

Vocation Matters Report 2010

To be literate is to become liberated from the constraints of dependency.

To be literate is to gain a voice and to participate meaningfully and assertively in decisions that affect one's life.

To be literate is to gain self-confidence.

To be literate is to become self assertive.

To be literate is to become politically conscious and critically aware, and to demystify social reality.

Literacy enables people to read their own world and to write their own history.

Have a voice

Literacy makes people aware of their basic human rights and enables them to fight for and protect their rights.

Literacy enables people to have a greater degree of control over their own lives.

Literacy helps people to become self-reliant and resist exploitation and oppression.

Literacy provides access to written knowledge - and knowledge is power.

In a nutshell, literacy empowers

Yusuf Kassam (1994): 33



Introduction and context

The Vocation Matters project is integrated within a SLAM Vocational Resource Centre in Stockwell. We assist secondary care mental health users, carers and professionals within the Lambeth Borough by offering time-unlimited information and support for all vocational needs.

The project began in 2003 when it was managed by a service user in a voluntary capacity. In late 2005 it was incorporated within SLAM and has grown and adapted according to need. The project has recently been enhanced with the recruitment of an Education & Grants Officer. This means there are now three paid staff and one service user volunteer who is currently constructing a new website.

The majority of people accessing the project are service users and because of the often complex nature of needs we see the majority face to face. We also assist significant numbers of professionals by phone, email and post.

The ethos of the project is that vocational achievement, wellbeing and recovery are the core of our work. We believe in using an individualised person-centred approach. For example:

“Recovery is about individualised approaches and, as the definition suggests, it is about having a satisfying and fulfilling life, as defined by each person”.²

Wellbeing

Two recently published reports: The Mental Wellbeing Impact Assessment Toolkit, National Mental Health Development Unit (2010) and Recovery is for All SLAM/SWLSTG (2010) highlight the critical importance of addressing wellbeing in relation to an individual's health. Whilst our main focus is to address vocational need, our experience of engaging with local service users tells us that we cannot do this in isolation e.g. If wellbeing is not addressed equally, then the chances of a lasting and effective vocational outcome are negligible.

The front cover of this years report contains written work by Yusuf Kassam.¹ His work talks about the importance of literacy and being literate. I have used this because this is a foundation for the promotion of wellbeing. The four core protective factors of wellbeing are an integral part of being literate and therefore have a significant influence on the mental wellbeing of individuals.

In the Wellbeing Toolkit there are four core protective factors. Many of the service users we see struggle on a daily basis with these, so we work in partnership with them to overcome these challenges. For example:

A **sense of control** including:

- Agency - the setting and pursuit of goals
- Mastery - ability to shape circumstances/the environment to meet personal needs
- Autonomy - self-determination/individuality
- Self-efficacy - belief in one's own capabilities

Resilience is broadly defined as: *“doing better than expected in the face of adversity.”*²

Participation: When required and where possible we will let individuals know about outside activities, for example walking groups and exercise on prescription.

Social Inclusion: *“People do not recover in isolation. Recovery is closely associated with social inclusion and being able to take on meaningful and satisfying social roles within local communities, rather than in segregated services.”*³

We actively promote social inclusion and a large majority of individuals who access our project make it very clear that they do not want to be segregated within a mental health or disability setting. We therefore increase their options by informing them of mainstream community options.

We also ensure that financial inclusion is addressed because the effects of poverty can be devastating on individuals. For example: by assisting with benefits maximisation. We have also assisted individuals with credit problems and informed people about credit unions, if they find it difficult to get a bank account. For example: asylum seekers and those with poor credit histories.

A brief introduction from the Education & Grants Officer

My professional training is in Post-Compulsory Education, specifically ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) and Adult Literacy. As a lecturer, personal tutor, trainer and course leader, I have set up and taught a huge range of courses in the boroughs of Lambeth and Greenwich, in further education colleges, the community and the workplace. I am also studying counselling.

Research has shown that education can have a positive effect on mental health, not only through the vocational opportunities that study and qualifications can bring, but through the *Wider Benefits of Learning*: the development of confidence, self-worth and interpersonal skills, through participation, encouragement and inclusion in education. I have seen this time and time again 'from the inside', and been privy to incredible personal journeys, as well as academic and vocational ones. I've seen what an immeasurable difference individual educational staff and institutions can make, when they listen to their learners and support them in an individualised way, promoting inclusion and wellbeing in their classrooms, and how tough it can be for learners when this doesn't happen. I understand how daunting it can be to re-enter education, especially after a difficult period, or if experiences weren't good the first time round.

