

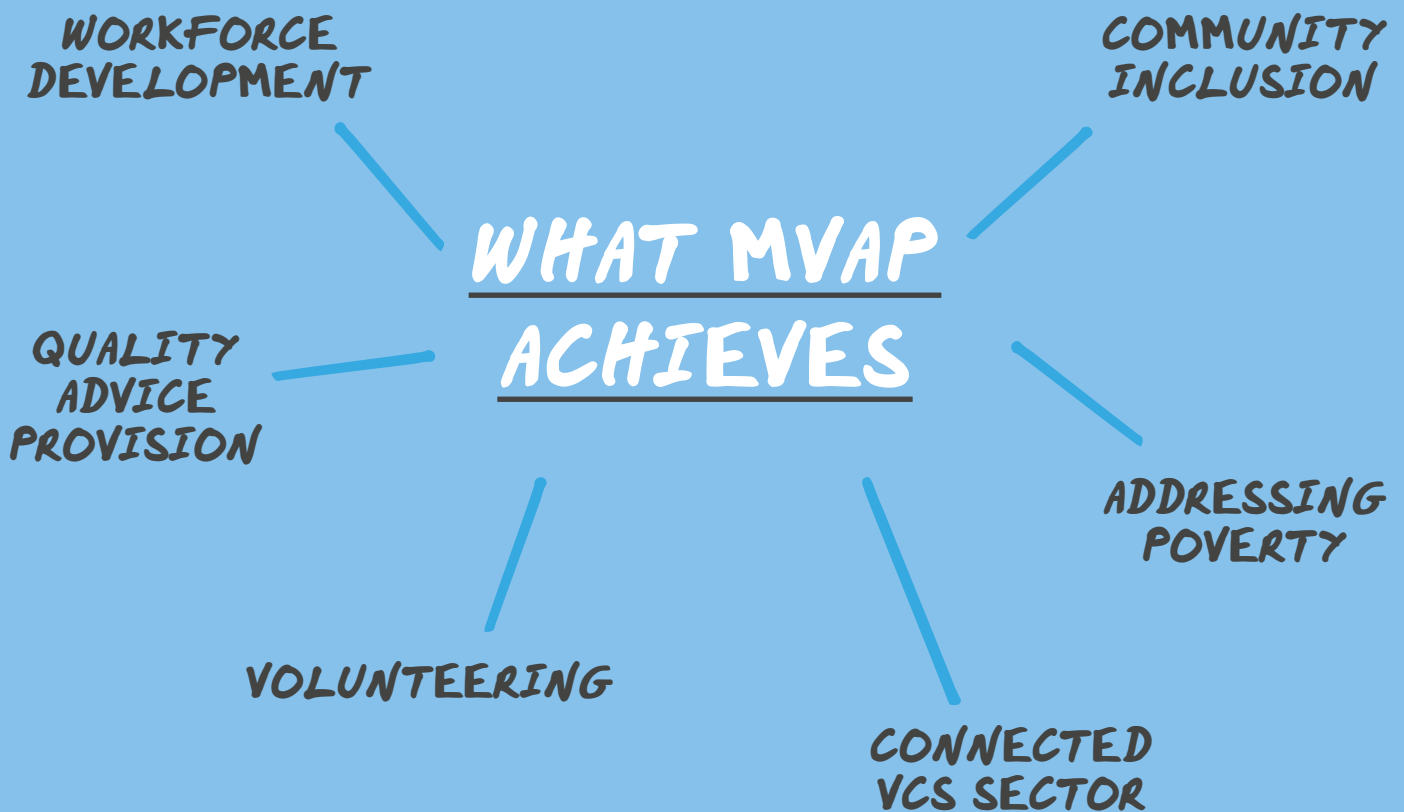
MANCHESTER VOLUNTEER

ADVICE PARTNERSHIP

External Evaluation Report of the Manchester Volunteer Advice Partnership (MVAP)

BUILDING CAPACITY TO ACT

Sarah Forster, June 2024



MVAP

CHEETHAM HILL ADVICE CENTRE – MANCHESTER MIND – MANCHESTER REFUGEE SUPPORT NETWORK
CENTREPOINT – GREATER MANCHESTER IMMIGRATION AID UNIT – MANCHESTER CITY COUNCIL



WHAT IS

MVAP

The Manchester Volunteer Advice Partnership (MVAP) aims to enhance the provision of advice services in Manchester through training and supporting volunteers in community advice work organisations. The National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF) has funded MVAP from 2013 to May 2024, with a period of self-funding from January 2020 to April 2021.

This external evaluation has elicited views from partners, volunteers and external stakeholders. These have been used alongside project monitoring data to assess the impact being achieved by MVAP in resourcing the advice sector. The views given by all stakeholders demonstrate that the partnership is playing an important role in developing volunteers' skills in advice work and increasing their employability, providing capacity to the advice sector, and in supporting people needing advice to overcome difficulties. This report includes outcomes data for the three-year period June 2021 to May 2024.

