

Shaping the future

of volunteering in

the homelessness sector

May 2021



**MILTON
KEYNES** | HOMELESSNESS
PARTNERSHIP

LOOKING AT VOLUNTEERING THROUGH THE LENS OF THE HOMELESSNESS SECTOR

MKHP Findings from the Volunteer Forum

*Uncovering the
perceptions and realities to
assess the level of 'need'
of mental health support
for MK volunteers working
in the homeless sector*

May 2021

This report outlines the findings from the "Shaping the Future of Volunteering in the Homelessness Sector" Forums

There were **two forums**

One with **volunteers** within the homelessness sector

One with **personnel** from **key organisations**

The aims of the forums were:

- 1) To understand the need for wellbeing support for volunteers within the homeless sector
- 2) To identify any other common themes that warrant further discussion.

The forums were a response to the lack of uptake of the Wellbeing Therapist programme

Background

MKHP received funding (an extension to the Milton Keynes Community Foundation Emergency COVID Response Funding) to support the coordination of volunteering within the homeless sector

MKHP led a collaborative project with SMART, Winter Night Shelter MK and Community Action MK to assist Milton Keynes Council in their work supporting homeless clients during lockdown

During this work, it was identified that volunteers may benefit from support which would help them to raise any concerns or worries with regards to their volunteer role.

MKHP worked with SMART to develop an outline of a potential project looking into support needs

Plan A: Volunteer Wellbeing Therapist



MKHP provided a volunteer Wellbeing Therapist offering support to SMART volunteers in a safe and confidential environment to help them feel confident in dealing with both work and personal challenges/anxieties.



SMART would promote the service by circulating an advert as well as telling each volunteer individually



Volunteers would be contacted bi-weekly asking how they are doing



Feedback would be gathered to understand the needs of volunteers



An impact assessment would be done to determine the extent to which volunteers work was making a difference



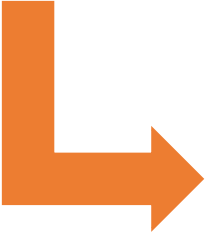
The project
Commenced June 29th



There were attempts made to capture data on promotion and impact but no feedback was received.

Plan B: Volunteer Forums

The lack of data and feedback meant there was no real clarity as to why there was no uptake by volunteers for mental health & wellbeing support.



There is a theory that **those who choose to volunteer with the homeless** may be **more prepared for the emotional challenges** they will face, and as a result, may **not need/think they need support**



**MKHP
were keen
to
understand**



?

Whether providing mental health and wellbeing support for volunteers working with homeless people during the COVID-19 pandemic (in a confidential and safe environment) would improve the volunteer experience for both the volunteers and the organisation.



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Forum design

MKHP decided to run **two forums**

- No more than 10 participants
- 3-5 set questions

VOLUNTEERS

OBJECTIVE: Understanding the need / benefits in having a confidential and impartial outlet.

- Q1** Are you a new or experienced volunteer and why did you choose to volunteer with homeless people?
- Q2** Do you think there is a need for mental health support within this role however small that need may be? Why/why not?
- Q3** How would you know that your mental health was affected by your volunteering experience and that you would benefit from support?
- Q4** How important is it for the mental health of volunteers working with homeless people, especially during the pandemic, to have a third-party central point of access offering support in a safe environment –from a work and/or home perspective?
- Q5** What experiences can you share during your volunteering that has upset you and how did this impact on your volunteering experience?

ORGANISATIONS

OBJECTIVE: Understanding the impact volunteers had during the pandemic and what access to a confidential and impartial outlet could have had on them and paid staff

- Q1** Is there a typical demographic of a volunteer in the homeless sector (e.g., age, gender, background/employment status...)?
- Q2** Do we know if volunteers specifically choose to volunteer for the homeless sector and if so/not, why?
- Q3** How important is the mental health of volunteers to your organisation and the homeless sector, especially so during the pandemic?
- Q4** What support is (or should be) made available to volunteers during the pandemic to support their mental health – however small an issue?
- Q5** What experiences (however small) can you share where you have seen (or been aware of) the impact it has had on a volunteer's experience and what was the outcome?

