



RUSSELL WEBSTER

# Volunteering as a service user in the UK

Findings from a cross-sector survey  
Executive Summary

Funded by the Oak Foundation



Spring 2021

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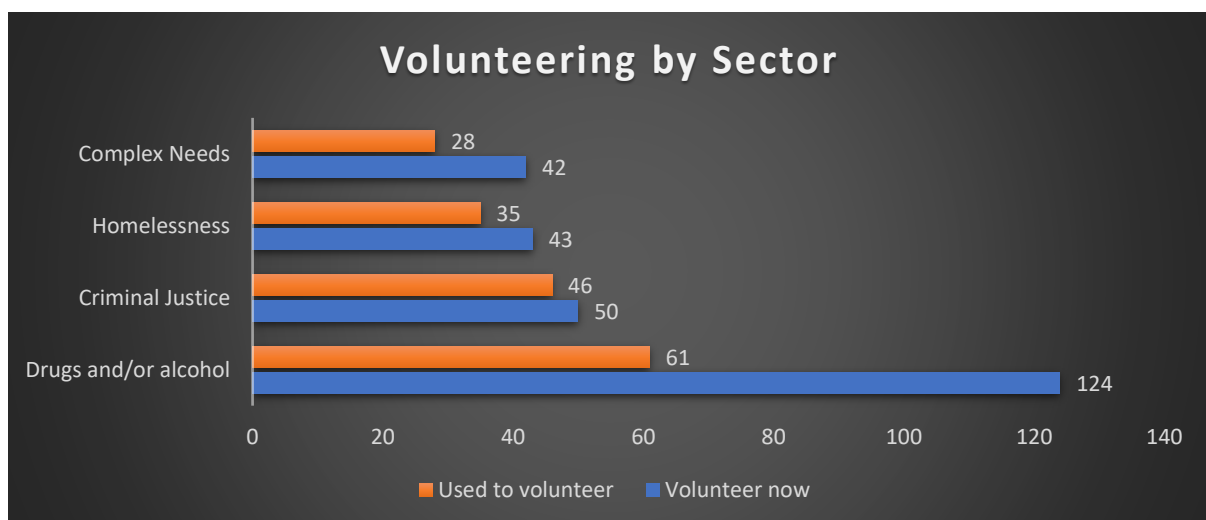
## Findings from a cross-sector survey – Executive Summary

### The survey

Myself, Russell Websters in partnership with the Revolving Doors Agency, conducted an online survey into the experiences of service users who go on to volunteer as peer mentors or any other role with helping services. The survey focused on service user volunteers in the criminal justice, drug & alcohol, homelessness and complex needs sectors. The purpose of the survey was to inform a new best practice guide to enable organisations to provide the best support to service users working as volunteers and for service users to know what they should expect from the services they volunteer for. This guide will be co-produced by people with lived experience and Russell Webster.

### Take-up and limitations

The survey was completed by 253 people; 70% of these individuals had used drug and alcohol services, 32% had lived experience of the criminal justice system, 23% had used homelessness services and 19% had used services for people with complex needs. This cohort also had very extensive experience of volunteering in this sector, with many people volunteering for more than one service. Seventy three percent of our survey respondents had experience of volunteering for drug and alcohol services, 38% volunteered in the criminal justice system, 31% had volunteered for homelessness services and 28% had volunteered services for people with complex needs.



Many respondents volunteered in a more than one role; 58% were peer mentors, 25% were peer support workers, 21% experts by experience and 5% peer coaches.

It is clear that the survey succeeded in reaching out to people with substantial experience of volunteering who were also heavily committed to their volunteering. Survey respondents had been volunteering for between a few months and over 20 years with an average (median) volunteering history of two years. People volunteered for between three and more than 100 hours<sup>1</sup> per month with an average (median) commitment of 25 hours per month. Our cohort estimated that between them they volunteered for over 9,000 hours in a typical month.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this survey. Although the sample size of 253 is reasonable, the cohort who answered our questions are more likely to be male (60% respondents), White British (80%), older (three quarters were aged over 40) live in the South of England (43%) and volunteer in the drug and alcohol treatment sector (55%). The survey consequently gives much less of a representative voice to younger people, those from BAME communities and those living in other parts of the UK.

