

North Yorkshire Police: Community Connectors Evaluation

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Introduction & Context

Introduction & Context

1. Introduction & Context

In early 2018, North Yorkshire Police recruited a number of volunteers to become 'Community Connectors' with the aim of reducing demand on the police created by issues around social welfare and low level crime.

The role of Community Connector would be to provide mentoring, support and a form of companionship to people in the community who are vulnerable, socially isolated, or disadvantaged. Community Connectors would attempt to help these individuals to take control of their lives, make better decisions, and develop social networks in their communities.

Individuals would be referred into the scheme through Community Safety Hubs or directly through Neighbourhood Policing Teams having been identified with one or more of the following risk factors:

- Poor social / problem solving / emotional management skills
- Anti-social attitudes
- Anti-social peers
- Lack of positive recreation or leisure activities / anti-social lifestyle
- Poor mental health (Low Level)
- Early onset dementia
- Isolated

Each individual referred into the scheme would be required to provide consent to engage with the scheme, and would thereafter receive a weekly meeting lasting between 2 and 5 hours over an agreed period of 3 – 6 months, depending on the needs identified. During meetings, Community Connectors would help referees with skills like problem solving, emotional management, and coping

mechanisms such as mindfulness, as well as helping to identify opportunities to develop social networks, engage in new or previously pursued hobbies, or receive additional support for issues they might be experiencing.

Due to the expectation of receiving disclosures of sensitive information, exposure to potentially troubling experiences, and the intensive one-on-one nature of the interactions, North Yorkshire Police committed at the outset to providing Community Connectors with training covering the following areas:

- The role of the befriender
- Problem solving techniques
- Mindfulness
- The benefits of positive social networks
- Listening & communication skills
- How to create rapport
- Dealing with disclosure
- Children & adult safeguarding
- Befriending development tools (e.g. life coaching steps)
- Hazzard spotting (Fire Service)
- Identifying signs of neglect
- Bite size learning workshops from partner agencies (e.g. independent Domestic Abuse Service)

In addition to this training, in acknowledgment of the duty of care that the police force had for its volunteers, it was intended that ongoing support and supervision would be provided for Community Connectors.

This report explores the experiences and perspectives of the volunteers recruited to the Community Connector scheme in North Yorkshire. The findings will establish the level of understanding among volunteers of what the purpose of the scheme and their roles were, along with how prepared they felt for delivering the service, successes, barriers to success, and

Introduction & Context

suggestions for improvements in future iterations of the scheme. A case study will be presented to demonstrate the activity of a Community Connector, before findings are summarised with a series of recommendations in the final chapter.

Qualitative Findings

Qualitative Findings

2. Qualitative Findings

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with volunteers who have been Community Connectors over a two-week period in May/June 2019. This chapter provides an insight into the experiences of the Community Connectors as well as their perceptions and opinions regarding the processes, success, and learning to take forward into future iterations of the scheme.

The findings explored in this chapter are split in sections covering perceptions of the purpose of the Community Connector scheme and understanding of the role among volunteers, recruitment and preparation for carrying out the role, experiences of delivering the role to service-user, impact and value of the Community Connector scheme, and suggestions for changes to improve the scheme.

2.1 Purpose of the Community Connector scheme and understanding of the role

Even among a relatively small group of volunteers, there was a range of different perceptions and understanding of the purpose behind the introduction of the Community Connector. Some volunteers perceived it as a service to support people in the community, whereas others perceived it as a method that would support the police to reduce demand created by call outs to deal with low level crime.

“To help vulnerable people in the community.”

“The purpose is reconnecting anxious people with their communities.”

“It’s supposed to reduce numbers of calls to police control room.”

While these perceptions vary, they are not exclusive to one another and demonstrate that the Community Connector scheme appears to serve both the police force and members of the community. Additionally, the responses provided match the intended aims of the Community Connectors scheme set out by strategic leads.

