

NCVO WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT Good employment practice case study

Engaging staff in innovative projects

Cara Cooper, HR Manager for [Mind in Croydon](#) spoke to us about how her organisation had engaged staff by encouraging them to develop innovative projects for the charity.

How did this come about – what brought the issue to light?

“When I’m not recruiting and there are no major HR issues as HR manager, I have capacity. It gives me an opportunity to ask what I’d really like to do. So if people come to me and say ‘I’ve always wanted to do x or y’ we help them. This is where the fundraising comes in.”

Cara began writing fundraising bids to help staff to develop new projects for Mind in Croydon. The idea was to support staff to realise ideas they had which would benefit the organisation’s service-users.

Who was involved in the process?

Cara and the Chief Executive worked together to do much of the fundraising. However staff also got involved in writing bids for their own projects.

What new projects have staff developed at Mind in Croydon?



Sailing. A welfare benefits advisor set up a regular sailing project where clients, staff and volunteers work together to crew 15 berth yachts.

Boxercise. Another welfare benefits advisor set up a boxercise project for clients which won a Third Sector Award.

An allotment. An administrator started up an allotment. *“He said to the allotment owners ‘give us your most neglected plot and we’ll turn it around’. So we got an allotment with overgrown fruit trees. We pulled the trees up. Within a year, it’s lovely. It has a summer house. It’s managed by the service users – they manage it themselves.”*



Building redevelopment work. The director of client services project managed the redevelopment of Mind in Croydon's club. *"Now we have a lovely garden, and a building with meeting space which is very accessible. It's helped us to run different sorts of groups such as salsa dancing. We have our annual barbecue which is great for PR. We invite all of the people who have helped us."*

A parenting advocacy service. Staff at our club saw a need to work with parents with mental health problems. Out of this work came a unique parenting advocacy service which won £142,000 funding for three years from the King's Fund. *"A mother had been criticised for the clothes her kids were wearing. But no one had looked at her case holistically. We referred her for a benefits check and she had actually been managing surprisingly well considering she had been substantially under-claiming what she was entitled to. As well as successfully advocating for this parent, our advocate managed to get free driving lessons for another mum who was having transport difficulties."*



Soft furnishings classes. The coordinator for the furniture service set up soft furnishing courses for clients which the public could also access. *"We discovered that in Croydon there are no courses on soft furnishings. And so she got trained in curtain-making and other soft furnishing work. The courses are open to everyone and so local people meet people with mental health issues. It's an opportunity to break down the barriers."*

Filmmaking. A Project Worker began making short films for Mind in Croydon. *"We spent money to get some equipment and the clients completely embraced it and made wonderful documentaries, uploading them to You Tube and showing them at the David Lean Cinema in Croydon."*

What has been the big impact of these changes?

- **A range of staff development opportunities.** Staff members can increase their confidence and skill set in new directions, by driving their work forward and meeting new people.
- **Positive image of HR.** *"The great thing with HR and doing charity fundraising is you're not just policing and keeping records. You can become an enabler. Our job becomes "how can we get that rolling?"*
- **A different kind of reward.** *"Being a charity, there are incentives such as company cars or discounts on products we're not able to give. But in terms of tangible benefits, you need something that motivates people. Why do staff join a charity? It's often because they have a social conscience. You have to be more creative in the benefits you give staff, such as the opportunity to start services for clients which are innovative."*

- **Excellent staff retention.** Some staff have been with the charity for over fifteen years.
- **Good workforce diversity.** *“We’ve a nice range of backgrounds in the staff and volunteers such as Citizen’s Advice, public sector, law – and our ages are really diverse. We have a trustee who has now been made honorary president. She’s 95. We have a varied trustee board of service users, accountants, lawyers. It’s democracy in action.”*
- **Positive press for the charity.** *“It’s very circular. Interesting projects get PR, kudos and awards.”*
- **Unexpected benefits.** *“There are unforeseen ups from doing good work – positive spin-offs which are unexpected. For example, we won a Third Sector award and for that we got an advisor from the Worshipful Company of Management Consultants. We used him for our strategy day. This way, everybody got a piece of the prize and it was extremely positive to hear good feedback from a professional from the private sector on what we’re doing. It is totally a win-win situation.”*

What was key to the success?

- **A non-blame culture.** *“The non-blame culture comes from the top and from the bottom.”* Staff are encouraged to look for solutions rather than allocate fault.
- **A flat organisation.** *“It’s a great help working in an organisation which has very little hierarchy. All areas are accessible.”*
- **An already performing organisation.** *“We’re very solid, we’re well respected and we fulfil our obligations. We have a solid bedrock which allows us to take some risks.”*
- **Inspiring leadership.** *“The present CEO challenged us – he said why do we say no when we could be saying yes? He realises the importance of having staff with personal interests that have a potential to benefit our charitable objectives.”*
- **An entrepreneurial spirit.** *“You’ve got to be business minded. To get big things done you have to play with other players. It’s about looking at opportunities and going for it. A problem cropping up might also be an opportunity.”*
- **A secure environment.** *“The current CEO and board have created a safeness that enables us.”*
- **Flexible job descriptions and schedules.** *“Our jobs are flexible enough, they’re quite fluid. We don’t let people bed themselves in.”*
- **Gradual development.** *“You create failings if you go too fast. You have to take people with you.”*

- **The ability to manage expectations.** *“Staff and managers have to be grown up in managing themselves. We must never forget that we have to do the bread and butter tasks for which we are contracted before we can take ‘time out’ to work on the more unusual projects”.*

What were the main challenges?

Cara explained that once you’ve been awarded funding it can be a real challenge to manage a big project. You have to be realistic about what you can achieve. Everyone involved has to put in equal effort, especially the staff member with the idea for the project. They need to be the driving force, to persuade us that their idea can work.

Are there any future developments in the pipeline?

Mind in Croydon are developing a number of properties currently including their shop in Crystal Palace and their facilities in East Croydon.

Any advice for other organisations?

- **Look at your culture.** Do you encourage people to come up with ideas? Do you have a trustee board which is open to suggestions?
- **Make sure you do things for the right reasons.** *“You have to do things with a real human face. If you’re not doing things 100% you shouldn’t do it at all.”*
- **Be imaginative and work that into your strategy.** *“Part of our strength comes by having a lot of strings to our bow. It’s a positive force.”*

About Mind in Croydon’s workforce

- **How many paid staff do you have?** 35 staff
- **How many trustees sit on your board?** 9 trustees
- **How many volunteers do you have?** 60 volunteers