

Steve (ex-charity worker and North Shields resident)

Can you tell me a bit about yourself, who you are, where you are from?

I'm a North Shields resident. I was born there. I've lived there all my life. And I'll shuffle off this mortal coil there, I would imagine. With the Star and Shadow being in Shielfield, when I first started volunteering, I actually had a bit of a struggle around Community Kitchen because I thought I should be doing this where I live. Of course, what's happened is that I've become part of this community – both the community of volunteers and the people who come to community kitchen.

And what were you doing at the time you signed up to volunteer at the Star and Shadow?

I worked in the charitable sector around Newcastle and Gateshead for fifteen years and stopped working three years ago. It wasn't that I was looking for something to do with my time, so much as I was aware when the build was going on and I thought what a fantastic idea, volunteers building the place, but I didn't get involved, which I regretted.

It would have been July of 2022 when I saw a little flyer on Facebook about the idea of starting the Community Kitchen. I just really liked the idea, so I came along. I didn't know if it would go anywhere, but there were enough of us who wanted to give it a try. One of the really nice things is a lot of people who were at the very first meeting have steered the whole thing and still come today.

So that, I guess, hooked me into the Star and Shadow.

It sounds like you all got involved straight away.

Yeah, it's noticeable how many people came to that first meeting, some had done their induction some did their induction after that meeting because they realised they needed to do the general induction to carry on, but we all got involved straight away.

And I think we've talked about this, and a few people around us have talked about this thing about sometimes there is a big gap between someone doing the general induction and then actually getting involved. And what can we do to support them.

So, though it wasn't difficult for you, because you got mixed in so easily, what do you think might be the reason for this gap?

I am a bit older, the work I've always done has been with people, so I'm quite comfortable working with people, whether you want to call it cooperative work, or partnership working, or even social interaction. I'll chat to anybody.

I think one of the things I've observed here is some of the volunteers are quite shy, quite introverted, they may be a bit lonely, they might have some mental health challenges, Some of them will be quite open, once they feel comfortable, about being on the spectrum, other people don't open up about it. But actually, even if none of those apply, if you're younger and you come into this space - the long-term volunteers are a bit older so maybe that can be a bit intimidating, I don't know.

But I think one of the things that is a huge overall benefit is that the Star and Shadow is a safe space for all types of people. I can't say it doesn't happen at all but by and large, there's normally no judgement. People are supportive. I think a lot of people take their time to find out about what's going on. Ask questions. I learn from people all the time.

I think it's just something about people finding their way.

This was the thinking behind the New Volunteer Hang Outs, wasn't it?

Yes, the idea was to create a space where people can get to know each other and find their own way. It's all very well if we older volunteers see that someone would be great for this thing or that thing and want to support them, but that doesn't work for everyone. Some people have to unlock it themselves.

And how have the Hang Outs been going?

We've had two. I think had twelve or thirteen people came to the first. The second one, there was three people so the numbers were down but actually, one of the good things was two people came along that had never met, so they sat and chatted away to each other. So, it's not about numbers, it's about the benefits.

But I think if you're a bit nervous or even if you're new to somewhere, it's just hard to walk into a building.

As someone with autism, I have got a lot from coming to cleaning club. It's a lovely, laid-back, peaceful thing to do anyway, but one of the key benefits is getting to know the layout of the building, week by week. It's like playing a video game - I have mapped it now and that made a big difference.

To get comfortable with the goings-on too, I am interested in the idea of shadowing more broadly. I was speaking to a younger volunteer about it and asked if she liked the idea of shadowing someone not just for one shift, say in the café, but shadowing someone for a whole day or a week even, which is almost the opposite of what you are talking about! But it did appeal to her and so maybe, for those that would like that, it is another idea.

You do get intensive training and a full tour of the building when you do keyholder training, but not everyone wants to become a keyholder. I think it's an interesting idea about, you know, mapping the place. We could maybe think about developing that though the volunteer hang out – getting a better sense of the building, learning the codes for the doors, learning what's stored in where.

You probably wouldn't have been told at the general induction and you probably won't be told it, if you don't go down the keyholder route, so there probably could be an in-between stage.