When asked about their understanding of what the role of a volunteer Community Connector is, there was a strong focus on the idea of ‘mentoring’ members of the community to make their own decisions but being there to support them.

“Mentoring people mostly who were vulnerable.”

“Someone who I would say walks beside a person in order to improve their lot, rather than telling them how to do it, do it with them.”

“Not to encourage dependency, but to be there as a supporter.”

That said, there were a number of comments suggesting that a full understanding of the role had taken time to develop, perhaps suggesting that volunteers weren’t fully prepared to carry out the role in the early stages. Volunteers were aware of a similar scheme in Durham that was more established, which could have been referred to in order to provide more understanding of the role on the ground.

“Throughout the process we started to understand more about the role and limitations.”

“The people in Durham have a clearer idea as they’ve been doing it for a while.”

Qualitative Findings

It was noted that there does not seem to be much wider knowledge of the scheme across North Yorkshire Police more generally. However, where officers and staff are aware of it, they feel that it is a positive addition to the landscape.

"I'm not sure that it's known across the force. I normally have to explain who I am and what I'm doing."

"From our point of view, in [location removed], because there are fewer officers and PCSOs around, with repeat calling problems they've taken it on board that we can cope quite well with that – we reduce the pressure on them to always respond."

Overall, the comments made regarding the purpose of the scheme and the role display a relatively positive level of understanding among volunteers. Specifically in relation to the Community Connector role, there appears to be a consensus around how they intend to help and support members of the community. Although the overarching strategic aims of the scheme seemed to be covered across the comments received, further dissemination of information among both volunteers and officers and staff could be helpful to develop the understanding of the scheme as well as the language used around the Community Connector 'brand'.

2.2 Recruitment and preparation for being a Community Connector

Volunteers did not mention any issues around their initial recruitment into the Community Connector scheme. It was generally seen as clearly explained and a smooth process. It was felt though that the gap between the recruitment of volunteers and the start of the training was too long, and that this caused some

volunteers to lose interest and drop out of the scheme.

"I felt the recruitment process went well and I understood from the start what my role would be."

"It took a terrific amount of time between recruitment and training, and getting out there and helping people. I feel that was far too long. We lost some people along the way because of the length of time involved in that."

"A shorter vetting time. HR should have a light lit under them... ..If you sign up to do something now you don't want to wait 6 or 8 months, you'll have moved on."

"I think the process could be improved by providing more keeping-in-touch sessions with the volunteers..."

Additionally, there were some comments suggesting that more attention should be paid to the previous professional and volunteer experiences of volunteers during recruitment, as the role involves exposure to vulnerable individuals and requires the ability to deal with sensitive and potentially volatile situations.

"They should include some people who already have experience of connecting with people who are anxious and challenged and lead lives which are difficult."

"I think it would be ideal to have volunteers who have had previous experience of volunteering in order to help them deal with the potential demands that might be put on them. Also, some previous experience or knowledge of dealing with erratic individuals should also be considered when speaking to the volunteer at the initial stage."

Qualitative Findings

“I think that the role needs to be offered to volunteers who have a bit of prior experience dealing with the public and some of the idiosyncrasies they may have.”

Views on the training provided for volunteers were mixed, with some suggestion that the training was good and enjoyable, but that there wasn't enough of it to adequately prepare individuals to go out into the community. Some of the volunteers who did feel fully prepared put that down to their previous experience of working in similar environments.

“I felt the quality of training was good but I don't think there was enough of it especially in regards with providing the right 'tools' for the younger volunteers. Dealing with complicated people requires a little bit of knowledge and experience and I felt that some of the younger volunteers were not prepared enough for what they might see in the role of Community Connector.”

“Training was very thoroughly delivered by great enthusiastic people. However, some bits I did feel as though I was back at university, with the tutors explaining theories etc, which could have just been given for bedtime reading, instead of it being embedded throughout the slideshows.”

“It was good. I felt I was fairly well equipped already. Not sure if some people got what they needed from it.”

