



RUSSELL WEBSTER

# Volunteering as a service user in the UK

Findings from a cross-sector survey

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## Findings from a cross-sector survey

### Table of Contents

Executive summary .....	4
The survey .....	4
Take-up and limitations .....	4
Findings.....	5
Overall levels of satisfaction.....	5
Experiences of Training .....	6
Experiences of Support .....	7
Experiences of help developing skills .....	7
Experiences of help with employability.....	7
Experiences of financial support .....	8
Control over voluntary work.....	8
Summary .....	9
Introduction .....	10
Distribution of the survey.....	10
Survey responses .....	10
About respondents' volunteering .....	13
Volunteering by sector .....	13
Time as volunteers.....	14
Survey Findings – people's experiences as service user volunteers .....	15
Role as volunteer .....	15
Survey topics.....	16
Experiences of Training.....	16
Positive training experiences.....	17

Negative training experiences .....	18
Other training experiences.....	20
Summary of Training experiences .....	20
Experiences of Support .....	21
Positive support experiences.....	22
Negative support experiences .....	23
Summary of Support experiences .....	24
Experiences of help in developing work skills.....	25
Positive experiences of developing work skills .....	26
Negative experiences of developing work skills.....	27
<i>Summary of experiences with help in developing skills</i> .....	28
Experiences of help in becoming more employable .....	29
Positive experiences of help in becoming more employable .....	30
Negative experiences of help in becoming more employable.....	32
<i>Summary of experiences of help in becoming more employable</i> .....	32
Financial help to support volunteering .....	33
<i>Summary of experiences of financial support for volunteers</i> .....	35
Control over voluntary work .....	35
Positive experiences of control over voluntary work .....	36
Negative experiences of control over voluntary work.....	37
Summary of experiences of control over voluntary work.....	38
Analysis .....	38
Conclusion.....	40

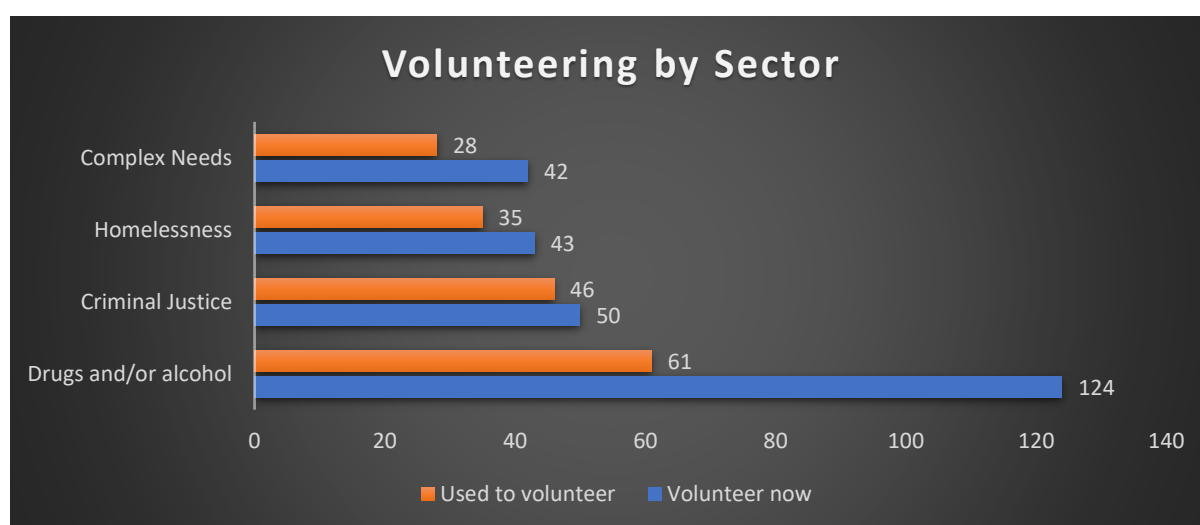
## Executive summary

### 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.

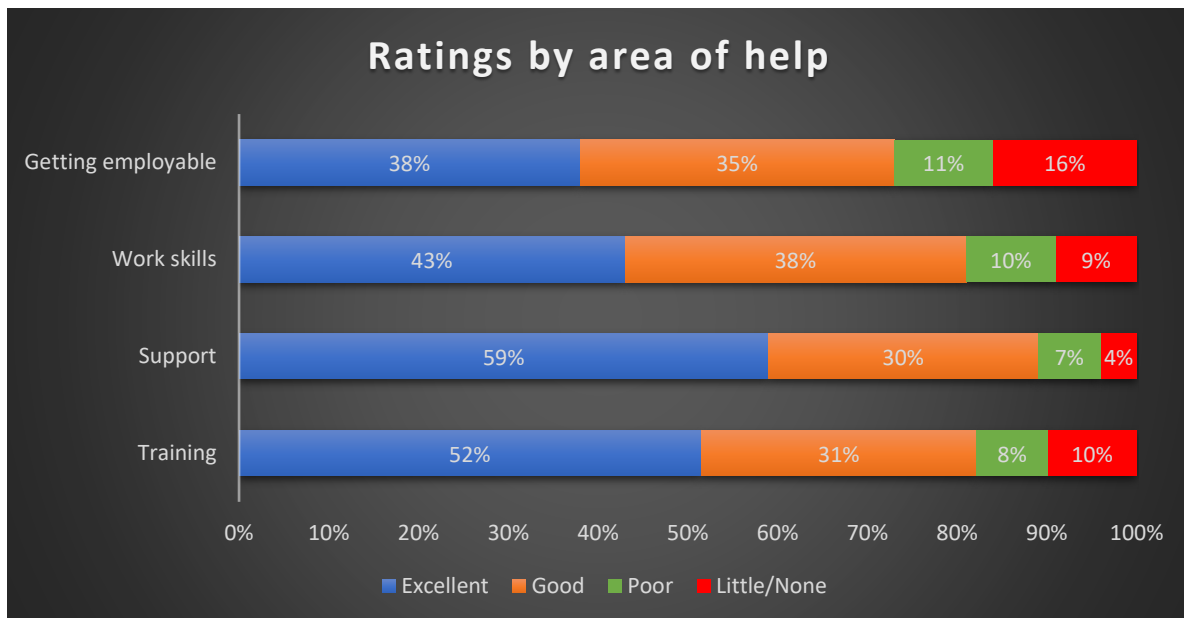
### Overall levels of satisfaction

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

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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.

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.

## Introduction

This document presents the findings of a UK-wide 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, although a small number of people with lived experience who volunteered in other sectors also took part.

The survey was designed by [Russell Webster](#) in partnership with the [Revolving Doors Agency](#) with input from people with lived experience of being service user volunteers. It sought to explore the quality of support service user volunteers received from the organisations for whom they were volunteering.

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 and will be shared widely so that organisations are aware of best practice and commissioners can award contracts to organisations who treat their service user volunteers well and with the support they need to succeed.

## Distribution of the survey

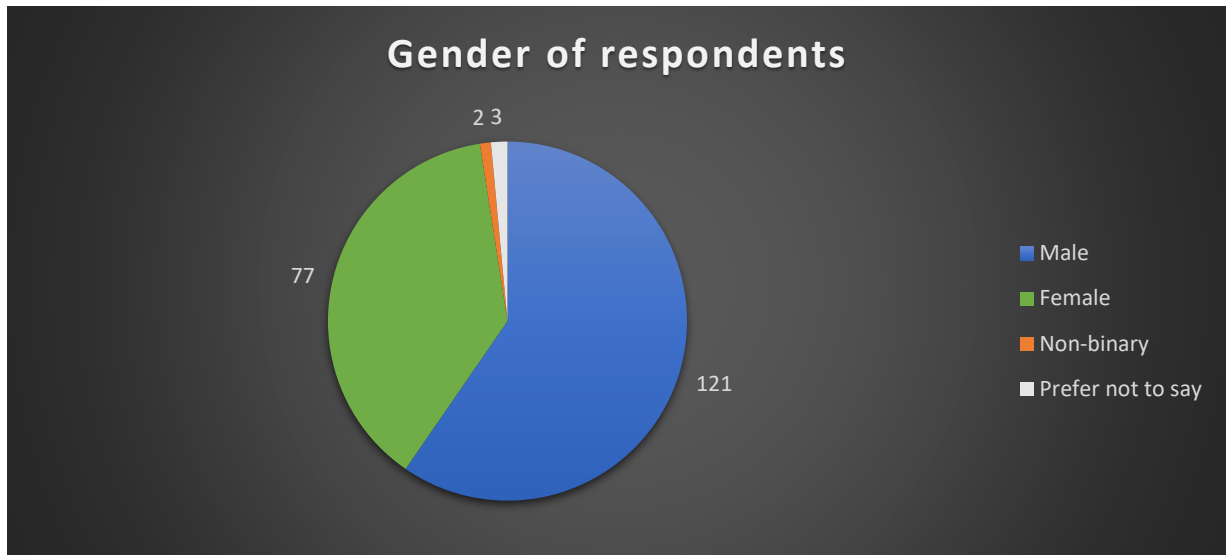
Russell Webster and the Revolving Doors Agency promoted the survey via their networks and Russell made direct contact with more than 200 agencies in the criminal justice, drug & alcohol, homelessness and complex needs sectors across the UK. Ninety two of these organisations agreed to promote the survey directly to their service user volunteers and/or with other organisations in their networks. Additionally, the Forward Trust and St Martin's Frontline Network promoted the survey more widely among the substance misuse and homelessness sectors respectively. The survey went live on 2 February 2021 and was actively promoted until 5 March; the survey remained open until 18 March 2021 to allow responses from service user volunteers who were informed about the survey via organisational newsletters that were sent out up to and including 10 March.

## Survey responses

A total of 253 people responded to the survey. The charts below show the demographic breakdown of survey respondents by age, gender, ethnicity and region.

