By Saana Taussi, The Rank Foundation
October, 2024

The Start Here Programme:

The Digital Lead at Foyle Search and Rescue

" I'm very, very proud of those achievements, as well as the impact of my work. A lot of the digital systems have made it a lot quicker and a lot easier for volunteers to do their job. "

– Rossa Smallman, Digital Lead at Foyle Search and Rescue

Modernising the Operations of a Suicide Prevention Charity

Foyle Search and Rescue (FSR) hired a new staff member with the Start Here Programme funding in August 2022. As a result of the new role of Digital Lead, FSR has successfully modernised many of their operations, increasing their reach. With increased staff capacity, FSR has also implemented a review of staff duties, with better defined roles for the team. Currently, they are working on a complete restructuring of the organisation, leading to more involvement from staff in the overall decision making.

This case study explores the outcomes of Foyle Search and Rescue partaking in the Start Here programme, focusing on the positive impact the programme has had on the Start Here postholder, the organisation, and the wider community. This report is based on interviews with **Rossa Smallman**, who has been funded as the Digital Lead through Start Here, and with **Christina McKeegan**, who is the Charity Manger at Foyle Search and Rescue.

Start Here Programme

The Start Here programme is a part of the Department for Communities COVID Recovery Employment and Skills Initiative. It was set out to aid recovery, resilience, and sustainability within the VCSE and Sports sector, through attracting new talent to the field and upskilling existing employees. Start Here has provided 100 VCSE and sports organisations funding for a new, entry-level post for a 3-year period. The Rank Foundation is administering the programme and delivering additional development and networking opportunities for the postholders and their organisations throughout the years.

Foyle Search and Rescue

Foyle Search and Rescue (FSR) is **a voluntary based search and rescue charity based in Derry/Londonderry**. FSR was set up by the local community in 1993, in response to the high number of drownings in River Foyle.

On top of carrying out work on the water, **the charity has taken on the role of suicide prevention more broadly, through building social awareness around mental health and suicide.** They collaborate closely with other public and community bodies to provide services on prevention, intervention, postvention and education.

Rossa's Journey to Digital Lead

> "It's kind of changed my life from that point because this is not a job I'm quite used to - it's something I enjoy, I love working with digital systems, I love technology... And it's even better that I get to do that with a good purpose."

A Second Chance to Pursue a Passion

Rossa Smallman has been passionate about technology and digital systems for a long time he pursued an integrated master's in Computer Science in Newcastle Upon Tyne. The COVID-19 pandemic began during Rossa's first year of study and he struggled with the isolation of doing everything remotely, eventually dropping out of the degree.

After leaving university, Rossa worked in hospitality. This wasn't his passion, but he didn't really see a way forward: **"I didn't really see my life going anywhere because I couldn't do uni"**, he describes.

The post FSR originally set up with the Start Here funding was Coordinator's Assistant. Rossa saw the post online and applied for it spontaneously. It was a great opportunity for him to work in a new sector. Furthermore, once he had been in the role for a while, **his team recognised the strength of his existing digital skillset, and about 6 months into the role, they changed Rossa's role to Digital Lead.** This gave Rossa another opportunity to follow his passion for working with technology.

The Start Here Programme has also given Rossa the opportunity to return to his studies. He's currently doing a degree in Cyber Security at Open University, with the support of Start Here and the FSR Board.

New Role, New Improvements

The Digital Lead role was new to FSR and Christina McKeegan (the Charity Manger at FSR) emphasises that the role and Rossa's skills have been a real asset to FSR. **As the Digital Lead, Rossa is in charge of digital systems, social media, and also physical systems such as new computers.**

"I'm very, very proud of those achievements, as well as the impact of my work. A lot of the digital systems have made it a lot quicker and a lot easier for volunteers to do their job."
-Rossa

The Outcomes of the Digital Lead Role Include

- Implementing Near Field Communication Technology to provide a human-machine interface for their digital system, which means volunteers can access all important information by scanning with their smartphone.

