

Volunteer Impact Report



March 2020

1. Introduction

This report has been prepared as a means of evidencing the positive impact that volunteering at the East Belfast Independent Advice Centre (EBIAC) has enabled over the last five to ten year period. In this respect it is fair to say that the impact has been sustained and significant rather than being of a short term or one-off nature.

The focus of the analysis has been on assessing the extent to which employability has been enhanced as a result of volunteering at EBIAC. For a considerable period of time the senior management team at EBIAC have been aware that their volunteers have benefited from volunteering both from a personal development and economic perspective.

The net result has been that their potential to gain meaningful employment opportunities and to accrue all the accompanying positives associated with such employment has been improved significantly.

The methodology applied was a set of interviews in early 2020 conducted by Smith Associates with a sample of ten individuals who had volunteered for EBIAC in the past and who had progressed to paid employment as a direct result of this volunteering.

Each person was asked to articulate a 'before and after' scenario to illustrate how their volunteering experience had represented a positive journey from difficult circumstances of unemployment to eventual progress to gaining employment.

The former volunteers interviewed were:

Jimmy Gallagher Cindy Gordon Lora Jane McDonnell Terri Orr Hannah McWilliams	Carla Nicholl Carlie Martin Lisa King Kathy McKay Heather Jackson
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The remainder of this report presents summaries of each interview and a set of key conclusions drawn from analysis of the interview material.

Jimmy's Story

I had worked for years in the bar trade, mainly as a barman, but had started to become seriously disillusioned. My work environment was poor, I was working anti-social hours and to be honest I felt completely unchallenged by this negative work experience.

I was given the opportunity to volunteer at EBIAC for two days each week, a role I performed for eighteen months. I was given structured training such as the Welfare Rights Advisor Programme (WRAP) with the Law Centre NI. I was also given one-to-one mentoring support by senior EBIAC staff which helped greatly in terms of me putting the external training into practice on a daily basis. I really enjoyed both the training and the advice-giving work. I felt that for the first time I was doing something worthwhile and that I was developing skills that would stand by me going forward with improving my career.

After my volunteering at EBIAC I was successful in getting a full time job with Advice NI working on the 'Improving Benefit Uptake' scheme which involved face to face advice and assisting with the helpline.

I then moved to a full time job which is not in the advice sector. For the last four years I have been working on a full time basis for Employers For Childcare, a voluntary sector organisation. This showed that my skills developed through volunteering at EBIAC were transferable to other work settings.

My experience of volunteering has been brilliant. After years of trying to get beyond a minimum wage job, the volunteering and specialist support from EBIAC developed my skills, knowledge and definitely improved my employment prospects.

The experience was also beneficial from a personal development point of view. I found it very rewarding helping people in serious need such as those with disabilities and the long term unemployed. This has made me a better communicator, with improved confidence and all round a much better employee.

Cindy's Story

I volunteered at EBIAC four years ago. At that time, I needed a new life direction after twenty six years in the health service and had heard good things about how EBIAC had created a very positive work environment for volunteers.

I trained as a Benefits Advisor and found the training very challenging but also interesting. On top of this I worked providing practical advice to a range of people, most with serious life challenges. This work was very productive because I built up a lot of learning through day to day hands on working. I was supported very well by EBIAC senior staff who always gave constructive feedback on how I could improve my advice delivery. This support was invaluable because it meant that any mistakes were not repeated and this developed my effectiveness.

I developed key skills such as specialist advice provision, communication skills which included being a more effective listener with a more person centred approach to solving problems.

My volunteering work at EBIAC built up my CV to the extent that I was able to apply for jobs that I would never have dreamt of previously. Eventually I was successful in getting a full time post in another advice organisation which I have retained for four years now.

I would have to say that in addition to the new skills and knowledge developed as a volunteer, I also became a much more confident person – I felt I knew what I was talking about! When it came to doing interviews I felt much better equipped and full of belief that I was ready for the jobs I was applying for.

