

Making a contribution and being well

VOLUNTEERS' MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING



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About this project

The experience of people in West Dunbartonshire and in other places is that becoming a volunteer is often good for people's well-being and is an important part of their recovery. But if there is unwelcome pressure or tensions, these activities can be unhelpful. The West Dunbartonshire Mental Health Consumer Issues Group, a sub group of the West Dunbartonshire Mental Health Strategy Group, commissioned this project to explore support needs for mental health service user and carer volunteers and to provide guidance on supporting volunteers in their role.

The Consumer Issues Group, which brings together members of the Mental Health Forums, NHS staff and local authority staff, decided to consult with the volunteers about their support needs. They asked Outside the Box to carry out this project for them. Outside the Box is an independent community development support organisation which has worked with local mental health groups in West Dunbartonshire and in other parts of Scotland. The members of the Consumer Issues Group gave advice on the planning and completion of the project.

Funding was provided by the West Dunbartonshire Partnership and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde through the West Dunbartonshire Mental Health Awareness Group.

The aims of this project were to:

- describe the roles and tasks people are undertaking, what the good aspects of these are, for the people taking part, and any concerns or difficulties they face
- establish what support needs they have, in their volunteering roles or in other aspects of their lives, which affect their health and well-being
- suggest ways in which these support needs can be met.

The definition of user or carer volunteer for this project was someone who takes on one or more of a range of tasks:

- organising self-help groups
- being a peer advocate
- being on the committee for user-led projects
- being a committee member of a Mental Health Forum
- participation in partnership groups with the council or NHS to represent the views of other people who have mental health problems.

How we gathered the information

The information in this report came from 3 main sources.

- We had a discussion session with experienced volunteers, to identify the main issues. This was the basis of the questions we then asked other people.
- We contacted all the volunteers through the mental health projects and invited them to contribute their views through completing a questionnaire or coming to a focus group. The meetings were held in Clydebank and Dumbarton, on an afternoon and an evening in each place, to give people choice around what was convenient for them.
- We looked at what people in the West Dunbartonshire area had said about their support needs in previous consultations and reports. We also looked at what people in other parts of Scotland have said on these issues.

Views on mental health services

The main focus of this project is people's roles as volunteers, rather than gathering people's views around service provision. People did tell us about the range and quality of support for people around their mental health problems, because this is the context for much of the work of the volunteers.

We produced a summary of the points people raised and have fed this back to inform the on-going work of the Consumer Issues Group. All of the points raised have been identified through the existing consultations and the feedback through the Mental Health Forums.

How and why people got involved

Overall, 22 people took part in the consultation, out of a possible 45. Most people were involved in a few groups (1-3), but there were 4 people who were each active in 6 or more groups or formal meetings, sometimes as a member but usually as a committee member or in another leading role.

Four people mentioned a voluntary activity which was not specifically about mental health matters. All the other voluntary activities were focussed on mental health matters or on people's use of health and/or social care services.

The pattern that many people described was that they became a member of one self-help or peer support group. One – or more – of three things then happened.

- Some people started as a member of a group and then found they were getting more involved in supporting other people or running the group.
- Some people were then asked to be a committee member at the group.

- Some people found that they were also helping in other projects to support a self-help group or to take on a related activity such as being a peer advocate.

The most frequent route was getting involved in a peer support group because of the person's own circumstances or as a way of managing symptoms or an illness. Workers such as CPNs and social workers who referred people to the groups or encouraged them to take part were often mentioned.

Other reasons for people getting involved reflected the focus of particular groups:

- Good for own health and well-being
- To build own confidence and self-esteem
- To use own experiences in a positive way
- To find out about the proposed changes within a care service and/or to have a say in the future of that service.
- Having a role – the person was not able to do other work, or was looking for something after retiring, for example

- Opportunity to learn skills and qualifications – a way of getting more options and opportunities for the future
- Believed in ethos of service-user led group.

These are consistent with the reasons volunteers in all settings have for getting involved.

“I was referred by my CPN. I got a lot from the group and was happy to join the committee.”

“To share my experience and help other people.”

Why people stay involved

People who are involved in peer support activities frequently mentioned the support they get from others and seeing benefits for other people as reasons for continuing to be involved with those groups.

The reasons that people mentioned most often for staying involved are:

- Friends made at the group
- Participation and being busy is a way of reducing their own anxiety and worry
- Wanting better /more relevant services for people who live with mental health problems, and peer support or user-led services being part of that range of services.

These are the other reasons that keep people involved:

- Like to be busy
- Self and other people gaining confidence, etc
- Being able to help other people

- Support I get from other members of the group
- Enjoy meeting people and learning new things/skills
- Be involved, part of the community
- Want to give something back.

“The friends I have made at the group help me with my illness, and on good days I can help them and other people.”

“I want to be involved and part of society.”

“It helps me stay well.”

Benefits of being a volunteer

All of the people who took part in this project were positive about their participation in the user-led or peer support activities and enjoyed being involved.

We asked people about the good aspects for them of being involved in these projects.