“I was fully prepared to carry out the role but that was also due to my previous volunteer work and my work as a teacher.”

It was suggested during some interviews that volunteers have already been consulted by the strategic management team for the scheme in order to develop and improve the training

provided to Community Connectors before they begin work with vulnerable individuals. This will be a positive step in improving both the service provided in the community and the experience of volunteers. Overall there appears to be a very mixed experience of training, with experiences from outside of the Community Connector scheme determining whether volunteers felt prepared upon starting work in the community.

2.3 Barriers to delivering the Community Connector service

Despite having received training, many of the volunteers felt like the initial experience of delivering the Community Connector service involved a sense of figuring it out on the job. This extended to the supervision they had as well.

“I was told we would be assigned to a PCSO, so we could work together, but this never got implemented. We do have two people who took charge of managing the project in our area, but they didn't know what they were doing due to it being a new project.”

“We're learning as we go along.”

“I think it's us that have changed as we're doing it. We've been learning and raising issues.”

There was an issue raised around the availability of support for the Community Connectors from within the police. It was felt that the structure was not formal enough, making it difficult for volunteers to get responses to queries they had or requests for additional support. Additionally, the shifts that the officers responsible for providing support worked would often not align with when Community Connectors arranged to do their volunteering, and this created delays in communications.

Qualitative Findings

"I expected more support. Getting support from the police has been hard."

"Because of the police shifts they are often not available for a few days. If they're on duty they normally deal with it quite quickly."

"I have found that the police rota duty system does not encourage regular meetings with them to update the police or the police to update us. They're very busy anyway. As long as we're 'managing' we just get on with it."

A concern raised by volunteers was the scheme's lack of engagement with outside services that a member of the community might benefit from. It was felt that the scheme would benefit from some kind of formal partnership with local mental health services involving a process that ensures timely support for those who need it.

"I wasn't quite sure if I was allowed to just contact other services with people I've mentored to meet their needs."

"Could be improved with extra Mental Health services. The bodies involved don't seem to work together."

"We need more support. Some haven't been referred to mental health services. But they need it."

"We need some way of feeding information back and the inter-agency issue, how do we deal with that?"

"When you talk to people from other agencies the shutters come down."

Although this section highlights a number of barriers to service delivery in the Community Connector scheme, they are largely issues that can be resolved through developing the

structure of the scheme to meet these emerging needs.

2.4 Impact and value of the Community Connector scheme

Volunteers highlighted the value of being able to provide a bespoke service at a time when it is needed through regular contact and developing an understanding over time of the kind of support that will be most helpful. This varies from helping people to take control of certain aspects of their lives, getting them the professional support they need, or just being there to listen.

"As a Community Connector you provide a service that is required at that specific time."

"One of the people we've been working with, I believe we do have success, in that we seem to have got him into the system and he has been to a mental health assessment, we put everything in place to make sure that he continues with whatever he's doing with that."

"If somebody has your number and you have their number it relieves pressures and anxieties. Having that contact is really useful for people."

Additionally, there were anecdotal accounts of a variety of different ways in which Community Connectors had provided valuable assistance that made a real difference to the individual they were working with.

"I cleared the garden of one client to help him feel safe in his house. It was effective because it allowed the client to get out of his house and work in the garden, something he hadn't done in years."

Qualitative Findings

"Accompanying people on journeys, appointments, to see people in authority if they feel slightly overwhelmed. That's very useful. I had a day in court with a young lady. Went to court with her. It was amazing and empowering for her."

**"Developing trust. This takes time...
...We're starting to understand him much better. We have some real laughs. But that's all you can do with that guy. We are providing some relief."**

Moreover, despite the issues or barriers encountered, Community Connectors reported having enjoyed carrying out the role and found it rewarding. A number said that they hoped it would continue to provide a service for vulnerable individuals in the community and grow in the future.

"I've thoroughly enjoyed my involvement in the North Yorkshire Community Connector scheme and I hope it continues and grows in success."

