largely driven by reduced funding for and access to statutory services, which is a gap that charitable organisations have been filling (London Funders, 2019). The wider context of cuts to public services, coupled with resource

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constraints and precarious funding in the crisis support sector, have created more instability in the crisis support workforce.

Volunteers in crisis support

Volunteers have traditionally played an essential role in many crisis support organisations. For example, local Citizens Advice organisations have a long history of training volunteers to provide advice (Fisher, 2009). HtC case study visits in November 2019 to select local Citizens Advice organisations indicate an increased reliance on volunteers, especially as the hours of paid full- and part-time staff continue to be reduced. Rape crisis centres have also typically always been staffed by volunteers, with approximately a third of centres in England and Wales relying solely on volunteer labour (Rath, 2008). The reliance on volunteers in the crisis support sector has been seen as the norm due to inadequate funding and resources (London Funders, 2019; Aguirre & Bolton, 2013).

In recent years, there has been an increasing reliance on volunteers in crisis support. Consider, for example, the youth sector, which encompasses social care services for children and young people. Previously this sector would have comprised of 75 percent paid staff and 25 percent volunteers, but these proportions have now reversed (London Funders, 2019). The significant reduction of paid staff has increased the sector's reliance on unpaid volunteers, which reflects the resource constraints and increased precariousness of the crisis support workforce.

Motivations for volunteering

More broadly speaking, the literature on general motivations for volunteering identifies three main categories of motivation: altruism, personal fulfilment and personal growth – including professional development (Aguirre & Bolton, 2013; Proteau & Wolff, 2008). Sometimes volunteering can be a means through which individuals can address, or possibly avoid, personal problems (Clary et al., 1998). An adverse effect of volunteering is that it can become a potential source of dependency for service users (The Warwick Consortium, 2019).

Though there is a smaller body of work on volunteering in crisis support, Aguirre and Bolton (2013) found six themes that underpin volunteers' motivations in crisis settings:

- Internal motivation to make an external difference – volunteering for altruistic purposes, as a way to give back to the community.
- Volunteer existentialism – finding a deeper sense of purpose, community or meaning through volunteering.

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- Lived experience – volunteering due to having personal experiences of certain crisis situations (e.g. suicide, sexual violence), using volunteering as a mechanism to continue the healing process.
- Internal or personal fulfilment – this includes volunteering because it is rewarding and helps volunteers through life changes they may be experiencing.
- Lack of support – feeling a lack of support in fulfilling their roles is a reason why people stop volunteering in crisis support.
- Lack of direction – related to the above point, people also stop volunteering in crisis-related roles due to a lack of direction from the crisis support organisation (e.g. clarifying a volunteer's role and responsibilities, especially around when and how to intervene).

What are the contemporary trends around the transition of beneficiaries to volunteers?

Research on the beneficiary to volunteer transition in crisis support largely focuses on volunteering at suicide hotlines and rape crisis centres. Within those two areas, lived experience, altruism, healing and a strong desire to give back are key motivators for beneficiaries transitioning to volunteers (Aguirre & Bolton, 2013; Hector & Aguirre, 2009; Steffen & Fothergill, 2009). In particular, those with lived experience were more likely to volunteer due to altruism, deep gratitude for having received help from services, and an obligatory sense to give back (Aguirre & Bolton, 2013).

A study of suicide hotline volunteers found that people who had experienced suicidal thoughts in the past retained clear memories of how calling a suicide hotline had once saved their life, which made them want to give back (Praetorius & Machtmes, 2005). Similarly, a study of volunteers at rape crisis centres found that survivors of sexual violence who sought support from rape crisis centres later volunteered to “*put something back in*” (Rath, 2008, p. 24). Survivors also described how sexual violence can be all-consuming, with lifelong impacts. Volunteering was seen as a way to turn their negative experiences into positive ones (Rath, 2008; Aguirre & Bolton, 2013).

For volunteering to be a means through which people with lived experience of hardship crisis can channel and transform negative experiences into something positive and healing, beneficiaries must be supported in the transition to volunteers. Some crisis support organisations, like Citizens Advice suggest a break period between accessing services and volunteering (Citizens Advice, 2019). The length of the break period can be determined on a case-by-case basis and is important to ensure that people with lived experience are emotionally ready to volunteer (Rath, 2008). This includes, for instance, having adequate coping skills and support systems, and being able to set boundaries between their personal lives and their volunteer work (Rath, 2008; London Funders, 2019).