- Implementing regular maintenance checks on watercraft & vehicles

- Working on a completely overhaul FSR's Maintenance, Asset Control, Paperwork, and Digital Workspace – centralising this all onto an online workspace

- Collaboration with other organisations in the area to deliver a mental health intervention campaign, using his skillset.

Maximising Impact

This section outlines some of the strengths of the Start Here programme in supporting sustainable change, and the approaches that FSR has taken in maximising the impact of the programme for their organisation.

Permanent Staff Enable Growth

FSR are a small organisation with nearly 100 volunteers, and before Start Here they only had two permanent staff. They really needed someone permanent to support volunteer work, and to help with other admin duties.

FSR often uses job schemes and work experience schemes to find support with the work load. As useful as these schemes are, they come with their limitations due to the nature of the work. Christina explains to me, that with work such as suicide prevention, it takes time and practice before people can carry out duties on their own:

"You can't get a new person to answer the phone until they have extensive training, because it could be an incident... And then the scheme is done and you're only starting to build that report with someone".

It's understandable that in conditions that lack permanence, it's challenging to take on bigger changes to make organisational progress. **Christina emphasises that three-year funding for this type of role really works.** Having Rossa join the organisation, alongside their ability to hire a fourth staff member soon after, has paved the way for the bigger organisational changes.

Embracing Change to Provide a Sustainable Service

With limited resources and a crucial role to play in providing life-saving support, taking time to review structures and practices isn't always a priority or an option. However, these processes are essential for creating a sustainable service. **With more staff, FSR has prioritised making changes to build the organisation's strategic direction.**

When Rossa's role changed to Digital Lead, all staff were granted better defined roles and responsibilities. Christina said this was really to embrace everyone's strengths. **With Rossa's digital updates simplifying the management of volunteers and the admin workload, alongside all staff having clearer direction, there is more capacity to take on other challenges.**

The FSR renewal process continues for other structures of the organisation. This past summer, FSR have been doing a renewal of their standards in relation to volunteer work, and as a part of that process, they decided to change the structure of the FSR as a whole:

"The organisation was very led by the management committee, and now with the new staff in place, the new structure, the board's going to look at the strategy with the support of me. And the staff are actually going to manage all the volunteers and all the programmes so that we have more of an operational say on the day-to-day running of the organisation", Christina says.

Relationship Building – Broader Impact

The Rank Foundation works in communities across the UK to encourage leaders, develop entrepreneurial mindsets and form strong networks that improve life. **The development opportunities Rank has delivered as a part of Start Here are reflective of Rank's ethos of investing in and nurturing talent within the community sector.** A big focus of the approach is supporting people and organisations in building impactful relationships.

As part of the Start Here networking and development opportunities, Rossa has regularly met with a group of other Start Here postholders throughout his time in his role. Building connections is at the centre of The Rank Foundation's ethos, and this is the aspect of Start Here that Rossa would encourage even more:

"I've quite enjoyed meeting people from all the different charities around the town, we do work quite closely from it. It's nice to meet people from these organisations – and hearing their struggles – it's very nice to hear like oh you're not the only one who's encountering that."

Beyond emotional support, Rossa continues to emphasise the importance of sharing ideas and resources. "Sharing technologies that people use – that's made our lives so much better, much easier so yeah that would be what I would encourage."

This **knowledge sharing has helped Rossa modernise FSR with his IT skills, the impact of which ripples through to the wider community, by making FSR more efficient.** They can also continue to share these systems with other similar organisations – spreading the positive change.

Looking Ahead

This work at FSR is ongoing and goals for the future include a website upgrade, e-learning solutions and a FSR app.

Collaborative Effort:
The Lighthouse Project

The work Rossa has done to help deliver The Lighthouse Project is a great example of how collaboration boosts impact and reach.

The Lighthouse Project is a central database that brings together all services supporting people in needs, such as mental health, addiction, homelessness, family services, minority groups and much more. Rossa's knowledge of Near Field Communication technology has been utilised, so that the database can be accessed by scanning a sticker, and these stickers can be left anywhere for people to reach support.