

## **Hampshire County Council**

### **The Role and Impact of Volunteers within Family Support**

#### **Rapid Research Review**

**July 2015**

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### Rapid Research Review

#### 1 Introduction

The Institute of Public Care (IPC) at Oxford Brookes University has prepared this summary review of evidence for Hampshire County Council. It forms part of their Innovation Fund 'Active Agents for Change' Evaluation.

Hampshire County Council and the Isle of Wight (IOW) were successful in an application to the Department for Education (DfE) for a share of the Innovation Fund in order to undertake a major change programme relating to the way in which social care services for children, young people and families are delivered.

The overall objective for the programme is to create the right conditions and capacity for professionals to work more effectively and cost effectively with vulnerable children and families in order to **get it right first time** and therefore to reduce the demand for more remedial or repeat interventions – in other words, to become 'active agents for change'.

This review has been prepared to inform the activities of the programme work stream concerned with the development of a network of volunteers to work with children and families alongside professional teams. It has also been prepared to support lines of enquiry for the evaluation of this work stream. We note that the scope of the work is likely to include:

- The recruitment of Volunteer Coordinators in Hampshire and the IOW to be managed by the Early Help Hub Managers.
- Coordinators tasked with recruiting, training and supporting a certain number of volunteers.
- Volunteers involved in a range of cases requiring family support – aiming to support family outcomes and the creation of greater capacity for social workers to create change within families.

A number of key assumptions and implications are associated with the prospective outputs and outcomes of the 'Volunteers' work stream and these are summarised within the relevant Theory of Change (Appendix One). In turn, this Theory of Change document has suggested particular lines of enquiry for the review and critical assessment of available evidence.

The source material for the review was obtained through a literature search comprising four main strands:

1. Thomson Reuters Web of Science and Google searches using appropriate search terms.
2. A search of the following academic journals (using the same search terms as above) for the period 2005-15: British Journal of Social Work; Child & Family Social Work; Journal of Social Work; Research in Social Work Practice; Child Welfare; and Journal of Children's Services.
3. A search for relevant articles within two practice-focused publications: Community Care and Practice (BASW).
4. A search for relevant materials within the SCIE online resource.

The overall picture set out below derives from a mix of academic research-based evidence, government commissioned reviews, and best practice guidance.

## 2 Context

Over the last 10 years, there has been a growth in interest and attention to the development of effective services and interventions for vulnerable families on a spectrum of family support needs straddling 'early help' and 'statutory intervention'. In more recent years, this growth has coincided with an increase in the competing demands for limited funds. Consequently, interest has developed in alternative models of service delivery within the public sector. This is 'not just about the money' but is linked to a broader review of 'welfarism' as well as 'voluntarism' and the particular characteristics and values of the volunteer relationship. In general terms, this recent public interest encompasses three key aims:

1. To build capacity in family support through volunteering and peer support.
2. To build capacity for parents to help themselves and others.
3. To promote awareness and knowledge of effective parent / family engagement.

Volunteer services capable of being deployed to provide or enhance organised family support services have been developed in the UK in response to a broad spectrum of need. In the right circumstances, Mundle et al (2012) found that volunteer services can:

- effectively contribute to delaying or preventing entry to more expensive systems of care and support;
- create resources that are responsive to local needs and sensitivities; and
- engage with the 'hard to reach' or those who find it hard to access established services.

The Munro Review (2012) endorsed these findings, highlighting as it did the need for volunteers to be available in particular to help parents adopt models of good parenting. The Review confirmed their deployment as a useful and effective resource for children with complex needs who may also be subject to a child protection plan.

There are no especially consistent or clear patterns about who volunteers, and why, across sectors. Using an extensive range of variables, a review by Mundle et al (2012) found some significant differences in the profile of volunteers within health or social care settings. In respect of the latter the review cites earlier research by Hussein (2011) who found no clear relationship between deprivation, employment or local income levels and volunteering in social care. The study also found that whilst, in general, levels of volunteering are low in the social care sector as a whole, it can be very important in the organisations in which it is present, particularly in areas such as counselling, advice and support. It also seems that volunteers are much more likely to be present in voluntary or community services (VCS) compared with private sector or statutory organisations.