The most frequent answers were:

- Helping other people
- Meeting people and making friendships and/or getting know in the local area.

People mentioned many benefits around their own mental health or self-esteem:

- Giving something back
- Keeps me occupied
- Feeling valued
- Bringing a structure to people’s day – own and others
- Not thinking about symptoms
- Getting confidence
- Learning new things/skills.

“I enjoy working as a team. When I overcome challenging situations this improves my own self esteem.”

“It has given me support and a routine to rebuild my life.”

“Seeing people recovering.”

“Having something to do, a purpose, a distraction from symptoms, giving something back.”

Difficulties and concerns

Only 3 people said that there were no difficulties or concerns for them around their work as a volunteer.

For the others, the concern that was raised most frequently was that there were not enough volunteers to share the work, and as a result the person – and others – felt they were getting swamped and feeling under pressure.

Another concern raised by several people was finding the balance between the volunteering role and associated responsibilities and managing their own mental health and well-being. A few people were having current or recent difficulties in coping with symptoms or their illness.

Scope for user volunteers

People were clear that there were many more opportunities for people who have experience of using mental health services to be part of delivering or at least designing services.

Some people thought it should be an aspect of all or most services. Other people listed particular ways where user volunteers would be a big asset.

- Having more people to help you look forward.
- Helping each other keep well, for example find ways to cope with the bad days.
- People to talk to about how you are feeling.
- Give views on type/quality of services, what keeps you well afterwards.
- Visit people in touch with services now.
- Support for people who have no family and friends – someone to talk to, share your worries with.
- Supporting other people – self-help groups.
- Peer advocacy.
- Signposting – information about services and being able to refer/point people to services.
- Organising holiday projects, days out for people.
- Working alongside mental health teams.

“It needs respect from mental health staff if user/peer volunteers are to have an impact.”

“Someone to encourage you in your life and to believe in yourself.”

“Yes – we need to look at it in detail.”

“Where wouldn’t volunteers be a big asset?”

Keeping well and making a difference

In the initial discussion with the experienced volunteers, they identified a list of things that keep them well and which they thought made a difference for other people. When we asked the other people, the great majority of people agreed that these were important for them. On one item – opportunities to learn new skills – everyone who responded said it was important. For all the other items there are a few people for whom this is not important, or at least not essential.

It is a useful checklist for individual user-led groups and representative groups, and for committees or groups that seek the views of service users and carers, to look at whether they can build in more of these opportunities and sources of support to what they do. But it needs to be remembered that some people will not be looking for every type of support.

- Making a difference for other people.
- Being valued as volunteer.
- Opportunities to learn new skills.
- Friends or other people who care about me and look out for me.

- Being able to cope with my illness or symptoms.
- Support from self-help groups.
- Support through crises or other difficult times.
- Advice and support around the volunteer role from people who understand about mental health.
- Being able to work as a volunteer in the ways that suits the individual – e.g. type of activity, where and when people do it.
- Encouragement from other members of the peer support or user-led group.
- Encouragement and support from people in the mental health system.
- Being able to share the volunteer work, not getting over-loaded.
- Practical resources such as computers, training, expenses.
- Advice about welfare benefits, e.g. how volunteering fits.
- Advice from other user volunteers who have experience.

“Each person has to be able to get the support that is right for them.”

Sources of support

We asked people who they would like to get this support from. There are some sources of support that most people value and use. For other potential sources of support, a significant minority of people were clear that they would prefer not to use these sources of information or support, or only if there was the right focus.

A few people commented that they did not know what was available – so the starting point was better information about possible sources of information, training and support.

Actions that volunteers can do themselves

Take responsibility for your own mental health and well-being.

- Look at the things that keep you well – such as friends, space for yourself, other volunteer activities that are not all about mental health, time for hobbies, fresh air and exercise, as well as the voluntary activities which are related to mental health. Get a good balance that works for you.
- Get some people around you who will help you keep well and will tell you of you are beginning to get unwell.
- You can use the checklist in this report to plan your own support.
- There are ideas on ways to plan how you can keep well in the booklet Supporting People’s Mental Health and Well-being.

Take responsibility for your role as a volunteer.

- Make sure that you have a description of the role that is as clear – or as flexible – as you need it to be.

- Ask for training - and not just at the beginning. Look for opportunities to learn and keep up your skills throughout your time as a volunteer.
- Ask for time out, or maybe changing the type or level of activities you do, if you need it.
- Tell people at the project if you would like them to do something which will help your well-being. And make suggestions that would also help the well-being of everyone who is a volunteer at the project.

Keep track of the impact of what you are doing as a volunteer.

- Recognise the impact for yourself, such as what you are learning. Many projects take time each year to let each volunteer look back at how the year or so has gone for them. But in any event, you can have a ‘stop and reflect’ yourself or with a friend and make a list of what you have learned, where you are more confident, and so on.

Examples of the impact for volunteers

I went on the training sessions. I learned about the new Mental Health Act and that made me more confident of giving better support to the people in the group. I was worried beforehand about mixing with a lot of people I didn't know. But I coped better than I had expected and I got personal benefits from taking part in the training.