MVAP is a partnership of four voluntary organisations each with their own areas of expertise and need for advice provision:

- Manchester Mind - mental health support – lead partner
- Manchester Refugee Support Network (MRSN) – asylum seeker and refugee support
- Cheetham Hill Advice Centre (CHAC) – neighbourhood advice centre in north Manchester
- Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit (GMIAU) – free legal immigration advice, representation and support services to people seeking asylum, refugees, children and vulnerable adults

**Links for further information
are given throughout the report.**



WHAT IS **ADVICE WORK**

Advice-giving consists of a range of interventions and skills, and requires quality assurance to ensure it is appropriate. The interventions vary in skill level and complexity including:

Recognition of advice needs

Signposting

Information giving

Arranging access to advice

Triage of advice needs

Form filling, making phone calls

Researching

Complex ongoing advice and assistance

Representation

WHY MVAP IS NEEDED

The advice sector in Manchester has been heavily affected over the past 10-15 years. Austerity measures led to reductions in advice services in the city (approximately halving capacity), even while demand was rising. When the MVAP partners came together twelve years ago, it was to create economies of scale for training volunteers, as all partners were doing their own with limited time and resources. Volunteers are invaluable to delivering services for all of the partners, and a good base of skills and knowledge is essential for them in taking up an advice role.

Since then, ongoing economic conditions have worsened for many people, due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis. These have highlighted and compounded the inequalities that exist in communities and led to further increases in demand for the partners' advice services.

The reduction in advice services in the city has impacted the advice workforce, as there are now fewer experienced workers. Recruitment to paid positions is always a challenge. The need to develop people to have the skills to deliver good advice has been a further impetus for the work of MVAP, as the training and experiences that volunteers receive can be the first steps into employment in the sector.

HOW MVAP WORKS

MVAP has a comprehensive recruitment, selection, advice work training and support programme to enable volunteers to gain the skills and confidence needed to carry out a range of advice work roles, starting at an entry level. The project intentionally seeks to attract people to volunteer who may not have the usual profile of advice work volunteers, or feel they have the skills and experience required, and to address barriers to them volunteering. This includes people with lived experience of the issues partners address, including seeking asylum, mental health and poverty.

The core Access to Advice Course training programme consists of:

Publicity

Through community networks and venues targeting people who may not have the usual profile of volunteers or feel they have the skills and experience required

Recruitment

Information sessions and an informal interview

9-week course

1 day per week

Initial sessions

Role of advice
Safeguarding and confidentiality
Empathy and listening skills
Good interview practice



Volunteering placement

Half a day per week at partner agency or within project network

alongside

Further training sessions

Welfare benefits / Debt / Housing

Ongoing support is available to volunteers through their placement agency and from the MVAP team, including for CV writing and job applications.

The training is also offered to other voluntary organisations in Manchester who are struggling to deliver generalist advice to Manchester communities and have volunteers who would benefit from the MVAP programme.

MVAP ALSO DELIVERS:

Understanding the System Course

A half or two half days course for organisations who do not have advice as their main focus, but are reaching people on the edge of the advice sector, and are the first point of contact for many people who may need support. It is available as an open access course or bespoke to a particular agency.

Short Training Courses on a range of advice topics including:

Immigration, Personal Independence Payments (PIP), Work Capability Assessments, Housing Options, Homelessness Prevention and State Pension Age Benefits.



IMPACT ON VOLUNTEERS

June 2021 to May 2024

Volunteers from a diverse range of backgrounds have gained skills, knowledge, confidence and invaluable experience. This has led to people gaining employment within the advice sector and in other areas.

140

volunteers have completed the MVAP programme

100%

of volunteers have reported increased level of skills due to training and volunteering experience

63

volunteers (45%) have moved into work, education, training

91%

of volunteers report increased connections within their communities

Follow this link to read five in-depth and powerful case stories of MVAP volunteers



VOLUNTEERING IN ADVICE ROLES

101

people have volunteered at partner agencies, others have done placements at 8 additional voluntary and community organisations

19

people are continuing to volunteer at partner agencies, 3 of these have volunteered for over 18 months

EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING

8

volunteers have gained employment with partner agencies

7

volunteers have gained employment elsewhere within the advice sector

39

volunteers have gained other employment

9

volunteers have moved into education or training



Skills and knowledge gained

Soft skills for dealing with and understanding clients – communication, empathy, compassion.

Knowledge and skills to deliver entry level advice – information giving, signposting, making phone calls – and for some more complex casework.

Confidence to deliver advice at an appropriate level.

Political understanding of the context in which advice is being offered.

Community

Some volunteers support members of their own communities with advice work, including information giving, form filling, travel documents and signposting. Some partners encourage strict boundaries around this to ensure quality, others take a hands-off approach.

Volunteers sometimes pass on skills to people they support whilst doing advice.

Even people who have taken the MVAP course but have not continued volunteering in the advice sector still have the learning and can pass this on within their communities – to inform and educate people about advice and statutory systems.