Reviews by Low et al (2007) and Brodie & Jackson (2012) found that, whilst the need for a participatory activity to feel purposeful was a common thread across volunteers' involvement, people's personal motivations, triggers, opportunities and resources to get involved varied widely.

### 3 Key Findings from Existing Research

#### 3.1 Overview

The key questions for this rapid review of the research are:

- What do we know about the use of volunteers in family support interventions generally?
- What makes for effective volunteer input into social care-led interventions?
- To what extent have these services proven to be cost effective?

There is a growing evidence base relating to public services delivered by combinations of paid and unpaid workers (Tunstill and Malin, 2011). At the same time, it remains difficult to demonstrate in a definitive way that volunteers have succeeded in creating lasting improvements and outcomes of those who receive their support. For Mundle et al (2012) this question is complicated by the issue of whether volunteers substitute for, or complement, professionally-led care. The evidence suggests that in practice they do both, depending on the circumstances. In terms of what can matter in getting the relationship between paid staff and volunteers to work well, a study by Caduri and Weiss-Gal (2014, p. 1) found that *social*

*workers who worked with volunteers differed on almost all the dimensions from those who did not. They perceived volunteers as making greater contributions; were more inclined to view volunteering as having no less value than salaried work; tended to perceive their organisation's managerial and peer cultures as more supportive of work with volunteers; and were more likely to have had experience of volunteering themselves.* Providing a supportive and positive experience for students, for example, who are volunteering has been found to be effective at increasing social worker retention rates and length of stay beyond study completion (Taylor and Pancer, 2007).

Difficulties with outcomes also extend to questions of cost-effectiveness. Here, conventional accounting systems tend to miss all of the social impacts of volunteering effort by non-profit organisations (Handy and Mook 2011). Social accounting models such as the Volunteer Investment and Value Audit (VIVA), developed in the UK examines inputs into volunteering programmes and creates a "VIVA Ratio" attempting to demonstrate the return on volunteering-related investment. In an earlier comparative study of volunteering across a range of organisations in three European countries (England, Denmark and Netherlands), Gaskin (1999) computed VIVA ratios ranging from 1.3 to 13.5, showing volunteers to be generally cost-effective. The study concluded that, although all volunteers can be 'cost-effective', "*it is fair to say that some are more cost-effective than others*". This, the study suggested is nothing to do with the productivity of individuals or the efficiency of the organisation), rather the nature of presenting need. For example, Gaskin suggests that it is reasonable to anticipate lower VIVA ratios where volunteers are working with families with complex problems and high levels of vulnerability and where the volunteer role is therefore highly structured, challenging and sensitive, requiring close supervision and support.

### **3.2 Volunteering with a family you already know**

A current review of UK and international research 'Understanding and Supporting Families with Complex Needs'<sup>1</sup> suggests that early help / family support services currently under-estimate the value of drawing in communities and social networks to providing or contributing to sustainable support for families.

The implication is that these less formal contributions could provide longer term and therefore potentially more sustainable support than professionals or indeed volunteers recruited to deliver a time-limited programme of support.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/activity/social-policy/families-policy-practice/research/supporting-families.aspx>

### 3.3 Volunteering in a family or children's centre

In an evaluation of the impact and value of volunteers in Action for Children family centres, Brodie and Jackson (2012) found particular benefits of the volunteer service including: general extra capacity for the centre; ability to provide role modelling for other parents; practical support; and what was described as an 'informal reassuring presence' for families using the centres. The intervention overall was found to be cost-effective to Action for Children. The use of volunteers to support the delivery of children's centre services identified a modest cost benefit of approximately £2 for every £1 invested.