Recruitment

To recruit for the forums MKHP used a variety of methods:

- ➔ Published an expression of interest in their November 2020 newsletter
- ➔ Presented the project at their quarterly partnership meeting in Nov 2020 asking partners to:
 - encourage volunteers through social media and direct interaction to take part in the online forum
 - nominate a representative of their organisation to take part
- ➔ Sent an invite to mailing list (Volunteers and Organisations)
- ➔ Had targeted conversations with the Volunteer Wellbeing Therapist, Homeless Link and BLMK Mind asking for their support at the forum
- ➔ Asked recognised partners (WNS, YMCA, Dreamsai, Bus Shelter, CAMK) to target longstanding volunteers and encourage them to sign up
- ➔ Sought input from the wider community of volunteers working in the homelessness sector outside of Milton Keynes.

Sample

VOLUNTEERS

FINAL SAMPLE: 2

8 volunteers signed up (including one that signed up to both) and sent Zoom link a few days prior to forum

2 confirmed

1 extra requested to attend but not relevant to volunteer forum so invited to join organisation forum

1 attended forum and 1 could not make it but agreed phone conversation that day

NOTE:

- *Both volunteers considered themselves to be very resilient.*
- *Neither were direct delivery but both have had direct contact with rough sleepers at some point.*
- *One volunteer had not been volunteering for long*

ORGANISATIONS

FINAL SAMPLE: 12

10 organisation representatives signed up (4 separate organisations and 2 not revealed) and sent Zoom link a few days prior to forum

7 responded (one requesting extra invite)

12 attended including the 3 guests (plus 2 MKHP leads)

Findings

Volunteer forum attendance

The attendance at the volunteer forum was disappointing



Of 8 sign ups, only 2 attended and each at different times/modes.

To gain some insight as to why, the question was posed at both forums. Possible reasons offered were:

Some organisations not using volunteers due to lockdown and changes to operations, so the discussion was not relevant to them

Discussion topic not important/not of benefit to them

Volunteers are busy people dealing with their family, the uncertainty /impacts of COVID, busy volunteering for other organisations.

Volunteers who participated considered themselves to be very resilient.

Volunteers (who were self defined as resilient) felt the focus and resource should be placed on the people they support and not on the volunteers

Organisation forum attendance

The forum for organisations was very well received



Attendees enjoyed the session and look forward to more

"I thought the forum was really enlightening and useful. It just shows how different things are for each organisation."

"I just wanted to thank you for the Wednesday's forum, it was brilliant, very informative and great to connect with other similar organisations. Please let us know about any future forums you will be holding; we would be more than happy to take part."

"Thanks so much for yesterday, it was really informative, and it was so lovely to be amongst partners and other organisations with common interests and goals. I'm really looking forward to the next event."

Organisations liked the offer of an inclusive confidential environment that allowed them to:

Have the opportunity to discuss, self-reflect and share ideas and resources

Freely express their own opinions and points of view

Give any answers, there was nothing that was right or wrong

Have different points of view

Share thoughts confidentially

Detailed findings* from volunteers

Of the volunteers that took part, they agreed that volunteering in the homeless sector requires resilience, but the need for support may differ depending on what you are exposed to.