Yeah, that's the thing. My formal induction was great, I loved it, but it was a lot of information all at once. It's easy to go away and forget. And so, perhaps, and this could be more for neurodivergent people, there could be something, maybe not an induction, but something a bit looser and more casual, where you could say, 'I'm new, can I just come in?' And the people who are here for the day could explain a lot of what goes on when it's calmer and easier to take it in and you don't necessarily need to learn all the codes for the doors, but just, you know, kind of get a sense of it all.

Yeah, and I think being familiar with the space, you are comfortable in the space, and if you're comfortable you're more likely to get involved.

I think there is one other thing about supporting new volunteers. Myself and Joe do a lot to support people and get them involved, but some people will look at myself and look at Joe and think, 'You don't look like me.' That can definitely be an age thing or a gender thing.

I used to work on a youth project and it was predominantly white British. There were some black youth workers who were saying, and it's kind of obvious, if a young black person walks down to the

youth project and they see loads of white-faced workers and loads of white-faced young people, they will think, 'This is not for me'.

If it's white blokes of a certain age being supportive around here, it'll help some but not others, so I think there's something about how we support and encourage the younger volunteers to be part of the process.

Yeah, there is something in what you are saying - some people will respond well to the direct approach but other people might like the, 'I'm here. Come find me if you need me' approach. And more of us could offer to do that simply via the rota - someone could say which days/shifts they are available.

We do have a notice board, but its quite formal. I don't know if it made a difference, but for the New Volunteer Hang Out, I did a handwritten great sign and I stuck it on the wall here. We could make one that says, If you've got any questions, Ask Tianna, she's behind the café, or something similar.

I had an idea, because everyone seems to be heading off on trips and travelling this summer, we could stick a world map on the wall and label the places we have all been. That way, if anyone is planning a trip, they could go find someone who has been there and get some insider knowledge. Plus, it is just another excuse to make even more connections.

Right, we could chat all day, and will at this rate. To close, I'd love to hear your answer to the question I have been asking everyone which is: How would you describe the Star in Shadow to someone who's never heard of it?

It's like nothing else I've come across. That's not hyperbole, it's true. I suppose it's a bit like, if you go to the pub: it's communal, you'll see friends there, you'll probably sit with maybe five or six of the same people every week sort of thing.

The last couple of years on Facebook, I've done this thing. I was reflecting back and made a list of all the people that I have met at the Star and Shadow, without naming them, that I hadn't known twelve months previously. These are people that, if I bumped into in the street, I'd stop and have a chat to them and most of whom, I'd happily go for a coffee with. There were thirty two names on it. Then I did it again a few months later, and it was at forty-four. I think it's up to seventy-two now.

Seventy-two really? That's amazing.

There's something about this place - it's a space where people can connect. The fact that no one's in charge and forcing those connections is at the heart of it.

Also, if you asked each volunteer what the Star and Shadow is to them, they would say different things. If you speak to Adrin, he talks about this place as a do-it-yourself Cinema. We often talk about 'the cinema' and mean the whole building, but when Adrin says 'the cinema' he means the films that we put on. If you talked to Ken, who is involved in Community Kitchen, the Star and Shadow is a place where he just wants to come, chop onions and carrots, fling them in a pan and feed somebody. Someone may say it is a workers' cooperative or that it used to be and it's now it is more of a community centre. And I think the thing for me is: all of those things are important. We don't have to agree. It doesn't have to be one thing or the other, it can be all of them.

I was just speaking to some people outside, who were asking what this building is, and if I'm describing the space to people, I think the main thing I say is it's a 100 per cent volunteer-run space. No one is in charge; we have no paid staff. That's at the heart of it and then everything else weaves around that.

It is kind of beautiful, isn't it? Sometimes I forget that. Then someone reminds me that no one is paid and you look around and realise we are all here because we want to be. We just want to support one another.

I can't think of anything else like this.

I was asking someone yesterday if there are places like this around Britain and they thought there used to be something a bit similar in Edinburgh, but this place is pretty unique, isn't it?

We are part of a network of Independent Cinemas and a couple of volunteers, Ana and Dan, have attended conferences in Europe, but while there are certainly other small cinemas, there is nothing quite like the Star and Shadow.