- Keep a note of the things that you have helped change or make happen.

Examples of the things volunteers do and help achieve

I was an advocate for 5 people over the year, and I helped them have their say.

I helped develop the training pack for new volunteers.

I organised the consultation with women in our area, so I helped them have their say and get better services.

I ran the support group. I helped the 3 new people feel more relaxed and take part. All 8 of us helped each other with our own well-being and got more confident.

I was one of the organisers of our conference. 50 people came together and had a great time.

- Think about how you can tell other people, to encourage them.
- Remember that it is always hard to see what is changing when you are in the middle of it.

Things that the projects can do

Help volunteers look after their own health and well-being.

- Make sure that your volunteers know that the project recognises their health and well-being needs – for their mental health and physical health.
- Look at the things you can do to support volunteers in their well-being and encourage them in making use of other sources of support. The West Dunbartonshire Supporting People's Mental Health and Well-being booklet will be useful here.

- Give information about services that promote people's health and well-being to volunteers as well as to staff and to the people who use your project.
- Make sure that the volunteers at your project have copies of the checklist to help people plan their own support, and make time to help people use this if they want this.
- You might think the volunteers at your project would benefit from other people – such as staff in the Mental Health teams or support providers – being more aware of the work people do as volunteers. If so, give these staff members copies of the checklist for care providers that are in this report. You could also put together some information about what the project and its volunteers do and contribute – either on your own or as a joint effort with other groups in the area.

Take responsibility for your role in supporting the volunteers in their volunteer role.

- Provide training and support, both for new and experienced volunteers.

- Make sure people have a clear description of their role, so they know what they have to do and what support the project will provide. Keep these roles under review as far as possible, as some people may want to take on more responsibility or contribute in different ways over time.
- Make sure that the staff who have responsibility for supervising and supporting volunteers have the training and support they need to do this role well.
- Use the checklist for groups to plan for the support needs of their volunteers and members.

Keep track of the impact of the project's and of the volunteers' contribution.

- Make sure that the people who are volunteers are involved in any reviews of what the project as a whole has achieved – for example, in planning the annual report.
- Look at ways you can gather feedback from the people you work with and what differences the project and the

- Ask the people in West Dunbartonshire Council and West Dunbartonshire Community Health Partnership – and other organisations – what impacts they see from your activities.
- Every so often, look back over what you have helped to change over the past 1, 2 or 3 years.
- Look at what you can do to help explain to the members of your group about the changes that are happening, so they can see the ways in which they and other people are contributing.
- Remember that it is always hard to see what is changing when you are in the middle of it.

There are checklists intended to help individual people who are volunteers and projects which work with volunteers work out what support and information they would find helpful.

There are also checklists to help other teams think about what they can do to support volunteer activists and respond to the issues that people are raising.

You can download the checklists for free at www.otbds.org/contribute

Things that each formal group that has a user and/or carer contribution can do

Help volunteers look after their own health and well-being.

- Identify someone associated with the formal committee or group who will be a link for the service, or for carer members, so that people have an easy and informal route for raising any issues around their health and well-being. Part of this person's role should be actively looking out for people and for example asking if they want to take a break or step back for a bit.
- Plan the work of the group to take account of the health and well-being of the members. Examples might include avoiding situations where people are under pressure to read and absorb a lot of information at very short notice, long meetings where there is no break or refreshments, or very early or late starts. (The Partners in Change Meetings Checklists and National Standards on Community Engagement are useful here.)

Take responsibility for your role in supporting the service user and carer members of groups

- Make sure that the people who bring a service user or carer perspective to formal groups know what their role is – for example, are they representing other people, or contributing their own experience and views? Also make sure that other people know the volunteers' remit and roles.
- Make sure that the service user and carer members have reliable information about the roles of other people on the group: who they are, which bodies they come from or represent, and how to get in touch with them between meetings.
- Provide training and learning opportunities for the group, so the service user and carer members and everyone else is comfortable working together and able to make a good contribution
- Use the checklists on www.otbds.org/contribute to help you plan how to contribute to meeting the support needs of each local group with a significant number of active volunteers.

Keep track of the impact of the contribution from people who use service and carers

- Look at ways for the group to identify and celebrate its achievements – for example, in getting an issue recognised as a priority, getting other bodies to take up an issue, contributing to consultation papers. The checklist for an annual review session will be useful here.
- Every year or so, tell people across the area what the impact has been of the feedback and comments received from people who use services and their carers. For example, look at producing a short paper with the Mental Health Forum which celebrates what has changed and what is planned in the coming year.
- Every so often, look back at what has been achieved over the past 5 years or so, as some changes have a long time span.

You can download the checklists for free at www.otbds.org/contribute

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West Dunbartonshire Partnership

West Dunbartonshire Community Health Partnership

West Dunbartonshire Council



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You can download the full report and checklists at
www.otbds.org/contribute

Outside the Box can point you to other useful sources of information about mental health and well-being, and about ways for people to influence what happens in their local area.

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