Theory:

To choose to volunteer with the homeless you are likely predisposed to be prepared for the emotional challenges you will face, and as a result, volunteers may not need/think they need support

The volunteers reaction:

- ➔ Homeless volunteers need resilience to be prepared to hear/see things not in day-to-day life.
- ➔ They must be non-judgemental.
- ➔ Must have a high tolerance for bad behaviour.
- ➔ Have a mindset that it is about them, not me.
- ➔ Can lead to lots of reflection - I have roof, food...
- ➔ Not for the faint hearted. People don't go in with rose tinted glasses thinking they can get them in off the streets.
- ➔ Be aware the role is emotionally draining – some may never felt need to talk to anyone else, others may talk to family.
- ➔ If next layer like a suicide, you would have to talk to somebody. How often would it come up that a volunteer would see something so tragic that they can't deal with by themselves.
- ➔ Would not want to take up wellness person time when you have 15 homeless people needing them more.
- ➔ Resilience would be different if you spoke to volunteers who used to be homeless – it would be a different story.

Volunteer responses to 5 key questions

Q1

Are you a new or experienced volunteer and why did you choose to volunteer with homeless people?

- New. Chose to volunteer in the homeless sector but would have considered other sectors.
- Have an empathy for people. Don't want to see anybody unhappy, cold. Mothering instinct. Sister-in-Law volunteered at WNS – she has gene to give.
- Chose to volunteer in the homeless sector because wanted to help people less fortunate. Not as frontline as others - deliver food one afternoon a week.

Q2

Do you think there is a need for mental health support within this role however small that need may be? Why/why not?

- One did not think there is a need for mental health support for volunteers.
- Possibly needed if experienced high trauma such as suicide. But how often would that happen?
- Would not want to take up wellness person time when homeless people need it more.
- Resilience may be different in volunteers who used to be homeless

Q3

How would you know your volunteering was affecting your mental health and you'd benefit from support

- You would dwell on things.
- I would know if I felt different.

Probing question: If you felt like that, would family support still be ok?

- I would stop volunteering

Probing question: If you spoke to a therapist, would it change your mind?

- No, I would deal with it myself and if it doesn't work, I would stop
- Not looking for someone to change mind. I volunteer to get something positive. If not positive, it would not be for me

Volunteer responses to 5 key questions

Q4

How important is it for the mental health of volunteers working with homeless people, especially during the pandemic, to have a third-party point of access offering support in a safe environment – from a work and/or home perspective?

NOTE: This question had to be probed into a generic question because of Q3 response...You may be resilient but what about others? Would it make a difference knowing it was there?

- ➔ If free, then yes. If paying for someone, then no. If the service was provided by a volunteer, then yes.
- ➔ Good to offer point of contact if needed. Offer it, whether used or not. Resource for volunteers is helpful but you can put that resource directly into the people you help.
- ➔ Uncomfortable taking up their time when others more worthy than me

Q5

What experiences can you share of your volunteering that has upset you and how did this impact on your volunteering experience

- ➔ A young guest that just wanted four walls
- ➔ Another guest I see in city centre a lot. Wears white a lot, not moping, just living.
- ➔ Witnessed an old homeless person die in toilets. Not nice to see but personally, has resilience. Does not feel the need to speak to anyone

Forum evaluation findings – volunteers (n=1)

At the end of both forums, we asked attendees to complete an Evaluation Poll on how we did.



NOTE: the 1 x volunteer attendee via telephone was not sent the poll but did comment that resource should be invested in homeless people.

Detailed findings* from organisations

Organisation responses to 5 key questions

Q1

Is there a typical demographic of a volunteer in the homeless sector (e.g., age range, gender, background/employment status...)?

NOTE: This question dominantly flowed into the 'why' which preceded Q2 and felt relevant as an additional point to the discussion not otherwise thought about.



Depends on environment and make up of service (each organisation had their own demographic)

- Hosting services offered more from older/vulnerable demographic where children of their own now grown up so have a spare room.
- Hostels tend to attract students/medical students and men more than women.
- Closure of night shelters required other types of volunteers like cooks, cleaners etc. so demographic based on role.
- University students tend to volunteer for mentoring/support roles. Studying relevant to course. Less experience. A different demographic.
- Some volunteers may be told to volunteer by job centre/work plan.