For those who didn't take up a volunteer placement, reasons include:

- personal life events such as immigration and asylum-seeking issues, parents who were very unwell
- moving away after the training
- a very small number of people found that placement was too intense and stressful for them

VOLUNTEERS SAY:

“I have always wanted to try to assist my community. The training was excellent, and so was the support at MRSN. So, you aren't alone and know what to do. It's a big step to go from the training to one to one advice. It was amazing when I was given permission to see someone on my own. The issues that people are facing are absolutely life changing, life threatening situations, which can be very stressful as a volunteer. Especially as a lot of the services out there that should help are not fit for purpose. My supervisor is incredibly fine-tuned to this and offers support when it's needed. I have supported many people and it has also really helped my own mental health. I have volunteered for two years – alongside my long-term job. It's the best thing that's ever happened to me.”



ABOUT THE VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers from the wide range of Manchester's communities have been recruited with lived experience of: living on benefits or in debt, mental health problems, being a refugee, being a young person, being from communities experiencing racial inequalities (42% of volunteers).

140

volunteers

(Demographic data available for 102 people)

52%

Female

16%

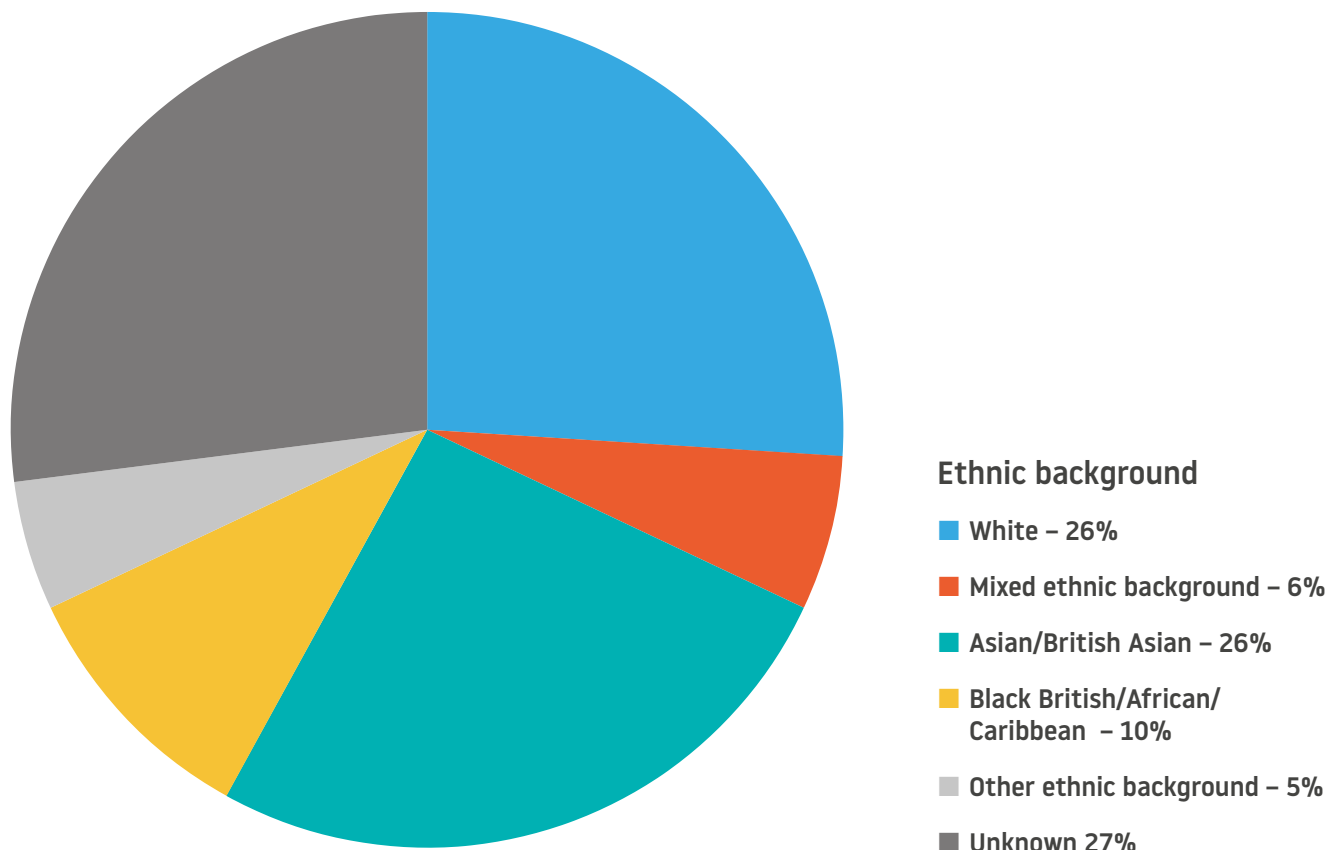
Male

3%

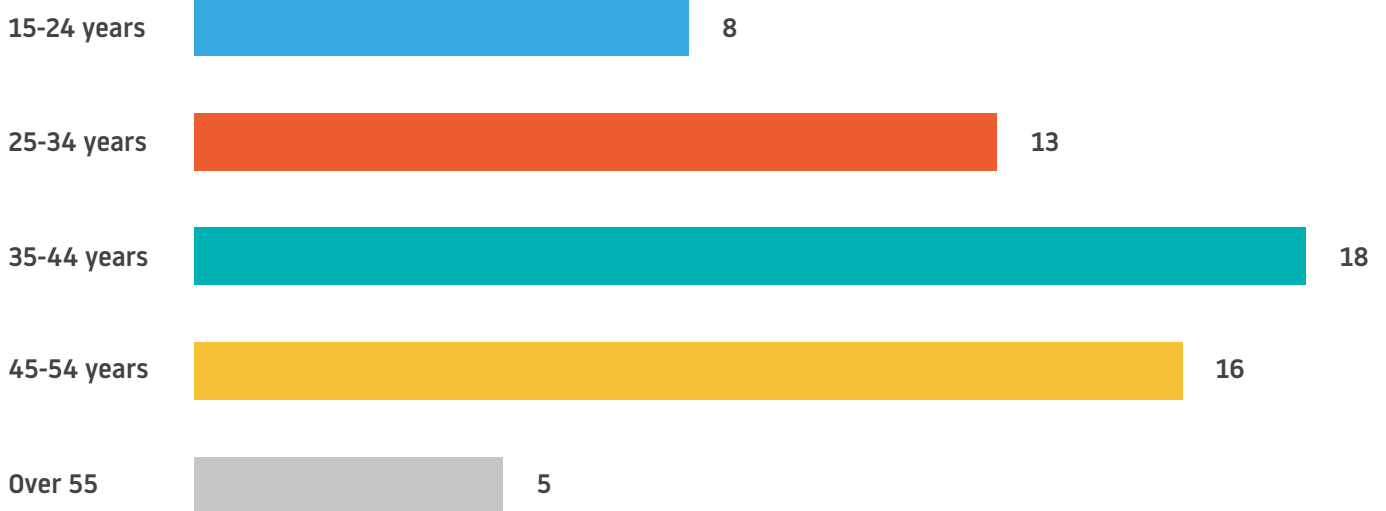
Non-binary

18%

disabled



Age



VOLUNTEERS SAY:

“I did the full 6 months volunteering at MRSN and I learnt so much, it was hugely beneficial to me. I realised that advice work wasn’t for me but all the training and volunteering gave me the confidence to go back to work, after several years away from it. And I have knowledge so can tell people where to go for help, for example with housing issues.”

“When I did MVAP I felt like this is me, this is who I am. Helping migrant people to settle down. I do this a lot for family and friends every day – helping with interpreting at meetings, understanding letters and kid’s homework. Through MVAP and volunteering at CHAC I am more professional – I want to go up the levels bit by bit.”

“I feel like a miracle has happened, where I have found a road and a direction I didn’t even know existed. I enjoy working as an advisor and want to keep on doing this. Now I see people differently – it’s not how people look from the outside.

Everyone has problems and everyone needs someone. We all need each other.”

– Volunteer

IMPACT ON THE ADVICE COMMUNITY

June 2021 to May 2024

The advice community has benefitted from having well trained advice volunteers, having greater overall capacity to deliver advice, from better understanding of welfare systems within non-advice giving agencies, and from moving volunteers into paid employment in the sector.

