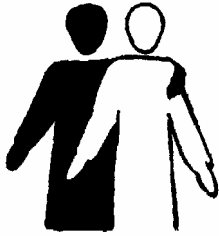


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# Voluntary Support Scheme

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.

This year VSS was 15. This gave us the excuse to invite our volunteers, Friends of VSS, some funders and some local councillors to come together to celebrate and eat birthday cake.



The past year as been a busy one. As ever changes have happened in the world around us and we have had to work out how to react. The Community Mental Health Team has been restructured and this seems to have resulted in a yet higher number of referrals of people with complex or particularly enduring needs. Over the years different referrers have come to know of our work and have started to send us people they feel we could help. This year has seen the development of the NHS/Community Services Complex Care Teams. As they have come to grips with their role they have sought sources of support for their patients. Unfortunately people don't always agree with what others feel might be good for them and this accounts for the increased number of people referred to VSS this year who did not end up with one of our core services (Visiting Volunteers or Self-help Group). Some of these

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people *were* helped by a visit or two from the Co-ordinator to discuss their options or to support them to visit our local Volunteer Centre.

We have had 57 *new* referrals this year and continued to support 26 people previously referred. 27 new people were linked one-to-one with volunteers and 15 introduced to the Self-help Group.



The Self-help Group enjoying a Christmas meal at our local college.

The other factor which has influenced who we can support has been the blossoming of the Self-help Group—now 2½ years old. It provides a warm, understanding, stimulating environment within which people flourish. The list of activities (indoor bowls, regular cycle trips, art therapy, guided tour of Exeter Cathedral, sign language) just gives a hint of what people have been doing, not the way they have been doing it.

People come to us often having become very isolated—unused to social activity or sometimes to leaving home at all. They find, in the group, people who understand and with whom they can be totally frank. The support of others means that tackling fears like use of public transport becomes a climbable mountain and lives change. Members use the group's fundraising as a way of exercising their new-found confidence (organising a Bring & Buy) or facing their fears (being sponsored to walk alone), knowing they have the full and enthusiastic support of others who understand what the activities are costing them.

I would have never tried cycling on my own and it is certainly something I want to do again.

We have had a romance in the group. A couple met there and are still together.

Through the group I have met people I can talk to. We don't just sit round and discuss our problems. We are encouraged to meet up outside the group and do things with our new friends.

### Comments about the Self-help Group

The group of volunteers who facilitate the Self-help Group work hard to keep the balance between enabling and encouraging the members to run things themselves and providing the structure and know-how for them.

The existence of the group has given us the opportunity to offer support to people who wouldn't consider themselves "bad enough" to need the support of a weekly visitor but who have lost their way for a while and need a safe and supportive environment to get used to being with people again, forming friendships and rediscovering their own skills and abilities.



The Self-help Group fossil hunting at Charmouth.

The success of the group has caused us concern as its size has grown and grown. Existing members insist that there is no problem and they have absolutely no wish for the group to be divided in any way. The members are fantastic at actively nurturing newcomers into the group but we still worry that the size of the group (27 members, with about 12 attending in any one week) is a barrier to some people and we are actively considering workable alternatives.

Behind all this the weekly one-to-one Volunteer Visiting goes on. The existence of both the visiting and the group means that we can be very flexible in the way we meet each individual's need at any particular time. Visiting helps people contemplate their whole life and any steps they want to take (which may or may not, at some stage, include wanting to go to the group) or sometimes people have a Volunteer Visitor solely to work towards being able to attend the group. Other people feel able to go into the group by themselves, without the support of a Volunteer but then later identify something they want to work on, or simply have a bit of a dip in their well-being for a while and need more support and so have a Volunteer Visitor then, for as long as is necessary. Because the Self-help Group is available the Volunteer Visitors increasingly find that those people they are asked to support are the individuals with more complex and longer-term problems. It is not always easy for them to see the difference they do make to peoples' lives as change is often slow and in very small steps but their dedicated and determined support and encouragement can often be the only form of help that has ever made a difference to a person.



The VSS Team celebrating our 15th birthday

I know that I can tell her anything and that she will be fair, honest and sensible!

She never lets me down. People have let me down through my life. She is there. Great!

He has made me more talkative. I have become more outgoing with other people – instead of just saying 'yes' & 'no'.

Best thing that has happened to me for years

**Clients' comments about their volunteers**

This year we have held three forums: *Family Rules, OK?, Sleep & Well-being, and Coping with Change?*. 138 people have attended and feedback suggests they enjoyed the days and took something from them to inform their own lives and to use to help others.

Great speakers. Lots of info in very short time.

Makes you think about how families work – how you can compromise in family life

She was a good speaker – fluent, coherent, with a good mastery of her material

It was very simply explained & very interesting. Made me think

### Feedback on the forums

That is the visible work of VSS. Behind that is the long haul of what can be very thankless work identifying suitable sources of funding, collating the information necessary and going through the application process. We are immensely grateful to the funders who offer us encouragement and who are genuinely interested in the work we do. These supporters make us feel that they are really "on our side" and are like bright shining lights in what *can* seem an endless slog to keep the show on the road. We made some 14 applications of which 8 were successful. It is hard to keep tabs on all the different conditions and reporting necessary for each grant. If it weren't for the clear oversight and sheer hard graft, largely of one volunteer, huge amounts of the Co-ordinator's time would be spent so, limiting work on client-based activities.

Changes in the personal circumstances of some of our most long-standing and involved Trustees has meant that we have had to look at how we will cope, as an organisation, with inevitable change. We have started having roving management meetings to enable people to attend. We are also actively seeking new trustees to bring their talents to the team.

In the 15 years it has been in existence VSS has been able to offer a helping hand to many people. The way we do so has developed somewhat over the years but the ethos behind it - that each individual knows deep inside what they need to recover and can be supported to find the strength to do so—hasn't changed and neither has the cheerful willingness of the many volunteers who have made it happen.

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