Some people volunteer because they want to give back/gain experience

- Volunteers seek personal development, resilience, support, and what organisations can do for them.
- Important to know what organisations can offer.
- Important to support retention – what organisations offer to them.
- One organisation noted transient volunteers. Increase in Autumn/Winter and a drop in Spring/Summer.
- Experienced therapist noted that people volunteer so their own needs can be met. Part of a community – COVID 19 has taken that away. Getting out of the house is significant. Mental health needs not met.
- Social conscience, experience with homelessness, lived experience (although some may not disclose lived experience).

Organisation responses to 5 key questions

Q2

Do we know if volunteers specifically choose to volunteer for the homeless sector and if so/not, why?

- ➔ Homeless is big news in media.
- ➔ Volunteers doing different things for homeless.
- ➔ This year, different roles (e.g., cleaning roles) – not sexy/not direct delivery – resilience to do different roles anyway they can.
- ➔ Support needed is different and based on resilience.
- ➔ Not about role but how they can support.

Q4

What support is (or should be) made available to volunteers during the pandemic to support their mental health – however small an issue?

- ➔ Support over weekends when organisations open weekdays – someone to contact over weekend if faced with a situation – real example where volunteer had to deal with suicidal call.
- ➔ Peer mentoring

Organisation responses to 5 key questions

Q3

How important is the mental health of volunteers to your organisation and the homeless sector, especially so during the pandemic?

- Supporting volunteers is important.
- They support each other using platforms like WhatsApp. Pick out where we spot someone struggling.
- One to ones are person specific/supervisions.
- Both equally successful.

Additional question: Some may think support is not needed so is it encouraged?

- All offer some form of support.
- Mix of informal and formal
 - Talk about it in training, informal chats, volunteer counsellor, Offer peer support forums offering opportunity to share experiences, WhatsApp groups/Zoom
 - Volunteers say it is important for them.
- Not all will engage, but more likely to if they see others do so
- Emphasize informality - can put them off if formalised.
- Not all able to provide structured approach due to lack of experience/resources

Additional question: Resource point/expensive. Access to external support - would it help/hinder?

- Support would be helpful but none available
- More networking events (similar to forum) to share knowledge and enable volunteers to tap into other organisations.
- Support in how to support mental health and wellbeing by signposting.
- Consider national groups

Organisation responses to 5 key questions

Q5

What experiences (however small) can you share where you have seen (or been aware of) the impact it has had on a volunteer's experience and what was the outcome?

Note: Suggestions from the group on outcomes/how situation was handled/feelings.

- ➔ Competent volunteer can handle situations, but new volunteer has big impact. E.g., suicidal call
- ➔ Volunteer recently bereaved. Shared with us (note: not all share).
- ➔ Volunteer had elderly family member diagnosed with COVID19 (in a home). We follow up – lucky we have welfare councillors.

