

City Year (Birmingham) Visit on Friday 10th November 2017

I arrived at the City Year UK offices just after 09:30 on Friday 10th November where I was greeted by Uman, the Recruitment Officer for City Year UK in the West Midlands. The City Year volunteers were already stood in a circle listening to an introduction of the day where they were being told about the day's activities and volunteers had the opportunity to voice their stories, concerns and experiences from the past week. The clear support and morale shown across the team of volunteers in the West Midlands was outstanding, this stood out to me immediately. Everyone listened to each other and offered support to one another with great care and professionalism, the atmosphere in the room was positive and it was well-defined that the volunteers were happy to be part of City Year UK.

After all the housekeeping and introductions were over, I joined the circle of volunteers and Uman introduced me and spoke about Youth Employment UK and what I was there to do. We then played a game called Splat whereby stand in a circle, one person is nominated as "splatter" and stands in the middle. The person in the middle then randomly points at someone and shouts "Splat!" The person they pointed at must duck, then the two people either side of the one who ducked must "splat" each other, by pointing the other and yelling, "Splat!" The last one to do so is out, this continues until there are only 2 active people left in the circle. When you are out, you stay in the circle, but do not play. This is part of the challenge for the remaining players. It gets harder with less numbers as it becomes harder to determine who is next to you as the numbers deplete but the circle size remains. Once you are down to 2 people remaining active in the circle they stand back to back western style, then the person who was in the middle counts from 1 - 20. With each number the 2 remaining competitors must take a step away from one another, and at any random point between 1 & 20 the counter shouts splat instead of a number, at which point it's a quick draw on each other and the last one to point at their opponent and say splat is out leaving a winner.

The game was great fun and Uman advised me that the team start off each Friday by playing a game like Splat as the volunteers are often so excited to see each other after all being at their individual schools Monday-Thursday and I was told that it can regularly be hard for them to focus without them having some time to interact with each other and discuss what they had been up to over the past week before starting the day's activities.

After finishing the game, the volunteers separated into smaller teams to take part in the first activity of the day - I was taken to a separate office whilst the first activity was taking place to interview Uman and two other City Year volunteers about their experiences.

Below I have listed the questions I asked and the general response from the participants of the round table discussion:

Tell me a little about what you've done before City Year and why you chose to take part in the scheme?

One volunteer was on her placement year at university and had chosen to volunteer with City Year rather than doing a paid work placement with an employer. She had been

volunteering since age 10 and therefore felt like it was the right option for her as she gained a lot of enjoyment from being able to give back to the community. She highlighted that her experience with City Year over the last few months has helped to shape her into the woman she is today and that the experience in her school has helped her to realise that she wants to work with SEN children. The second volunteer had just level sixth form and didn't know what he wanted to do at university so he was taking a year out to do the City Year scheme in the hope to find what specific role he wanted to aim for in education as he felt the scheme would help him to apply for the right university course.

There are less young people volunteering today compared to in previous years, why did you choose the scheme over a paid work placement or a part-time job?

Both volunteers emphasised that they had chosen the scheme over a paid work placement or part time job to enable them to make positive changes in society and to gain all the skills that they would learn in a part-time job and more whilst also having a great encouraging impact on lives of young people. They both felt that they had certainly made the right choice and commented on how they felt they had grown in confidence and changed as people since being part of the City Year scheme.

Do you ever come away from a day in your schools feeling like everything is getting too much for you?

We spoke about this for a while - both volunteers said that they occasionally experience days where they get upset or must take timeout due to a negative occurrence in their schools. I got the impression that this happened when the teacher reacted in a negative way to a child with anxiety or SEN issues due to the pressures of having to keep the class all on the same level. The two volunteers said that when they've been working so hard to raise a child's confidence and aspirations after they've been struggling and then the teacher shatters their confidence by interacting with them inappropriately, they find it extremely upsetting and difficult to deal with. This was highlighted as one of the negative points about the City Year scheme as the volunteers felt they became too easily attached and invested in the children they worked with - however, this could also be a positive.