Delivery challenges for volunteer schemes operating in these environments identified by the Action for Children research included:

- Establishing and maintaining boundaries and confidentiality.
- Pressure and time for employed staff spent on supporting volunteers.
- Challenging and time-consuming recruitment processes, including the development of appropriate training programmes.
- The shifting priorities and availability of volunteers (it's easy for volunteering to be 'disrupted').
- The 'loss' of volunteers into employment.

The research also summarised 'tips' for maximising volunteer contributions in Children's Centre environments including for example: having a dedicated volunteer manager or a manager who has sufficient time and experience to do this; sharing volunteers across more than one site; providing opportunities for growth and development; recruiting a broad range of people with diverse backgrounds where possible; using a range of recruitment channels e.g. [www.do-it.org.uk](http://www.do-it.org.uk) or local volunteer centres and word of mouth such as asking staff or parents using the centre.

### 3.4 Volunteering with families in their homes

#### 3.4.1 Home Start

Home Start is one of the largest providers of support and befriending for parents of young children in the UK, established 30 years ago. Typically, families being supported by Home-Start have moderate to complex family circumstances or risk factors. Home Start has been evaluated several times in relation to its impact. For example, a 2001 study by Armstrong and Hill found that the service had led to improved emotional wellbeing for half of the mothers involved over a 6-month period and had contributed to more responsive and confident parenting in a similar proportion of cases. A more recent and large-scale evaluation by Kenkre and Young (2011) confirmed these findings. Professionals involved in this study described the following specific benefits:

- That it is flexible, providing responsive forms of support for parents including activities that might otherwise need to be undertaken by a professional e.g. accompanying families on visits or to meetings with other professionals.
- That it is non-stigmatising and therefore potentially more acceptable to families than statutory services in particular.
- That it can effectively complement statutory i.e. child in need services.

The evaluation identified that Home Start volunteers often customise their support to meet the changing needs of the families. It is this support that underpins the journey of change which the families take.

Specifically, the greatest impact was on family feelings of social isolation. However, there were also significant child outcomes. Families reported improvements in the management of child behaviour, being more involved in child development, and coping better with their children's physical and mental health.

However, both of the above studies contrast with research conducted by McAuley et al in 2004 which cast doubt on the cost effectiveness of Home Start suggesting as it did that, although parents who received the support of a Home-Start volunteer obviously valued the service, there was no clear evidence that it had made a positive difference to them in terms of sustainable outcomes, relative to families who had not received a service.

#### 3.4.2 Post-natal home-based support

A review by MacPherson et al (2010, p.175) on the use of volunteers in post-natal home-based support to socially-disadvantaged mothers found that, in comparison to programmes led by professionals, there were benefits to capitalising on experienced mothers in the community in terms of both cost and cultural sensitivity. *“Semi-formal support from someone like a local parent volunteer can be an important source of emotional and practical support without any expectation that the assistance needs to be reciprocated”*. The study also suggested that hard-to-reach and vulnerable families in particular may respond better at least initially to support from other parents than from professionals.

Coe and Barlow (2013) report on a study of four UK sites using the 'Newpin' model of working. This service is offered to women experiencing perinatal anxiety and depression with support from volunteer befrienders. The evaluation found both high levels of need and positive outcomes for parents. Key professional stakeholders also valued the service being offered. This is in contrast to an earlier study by Barnes et al (2009) which found that informal (volunteer) support initiated following screening for disadvantage in pregnancy did not reduce the likelihood of depression for mothers with infants.

### 3.4.3 Instructions not included

Marden et al have recently (2013) evaluated the 'Instructions Not Included' (INI) pilot parenting and family support programme delivered by Family Lives and funded by the Department for Education. The INI was designed to trial a volunteer-led model of parenting and family support for vulnerable families. It draws on parenting capacity from within the community to deliver both befriending and a structured parenting skills framework. The model of support is premised on a therapeutic relationship between volunteer and parent, securing sufficient trust and empathy for the parent to talk candidly about their problems and think critically about their situation. The index child, i.e. the child about whom parents were most concerned, generally displayed substantially higher levels of behavioural problems than in the general population. Referrals to the programme as a whole originated from a wide range of sources with 70% coming from education, family/children, health-related services or social workers.