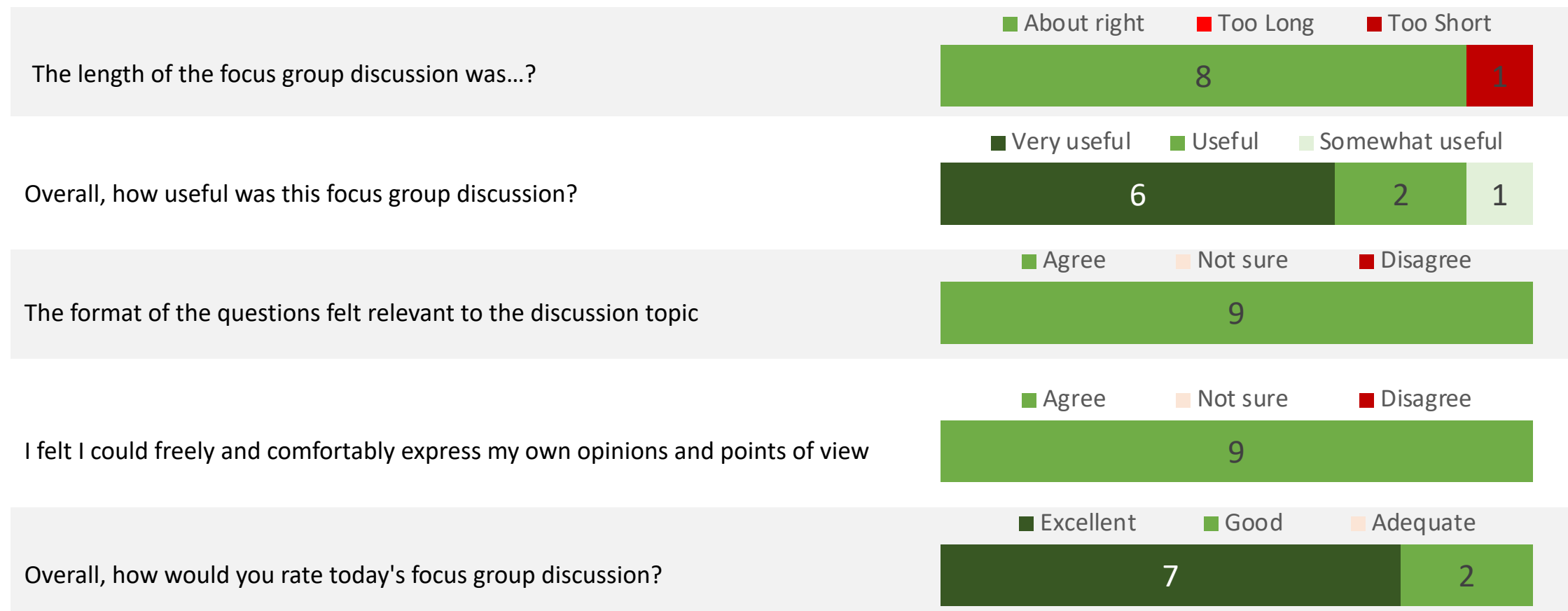
- ➔ Personal experience on how it makes us feel – how can we help volunteer.
- ➔ They say they are fine, assume they are. May be working it out in their head/own way. If it escalates and affects sleep and day to day life, then different approach.
- ➔ Consider Vicarious Trauma Training.
- ➔ If comfortable with volunteer, opportunity to probe. Example where they need support, encouraging it helped by relationship with them.
- ➔ Don't assume not ok but have safety net. Relationship with volunteers.
- ➔ Resilience – level playing field – access to services flows across organisations.
- ➔ Doesn't always need belt and braces approach.
- ➔ Focus is on guests – not on volunteers and ourselves.
- ➔ From an organisation and volunteer perspective (where organisation staff are also volunteers) and available 24/7 – list of organisations to refer to. Personal experience where thought person was ok, person passed away – it was difficult.
- ➔ Guests come first.

Organisation summary

- ➔ Organisations agreed there is a 'need' for volunteer support based on their experience of managing/working with volunteers and for some, their experiences being both the organisation and the volunteer.
- ➔ Preference for informal group sessions versus formal one to one sessions with a qualified/experienced therapist.
 - Although acknowledged both formal and informal (one to ones and group sessions) could be equally effective.
 - Support does not need to be structured
- ➔ Organisations felt that staff and volunteers should not be differentiated.
 - Some organisations have more volunteers than paid staff and hence felt that mental health support should be available to everyone.
- ➔ Organisations also felt that forming good relationships with volunteers helped enable the process of encouraging volunteers to seek mental health support
- ➔ The wellbeing therapists' view is that mental health support should not be pushed but left to volunteer to decide whether its needed

Forum evaluation findings – organisations (n=9)

At the end of both forums, we asked attendees to complete an Evaluation Poll on how we did.



Of the 12 organisation attendees, 5 left just before the end, but 2 out of the 5 did complete and return the poll via email.