With the City Year scheme are you able to influence what teachers should and shouldn't do, particularly with SEN children?

Mutually the volunteers agreed that they had both experienced positive and negative interactions with teachers and depending on the teachers age and authority within the school, they could have professional discussions with them on different levels. One volunteer based in a local secondary school highlighted that he had a particularly difficult time trying to speak with a maths teacher who was very 'figures focused' after he was more concerned about raising target levels than focusing on what those who were struggling could do to improve individually. The volunteers both agreed that younger teachers were more open to criticism and suggestion and were really invested in building a positive relationship with them whilst others who had been teaching for years didn't always appreciate the efforts that they made to bring positive change to the schools.

Has City Year helped you to decide what you would like to do in the future?

The volunteers both stressed that the City Year scheme had helped them to realise that they don't want teaching roles in the future but had helped them to gain an understanding of a position that they would like to work in within a school - both expressed an interest in working with SEN children and were grateful for the opportunities they had gained through the City Year scheme.

How are the volunteers supported through the City Year scheme?

Uman advised me that volunteers were supported in building skills in the following areas: developing leadership potential through regular workshops, corporate engagement through interview practice with local and national employers, networking events with the wider network of City Year volunteers and local business people, developing public speaking, problem solving, teamwork, creativity and self-awareness. The volunteers backed this up and both spoke about how they felt they had developed their skills and grown in confidence over all the areas mentioned.

The volunteers are also:

- Managed and supported by an onsite Impact Officer, who is part of the City Year staff team.
- Plus, they receive regular mentoring support from an employee at one of City Year's corporate partner organisations.
- They have one day per week dedicated to your personal and professional development through leadership development Fridays

Do you have a part-time job to support yourselves financially whilst doing the City Year scheme?

One of the volunteers had a part-time job to support them through their year of service with City Year, however, both highlighted that their free-time was very limited due to the intensity of the scheme and therefore it was difficult to find a part-time role that was flexible enough to meet their needs. The volunteers taking part in the City Year 'Year of Service' are entitled to the following benefits:

- Living expenses up to £4,400 a year in London and £3,960 in the West Midlands and Greater Manchester
- Reimbursement for any travel expenses you incur because of City Year activities.
- Support with your financial management through training, workshops and online tools.
- The City Year Hardship fund if eligible

Have you had any interaction with employers, do they appreciate the efforts you're putting into your work with City Year - do they realise the skills you gain here are transferrable into employment?

The volunteers I spoke to both in the round table discussion and in the larger group when I joined in with an activity said that employers visit them regularly as part of their Friday

sessions to give talks and develop their interview schools. All had interacted with employers both through City Year and privately and emphasised that employers were really interested in their valuable work with City Year and told me that employers they had spoken to saw it as a more valuable asset to their CV over a part-time job. This was great to hear as I was worried that many of the volunteers would have experienced issues with employers not recognising the importance of their voluntary work as I have had issues in this area myself.

What would you like to change about the curriculum based on your experiences working in a school?

Many of the volunteers I spoke to stated that many of their schools were too heavily focused on producing statistics and getting results with low budgets rather than focusing on practical skills that would help to better the school children in the future such as finance, interview skills, building relationships etc. Many highlighted that problems were arising when teachers were too busy focusing on the classes rather than on those with more specific needs. One volunteer was left in-charge of helping to build the English skills of a Thai boy that had arrived recently in her school and she said that she knew if she wasn't there, he would just be left with no additional support which he very much needed.

Summary

Overall, I really enjoyed my experience with the City Year volunteers and appreciated why the scheme has such a strong reputation and is becoming increasingly popular. The drive, energy and enthusiasm across all the volunteers was amazing and I would love to visit them again in the future.

I have included a copy of the activity the volunteers were completing on managing stress. All seemed to really enjoy their Friday development sessions and the City Year staff were continuing to boost volunteers' skills in a positive way.

A Stress Bucket example

