

A sense of worth

Drug users as community volunteers

A special volunteering scheme helped restore drug users' sense of self-worth

BETWEEN THE APPOINTMENTS, the counselling sessions, and the 'drop-ins' for a chat, many drug users spend a lot of their time wondering what to do with themselves. Some seasoned and cynical workers may suggest this is the sort of pondering that probably got them into drugs in the first place; others may feel that a 9-5 job in the world of accountancy or something equally upright would solve all.

This article describes an option that for many drug users may be more viable, attractive and useful. We describe a scheme called CSV Action that has already proved itself in parts of the London area and which might be usefully copied elsewhere.

For many years, CSV (Community Service Volunteers) has been placing young people with a variety of 'problems' as volunteers in a wide range of situations. The aim is that the experience of becoming a Community Service Volunteer will enhance self-esteem, build confidence and help reintegrate those feeling distanced from the rest of society.

Taking back control over one's life and using the 'safe space' the scheme provides to tackle problems clearly also fits the needs of drug users. Other CSV initiatives have previously taken on drug users and – contrary to stereotypes – found they did particularly well. These have included CSV's Young Offenders' scheme (in which young people in the later stages of a custodial sentence become full-time volunteers for one or two months prior to release) and the Give and Take scheme involving young people in care. As awareness of increasing drug problems grew in the early 1980s, CSV sought to develop a scheme specifically for drug users.

In 1984 CSV sought funding from the Department of Health for a scheme – CSV Action – which would offer young drug users the opportunity of taking up a local volunteering placement working face to face with people for four to twelve weeks, with the option of continuing for up to a year. This non-medical and non-judgmental

approach aims to provide a 'space' during which other interventions could be made by appropriate agencies, and during which practical problems such as accommodation and employment could be tackled.

Now a model proven in practice, the scheme works in a simple and straightforward way. Young people are referred to CSV by the statutory or non-statutory agency already working with the volunteer, and these agencies are kept up to date about the activities of the volunteer throughout the placement. Thus a referring agency loses neither responsibility for nor contact with their client, yet can take advantage of an extra resource clearly useful to both. However, the principal beneficiary should certainly be the client; from the start it was emphasised that the scheme must not be seen as a dumping ground for 'problem people', but rather as the offer of a positive

by

Cilla Phillips & Nigel South

Cilla Phillips was formerly the London Regional Manager of CSV's Volunteer Programme and was responsible for establishing the CSV Action scheme. Nigel South is a Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Essex but assessed the CSV scheme between 1987 and 1990 while at ISDD. The authors would like to thank the original workers on the schemes for their efforts and help.

Community Service Volunteers (CSV) arranges volunteering placements for young people experiencing a variety of problems. A pilot project, CSV Action, tested the viability of such a scheme specifically for problem drug or alcohol users. Despite difficulties in establishing a referral network, an inner London CSV Action Scheme has shown the idea's value as a supplement to existing programmes. A sense of being needed helps boost the client's self-esteem and a new drug-free environment provides an opportunity for a fresh start.

intervention in the life of the individual.

Following the referral, CSV interviews the young person as quickly as possible, explaining and discussing the scheme, and then sets up an appropriate volunteer placement, usually within two to four weeks. Based on the discussion at the interview, the placement takes account of an individual's interests and abilities and can be tailored to last initially for six to twelve weeks.

How the placement is working out is reviewed after the first four weeks (or earlier if there are any evident problems). If a different direction is required, there are always other placements that could be tried; and, in addition, the volunteer could move onto CSV's National Network as a full-time and away-from-home volunteer – potentially an attractive option for many users who wish to move away from a local scene that they feel trapped in.

The philosophy underlying the scheme is that once a person is on their placement, they are no longer a 'problem' – they are a 'solution', an extra pair of hands to improve the quality of life of their clients.

This may be the first time some young substance users have felt needed, the first time they have been involved in something clearly positive rather than a pretty negative subculture. It may also be a turning point which helps to break old patterns of behaviour; new relationships and a new sense of identity can be built up.

Pilot projects

Pilot projects for the CSV Action scheme were set up in 1987 in Haringey, north London, and in Maldon in Essex. Assumptions that such locations would provide a useful comparison between an inner city and a rural area were correct, but assumptions about the level of drug use in both areas proved less well founded.

The initial idea was to create a network of agencies within a particular area which would be prepared to refer their clients to CSV Action for placement as volunteers.

The only criteria for acceptance on the scheme were that there was known problem substance use (in practice, 'substance use' included alcohol) and that the individual concerned wanted to become involved.

Various difficulties faced the Maldon site and even with a move to the more centrally located town of Chelmsford, this pilot scheme did not survive. The difficulties encountered were in no small part related to the haste with which the sites for the scheme had to be chosen in order to qualify for Department of Health funding. But other factors were, of course, equally significant, for example, the poor public transport facilities common in many rural areas today, difficulties in networking and liaising across a large rural area, and lack of a well-developed service infrastructure – especially one willing to prioritise action on drug problems.

