

Using Volunteers in Child Protection Work: Findings from local authority stakeholders and emerging questions for social work

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Abstract:

This paper examines findings arising from commissioned research into the use of volunteers in local authority child protection services. Concentrating primarily on findings obtained from interviews with local authority staff and stakeholders, the paper considers the merits and possible pitfalls of such schemes. Examined against the backdrop of the current economic climate and political agenda, it raises pertinent questions for social work research and practice, which include:

- *Is there a legitimate role for the use of volunteers in child protection work?*
- *What are the ethical questions and practical risks regarding the use of unpaid labour in place of paid support staff?*
- *Post Munro, do volunteers enhance or hinder progress in child protection work?*
- *What are the lessons of conducting commissioned research and service evaluations?*

In addition, the paper forms a useful guide to individuals and organisations who may be considering the use of such provision as it contains detailed qualitative data documenting the views and experience of front line local authority stakeholders who have experience of one such scheme.

Introduction:

Criticism of child protection practices have become common place in the UK in recent years, with similar discourse occurring during the same period in other English-speaking countries such as the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand. Commentators have advocated (Lonne et al 2009, Munro 2010, Connolly & Smith 2010) the need to whole scale change to children's services, systems and the very paradigm on which they have developed. They highlight forensic, risk-adverse, adversarial approaches where the family has become alienated, where the voice of the child is lost, where the role of community is absent and where the professional social worker has become little more than a policing agent of the state. The failings of such systems are equally well documented in terms of headline grabbing child-death tragedies, cumbersome, costly and inflexible processes, and poor outcomes for the children who are removed from home and cared for by the state. Within this backdrop local authorities struggle to create meaningful change in families and better outcomes for children. The use of well organised community volunteers is being rolled out in a number of areas and the potential to engage local 'citizens' to plug the gap where perhaps previously the extended family might have acted. The strength of belief in the potential of volunteers and the possible economic benefits during a time of austerity has opened-up opportunity for new initiatives. These are now emerging within the provision of social care and must be examined and evaluated on merit as part of a considered debate about providing effective future services. There are many questions which such schemes raise, including the ethical issues arising from the use of unpaid staff and the potential impact this could have on the social work profession.

In recent years we have seen a shift in the debate regarding social work practice, particularly in children's services. The Munro Review (2011) raises the possible dangers of increased regulation, inspections, targets, use of technology:

'An over-standardised framework makes it difficult for professionals to prioritise time with children and young people and to meet their wide variety of needs and

circumstances.’ (Munro 2010: 43)

This shift has been profound and one which has distanced social workers not only from their key skills, but from the very communities and individuals they work within. This distance brings into question the whole notion of ‘partnership’ with parents set out in the Children Act 1989. Any initiative which attempts to aid meaningful communication between professional services and families in child protection cases must be given due consideration. There is little doubt that such schemes do not seek to impose radical reform which many commentators see as necessary (Lonne et al 2009, Connolly & Smith 2010, Goodman & Trowler 2012.) However, the use of the ‘volunteer’ is a growing reality in many authorities and it is on this level that we offer our evaluation findings to the debate.

Context of the Study:

The Volunteers in Child Protection (ViCP) project was established in 2005 by Community Service Volunteers (CSV) as a response to the Victoria Climbié enquiry, aiming to provide additional support to families in their own homes where at least one of the children was subject to a Child Protection Plan.

ViCP work with families with children up to 18 years as set out in the 1989 Children Act. The volunteers work alongside local authority professional staff, offering practical and emotional support. The ViCP scheme has dual objectives:

- To support families under stress and to help protect children from abuse and harm.
- To use volunteers alongside local authority professional staff and others in ensuring that children considered to be ‘at risk’ are visited regularly and their families supported.

Methodology:

The study took place in 2010 – 2011. It was a CSV commissioned piece of research designed to evaluate the impact of the ViCP scheme in a Unitary Authority in the south east of England. The focus

of the overarching research was to evaluate whether the scheme provided value for money to the Authority. Methodologically, it was mixed methods study using a three sampling population strands: Families, Volunteers and Local Authority Stakeholders. In addition there was an evaluation of 'value for money' using a service related cost calculator developed by The University of Loughborough (2009).

