

How does mentoring a disadvantaged young person impact on the mentor?

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Abstract

The resources used to run mentoring schemes are justified on the basis of the progress that is made by the mentee and while this must be the correct focus, it is important that the motivation and needs of the mentor are considered if programmes are to be successful. This study examines the impact on the mentor when working with a diverse, complex group labelled disadvantaged youth, generally within state guidelines through a voluntary organisation and where the mentor is a volunteer, drawn from society at large and equipped with basic everyday skills that have been enhanced through a short training programme. Using survey methodology, it examines the reasons people undertake this type of work, what they actually get out of volunteering and whether it changes attitudes and allows them to achieve goals in their social, personal and working lives that they would not have been able to achieve without that experience.

Key Words: mentoring, disadvantage, young people, volunteers

Introduction

Since 1997 the UK Labour Government has embraced mentoring as a social intervention. The Department for Educational and Skills (DfES) has funded the National Mentoring Network that now has over 1,600 affiliates, and mentoring is a key ingredient in major initiatives such as:

- New Deal, aimed at the long term unemployed;
- Excellence in Cities, aimed at improving the academic performance of children from disadvantaged homes; and
- Connexions, aimed at providing multi-agency support for young people between 13 and 19 through the transition from adolescence to adulthood and from school to work.

While perhaps not universal, there is broad agreement that mentoring can assist young people overcome disadvantage.

The resources used to run mentoring schemes are justified on the basis of the progress that is made by the mentee and while this must be the correct focus, it is important that the motivation and needs of the mentor are also considered if programmes are to be successful.

As Colley (2003, p13) says,

If mentoring is key to the Government's approach to disadvantaged young people and they base, at least partly, that policy on the involvement of the voluntary sector then it needs to be pursued within the context of what motivates and retains the volunteers.

All mentoring schemes need to attract and retain mentors and it is not unreasonable to assume that if both parties in the relationship benefit and the situation is one of 'win, win', then the mentor will be more effective and stay the course. This will be important to the mentee; any sense of

failure should not be reinforced by the mentor discontinuing the relationship because they are unhappy.

Initiatives aimed at assisting disadvantaged youth are generally born out of government policy, the expectations of potential employers or society at large. Schemes are diverse, but many utilise volunteer mentors to fulfil objectives, aimed ultimately at getting young people into education or employment. Due to the diversity and the fact that many schemes are, at least partially, within the voluntary sector, their competency in terms of training, support and supervision is likely to vary.

Mentors will come to the work with a range of experiences, motives and competencies, enhanced through a short training programme, and (hopefully) try to fulfil the objectives of the scheme by exercising key mentoring skills such as listening, supporting, encouraging and advising. The mentee will receive this support but will bring a wide range of issues borne out of their social situation and these may well detract from achieving the objectives of the scheme. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

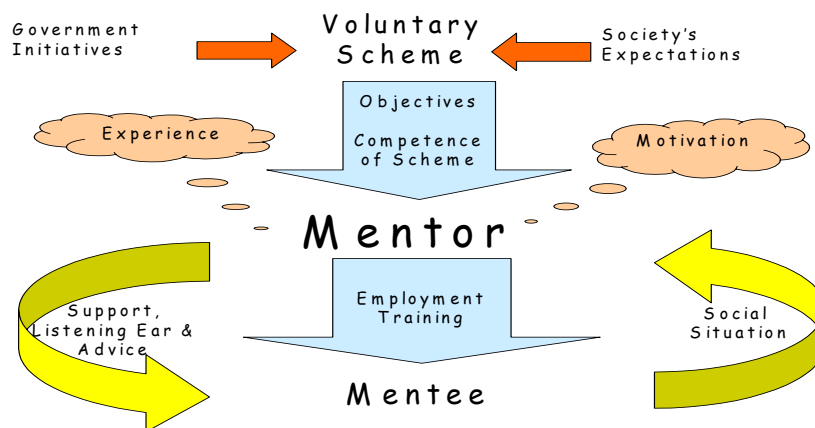


Figure 1: Factors affecting achievement of mentee and scheme objectives

This research study resulted from work undertaken as a volunteer mentor and examines the impact on the mentor of working for a period of approximately 9 months with a 16 -23 old young person who is at risk from being marginalised from society. It looked at the reasons they volunteer, what they got out of it and whether it changed attitudes and assisted people to achieve things in their social, personal and working lives that they would not have been able to achieve without that experience.

