

The Experiences of a Commissioning Organization in Using Volunteers to Work alongside Child Protection Case Workers

Teresa Cleary, MA

Jane Akister, PhD

Anglia Ruskin University
Department of Health
Social Care and Education
East Road
Cambridge CB1 1PT

Abstract

This paper explores the experiences of a commissioning organisation in the use of volunteers to work with families in complex child protection cases, where there is an identified risk to children who are known to statutory children's services. Can the volunteer working alongside professionals promote meaningful change and contribute to positive outcomes. At a time of austerity in public spending and political rhetoric of 'Community Involvement' this is a key and relevant discussion for social work practitioners, managers and policy makers since such schemes are becoming more widespread in the UK. The use of volunteers in the delivery of public services raises some important questions in relation to seeking to provide a cheap alternative to professional intervention, for potentially diluting the role of the social worker and for failing to take on board more far-reaching criticisms of a fundamentally flawed welfare system. However, the findings from the commissioning organisation involved in this study indicate specific benefits in the use of volunteers in promoting positive outcomes for children and families. The recruitment, management and supervision of the volunteers are critical to the success of such schemes.

KeyWords: Volunteers, Child Protection, Service Delivery

1. Introduction

Child protection services in the UK have come under significant criticism in recent years, and similar critique has occurred during the same period in other English-speaking countries such as the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Commentators have advocated the need for whole scale change to these services and systems and question the very paradigm on which they have developed (Lonne, Parton, Thompson and Harries, 2009; Munro 2010; Connolly & Smith 2010). They identify 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 (Akister, Owens and Goodyer, 2010). In the UK, the use of well organised community volunteers is being advocated by government, with the potential to engage local 'citizens' to plug the gap where perhaps previously the extended family might have acted.

'In the last twenty years government has recognised the critical contribution that volunteering makes to build a strong and cohesive society. It has promoted volunteering as the essential act of citizenship, a means for combating social exclusion, and an important contributor to the delivery of high quality public services.'(Neuberger 2007, p.3)

Within the same period in other industrialised democracies including Australia (Volunteering Australia 2003), the USA (Brudney, 1999), Canada (Mook, Richmond and Quatar, 2003), Hong Kong (Chan, 2008) and parts of mainland Europe (Ascoli & Cnaan 1997, Sajardo & Serra 2011), there has been increased emphasis on promoting ‘a civil society’ in which the volunteer is seen to play a significant role in the social space that is seen to exist between the state/market and the family/individual (Baubock, 1996). Expectations and aspirations for involving more people in ‘voluntary’ activities - which are entered into freely, without payment and largely for the benefit of strangers – are vast. However aside from financial gains to be had in the form of a cheap pool of labour (Gaskin 2000), little evidence of whether volunteering achieves any of those higher aspirations, of creating a more cohesive society and combating social exclusion, seem to exist beyond anecdote and rhetoric (Graff, 2009.)

Despite this, 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 on merit as part of a considered debate about providing effective future services. Recent government initiatives in the UK, call for ‘active citizenship’. Whilst the concept remains somewhat poorly defined in the public consciousness, it is accompanied with by the recent Localism Act (HMSO 2011) setting out the agenda for more local accountability and community participation in the delivery and management of public services. In addition, the White Paper ‘Opening up Public Services’ (HMSO 2010) seeks to involve both the private and voluntary sector in public service delivery by promoting the tendering out of all such services. The use of volunteer labour is one established way to facilitate cheaper service provision (Gaskin 2000) and has tended to be utilised more by the private/voluntary sector (Whitely 2004). In addition, rising unemployment, particularly among the young and inexperienced, have created a growing pool of potential volunteers.

At the same time we have seen a shift in the debate regarding social work practice, concerning the possible dangers of increased regulation, inspections, targets and the use of technology:

‘An over-standardised framework makes it difficult for professionals to prioritize time with children and young people and to meet their wide variety of needs and circumstances.’ (Munro 2010: 43)

Any initiative which attempts to bridge the gap between professional and families in child protection cases must be given due consideration. Although schemes using volunteers do not seek to impose the radical reform which many commentators see as necessary (Lonne et al 2009; Connolly & Smith 2010; Goodman & Trowler 2012).