Hence, in this short article our focus is on the Haringey site as the scheme that best illustrates the potential of the CSV Action idea. This is not, of course, to suggest that the scheme cannot work in rural areas but that its introduction in such circumstances needs the help of an established infrastructure and a genuine welcome from potential sources of referral.

In Haringey there were also problems! It was intended that the three main contact agencies in the area would be the social services, Middlesex Probation Service, and the newly established Drugs Advisory Service, Haringey (DASH). It was impossi-

ble to foresee at the outset the difficulties social services in Haringey would be facing by the time the scheme was up and running. Severe cash problems and a shortage of social workers meant that a resource like CSV Action, while a valuable facility for clients, was not a priority for social workers. Close relations were developed with the borough's intermediate treatment (IT) teams but these were themselves the victims of the cuts forced on the borough through rate capping.

**This may be the first time
some young substance users
have felt needed**

DASH, the Borough's new drugs advisory service, was facing its own problems in establishing itself, so the hoped-for working links with this contact took much longer to develop than anticipated. Some referrals were forthcoming from the probation service, but it was a local probation-linked project for problem alcohol users that helped the scheme through its early days with a supply of volunteers. This project remains a strong supporter of the scheme.

Faced with the initially limited number of referrals, the CSV workers involved discussed and investigated a variety of possible explanations, including the

possibilities that:

- there was no drug 'problem' in Haringey;
- there was a problem but most agencies took the attitude that it was not a problem to refer on to others;
- there was a problem but it did not come to the attention of any agencies because it was being handled within the family and local community.

The borough is multi-ethnic with long-established working class communities; arguably, new services will have a hard time raising their profile in such an area, whatever they are offering. The reasons for this are debatable, but recent research offers two points of relevance:

"African-Caribbean and Asian people are less likely to approach drug services than white people, for two reasons. The main reason is that the services are perceived as being run for and by white people; experience of racism in the context of other services and in everyday life creates expectations that an approach to drug services would be unrewarding and possibly unpleasant. The second reason for low take-up is simply that services are generally not well-known, even among white people."

The experience of the scheme by the end of its first year seemed to confirm these observations, at least to some degree. Not only was the scheme failing to attract referrals of African-Caribbean or Asian youth, but it wasn't even being highly successful in attracting white youth: rather, the demand for CSV Action seemed to come from agencies whose clients were

Community Service Volunteers London Action expands operations in 1991/2

CSV London Action has continued to expand over the 12 months to the end of March 1992. We have around 30 enquiries from potential volunteers each month of which between 10 and 15 result in completed application forms. A substantial proportion of these applicants will go on to complete a placement. We are all set to exceed our target of 75 placements this year, and this has led us to raise our target for next year to 110 placements.

The range of agencies with whom we work continues to be very broad. We are now picking up more and more younger people, many of whom come from street agencies or short-stay homeless hostels. A substantial proportion of these younger volunteers are multiple substance users, many with a history of offending and with mental or emotional problems. There are still more male volunteers than females, though the proportion of females is rising.

On average, volunteers spend three days a week in a variety of projects, including day centres, hospitals, schools, city farms and hostels, working with all ages of people with varying needs. Most stay on placement for 5-6 months. However, in the current climate the 'moving on' process has become more difficult. In all cases we have stressed the importance of retaining London

Action's 'stepping stone' image, promoting the increasing independence of the volunteer, not dependence on CSV.

A number of the volunteers have been employed by their projects; one project has employed every one of the volunteers placed there. The valuable contribution made by our volunteers has been acknowledged; recently a day centre for senior citizens was able to set up a lunch club, made possible only by the input from their volunteers. Stories like this enable us to 'sell' CSV London Action volunteers to new projects.

Over the last couple of months we have been very concerned by the number of ex-volunteers re-applying. This is in part due to the current employment situation, but also indicates a lack of appropriate support. Wherever possible, we refer these volunteers onto our National Network away-from-home placements, or on to training courses or further education. We are also feeding back to the original referring agencies and will be working with them to identify how appropriate help and support can be made available post-CSV. What is for us very important, is that CSV London Action is seen as such a positive intervention in individuals' lives that when other things fail, they want to come back and repeat the experience.

Jo Heywood and Rosie Blake, CSV London Action

older – in some cases, much older!

Given that the principle of 'non-rejection' is central to CSV's work, this state of affairs had to be accepted and decisions were taken (a) to be as flexible as possible in accepting referrals and (b) to widen the referral 'catchment area', taking referrals from any agency that wanted to make use of the scheme. This development followed the increase in enquiries from agencies outside Haringey.