I now deal on a daily basis in work with very challenging situations and have no doubt at all that this is very much down to the original volunteer experience I had at EBIAC.

Lora Jane's Story

I started volunteering at EBIAC in 2015 and managed to gain full time employment three years later – a post I am still in today. Back in 2015 I had been unemployed for three years and experiencing serious life challenges, mainly due to mental health issues. I really wanted to get off benefits and basically feel better about myself in the process.

As a result of my volunteering I was able to get a full time post as a Tribunal Representative, a post I really enjoy and which I have kept for two years now.

My involvement at EBIAC has saved my life. This is not a throwaway comment, I really mean this. With my disability and without the structured support provided by EBIAC I would have deteriorated rapidly, never mind being able to move from being on benefits myself to coming in every day to a challenging but rewarding job helping vulnerable people.

In terms of these vulnerable people, I have seen numerous people with disabilities come through as volunteers at EBIAC and progress into employment. There is no doubt that the way volunteering is managed here is helping people travel from being unemployed to getting good jobs.

The support provided to volunteers by EBIAC is on a strong non-judgemental, respectful human rights basis which is especially relevant to supporting volunteers with disabilities.

Terri's Story

I volunteered at EBIAC and was encouraged by the fact that I wasn't just thrown into working but rather was enabled to complete specialist training through Advice NI and training in debt advice in particular. I started by shadowing other full time advice staff then progressed onto direct client engagement which I saw as an effective way to assist volunteers to gain learning and confidence.

I found the EBIAC Volunteer Co-ordinator very helpful. He made sure I was properly trained and was also continuously encouraging me to apply for jobs as and when they were advertised. I felt that I wasn't just volunteering but that I was also being positively supported to use this volunteering as a stepping stone access to paid employment.

Providing the day to day and face to face welfare advice as a volunteer definitely developed key skills for me that proved very beneficial when I was applying for jobs. It gave me real self-confidence and improved my communication skills. I also definitely became more empathetic which I feel is important in the field of advice provision.

I now have a full time job in the advice sector, providing welfare and EU resettlement advice to a range of clients. There is no way I could have progressed from unemployment to this post without my volunteering experience at EBIAC and I am eternally grateful for that.

I would also like to say that all the other volunteers I worked alongside at EBIAC have also made the same journey to paid employment which is a testament to both the value of volunteering in terms of employability and also the structured, professional and supportive way in which EBIAC manages volunteers.

Hannah's Story

I started as a volunteer with EBIAC in January 2018, working three days a week and taking advantage of the WRAP training and internal training courses.

About a year later I became a full time paid advisor and am still in this post.

Before volunteering I had been a stay at home mum for five years and because of this, had a five year employment gap in my CV. I saw an opportunity to volunteer at EBIAC and thought it would be helpful in terms of getting me out of the house and back into the world of work. I also liked the work EBIAC was doing and was sure the experience of helping people would be rewarding. In addition, I received practical advice at the start about my own benefits which really helped.

Without my volunteering experience there is no chance I would now be in full time paid employment. It gave me work experience I then used for job applications to show I was holding down a trusted position over time.

I tell people that this is the best thing I have ever done. The way it is done at EBIAC is not just helping out – it is learning on the job and having a meaningful role to play as well.

The support to volunteers is central to how effective the volunteering experience is in terms of moving us from unemployment to real paid jobs. The culture at EBIAC is one about supporting staff constantly and there is no differentiation between paid staff and volunteers. Volunteers are made to feel like valued team members, which is very beneficial for their self-esteem – this helps greatly with approaching job searching with the confidence that is required.

I both enjoyed and am very proud of my volunteering experience.

Carla's Story

When I took up the opportunity to volunteer at EBIAC I had been unemployed for two years. This was linked directly to my cancer diagnosis and the combination of being ill and out of work had left me in a very low emotional state.