2. Context of the Study

The Volunteers in Child Protection (ViCP) project was established in 2005 by Community Service Volunteers (CSV) and aims 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 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 professional staff and others in ensuring that children considered to be ‘at risk’ are visited regularly and their families supported.

In an earlier evaluation of a separate ViCP scheme, Tunstill (2007) 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’. Valios (2010) summarised the benefits of using volunteers in such cases as relating to time available and practical usefulness, being seen as non-threatening and therefore able to build more trusting relationships, acting as an additional monitor of the family alongside professionals. Possible drawbacks to the use of volunteers include the potential distrust among professionals, the risk of over involvement/boundary issues and the question as to whether volunteers may be more usefully involved in preventative work rather than in serious child protection cases where statutory intervention is already great.

3. Methodology

The study took place in 2010 – 2011. It was part of an independent evaluation of the impact of the ViCP scheme in a Unitary Authority in the south east of England (Akister, O’Brien and Cleary, 2011; Akister and O’Brien, 2012).

The focus of the research was to evaluate if the scheme achieved improved outcomes for children and families and whether it offered value for money for the Authority. It was mixed methods study using qualitative interviews and standardised questionnaires with families, volunteers and commissioners identifying changes in wellbeing together with the lived experience of the volunteer scheme. In addition there was a calculation of 'value for money' using a service related cost calculator developed by the University of Loughborough (Holmes, Munro and Soper, 2010).

The experience of the commissioning organisation reported in this paper presents the qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews with the organisations employees. The rationale for this part of the research was to consider the impact of the scheme from the perspective of the professionals involved in the child protection process who had worked alongside volunteers. A purposeful sample of six stakeholders was identified to access a cross section of roles including Commissioning Managers through to case holding Social Workers.

Face-to-face semi structured interviews were conducted by a consistent researcher. 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.

4. Findings from the Interviews with Commissioning Organisation Employees

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of the commissioning organisation staff, all of whom had direct involvement at some level of the ViCP scheme. This included Social Workers, Commissioning Managers and a Child Protection Review Chairperson. Key themes from the interviews are summarised in Table 1.

The general view of the commissioning organization was that the ViCP project provided an invaluable resource which appeared to improve outcomes for families. In conjunction with the work of professional 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 professional 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 professional 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 with families fearful that social workers will remove their children.

It was stressed that the role performed by a volunteer could not be directly compared to that of a professional worker:

'...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.'

'... 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.'

The informal and unpaid nature of the volunteer's role ascribes 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.'

The fact that the volunteers only had one case was also highlighted:

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

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 (see Table 1):

'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.'

Some of the managers interviewed raised the question of regular monitoring and measurement of outcomes for the scheme, acknowledging that in the current economic climate continued funding may rely on quantifiable data as evidence of 'success.' There was a suggestion that this was a factor that had been missing when initially planning the scheme and something that needed to be considered in the future. Personal experience and anecdotal evidence clearly indicated that the scheme is effective, but the commissioning manager felt that more objective measures and monitoring systems should be put in place:

5. Discussion and Implications for Social Work Practice

The findings reported above concur with the results of previous evaluations of such schemes (Tunstill and Malin 2011). Three themes emerging from this evaluation 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:

- 1) Volunteers provide **added value** over and above the monetary equivalent of a paid worker.
- 2) Volunteers can form trusting **relationships** with families which may create a climate for sustainable change to occur.
- 3) Volunteer's can provide additional and meaningful **communication** between family and professional services.

The professionals interviewed in this evaluation commented on the impact that the volunteer was able to have (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.'

Trying to calculate the monetary value of what volunteers are able to accomplish, *'obscures the multiplicity of values created by volunteer involvement.'* (Graff: 2009). 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.

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.