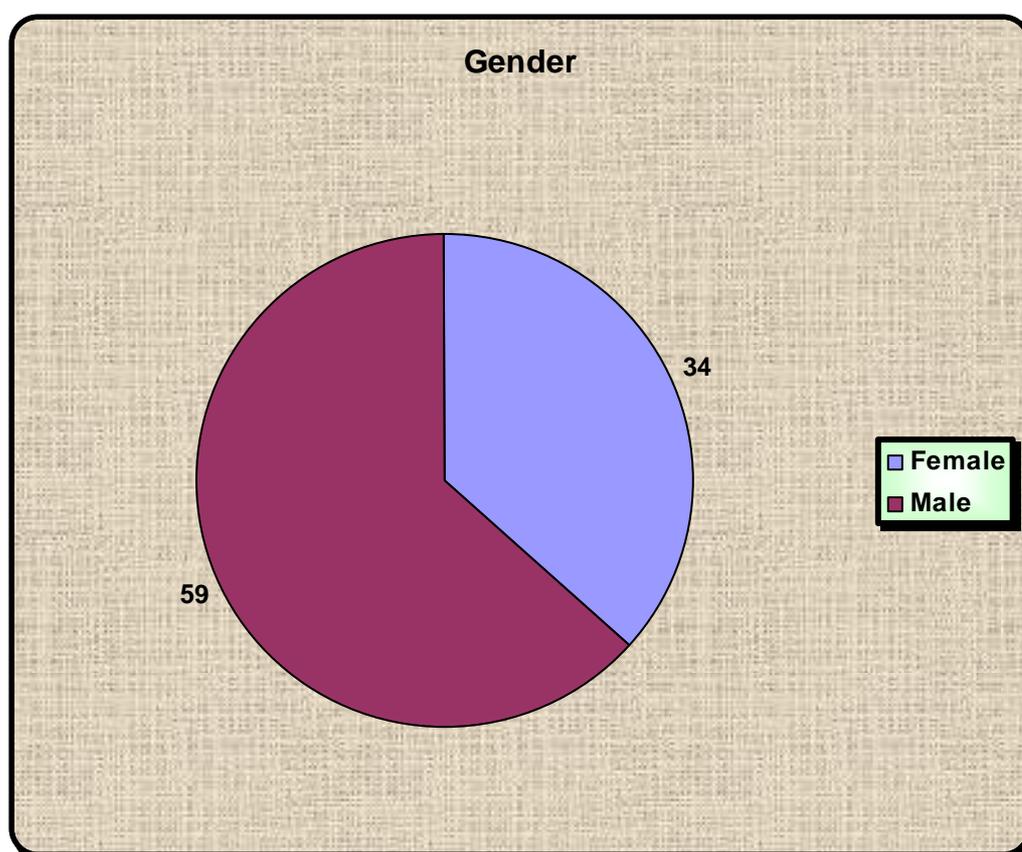
Vocation Matters reached the conclusion that an education 'specialist' would add to the value of the project; someone to focus specifically on accessing education and grant funding opportunities, and so my post was created. Our hope is that my 'hands-on' education background will add some extra value to the work that Shaun and Rob are doing with service users. I have a real, working insight into the application, interview and enrolment systems in further and adult education, so hope to be able to support service users navigate them. I'll be getting out and visiting colleges and training providers myself, getting to know individual staff and systems personally, and making myself aware of potential barriers. I will be supporting and encouraging people as they wade through the array of courses and qualifications available, encouraging informal visits to get a 'feel' for different places of learning in Lambeth and elsewhere, and helping ensure people are given whatever level of educational support they want from us and the providers, both before and during courses.

