

SUMMARY REPORT

A Guide for the Journey A Research Study Into Volunteer Mentoring In Northern Ireland

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Background

The need for this research was highlighted in the Draft Northern Ireland Action Plan for the Active Community Initiative. The Active Community Initiative began in January 1999 with the Prime Minister's vision of a society that encourages active citizenship. This aim was developed into a strategic framework by a UK working group (with NI representation) chaired by Lord Warner, published as *Giving Time, Getting Involved*. A Northern Ireland Working Group was established to develop an action plan for taking forward this agenda and specifically to achieve "a more active community by increasing public involvement in community life through volunteering and other forms of community activity." The remit for the Northern Ireland Action Plan also included "exploring mentoring as a means of increasing public involvement in community life".

In order to establish useful baseline information the Voluntary Activity Unit, Department for Social Development, provided funding for the Volunteer Development Agency to commission a specific pilot study on mentoring.

Objectives and Methodology

This research study has been commissioned in order to "research the current volunteer mentoring opportunities in Northern Ireland; consider best practice benchmarks and explore the potential to support and/or increase the number of volunteer mentoring opportunities".

The research brief identified the following key strategic questions that the study needed to address:

- What is defined by the term "mentoring"?
- What are the generic components of the volunteer mentor's role?

- What is the current extent of volunteering mentoring opportunities within the voluntary/community and statutory sectors?
- What is the involvement of the private sector in volunteer mentor programmes?
- How effective is volunteer mentoring?
- What are the models of best practice?
- What attracts individuals to the mentoring role and can mentoring provide a means of broadening the base of volunteering and community activity?

The agreed methodology for the study included the following:

- A literature and internet search and review on mentoring by volunteers
- A survey of projects involving volunteer mentors in Northern Ireland to identify:
 - The range of opportunities and activities carried out, and
 - The number of organisations involved
- Interviews (in person or by phone) with key staff of volunteer mentoring projects to identify:
 - Practice and management issues
 - Impact of involving volunteer mentors.

Origins and Settings of Mentoring

In recent times interest in the concept of a mentor was sparked by a seminal research project by Levison et al in 1978, where the researchers explored the lives of forty men aged 35-45 and discovered that a relationship with a mentor was "one of the most complex, and developmentally important, a man can have in early adulthood".

The value of having a trusted and wise adult who is not a parent was already realised by a group of people who founded the Big Brothers of America (later the Big Brothers and Big Sisters of America) in 1904 that matched adult mentors with young people, particularly of single parent families. However it is particularly since the Levison et al study that formal mentoring schemes have been developed which attempt to replicate the kind of

“natural” or “informal” mentoring highlighted by Levison, by sensitively “matching” an individual adult to mentor a young person (Flaxman et al 1988).

In the UK and Ireland, interest in the concept of mentoring has also been growing, to the extent that there are now a significant number of mentoring schemes in a wide variety of settings. There are also two umbrella agencies, based in Britain: The European Mentoring Centre, which focuses primarily on mentoring as a development tool in the workplace, a concept which has been growing with an increasing awareness of how people tend to learn in reality and increasing scepticism about formal training and education methods, such as formal courses; and The National Mentoring Network which is playing a lead role in the development of one-to-one mentoring schemes, particularly with marginalised young people.

The UK Government has become very supportive of the development of formal mentoring schemes over the last three years. Government web-sites include more than 1,100 mentions of mentoring. Various Government policy documents have emphasised the value of mentoring in relation to the family. These have included support for the kind of schemes mentioned above involving young people from single parent families and who may be at risk, but also schemes to advise and support parents facing all the challenges of parenthood.

Definition of Mentoring

It is important to try and clarify the boundaries between “mentoring” and each of the other key related concepts such as “befriending”, “counselling” as well as “coaching” and “tutoring”. The following is suggested as an appropriate definition of mentoring in the narrow sense:

“Mentoring is a formal voluntary arrangement where an experienced individual provides one-to-one support and encouragement over a period of time to another person in order to assist them set and achieve goals; develop their skills; manage their own learning and development; and maximise their potential to become the person they want to be.”

This is not to suggest that schemes that fall outside this narrow definition are any less valuable. However hopefully having a definition which helps define the boundaries with other important forms of helping activity will create greater clarity in the on-going discussion of the future development of mentoring.

The Nature of Mentoring

Roles of a Mentor

From the literature and discussions with organisations involved in mentoring the main roles of a mentor would seem to include the following:

- To establish trust through conveying personal integrity and genuine interest in and concern for the mentee
- To be an active, reflective listener
- To gather information about the mentee’s plans and progress
- To help interpret the environment relevant to the mentee’s development
- To stimulate the mentee’s thinking with regard to envisioning their own future
- To help set goals
- To help identify alternatives/routes for achieving personal goals
- To help identify consequences of actions
- To help identify the mentee’s strengths and other positive qualities
- Helping to raise the mentee’s self-esteem, through praise of achievements
- To motivate and encourage initiative
- To engender an enthusiasm for learning
- To provide productive challenge in relation to mentee’s explanations for, or avoidance of, decisions or actions relevant to their development
- To provide practical help and guidance in relation to tasks which may help in the mentee’s development
- To act as a sounding board
- To give information
- To identify and facilitate access to resources and contacts that may be useful

- To disclose relevant life experiences (good and bad)
- To act as a role model
- To encourage increased self-determination
- To regularly review the way the mentoring is working and re-negotiate, as appropriate.