Volunteers were largely female (91%) but came from diverse ethnic backgrounds, reflecting the population of local areas. The largest cohort by age was 36-50 years (57%). A large proportion of volunteers were not in employment, training or education (83%) and only 17% indicated that they were looking for work. *"This was a group of people that in many ways defied conventional categorisation: many were neither working nor looking for work but were eager to get experience doing something that might lead to a career and/or were looking to give something back to the community"* (Marden et al, 2013, p. 35). Just over half of successful applicants completed the training. This focused on listening and mentoring skills, the ability to empathise, and managing boundaries within befriending, all key elements to the model of parent support being offered.

Volunteer drop out following successful application was found to be associated with the length of delay between the completion of training and start of befriending. Almost one-third of trained volunteers dropped out of the project at this stage.

Evaluation indicated that those volunteers who did go on to engage in befriending work proved successful in delivering high quality therapeutic-based support through informal meetings with parents. Parents responded well to the volunteer-led support offered, valuing the emotional support and the opportunity to take time out from their family life to talk about issues. Key outcomes were achieved for positive effect on parents' mental well-being and parenting style e.g. on self-efficacy as well as children's behaviour. Befriending by itself seemed to have especial value in helping parents manage children's behaviour.

Finding appropriate measures for this type of initiative is difficult and the research team evaluating INI identified a number of caveats applicable to their own analysis. They settled on a cost-benefit analysis based on improving children's behaviour and used the SDQ Total Difficulties clinical

categories to measure child behaviour during the intervention. Costs were calculated up to the age of 25 and, assuming the intervention had taken place at an average age of eight, therefore totalling 17 years. Using methodology developed by Bonin (2011) for parenting programmes and the prevention of conduct disorder gross project costs in the development phase represented a modest social return of £1.31 for every £1 invested. Operational costs, i.e. those costs incurred during the full operational phase only of the project, saw a still modest social return of £2.32 for every £1 invested.

### 3.5 Volunteering with families where there are child protection concerns

The piloting of a community service volunteers 'Volunteers in Child Protection (ViCP) project' provided an opportunity to explore some of the possible implications of developing an expanded role for volunteers, as opposed to paid staff, within child protection services. The volunteers involved in ViCP deliver work with families where at least one child is on the Child Protection Register. The volunteers work alongside professional social workers to support families under stress and to help protect children from abuse and harm including in particular through regular home visits and home-based emotional and practical support.

An evaluation by Tunstill (2007) of two early pilot ViCP projects in Sunderland and Bromley suggested that these services were valued by both the professionals and the service users, particularly where volunteers were supported to work closely with social work staff and were treated positively. Subsequent analysis confirmed that volunteers were seen by social workers as delivering a personalized support service which had an impact on the day-to-day functioning of families (Tunstill and Malin, 2011). The use of volunteers and their impact within the pilots has also been endorsed by the Munro Review (2011) which found they demonstrated the value of volunteers in communicating models of good parenting. A key finding in relation to outcomes for individual children, though not necessarily children with a child protection plan, was that families with the most complex needs required a robust outreach strategy, without which they were highly unlikely to access centre based services. Home visiting volunteer services were therefore both a crucial service in their own right as well as a means to the end of ultimately accessing other services in the community.

More recently, the ViCP findings were endorsed in a small-scale study conducted by Akister and O'Brien (2014) which suggested that a volunteer service *might* be the catalyst for promoting positive outcomes for families, particularly because of their offer of 'time that is freely given', emotional and practical support for parents, and enthusiasm for accompanying families to places to which they have been referred. Whilst these schemes do provide

a unique contribution which can be valued not just as an alternative to a paid employee, they also need:

- Realistic funding resource and a thorough evaluation of the likelihood of supply and sustainability of volunteer labour.
- Monitoring systems for recording outcomes.
- Effective selection processes.
- Good supervision, training and other support.
- Clear and open channels of communication between the paid and unpaid workers.