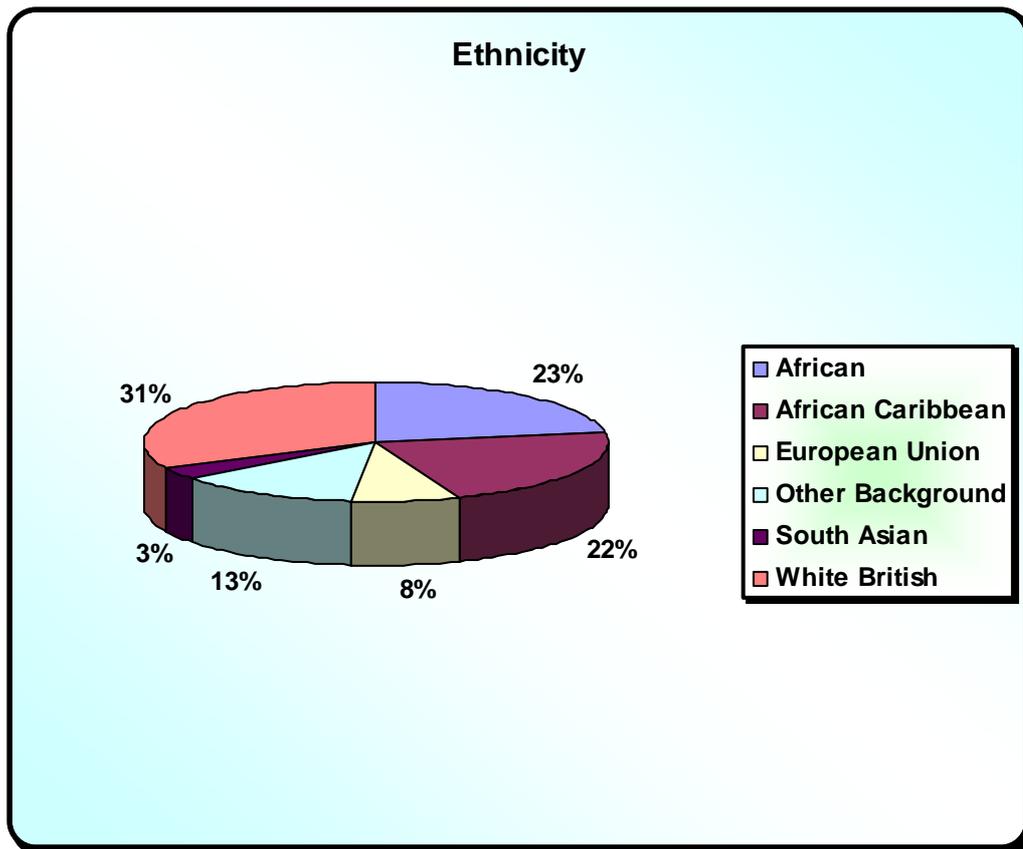
Kate.

Who we engaged

Ninety-three service users attended the project within the year receiving dedicated vocational information and in-depth support. A further four referrals have been made and are waiting to be seen.

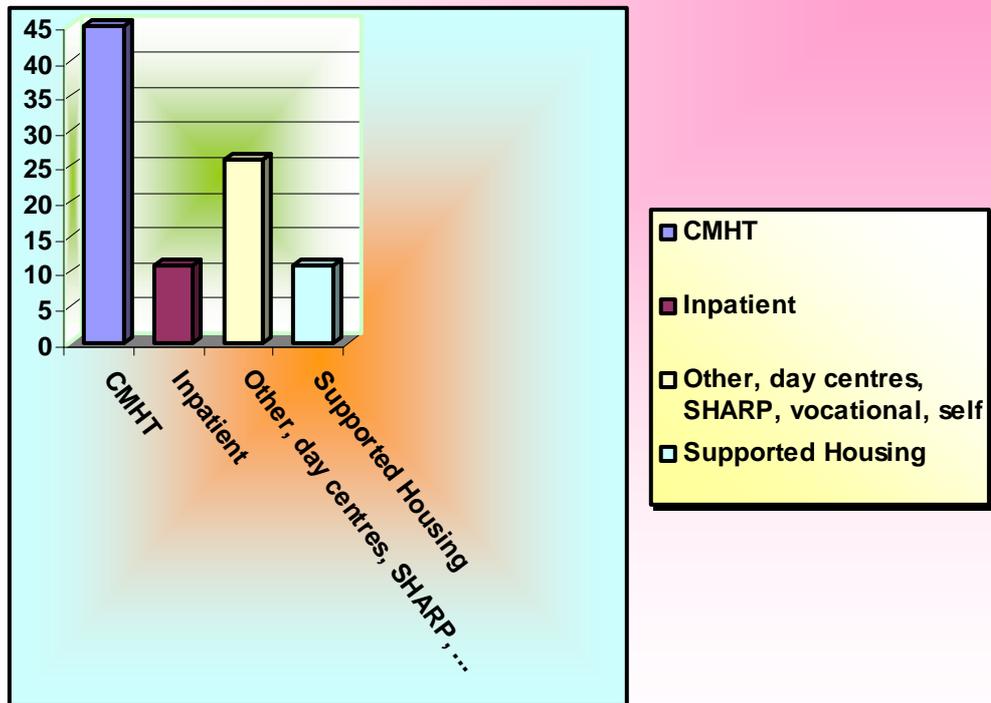
Twenty-four service users did not arrive for initial appointments. This is a far greater number than in recent years. The most common reason being mass referrals from supported housing and social inclusion providers. If we receive a large number of referrals from a provider in one go our experience shows us that the numbers who DNA is often very high. This is because the referrer does not spend enough time taking into account an individual's needs or wishes before making the referral. We therefore no longer take referrals like this, but accept individual referrals. The second most common reason stems from referrals from professionals on acute wards. Whilst it is understandable that an individual who is about to be discharged may need vocational support, all too often at that moment in time it is not the service user's main priority.