## Findings

We asked people to provide us with information about the quality of support they had received in a number of different areas; for each area we asked them to rate the quality of service they had received on a four-point scale before asking them to provide additional information about any particularly positive or negative experiences in that area. The areas we asked about were:

- Training
- Support
- Help in developing work skills
- Help in becoming more employable
- Financial support

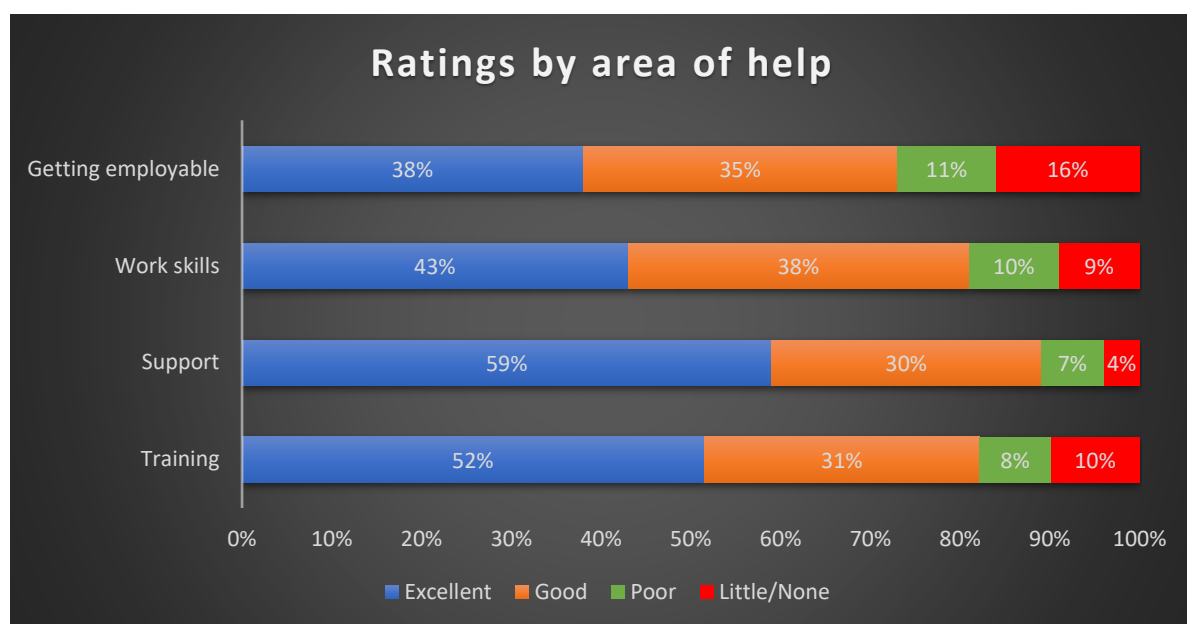
We also asked how much control people felt they had over the AMOUNT and TYPE of voluntary work they did.

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<sup>1</sup> A small number of people misread the question, reporting that they volunteered more than 1,000 hours in a month, these figures were disregarded for the purpose of the calculations in this report.

## Overall levels of satisfaction

We summarised survey respondents' experiences across the four areas where we asked them to rate the quality of help they received and found that overall people were pleased with the help they received although there were different levels of satisfaction with different areas of help. We calculated people's level of satisfaction (defined as rating help excellent or good) as 88% for the support they received, 83% for training, 81% for help with work skills and 73% for help with getting more employable.



## Experiences of Training

A large majority (83%) of our respondents rated the training they received as volunteers as excellent or good. The most common positive experiences were: training tailored to the volunteering role, training which was flexible and adjusted to suit needs and included opportunities to self-reflect and develop new skills and approaches. People valued opportunities to do the same training programmes as paid staff, regular supervision and opportunities for further training, in particular training which led to a qualification and supported career progression.