Source of respected training

MVAP has provided valuable and trusted training, which has been relied on by partner organisations and other organisations in the sector.

Community organisation staff who have done the MVAP training have also then taken their learning back to their organisations to improve advice provision and to train their volunteers.

Other sources of open access training are not to the same depth or quality. And/or may be expensive, for example Advice UK £815 Learning to Advise

Follow this link to read two in-depth and powerful case stories from the advice community



101

MVAP volunteers have carried out placements at partner organisations, approximately 20 MVAP volunteers have carried out placements at other voluntary organisations

15

volunteers have gained employment within the advice sector, including 8 volunteers at partner organisations

16+

agencies from outside the partnership have engaged with MVAP training

97%

of attendees of the "Understanding the System" course said they felt more confident of dealing with benefit issues in the future (135 attendees, 102 gave feedback)

A small number of paid staff from small community organisations have accessed the MVAP core course, and may do placements in partner agencies or their own organisation

Increased capacity to deliver advice

MVAP trained volunteers have delivered advice services for partner and other organisations, vastly increasing their capacity to deliver advice.

Having volunteers to deliver lower level advice frees up hard-pressed paid advisors to deal with the more complex cases. There are 21 longstanding MVAP volunteers across all partner organisations, who have volunteered for up to 5 years (including those from previous a funding round).

Having community organisations with greater knowledge of basic advice, information giving and signposting can relieve the demand on overstretched larger advice agencies. They are further along the scale in the level of advice provision they offer.

Source of staff including future advice managers

Over the life of the programme many MVAP volunteers have gone on to paid employment in the advice sector including 18 reported this funding period and 9 reported in 2019.

People in the advice sector see employees coming through MVAP route as a potential source for future sector managers.

Networking

Increased relationships between advice and community organisations, understand each other's work better, can cross-refer and offer each other support.

Longstanding supportive and active relationships within the partnership.

“MVAP offers a route into paid employment. There are cost benefits it generates by having more people who are more capable of bringing money into the city's economy.”