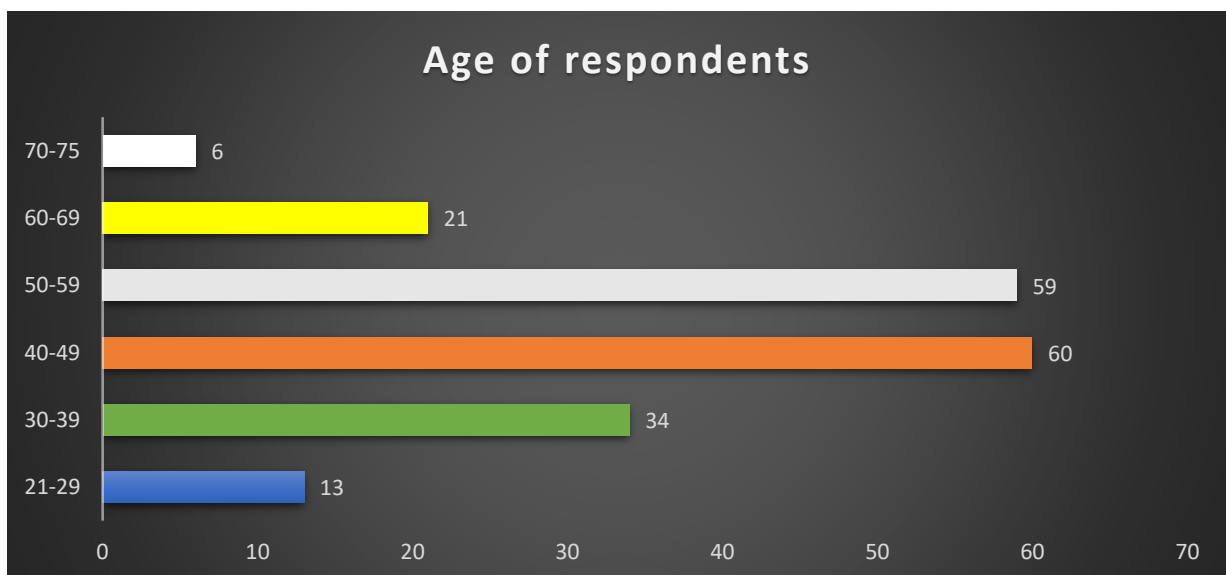
Two hundred and three survey respondents told us about their gender, three out of five people who took the survey were men.

**Figure 1 Gender of respondents (n = 203)<sup>2</sup>**



One hundred and ninety three respondents provided their age in years; they were aged between 21 and 75 years old with an average (median) age of 48 years. **Figure 2** shows the age of respondents broken down into decades. Three quarters of the people who took the survey were aged 40 or older.

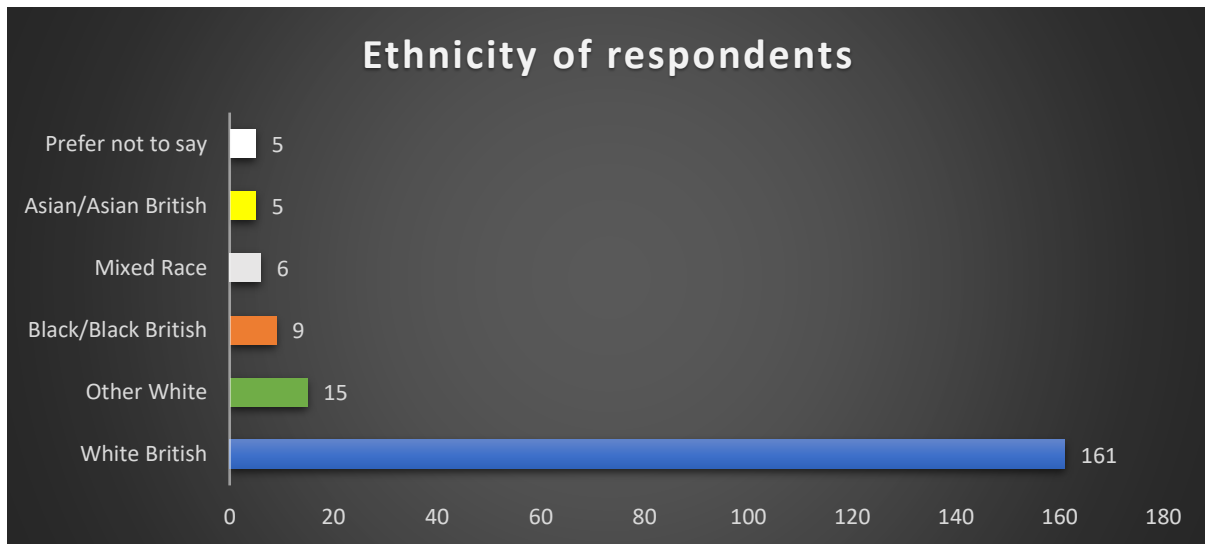
**Figure 2 Age of respondents (n = 193)**



<sup>2</sup> Respondents were also offered the chance to self-define how they described their gender but no-one chose this option.

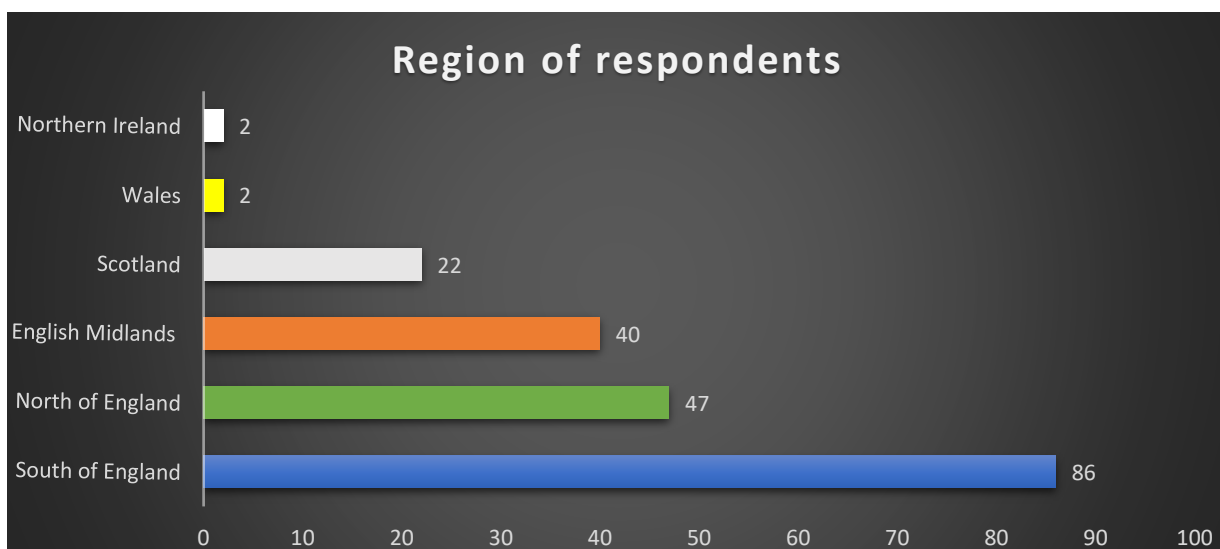
Two hundred and two people provided information about their ethnicity. Despite reaching out to a large number of organisations serving BAME communities, our cohort was 80% White British<sup>3</sup>.

**Figure 3 Ethnicity of respondents (n = 201)**



Finally, 199 people provided information about the region of the UK they lived in. Over four out of ten ( $86/199 = 43\%$ ) survey respondents who told us the region they lived in were from the South of England.

**Figure 4 UK region of respondents (n = 199)**



<sup>3</sup> The last complete census conducted in 2011 found that 80.5% of people living in England and Wales were white British.

## About respondents' volunteering

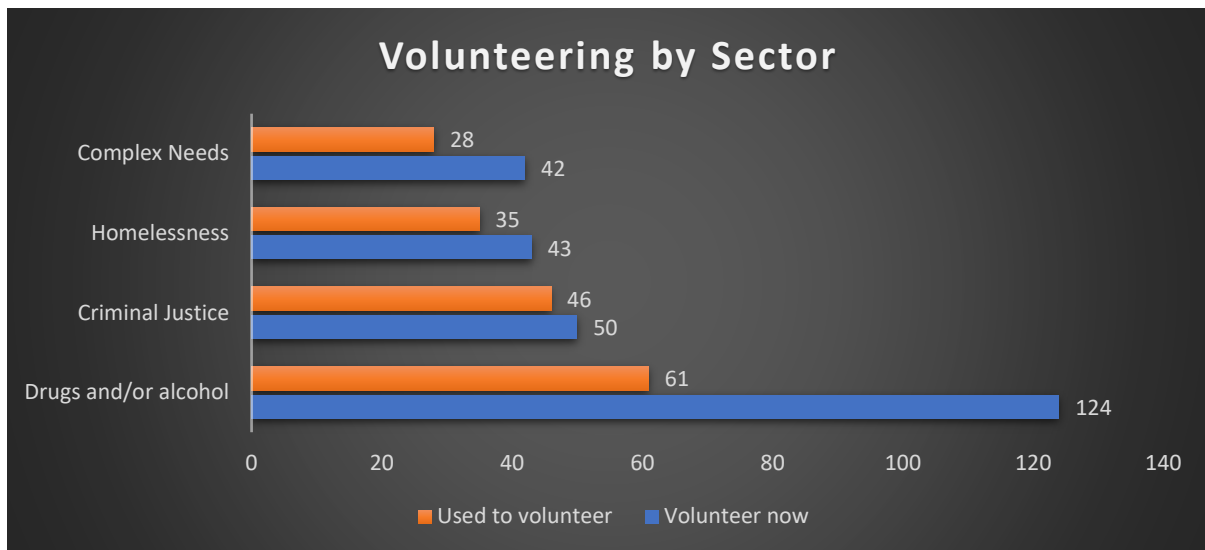
We asked survey respondents a number of basic questions about their volunteering. We asked about which sector(s) they had been a service user in, which sector(s) they had been or were volunteers in, how long they had been volunteering and how many hours per month on average they volunteered for. It is clear that the survey was most successful in engaging people in contact with drug and alcohol treatment services.