When I was well enough to start thinking about working, I volunteered three mornings a week. This ended up lasting for nine months. As a result of gaining experience as a volunteer I was able to put together job applications which had substance to them because I was able to show that I was on the path back to work rather than having a gap in my employment record.

I was successful in getting a paid one-year work placement at an employability project as a result of one of these applications. My volunteering experience also helped me with the job interview because my confidence levels and ability to talk in a face to face situation had been massively boosted by my advice-giving experience as a volunteer.

After this one-year placement I was successful in securing a paid post at EBIAC as an advisor and now work part-time in a job I love. I work in the drop-in service providing advice to people from all walks of life such as disabled and homeless.

I would say that like others, my personal and career development was a priority for EBIAC. No-one is ever just another employee. I was encouraged to undertake training and I gained an OCN Level 4 qualification in advisor training which was directly relevant to the job I do now. I was also supported with childcare without which I would not have been able to volunteer, train or apply for jobs.

My journey from illness and unemployment through to permanent paid employment has been made possible by my volunteering at EBIAC with a lot of practical support and understanding which has changed my life and for which I am truly grateful.

Carlie's Story

I began volunteering at EBIAC in 2012 and took advantage of the training that was required to develop my advice skills. A year later I got a paid post at EBIAC.

I started off as a General Advisor and was then given responsibility for the 'Better Off Families' project for three years.

I am currently acting up as Volunteer Co-ordinator while the CEO is on a career break and I am finding the role very fulfilling. I really enjoy training volunteers because I know the positive impact supported volunteering like that enabled at EBIAC has on volunteers. Like me, they are gaining by having their confidence built and having life and career development opportunities – even the simple things like giving them a purpose to get up in the morning as a stepping stone towards eventual paid employment.

The model of volunteering at EBIAC is very effective. Practical support is provided for volunteers such as daily expenses covered, childcare, after-schools club which is invaluable particularly for single parents. This is the first way in which volunteers can move from a position of unemployment to daily work.

The volunteering is very similar to 'real' employment. There is a structure and routine with high standards expected. To achieve this though, EBIAC pays for essential training such as WRAP, immigration, housing, employment advice and consumer advice. In addition, on the job supervision builds skills such as communication skills through intensive interaction with people in need of advice.

There is a culture of positivity in EBIAC which is all about getting the best out of volunteers as individuals. Volunteering for EBIAC is not about getting free labour. It is about person centred support and skills development to help volunteers (if they so wish) to be equipped to make progress from being out of work to eventually moving into a paid job.

Lisa's Story

I took up a volunteer post at EBIAC in 2018. This followed a period of over ten years when I had been unemployed due to having to provide main caring duties for my ill mother.

The volunteering experience was a very positive one. I would give EBIAC 10 out of 10 for their support!

I was given access to training across a range of disciplines including general advice, Universal Credit, vulnerable clients and lone workers. Basically EBIAC made sure I was taught everything I needed to know to be able to provide good quality advice to the wider public. In addition to the training I shadowed experienced advice staff so that I could see how things needed to be done and to get experience of the challenges that advice staff face in the reality of dealing on an intensive basis with the public.

As a result of my volunteering experience and development of key skills, I got full time paid employment last September. I would struggle to explain the difference this has made to my life but it has been positive in many ways. The volunteering gave me the confidence to apply for jobs and I had real experience to talk about at interviews.

I feel that volunteering at EBIAC was my personal stepping stone on my career path – I look at it like that. After ten year's unemployment it was the one reason I was able to get back into the world of work and I am very thankful that I found EBIAC and their wonderful service.

Kathy's Story

I was a volunteer at EBIAC in 2015 and volunteered in total for just over two years. Prior to this I had been unemployed and the volunteering opportunity really was a lifeline for me.

I have now been in full time paid employment for three years and I have no doubt whatsoever that being able to tie down this job is the result of being a supported volunteer at EBIAC.

I benefited from a good mix of delivering advice but also from the training I received. I gained experience delivering face to face advice, identifying the full extent of client's needs and I did some work around case recording.