During the second year of the scheme referrals were received from various probation offices within the Inner London Probation Service, from drug dependency units, voluntary sector hostels and agencies, individual social workers, a needle exchange scheme and a hospital psychiatric unit. These were new sources of referrals, adding to the take-up of the scheme by others in the first year. Referral sources and subsequent placements were spread across the London boroughs of Haringey, Camden, Lambeth, Wandsworth, Hackney, Hammersmith and Fulham, Ealing, Tower Hamlets, Westminster, Brent and Kingston; the district health authorities served were Haringey, Bloomsbury, Riverside and Westminster.

Feedback from the referral agencies, the placement projects, and from the volunteers themselves, showed that the scheme was proving valuable. Its value lay not just in the opportunities it provided, but also in the way that the scheme was being run, placing emphasis on the volunteer yet enabling both referral source and placement project to keep in touch.

By the third year of the pilot funding period, referrals to the Haringey scheme had increased to the point where one worker could no longer cope alone. Even with the valued help of a volunteer attached to the scheme, resources were being stretched to their limits; this is, of course, one of the unenviable relicts of a pilot project – to see how much can be achieved in 'x' amount of time with 'y' allocation of resources.

Achievements

What was achieved? During the first three years of the scheme, 137 volunteers were referred to CSV Action. Of these, 70 were placed in a variety of projects including city farms, a children's special needs unit, the Red Cross, community transport schemes, hospitals, an independent living project, a

1. Awiah J. *et al.* "The last place I would go": black people and drug services in Britain." *Druglink*: 1990, 5(5), p.14-15.

Well received – placement agencies' comments on CSV Action volunteers

"We have found him dependable and reliable, he is pleasant to staff and clients and has been flexible as regards to changing times and hours."

"He has been a great asset to the house and we are pleased that we have been able to reward his hard work as a volunteer with some paid employment here."

"She goes about her work carefully and is sensitive to the users' needs and is careful not to become over-involved with users who are particularly in need or manipulative. She has shown insight into the complex dynamics of users' situations and how they present their problems."

"We would like to use CSV Action volunteers in all our houses; they make a special contribution which improves the quality of life for our clients."

youth club, an adventure playground, an adult training centre, day centres for the homeless, a health centre, a bail hostel, and more. The average length of placement was 23 weeks; considering placements lasted anything from one day to over a year, this was a considerable achievement for those involved.

For some of the volunteers, the projects they were working in were the only drug-free environments in their lifestyles

Although it was hard to keep track of what happened to volunteers after they left their projects, it is known that some went on to degree and post-graduate degree courses, to various college access courses, to work in the caring professions and to community work; one volunteer is now an ancillary worker with the Inner London Probation Service.

Of course, some of the volunteers have reverted to their previous lifestyles – which they may never really have left behind anyway. This is not to say that they were in any way failures. At the level of the individual volunteer, 'success' and 'failure' were never really crucial concepts for the

scheme. For some of the volunteers, even to have made the decision to take part was considered an achievement.

Two volunteers referred from a drug dependency unit offer an example. Both were long-term heroin users who had been attending the unit for some ten years; there was little expectation they would ever significantly change their lifestyles. Yet, if CSV Action did not 'change their lives', it must have offered something, for both stayed in their respective project placements for a year, did well, and enjoyed it.

All the agencies that took part and referred volunteers to CSV Action saw the scheme itself, and the voluntary work their clients contributed, as a valuable supplement to the established work of the drug and alcohol field. For some of the volunteers, particularly those with histories of long-term drug and/or alcohol use, the projects they found themselves working in were the only drug-free environments in their lifestyles, enabling them to get a sense of how they could cope with work and responsibility.

CSV Action doesn't claim to be a radically new idea – in fact, it's a rather old and simple one. But it does claim to offer an opportunity that many users could find valuable. The London scheme is now flourishing, picking up referrals from rehabs as well as street-level agencies. Between April and October 1991, 100 people applied to the scheme and over 50 were placed as volunteers. The present average length of placement is around 18-20 weeks but many volunteers stay on for a year. If funding can be found, extra staff will be taken on. It's a pilot project that has proved worth the investment. It would be good to see the model tried elsewhere in the country. ■

FOR MORE INFORMATION

■ TO REFER CLIENTS TO CSV ACTION.

For agencies in the London area who wish to make referrals to CSV Action.

Contact Jo Heywood or Rosie Blake on 071 278 6601.

■ TO SET UP A CSV ACTION SCHEME.

For agencies or individuals interested in setting up similar schemes elsewhere.

Contact Sue Katz on 071 278 6601 or write to CSV Action, CSV, 237 Pentonville Road, London N1 9NJ.

■ CSV ACTION – AN ASSESSMENT.

The final 'overview' report describing the schemes; includes more about the Essex scheme.

Available from CSV, 237 Pentonville Road, London N1 9NJ.