– Director, Manchester Community Central (Macc)

“We have 6 paid staff members from MVAP – from this round of funding and from the previous round. We bring volunteers through into paid posts wherever we can as they have good skills, and we give them extra training. Others have gone into paid roles elsewhere in similar types of roles to advice giving.”

– Chief Executive Officer,
Manchester Refugee Support Network

PEOPLE SAY:

“Volunteers are mainly doing the basic level applications for council tax, child benefits and Universal Credit. This has really helped us, with important outcomes for increasing people's income. The paid advisors don't always have capacity to do that and we don't want to block up their time, when they could be doing appeals and more complex issues. The system is difficult to navigate and some people may not be able to do it themselves, but volunteers are also showing them how to do what's needed and explaining how it works. It's a good amount of independence for the early start of the volunteers and it builds resilience in the people being supported to try to do things for themselves.”

– Advice and Volunteer Manager,
Cheetham Hill Advice Centre



PEOPLE SAY:

“MVAP is a really sensible project, getting people involved in the delivery of practical advice. They’re really good at engaging people with lived experience, and from diverse communities across the city. It’s been really great for moving people into employment in advice or other parts of the voluntary sector.”

– Assistant Chief Executive Officer,
Citizens Advice Manchester

“We support families whose children have been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and have missed out on learning. We help with family support or learning support. We had a bespoke ‘Understanding the System’ course from MVAP of three half day training sessions, which helped us with understanding the benefits and housing systems and how they work. It was really well tailored to our work and practical. It totally transformed the way we think and deepened our knowledge, backed up with detailed handouts. We can support families immediately now as we can answer their questions more clearly without having to wait for others to answer them. We can put action in place sooner and families feel more confident in the plans. This also means we can support more families.”

Outreach Workers (Kickstarter Programme,
Making Manchester Fairer)

“The advice sector has been hammered over the last few years. MVAP has definitely been a vehicle for bringing new people in to resource the sector that needs it. There's such pressure at the moment.

There is value in working in partnership with others to address something, otherwise it’s easy to be in your own silo and not engage with other areas of the law. Creating the links between organisations and understanding each other’s work has been really helpful. And the crossover of understanding – seeing people in the whole and not just immigration or benefits issues – is hugely valuable.”

– Chief Executive,
Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit



PEOPLE SAY:

Director, Greater Manchester Law Centre

“MVAP works collectively in bringing together the advice sector, particularly that is at community level - smaller groups that work with a community of interest or geographic location. This enables them to upskill volunteers in the community. Face to face is the premium standard [for advice]. MVAP is potentially taking the neediest part of the community infrastructure in Manchester and providing a free/cost effective service that enables them to develop their advice capacity and have support from the MVAP network. In a changing world where advice demand is going up, even increasing capacity by 15% has a value.

We have employed a staff member who was trained by MVAP. What that meant for us as an employer was quality assurance in terms of their training and work they've done.

MVAP is developing a pool of people in the advice sector given the massive skill shortages we all face, in part due to the degradation of the sector over the past 10-15 years."

IMPACT ON THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN ADVISED

June 2021 to May 2024

Advice from MVAP partners, including that delivered by volunteers, has led to positive outcomes for people, including improved finances and housing situations, as well as reductions in stress.

13,146

people have accessed advice across the partnership over the three-year period

It is not possible to quantify the number of people accessing advice through other agencies who have MVAP volunteers. One of the MVAP network organisations alone has seen 1576 people – see Rainbow Haven case study.

IN FEEDBACK FROM 1259 CLIENTS

99%

of people said that the advice led to a positive outcome

Positive outcomes include: increased benefits, reduction in debt, improvements in housing, homelessness prevention, access to statutory services, access to foodbanks.

51%

of people giving feedback said that the advice helped reduce stress levels

Having positive outcomes such as greater income or reduced debt reduces worry and anxiety, leading to improved mental health

“Knowing that you are there to provide advice and support has helped reduce the isolation and the despair I feel.”

– Advice recipient

“The advice service has certainly been helpful. You’re very thorough, persevering, and patient. I couldn’t have done any of this without you.”

– Advice recipient

The diverse volunteer recruitment has included people from a range of Manchester communities who speak languages other than English, including Amharic, Arabic, Kurdish and Urdu. So, some volunteers have been able to provide advice and support in the client's first language, which makes a big difference to people in feeling understood, and for them to understand their situation better.

“I do not know how I would have made these applications alone, I am very grateful for the help I have had, and all the team here are friendly and supportive.”