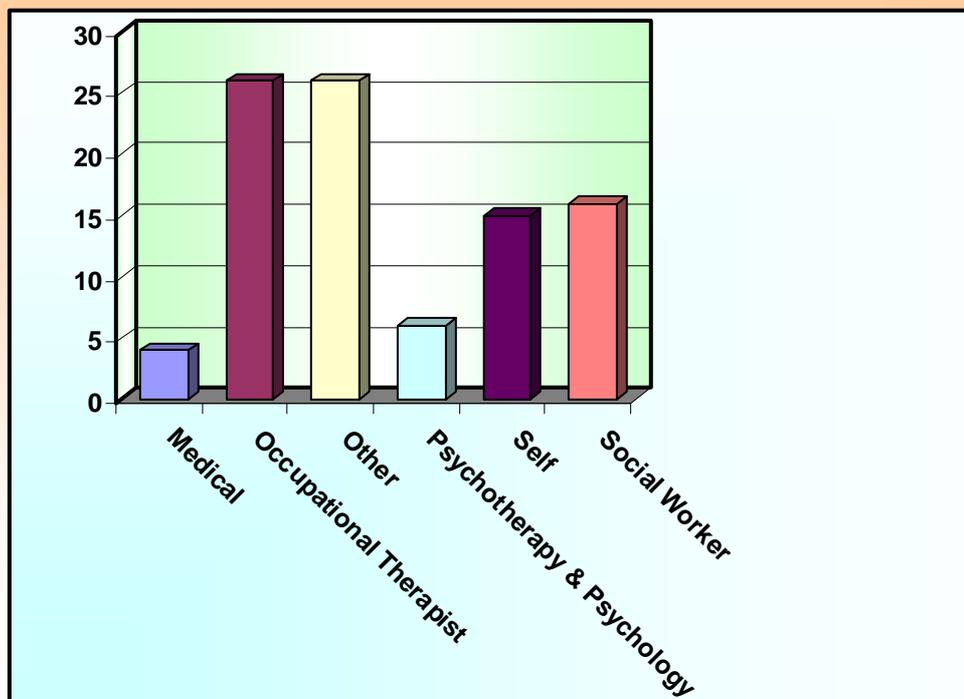


Other backgrounds include: Dual Heritage, Filipino, Traveller, Turkish, and Venezuelan. African backgrounds include: Cameroonian, Congolese, Eritrean, Ghanaian, Kenyan, Nigerian, South African and Ugandan.