Much of the study concentrated on reported changes in family functioning, parental well-being and child strengths and difficulties using standardised questionnaires repeated over a six month period.

Volunteers and Families were additionally interviewed to gather qualitative data. Details of the full evaluation can be accessed in the final Report (Akister, O'Brien & Cleary 2011.)

Data collection from local authority stakeholders involved face to face semi structured interviews conducted by the author (TC.) Contemporaneous records of the comments made were taken and thematic coding was used to highlight relevant emerging issues. Peer evaluation added to the trustworthiness and validity of the data. Participants were fully informed of the context of the study and had the opportunity to review and amend transcripts of their interview before data was analysed. Informed consent was given for comments to be recorded and quoted in the evaluation report and subsequent analysis.

Findings from interviews with Local Authority Stakeholders

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of local authority staff, all of whom had direct involvement at some level of the ViCP scheme. This included Social Workers, Senior Practitioners, Child Protection Review Chairperson and Commissioning Managers.

The general view of the stakeholders was that the ViCP project provided an invaluable resource which appeared to improve outcomes for families who engaged. In conjunction with the work of statutory services, the scheme achieved results which exceeded those normally considered achievable by statutory intervention alone. The 'value' of the service provided by the volunteers was acknowledged as something nebulous and difficult to measure. It was seen as being based on *prevention* of reception

into care, or *prevention* of a family requiring intensive statutory intervention, or the *relative cost* of a statutory worker providing the same number of hours working with a family. However, what was clearly highlighted by all those interviewed, was that the role of the volunteer was viewed as something *significantly different to that which could be offered by a statutory worker*. This is perhaps indicative of the 'distancing' which has occurred in recent years between worker and family, and the power-based relationship which exists.

Stakeholders stressed that the role performed by a volunteer could not be directly compared to that of a statutory worker:

'...rather than simply to use volunteers to replicate a family support type role, we wanted to use the unique status and role of a volunteer to work in a different way with families who may be more receptive to non-statutory agency getting involved.'

'We wanted to target social work time on crisis cases but also taking on board the fact that some families just don't respond well to statutory social work and a volunteer may be able to form a different relationship and be accepted as a 'critical friend.' They can become a role model, a friend, a big sister...'

The informal and unpaid nature of the volunteer's role appeared to be key to this unique status. Many of those interviewed referred to the volunteer becoming like a substitute extended family member.

'The volunteer aspect is important because they are seen as wanting to be there not because they are being paid.'

'How often do we think 'this person is a natural' and when they become a trained social worker they lose something - the ability to really connect in a natural way. The volunteers keep that natural ability to respond in a very human and natural way. An 'unhampered human response' I suppose. They are instinctive and intuitive.'

The fact that the volunteers only worked with one family was also highlighted, meaning that they could invest a level of time and commitment in the family that could never be replicated by a statutory worker:

'Busy social workers don't have time to engage and listen as much as they would like. Like an extended family, the volunteer becomes a protective influence.'

Stakeholders were able to provide examples where they considered the ViCP scheme prevented reception into care. Managers involved with the commissioning of the scheme stated that the use of volunteers should not be viewed as a cheap option. Good recruitment, training, management and support required significant and appropriate levels of funding. They also placed great emphasis on the importance of organization, management and administration of the scheme:

'The initial thing is to get good staff to manage the scheme and we have been really lucky as they are experienced and able to work well with social workers. They have developed a really good reputation. They share information and are able to spot problems/dangers/risks. They are very clear and boundaried. Volunteer training and supervision is also good and this is really important.'

Personal experience and anecdotal evidence clearly indicated that the scheme is effective, but stakeholders felt that more objective measures and monitoring systems should be put in place:

'Intuitively and anecdotally it works well but we want hard research. I mean for the £140,000 the scheme costs we could employ 6 family support workers – so why not?'

Whilst all of the stakeholders were specifically asked if they felt the scheme provided value for money, none felt able to give an informed and conclusive response.

