

NEWS Volunteers recruited in pilot schemes

Parent mentoring 'can save £50,000'

Jim Dunton
jim.dunton@emap.com

Using volunteers to help support families with children at risk of being taken into care can be 20 times cheaper than a conventional support programme, according to one programme operator.

Early results from Community Service Volunteers (CSV) pilot programmes suggest that funding co-ordinators who arrange parenting mentors to work alongside child-protection professionals may achieve longer-lasting results than conventional programmes, and cost much less (see In Practice, right).

✕ CSV has run Volunteers in Child Protection programmes in conjunction with Bromley, Lewisham, and Islington LBCs, Sunderland City Council, Southend-on-Sea BC, and is setting up a programme at Coventry City Council.

Sue Gwaspari, director of part-time volunteering at CSV, said that in some cases using volunteer mentors could prevent children getting to the stage where councils needed to put them on a child protection plan.

She said that the potential

investment of £1,000-£2,500 a year per child could result in huge savings on the £40,000-£50,000 costs of child protection plans.

"One 20th of the cost is a reasonable figure," she said.

"Saving money is definitely secondary to helping to improve people's lives. But if it is possible to stop children needing to go into care, or needing child protection plans, then there are big savings to be made."

Ms Gwaspari said that even improving people's parenting skills to the extent that children were inoculated on time produced positive knock-on effects for the health service.

She added that in Bromley hardly any of the children who had been involved with the programme during its first six years had had to go back on to child protection plans, versus a local average of about 11%.

Volunteers on the programme receive out-of-pocket expenses but are not paid. The cost associated with the programme comprises the roughly £25,000 a year to fund a co-ordinator who recruits approximately 35 volunteers.

IN PRACTICE

CSV scheme set to be forerunner in services revolution

Using unpaid volunteers to support families with children at risk fits David Cameron's Big Society agenda, reports Jim Dunton

We are likely to hear a lot more in the not too distant future about programmes such as Volunteers in Child Protection.

The Community Services Volunteers (CSV) programme, which pairs people who want to give something back with families whose children are known to social services, is attracting considerable attention.

For one thing, the new government's action plan has pledged to "support the creation and expansion" of mutuals, co-operatives, charities and social enterprises, and give them "much greater involvement in the running of public services".

For another, new children and families junior minister Tim Loughton is well aware of the programme, and its successes were trumpeted in the recent Conservative paper *Child Protection: Back to the Frontline*.

Sue Gwaspari, CSV's director for part-time volunteering, is cautiously optimistic.

"It's good that Tim Loughton has been brought into the Department for Education – he's keen on our work," she said.

"The Big Society idea is positive news – provided it's

seen as volunteering in the community to achieve better outcomes, rather than as a cost-cutting agenda."

But Ms Gwaspari is adamant that volunteers – who, so far, range from former teenage mothers in their early 20s to retired city executives – cannot replace child-protection professionals.

She argues their role is passing on skills based on their experiences and being a "critical friend" who can spend more time with parents and their children than social workers, and who – crucially – is seen as being independent.

That is one reason she believes councils should not set up complementary volunteering schemes in-house.

So far, CSV has launched projects at a handful of councils, ranging from a small scheme aimed at parents with drug and alcohol or mental health problems at Islington LBC, to larger-scale work at Southend-on-Sea BC (see Comment, p18).

How it works

The principle is that one co-ordinator placed at the authority recruits and runs a pool of 35 volunteers, about 25 of whom are assigned fam-



Volunteer help could prevent children needing a protection plan

ALAMY