



## **ESRC Seminar Series**

### **‘The Third Sector in Criminal Justice’**

**Seminar Two – June 28<sup>th</sup> 2011**

# **‘Volunteering in Criminal Justice’**

**Keele University**

**Report**

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## Programme

- 9.00-10.00 Registration and refreshments
- 10.00-10.15 Welcome and introduction  
*Mary Corcoran (Keele University)*
- 10.15-11.30 Volunteering partnerships in criminal justice: statutory and voluntary sector perspectives  
*Chris Lee (Dorset Police)*
- 11.30–11.45 Break
- 11.45–1.00 Volunteering by offenders: views from prisons and community-based partnerships  
*Michelle Jaffe (Keele University)*  
*David Gamble (Leicestershire & Rutland Probation Trust)*
- 1.00-2.00 Lunch
- 2.00-3.15 Volunteering in criminal justice: some challenges and pitfalls (chair: Mary Corcoran)  
*Jurgen Grotz (Roehampton University)*  
*John Thornhill (Magistrates' Association)*
- 3.00-3.45 Break out session: Opportunities for and limits to volunteer involvement in criminal justice
- 3.45-4.00 Feedback and summary

## **Introduction**

The second of six ESRC seminars on the involvement of the third sector in criminal justice was held at Keele University on the 28<sup>th</sup> June 2011. The focus of the day was on volunteering in criminal justice. The event was attended by representatives from voluntary organisations, government departments, statutory bodies, academics based at Universities and research institutes and research students.

## **Summary of content**

The day's discussions scoped the use of volunteers in the Police, the Magistracy, the Prison and Probation services and the community, with particular consideration given to benefits, challenges and impacts. The discussion concluded that volunteering in criminal justice held the potential for generating significant benefits, not least in empowering individuals, but also in providing a different 'authentic' philosophy for engaging citizens and offenders; a philosophy which appears to be perceived as worthy of trust by users, particularly where statutory intervention is viewed as a barrier. Yet there was a note of caution that issues of credibility, accountability and blurring of boundaries between 'criminal justice' and 'social engagement' should not be overlooked to the detriment of individuals and organisations.

## **Defining volunteering 'work'**

Several presentations focused on case studies of projects which used volunteers. The first discussion centred on debates as to what 'volunteering' is. It discussed issues relating to whether volunteering is defined simply in terms of work without remuneration or whether there are other issues to consider such as the motivation of volunteers and the responsibilities placed upon them. It was acknowledged that the risks and challenges that arise in volunteer work mirror those in paid roles. Therefore, they arise not necessarily as a result of volunteering per se, but as a consequence of the roles which are undertaken. Delegates also discussed what roles it is appropriate for volunteers to undertake. A number of questions arose in the discussion such as: Do volunteers consider volunteering as different to paid work, and if so in what ways? Should volunteers undertake the same or similar tasks as paid workers? Are citizens being asked to provide professional services for free? How are volunteers 'rewarded' for their volunteering? Should volunteers be paid or receive benefits for the work that they do? Who is accountable/responsible when things go wrong - the volunteer, trainer, organisation or government?

There was a consensus that volunteering should not be used to fill roles that had been previously undertaken by paid employees and it was acknowledged that there have been concerns from Trade Unions that volunteers may be used to replace people's jobs. Working conditions of volunteering were also examined. A discord was identified between the nature of some service level agreements, which precisely define levels of service and standards; and the lack of corresponding contracted standards for the volunteers who will carry out the work.

## **The question of 'benefit' in volunteering**

The notion of volunteering as a recruitment tool in particular was explored at length in the morning's sessions, with reference to claims that volunteering can serve a useful purpose in familiarising potential employees with the realities of working in the criminal justice process and preparing them for new roles and responsibilities, as well as offering valuable experience. It was also recognised that it reduced training costs and drop out rates.