### Volunteering by sector

All 253 respondents told us about the sectors in which they had been or were currently service users (respondents were asked to tick all relevant sectors). Seven out of ten people ( $178/253 = 70\%$ ) had used drug and alcohol services, almost one third ( $81/253 = 32\%$ ) had lived experience of the criminal justice system, almost one quarter ( $57/253 = 23\%$ ) had used homelessness services and almost one fifth ( $48/253 = 19\%$ ) had used services for people with complex needs. Sixteen people (6%) also recorded that they had used mental health services, two reported that they had been in care and two said that they had used gambling services. People had used services in between one and four sectors, with most respondents having lived experience in at least two of the drug and alcohol, criminal justice, homelessness and complex needs areas.

All 253 survey respondents also told us which sectors they had been (or currently were) volunteers. Almost three quarters of people ( $185/253 = 73\%$ ) had experience of volunteering for drug and alcohol services, more than one third ( $96/253 = 38\%$ ) volunteered in the criminal justice system, more than three out of ten ( $78/253 = 31\%$ ) had volunteered for homelessness services and more than one quarter ( $70/253 = 28\%$ ) had volunteered services for people with complex needs. Seven people also recorded that they had volunteered for mental health services, four reported that they had volunteered for services in the health sector and two said that they had volunteered for gambling services. People had volunteered for services in between one and four sectors, with most respondents having volunteered in at least two of drug and alcohol, criminal justice, homelessness and complex needs.

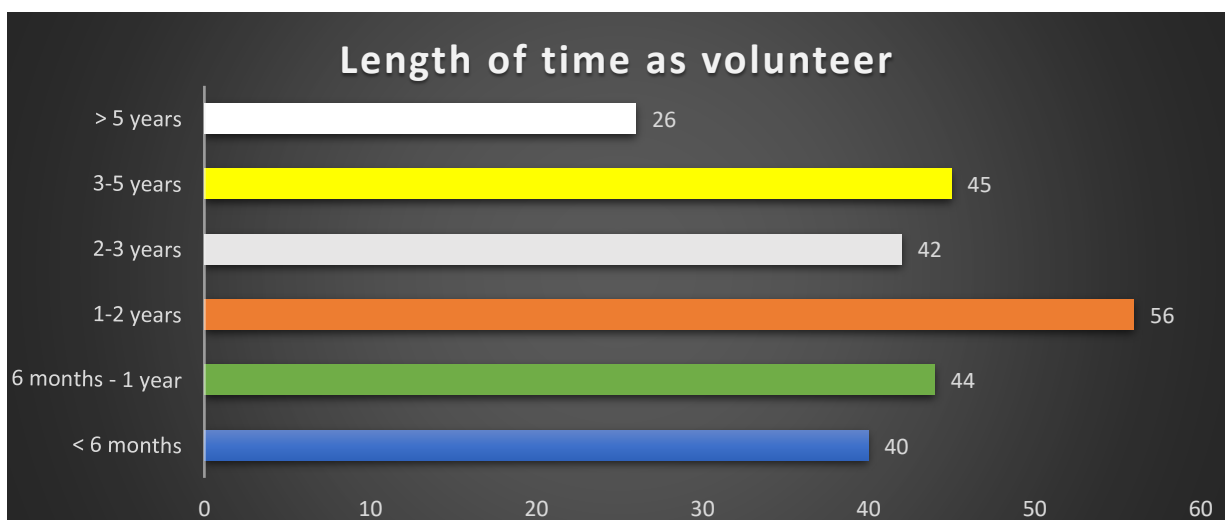
**Figure 5 Volunteering as a service user by sector (n = 253)**



### Time as volunteers

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 the average (median) length of time spent as a volunteer being two years.

**Figure 6 Length of time as a volunteer (n = 253)**



We also asked about the extent of respondents' volunteering, people said they volunteered for between three and more than 100 hours<sup>4</sup> per month with an average

<sup>4</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.

(median) commitment of 25 hours per month. Our cohort estimated that between them they volunteered for over 9,000 hours in a typical month.

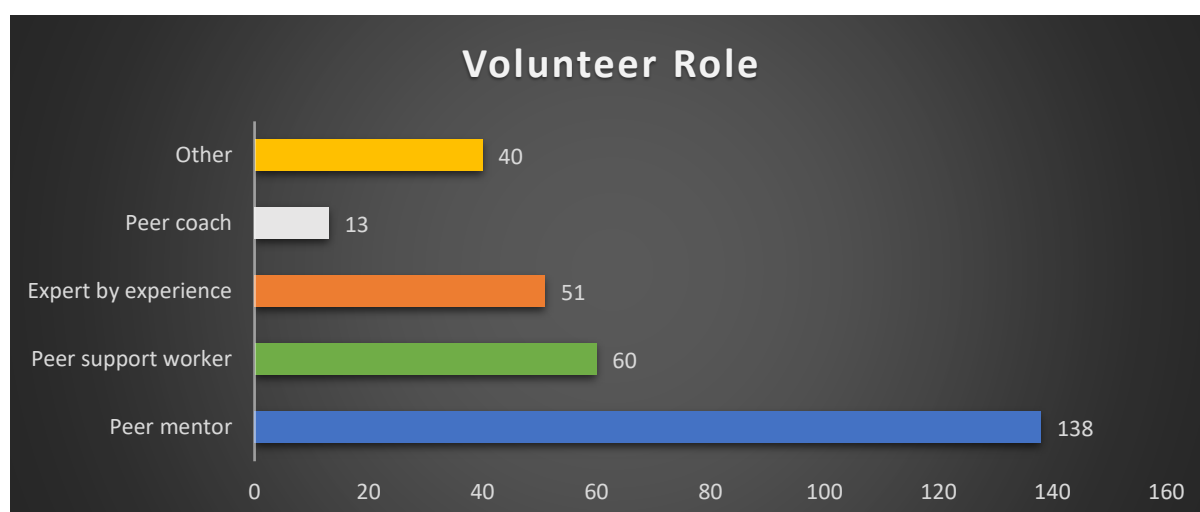
### Survey Findings – people’s experiences as service user volunteers

Survey respondents were asked to pick one service for which they volunteered and answer the remaining survey questions in relation to this one service. More than half (140/253 = 55%) chose to give feedback on a drug and/or alcohol service, almost one fifth (50/253 = 19%) on a criminal justice service, approximately one tenth (26/253 = 10%) on a homelessness service and about one in 14 (17/253 = 7%) on a service for people with complex needs. Six individuals provided feedback on a different type of service<sup>5</sup>.

#### Role as volunteer

We also asked our survey respondents their primary role as a volunteer; providing a choice of five options plus the opportunity for people to give their own answer. More than 80 individuals volunteered in more than one role. More than half of the 239 people who answered this question (138/239 = 58%) said they were peer mentors, with one quarter giving their role as peer support worker (60/239 = 25%), one fifth as experts by experience (51/239 = 21%) and one in twenty (13/253 = 5%) as peer coach. The most common role descriptions given by those who gave their own answer included: facilitators (5), trustees (3), admin support (3) and peer researchers (3).

**Figure 7 Volunteer role (n = 239)**



<sup>5</sup> These six services were in the mental health, health, women’s services, carer and gambling sectors.

## Survey topics

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

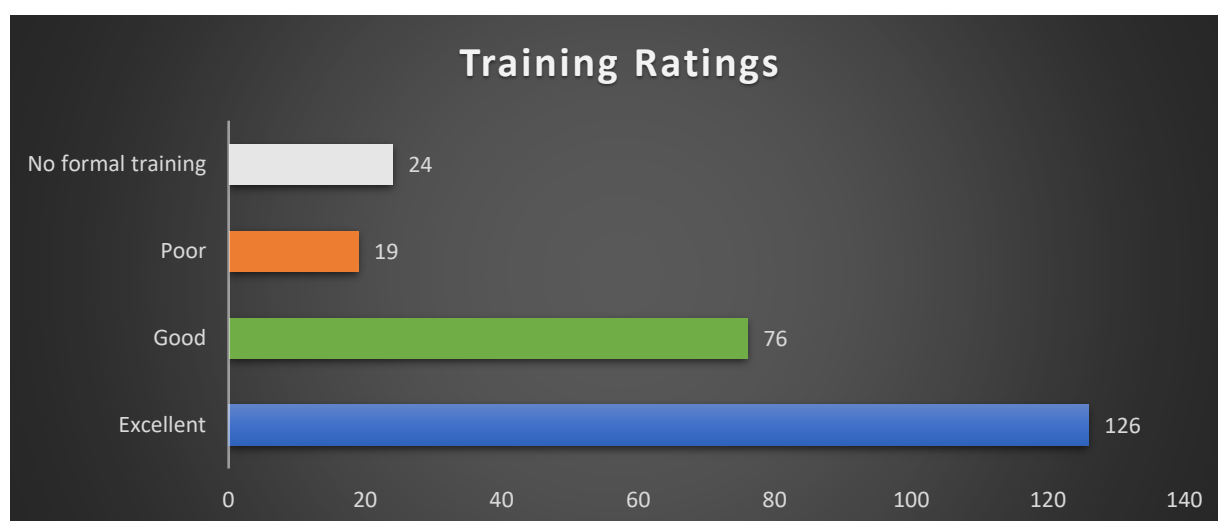
We also asked how much control people felt they had over the AMOUNT and TYPE of voluntary work they did. Finally, we asked people if they would like to say other things about their experience as a service user volunteer. Thirty eight respondents said they would like to add to the detail provided in the survey and all were contacted by email and/or telephone with an offer of an individual interview with Russell by phone or video call. Thirteen individuals responded to this offer and eleven individual interviews of between 15 and 35 minutes were conducted. The summary of survey responses below include both information submitted on the survey and additional information provided in these eleven individual interviews. Each of the following sections first sets out the quantitative findings from the four-point scales, before exploring the qualitative data that helps explain these patterns. We should make clear that the focus of the survey was to ask service user volunteers to share their experiences (positive, negative or neutral); for this reason we include a large number of verbatim quotes from responses and individual interviewees. At the end of each section, we present a short summary of the different ratings of each topic by sector.

