Project Proposer: Helen Brown
Organisation name: On the Out CIC
Community Project title: On the Out

Project Summary:

The project, `On the Out` is formed by people with a shared experience of prison, creating and delivering a community mentoring and support project. It offers holistic and peer led support through a ‘drop in’ service, staffed by trained mentors/workers who are ex-offenders. It takes the form of an informal mentoring ‘community’, with an emphasis on pro-social identity change and belonging for all participants. The project is created and led by people who have experienced life in prison.

The project is based within a local community centre, but with drop in’s within Manchester - for example the Booth Centre and Manchester Homelessness provision.

The project is independent from, but strongly supported by HMP Manchester, and offers a direct pathway from the prison into the community. Agencies within the prison are referring to the project, either in relation to men who would like to work there, or for whom support from a peer may be beneficial.

My role as Peer Mentoring tutor within the prison supports the development of this pathway. I am a teacher, although my background is within homelessness and social care - working within numerous challenging/‘front line’ environments for around 25 years. Inside the prison, I have been pivotal in setting up a system of mentoring upon the wings - which now has formal backing within the prison from Governors, and has established strong multi-agency links.

My role - with one ‘foot’ in the prison and one outside - places me in a unique position to develop the proposed project. It enables a continuum from the prison to the community, with continued support from a trusted and consistent source. Learners from within the peer mentoring class are able to continue their development within the community, building their experience and qualifications/training. Those who have not been learners within the mentoring class are also welcomed, and can achieve both accredited qualifications, training and experience within our community setting.

There is approval and energy from the prisoners currently involved in mentoring, and ex – offenders/agencies within the community. To date we have established links and working pathways with key organisations within the criminal justice and support sector. We are developing links with Styal prison, as well as other prisons in the North West.

Links and partnership working to date include
- HMP Manchester: full support and access to prisoners. Part of prison Reducing Reoffending agenda.
- Offender Manager Unit, Prison Chaplaincy (HMP Manchester): referrals and joint working.
- Shelter: joint working, pilot whereby our project works with ex offenders who need additional peer support post release or continued housing support. Shelter refer prisoners on short sentences for TTG support.
- Novus: Partnership working, accreditation of Level 2 Award in Mentoring (NCFE)
- Delphi (addiction): referrals, link to ongoing development of peers within the prison.
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- National Careers Service, Achieve North West, referrals, joint working
- MIND. partnership working, free training to workers within the project
- Samaritans. partnership working, free training to workers within the project
- National Probation Service, partnership working, referrals, pathways for volunteering work.
- Community Rehabilitation Company, Cheshire and Greater Manchester, support and input, joint working around how to best meet ex-offenders who are hard to engage with upon leaving the prison.
- Northern Rail: establishing post release training package in conjunction with Arriva and Network Rail. Given a station platform to advertise and showcase skills and services.
- Greater Manchester West – community justice mental health provision – ongoing partnership and pathways.
- Ex-servicemen – in process of developing links to relevant organisations, led by an ex-forces participant within the project.
- Manchester Street Law - working in partnership to develop continued bespoke training for On the Out workers.
- DWP - joint working, outreach worker to support mentoring work, DWP training, referrals.
- Bolton University - teacher training placements
- Salford University - criminology placements

The problems faced by prisoners on release are well documented (Prison Reform Trust, Howard League for Penal Reform, Shelter) to include

- Homelessness - we address through joint working, Shelter/On the Out pilot, specialist training with Shelter for workers. We also seek to reach excluded ex-offenders who are sleeping rough in Central Manchester and Salford through street outreach work – this proactive, direct and peer led approach if effective in engaging rough sleepers. Part of Street Support network and Manchester Big Change action groups.
- Unemployment – we will address through joint working/training with DWP, National Careers, Achieve North West, corporate bodies. Employment opportunities at Salford Central (see below) with placements, work experience and ringfenced jobs.
- Financial difficulties, compounded by issues claiming benefits with limited ID – to be addressed through joint working with DWP to form prison – community continuum.
- Relationship issues - ongoing support offered through peers, family law drop in to be established.
- Mental health problems – ongoing support and training through MIND and Samaritans, links to Greater Manchester West, St Joseph’s approved premises.
- Addiction issues – ongoing links and joint working, including prison – community continuum, with addiction agencies, including detox/recovery housing.
- Low self-esteem – boosted through identity shift from ‘ex - offender’ to worker, boosted through a heavily strengths based approach and development of skills
- A lack of purpose and ‘fitting back in’ to the community they have left – to be addressed through involvement in a meaningful project, where roles are valued.
- Stigma and discrimination – to be addressed through forming new and productive relationships with professionals (including authority figures) by providing powerful role models and demonstrating the ability to move into paid employment despite offending backgrounds. This sends a powerful signal to both participants and partner agencies and will help evidence the ability for pro social identity change.
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What will the Scholar do?

They would join our team, meeting people at the prison gate and within the community, helping them to adjust to life on the outside. There is the need to provide both practical and emotional support. We also have a drop in at Manchester Council Homelessness Dept and other locations within the community. We are based within a diverse community centre in Cheetham Hill, with other opportunities to become involved in community work.

Skills required by the Scholarship holder:

We are looking for a student with the following skills:

- Empathy
- Listening skills
- Non-judgemental
- Good sense of humour
- Interest in criminal justice/marginalised communities and a desire to help.

Would particularly welcome anyone with an offending history or history of homelessness/addiction/mental health issues/marginalisation.

How will your project benefit the Scholarship holder and your organisation?

It will give the holder a unique experience, working alongside ex-offenders as they support their peers, with a strongly user led ethos. Ex-offenders are not merely volunteers—they run the project.

It will also enable the person to experience and familiarise themselves with support services within Manchester, particularly relating to homelessness, mental health and addiction.