

## Volunteering for people with a learning disability

“And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.”

Anais Nin (1903 – 1977)

### Summary of discussion with Jemma Mindham – Area Manager CSV

Jemma is an Area Manager employed by CSV, and is responsible for overseeing a number of projects – one of which is a [supported volunteering programme](#) for people with a learning disability.

The project commenced in 1989, but over the last 10 years it has worked closely with statutory providers to provide meaningful volunteering opportunities in the community for people with a learning disability. These placements happen in a range of contexts – community allotments, nurseries, schools, charity shops, befriending schemes etc.

Currently around 80 volunteers with a learning disability are engaged with the programme each year, and of these, 50-55 are supported in their placement by a volunteer mentor. There are around 30 volunteer mentors at any one time, who help with making sure these placements work. It’s interesting to note that some former ‘client’ volunteers have now become volunteer mentors for the programme. NB No preferential treatment has been provided in their case, and they all needed to undergo the same recruitment and selection processes as anyone else to become a ‘support volunteer’. As with any applicant, the team simply ensured that the process was accessible for them as individuals.

### How did things get started?

In the 1980s society’s views on disability were beginning to change and the delivery of care for adults with a learning disability was becoming influenced by the theory of ‘normalisation’ – a right to choice and opportunities and a recognition of the uniqueness of the individual. By 1990 this had become Government policy with the National Health Service and Community Care Act which emphasised an individual’s right to be supported in their community. CSV had approached a Trust with the idea of promoting this through community based activities for adults with learning disabilities supported by volunteers. We then developed a key personal contact within Norfolk Social Services who was happy to explore matching this to pilot creative solutions for people with a learning disability. We worked in partnership to set up a pilot to explore ‘meaningful social activity’ that involved around 30 people with a learning disability, of 18-35 years of age, all living in rural West Norfolk. A steering group was set up with regular meetings to ensure all stakeholders were both appraised of and able to influence progress.

The pilot worked, and the project blossomed with the upper age limit being removed. In the new millennium we were keen to engage with the ‘Valuing People’ White Paper which had obvious synergy with what we were trying to achieve - to promote and celebrate ‘choice and inclusion’,

'meaningful activity', 'employment opportunities' and 'community integration'. This was based on the premise that 'meaningful social activity' could reinforce dependency as a service-user, whereas volunteering in the community encourages people with a learning disability to consider themselves as an asset to their community. The project was evaluated by the steering group (funders, referrers, project staff at the time) and the emphasis on meaningful activity and inclusion became stronger with CSV changing the focus of the project to support individuals to become volunteers themselves. The project more than doubled in size during these years, reflecting its relevance to commissioners and beneficiaries.

Constant reviewing of the Project's purpose by stakeholders (the Steering Group now includes carers, volunteers, and beneficiaries) has ensured that we continue to deliver relevant services 22 years on. For example, in 2009 'Valuing Employment Now' strategy gave a new vigour to the Project's focus with the emphasis on supporting meaningful employment and CSV established a relationship with the internal Employment Advisors to ensure a streamlined journey into employment for those who wished it. This relationship is being further developed in 2012 to ensure that the purpose of the Project still meets beneficiaries needs.

### How is success celebrated and shared?

Each client has an 'Activity Log' where achievements are recorded, and this is recorded in a number of ways. For example photos, quotes received from others regarding the client's volunteering contribution and case studies are common methods.

This activity forms the basis for reporting to the funders, and it involves both tangible and intangible achievements. For example the extent of social engagement and involvement in activities is qualified, and the development in personal confidence is also reported on. Again, individual records, case studies and quotes support the statistical evidence provided. Quite uniquely, the focus is always on moving the individual away from CSV through community integration, increased independence and the development of confidence.

Aside from reporting to funders, we celebrate success in a range of other ways. For example we had an event at the Town Hall with a range of stakeholders, including beneficiaries, carers, and funders, which included a presentation from a Remploy representative signposting 'next step' employment options.

We have produced a DVD of clients' successes, using this as a promotional tool, and also encourage local newspapers to write articles of their achievements.

### What were the main things that have made the programme work?

There are a few critical ingredients that have made the programme work. Firstly, the joint steering group helped the project to take advantage of any changes in policy direction. Both the statutory team and our own team have kept an eye on policy changes, and this has ensured we have been well placed to take advantage of potential opportunities. I also ensure that I put myself forward to participate in any policy review groups which are relevant to the Project which not only keeps me abreast of what is happening but also enables CSV to represent our beneficiaries' interests.