Phases of Mentoring Relationship

Each of the above mentoring roles are not equally appropriate at all stages of the mentoring relationship. Cohen (1995) argues that the mentoring relationship is a development one which has four main phases as follows:

An **early phase**, in which the mentor emphasises relationship behaviours with the mentee to establish the foundation of trust;

A **middle phase**, where the mentor emphasises the information accumulation and exchange component to ensure factual understanding of the mentee's concerns and goals;

A **later phase**, in which the mentor explores the mentee's interests, beliefs, and reasons for decisions;

A **final phase**, in which the mentor actively functions as a mentor model who directly motivates mentees to critically reflect on their goals, to pursue challenges, and to be faithful to their own mentee vision of chosen personal, educational and career paths.

Benefits of Mentoring

For the mentee

- Increased self-confidence, self-esteem and self-awareness
- Improved achievement and future progression (e.g. educational, career)
- Improved attitude to, and acceptance of responsibility for, their own education and learning
- Improved inter-personal and communication skills
- Improved goal-setting and problem-solving skills
- Improved relationships
- Increased knowledge of opportunities and how systems work.

For the mentor

- Improved self-image and self awareness
- Improved communication, interpersonal, problem-solving and listening skills
- Increased understanding of young people
- Help reflect on own personal development
- A feeling of satisfaction in making a tangible and positive difference to someone's life
- A feeling of giving something back to the community
- Meeting new people.

Benefits for organisations participating in mentoring programmes

- Implementing equal opportunities policies by supporting socially excluded groups such as women or ethnic minorities
- Retaining disaffected young people within the system
- The development of additional skills in employees participating in voluntary mentoring schemes
- Fulfilment of an obligation to the local community
- Gaining, or reinforcing a positive image.

Mentoring In Northern Ireland

Drivers of the growth of mentoring schemes in Northern Ireland

The following factors are likely to drive a very significant expansion of mentoring schemes in Northern Ireland in the next few years:

- The public policy context, particularly from the current UK Government, highlighted above, which strongly favours the development of mentoring schemes in a variety of contexts
- The Equality and Targeting Social Need agenda of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the need for effective deliverable programmes
- The success of US mentoring schemes and models which are being imported into Northern Ireland, particularly Big Brothers and Sisters and Youth at Risk

- The development of schemes, models and materials in Britain that are adaptable for Northern Ireland, such as the Dalston Youth Project adapted by the Turning Point mentoring scheme in Lisburn
- The development of local materials such as the MSC Associates Mentoring Training Pack;
- The accreditation of Mentoring training by OCN and the development of nationally recognised standards which will hopefully soon be translated into a national accreditation scheme
- The enthusiasm of Government Departments/Agencies (eg the Probation Board for Northern Ireland) for mentoring.

Barriers to the development of mentoring in Northern Ireland

However there are also some barriers to the development of mentoring in Northern Ireland which need to be addressed. These include the following:

- The lack of a clear and agreed definition of mentoring, and the resulting wide use of the term which is gradually devaluing its meaning
- The fact that mentoring is taking place and being developed in all three sectors (public, private and voluntary) and in very different contexts, and through organisations which do not consider themselves to be involved in volunteering
- The lack of any co-ordinating mechanism or forum where those who are interested or involved in mentoring could meet regularly to exchange ideas and experiences
- The lack of mainstream funding programmes to support mentoring schemes
- The lack of awareness of mentoring amongst the general public, from which the pool of potential mentors would be drawn

- The lack of established and evaluated examples of best practice in mentoring in Northern Ireland
- The lack of effective links with the National Mentoring Network in Britain which is leading developments in mentoring with young people in the UK.

Recommendations

The following are recommended as a way of taking forward the agenda on mentoring in Northern Ireland:

- The publication and wide dissemination of this report in Northern Ireland
- The establishment of an inter-agency mentoring group to provide a forum for progressing the mentoring agenda and to act as a consultation forum for the development of mentoring in Northern Ireland
- The Volunteer Development Agency becoming a member of the National Mentoring Network and European Mentoring Centre
- The Volunteer Development Agency developing links with the education sector to explore further the interest and involvement in mentoring in schools and colleges
- The organisation of a conference on mentoring in Northern Ireland, in co-operation with the National Mentoring Network, presenting examples of the various models of mentoring in its various settings in Britain and Ireland; highlighting examples of best practice elsewhere; and discussing issues of the development of National Standards and Quality Frameworks.



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