While mentoring in the community sector may be perceived to be somewhat different from that in the business sector there was an interesting observation captured from one mentor who had experience in both mentoring junior staff in the National Health Service and mentoring disadvantaged young people indicating the role and expectations can be similar in the two different situations.

People tend to think that employed people are doing relatively OK. You assume that confidence, self-belief, drive, is higher than with Community mentoring but sometimes it is not. People have been stuck in a job for ten years; they have got as much potential as the next person but they have no belief in themselves, no confidence, feel they have no control. The conversations are pretty much the same because it is about life and about how they have got to where they are, about a

daydream. Both groups have hopes and aspirations but they do not know how to achieve them and it is about supporting them to do that step by step.

This may indicate that the findings of this study have applicability outside the community mentoring sector.

The Research Method

A survey was conducted and analysed within the interpretative paradigm, trying to understand human behaviour from the participants' own frame of reference, acknowledging the subjective state of the individual and that the act of investigation has an affect on reality. The aim of the study was to examine voluntary mentoring and explore the impact on the mentor.

A postal/e-mail questionnaire survey was used to collect a data sample, and to mitigate some of the disadvantages of this type of method and to introduce an element of triangulation into the study, it was decided to follow up the questionnaire with interviews with experienced mentor coordinators who were chosen because of their mix of experience from working with schemes with different emphasis in objectives and mentee group. The issues identified in the questionnaires provided the basis for the semi-structured interviews.

The questionnaire was distributed to nine schemes in the UK that were either local, worked through the Prince's Trust or were found via the Internet, searching on schemes working with disadvantaged (no precise definition) young people. It went out to 189 mentors and 49 responses were received - 26%.

Results of Study

Profile of Volunteers

The first analysis undertaken was to establish that the sample was broadly representative of mentors working in this field and a comparison was undertaken with work done for the Prince's Trust of 117 mentors working with young people leaving care and the characteristics of the 'typical' volunteer. A good match was found showing that the 'typical respondent' was female, employed, educated above A -level, in her mid forties and had experience of working with or looking after young people.

Reasons for Volunteering

Clary and Snyder (1999, p158) identify six personal and social functions fulfilled by volunteering:

Function	Definition
Values	The individual volunteers to express or act on important values such as humanitarianism, religious beliefs or altruism
Understanding	The volunteer seeks to learn more about the world or exercise skills that are not often used
Enhancement	The volunteer grows psychologically, they need to feel useful
Career	The volunteer has a goal of gaining career related experience through volunteering
Social	Volunteering allows an individual to strengthen their social relationships
Protective	The Volunteer uses volunteering to reduce negative feelings such as guilt or address personal problems

They found that typically values, understanding and enhancement were the most important factors, although with younger people career can also be important. Many people have more than one motive for volunteering, motivations that fall on different sides of the altruism-egoism, debate i.e. they are there to benefit themselves and a concern for others.

Surveys have shown that 'doing good' is the most popular answer to the question 'Why volunteer?', but there is evidence (Brooks, 2002 p14) that many volunteers feel it is necessary to start with this as a reason, but if allowed to talk further offer up more complex and personal reasons associated with 'doing ones duty', keeping busy, relationships, loneliness, career moves, bereavement.

51% of the mentors in the surveyed group gave altruistic reasons as the main driver for wanting to work with disadvantaged young people. Humanitarianism, religion or a strong desire to help or improve society led them to volunteer. Quotes such as:

I wanted to put something back into the local community

Feeling that I am fulfilling my purpose as a person made by God to use my skills to help others

Give me something in my life that is NOT work & family, and provide a sense of giving something back & helping my community

were typical.

However further analysis reflected Brooks (2002) conclusion that while this is an instinctive reply, many people have deeper reasons based on utilising hard won experience, career, relationships or bereavement.

41% of the mentors had difficult experiences in their own childhood or with their own children and wanted to use that experience to support and encourage a young person through a transitionary period of their life, (hopefully) avoiding some of the pitfalls:

Assist a young person in developing values, having been through the care system I have direct experience of the emotional pitfalls/problems you can face once you leave the system

Both my sons had problems with drugs and I had no outside help

I was put into care as a child and wanted to give something back to society as I was helped to get over a very abusive upbringing

Around 25% of mentors admitted more egotistic reasons for volunteering. Many wanted to either enhance their CV in preparation for a career move already decided upon or to learn more about the caring professions as an input to a decision making process that may lead them in a new direction.