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Other important aspects of supporting beneficiaries as they transition to volunteers include training and one-to-one support (Aguirre & Bolton, 2013; The Warwick Consortium, 2019, Revolving Doors, 2010; London Funders, 2019). Training can include general training on trauma and complex issues, as well as more practical training on how to establish and maintain boundaries with the people using services, and how to offer initial support until professional help is available (London Funders, 2019). Bespoke training for volunteers also provides an important opportunity to share knowledge around key safeguarding policies and procedures, as well as escalation routes if volunteers are unsure what to do (Dorning et al., 2016). This is particularly valuable because people may not have prior experience working with very vulnerable people, and therefore can encounter challenging situations that they may not be prepared to handle (NCVO, 2017). To be effective, training must be accessible to the target audience. For example, the Stroke Association provides volunteer training content that is accessible to people with aphasia as part of their volunteer-led community groups (Dorning et al., 2016).

Bespoke one-to-one support is also important to help beneficiaries in building confidence and developing practical skills, as well as helping them become aware of and link to other services when latent problems arise (The Warwick Consortium, 2019; Dorning et al., 2016). However, there is a delicate balance between providing former beneficiaries adequate support to build confidence and overcome social isolation while preventing dependency (The Warwick Consortium, 2019). This may be because people with lived experience of crisis can need more support to draw boundaries between their involvement with support services and their personal lives outside services – whether they are accessing or providing them (The Warwick Consortium, 2019; Aguirre & Bolton, 2013; Rath, 2008).

In what ways does the transition of beneficiaries to volunteers affect the support people receive?

A person's lived experience of crisis, gratitude for crisis support services that helped them in times of great need and altruistic motives to give back can make them a caring, compassionate and helpful volunteer. Organisations appreciate the value of volunteers with lived experience, as their direct experiences of crisis and accessing services can equip them with more empathy and insights about improving services (Aguirre & Bolton, 2013; Revolving Doors Agency, 2010). Volunteering can have a positive impact on former beneficiaries by giving them a sense of ownership of the services provided for them, improving their skills and abilities, building their confidence and helping with recovery (Revolving Doors Agency, 2010). There is also evidence that volunteering leads to reductions in social isolation and improved wellbeing for both the volunteers and the people they are supporting (Dorning et al., 2016).

However, as outlined in the TNLCF (2019b) [trauma informed approaches](#) literature scan and policy commentary, volunteers can be vulnerable and at risk of re-traumatisation, thereby preventing them from supporting those in crisis. This may be particularly true of volunteers who were once beneficiaries

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(Aguirre & Bolton, 2013; Rath, 2008). As such, it is essential to ensure that *everyone* involved, including paid staff and unpaid volunteers, has adequate support to enable them to effectively support those in crisis.

In addition to diminishing the availability and quality of beneficiary support, inadequate staff capacity to support, manage and guide volunteers also poses risks (Yanay & Yanay, 2008; Aguirre & Bolton, 2013). This includes:

- Volunteers losing interest in and stop volunteering altogether.
- Volunteering leading to re-traumatisation and therefore being counter-productive to a volunteer's health, wellbeing and healing, as well as their ability to provide support.

These risks could have a detrimental impact on beneficiary support. To improve beneficiary support, organisations require dedicated resources and sustained funding both to provide direct support to people using services and to ensure volunteers have the skills and backing required for their role (Aguirre & Bolton, 2013; London Funders, 2019).

What are some of the good practice examples of supporting beneficiaries transitioning to volunteers?

Two key elements of good practice to support beneficiaries transitioning to volunteers are (London Funders, 2019; The Warwick Consortium, 2019; Rath, 2008; Aguirre & Bolton, 2013; Revolving Doors Agency, 2010):

- Creating and resourcing formal structures and mechanisms that can help manage the beneficiary to volunteer transition. This should include volunteer specific training and one to one support.
- Building a peer support network for volunteers to get to know each other and provide informal support through the transition.

