

A job for volunteers

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Volunteers have undertaken social work for hundreds of years but should their involvement be formalised, particularly in the context of the Big Society? Natalie Valios reports

If ever there was a Big Society idea, then [Volunteers in Child Protection \(ViCP\)](#) is it.

The scheme, run by charity CSV, matches volunteers with families and children on protection plans to give practical advice and support. Not only does it help councils with the problem of not having enough social workers to work with families, but it also fits in with the government's ideas to involve volunteers more in running services.

Professor Eileen Munro, who is leading a review of the child protection system in England, has been asked to consider the support role volunteers might take on for social workers and the [Conservative party policy document on child protection](#), published before the election, praised the scheme.

But there are fears that volunteers could be used as a cut-price solution to the problem of social worker recruitment and might be loaded up with tasks that ought to be undertaken by qualified social workers.

However, an evaluation of the scheme in 2007 by Jane Tunstill, visiting professor, Social Care Workforce Research Unit, Kings College London, concluded that although there had been initial apprehension, volunteers were regarded by service users and social workers as "making an important contribution to the well-being of the children and families".

Tunstill says the volunteers did not want to take on social work tasks and were aware they lacked the skills. "But a number of them were inspired by the experience to go on and train as social workers."

"The scheme substantially increases the capacity of children's departments to deliver family support to vulnerable families. This sort of input constitutes a vital part of ensuring the welfare of children is safeguarded as well as promoted," Tunstill adds.

Originally a three-year pilot in two local authorities in 2004, the ViCP scheme now runs in the London boroughs of Bromley, Lewisham and Islington, and in Southend-on-Sea. The scheme is about to be launched in Coventry and CSV is in talks with others.

There are currently just over 100 volunteers. Sue Gwaspari, head of part-time volunteering at CSV, says: "They work with children at risk of serious harm through neglect. They give basic parenting help but, unlike parenting classes, this is done within the home so the volunteer sees them in their real circumstances. Volunteers are not a threatening presence in the home - they have no powers to take a child away, they are there to listen and help. They have time to go in several times a week to build a relationship with a family and can turn up when it suits the family, at weekends and evenings which social workers just can't do."

She points to the fact that none of the families who have been helped off child protection plans by the scheme, have had to be re-registered. "Bromley said it would expect 11% or more who come off plans to go back on them," Gwaspari says. She adds that the figure is even more significant as often councils use volunteers as a last resort before taking a child into care.

The scheme is backed by charity thinktank New Philanthropy Capital which, in 2007, recommended ViCP to funders; three went on to invest money in the scheme. Angela Kail, research analyst at NPC points out that it costs councils about £2,200 per family per year to invest in the scheme and CSV matches that. It costs £40,000 per year to have a child on a child protection plan.

These figures make the low uptake from local authorities surprising. But Kail puts it down to the Baby P case: "Local authorities went into crisis management mode and weren't looking at how external services could help them."

Gwaspari agrees; before Baby P some 40 local authorities were interested. "We are hoping the momentum we gained then will return. There is a body of evidence behind it now; its time has come."

Find out more at <http://www.csv.org.uk>

[Join the debate on Carespace](#)

<http://www.communitycare.co.uk/carespace/forums/volunteers-in-childrens-social-care-7614.aspx#30432>

[More on Bromley's volunteering scheme](#)

<http://www.communitycare.co.uk/Articles/2004/05/20/44809/Benefit-or-burden.htm>

Case study: Southend Council ViCP scheme

'It helps that I am not a professional'

Southend-on-Sea has used the ViCP scheme for the past year. The council uses some 50 volunteers to support 40 families. Michael Stephenson, group manager in specialist services in children's services, says it used the scheme to see if it could make progress with the 15-20% of those who had been on child protection plans for more than 18 months.

"We wanted to look at whether we could really work with those families to engender change. An important aspect for us is that volunteers work off a child protection plan or a child-in-need plan, so they work to make specific changes to the family."

For Caroline Jennings, a social work team manager in the child and family support team, the appeal of ViCP is that "social workers don't have the time to spend quality time with children and parents. Most people respond to the time, patience and understanding that the volunteers are able to give".

With seven children aged between 18-28, Lorraine Garten felt she had a lot to offer as a volunteer and is now supporting her fourth family. "Initially, families are scared about why you are there, but after a few weeks the barrier comes down and you build a bond," she says. "It helps that I'm not a professional and that I've got children myself."

Depending on the situation she visits families up to three times a week. Rather than accompany a social worker, volunteers visit alone - it is an important part of the scheme that they are independent of the local authority. They then report back to their manager - a CSV member of staff co-located in the council's children's services - who passes information onto the social worker.

Garten's third family was a 19-year-old mother who was neglecting her two-year-old daughter. Initially the mother was defensive, but, says Garten, "you're there to encourage, so when there's a big pile of washing on the floor and the next time you go it's gone, I'd say 'something looks different' and she'd tell me that she washed, ironed and put it all away. I would say 'well done' because it's a big step for her. That encouraged her to do more. A few weeks later she painted the place and turned a house into a home."

"Her child was on a child protection plan, then classed as a child-in-need and then signed off by social services. At that last meeting she said, 'if it wasn't for CSV's involvement I wouldn't be where I am today'."

Pros and cons of volunteers

Pros

- Volunteers have the time to visit often and do practical things like help with budgeting, cleaning and playing with children.
- Parents see volunteers as non-threatening and might be more inclined to reveal the truth to them.
- Volunteers can be another pair of eyes and ears for the social worker.
- Volunteers can be inspired by the experience to train as social workers.

Cons

- Social workers may distrust volunteers and have strong feelings about working with them.
 - A volunteer could become emotionally involved with the family and try to undermine a social worker's decision.
 - Some think volunteers should be used in early intervention and not in cases where there are child protection concerns.
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