The most common negative experiences were: training which reflected the needs of organisations rather than volunteers, little supervision and an expectation to be ready to volunteer without time to process training. People were frustrated when training was not tailored to the volunteering role, and was not accredited.

There was an appreciation of the necessity of online training throughout the pandemic but this was felt to be not as effective as face-to-face training.

### Experiences of Support

An even larger majority (89%) of our respondents rated the support they received as volunteers as excellent or good. The most common positive experiences were: staff proactively reaching out to offer help rather than expecting service users to request it, being treated as an equal and getting support from the wider staff team where needed, staff taking the time to explore wellbeing and develop a personal development plan; a culture where support from other volunteers was the norm was also appreciated.

The most common complaints were: a lack of communication through the pandemic, turnover of volunteer coordinators, staff having insufficient time to support volunteers appropriately, not treated equally to staff, lack of peer support, being asked to share one's story without sufficient support to do so safely and without follow-up.

### Experiences of help developing skills

Again a substantial majority (81%) rated the help they received to develop skills as excellent or good. People valued: tailored support and advice for developing skills relevant to the role, funding opportunities for additional skills development (e.g. attending conferences or new courses), encouragement through 1:1 mentoring with a staff member, and dedicated progression pathways within services.

The most common complaints were a lack of focus and consideration for personal growth and development, few opportunities offered beyond initial training, and not being provided with the same development opportunities as staff.

### Experiences of help with employability

A smaller majority (73%) of our respondents rated the help they received to become more employable as excellent or good. Nevertheless, positive experiences were common with 56 of our cohort having found paid employment on the back of their volunteering experiences. People valued encouragement from staff (including with internal opportunities), career development advice tailored to their interests, support developing interview and CV writing skills, opportunities to shadow staff members and an organisational culture which placed increasing employability at the heart of the volunteering programme.

Negative experiences typically related to not being provided with any support or having opportunities obstructed (e.g. not being offered a reference or raised expectations around working internally, only to be barred due to a previous conviction).

### Experiences of financial support

We also asked people about their experience of receiving financial support in return for their volunteering. Most organisations had efficient systems for reimbursing volunteers for their costs and some were sensitive to the restricted cash-flow of people surviving on benefits. Bus passes (rather than bus fares) and refreshments at meetings were appreciated. Some organisations were very generous in providing funding for computers and training courses. By contrast, a substantial minority of organisations had slow and cumbersome administrative systems which meant that volunteers had to wait to get back the money they had already spent on travel and other expenses.

### Control over voluntary work

In general, volunteers have more control over how often they work and what sort of work they do than paid employees. We wanted to check whether service user volunteers were given the same level of control. A large majority were happy with their control over the amount and type of voluntary work they did, although more than one in six people did perform tasks which they did not want to do on occasion.

Key aspects of people being happy with the amount and type of voluntary work they did included: organisations being proactive about volunteers' wellbeing; clear structures for ensuring that volunteers are happy with their workload and organisations explicitly offering an enhanced level of care for people in recovery

There were three main themes among people who were not happy about their control over their voluntary work: pressure to do more work from the organisation, internal pressure to do more work from volunteers themselves and no choice over the nature of the voluntary work or an expectation of performing menial tasks.

The findings from this survey will provide the evidence base for the best practice guide which will be co-produced over the Spring and Summer of 2021. The guide will provide practical advice, based on the lived experience of service user volunteers, for delivering an effective and supportive volunteering programme.

## Summary

The main common themes across the survey were that service user volunteers flourished when they were treated with respect and valued not just by volunteer coordinators but the rest of staff teams. They respected a proactive approach which made support and training easy to access and which was personalised to individual needs and goals.

Finally, they appreciated organisations keeping a balance between a duty of care – ensuring that volunteers were not pressurised or tempted to take on too much work, especially in the early days of their recovery journeys – and encouraging and motivating them to have high aspirations for future study and work prospects.

The experiences shared via the survey will provide the basis for the best practice guide which will be co-produced over the Spring and Summer of 2021. The guide will provide practical advice, based on the lived experience of service user volunteers, for delivering an effective and supportive volunteering programme.