

George House Trust volunteers help to shift attitudes



George House Trust is a charity which provides support services for people living with HIV in the north west of England. The charity was started by gay men in 1985, and now supports over 2000 men, women and children each year

With a core team of 16 paid staff, the charity relies heavily on the contribution of over 100 volunteers, and for the last five years has employed a Volunteer and Development Manager, to ensure that help is targeted where it is most needed.

Volunteers help with a range of activities, from assisting at drop in sessions, to providing short term mentoring and befriending, driving, counselling, and translating support, and all based on meeting individuals' needs.

Image: Graeme Vaughan graeme@photogas.com

The charity holds the Investing in Volunteers standard, which means that recruits are well supported, trained and matched carefully with service users. The volunteers provide support to complement the work of statutory services, and play a vital role in providing a holistic framework to tackle social exclusion and promote health and wellbeing. George House Trust takes referrals from a range of Health and Social Care professionals, including HIV Social Workers, Genito Urinary Medicine Clinics and other Primary Care Trust (PCT) staff.

Moving people back to independence

George House Trust has a strong track record of involving service users as volunteers. 40% of its volunteers are people living with HIV. Highlights from its 2008-2009 Volunteer Survey show:

- **82%** of volunteers said their confidence had increased
- **75%** felt they had improved social and communication skills
- **51%** had developed vocational/job related skills
- **49%** said their mental health and wellbeing had improved.

This is clear evidence that the Volunteer Programme not only benefits those who access support, but also impacts positively on the health, wellbeing and social inclusion of volunteers themselves.

“Volunteering has helped me to re-identify what being +ve is, and taught me that the glass is still half full.”

GHT Survey Respondent

“My volunteering role at GHT has paved my way through to paid employment. I am very grateful to staff...for giving all the support that I needed.”

GHT Survey Respondent

Laura Hamilton, the charity's Volunteer and Development Manager, explains how a recent impact report²⁸ has provided clear evidence of the value of volunteering, and shows that their service user involvement strategy works:

“The impact on volunteers can be really dramatic; we see people become more positive about their health and the possibilities open to them. We have seen people access our services, and then go on to become a mentor to then help other service users. People really do come on a journey.”

²⁸ A Positive Difference: The Impact of Volunteering at George House Trust www.ght.org.uk/about-us/22/volunteering

CASE STUDY: George House Trust

In the last two years, George House Trust has made some big changes to its volunteer-delivered mentoring and befriending programme with a greater emphasis on short term support that encourages a speedy return to independence. For some service users, becoming a volunteer themselves may form part of that journey back to a full life with HIV.

"We have volunteers here who then go on to volunteer in other organisations that are not HIV focused. We also do a lot of work in helping people to move towards independence so they get back to doing the things they loved before being diagnosed."

Financial impact of freely given time

The report also points to the level of 'in kind' contributions from those who help. In 2008-2009, volunteers at GHT gave over 7,000 hours of time. In financial terms, this amounts to a contribution over £72,000 a year to the organisation (calculated using the Volunteer Investment and Value Audit)²⁹.

As a result of effective volunteer management systems, staff are more confident in using volunteers in a variety of ways, ranging from 'front of house' activities so they act as first point of contact with service users, to helping with administrative tasks.

Volunteers also provide help with awareness raising, to challenge misinformation through George House Trust's Positive Speakers programme, and through distributing information and campaign literature at community events throughout the region. The impact of the positive speakers has been dramatic since the pilot programme began in 2008.

Thirty two sessions were delivered to a wide range of groups including schools, FE colleges, healthcare professionals and health and social care trainees. Evaluation showed that the speakers helped to shift attitudes among all audience groups. Evidence of any negative or stigmatising attitudes was almost completely eradicated amongst participants within a healthcare professionals group following the session. One delegate described what she had heard as:

"Excellent, great insight from client perspective. I will try to keep in mind the difference between appearing

empathetic and sympathetic. Also lead by example when it comes to treating patients without prejudice."
Qualified nurse, Manchester University

There was an equally powerful impact on the speakers themselves. When surveyed after the pilot, all speakers interviewed voiced positive perspectives on their HIV status, all felt more confident, and all felt more comfortable talking about HIV with people in their personal life than they were prior to becoming a Positive Speaker.

"Empowering, that's the only way I can describe it"
GHT Positive Speaker

Use of volunteers' professional skills

Volunteers have also been invaluable with providing strategic support. George House Trust worked closely with the Cranfield Trust, which provides management consultancy to eligible groups, by linking them with skilled managers from the commercial sector who act as volunteers. Staff made the most of being able to access free professional expertise including specialist HR support around advertising and recruiting a new Chief Executive. They are also looking to work with a Cranfield Trust volunteer around developing effective performance management systems.

The organisation has also drawn on the professional skills and expertise of its own body of volunteers. For example, a volunteer with marketing expertise has offered support around undertaking a communications audit and developing a strategy. Another volunteer has provided guidance around staff learning and development systems.

This gave the charity a useful insight into making the best use of volunteers' professional skills, as Laura concludes:

"If someone with specialist skills volunteers at George House Trust, we look at how we can match this with our strategic needs. Our recent experience with Cranfield Trust meant we could tap into some excellent HR expertise at no cost. Volunteers give us access to expertise and skills that we simply could not afford to buy in."

To find out more about GHT see www.ght.org.uk

For more information about the Cranfield Trust see www.cranfieldtrust.org

²⁹ www.volunteering.org.uk/WhatWeDo/Projects+and+initiatives/Employer+Supported+Volunteering/Resources/Evaluation/VIVA