## Experiences of Training

Survey respondents were first asked to rate the quality of training they had received as a volunteer on a four point scale: “Excellent”, “Good”, “Poor” or “I did not receive formal training”. Two hundred and thirty eight individuals responded to this question and their experiences are summarised in **Figure 8** below. A large majority (202/238 = 85%) of respondents were pleased with the quality of training provided, rating it as excellent (126/238 = 53%) or good (76/238 = 32%).



Figure 8 Rating of Quality of Training (n = 238)



One hundred and seventy people provided a text response to the question “Please tell us the good and/or bad things about this training”. We categorised the responses into three main categories: positive experience, negative experience or neutral/mixed experience. Just over three fifths (103/170 = 61%) comments were broadly positive, just under one quarter (39/170 = 23%) were broadly neutral and approximately one in six comments (28/170 = 16%) were mainly critical.

#### Positive training experiences

The most common positive attributes of training identified by the service user volunteers taking this survey are listed below. These attributes are listed in order, according to how frequently respondents mentioned them, with the attribute most frequently raised heading the list. The same principle of organising experiences is applied in every section in the report.

That the training was related to the role for which they were volunteering:

*“The training was face to face and covered a wide range of topics and situations that gave a good understanding of what was involved and how to deal with relevant situations.” [Respondent 19]*

*“Supported and given guidance on helping people with addiction issues. Shown how to use my lived experience to help others effectively.” [Respondent 149]*

That the training was flexible and responsive to individual needs:

*“The training accommodated my needs and was added onto when we suggested other topics.” [Respondent 1]*

That the training facilitated self-growth:

*"The training was very good because I got to learn a lot about myself and how to help others to know that change is possible." [Respondent 3]*

*"Peer mentoring gave me the opportunity to grow as an individual, learn new skills and later on the opportunity to be employed to work in probation." [Respondent 84]*

That the training helped people learn new skills:

*"Was very informative, gained many new skills." [Respondent 12]*

That the training was of a high quality, the same as was offered to paid staff:

*"Was sent on training with current responsible officers/offender managers. Felt included and worthwhile." [Respondent 9]*

That training is ongoing:

*"My previous and current training is excellent. I have been matched with workers who I can build a rapport with. I have had supervision with my trainer, who really looked out for my needs." [Respondent 18]*

*"Very thorough training. Mentor training is 14 weeks and lots of additional training following. Resources good and support during training good." [Respondent 52]*

That training was accredited and portable which also gave hope for a positive future and job prospects:

*"The training was excellent covering all aspects of the role and led to an NVQ qualifications. It gave me hope and a focus for the future, a chance to give something back and help others." [Respondent 81]*

*"Delivered by a mixture of individuals with and without 'Lived experience'. Informative, interesting and inspiring. Level 3 in IAG - All good!" [Respondent 153]*

That the training was delivered at a pace which facilitated learning:

*"Thorough but enjoyable, spaced out over several weeks rather than compacted into one chunk, which was better" [Respondent 154]*

Negative training experiences

Some of the negative experiences respondents shared contrasted with the positive experiences outlined above, for example that training did not take place or was not

tailored to their volunteering role. Additionally several respondents who took part in an interview stated that although the training had often been of good quality overall, it sometimes reflected the organisation's agenda rather than the needs of new volunteers. In particular, these respondents felt that the training did not equip people on how best to use their lived experience in their volunteering as peer mentors or in other support roles.

Other negative experiences included:

The absence of training:

*"No training just personal life experience." [Respondent 53]*

Training not specific to the volunteering role:

*"The training was outsourced, very generic online training that didn't speak to the job we're actually doing - clearly only done to tick boxes." [Respondent 106]*

*"Most of the training covered the basics first aid, safe guarding etc, also training around service users' needs were helpful (housing/accommodation) but very little if any on the role and structure on working with and being a peer mentor." [Respondent 165]*

*"No peer mentoring training." [Respondent 133]*

Not enough time to process learning from training:

*"Safeguarding training as standard didn't meet complexity of the role, little supervision no reflective time or what there was, was very basic, not useful to me." [Respondent 11]*

A lack of structure to the training experience:

*"No structure or plan agreed. No direction by leaders." [Respondent 92]*

No accreditation:

*"It was diverse however there was no qualification for it. In any of the formal training I think now there should have been something you could take to other companies. I did basic other training like first aid, food hygiene. Safeguarding. DBS. However, something level 2 or level 3 on drug awareness would be better. I have the knowledge but didn't get the paperwork. I did Meds training but o actual certificate to say I had done it. If I go elsewhere I'll have to start from scratch." [Respondent 147]*

## Other training experiences

The other most common experience of training discussed by over 20 respondents was the issue of remote training which had been launched by many organisations to cope with the restrictions of lockdowns imposed during the pandemic. There was a consensus that organisations had done well to continue training and that this was often of good quality but a disappointment that people did not feel equipped for volunteering in the same way as they thought they would have been if they had had the chance to participate in face-to-face learning:

*“Online training suits me and that helped. However it's a 2edged sword these days - getting help when stuck is difficult.” [Respondent 141]*

*“Good - detailed and informative Bad - it was online and I missed the interactive elements (understandably due to Covid)” [Respondent 137]*

## Summary of Training experiences

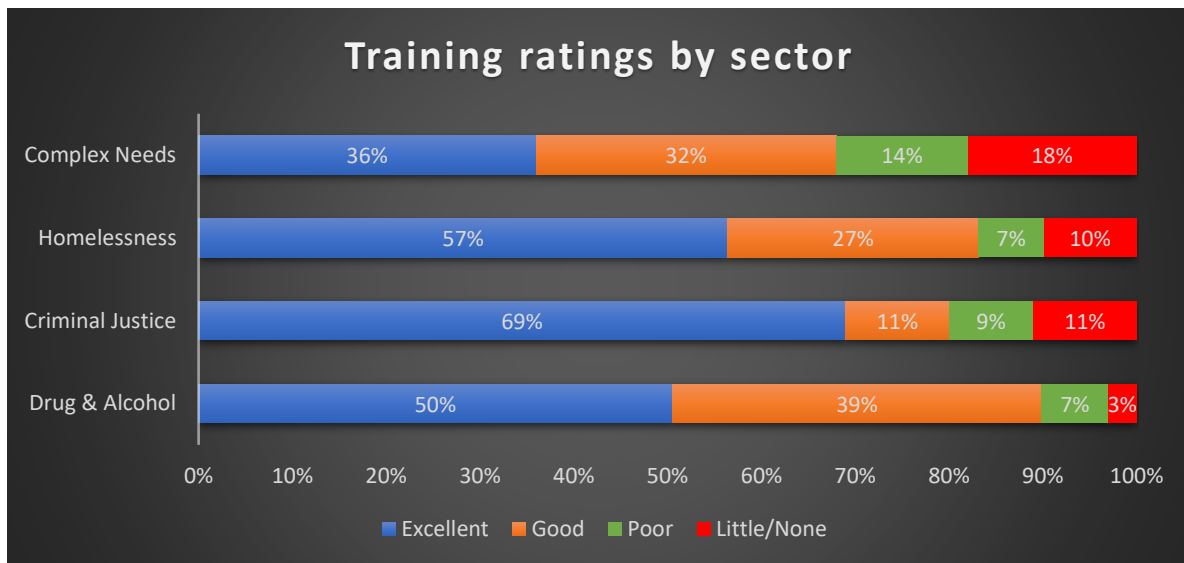
*The most common positive experiences of volunteer training were: training tailored to the volunteering role, training which was flexible and adjusted to suit needs and included opportunities to self-reflect and develop new skills and approaches. People valued opportunities to do the same training programmes as paid staff, regular supervision and opportunities for further training, and training which led to a qualification and supported career progression.*

*The most common negative experiences of volunteer training 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.*

We compared overall satisfaction rates by sector and found that a higher proportion of service users volunteering in the drug and alcohol treatment sector were satisfied (defined as giving ratings of excellent or good) with the training they received compared to other sectors.

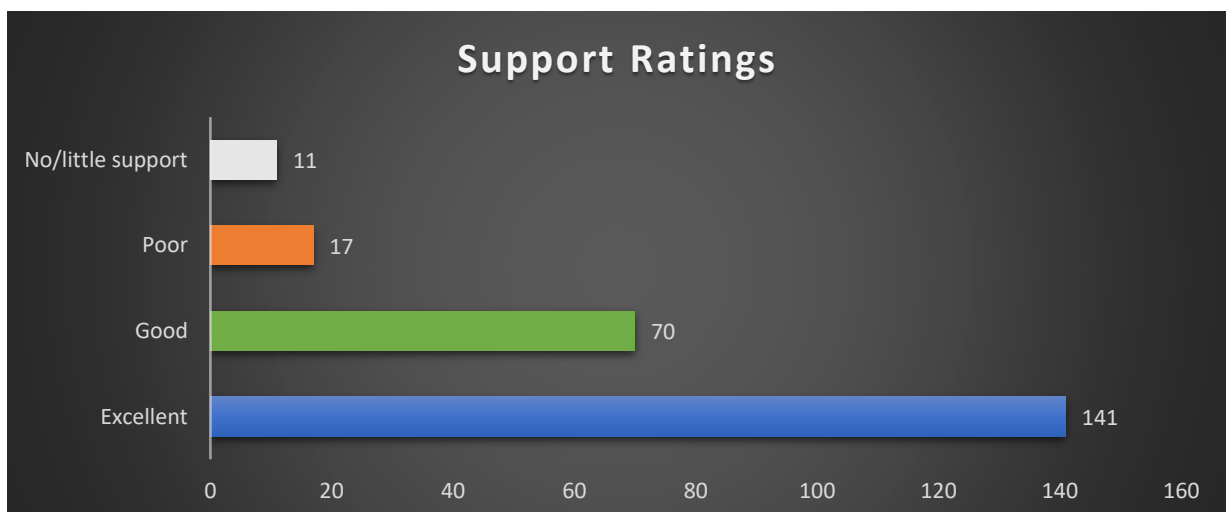
**Figure 9: Training Ratings by sector**



### Experiences of Support

Survey respondents were asked to “rate the quality of support you have received as a volunteer” on a four point scale: “Excellent”, “Good”, “Poor” or “No/very little support”. 234 individuals responded to this question and their experiences are summarised in **Figure 10** below. Again, it is clear that a very large majority (211/234 = 90%) respondents were pleased with the quality of support provided, rating it excellent (141/234 = 60%) or good (70/234 = 30%).