– Advice recipient



WHO HAS BEEN HELPED WITH ADVICE

June 2021 to May 2024

13,146

people

37%

Female

43%

Male

1%

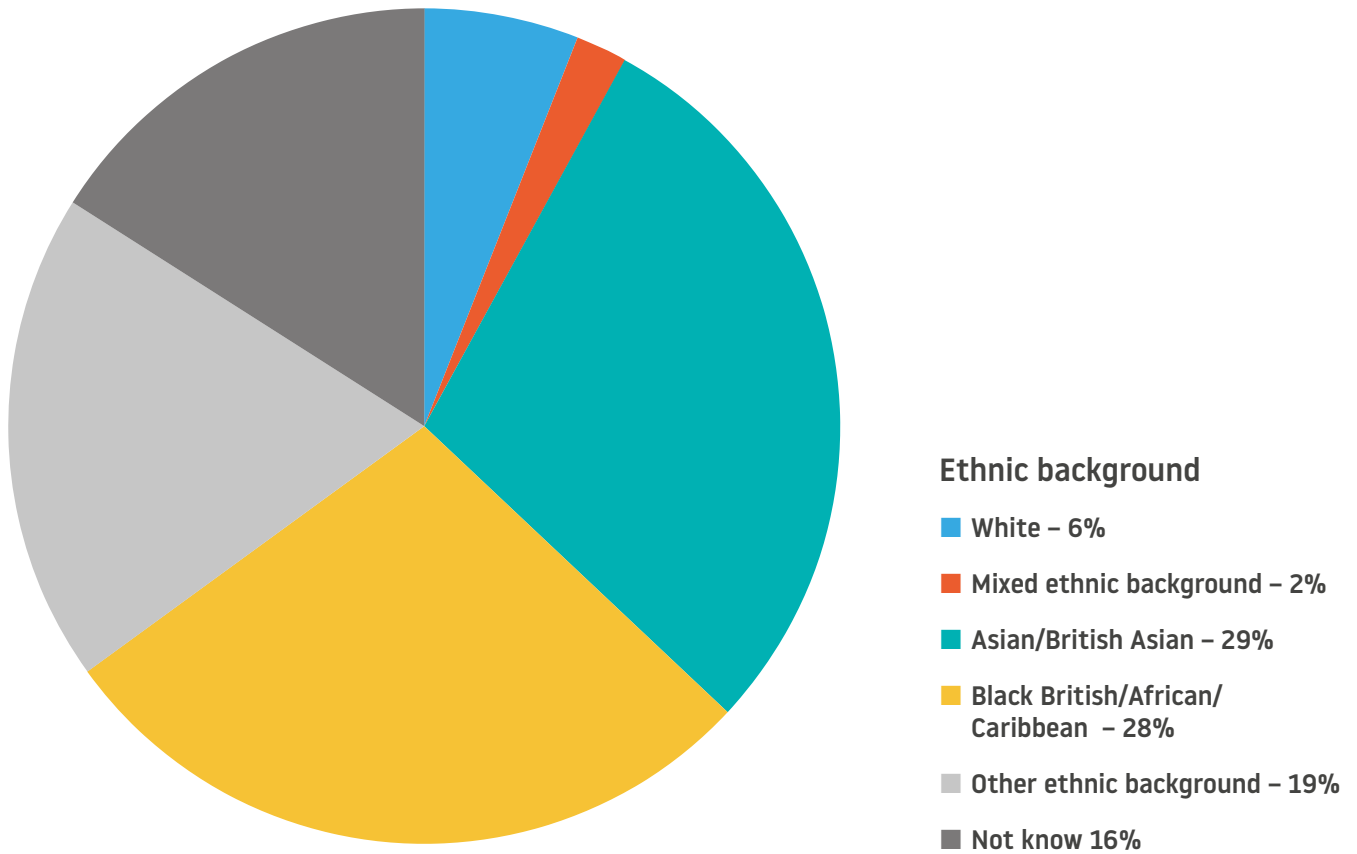
Non-binary

18%

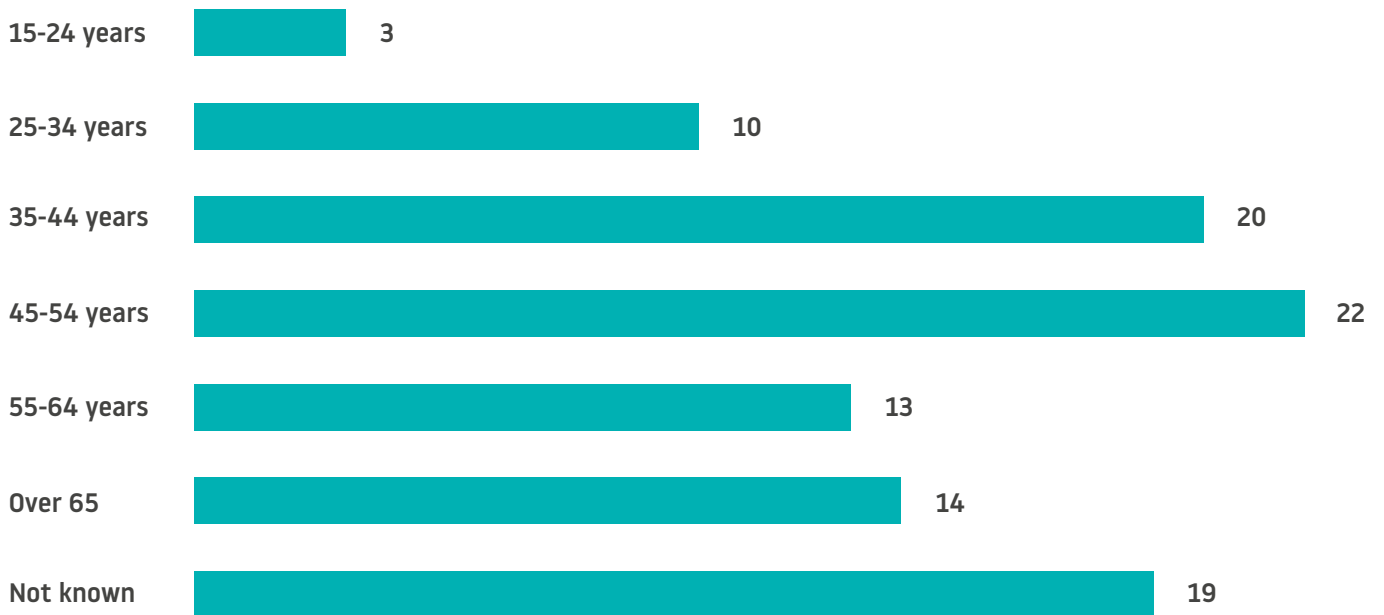
disabled

“I am no good with computers, having someone help me meant a great deal, I do not feel I could have done this on my own. The lady who helped was very friendly and put me at ease, I will go back if I need any help in the future.”

– Advice recipient



Age





PEOPLE SAY:

Chief Executive Officer, Manchester Mind

“Advice work provides an amazing vehicle for volunteering as it covers so many bases and skills. You can do a tiny bit or you can grow into the role and learn about it and take on more complex bits. What it offers to people is massive and as a volunteer you make a difference. Someone may be carrying around this problem, which may seem small to others but to them it’s huge and all consuming. Maybe it can be solved easily by a phone call or filling in a form at the right time, being navigated to the right spot. It relieves someone of a burden or it creates light at the end of the tunnel. Never underestimate the impact on someone for whom that problem has become overwhelming.

Not many volunteering roles have that direct line of impact where you can see that this bit of advice that you've given, this listening to someone and being able to do that, has led to this.”



KEY FINDINGS

ABOUT MVAP

The MVAP model

Need for this city-wide volunteer advice training programme validated

9-week Access to Advice course provided face to face validated as providing a good level of understanding and skill for volunteers to begin delivering face to face advice work. Then people build up skills according to each placement organisation's practices.

Short courses also validated for effective training in advice related issues

Support and supervision is needed to ensure volunteers/staff develop and are practising safely

Volunteers

- MVAP has consistently recruited volunteers, with the courses always full. This contrasts with NVCO's Time Well Spent 2023 reporting a decline in volunteering, and other colleagues in the Manchester voluntary sector struggling to recruit.
- MVAP is intentionally attracting people from non-traditional volunteering/diverse backgrounds, including people with lived experience of core partner issues – mental health, disability, poverty, race discrimination
- MVAP is attracting people who had no idea about the advice sector as an employment option, or who had an inkling/non-specific interest and have become committed to the sector
- The MVAP volunteering experience produces greater levels of skills and experience than many volunteer routes, which is highly likely to be a factor in the high level of employability of MVAP volunteers. Many volunteers have subsequently gained employment in the advice sector and other fields.