### 3.6 Potential limitations of the volunteer role

The motivations to volunteer are many and varied and the role of volunteer can be no less complex. Attitudinal differences between individuals can affect the experience of support. Talk of 'best matching and potential friendship' may raise expectations of volunteers that can't be met. Volunteers may also expect some flexibility from the family or want to have some say in the planning of visits so that their own lives are not unduly disrupted. In some cases, this might result in misunderstandings with families feeling that support is not consistent. Some families may feel restricted by the volunteer coming at a specified time but that there is an obligation to comply as the volunteer is not a paid employee (Barnes et al 2006, 2009). The support being offered not meeting the clients own identified needs is a common reason for volunteer input being declined. Volunteers themselves typically see their role as flexible, informal and sometimes peripheral, all characteristics that may be stressful for them (Burbeck et al 2014). There may also be implications for potential de-skilling of social workers. For example, Parrot et al (2006) argue that models of volunteer support can be premised on past difficulties in social workers (or social services) being viewed with a degree of suspicion by families and less able to engage effectively with families in need.

## 4 Summary of Key Messages

There is research to suggest that trained volunteers, properly matched with families and well-supported can play a significant role in enhancing the quality of family life across the life cycle and the continuum of need. Families like and often welcome the contribution of volunteer workers if only just because of their ability to offer 'time' or 'time to listen'. The range of benefits that can be gained extend from individual family-level through to the whole system.

There is also a growing evidence base around the factors in support of effective volunteer arrangements, including attention to volunteer support and encouragement provided by both a central Coordinator as well as the

broader environment in which the volunteer is being asked to contribute to family support i.e. the other professionals alongside whom they will work.

There is less robust evidence about the cost effectiveness of specific interventions. Where volunteer services are being provided in addition to other paid family support services or to complement a programme of support, it becomes very difficult indeed to tease out the particular cost benefit of the volunteer 'element'. In reality, the costs of volunteer provided services are likely to incorporate those associated with:

- Recruiting and training volunteer workers.
- Ensuring their travel and expenses are paid.
- Providing ongoing development opportunities and supervising them.
- Replacing them (there is some evidence to suggest that volunteer 'turnover' can be quite high and that particularly the more skilled workers will go on relatively quickly to obtain paid work).
- The broader management and administration costs associated with running this kind of service.

It seems important to measure the cost benefits not only in a 'developmental phase' of a newly implemented volunteer programme, but also during a fully operational phase.

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## Appendix One

### Hampshire and Isle of Wight Theory of Change: Volunteer Programme

What's the problem? What needs to change?	What do we need to do to effect change?	What will look different by November 2016 if we do these things?	What longer term outcomes will result if we succeed?
<p>Social workers currently have relatively high caseloads and insufficient capacity to undertake effective direct work with families.</p> <p>For children in need, there is insufficient focus on holistic work with the family to improve outcomes for children.</p> <p>Social workers need to have the capacity to change what goes on in the family in order to improve outcomes and reduce demand for care.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Create capacity / add capacity including from volunteers, in particular to work with families 'in need'; children permanently excluded; children returning from going missing; and children on the edge of care</li> <li>■ This through the appointment of 4 Volunteer Coordinators (3 in Hants and 1 for Isle of Wight) who will recruit, train and support volunteers as well as help to match them with children and families either via Early Help Hubs or Child in Need Teams</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Social workers working in a different way with families including making use of appropriate volunteer contributions</li> <li>■ More effective interventions with families overall where a child is in need, on the edge of care or vulnerable for other reasons e.g. permanently excluded from school or running away from home</li> <li>■ Sustainable cost effective use of volunteers to support vulnerable children and families</li> <li>■ Greater connection and collective support for families between the Council and the community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ More children supported to remain safely at home including through support from volunteers</li> <li>■ Families agree that their volunteer input has helped them to create a safe environment for their child</li> <li>■ Children and young people feel helped by the volunteer working with them</li> <li>■ Return interviews for child who go missing completed in statutory timescales</li> </ul>