Referral Source



Professional Referrals

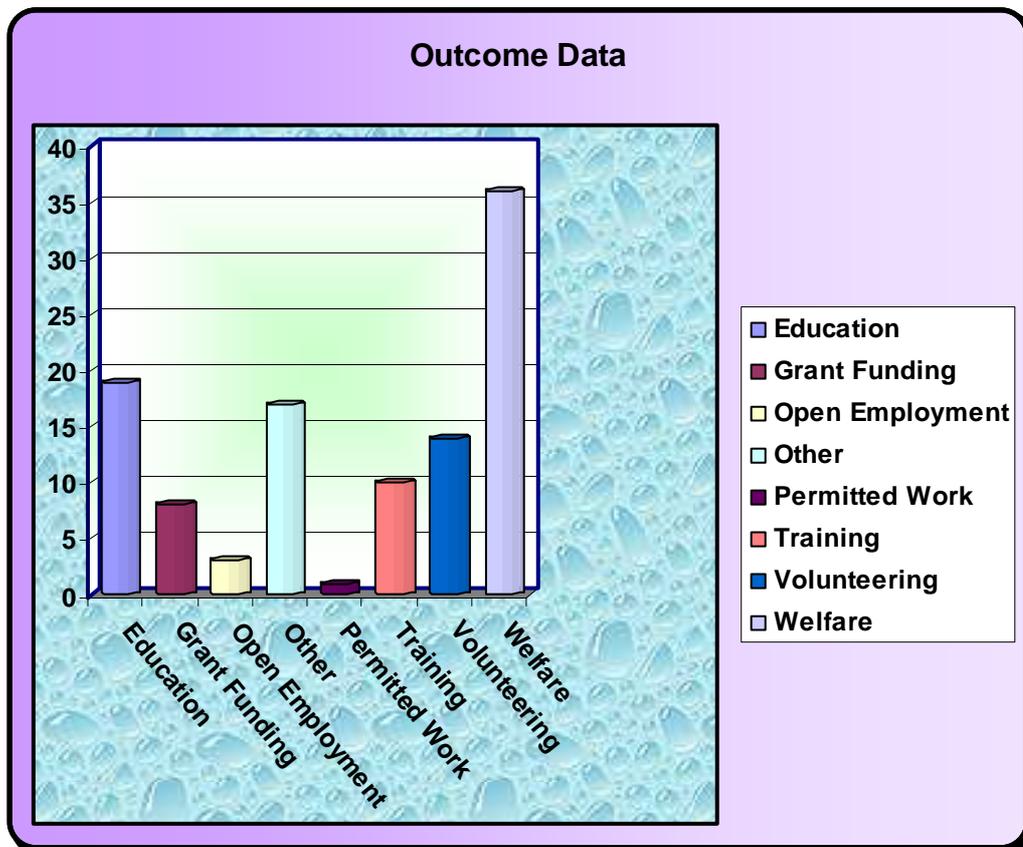


Interventions undertaken

We provided a broad range of interventions with individuals this year:

- Assessment - initial appointment & ongoing
- Engagement - more than one appointment
- Career information
- Career support - CV assistance, job search & applications
- Career counselling - including job retention support
- Education information
- Education support - any support required to start a course / training
- Volunteering information
- Volunteering support - any support required to start volunteering
- Welfare information
- Welfare support - applications, benefits maximisation
- Grant funding support
- Advocacy
- Referrer engagement
- Social inclusion/other

Outcomes



Other outcomes include

- Mentoring to remain in paid employment
- Freedom pass and discount bus pass information and support
- Dealing with utility providers
- Health benefits
- Physical health and wellbeing information
- Bid assistance for a research project - Wellcome Trust

Benefits maximisation outcomes

Total obtained for 12 service users: £34,247.06

This total is the result of new Disability Living Allowance claims along with the resultant premiums - severe and enhanced disability. A number of people were awarded premiums that they were entitled to, but not aware of until they received support from the project. Other examples include: Employment and Support Allowance back pay, Working Tax Credit, a Community Care Grant and a Budgeting Loan.

From our experience individuals who are in the receipt of the correct level of welfare often experience improved health and wellbeing. They are more likely to be involved in some vocational activity, and are therefore more socially included. So where needed we will assist with benefit maximisation.