**Figure 10 Rating of Quality of Support (n = 234)**



One hundred and fifty nine people provided a text response to the question “Please tell us the good and/or bad things about this training”. We categorised responses into three main categories: positive experience, negative experience or neutral/mixed

experience. Seven out of ten (111/159 = 70%) comments were broadly positive, almost one in five (29/159 = 18%) were broadly neutral and approximately one in eight comments (19/159 = 8%) were mainly critical.

#### Positive support experiences

The most common positive attributes of support identified by the service user volunteers taking this survey were:

That support was offered rather than requested:

*“The support of the people around me has been outstanding. There is nothing I don't feel I could ask for help around and the encouragement is really making me feel valued.” [Respondent #53]*

That support came from the whole staff team, not just their supervisor, with the volunteer treated as an equal member of staff:

*“Close attention to what I was being asked to do and the ability to put forward my own ideas.” [Respondent #72]*

*“I feel part of the workforce. Regular team meetings. Clinical supervision. All good. None bad.” [Respondent #104]*

*“I felt accepted and a sense of belonging which made me feel comfortable. I also knew help was at hand whenever I needed it and I never felt pressured to do anything I didn't want to.” [Respondent #33]*

That support went beyond help with volunteering but focused on personal development as well:

*“Well supported from service user with a wellbeing plan that is continually reviewed to find how I can be supported. Flexible hours to fit around other responsibilities and recovery needs. Genuine care for helping me develop and create a PDP (Personal Development Plan).” [Respondent #21]*

*“One to one coaching opened up a truly coproduced dynamic in my involvement within the organisation and resulted in my capacity to benefit the most from my own direct involvement in both peer-led activities such as attending and co-organising workshops, conferences, working group meetings where people with lived experience were often invited but less often involved in all aspects of organising.” [Respondent #26]*

That the volunteer co-ordinator provided ongoing support and matched the volunteer with the service users they were supporting with care:

*"I was supported in complex problems and needs that arose in my life. The team went further and beyond to make sure I was ok. They did not give up on me when things got difficult. They were there for me when I needed them most." [Respondent #132]*

*"I have been given so much support from both my trainers and the volunteer coordinator, who has gone over and above to help and advise me. He has been extremely supportive during my volunteering and has matched me with the perfect workers for me and my training needs." [Respondent #15]*

That support was comprehensive and from a range of sources, including peers:

*"Ad hoc support and 1-1 supervision with co-ordinator. Group supervision with supportive mentors. Excellent external supervision. In all of these we get to discuss our cases and receive thorough advice." [Respondent #48]*

Negative support experiences

Again some of the negative experiences were the opposite of the positive ones above, particularly where support was just not available or was hard to access. In some cases support had been good but was interrupted by coronavirus; this was the case for seven respondents:

*"I have little or no connection with the service. After fantastic training and great success with service users, everything has dried up. Covid seems to have decimated the service and it has become redundant in my area" [Respondent #38]*

*"There has been a high turnover of volunteer coordinators. Since the lockdown in March 2020, I've been conducting 1x weekly video calls with the service user - as well as other ad hoc calls and messages in between- there has been little communication from the service throughout the period." [Respondent #86]*

*"Covid hit and we didn't have a volunteer co-ordinator. Still waiting on action plan from new co-ordinator but only has one day free so no clear plan put in place and restrictions stopping a lot." [Respondent #5]*

In other cases, the quality of support was good but there was not sufficient capacity:

*"Tutor is dedicated but given little time." [Respondent #87]*

Other negative experiences included:

Service user volunteers not seen as equals:

*“Not all staff understand the role of a volunteer and the benefits.” [Respondent #108]*

*“very little support expected to make tea, support workers and keep quiet.” [Respondent #126]*

Variable responses, depending on the individual concerned:

*“It's a mixed bag. Various degrees of understanding and delivery.” [Respondent #119]*

*“Again unless “in” with staff you're ignored.” [Respondent #116]*

A lack of peer support:

*“I don't get the chance to share with my peers because training is all online and national” [Individual follow-up interview]*

Another concern expressed in an individual follow-up interview is that service user volunteers are sometimes encouraged to tell their own story without training or support, before or after, resulting in people feeling vulnerable and low and at risk of relapse/return to previous problematic behaviour.

Summary of Support experiences

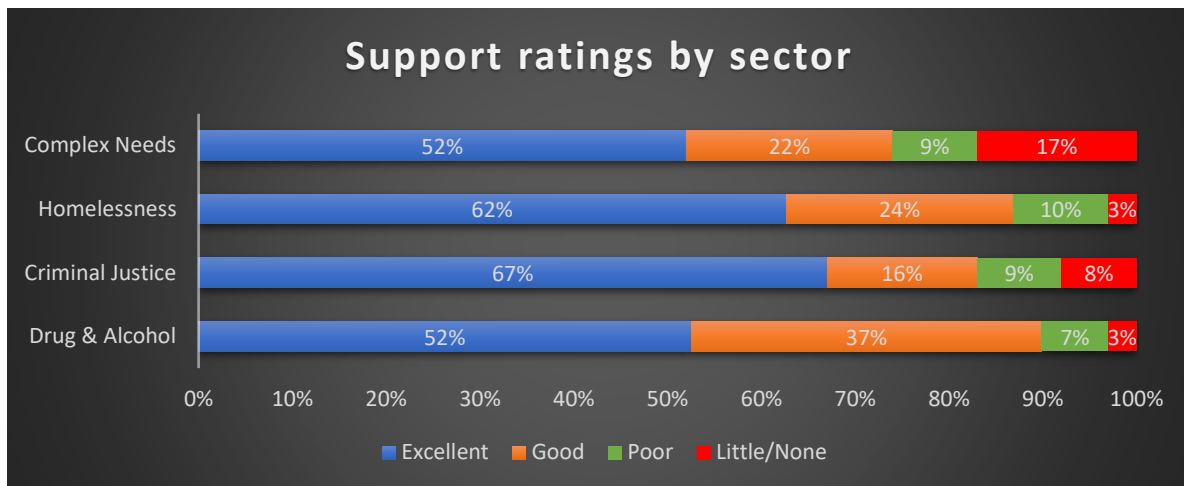
*The most common positive experiences of volunteer support were: staff proactively reaching out to offer help rather than expecting service users to request it, being treated as an equal and getting support from the wider staff team where needed, staff taking the time to explore wellbeing and develop a personal development plan; a culture where support from other volunteers was the norm was also appreciated.*

*The most common negative experiences of volunteer support 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.*

We compared overall satisfaction rates by sector and found that a higher proportion of service users volunteering in the drug and alcohol treatment sector were satisfied (defined as giving ratings of excellent or good) with the support they received compared to other sectors.



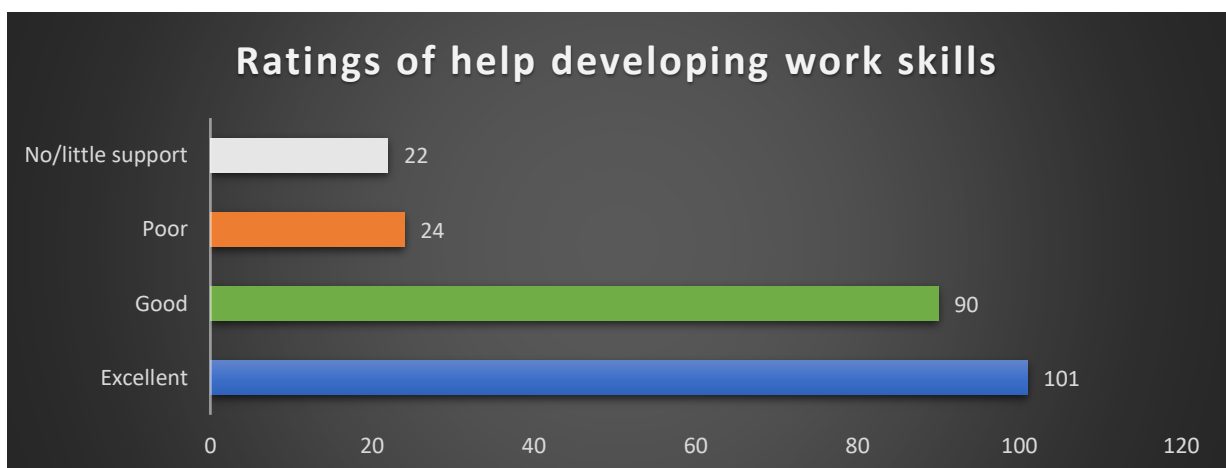
**Figure 11: Support Ratings by sector**



### Experiences of help in developing work skills

Survey respondents were asked to “Please rate how much help you have received in developing your work skills” on a four point scale: “Excellent”, “Good”, “Poor” or “Little/No support”. Two hundred and twenty nine individuals responded to this question and their experiences are summarised in **Figure 12** below. Once again a large majority (191/229 = 83%) of respondents were pleased with the quality of help provided, rating it excellent (101/229 = 44%) or good (90/229 = 39%).

**Figure 12 Rating of Help in Developing Work Skills (n = 229)**



One hundred and forty one people provided a text response to the question “Please tell us the good and/or bad things about this help”. We assessed every response into three main categories: positive experience, negative experience or neutral/mixed experience. More than half (80/141 = 57%) of comments were broadly positive, more

than one quarter (37/141 = 26%) were broadly neutral and approximately one in six comments (24/141 =17%) were mainly critical.

