

## **Volunteer case study to support the consultation on the Strategic Mental Health Workforce Plan for Health and Social Care in Wales**

This case study illustrates the principle of ‘seamless workforce models’.

### **Volunteers’ vital role within integrated local mental health services**

**Volunteers can play a vital part within the spectrum of mental health services, meeting low level needs within the community, relieving statutory services of pressure and, importantly, providing support that is tailored to individual’s cultural context and circumstances.**

[CCAWS](#) is a mental health and wellbeing charity that serves the community through counselling, befriending and advocacy. ‘Volunteers are embedded within the service; they are at the heart of what we do’ explained Fehmida Ahmed, Charity Manager.

‘After completing their initial training, volunteers are allocated case work according to their strengths and experience. They have the support and oversight of a paid coordinator and work very closely with them. We have a small staff but it is the time, language skills and goodwill of volunteers that enables our services to function.

‘A pool of trained volunteers is available to support our befriending, advocacy and counselling services. Some are on placement to get experience for a counselling qualification and many of them choose to stay on after completing their mandatory hours, continuing to give a few hours each week as a volunteer. At least twenty to twenty five hours of counselling each week is currently provided by our volunteers’.

Our [previous case study](#) describes how volunteers make a difference and how they adapted to meet the challenges brought about by COVID-19.

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## **A GROWING NEED**

Initial client assessment is made by a staff member within two to four weeks, to get an understanding of what kind of help is needed and for how long.

CCAWS has seen a massive increase in demand for services, with waiting lists increasing fourfold since the outbreak of COVID-19. Where there was previously a four to six week waiting time, now it is at least six months.

Thanks to the dedication of volunteers, services are free of charge, whereas counselling from other sources would be beyond the means of many people, at around £40 per session (a typical course of six sessions amounting then to £240). Waiting times to access such counselling can be even longer, too.

## **FLEXIBLE AND COMMUNITY-LED**

CCAWS offers a holistic service and support can be flexibly tailored to individual need and complex cases can be managed and supported using a variety of approaches simultaneously. For example if something crops up during counselling which requires advocacy support, this can be arranged.

The befriending service meets a gap in supporting people who are isolated and just want someone to talk to. Thirty active volunteer befrienders provide one to one support for vulnerable people. Some have been trained as interpreters so that individuals speaking minority languages can be heard and understood.

‘We are able to support our clients through their journeys, whilst remaining as a community hub and resource for people to access when needed’ Fehmida explains ‘People often feel safer accessing a community based and community led service for their mental health and wellbeing concerns. It is less clinical and intimidating for many communities, where mental health still carries a stigma.

‘The economic value of volunteering is self-evident. Our charity’s strength is in being community led, involving volunteers from the local community who give of their time. On average volunteers provide, between them, ninety hours for support each week, which is equivalent to 2.4 FTE staff’.

## **LOCAL SERVICE INTEGRATION**

There is a good and trusted relationship with statutory partners. Referrals to CCAWS are made by the local primary mental health service and community mental health teams, for counselling, befriending or for wellbeing support – such as weekly check in calls during the pandemic.

CCAWS works with the local GP cluster, providing a listening and emotional wellbeing service for people who have been recently bereaved.

Referrals may also be made by CCAWS for specialist support elsewhere, for example in cases of psychosis, or post-traumatic stress, when CCAWS is not able to offer adequate help.

## **CONCLUSION**

Volunteers can bring a diversity of experience and cultural background. With adequate training and staff support, they can provide essential mental health support as part of an integrated range of local services. The services they provide can be more flexible, more accessible and far cheaper to clients.

It takes time and ongoing core investment, however, to build up a strong, active volunteer base, develop and deliver effective services and build working relationships with statutory mental health services, in the way that CCAWS has succeeded in doing.

**Case study by Helpforce Cymru. Helpforce is working with Third Sector Support Wales (WCVA and 19 CVCs), Welsh Government and other partners to develop the potential of volunteering to support health and social care services in Wales, The [Helpforce page](#) on our website includes links to recent articles, blogs and case stories.**