Grant outcomes

A total of £1,875.00 has been raised from grant-funding charities to assist service users with their vocational goals:

- Editorial & Proofreading Course at London School of Publishing- £300.00 from a Goldsmiths grant and £250.00 from the Simon Walker Trust Fund.
- City & Guilds PAT electrical testing course at NICEIC Training- £425.00 from a Goldsmiths grant.
- C/C ++ part 2- Object Oriented Programming using C++ at City University- £300.00 from a Goldsmiths grant.
- NVQ 3 Health & Social Care Assessment from Mapilim Training- £300.00 from a Goldsmiths grant.
- £300 from Goldsmiths for a laptop for self-employment research and business-match funding was not available so this amount was turned down.

Qualitative data

We have recently adapted our evaluation form to obtain a clearer picture of how the service interventions impact upon an individual's health and wellbeing. We asked if the provision would have any effect on their use of mental health services. The response rate from the evaluation forms for this year is 41%.

Findings

Did the appointment and information given adequately meet your needs?

Yes = 94% No = 6%

Since attending the service do you feel that your mental health, physical health and social wellbeing have improved?

Yes = 84% No = 13% Not sure = 3%

If you have answered yes to this question do you feel you are less likely to require mental health treatment than before?

Yes = 26% No = 55% Not sure = 19%

Verbatim responses from Service Users

'The support that I received and am still receiving have been tremendous and astonishing. Through Vocation Matters, I was able to find first of all a welcoming and dedicated staff. Their enthusiasm, reliability and desire to support using various tools (advocacy, counselling, one-to-one support, training and orientation, financial advises, etc...) have impacted positively in my life such as that, psychologically first and foremost I am moving towards stability, self-esteem, and my integration is going forward as I have started a Degree Course this September.'

'I have found the individual support + advice session to be of great use.'

'I feel the service as it stands is of great quality. It perhaps can be advertised more widely.'

'Vocation Matters has given me the opportunity to meet & do a lot of voluntary work.'

'This is a very useful service. Perhaps there is space for ex-users of the service to come back and help to support others.'

'It meets all my needs very well.'

'You people are a lovely bunch, beyond caring and ever so supportive.'

'I think the service is a good service for what I've seen so far.'

Verbatim responses from Professionals

'Service users have found it to be a friendly, helpful project.'

'It is very useful to have the project located at Beale House with links with other vocational resources there. The project has been very helpful to clients in looking for and finding work/vocational activities.'

'I have recommended the service to colleagues for their clients on a number of occasions and will continue to do so.'

'Reporting that they find it useful and staff helpful. They are managing to access education, employment and voluntary-based activities which they have found very helpful.'

'Very useful. It is great that they can make contact in their own way in their own time. I like that I can just send an email.'

'Great starting point for people when thinking about work, etc. I regularly use this service, and am continuing to do so.'

'The referral process is very straightforward and easy and makes the service very accessible.'

'The response time is absolutely fantastic. I have responses to emails almost immediately or within hours, and always very helpful and informative around advice and information.'

'I have received some positive comments from service users about their experience of the service in terms of the support and information and advice they have received, which makes me feel very confident to continue to seek out the help of this project for service users.'

Service-user's resilience Vs system failures

Below we have a number of examples whereby service users have tried to take control of their circumstances, requiring a great deal of resilience on their part. With our assistance and support they have tried to resolve a number of challenging system failures within the welfare and education systems. These examples are just the tip of the iceberg:

A 49-year-old man accessed the service to discuss his vocational options. He had been using the facilities at Morley College to create original pieces of work, having studied on various related art courses at the college.

As he is on benefits he is able to afford subsidised weekly studio time which he finds therapeutic. It provides a creative outlet and adds valuable routine to his life.

Having accessed our service, he achieved a significant breakthrough when a major London tourist attraction requested they exhibit 2 of his sculptures. They offered him payment for this, which brought to the fore significant issues about this man's health and his readiness for a return to work.

He wanted to seriously consider his route away from a life dependent on benefits, but was anxious not to find himself in a 'freelance' world of uncertainty – which might pose significant risks to his health and wellbeing through potential stress and anxiety.

He was however open to the idea of moving towards a more independent life.

As part of the process of exploring his options and attempting to plan a way forward he approached the benefits agency to ask what, if any, affect this payment would have on his benefit entitlement. Income Support said it would be seen as a 'one-off capital payment' and therefore, provided he abided by certain conditions, it would not affect his entitlement - as long as he informed them in writing.

Unfortunately, having written this letter with full details of the payment agreement, and having followed all of the benefits agency's guidance, his Income Support was suspended. Income Support said they considered him to be self-employed.