"I feel so privileged to be part of the whole scheme, and even with the small amount of work I have done, it has given me good experience to put on my CV and talk about."

The comments in this section demonstrate the positive impact that the Community Connector scheme has had, both on vulnerable people within the community, and also on the volunteers carrying out the roles. Furthermore, the feedback provided in this section, when considered alongside some of the barriers mentioned previously, shows that there is a great potential to develop the scheme into a service that delivers great impact for communities and real value for the police and other public services.

2.5 Learning and suggested improvements

Volunteers in the Community Connector role were keen to highlight that improvements could be made by making them feel more a part of a bigger scheme by providing opportunities to come together as a group and understand what other Community Connectors are doing. This would provide a good opportunity for volunteers to share learning with each other and help the Community Connector role to grow organically.

"I feel it is a must that other Community Connectors in different areas meet up to allow you to feel part of something special, instead of feeling isolated and doing free work."

"We've now decided to have a regular meeting – every 6 weeks the [volunteers] and the PCSO to ask questions and catch up"

Additionally, more access to PCSOs or police officers was requested, especially in the early stages when working with a vulnerable individual in the community. It was felt that this may provide extra credibility to the Community Connector role and facilitate the building of trust from the member of the public towards the scheme.

"A little more possibility to accompany a PO or PSCO to see the person in the first person. The handover should be done by a PO of whatever rank. So you're introduced as someone that ranks alongside them. A bit of credibility."

Case Study

Case Study

3. Case Study

Context: The individual was brought to the attention of the Community Connector scheme due to displaying poor social/problem solving/emotional management skills, a lack of positive recreation or leisure activities/anti-social lifestyle, poor mental health (low level), anti-social peers, and social isolation.

Case activity: The first interaction involved a 20-minute phone call with the individual where a good understanding of their problems and needs was obtained. There was an initial concern that his vulnerabilities may be exploited by a woman with substance abuse and mental health problems, and the police were called in to remove her from the individual's property.

At the first face-to-face meeting, the volunteer explained the support on offer from the Community Connector scheme and got the individual to sign the Community Connector agreement. During this meeting, they also discussed the idea of volunteering as a way to reengage with the community and talked about looking for volunteering opportunities as opposed to just for paid work. The Community Connector also noted the increased level of trust in this conversation compared to the previous interaction.

The Community Connector met with the individual's parents to gain a better understanding of the individual's background and the ongoing issues and needs. They agreed that the parents would support the Community Connector's efforts to build social networks and family reintegration. A meeting was also held with a Housing Officer, who agreed to refer the individual to the Tenancy Sustainability Team for additional support.

Further to this activity, the Community Connector checked in with the individual by phone and offered lifts to and from the food bank and ensured he attended meetings with a housing officer that he had previously been avoiding.

The Community Connector's comments indicate that the regularity of contact, especially a friendly phone call, was highly effective in encouraging the individual to ask for the support that they needed, which in turn led to more engagement with the services that were available to them.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Conclusions & Recommendations

4. Conclusions & Recommendations

By introducing the Community Connector scheme, North Yorkshire Police has recognised both the needs of vulnerable people in the community and the opportunity to reduce demand on response and community policing through engaging with them at an earlier stage. Interestingly though, the police engagement through the Community Connector scheme is not carried out by a police officer or member of police staff.

Instead, the Community Connector scheme recognises that a volunteer role can be just as effective, or potentially more effective if the right volunteers are recruited, in facilitating the connection between community/voluntary sector service provision and public services. However, the findings in the previous chapters demonstrate that there is untapped potential within the scheme, and that some of the successes are down to the tenacity of individuals and their prior professional experience. This chapter will make a series of recommendations (R) throughout in order to develop and improve the efficacy of the Community Connector scheme in future iterations.

