

My personal experience and thoughts on Derby Women's Centre's future

I joined Derby Women's Centre as a volunteer in September 2006, having previously worked in adult education as an ESOL tutor. I felt I needed some time away from paid employment, and approached Derby CVS to find out about volunteering opportunities. After a helpful interview there, a number of possibilities emerged, with Derby Women's Centre being one of the most appealing options. CVS passed my details onto Derby Women's Centre.

A friend of mine had briefly volunteered at Derby Women's Centre during the 1990s, so I knew a little about the centre already. However, when I received some information from Derby Women's Centre, I was surprised by the range of its activities, in particular the thriving counselling service. The opportunity to work as an Office Administrative Assistant was especially welcome, as I had enjoyed the administrative aspects of my previous jobs and was keen to relate them to an office environment.

Working at Derby Women's Centre was a challenge from the start. The centre was not well staffed at that time; the Services Co-ordinator finished work shortly after I arrived, and was not replaced. Over the next few months the other two members of staff also left their posts – and for several weeks there were no paid workers at the centre. There were however several core volunteers, especially on the counselling side – which was managed then by a small counselling committee (also voluntary). The need to maintain a good counselling service, and to remain as a drop-in and advice centre, were major incentives for keeping Derby Women's Centre open – using a range of voluntary help, but principally the four office administrative volunteers. We worked extra hours just to keep the centre open. The Board of Trustees were busy as well: ensuring oversight of centre functions and activities.

Thankfully, by the summer of 2007 a new centre manager plus two other staff members were in post, and shortly after that a counselling co-ordinator and counselling assistant were appointed. The experience of the volunteers proved useful in enabling the staff to settle in, and to find out about routine procedures plus on-going activities. Changes in staff membership have continued, although not so dramatically, and centre volunteers have remained a stable part of the 'team'.

Each volunteer will have different reasons for her continuing commitment, but for myself there are two: belief in Derby Women's Centre and its future, and personal satisfaction. The ethos of the centre is extremely important: that it is open to all women in a welcoming and non-judgemental way, responding to their needs either directly or through sign-posting. The counselling service is key – it reaches out to women at a low point in their lives. Likewise all the other centre activities offer support and opportunities to women who are vulnerable and need a 'step-up'. Perhaps less immediately obvious, but also important is Derby Women's Centre's educational and training role: giving placements to trainee counsellors and therapists.

Volunteer office administrative assistants like myself form part of the background support team, which enables the more direct 'service functions' to take place. When I first began work at Derby Women's Centre, I had hoped that consolidating and extending my experience of office work might lead to paid work at the centre or a similar organisation. This has not happened; however, my voluntary work has proved very rewarding in its own right.

For the future:

Derby Women's Centre should aim to carry on the many current activities which are successful, especially those newer initiatives which reach out to other parts of Derbyshire, such as the Relate-funded confidence courses in Belper and Ripley. Additionally, the new data base of service users can identify which areas of Derby are well or badly represented. The lack of a crèche is a disadvantage, so new premises with space to accommodate one would be very welcome.

In future planning, it is important that Derby Women's Centre works with other support organisations – to complement rather than compete or duplicate. The centre should continue to respond to what its

service users want, and also not be afraid to try out something different that might risk failure if there is a poor response. Volunteers could assist with pilot schemes or where no funding is available; they may well have relevant professional experience or skills to offer.

Volunteers are always keen to be involved in decision making which affects them and the service users. It is best if their services and skills are used in a well-defined way so that they feel that the time which they give to the centre is valued. When extra staff members are appointed, it will usually be more practical to get them to take over basic tasks which a volunteer could do for only a few hours a week. However, the volunteer should be put into the picture beforehand, and offered an alternative role which she feels is equally worthwhile. If the staff appointment is only short-term, then it may be helpful to allow the volunteer to continue to do the task occasionally : to maintain familiarity and confidence (for example, answering the telephone and supplying information).

The future role of volunteers at Derby Women's Centre will necessarily depend on how much funding is available/how many paid staff are employed. It should always be recognised that volunteers will vary in their reasons for volunteering, in what they seek from the work they do, in the skills and experience they bring, and how much time they can commit.