He was extremely distressed by this. The situation had changed from one of looking positively at his employment options to one of great anxiety and uncertainty.

It took some weeks to find a specialist benefits advisor in Lambeth. The adviser informed this man that he may also be pursued by the Inland Revenue, as well as have his Housing and Council tax benefit stopped. The fact he had done all he'd been asked to do by the benefits agency, and

attempted to be transparent at all times seemed to count for nothing at this time.

The adviser wrote a letter to the Income Support decision makers reiterating the information he had received from them only a few months before, and stressing that his exhibits were done as a hobby, for therapeutic reasons in his spare time. The payment was a one-off capital payment and he had no plans to accept payment for any other pieces.

Fortunately this intervention seems to have done the trick, and the man's Income Support has been reinstated and back-paid.

The lasting impact of this whole saga has yet to be seen. But the journey back to work for this man has been complicated by the heavy-handedness of the benefits agency.

One of our clients found there were significant barriers for people on a low income to access even short vocational courses.

He has a background in electrical work, but this was interrupted by a spell in prison and his engagement with mental health services (including admissions to hospital) since the late 1990's. He was keen to refresh these skills.

We found funding for an electrical work-related health and safety course, which he completed.

He had the idea of getting a PAT Inspection and Testing of Electrical Equipment qualification – as a step towards getting back to paid work in the industry. We helped him get funding to take part in a course at a local further education college. When the time came to enrol, he was informed that the price had increased from £291 to £425.

There were issues around access, communication and a lack of any real learner-support at this institution. Enrolment was only 'in-person'; no notice of the price increase was given at any stage; and his low income counted for nothing when we requested time to find the extra funding.

Fortunately the grant-giving organisation was very accommodating and a supplementary grant was awarded to cover the shortfall. He travelled again to the college campus to enrol. Having done so, he was contacted and informed that the course would not run as there weren't enough participants.

He did eventually complete the course at an alternative venue – this was in the Home Counties and the cost of travel was another struggle. He showed real resilience to make the journeys involved, remain patient and spend

significant amounts of his own money to improve his vocational prospects.

We have been supporting a female service-user in her mid 30's who experienced workplace bullying a couple of years ago. She has been claiming sickness benefits since and we have assisted her with career counselling, information and welfare support.

She recently decided that she was feeling capable of returning to employment and had joined a relevant employment agency. She decided that she wanted to come off benefits gradually and felt that she no longer met the required criteria for Disability Living Allowance. We mentioned to her that she could still claim this benefit whilst working if her health needs remained the same. Despite this, she wanted to stop this claim. She was concerned that the benefits agency might question whether she should have told them that her health had improved earlier. She was worried that she maybe charged with fraud. We gave her written information from a renowned resource managed by a number of barristers. She felt happy with this literature and she wrote to the disability benefits department asking them to end the claim. She then had to complete a form stating how her health had changed.

After this, the disability section contacted the Employment and Support Allowance office who then decided that her claim for ESA needed to be re-assessed. She now finds herself very stressed and her health has deteriorated once more whilst she awaits the outcome of this assessment. It is highly likely that she will be found 'capable of work' and forced towards wholly unsuitable employment.

This example shows that it is very difficult for service users to try and come off benefits and get back to work without the 'carpet' being removed from under their feet. This is a very clear example of how good intentions have been thwarted by an increasingly inflexible welfare system that fails service users.

Volunteer Feedback

My name is Oliver and I manage the Vocation Matters website. I am also a user of the service. I hope this perspective lends my comments some credibility.

I first met Shaun after my therapist suggested volunteering might be beneficial. At the time, I wasn't overly optimistic. What could he say that I hadn't heard before? But after a quiet chat about my situation, he immediately suggested I could help with the website. I remember being struck by how quickly Shaun had deftly soothed my anxiety with a level of compassion and understanding that seemed almost uncanny. But mostly, I remember how kind and supportive he was - how convinced he was he could help me.

Over the following months I was encouraged by both Shaun and Rob to become more involved. It wasn't just kind words they offered me, they even created a space for me to work in. My flat had begun to feel like a padded cell and the simple act of 'going to work' dramatically reduced the isolation I had been feeling. By volunteering to redesign and update their website I had begun to feel more like a real person with something worthwhile to contribute, someone actually useful and genuinely appreciated.