I wanted to change my career and saw mentoring as a useful thing to have on my CV, as well as being interested in it

Having stopped work to care for my baby I saw mentoring as a step back into employment

22% identified extending their world experience and creating new social relations as a key reason for becoming involved.

Having had to retire early after the suicide of my son I wanted to get back gradually into life rather than just exist

Broaden my life and participate in different activities

This range of responses indicates a complex mix of starting points that will influence both what the Mentors can offer and what they will get out of their mentoring experience.

The Schemes

The schemes were mostly run under the banner of Social Services but with funding from charitable bodies such as the Prince's Trust or Children's Fund and/or the Youth Justice Board.

Although some authors (Colley 2003, Piper & Piper, 2000) identify tension for mentors, generated from a conflict between the focussed employment/educational objectives of schemes and the broader needs of disadvantaged young people, this was not generally apparent in this sample.

The schemes were generally mature and the coordinators were aware that the relationship should be focussed on the support and encouragement nature of mentoring rather than the achievement of specific 'hard' goals. They seemed to recognise that they were dealing with a wide range of issues in their mentees and suitably set expectations of what could be achieved in a relationship during training and to their sponsors when they report to re-justify funding. In many cases 'moving forward' was not measured in hard indicators such as a job or an educational course, but in greater confidence or more self-discipline.

In some cases mentors appeared to have difficulty in accepting their own responsibilities to provide information on the mentoring encounters and/or attend support meetings to obtain guidance or support other mentors. Mentor coordinators tended to see the provision of information as a routine part of the management process, achieved through letter or e-mail. Mentors wanted a more personalised service as part of the positive strokes for giving up their time.

While many mentors felt that knowing more about their mentees background would assist them in the relationship, the coordinators were united in the fact that it would skew the power balance and destroy something special within the relationship. Their key message was that mentoring should be based on the mentee's agenda at that point in time, not trying to fix past problems or trying to second guess where the mentee was at. What stops them from moving forward now is the key question, not how they got to where they are.

Mentoring Disadvantaged Youth

A hybrid model, based substantially on the work of Parsloe & Wray (2000) and Egan (1982), of the process that generally seemed to emerge when mentoring disadvantaged young people is shown in Table 1 below:

Stage	Action
1	Gain acceptance and develop trust and confidence.
2	Understand where the person is now. Recognise strengths and resources, Listen to what has happened and his/her feelings about it.
3	Recognise and support negative self-image and construct an Action Plan. Where does the person want to be? Assess viability of goals and choose most useful.
4	Support the Plan by encouragement and 'hand holding'.
5	Review progress and maintain momentum, celebrate the achievement of perhaps modest goals and set new goals.
6	Move on by scaling down relationship and prepare for the end or establish a more informal 'friendship'.
3a,4a,5a	Relapse: Temporary reversion to old ways and re-enter the model at Stage 2 but with greater knowledge.

Table 1: Mentoring Process Model for work with disadvantaged young people

Stages 2 to 6 are common to most models but it is important to recognise Stage 1 which can take a long time before any meaningful work can be done and Stages 3a, 4a, 5a which Mentors must be prepared to visit without feeling a failure. Without this recognition it may be difficult to utilise their mentoring experience in a positive manner.

Expectations

Most mentors came with a reasonable idea of what mentoring was all about, but their expectations reflected different backgrounds, life experiences, personalities or knowledge about mentoring and were good inputs to healthy and lively discussions during training.

A key element in what the mentor gets out of mentoring is ensuring that they understand the role and what they can achieve. Managing or setting expectations is an important part of the training. Some thought they could change the young person and seemed to miss out the important fact that it is not about them doing something for the young person, but about working at their pace and supporting them doing things for themselves. That was a hard message for some mentors. They could not change a young person's past but they may be able to influence their future.

The message from the coordinators was,

Remember they are teenagers, they are teenagers in care, but they are teenagers, very few people know what they want to do when they are 17 and have a sorted life plan.

Mentoring is a simple idea, try to forget you are mentoring, you are spending time with a young person who lives in your community, see what develops

If after a year the young person is thinking about signing on or thinking about training then the mentor coordinators recognised that is an achievement.