The key point is that I would not have been able to deliver this role without the structured training funded through EBIAC. I was able to complete the WRAP course at the Law Centre and also seriously developed my ICT and communication skills through my daily volunteering. I also appreciated the support EBIAC provided in terms of mentoring me.

My volunteering experience massively improved my employability. I just couldn't have applied for jobs because I didn't meet the minimum requirements such as qualifications and number of years work experience. These are vital things that volunteering helps with in my opinion.

I have now increased self-esteem and confidence, my social skills have improved and my personal economic situation has improved beyond all recognition – again as a direct result of my volunteering at EBIAC.

Heather's Story

I was a volunteer at EBIAC for a year in 2017. At that time I was a lone parent with my father recently deceased for whom I had been caring for a considerable period of time. It is fair to say that I was at the lowest point in my life. I was unemployed, grieving and suffering anxiety.

I spotted an advert from EBIAC about volunteering opportunities and was aware of other people who had found volunteering beneficial for their state of mind and helping with getting into employment so I applied and was accepted to come in and start volunteering.

The training I received changed me in a good way as a person. Although the training was work related I also found it was transferable to home life as well. More than anything It definitely built my confidence and self-belief and this was very important for helping me move towards paid employment.

From the volunteering role I was able to get a placement at a local employment project. My volunteering experience helped with this application. This was another positive career step.

I then got employment at EBIAC, firstly through a job share and now over a year as a Mental Health Advocate Worker, which is mostly an outreach post. This post is challenging but very rewarding. It is an important post in the community and I really enjoy what I do helping people.

I would finish by saying that my own progress both personal and professional owes an awful lot to my initial supported volunteering with what is a great organisation in EBIAC.

3. Key Conclusions

The above Case Studies of former EBIAC volunteers are testament to the range of positive impacts achieved by volunteering experiences in high quality supportive organisations. The impacts most relevant to employability are summarised as follows:

1. EBIAC provided support and training for those who are the furthest from the job market giving them the opportunity to build their confidence, identity and self-worth and reach their personal potential to work.
2. Through volunteering, people have improved skills and moved towards employment and/or being work ready. Volunteers developed appropriate specialist skills including communication through intensive face to face delivery of advice and gained employment as a result.
3. Volunteers engaged in training facilitated by EBIAC to reach their personal potential to work or volunteer. Job specific training such as the Welfare Rights Advisor Programme (WRAP), immigration, housing, employment advice and consumer advice was an important factor in improving the employability of volunteers.
4. Volunteering at EBIAC addressed the three key barriers to accessing employment for those furthest from the labour market, namely:
 - Work experience
 - Skills
 - Qualifications.
5. Volunteering at EBIAC is open to persons with disabilities, both physical and mental and represents an effective means of progressing the development and employability of these people. The support provided to volunteers by EBIAC is on a strong non-judgemental, respectful human rights basis which is especially relevant to supporting volunteers with disabilities.

6. The EBIAC model of supporting volunteers is unique and characterised by a range of factors which optimise the volunteering experience and maximise the achievement of positive employability outcomes.

In addition to the facilitated training and skills development identified above, additional factors include:

(a) Ensuring that the volunteering is similar to conventional employment settings. There is a structure and routine with high standards expected, monitored and achieved.

(b) There is a culture of positivity in EBIAC which is all about getting the best out of volunteers as individuals. As explained in one Case Study, volunteering for EBIAC is not about getting free labour.

It is about person centred support and skills development to help volunteers (if they so wish) to be equipped to make progress from being out of work to eventually moving into a paid job.

(c) A range of practical support is put in place to address key barriers to employment which volunteering helps to address such as childcare provision, benefits advice and basic expenses being financed.

This practical support to volunteers is central to how effective the volunteering experience is in terms of moving them from unemployment to real paid jobs.

(d) The culture at EBIAC is one about supporting and mentoring their people constantly and there is no differentiation between paid staff and volunteers.