Much of the work that the Community Connector does is around identifying the needs of vulnerable individuals and helping them to access existing support or services in the community. There is potential for significant growth in this aspect the scheme, with volunteers voicing some frustrations around difficulties experienced when trying to access mental health support specifically. North Yorkshire Police could promote the existence of the Community Connector scheme to local public and third sector services and attempt to create formal partnerships so that pathways are

available to the volunteers and the individuals they are working with.

R: Promote awareness of the Community Connector scheme across the local area to service providers including mental health services and charity, housing services, local government, substance abuse services and other relevant organisations.

R: Create formal partnerships with local public and third sector services to provide support pathways for Community Connectors to access.

Volunteer recruitment processes need to be easy to complete and quick so as to not to lose the enthusiasm of applicants. It was pointed out that the delay between recruitment and the beginning of training was particularly lengthy due to the vetting process. This is an issue that could be easily resolved by working with the relevant department to create an agreed time-scale that can be communicated to applicants to manage expectations.

R: Work with Human Resources to create an agreed time-scale for the recruitment process and communicate this to volunteers at the application stage.

There was a suggestion that the training left some volunteers feeling unprepared to deliver the Community Connector scheme on the ground. Some volunteers mentioned that discussions have already taken place to develop the training programme for the next intake of Community Connectors. This is an important process to correct and requires the scheme's strategic leads to obtain the opinions of all volunteers, which should be achievable due to the small cohort.

R: Consult all Community Connectors regarding what they would have benefitted from learning during the training process.

Conclusions & Recommendations

R: Develop a training plan using the feedback received factoring in the experiences of the first cohort of Community Connectors.

R: Consider engaging with local service providers to participate in training to facilitate understanding of the roles and remit of statutory and third sector organisations that can/should be referred to.

A sense of belonging and being a part of something bigger is important, whether it is feeling a part of North Yorkshire Police, or just having a more detailed understanding of the Community Connector scheme's work. This was an aspect that some volunteers felt was missing, and comments received mentioned being left alone to get on with the volunteer work, feeling isolated, and wanting to meet up with other Community Connectors to share experiences and learn from each other. In addition to this, although one of the functions of the scheme is to reduce demand on police, volunteers wanted to feel more connected to the Community Policing Team, including PCSOs and police officers, and felt that they could be more effective in their roles by having access to these professionals.

R: Create formal processes for interaction between volunteers, and also between strategic leads and volunteers to continue learning and recognise the individual and overall successes of the scheme.

R: Work with PCSOs and PCs in the Community Policing Team to provide more access to support for volunteers.

The purposes of the Community Connector scheme were to reduce demand on police created by calls involving low level criminal activity generated by vulnerable people within the community through working with these individuals to address their issues. The

qualitative accounts of volunteers detailed in this report alone do not provide confirmation that the scheme is achieving these goals. Therefore, strategic leads should develop a framework for capturing quantitative data in conjunction with the force control room to measure demand, as well as developing a system for Community Connectors to fully document their work with vulnerable people. It may also be possible to measure the cost-benefit of interventions by volunteers. This information would provide a more complete picture of the effectiveness of the Community Connector scheme as well as a basis for future strategic decision-making.

R: Introduce detailed data capturing systems to measure demand created by vulnerable individuals identified by the Community Connector scheme as well as a compulsory process for volunteers to record their interactions with the individuals they are working with.

R: Consider building a value framework to demonstrate the cost-benefit of the Community Connector scheme to North Yorkshire Police senior leaders.

R: Consider commissioning the IPSCJ to carry out a follow-up evaluation using new data capturing systems in 12-18 months.

Overall, despite experiencing some barriers, the enthusiasm of the volunteers to delivered the Community Connector scheme demonstrates its value and its potential to positively impact on the lives of vulnerable individuals. There are a number of areas that can be developed and improved in future iterations, and this should be expected from a pilot scheme.

The scheme has demonstrated that there is an appetite in the community for more specialist volunteer roles, and with improved awareness and recruitment process, that appetite could be

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exploited to great effect for both North Yorkshire Police Force and the local community it serves.

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