Reconciling what the mentor thinks should be achieved can be difficult. Those mentors that struggle with that found it difficult and usually the mentoring relationship broke down because it was not fulfilling the mentor's expectations.

Key Moments

Some mentors (43%) could identify a key moment when they felt that their mentoring relationship was working. Mentor coordinators felt that this was as much dependent on the mentor as the mentee. When they relaxed and stopped looking for the 'road to Damascus' experience, they began to notice the little things that showed that in fact the mentee looked forward to seeing them or the discussions were at a deeper level, or that they were turning up regularly, on time and these were achievements that could be celebrated.

Key moments could be divided into three types:

Physical moment - *When mentee ran down the stairs to let me in with a smile on his face, instead of waiting for other people to open the door*

Emotional moment - *When mentee felt able to talk about personal issues & express emotions to me*

Confrontation moment - key moments could be both uncomfortable and significant, as one coordinator put it:

There has to be rules and boundaries because the world does not tolerate people turning up late, swearing, who don't care etc and part of mentoring is providing a role model. Challenging of antisocial behaviour provides important messages

A key moment could end the relationship or re-launch it. Significant moments can be a realisation to the mentor that they have achieved something and act as a springboard both to a deepening in the relationship with the mentee and for the mentor using the mentoring experience in their own lives. These joint turning points can have an important impact on the mentor but sometimes the key moment is focussed just on the mentor:

Realising that different young people respond to mentoring in different ways, that just listening is useful, I don't always need to have the answers

The Impact of Mentoring on the Mentor

The following five themes emerged from the data as the basis to examine the impact:

- Everyday interaction with people;
- Confidence to try new things;
- Feel good about myself;
- Career;
- More positive attitude to young people.

Everyday Interaction with People

42 % of mentors said that mentoring had helped them in their personal lives interacting with people. Typical responses were:

It is building relationships, it is adapting your language, it's developing your communication skills.

When I talk to people at work it's very different from talking to a 16 year old Mentee who never went to school, so you change, you adapt so you don't intimidate them ... you become more conscious of the other person...

The key thing is that the mentee must feel that you have some respect for them and you are supporting their needs, this awareness and greater range of communication skills can be used elsewhere

People also found that there was a snowball effect, once they were sensitive to other people, reactions changed.

Confidence to try new things

35% of the mentors felt that the mentoring experience gave them a catalyst to do other things. For many Mentors, they had entered an area of life that they had only read about and realised that they were both capable of doing it and had made a real contribution.

human beings ordinarily stick within the same circles, whether it is through employment or just social circles we deal with people who are similar to ourselves. To be able to build relationships with people who are quite obviously different and have different life circumstances from you does open your eyes to what is possible, builds your self-confidence and your self-esteem

The things done varied widely but examples include,

Living a more normal life following depression, mentoring was the bridge

I had the opportunity to stand on a platform & describe my problems with my son which I found very emotional but cleansing

Been to see films that would not have been my first choice

Learnt to play pool

... decided to go off and see the world which is a result of doing the mentoring and meeting other people who have had a different lifestyle and influenced me to get out of my rut and do it

Some of these things may not seem earth shattering but the Mentors saw them as at least cracking their mould if not actually breaking it.

Feel good about myself

51% of the surveyed population said they volunteered for altruistic reasons and wanting to help society and many did feel that objective had been fulfilled,

Feel done something worthwhile and given something back to society

However when they had done some mentoring and were asked what they got out of it, 47% made statements like 'I feel good about myself' and 'I have increased self esteem and self confidence'. By helping an individual they seemed to have moved from helping a large, nebulous thing called society to a more personal benefit.

Examples of statements indicating that mentoring made people feel good about themselves include:

It has been great to see a young person blossom as the weeks go by, It has helped me to see that I have useful skills

It has been very uplifting to do something totally different & something that I feel 'right' or 'good' about in myself'

It has given me a great deal of satisfaction & pleasure

A great joy from seeing young people succeed

Career

19% of the sampled population said that it had allowed them to develop an existing career in the social sector or had led them to a realisation that they wanted to work in that sector.