#### Positive experiences of developing work skills

Many of the positive comments related to a general commitment to ongoing support to access training and develop a range of new skills relevant both to people's volunteering role and transferable skills which could help those who wished to do so find paid employment. Typical comments were:

*"I would rate my work skills development opportunity as excellent. I have learned so much and have had the opportunity to access several training courses." [Respondent #16]*

Key elements of positive experiences in this area included:

A focus on developing skills for the volunteering role:

*"I cannot fault in anyway the help and assistance that has been provided to develop and enhance the skills that I need for peer mentoring." [Respondent #17]*

*"Great support from my line manager particularly in supporting me in decisions I have made about where I want to go in my role. Support and advice when I feel my knowledge is lacking allowing me to better grow in my role." [Respondent #24]*

Access to funding for additional skill development:

*"Funded diploma courses." [Respondent #107]*

*"Within the space of one year I received significant support through coaching and increased my level of self-confidence. I additionally was able to secure funding for traveling to conferences, meetings with other groups and people with lived experiences and ultimately also to attend job interviews. This enabled me to increase my employability and resulted in the rebuilding of my professional career." [Respondent #27]*

Proactive support and motivation to develop skills:

*"I have been given support in my achievements in my diploma in Adult Health and Social Care Level 3, regular in house training and 1-1 support (monitoring my progress, objectives and achievements)." [Respondent #110]*

*“My supervisor is really focused on personal development and has encouraged me consistently to take on studying opportunities and/or relevant training courses.”*  
[Respondent #61]

People particularly valued a comprehensive package of support with the expectation of success:

*“I was able to take part in various trainings (Research, Reporting, Writing for a magazine, etc.) and activities and could try different things including meeting and interviewing vulnerable participants face to face. I also got a help with equipment via development grant (laptop, phone) and my mentors guided me and advised me how to use it. I was helped with getting on Zoom and I use it now regularly. I was also enabled to take part in recording podcasts and to write for a magazine. I was recently trained how to advocate for people to support them to appointments.”* [Respondent #120]

Several people had been able to convert the help they had received in building work skills into paid employment (an issue covered in more detail later in this report):

*“I have had support and opportunities to develop through training. I was also offered an employed position as a project worker and then another role in communications which has allowed me to develop my work skills further and be more invested in the project.”* [Respondent #46]

*“My Peer mentor coordinator was always supportive and gave me paid employment after my volunteering.”* [Respondent #136]

*“I have had support in every area of my life which has benefitted me 100%. I have now secured a permanent paid job in probation.”* [Respondent #57]

Negative experiences of developing work skills

The main criticism from respondents with negative experiences of this area was a lack of information, advice or support in developing work skills:

*“Most charities expect you to continue volunteering with no personal benefit.”*  
[Respondent #132]

Many people felt that they had to take the initiative themselves:

*“I do research in my spare time. This helps.”* [Respondent #130]

*“Once formal training is complete, further development appears to be down to the individual.” [Respondent #96]*

*“The initial training was useful, but did not go into enough detail. More in-depth, specialised training would help. A lot of what I learnt was picked up through my own research or from the service user.” [Respondent #81]*

Another concern was that some individuals felt that as service user volunteers, they were not considered sufficiently valuable to have their skills developed:

*“One great disappointment is that staff are not keen to have a peer mentor on the payroll. My skills, knowledge and experience seem okay for a voluntary role but not for paid employment.” [Respondent #40]*

*“I’m not valued, my work is not valued despite in other organisations I’m paid for the same role.” [Respondent #26]*

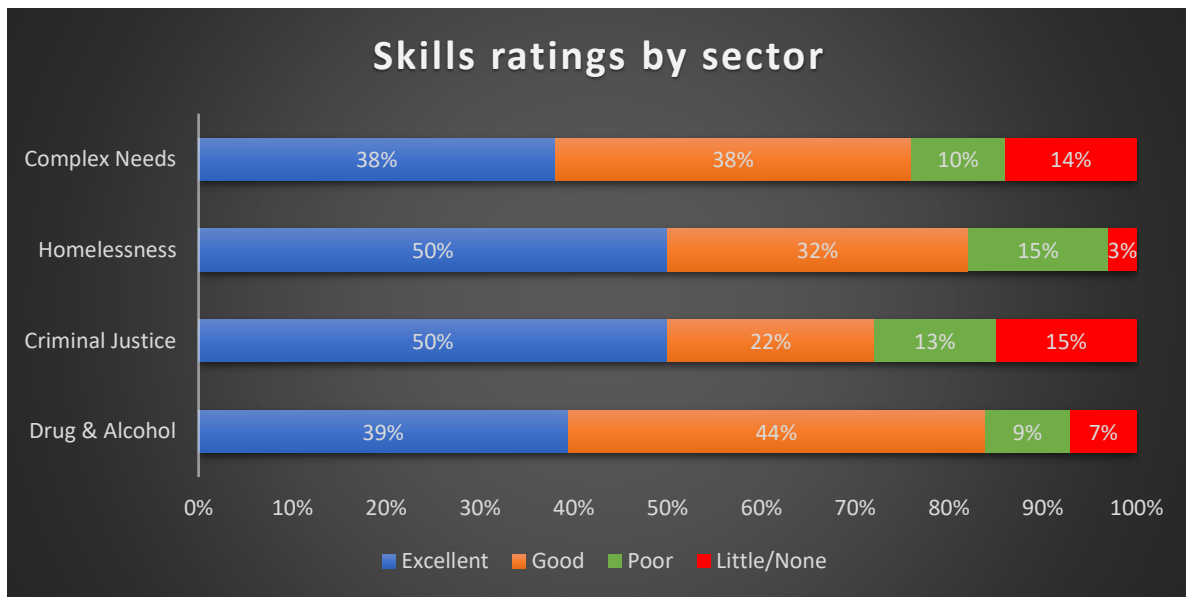
*Summary of experiences with help in developing skills*

*The most common positive experiences of help with developing skills were: 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 negative experiences of help with developing skills 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.*

We compared overall satisfaction rates by sector and found that a higher proportion of service users volunteering in the drug and alcohol treatment sector were satisfied (defined as giving ratings of excellent or good) with the help gaining skills they received compared to other sectors.

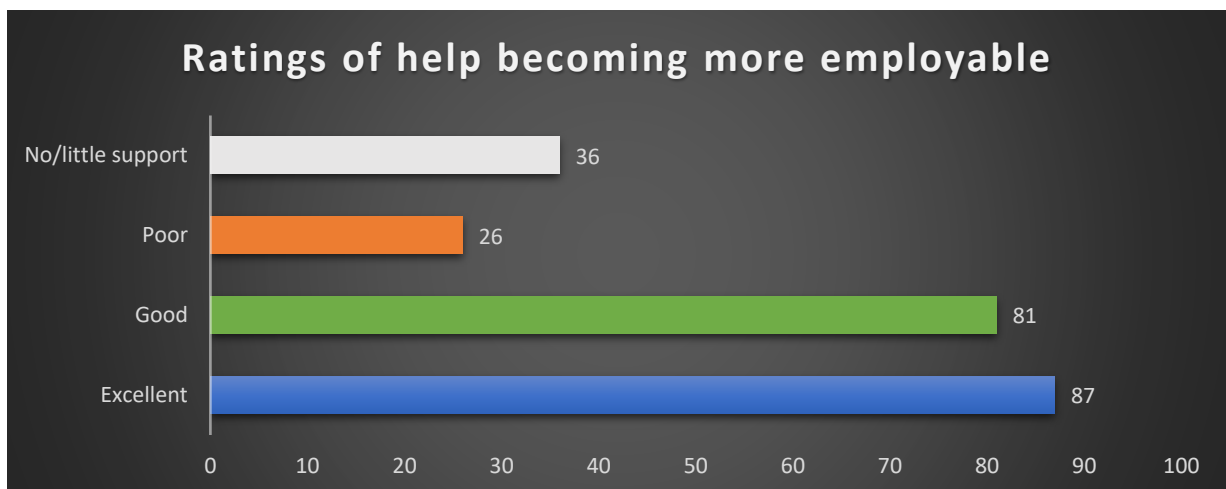
**Figure 13: Skills Ratings by sector**



### Experiences of help in becoming more employable

Respondents were asked to “Please rate how much help you have received in becoming more employable” on a four point scale: “Excellent”, “Good”, “Poor” or “Little/No support”. Two hundred and twenty five individuals responded to this question and their experiences are summarised in **Figure 14** below. Although there was still a strong majority of people with positive experiences – three quarters (168/225 = 75%) rated the quality of help in becoming more employable as excellent or good – there was also a sizeable minority (one quarter) who were not satisfied, with almost one in six people (36/225 = 16%) saying they received little or no help.

**Figure 14 Rating of Help in becoming more employable (n = 225)**



One hundred and forty seven people provided a text response to the question “Please tell us the good and/or bad things about this help”. We categorised responses into three main categories: positive experience, negative experience or neutral/mixed experience. More than half (78/147 = 53%) of the comments were broadly positive, one third (49/147 = 33%) were broadly neutral and approximately one in seven comments (20/147 = 14%) were mainly critical.

### Positive experiences of help in becoming more employable

It is no surprise that so many comments were positive as we know from an additional question in the survey that many (56) of our respondents had found work. We asked: “Has the organisation you volunteer for helped you find a job?” Two hundred and thirteen people answered this question and their responses are summarised in **Figure 15** below.

**Figure 15 Has the organisation you volunteer for helped you find a job? (n = 213)**



More than one third (56/160 = 36%) of those who wanted a job had found one and a further one third (53/160 = 33%) were confident of doing so. In the “other” category, nine people were already in employment before starting volunteering and a further five found work without any help from the organisation for whom they were volunteering.