Other areas of interest

From the forums there were 4 others areas of interested that the volunteers and organisations highlighted

Sharing and working collaboratively

Volunteer army/volunteer growth. COVID has engaged then disengaged volunteers. Signpost elsewhere to keep engaged. Other services to give them experience in other areas.

Sharing good practice

More forums like this to connect, share and collaborate. Organisations are learning, we are not perfect. Others best practice, what worked well, ideas.

Organisational culture


Volunteers are staff and not separate from staff cohort. Integrate with staff structure.

Training


Practical need for practical training e.g., food hygiene, manual handling. One person to do training for all – training expensive. Many issues around homelessness, many not aware of. This is where volunteer training comes in.

Conclusions


The lack of volunteers at the forum means we cannot draw a robust conclusion on the 'need' for support



Like many talent management initiatives, a bottom-up approach is needed but unfortunately without the views of more volunteers, this report remains inconclusive in ascertaining the need and dispelling the perception.



Without speaking to more volunteers and in the absence of data and feedback from the original plan (A), we cannot truly know if a 'need' for formal or informal mental health support for volunteers exists and what the impact of this type of support could have.



What is evident is the less formal/peer support approach according to organisations did appear to be well received by their volunteers and has certainly been a key shift in discovery/alternative thinking in terms of understanding if there is a 'need' for less formal/peer support and how best to support this type of 'need'.

Some insights were gathered from the volunteers that did attend, but findings are directional only



Volunteers felt the focus/resource should be on the homeless person



Both who took part said they were resilient, however further research is needed in order to fully understand what resilience means to different people.


- Do volunteers say they are fine because they don't want to worry others?
 - Do they genuinely feel fine and know how to deal with their emotions?
 - Do they prefer to talk to people they know?
 - Does it depend on the situation and whether they are yet to witness a situation that may affect their resilience?
 - How long would someone need to work/volunteer in this sector to experience something traumatic enough to weaken their resilience?
-



The discussion focused on the formal mental health support by a trained/experienced wellbeing therapist. No divergence was made to prompt the benefits and need of informal/peer support.

- Had the forum for organisations preceded the forum for volunteers, the need (or preference) for informal/peer support may have been established.

Organisations believe there is a need to offer mental health support to volunteers however informal provision is more applicable



Organisations believed offering mental health support to volunteers is important because it is something volunteers need

- However organisations said volunteers are busy people and the subject of this discussion likely not important to them
- – the latter possibly supporting a theory that there may not be a ‘need’ for a confidential and ‘formal’ outlet and that a less formal approach of support could be equally effective and well received by volunteers
- – this approach was proven to be successful by some of the organisations but not tested with the volunteers in this work



Organisations want collaboration and sharing of resources

- a central point for all volunteers to be able to access.
- a shared resource available Monday to Sunday.

More work needs to be done to understand the role and benefit of informal support and access to formal support if required.



Not every organisation can afford mental health support, but many find peer support/group sessions very effective.



Talking to colleagues, family members and friends can be the ‘therapy’ that is needed, and organisations want to support this.



Peer/group support can be both effective and less expensive than an experienced mental health therapist – the question is whether access to an experienced therapist is something volunteers would still wish to access.

Impact of COVID-19 on volunteering



COVID-19 has limited the availability of volunteers where one of our recognised partners reported not really using volunteers at the moment but will again when lockdown lifts. Another recognised partner reported that they have stood down all of their face-to-face volunteers.



COVID -19 has also created new volunteer roles that are not necessarily frontline e.g., cleaners and food delivery, hotel volunteers, mental health volunteers and translator volunteers.

What is MKHP going to do with these findings?



Use the report and findings to influence the next stage



Explore this further with the homelessness network



Continue into the 2nd phase in this themed area of work in "**Shaping the Future of Volunteering in the Homelessness Sector**" to understand what is required to continuously improve the volunteer experience, (e.g., reducing barriers, improving recognition, making volunteering attractive to a greater number of people).

For questions and queries about the report please contact:



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