The last word

SVP shops are at the heart of their local community

Anita Boniface

'Localism' is at the heart of the 40 community shops run by Catholic charity the St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP). Based in the heart of often diverse, multicultural communities with contrasting levels of wealth and deprivation, the SVP's retail operation provides a unique, often personal service to suit the needs of local people.

Kate Nightingale heads up SVP Community Support Projects (CSPs) including the shops, and explains:

"St Vincent's are more than just charity shops. Our employees and volunteers are sympathetic to the aims of the SVP and, wherever possible, extend the work of the 10,000 members of the SVP, supporting, and signposting customers, many of whom might be very vulnerable."

Eighty per cent of branches are based in large housing estates and away from town centres. People they serve often struggle to afford the bus fare into town so Kate says the shops are a "lifeline" for the local commu-

Searching for quality at an afordable price: "The people SVP shops serve often struggle to afford the bus fare into town, so the shops are a lifeline for the local community and often the only available means of affording quality goods."

nity and often the only available means of affording quality goods. The rest of SVP shops are based on high streets or in city centres. These shops' customer base is generally more affluent and prices reflect this. The higher income units support the large number of shops in deprived areas where income is lower. Kate says: "The whole of St Vincent's mantra is 'helping locally'. What we do is local – we price locally, we stock locally and employ locally."

Philip Kojcinovic is head of retail at the SVP. He explains that in the 80 per cent of neighbourhood St Vincent's shops, "we know nearly all of our customers by name. People will come in and talk about what's happening in their lives. Staff could be the first place of engagement with the wider SVP, helping someone sort out their debt or housing issue through signposting or just listening and befriending them."

This sentiment is reflected by area manager for the south, Helen Voyce. Helen says St Vincent's are excellent at balancing the "compassionate, caring and loving values of the SVP, and running a very efficient business to generate income." Helen believes that "the more ethical we are, operating with integrity, the better the business is. We get repeat customers, people who want to work for us, happy volunteers and happy clients."

Volunteers can be very diverse and generally fall into two categories. "Some, like refugees, have received support from SVP and want to give something back. Others have needs themselves and come to enhance their self-confidence, work skills and they become part of the family and we see them grow," says Helen.

Steve Milburn is area manager for the north east where there is a high level of deprivation due to the collapse of the mining, shipbuilding and steel industries in his area. This led to a high level of unemployment from the 1980s onwards, and Steve explains that "we are now seeing the second or third generation of unemployment." It has lots of knock-on effects on the community like drug and alcohol addiction, mental illness, and loneliness. "There can be a

sense of hopelessness in some places due to the limited opportunities," Steve says.

"However, St Vincent's shops bring hope. In some areas we're the only community shop. Unemployment and poverty have meant people almost giving up. The shops provide employment, build people's self-esteem and provide work experience to help school leavers."

Volunteers are given valuable transferable customer service skills such as answering the telephone or operating the tills which they can use in paid employment later.

Steve says that when he first joined the SVP he "wondered why on earth people gave up their time to volunteer. But now I see that volunteers get loads out of it because it helps them with their mental health problems or loneliness. People get back onto the road to recovery and gain their confidence. It's the reason I'm still here 10 years later."

The shops give everyone who walks through their door the personal touch. In Pontypridd, SVP shop manager Pam Ashworth tells one particular volunteer's story.

"There is a large homeless community in Pontypridd and the shop often stocks sleeping bags and warm clothes for them. After we provided a tent and cooking stove for one homeless man, Derek, he started to come in regularly for a hot cup of tea and a chat. Soon we got to know each other and he started volunteering, steam cleaning stock and helping.

Pam adds: "Despite Derek's schizophrenia, being around people and in the warmth seemed to really help him. When he was depressed we stepped back, and give him space to talk about what was troubling him. He was with us for four months, and then he managed to get a paid job on a building site." He still comes back to St Vincent's to say hello.

In a similar way, Bradford manager Annette Haigh explains: "Our shop managers have to be agony aunts as well as managers." She describes how people "depend on the shops for company, warmth and support".

"We have helped people through domestic violence and debt and signposted them to SVP members.

Sometimes our shop managers and their teams are the only people an older person sees all week. They can help alleviate their loneliness."

Annette describes how shops can really be a hub of the community, extending their reach into the wider community as well. The SVP Brighouse shop participates in local council initiatives, such as the '1940s Weekend'. "Everyone in the shop gets dressed up and we sell vintage items that we've saved all year – shoes, trilbies, fox furs, pearls and jewellery. It's tremendous fun".

Josh Dutch, shop manager at Tremorfa St Vincent's near Cardiff, provides another example of the community work. "We saw the need for friendship and decided to start up a community day. Now, every Friday we clear a space, bring out chairs and tables, and provide tea and cakes so that people can catch up and share what's going on in their lives. It gives volunteers and staff the opportunity to know the local community and say thank you to our donors and customers, who are very generous."

St Vincent's shops play a vital role in extending the values and ethos of the SVP by being part of their local community. Kate says she would love the public to visit their local shops and provide real feedback about what does and doesn't work.

"I'd love the public to volunteer in shops. They are at the coalface of communities, and provide an excellent way for the public to have a key role in helping," she adds.

Philip asks the Catholic public to promote their local St Vincent's shop through their parish priest. "Encourage your priest to spread the word."

Steve explains: "Shops see a lot of poverty that the general public may not know about."

"Shops are part of delivering the SVP mission", says Helen. "We care about everyone who walks through our doors."

Anita Boniface is Senior Media and Communications Officer at the SVP. To find out more about the SVP and its Community Support Projects visit www.svp.org.uk, telephone 0207 703 3030 or email info@svp.org.uk.