Implications for Social Work Practice:

Many of the findings reported above concur with the results of previous evaluations (Tunstall and Malin 2011) and provide intuitively (Munro 2009) and qualitatively compelling data. However, the significance

of three themes emerging from stakeholder's experience merit detailed consideration in the context of improving social work practice with complex and hard-to-reach families where there is an identified risk to children. These key themes are listed and evaluated in turn in the discussion that follows:

- 1) The suggestion that volunteers provide **added value** over and above the monetary equivalent of a paid worker.
- 2) The ability of volunteers to form trusting **relationships** with families which may create a climate for sustainable change to occur.
- 3) The volunteer's ability to provide additional and **meaningful communication** between family and statutory service.

Theme 1 - Value Added:

Most of the stakeholders interviewed in this evaluation commented about the impact that the volunteer was able to have and the unique role that they were able to play in the lives of the families to whom they were assigned (see Table 1). A senior social worker comments:

'CSV get better results than social services support staff. This family had a support worker in the past but she made no difference. A volunteer is less judgemental and only has one case. There are no power issues in the relationship and she has quality time to spend. This takes away suspicion, builds trust and a good relationship.'

This notion of added-value, over and above that which could be gained by a family support worker for example, is one which has not been factored-in using the 'cost calculator' method of assessing value for money in this evaluation. Other such studies which have attempted to use similar formula to calculate the monetary value gained from the use of volunteers have likewise been seen as limiting the focus of the value of the volunteer (Graff 2009.) The Volunteer Investment Value Audit tool (VIVA) developed by Gaskin (1996) has been widely used both nationally and internationally to establish the

comparable monetary worth that a volunteer brings to the work of any organisation by estimating equivalent replacement costs of a paid employee in a similar role. Using this model in a European study Gaskin (2000) was able to establish that for every £1 spent on the recruitment, training and support of a volunteer, organisations were likely to see a return of anywhere between £3 and £8 in terms of the time offered. Graff (2009) argues convincingly that this methodology fails to take into account the 'actual value' of what volunteers are able to accomplish, echoing the views of stakeholders' experience of ViCP, and stating that such an approach '*obscures the multiplicity of values created by volunteer involvement.*' (Graff: 2) Using the example of a volunteer in a children's hospice, Graff lists the possible benefits to be gained by using a volunteer such as comfort, solace, relief, 'a re-injection of humanness', and even 'a gentler, more generous, more caring spirit of community and civility.' Studies which attempt to measure this added value brought by volunteer workers are extremely rare (Putnam 2000, Baum et al 1999) and yet anecdotally reports such as those of the stakeholders in the ViCP study do not appear unusual, in that volunteers are identified as being able to achieve more positive outcomes than a paid equivalent worker:

'...something very strange and wonderful is going-on in the world of volunteering. It is this very elusiveness, the power of volunteering to act upon people in mysterious ways that makes it so powerful an intervention.' (Neuberger 2007: 3)

The potential for using volunteers within the public sector must therefore be considered as far more than just providing free labour. The contention that volunteers make a different and unique contribution to that of paid staff opens up the debate as to how volunteers and paid staff can work together in a complimentary way and how this partnership might be further evaluated in the future to tease-out some of the qualitative complexities of what is occurring.

Theme 2 - Relationships:

The second key theme emerging from the stakeholder interviews in this study is the notion that volunteers are able to develop more meaningful relationships with families than paid staff, and that such relationships create a milieu for sustained change and growth. As one senior staff member highlights:

‘‘The volunteer is seen as a ‘critical friend.’ Families are more receptive to a volunteer than a worker from the statutory sector and can effect change in people’s lives by acting as a role model, giving good advice, improving self-esteem, improving confidence & anger management. They have time to build real relationships and to listen. The impact is positive...Sadly, there seems to be an ingrained perception that social workers are all out to get them and a volunteer would be viewed differently.’

There is some evidence that a positive relationship with a worker can influence parental behaviour and as such have positive outcomes in child protection cases. Lee and Ayón (2004) pose the question in their research; ‘Is the client-worker relationship associated with better outcomes in mandated child abuse cases?’ and conclude:

‘...a more positive relationship with the social worker was associated with improvement in discipline and emotional care and tendencies toward improvement in children’s physical care and parents’ coping. This was expected because establishing a good relationship has been described as a powerful tool (Woods & Hollis, 2000).’