Consideration was given to the potential benefits which volunteers can bring to organisations, including that they may provoke positive changes in perspective and service delivery as well as increasing social diversity and bringing with them community perspectives on crime, safety and policing. Equally there is a danger that volunteers themselves can become institutionalised. The social backgrounds of volunteers were explored. The relatively narrow social backgrounds and lack of diversity of volunteers was commented upon and its implications for organisations and criminal justice policy and practice were discussed. Questions were also raised about the uncritical assumption that volunteering was wholly about bringing benefits and some of the challenges were explored. These included volunteer misconduct, burnout, posttraumatic stress disorder and in extreme cases; death. Within the context of criminal justice specifically, the compatibility of risk management processes and past criminal records were considered, along with imbalances of power, instances of coercion and the potential for involuntary relationships. The discussion unpacked the notion of 'benefit' by taking a closer look at who benefits from volunteering, what is a 'benefit' and who defines what is or is not beneficial, and on what terms?

## **Offenders and ex-offenders as volunteers**

Offenders and ex-offenders as volunteers in the criminal justice process was explored at length, drawing on practical examples from peer-mentoring projects in both prison and probation settings. Discussions focused on volunteer motivations, the level of training and support they received, and the benefits of and barriers to using peers as volunteers.

Common benefits of using offenders and ex-offenders were discussed including the additional support provided by volunteers; perceived increases in skills, confidence and self-esteem amongst volunteers; and a notion that peers offer unique contextual empathy and can therefore bridge a gap between staff and service users.

Common barriers identified were the incompatibility of risk management processes and criminal records checks with efforts to engage offenders or citizens with criminal records to volunteer. The discussion also alighted on the obstacles encountered by volunteers who were prisoners working in prisons and how reliant they were on the support of staff.

The notion of identity arose as an important theme with reference to what constitutes a 'peer mentor' and whether this changes over time. The issue was raised whether

offenders who were peer mentors had to confront a shift in their personal identity in order to make the transition from offender to citizen/volunteer. Citizenship was also a key theme more generally in relation to participation, notions of altruism and working for free. Citizenship was seen as central to the operation of justice both as magistrates and Special Constables.

## **Challenges and pitfalls**

The afternoon session considered in greater depth some of the issues that arise through voluntary or third sector involvement in criminal justice settings.

The benefits of volunteering were acknowledged throughout the day. It was noted that a large body of literature highlights a range of benefits of volunteering for volunteers, service users, communities, and society – economically, socially, physically and psychologically. It was noted, however, that the literature is not balanced because it does not consider, to the same extent, some of the possible downfalls, risks, burdens or negative experiences associated with volunteering. It was concluded, therefore, that volunteering should not be viewed as a remedy for all. Potential challenges were noted and included volunteers providing poor services, breaching codes of practice and regulations, acting inappropriately towards others, suffering from stress, or burn out. It was noted that many organisations have practices in place to deal with disciplinary matters, and have support structures in place for volunteers; they therefore recognise that there are challenges involved in using volunteers. However, it was acknowledged that there is a tendency and temptation for stakeholders to stress the positive outcomes and not to be as open to the possible challenges of volunteering but that potential problems should also be considered and monitored.

In some criminal justice settings volunteering may not be wholly voluntary and an element of coercion might exist. This applies, for example, to volunteer prisoners who cannot withdraw from their role as Samaritans because they cannot leave the prison environment. There may be other reasons why offenders, in particular, might experience difficulty in withdrawing from volunteer work due to the incentives associated with their volunteer work such as gaining parole, or complying with parole conditions. This raises questions about the extent to which offenders are empowered by volunteering, or coerced into it. Therefore delegates acknowledged that there are additional issues that need to be considered when volunteering is taking place in the criminal justice system.

A number of further challenges were highlighted throughout the day. 'Mission drift' was discussed with reference to the potential for government to damage volunteering despite stating that third sector activities are strongly encouraged as part of its localism and 'Big Society' agendas. It was acknowledged that organisations might be in danger of abandoning their own visions and missions in favour of government agendas and targets by bidding for service provision contracts. This in turn threatens their independence and their distinctiveness. Delegates also expressed concern that third sector provision was viewed simply as cheap alternative resource whilst acknowledging

the volunteering was not a free or necessarily cheap because of the infrastructure requirements. At the same time it was acknowledged that the sector was being asked to professionalise and to take on more responsibility for individuals being processed through the criminal justice system.