The different ways in which organisations helped our respondents find work on the back of their volunteering experiences included:

Active encouragement from managers & other staff:

*"My supervisor, co-ordinator and one of the support workers were encouraging me to become a Personal support assistant after six months as a peer support volunteer which I wanted to become. I spent towards the end of my time as a volunteer working towards becoming more employable." [Respondent #13]*

*"I was supported very well in becoming employable after decades spent in active addiction, I was given training, supported with expenses, and made to feel welcome and a valued member of the staff team." [Respondent #24]*

Provided with long term support & motivation, including after gaining paid work:

*"Allowed to make decisions about what kind of role I would like to do and given the help needed to move into those areas. Support when I felt earlier on that I couldn't do the job which allowed me to grow in the role and gain more confidence in my abilities." [Respondent #27]*

*"I had full support to develop my skills and attend all the extra training and help to apply for both employed positions. I have since been supported in developing my skills further whilst employed." [Respondent #51]*

Career development advice:

*"As well as the Facilitator training I have also been given good advice and guidance to enrol in college courses to gain the relevant qualifications I need to be able to follow my goal of becoming a drug and alcohol worker." [Respondent #16]*

Provided with specific job seeking skills:

*"Weekly sessions, one to one to help with application form development and interview preparation." [Respondent #66]*

*"We did lots of learning techniques interview techniques and employability workshops. As well as working with them learning the job itself." [Respondent #99]*

Given the chance to shadow existing employees:

*"Increased self-confidence through receiving positive feedback about my qualities. Also offered further training opportunities and the chance to work alongside professionals to gain experience and knowledge." [Respondent #36]*

Volunteering set up with employment as a core goal:

*"The whole system feels like it is geared towards gainful employment in the future." [Respondent #32]*

## Negative experiences of help in becoming more employable

Most of the negative comments related to the fact that respondents were not given any support in finding work, without providing any additional details or indications of what support they would have liked. Two respondents were particularly annoyed at having their chances of finding work obstructed; one was not offered a reference despite having been a volunteer for over two years, one was encouraged to apply for a job with the organisation for which they were volunteering only to be told that the Human Resources department had vetoed them on the basis of a very old previous conviction.

## Summary of experiences of help in becoming more employable

*The most common positive experiences of help in becoming more employable were: 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.*

*The most common negative experiences of help in becoming more employable were: 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).*

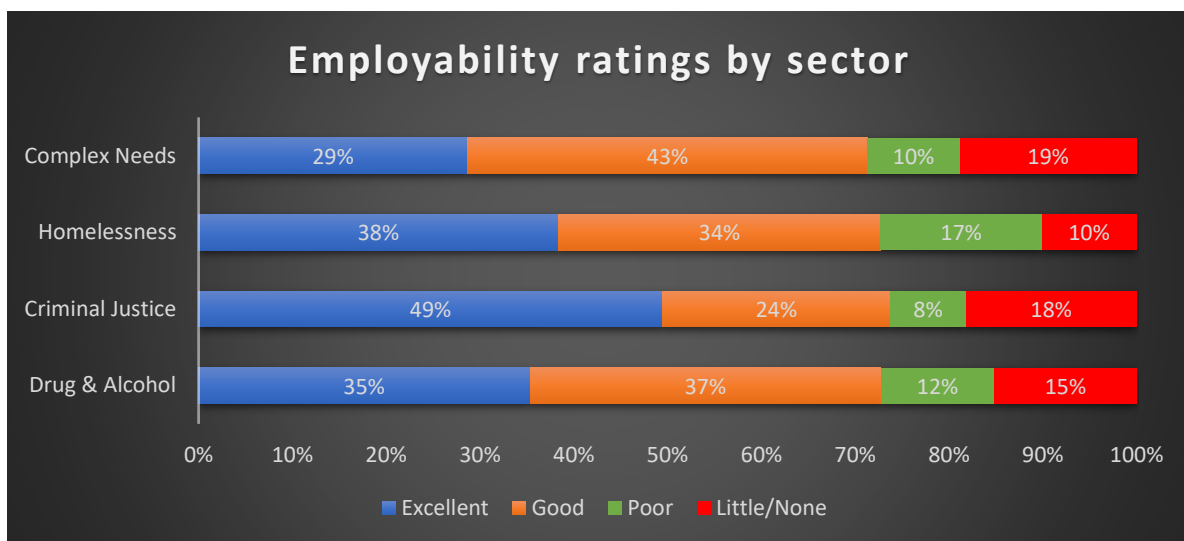
We compared overall satisfaction rates by sector and found that service users volunteering in all four sectors were almost equally<sup>6</sup> satisfied (defined as giving ratings of excellent or good) with the help they received in becoming more employable.

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<sup>6</sup> 73% volunteers in the criminal justice sector were satisfied with this help compared with 72% in the other three sectors.



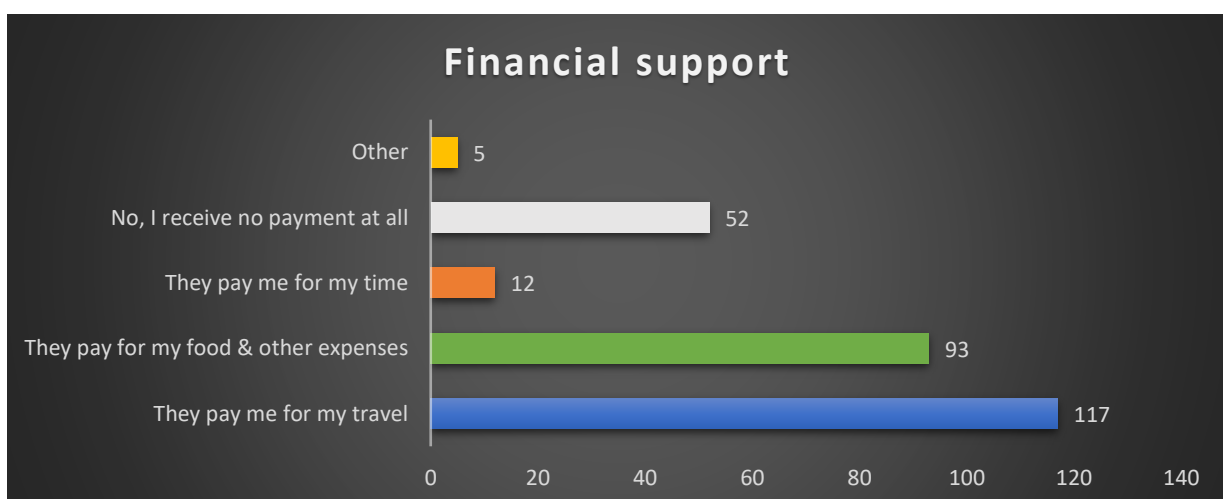
**Figure 16: Employability Ratings by sector**



### Financial help to support volunteering

We asked our survey respondents whether the organisation they volunteered for provided financial help to support their volunteering. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they received financial help for a number of expenses: travel, food and other expenses and to compensate for their time. Two hundred and thirteen people replied to this question and their responses are summarised in **Figure 18** below.

**Figure 17 Does the organisation you volunteer for provide financial help to support your volunteering? (Tick ALL that apply) (n = 213)**



Almost one quarter (52/213 = 24%) people said they received no financial help at all towards the costs of their volunteering although three people specifically said that expenses were available but they did not claim them. More than half of people

(117/213 = 55%) were reimbursed for their travel costs while more than four out of ten (93/213 = 44%) received money for food and other expenses. A small proportion of people (12/213 = 6%) were also recompensed for their time. The “other category” included three people who had had training courses, art materials and a computer supplied for them and two people who had incurred no expenses because they had been operating solely online.

One hundred and twenty one people provided a response to the question “Please tell us the good and/or bad things about this financial support”. We categorised responses into three main categories: positive experience, negative experience or neutral/mixed experience. More than three out of five (76/121 = 63%) comments were broadly neutral (predominantly referring to the fact that people did not claim for expenses or that minor expenses were re-paid), with about one fifth broadly positive (26/121 = 21%) and approximately one in six (19/121 =16%) mainly critical.

Positive comments mainly related to co-ordinators being sensitive to people’s needs, particularly if they were receiving benefits, and organisations willing to pay for a bus pass which service user volunteers were able to use for other journeys. One person mentioned receiving funding for a college course and laptop.

*“A great thing about this is the program's coordinator knew it was difficult to survive and look after yourself so he made plans so I could get money on a daily and weekly basis.” [Respondent #18]*

*“The good thing when I was volunteering was that the bus pass helped me getting out the rest of week.” [Respondent #106]*

Negative comments primarily focused on time-consuming and slow systems for reimbursing expenses for which volunteers had already paid and a small number (three) of people who said that after a prolonged period of volunteering, they needed more help to find paid work.

The issue of financial help for volunteering was the area in which respondents had a more mixed experience, with the number of broadly positive comments only slightly larger than those which were critical.

## Summary of experiences of financial support for volunteers

*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.*

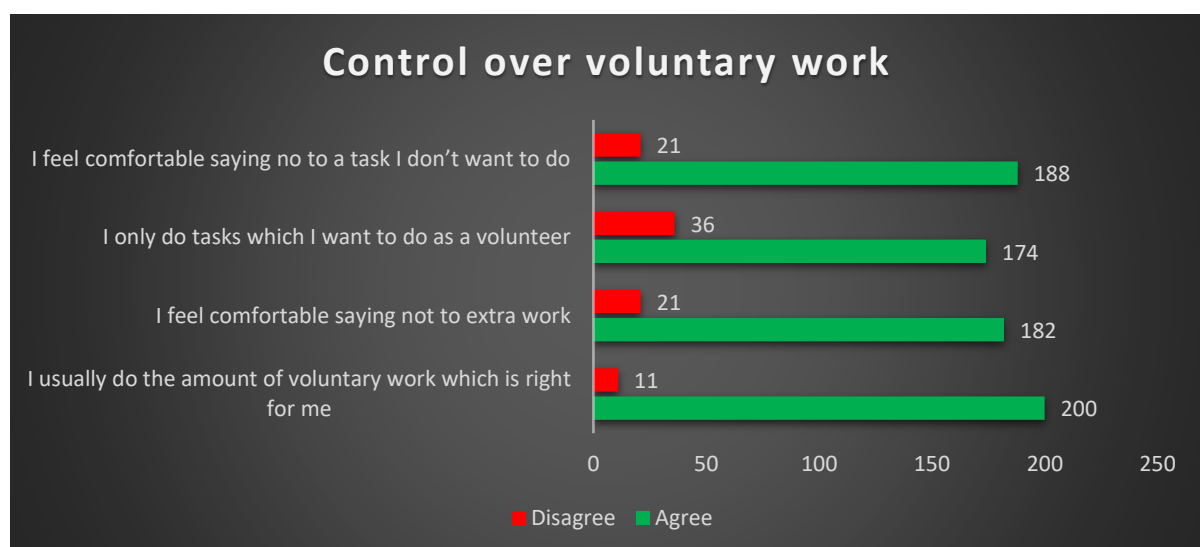
## Control over voluntary work

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. Therefore, we asked our survey respondents to agree or disagree with a series of statements:

- I usually do the amount of voluntary work which is right for me
- I feel comfortable saying not to extra work
- I only do tasks which I want to do as a volunteer
- I feel comfortable saying no to a task I don't want to do

Two hundred and thirteen people replied to this question and their responses are summarised in **Figure 18** below.

