

Volunteer Case Study

Why I chose to volunteer at FWT

I had just graduated from university and was looking for a full-time job. Though working part-time, I wanted to do something to help me gain some work experience and to make good use of my free time. I had been looking for volunteering opportunities online and had seen that FWT was looking for volunteers to help out at the centre.

I was familiar with FWT and aware of the work that the centre does, and thought this would be a great opportunity. I have always been a strong advocate for women, and having seen some of the issues facing women in Coventry – especially from minority and immigrant backgrounds – that FWT tries to improve, I chose to apply as a volunteer to help in whatever way I could.

I saw that the centre was particularly looking to take on volunteers who spoke other languages as well as English and volunteers who came from black and minority ethnicity (BME) backgrounds. I speak French and Spanish and come from a mixed ethnic (minority) background, so this seemed like a great opportunity for me. I also wanted to use my own skills to help others. I had trained as a translator, so where possible, I wanted to use my language abilities to help those who otherwise may not have been able to access services and help they need.

What I did as a volunteer at FWT

After completing my initial training, I volunteered at the centre for two mornings each week and got involved in many different areas of FWT.

On a Monday morning, from 9.15 a.m. to 12.30 p.m., I would cover the Reception, answering the telephone, taking messages, and being the first point of contact for anybody coming in to the centre. I would deal with any queries they may have, or information they may require, such as about classes or activities, and fill in service-user forms with women who were new to the centre. I also created flyers and information leaflets publicising classes, activities and events going on at the centre, which I also distributed in the area to promote the centre and the services it offered. Later on, I also helped to maintain the service user database, checking that information was up to date and inputting any missing details. I also helped out at the centre's Open Day in January, covering the Reception and providing information on courses.

I also volunteered on a Friday morning, initially from 9.30 a.m. to 1 p.m., where I helped out with the weekly coffee morning and "stay and play" children's sessions during school holidays. I would set up the room, which included preparing refreshments and getting out the materials needed for the session. To start off with, I assisted other volunteers or teachers running the session, providing help where necessary, and chatting to the women. After a few months, I was given more responsibility for the sessions, and was involved in the scheduling of activities – choosing what to do, devising an agenda, and buying materials within allocated budgets – as well as demonstrating the activities and preparing the room as before. I also made sure that sign-in sheets and evaluation forms were completed by the service users during each session to help the centre gather information about which sessions were popular, what the women enjoyed and any suggestions they may have for improving the sessions.

Later, I also helped out with Job Club on a Friday afternoon, between 1 p.m. and 2 p.m., where I helped women write their CVs and search for jobs online.

I also recently completed my training to become a Health Champion; where I learnt about the health issues and inequalities facing those from BME backgrounds, and how to advise people from those communities about preventing these issues and the services available to help them to deal with such problems.

My volunteering experience

I really enjoyed working as a volunteer at FWT. All members of staff were friendly and welcoming, and I really felt like part of the team. I was given a certain amount of responsibility and autonomy with my tasks and I felt like my ideas were always listened to. I felt that the FWT staff appreciated the time I was giving up to volunteer at the centre, which made it feel more worthwhile and motivated me to continue volunteering. This can be shown, for example, in the fact that the staff at centre nominated me (and other volunteers) to receive the Coventry Women of Achievement Award in recognition of our voluntary work at the centre. Collecting the certificate at the awards ceremony was a very proud moment. It made me feel like I was a valued member of the team, and that the work I was doing for the centre was important.

During my 6 months at the centre I was able to get involved with a variety of tasks and gained many new skills. In particular, I feel that volunteering enhanced my ability to deal with people from all backgrounds and cultures and improved my listening and organisational skills. The work experience I gained at FWT, in particular through helping with the marketing and publicising of activities and events, and in organising and running coffee mornings, has also helped me in my own job search, as I was able to show employers experience I had gained outside of my studies, provide examples of undertaking specific tasks, and demonstrate that I could work well as part of a team as well as using my own initiative.

On a personal level, I gained a lot of enjoyment and satisfaction from volunteering at the centre. The thing I enjoyed the most was coffee mornings. Firstly, because it was fun to plan activities and ideas for the sessions and see them put into practice, and secondly, chatting to the women who attended gave me an opportunity to get to know some of the women and form relationships with them. It was fascinating to hear their stories and viewpoints, especially those from different cultures and backgrounds to me, and after a while they really started to open up to me and the other women. It was great to see them enjoying themselves in the sessions, feeling proud of what they had created or achieved and grow in confidence as the weeks went on. When feedback on the sessions was good, it also gave me a sense of achievement.

However, the main challenges I faced were also related to coffee mornings, primarily if we had organised for a guest to come in and take the session and they were unable to come at the last minute. This happened a few times while I was at the centre, and as I hadn't planned an activity for that week but still had to deliver a session it was necessary to improvise, think on my feet and take decisions quickly in order to organise an activity at the last minute. In such cases, I was also able to consult other members of the team who were always ready to help and provide support, making the challenge easier.

Working as a volunteer also made me realise how important it is that we have women-only organisations like FWT. It is important to the women that use the services that they are only for women and run only by women. It provides an environment in which women feel comfortable: some women had told me they feel they can talk freely and enjoy themselves in socialising with other women at FWT in a way they cannot in other arenas. I believe it is because of this that they are able gain some freedom and confidence, as well as aiding their inclusion within the community by meeting others and, for some, practicing their English, which can also help to remove language barriers.

I would like to thank all staff at FWT for their help and support during my 6 months as a volunteer. I really enjoyed my time at the centre and hope to volunteer again in the future.