Overall, mentors seemed to fall into two categories. First, those that come into volunteering and are clear on what they want to do use it as experience and a reference for a career launch. They come in, do their time and get the reference and move on. They may be very effective mentors and provide lots of support and encouragement and give a lot to the young person, but they want something out of it as well. There were two components to it but the driving force is to develop their own career. The second category wants to give something and were committed to the volunteering ethos of helping their community. They start with low expectations of what they will get out of it and are surprised that they enjoy it and start to feel they are achieving something worthwhile, that talking to young people is fun and they start to get something out of themselves and that is an added bonus. It may even spark a career move but that is not why they started.

The quotes from mentors include:

It gave me more experience of working with young people, especially vulnerable young people, which I needed to make a career change

Through mentoring I have realised not only am I good at this kind of thing but enjoy it too. Hence it has led me to rethink my career

More positive attitude to young people

By far the largest impact on the sampled mentors was in their attitude to young people; 51% made clear statements that showed they became far more positive and understanding. Superficially this can seem rather strange in that a typical mentor was a well educated, employed, middle class woman, in her mid 40's and the typical mentee had, to varying degrees, a range of anti-social behaviour. Yet after spending time together the mentor has a more positive attitude to young people.

The Mentor coordinators saw a clear explanation for this:

Young people in care are often portrayed negatively and they do have a higher rate of crime, prostitution, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, pregnancy etc. But often Mentors learn is that they are doing these things because of the effect an adult has had on their life. What they see as they build up the relationship is a frightened, hurt, damaged and vulnerable child. That is why the attitude changes: they have insight and understanding

But it is not just one person who gets the benefit of this insight:

..... Mentors go out to tell their friends and family and when people start on 'oh the youth of today, and all this crime .. etc, etc, they will say, well actually there are reasons why, you need to look further than the headlines. Word of mouth is a great thing for educating people and changing the public's perception and attitudes towards young people in care and mentoring is a great way of getting people to start spreading the word. We are dropping a pebble into a pool and the ripples spread out.

A number of unlikely connections could be found:

I matched a young man who was a persistent offender with a very bad reputation with an older, upper middle class, privately educated woman and many people said what are you doing? but I had a good feel about it and it worked. What they found they had in common was that from the age of 5 this woman had been brought up in boarding schools and felt rejected by her parents from a very early age. She had been bought up in an institution and was damaged by that. The young man was put into care at the age of 5 and was bought up in institutions whether they were children's homes, residential units, secure units and then prison. So they made that identification and connection.

The Mentors summarised this as a growth in understanding of the issues facing young people:

Understanding where young people are coming from really helps me to form useful attitudes to other people in my community

Opened my eyes to the many problems and difficulties some young people face

How mentoring impacts on the mentor

Training – Mentor training courses aim to increase awareness of how people are perceived and enhance listening skills, they also included elements that encouraged mentors to look back over their own life, particularly those experiences that may be similar to those experienced by the young people they may mentor. Most found this a rewarding experience although some found it distressing. This reflection, particularly with a peer group that included people with different backgrounds to their own, proved in many cases to be helpful and therapeutic. Perhaps the key is that the training itself becomes a mentoring experience for the trainees with the trainer acting as the Mentor. What do they want to achieve? What are they unsure of? What are their concerns? These are equally valid questions for a potential mentor as they are to a disadvantaged young person and may solicit unexpected or deep-seated responses rooted in insecurity.

Enhance their own learning journey - If mentors are to promote growth and change in mentees they need to be willing to promote growth and change in themselves. If they hide behind a 'sorted' image and expert techniques the mentee is likely to keep their own feelings hidden. An effective mentor must also be on a learning journey of reflecting on experiences, drawing conclusions and moving forward.

The preparatory training and the act of mentoring presents people with challenges and encourages them to take time to reflect on new experiences and use the knowledge gained to plan the next steps. A range of other skills will also be required such as patience, looking for the positive, listening and it is likely that these will not be switched on and off for the hours of mentoring each week, they will carry over into other aspects of the mentor's life.

Feedback - A key element of the training is giving and receiving feedback and this too can have a very powerful effect,

People find it very difficult to accept compliments and have often never heard how they interact with other people and being told things like ‘-that is an excellent skill you have there’, or ‘when I first joined the group you made me a cup of tea and made me feel welcome’ can make people just burst into tears and say I never knew people saw me like that; people can be very negative about themselves

This is important because most young people come with all sorts of negative thoughts about themselves, having been put down for years. Mentors need to be able to understand that the impact of positive feedback is very powerful and can be very emotional.