So for example, most recently we responded to information we received from an internal Day Service Review looking at remodelling the way internal services are delivered. We discussed findings with the referrers, reviewers and commissioners and were able to talk with the Commissioning Team about the relevance of CSV within this process. We were able to highlight

that supported volunteering had benefits relevant to both moving people on from dependence on traditional services and also towards employment and we have been able to initiate conversations with other departments of the Council around joint working on this and moving our work out of the 'Day Service' category.

This dialogue helped us to focus on aspects of our contract with the Council, particularly on the development of skills and facilitating and getting involved in community activities. We were then able to take advantage of local contracts to broker supported volunteering placements.

I should also mention that one factor that added to the credibility of our work is that we obtained 'Approved Provider' status from the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation for the 'volunteer mentor' aspect of our programme.

However, probably the most important element in this process was to develop personal relationships with the statutory services teams 'on the ground' – Social Workers, Day Service Managers, Employment Advisors. This has been so important. When there was a change of Commissioner (which occurred 3 times in as many years), it was these personal relationships that made it all work. The local team have been so supportive of the programme, and they have opened the doors to the Commissioners. In fact once the Commissioner found out about our work they identified how our programme tied in with other initiatives and the work has flourished.

A key principle in all of this is that no matter what problems we come across with changes in statutory provision, we endeavour to work with our partners and avoid an 'us and them' approach if we feel things are working against the interests of our service-users. We seek to explain what we feel are barriers when they arise and support our statutory partners in understanding our perspective and finding solutions or compromises.

In addition, we have maintained a professional discipline of ensuring meetings are minuted, and minutes circulated for agreement, and following up key telephone conversations with email confirmation. This has ensured momentum is maintained between the formal meetings and within a robust framework.

### How are you approaching the challenges you currently face?

The move to 'Personalised Budgets' has provided a challenge, however we have found that the way we had designed and delivered the programme to date has really helped with this.

We had developed close 1-1 relationships with each client over the length of the project, and this involved a detailed discussion exploring a client's personal aspirations, what they were looking to get out of the programme, and how we could help them achieve their goals. The discussions actually helped the client to clarify and verbalise their aspirations, and this 'organic' approach has led to personalised and tailored solutions.

Again, the close relationships we have developed with the Supported Employment Advisors, Social Work teams and Commissioners has enabled us to adapt to the change in government policy, work with the current programme outcomes and modify the plans we have in place with our clients.

Mr S was referred to CSV in 2004 as part of the new drive to personalize services for individuals with learning disabilities and push forward the Valuing People White Paper.

CSV were working closely with the Social Work team and the statutory day service provider to offer supported volunteering as an alternative to traditional day services. 16 people were referred that year, and for Mr S it changed the path of his life thanks to the holistic approach he was offered.

Mr S had been in day services since leaving a paid job several years earlier. He lived with his mother in a rural village location and traveled into the nearest town 5 days a week to go to the day service where he participated in mens health groups, bowling, and similar social based activities. Mr S had enjoyed working but found it stressful and felt that he would like to volunteer as a suitable alternative, with the option of looking into paid employment on a part time basis in the future if appropriate.

Mr S joined a group at CSV 1 day a week and gradually built up his numeracy and literacy skills. He moved on to volunteer in a charity shop, which he requested, and went from 1 day to 3 days, including weekend volunteering – like any regular volunteer. He trained to use the till and do front of shop work after being in the back room sorting and steaming for a few months. Working closely with his Social Worker and the key worker at the day service Mr S left day services entirely. He changed charity shop a couple of times due to closures, but carried on his volunteering nonetheless. He sourced himself some adult education courses which he attended on his non-volunteering days, met with his girlfriend one day a week still supported to meet her at the day service before going out together, and volunteered the rest.

Mr S's next goal was to move into his own home in the town he was volunteering in and nearer to his brother. Mr S left CSV and during this time successfully moved.

In 2010, he came back to CSV in 2010 as the volunteering had stopped and he wanted to start again – in a shop. his Care Manager re-referred him for the purpose of finding him new volunteering so he could leave services again. CSV matched him to another charity shop and also accessed a workskills course for him, designed specifically for adults with learning disabilities.

Mr S has decided not to actively look for work just yet – he is enjoying settling into his home, meeting his girlfriend (without support – regularly heading for the bowling alley together!) and brother, and continuing his volunteering, but it is a real possibility for him in the future. From 5 days a week in a traditional day service he has gone on to live a fully independent life in a way which he has chosen and where he is a member of his community, giving something back through his volunteering.