Such observations are echoed in other studies where relationship-based work is identified as forming the basis of resilience and growth (Stein 2005) and is likewise reiterated in the Munro Review (2011.) The highly commended ‘Hackney Model’ additionally pin-points the body of research in which service-users give the consistent view that they value the relational aspects of social work intervention (Cross, Hubbard & Munro 2010.)

Statutory social work intervention, particularly within the field of child protection, has somehow distanced itself from the ability to form real and meaningful relationships with parents and with children. This is a 'persistent criticism' in child death enquiries (Munro 2011) in that social workers have failed to form relationships with and speak to children enough. The possibility that a volunteer may act to bridge this gap between families and statutory services, and that the work of statutory social workers will be enhanced if they align themselves alongside community-based volunteers, is one which is worthy of further and more detailed examination.

Theme 3 - Communication:

Finally, the fourth finding from stakeholder data in this study and earlier evaluations of ViCP (Tunstall 2007) is the additional work that the volunteer can see the family functioning over a period of time and perhaps in a more 'natural' state and setting and communicate needs to statutory workers. As one social worker commented:

'They keep an objective semi-professional eye on things for us.'

Child death enquiries again indicate that social work visits can become stage-managed events with parents eager to be seen in the best possible light, or perhaps even set on a path of outright deceit (Haringey LSCB 2010.) In building up a real and trusting relationship over time, the volunteer has the opportunity to perhaps 'see the family as they really are', to monitor risks and resilience from close quarters, and to feed-back this insight to statutory services. There are of course ethical questions relating to the use of volunteers in this capacity. We have seen that volunteers have been compared to an extended family member. Although families are told that the volunteer is duty-bound to report back to the local authority, mixed messages may occur to allow this trusting relationship to build. However, part of the credibility of the scheme among professionals was the willingness of the volunteers to share information and work alongside social workers to shared aims and objectives.

'They have developed a really good reputation; they share information and are able to spot problems, risks and dangers.'

Lessons and practical pitfalls of using volunteers in child protection work:

Although this evaluation and other similar studies are largely positive, potential pitfalls have emerged again from the experiences and comments of stakeholders. These may have specific relevance for practice and are summarised as follows:

- There is a need for realistic funding and management to support and facilitate the work of volunteers.
- Monitoring systems to record and evaluate outcomes must be part of any planning and costing.
- Selection processes and matching of volunteers with families are important.
- Volunteers require good quality management, training, support and supervision.
- Clear and open channels of communication between statutory workers and volunteers need to be in place.
- The supply and sustainability of volunteer labour needs to be considered.

Conclusions:

Within the current economic and political climate it would be tempting to take a cynical approach to the notion of using volunteers in the provision of public services and to see this as simply a possible cheap option which conveniently fits with the current political rhetoric. However, this evaluation has highlighted the potential for volunteers to both complement and enhance the role of statutory services in complex child protection cases, to build more meaningful relationships with hard-to-reach families, and to

ultimately contribute to the greater safety and wellbeing of children. There may additionally be fiscal benefits for local authorities, if these families move on to require fewer services.

However, recent shifts and professional developments in many areas are heralding the re-emergence of the social worker as an agent of change, who seeks to work alongside the family within the specific cultural context of a community and wider family network. Many authorities are seeking to additionally give social workers the time and space to build meaningful relationships with children and families in a reflective climate (Goodman & Trowler 2012). With this in mind, the use of volunteers is perhaps an option which local authorities are considering in some areas to improve outcomes for all children at least in the short term, since fundamental systemic change is likely to take 5 -7 years (Nunno 2006). The rise of similar schemes across the country and indeed internationally, will open-up debate relating to the possible deskilling of the profession, and the erosion of the role of the state and a healthy scepticism regarding governmental objectives to cut back the role of the public sector is necessary. However, the potential benefits of the involvement of volunteers should not be undervalued or overlooked within this. Our findings indicate that there is potential for volunteers to meet the needs of families who are struggling and improve outcomes for children. Whilst it is undoubtedly a sad reality that statutory social workers have become unable to fulfil this role due to the forensic approach that has been encouraged over the past two decades (Lonne et al 2009), until there is wholesale and systemic change, there may be a legitimate, ethically acceptable and indeed pragmatic place for the use of volunteers to improve outcomes for children?

(3365 words)

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