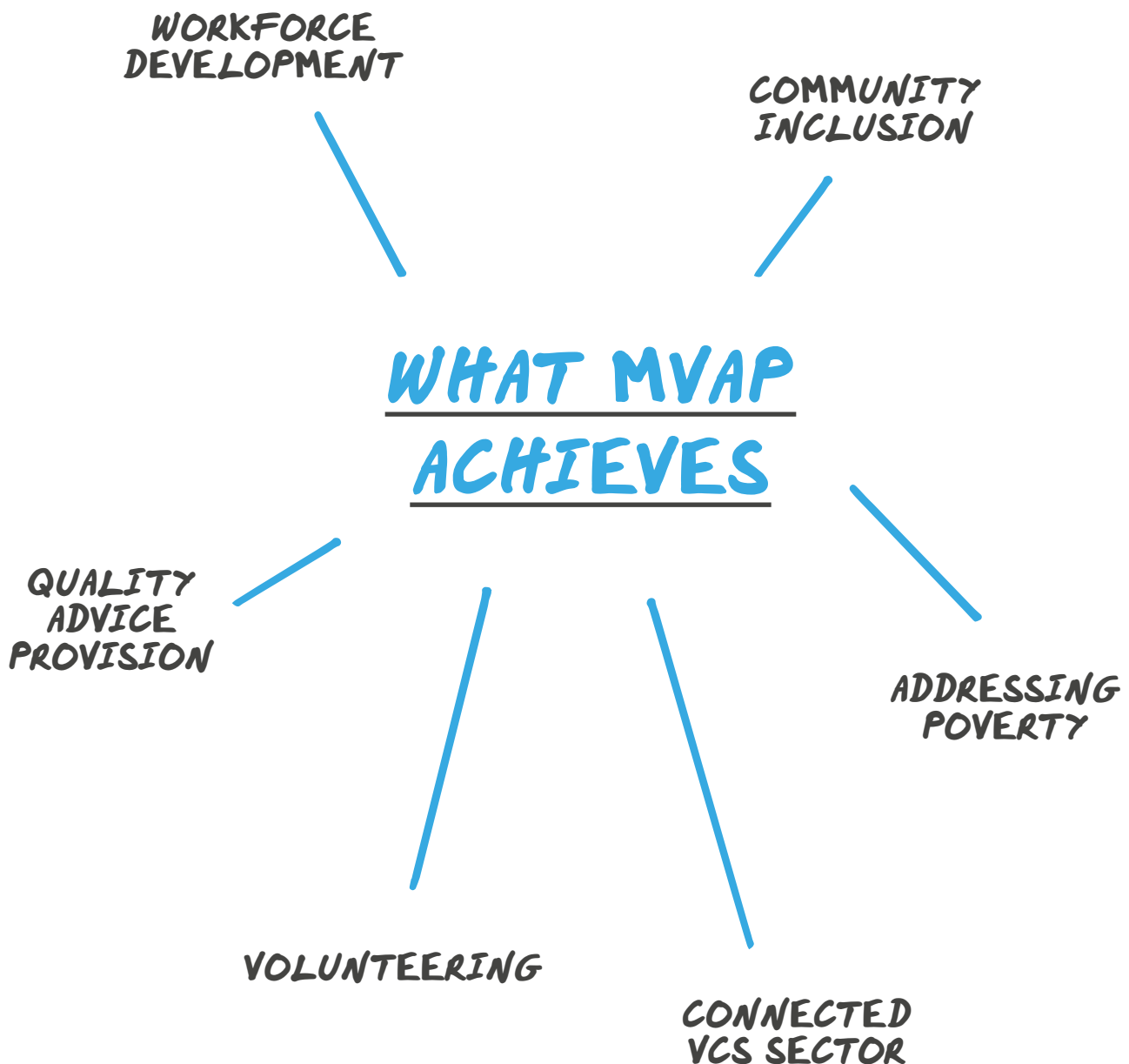
Advice sector

- MVAP has played a key role in skilling up the advice sector, especially for partners and small voluntary and community organisations without the resources to do this themselves. MVAP plays a different role in the sector than the larger advice agencies in Manchester who provide their own internal training to volunteers, and tend to attract a different set of volunteers such as law students.
- MVAP is playing a valuable role in bringing in a diverse range of new skilled voluntary and paid workers to the sector, with some of these people anticipated to be the managers of the future
- MVAP volunteers have significantly increased the capacity of both the Manchester advice sector and the community sector to support people needing help, and particularly to support people at an early stage of needing advice. This can prevent the escalation of problems, as well as enabling paid advice workers to focus on more complex cases.



AREAS OF MVAP INFLUENCE

MVAP is achieving impacts across a range of strategic areas especially:





FUTURE DIRECTION OF MVAP

This report has proven the value of the work of the Manchester Volunteer Advice Partnership. The partners have worked together to train and support volunteers to deliver advice, and to provide training to community projects needing to better understand and deliver advice work. MVAP's impact has been confirmed for creating skilled volunteers, for resourcing the advice sector and achieving outcomes for people receiving advice. MVAP has an experienced and remarkable ability to build capacity within communities, bring people together and develop a future diverse workforce of people with lived experience, skills and commitment. Alongside this, the need for good quality advice has increased with time as the economic climate has worsened living conditions for many people. These factors suggest that the need for MVAP is ongoing and that it has a key future role to play.

The future development of the MVAP project can be considered within a number of options:

- Explicitly taking a leading role in resourcing the Manchester advice sector – both volunteers and paid workers. As well as partner organisations, this will particularly support the smaller community organisations on the edge of the advice sector with limited internal training resources and systems, and complement their in-house supervision and support.
- Increasing awareness and understanding of the impact of MVAP across the range of strategic initiatives it contributes to, including workforce development, community inclusion, and addressing poverty. Engaging with and attracting resources from those initiatives.
- Developing the proven MVAP training programme further with potential for:
 - Ongoing delivery of the core MVAP programme targeting volunteers as well as paid staff in small community organisations
 - A modular approach, which can be used more broadly to ensure volunteers have core skills and knowledge before they go to placements, followed by a range of modules covering specific volunteer roles. This could also include non-advice roles such as interpreters, befrienders, mentors.
 - A resourced network of voluntary and community organisations, where regular meetings are held to facilitate joint learning and improve quality assurance
 - Income generation through providing training to larger third sector organisations and the statutory sector

The following links will give you more detailed information about MVAP and this evaluation:

[Evaluation methodology](#)



[About MVAP](#)



5 volunteer case stories

[Vera \(CHAC volunteer\)](#)



[Mark \(Manchester Mind volunteer\)](#)



[Jasmine \(MRSN volunteer\)](#)



[Tom \(CHAC volunteer\)](#)



[Dilvin \(Community organisation volunteer\)](#)



[Partner case study – CHAC](#)



[MVAP network – voluntary organisation case study: Rainbow Haven](#)