**Figure 18 Do you agree or disagree with these statements? (n = 213)**



A large majority of survey respondents were happy with their control over the amount and type of voluntary work they did, although more than one in six people (36/210 = 17%) did perform tasks which they did not want to do on occasion.

Eighty seven people also provided additional text information about their control over the amount and type of voluntary work they performed. The responses to both these questions are summarised below.

We received 153 comments to these two questions about volunteers' control over the amount and type of work they did. Again, we categorised responses into three main categories: positive experience, negative experience or neutral/mixed experience. Almost two thirds (98/153 = 64%) comments were broadly neutral, with over one quarter (44/153 = 29%) broadly positive, and approximately one in nine (17/153 = 11%) mainly critical.

#### Positive experiences of control over voluntary work

Key aspects of people being happy with the amount and type of voluntary work they did included:

Organisations being proactive about volunteers' wellbeing:

*"It's emphasised to us that we only do as much as we're comfortable doing. And, if we feel we're doing too much or under pressure, we are encouraged to talk with our line manager/supervisor." [Respondent #1]*

*"I am always asked and never told about the amount of work I do and feel under no pressure to always say yes." [Respondent #45]*

*"They keep reassuring me that is ok to tell them if I cannot do something or if I do not feel comfortable to do something. They are making sure I am ok.. [Respondent #73]*

*"It has been made clear that I am in control of the amount of work I do." [Respondent #34]*

Clear structures for ensuring that volunteers are happy with their volunteering:

*"I would have a 1-1 on a weekly basis and the quality of my time was discussed." [Respondent #37]*

*"at my supervision I always get asked if I am available to do more. they are not pushy and accept this currently is all I can do." [Respondent #48]*

*"I have full control over the time that I volunteer. We are always offered more as we get referrals in but our limit per volunteer is 2 mentees at a time." [Respondent #27]*

Organisations explicitly offer an enhanced level of care for people in recovery:

*“Mental Health problems make me un-reliable at times and less able to function - an awareness and acceptance of this is very helpful.” [Respondent #41]*

*“My organisation are compassionate and keen to keep my wellbeing strong all the time.” [Respondent #72]*

*“We are limited to how much we volunteer so our recovery or personal life isn’t impacted.” [Respondent #67]*

Explicitly offered choice over what work was preferred:

*“presented with a large scope of involvement and given the choice.” [Respondent #15]*

Negative experiences of control over voluntary work

There were three main themes in the responses from people who had had negative experiences in terms of control over their voluntary work: Pressure to do more work from the organisation, internal pressure to do more work from the volunteer themselves and no choice over the nature of the voluntary work or an expectation of performing menial task.

Examples of pressure to do more work from the organisation included:

*“I’ve seen people take on too much and relapse without staff intervening.” [Respondent #72]*

Examples where people felt they could not turn down work included:

*“At an early stage in my recovery I could have been supported more in getting a balance - Wasn’t confident at first to say no.” [Respondent #33]*

*“I learnt to say NO. some new volunteers feel obliged and not say anything to rock the boat in a new position. and will often become a little stressed but this is no fault of the organisation if they are not being open. It’s a people pleasing thing that is very common in this work. I try and educate new peers as I experienced the same behaviour.” [Respondent #39]*

*“The hours, would have liked a weekend off but didn’t feel I could ask.” [Respondent #6]*

Below are examples of people who were not given a choice about the type of work they performed on a voluntary basis or were expected to do menial tasks:

*“I do a lot of unnecessary bureaucratic work.” [Respondent #16]*

*"I would like my experience and knowledge to be given more respect and support to try out my ideas." [Respondent #25]*

*"It sounds strange to say this but often you're given work and I feel it might be nice to be asked about the Type of work that we might wish to do, and if we are ok and happy doing it." [Respondent #46]*

*"You're expected to run personal errands for the staff and pretty much treated like a skivvy." [Respondent #56]*

*"I have no control. I do what I'm told" [Respondent #61]*

*"As a volunteer, you appear to be treated as an employee, with little or no recognition of, your input" [Respondent #39]*

Summary of experiences of control over voluntary work

*The most common positive experiences of people being happy with the amount and type of voluntary work they did were: organisations being proactive about volunteers' wellbeing and having a clear structure for ensuring that they are happy about their volunteering. People also valued organisations offering an enhanced level of care for people in recovery and being offered an explicit choice over what work they would prefer to do.*

*People were less happy with being pressured to do more work by the organisation, having no choice over the nature of the voluntary work they were doing or being expected to undertake dull or menial tasks.*

*A substantial number of respondents noted that they had placed themselves under a lot of pressure to volunteer for long hours and accept any task suggested, especially in the early stages of their volunteering.*

## Analysis

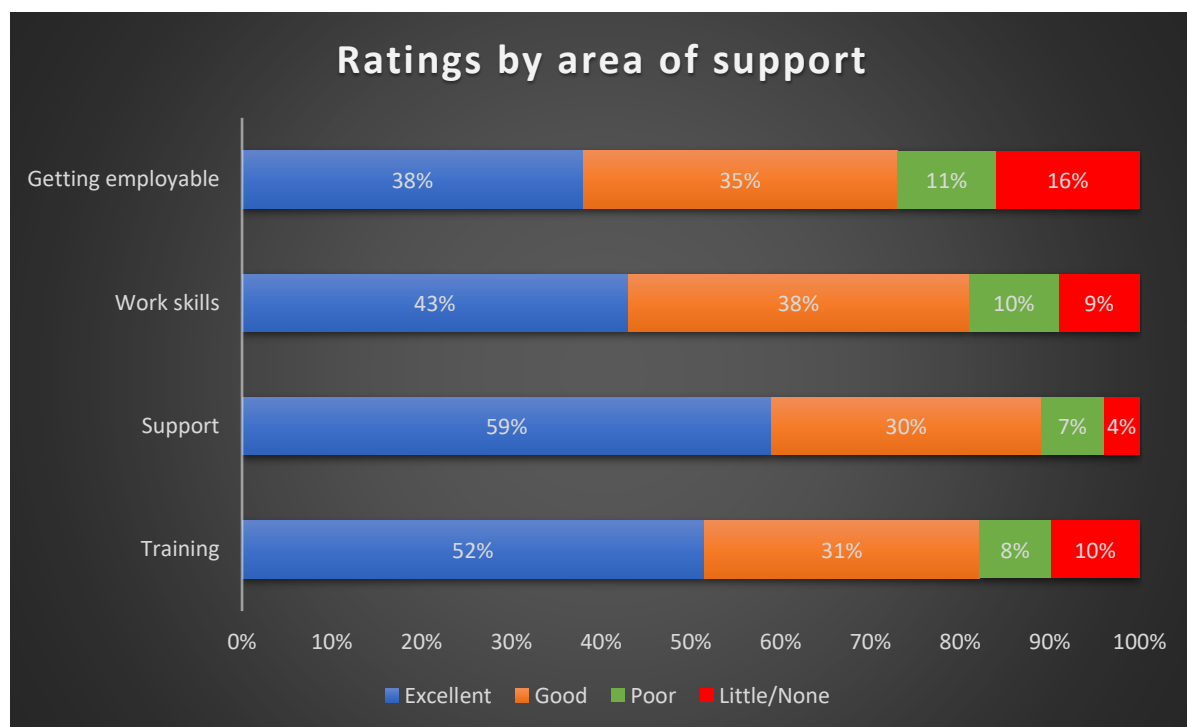
Before summarising survey respondents' experiences, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this survey. It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this survey. Although the sample size of 253 is reasonable, the cohort who answered our questions are more likely to be male (60% respondents), 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.

We were also slightly disappointed by the overall response rate, given the wide interest in the survey and its promotion by so many agencies. Having spoken to a range of other organisations, we think that prolonged lockdown (with many service user volunteers not currently able to engage in activities) and survey fatigue may be contributory factors.

We have summarised survey respondents' experiences across the four areas where we asked them to rate the quality of help they received which you can see in **Figure 19** below. As you can see, 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 support, 83% for training, 81% for help with work skills and 73% for help with getting more employable.

**Figure 19: Ratings by area of support**



We also thought it would be interesting to compare ratings by the sector in which people volunteered and we have already compared performance on a topic by topic basis in the sections above. Before we summarise these ratings, it is important to point out again that the number of survey respondents from the homelessness and

complex needs sectors were much smaller than the number for the drug and alcohol and criminal justice sectors, with the result that the ratings for the former two groups are based on much smaller sample sizes and are therefore considerably less reliable.

**Figure 20** summarises the relative performance of each sector on a comparative basis with the four sectors placed in order 1-4 on the basis of the proportion of respondents who were satisfied (again defined as those who rated help in an area as excellent or good). While survey respondents who volunteered in the drug and alcohol sector expressed the highest levels of satisfaction in relation to training, support and skills development, those in the criminal justice sector were the most satisfied group in terms of receiving help with becoming more employable. It is important to point out that our survey respondents described a wide range of experiences, irrespective of the sector for which they were volunteering.

**Figure 20: Relative satisfaction with help by sector**

Sector	Training	Support	Work Skills	Employability
Drug & Alcohol	First	First	First	Third
Criminal Justice	Third	Third	Fourth	First
Homelessness	Second	Second	Second	Second
Complex Needs	Fourth	Fourth	Third	Fourth

## Conclusion

The survey has generated a wealth of information about the current and recent experiences of service users who have gone on to volunteer for services in the drug & alcohol, criminal justice, homelessness and complex needs sectors.

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.



These experiences 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.