The second key theme emerging from the commissioning organisation 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 have positive outcomes in child protection cases. Relationship-based work is identified as forming the basis of resilience and growth (Stein 2005).

Statutory social work intervention, particularly within the field of child protection, has somehow distanced itself from forming real and meaningful relationships with parents and with children. This is a 'persistent criticism' in child death enquiries in that social workers have failed to form relationships with and speak to children enough (Munro 2011). The experiences of the commissioning organisation, 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 of interest here.

While acting as a critical friend, 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 (the volunteer) 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 '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.'

6. Organising and Managing Volunteers

The ViCP scheme was experienced as largely positive by the commissioning organisations employees. The experiences and comments relating to the organisation and management of volunteers were considered critical to the schemes success and can be summarised as follows:

i) The need for realistic funding to support and facilitate the work of volunteers

Although interventions are carried out by unpaid volunteers, there is a cost in management, recruitment, training and supervision. Budget holders need to be clear on an ongoing basis that such schemes bring quantifiable benefits which need to ultimately translate into improved outcomes for children and families.

ii) Monitoring outcomes and ongoing evaluation of the work of volunteers

There is a need for continuous review, monitoring and evaluation of any such scheme to ensure that the objectives continue to be met. This includes assurance that volunteers are working with families who fall within a set criteria, to avoid any risk of 'net widening.' This is a term usually applied to initiatives in youth offending where so called preventative strategies actually draw people into interventions by inadvertently extending referral criteria (Blyth and Soloman, 2009).

iii) The importance of selection processes and matching of volunteers with families

It was acknowledged that this could create some delay in the process but stressed as essential to the confidence that professionals had built-up. The importance of volunteers only having one family assigned to them was also highlighted by stakeholders, and may have significant impact on success rates.

iv) Safeguarding, management, training, support and supervision of volunteers

The management and administration of the ViCP scheme was identified as a particular strength in this area. CSV staff in this scheme had been known locally through other work. They were seen as insightful and some were singled-out as having an overwhelmingly positive impact. Ongoing support, open dialogue and supervision of volunteers were also seen as vital to identify any boundary issues or potential stresses in the work with particular families.

v) Professional interface with volunteer scheme staff

Stakeholders identified the availability of CSV staff as being another real strength of the scheme. Scheme staff also occupied office space with social work staff, which facilitated communication. Such detail may again have impacted on the success of this particular scheme.

7. 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.

The role and function of the volunteer are under debate. The rise of similar schemes across the country and indeed internationally, will open-up debate relating to the possible deskilling of the social work profession. 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.

Commissioning organisations reported that volunteers made a difference to outcomes and that it was a cost effective approach to child protection case work. Which they would like to see extended (see Table 1). The need for careful selection, management and supervision of volunteers was emphasised. The experiences of working with volunteers, through an organised scheme, led them to see volunteers as a useful resource and not as professional competition.