The impact of mentoring on the mentor is illustrated in Figure 2 below:

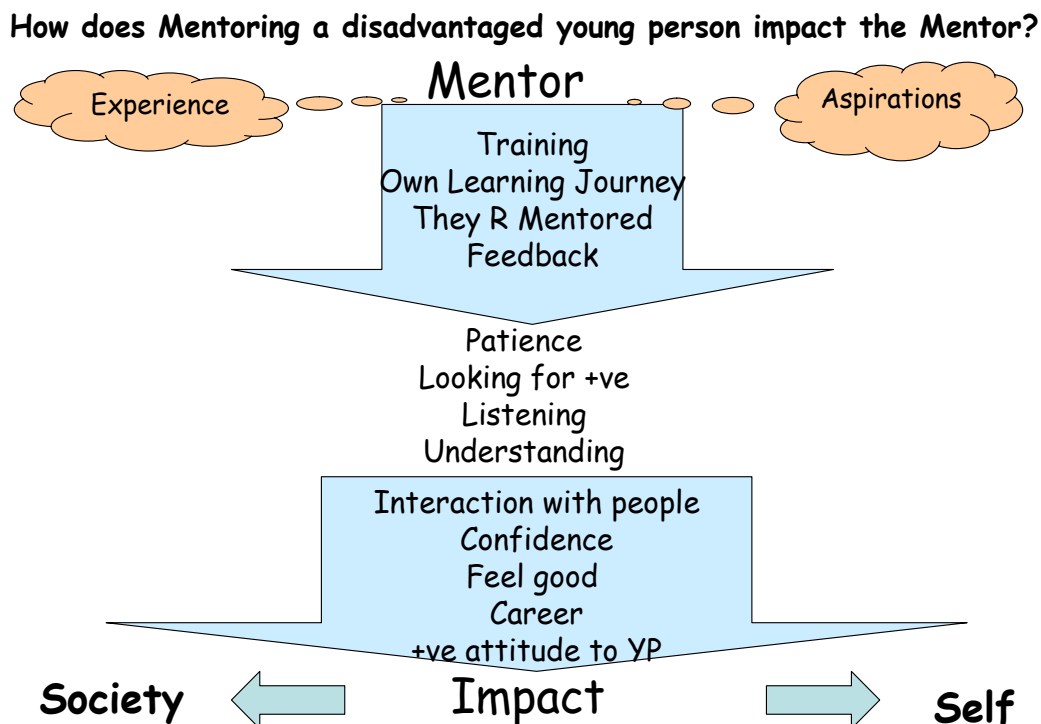


Figure 2: How does mentoring a disadvantaged young person impact the mentor?

Conclusion

Voluntary mentoring can assist the way mentors interact with people and give them confidence to try new things. Most found it fun, and it helped them to feel good about themselves. It can be a useful contribution to a CV and influence career choices, even if that is not why a mentor came into it. The main impact on most mentors was that it changed their view of young people to a more positive one and it was a view they were prepared to communicate and act on in the future.

The results of this study indicate that in a large number of cases mentoring did move them forward, either in a predetermined direction or one that they had not anticipated. Unlike volunteering to help at a jumble sale, or clean up the local canal, mentoring a disadvantaged young person involved many in an intense relationship where they were exposed and in a position of not always knowing the answer or way forward. Those that survived, which seemed to be most, used it and the preparatory training as a learning experience that helped them personally.

The study was aimed at understanding rather than driving any direct change in practice. It has shown that there is a positive impact on the majority of Mentors as a result of undertaking a volunteer Mentor role with a disadvantaged young person. This understanding could influence practice within mentoring schemes in the following areas:

- **Recruitment** : by adding the benefits that can accrue to the mentor to publicity material, it should increase the number of potential Mentors coming forward;
- **Application for funding**: it has been shown that mentoring has a double benefit, i.e. the mentor develops or is empowered to do 'greater' things as well as the mentee, so this should be an additional inducement for funding agencies to part with their money;
- **Retention**: by identifying those aspects that mentors find important to motivation and development, schemes should increase their retention rate thus reducing recruitment and training costs;
- **Development**: by identifying motives for volunteering and the sort of benefits that can be achieved, it should be possible for a more informed discussion to be had between Mentor Coordinator and volunteer as to the type of mentee that may be most appropriate at a particular time, or what other opportunities within the scheme may be available, e.g. administration, to train or even move to a part time paid position.

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