I could go on, there are many more examples of seemingly small things they have done that have helped me immeasurably. So much so, that I think Vocation Matters has become amongst the most effective treatments in my personal battle with mental illness. I only hope, through my work on the website and the continued hard work of Shaun, Rob and Mark, that many more people, who need quality information about Mental Health care issues in Lambeth, will get the help they deserve.

For me the value of their service has been incalculable.

Challenges

Each year we are faced with different challenges when supporting service users with vocational needs. In previous years it has been noted that there have been significant needs around abuse, alcohol and drugs, housing, homelessness and debt. This year three further themes have emerged. For example:

Physical Health

This has been particularly evident for many users of the project in the last year, with numerous examples of struggles related to: epilepsy, diabetes and asthma, vascular and cardiac conditions. In general this is often more a cause for concern when we meet with users than their psychological health.

A recent report about wellbeing highlights that:

*“Mental wellbeing and physical illness are intimately inter-connected – with long term health conditions”.*⁴

Concessionary fees and education

A second potential challenge over the coming years has recently been highlighted by a service user. We assisted one individual to start a level 2 Social Work Access to HE course in early 2010. Being allowed to start this course proved difficult for the individual and it was only through advocacy and intervention on our part that she was allowed on to this course.

Recently, she told us that if she wanted to do level 3 of the course, and thereby improve her employment opportunities she would have to pay the full amount of £850. After hearing this we contacted the course tutor who confirmed that there is a possibility that all concessions could stop in 2011 which would hit the poorest individuals on welfare benefits disproportionately. If this happens at Lambeth College it could happen at other learning institutes and will cause a great deal of distress for service users because they could end up excluded from education. It will also be a huge challenge for this project to assist service users with course funds.

Welfare benefit reforms

A challenge that occurs regularly focuses on welfare issues and reform. Distorted media portrayals do not help and continue to cause a great deal of distress for service users. The constantly shifting position is also a concern for the project. It is vital to provide accurate information so users can make informed vocational choices.

In the near future all recipients of Incapacity Benefit (IB) and Income Support (IS) will be migrated to Employment & Support Allowance (ESA). It is our experience and that of welfare advice providers that the ESA process is deeply problematic and flawed. Often very vulnerable individuals have major problems with the claims process, are left confused and told they are fit for work.

Disability Living Allowance is due to change radically in 2013 and it will then be called a Personal Independence Payment. The changes are also designed to reduce the existing number of claimants by 20% which again is likely to add to the fear and distress of many service users.

Local Housing Allowance reform due out shortly and the cost saving measures already mentioned are likely to seriously jeopardise previous government agendas regarding mental health and inclusion. This is because mental health users are one of the largest groups who depend on sickness and disability related benefits.

Conclusion:

The evidence here indicates the project is successfully meeting a wide range of complex and multiple needs. Significantly, 84% of service users stated that since attending the service their mental health, physical health and social wellbeing had improved. Despite this positive outcome 55% stated that they still wanted to access mental health services. A number indicated that they were anxious about saying that they were less likely to use services because they feared the withdrawal of support.

The significant number of outcomes related to welfare benefits highlights the need to address these concerns before advances can be made vocationally. Consequently, in order to address service users' vocational needs a range of input on welfare benefits is necessary.

The case studies highlight that a lot of the work we undertake focuses on trying to resolve a range of system failures and without effective support many service users give up, feel helpless and their health deteriorates. In this bleak climate of financial hardship it is crucial that vocational services such as Vocation Matters continue to provide vital help and support.

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References:

1. Kassam, Y. (1994) *Who benefits from illiteracy? Literacy and empowerment* in Morsy, Z. (editor) *The challenge of illiteracy: from reflection to action*. New York: Garland Publishing.

2. National Mental Health Development Unit (2010): *The Mental Well-being Impact Assessment Toolkit*.

3. South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust and South West London and St George's Mental Health NHS Trust (2010). *Recovery is for All. Hope, Agency and Opportunity in Psychiatry*. A Position Statement by Consultant Psychiatrists, London: SLAM/SWLSTG.

4. University of Central Lancashire, UCLAN (2010): *Commissioning Mental Wellbeing*.