References

- Akister, J., Owens, M., Goodyer, I.M. 2010. Leaving care and mental health: outcomes for children in out-of-home care during the transition to adulthood. *Health Research Policy and Systems*, 8(10) Available at <http://www.health-policy-systems.com/content/8/1/10> [Published 12 May].
- Akister, J., O'Brien, N., Cleary, T., 2011. CSV Volunteers in Child Protection (ViCP): An Assessment of its Impact and Effectiveness. *Final Report, October 2011*.
- Akister, J. and O'Brien, N. 2012. Using Volunteers in Home-Based Child Protection - Preliminary Indications for the Mental Wellbeing of Family Members. *International Journal of Business and Social Research*, 2(6), 226-240.
- Ascoli U., Cnaan R.A. 1997. *Volunteering for Human Service Provisions: Lessons from Italy and the USA*. *Social Indicators Research* 40: 299-327
- Baubock, R. 1996. *Social and Cultural Integration in a Civil Society* in R. Baubock (ed) *The Challenge of Diversity*. Aldershot. Avebury.
- Blyth, M., Soloman, E. 2009. *Prevention and Youth Crime. Is early intervention working?* Bristol. The Policy Press.
- Brudney, J.L. 1999. *The effective use of volunteers: Best practices for the Public Sector*. *Law and Contemporary Problems*, 62: 220-225
- Chan, M.K. 2008. *China's Hong Kong Transformed*. Hong Kong. University of Hong Kong Press
- Commission for the Future of Volunteering (Editor: Nick Ockenden) 2007. *Volunteering Works: Volunteering and Social Policy*. London. Institute for Volunteering Research and Volunteering England
- Connolly, M., Smith, R. 2010 *Reforming Child Welfare: An Integrated Approach*. *Child Welfare* 89(3): 9-31
- Gaskin, K. 2000. *Valuing Volunteers in Europe: a comparative study of VIVA*. London. Institute for Volunteering Research.
- Goodman, S., Trowler, I. 2012 *Social Work Reclaimed* London. Jessica Kingsley
- Graff, L.L. 2009 *Reconceptualising the value of volunteer work* published online by Linda Graff Associates www.lindagraff.com accessed 19.3.2012
- HMSO 1989 *The Children Act*. London. HMSO
- HMSO 2011 *The Localism Act*. London. HMSO
- HMSO 2010. White Paper: *Opening up Public Services*. London. HMSO
- Holmes, L., Munro, E.R., and Soper, J. 2010. *Calculating the cost and capacity implications for local authorities implementing the Laming (2009) recommendations*. Centre for Child and Family Research: Loughborough University

- Lonne, B., Parton, N., Thomson, J., Harries, M. 2009. *Reforming Child Protection*. London. Routledge
- Lee, C.D., Ayón, C. 2004. *Is the Client-Worker Relationship Associated With?*
- Mook, L., Richmond B., Quater J. 2003. *How including volunteers changes the financial statement: The Expanded Value Added Statement*. Voluntary Action Vol. 6 No.1
- Munro, E. 2010. *The Munro Review of Child Protection – Part One: A Systems Analysis*. London. DFE.
- Munro, E. 2011. *The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report*. London HMSO.
- Neuberger, J. 2007. Forward in The Commission for the Future of Volunteering (Editor: Nick Ockenden) *Volunteering Works: Volunteering and Social Policy*. London. Institute for Volunteering Research and Volunteering England
- Sajardo, A., Serra, I. 2011. *The economic value of Volunteer Work. Methodological application and analysis to Spain*. Non Profit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly 40: 873-895.
- Stein, M. 2005. *Resilience and Young people Leaving Care*. York. Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Tunstill, J. 2007. *Volunteers in Child Protection: A study and evaluation of CSV's pilot projects in Sunderland and Bromley*. London. CSV
- Valios, N. 2010. *Pros and Cons of Using Volunteers in Child Protection in Community Care* 16.7.2010
- Volunteering Australia 2003. *Working with volunteers and managing volunteer programs in Health Care settings*. Canberra. National Health and Medical Research Council.
- Whitely, P. 2004. *The art of happiness...is volunteering the blueprint for bliss?* London. Economic and Social Research Council.

Table 1: Key Themes from Interviews

Theme	Detail of the Theme	Frequency (n=6)
Organisation and administration of the ViCP scheme	- the scheme is well managed	5
	- the volunteers are well trained and supported	4
	- the volunteers and scheme managers work well with statutory services	6
Expectations of the ViCP scheme	- the scheme has exceeded expectations	6
	- had some initial reservations about the scheme	2
Experience and observations of the ViCP scheme	- has direct experience of children and families making progress as a result of the volunteer's work	6
	- the volunteers provide a different role to professional staff and/or are better placed to form positive relationships with service users	5
	- care action is being prevented as a result of the volunteer's work	3
	- cases come off CP plans as a result of the volunteer's work	2
	- believe the scheme saves money and/or resources	5
Suggested ways that the ViCP could be enhanced and/or expanded	- Offered comments/advice to other authorities considering the use of volunteers	6
	- Expressed ideas for enhancing the scheme	4
	- Would like to see the scheme extended	3