Formal structures and mechanisms to manage the beneficiary to volunteer transition

[Blackpool Better Start](#) (BBS) exemplifies the importance of formal structures and mechanisms to manage the beneficiary to volunteer transition (The Warwick Consortium, 2019). The vulnerability of volunteers and the level of training and support they require underscores the need to resource formal structures and mechanisms to ensure volunteer wellbeing (The Warwick Consortium, 2019; Aguirre & Bolton, 2013; Rath, 2008). BBS was established with TNLCF funding to help families to provide the best possible start for their babies and young children. In response to demands for more confidence and skills development to enable local people to assume leadership roles, BBS established a formal volunteer pathway. This is

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facilitated by BBS' Volunteer Academy and is designed to support transitions from service user to volunteer and from volunteer to paid staff.

The BBS volunteer pathway includes tailored one-to-one support, consisting of annual reviews and peer mentoring and support (The Warwick Consortium, 2019). During the one-to-one annual reviews, a staff member meets with a volunteer to check in about where they are at, whether or not volunteering is helping them meet their needs, and if there is anything they would like more support with. The annual reviews are also an opportunity for volunteers to learn about and explore opportunities to move into paid staff roles.

The BBS volunteer pathway includes peer mentoring and support, in which more experienced volunteers are paired with newer ones (The Warwick Consortium, 2019). This enables volunteers to get to know and informally support each other, especially as they may need support on similar types of issues (Dorning et al., 2016).

Peer support for volunteers

More experienced volunteers are an additional resource for newer volunteers to lean on for support and learn from. Peer support networks for volunteers can be effective in the absence of adequate staff guidance and support for volunteers – particularly new volunteers, as Voluntary Action Oldham found (NCVO, 2017). Voluntary Action Oldham established a peer support mechanism for volunteers during the induction stage of their project because staff, including the volunteer co-ordinator, had limited time to address new volunteers' questions and other concerns, e.g. what to do when volunteering, or when confronted with a challenging situation (Ibid). This peer support network has helped volunteers feel more comfortable in their role and increased volunteer retention (Ibid).

Conclusion

Volunteers play a crucial role in crisis support. This has increased in recent years, given the wider context of cuts to public services, resource constraints, heightened demand for crisis support and greater complexity of issues (TNLCF, 2019a; London Funders, 2019). Volunteers with lived experience can be especially effective in building rapport and empathising with service users, having directly experienced crisis and crisis support services. They may also have useful insights about how to improve service quality and delivery.

However, beneficiaries with lived experience may require ongoing support as they make their transition to volunteer, and throughout their volunteering, to minimise their risk of re-traumatisation. Two key ways that organisations can support beneficiaries transitioning to volunteers are:

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- Creating and resourcing formal structures and mechanisms that help manage the beneficiary to volunteer transition, including volunteer specific training and one to one support.
- Building a peer support network for volunteers to get to know each other, socialise and informally support each other through the transition.

In addition to peer support networks and formal structures, prioritising staff wellbeing is a necessary foundation to help organisations effectively manage and support the beneficiary to volunteer transition. Staff must also be adequately supported with their mental health and wellbeing to enable them, in turn, to be in a position to support volunteers' mental health and wellbeing (TNLCF, 2019a). This is particularly relevant when working with beneficiaries transitioning to volunteers, who may have greater vulnerabilities and support needs, given their previous experiences of crisis and trauma.

A [trauma-informed approach](#) may be relevant to ensure that beneficiaries are supported in their transition to volunteers (TNLCF, 2019b). Such an approach prioritises the safety of all people involved – beneficiaries and their loved ones, volunteers, paid staff and external partner organisations. This supports the beneficiary to volunteer transition by ensuring that organisations prioritise and dedicate resources (e.g. time, funding, training) to support the mental health and wellbeing of those providing services, as well as those receiving services. Ultimately, prioritising staff wellbeing, developing a trauma-informed approach and dedicating resources to support beneficiaries transitioning to volunteers will improve the ability of crisis support organisations to help people in crisis.

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If you have any comments or questions about any of the issues discussed in this literature scan, please get in touch with the Learning, Support and Evaluation team using the email address below, or via the Slack platform.



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