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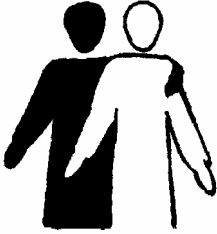
Voluntary Support Scheme

Registered Charity Number: 1097279

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The **Voluntary Support Scheme** is a small local charity, in Mid Devon which links volunteers with people who are going through a rough patch (anxiety, depression, isolation). We run a Self-Help group with the people we support and three times a year hold open forums on various aspects of emotional well-being.

One of our highlights this year was hearing that Sue Larg, our Chair, had been awarded the MBE in the New Year honours, for her service in the field of mental health. We are very proud of Sue. She very much deserves the award. Sue was not only one of the small group which set up the Voluntary Support Scheme but has worked tirelessly over the past 16 years to keep the organisation thriving. Sue has also been instrumental in setting up several other organisations in Mid Devon which, together, have helped hundreds of people to enjoy better mental health. Sue duly went to Windsor Castle to receive her medal and even managed to mention the current financial plight of many small charities to the Queen!



In spite of the many changes in the world around us we in the Voluntary Support Scheme have continued much as before to help people who have found themselves struggling through a difficult phase of life. Some people are catapulted into depression or anxiety by the situations

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they face such as redundancy, relationship breakdown or chronic ill-health. Others have battled with mental health problems for years. This year we have had 29 new people come to us for help, alongside the 37 we were still supporting who had come to us in previous years. 13 new people were matched one-to-one with a volunteer (16 people already had volunteers) and 5 joined the 24 members of the Self-Help Group.

Having a Volunteer Visitor come to listen for an hour a week seems to make a huge difference to people. Most of the people we visit would echo the lady who said,

"You have no idea how helpful it is having someone who just listens. Most people don't listen. She just listened and didn't tell me what to do. I know only I can come up with the answers. When she listened I found myself saying things I haven't told anyone else".

The volunteers come together every two months to talk about the work they do and to share ideas and feelings. A trainer is always present to offer any insight that the volunteers feel they need. The volunteers are very supportive of each other. While the work can sometimes be very demanding the volunteers seem to get something from it too. This year all of our volunteers were interviewed to see what they thought of the Voluntary Support Scheme, whether they could think of any changes we should make and what they, themselves, got from the work. They said things like,

"I do enjoy it, very much. It's very rewarding."

"If your client is willing you can really make a difference."

"It's given me a broader outlook on life"

"Volunteer Support Groups are brilliant things. You can toss ideas around."

"Support groups are very relaxed arenas for sharing and learning and getting support from one another."

Our volunteers are very special people. We are lucky that they tend to stay with us a long time. One volunteer recently resigned after working with us for 12 of the 16 years we have been in existence. She has now joined our Friends.

The second way we support the people who come to us is through the Self-Help Group. That meets for a couple of hours a week in a local community centre. While there are over twenty members in all there are usually only about ten people at the group on any one week. This year numbers have been particularly depleted due to ill-health as several members have had to undergo major surgery. The other group members have been really supportive and, as ever, have arranged their activities so that everyone is able to join in.



Looking for Easter eggs in Westexe park



A bracing walk round Wimbleball



The year started with an Easter Egg hunt in the park and there were other outings such as a walk on Exmoor and a guided tour of Exeter Cathedral. Members also visited Tiverton & District Community Transport Association to try out their mobility scooters. As well as walking members regularly cycle together and play indoor bowls.

An art therapist has taken sessions throughout the year, giving people a chance to discover their inner creativity. This has also been developed as members have learnt to make cards and jewellery and to do quilting. They have put all this productivity to good use by running several coffee mornings and sales to raise money for Voluntary Support Scheme.

As one member said,

"The VSS reaches many people in the local community and so we in the Self-help Group are proud that we are able to support the volunteer workers with our fundraising"



Some artwork from the Group



Creative writing at the forum

This year our forums have been a bit different. Instead of having a range of experts talking to us about a subject we tackled *Keeping Calm & Happy—How to maintain our emotional sparkle* by listening to a keynote speaker and then trying out various workshops to see what might be of help to us when we are feeling stressed or low. 61 people met in Tiverton to try workshops offering art,

singing, creative writing and Medau Movement.

This worked so well that we were asked to take the event to Hemyock where we repeated it in partnership with the Blackdown Support Group. When asked to describe in one word what they had got from the day people chose words such as, "Hope" and "Fun" and several people signed up there and then with local groups offering these activities.




Medau Movement

None of these activities could happen without the hard work of our trustees and the backing of our funders. This year we have been fortunate enough to have an additional two skilled people volunteer to join our management committee, bringing with them years of experience in the fields of emotional well-being and voluntary sector management. We are very grateful for their support at a time when things are very difficult for the voluntary sector as whole and fundraising a particular challenge.

Meeting with the people we support and discovering the huge difference our volunteers make to their lives refocuses us on why we do this work in the first place.

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