Volunteers – a way of encouraging active community participation?

Noeleen Cookman

The author

Noeleen Cookman is a consultant with David Haynes Associates and provides management consultancy services specialising in the public and special library sectors. She has over 15 year of public library experience, both in the UK and South Africa. As a consultant Noeleen has skills in user studies, public library management, positive management of change, information audits and formulation of information policy.

Abstract

In 1999 The Library Association commissioned David Haynes Associates and Information Management Associates to investigate the extent of the use of volunteers in UK public libraries. The research also examined the roles and potential roles for volunteers, current management practice and policy. The research concluded with draft good practice guidelines on the use and management of volunteers for local authorities. This article reports on one aspect of the research findings, notably looking at how public library authorities can work with, and engage volunteers, which in turn can contribute to their overall policy of social inclusion and increased community engagement in the local delivery of services.

The occasion

This research results from an investigation of volunteers in UK public libraries commissioned by the Library Association.

National context

Volunteering is high on the Government's agenda. In 1999 the Cabinet Office's Active Community Unit produced a report *Giving Time, Getting Involved*[i] which stated the Government's overall strategy objective of encouraging the increased use of volunteers. The report offers a framework for achieving active communities, raising awareness of volunteer opportunities and encouraging wider volunteer participation and take up of opportunities. Their stated aim is: "*by 2005 all adults should have the information to enable them to undertake at least two hours a week voluntary activity and two-thirds should be taking up the opportunity to do so."*

Government is committed to a policy of social inclusion. The DCMS issued their vision of how libraries, museums, galleries and archives can contribute to tackling social exclusion in *Libraries, Museums, Galleries and Archives for All*[ii]. The Guidance sets out an action plan for future activities and includes a 6-point plan for developing a strategic approach to tackling social exclusion. Within the DCMS guidelines on social inclusion in public libraries, the use of volunteers is specifically advocated:

> "*encourage public library authorities to use mobile library services, particularly drawing on volunteers, to deliver books to housebound people in the community*"
>
> "*Public library authorities should consider the role of volunteers in helping to deliver some library services*"
>
> "*Library authorities should encourage volunteers to become involved in any social inclusion initiatives alongside professional staff*".[iii]

The social inclusion agenda points to the need for local leadership and joint working between local authorities and a range of partners including the voluntary sector. Local authorities are expected to play a key role in developing local strategic partnerships and have a duty to prepare the local community strategies. The recognition that volunteers from socially excluded communities could be used as a bridge for authorities to make contact and involve the community in the service they receive is an important one.

LA Research

In 1999 the Library Association commissioned David Haynes Associates and Information Management Associates to investigate the extent of the use of volunteers in UK public libraries, to investigate good practice in the management of volunteers, and based on the research findings to produce Guidelines on the Management of Volunteers for Public libraries.[iv]

The project surveyed every public library authority in the United Kingdom. The questionnaire survey received a pleasing response rate of 87%, (182 public library authorities returned a completed questionnaire). The research found that the use of volunteers varied between the Home Countries and the London Boroughs:

- 85% of English Authorities use volunteers;
- 82% of Scottish Authorities;
- 63% Welsh Authorities;
- 39% London Boroughs.

The top 5 ranked service areas in which volunteers are primarily used by library authorities included:

- Housebound (75% of all authorities);
- Local studies;
- Hospital services;
- Storytime;
- Children's promotion.

Other areas also included homework assistants, leading reading groups, IT, and adult promotion. In addition within the area of local studies there was a wide diversity of tasks undertaken by volunteers, mainly project orientated roles, which add value to the existing local studies services. These projects often use existing local skills expertise – similar roles to those that volunteers within the records offices undertake.

Authorities were asked to indicate which areas they were considering the use of volunteers in the future. The list takes into account both authorities that already are using volunteers and those who currently do not, but are considering using them in the future. These areas include:

- Leading reading groups;
- Acting as a sounding board;
- Local studies;
- IT support;
- Homework assistants.

Why work with volunteers

Before engaging with volunteers, two key areas need to considered, understood and addressed:

1. Understand why the authority/service wants to work with volunteers, and what will be their value to the authority;
2. Understand why people volunteer, and what value they add to existing services.

An authority that decides to engage volunteers has a duty to both their paid staff and volunteers, and before engaging volunteers should have in place a clear volunteer policy.

The policy should take into consideration the reasons for engaging volunteers, the benefits volunteers can bring to the authority, as well as the benefits to the volunteer. The policy before it is introduced should go through a consultation process with staff and unions. This will enable any concerns to be addressed at an early stage and enable the authority put in place any required mechanisms to address the concerns. It should include a clear recruitment and management policy for volunteers. Specifically how volunteers are recruited, along with person specifications, job descriptions, application forms and interviews, and how the authority will manage and support volunteers.

The day-to-day management and supervision of volunteers should address good management and supervision principles in proportion to the involvement of the volunteer, project, and authority. A pragmatic approach to supervision and management was recommended by all those consulted during the research, to avoid the whole process becoming too cumbersome for staff and volunteers, which would be counter productive. The authority should be committed to providing support and training for both volunteers and the staff managing volunteers.

Why people volunteer

Volunteers are a valuable resource, and in order to use the resource effectively, the authority needs to understand why people volunteer.

Volunteers are not a homogeneous group, but have a wide range of needs and expectations, from those who are looking for a regular volunteer commitment to those

who would prefer a limited commitment, for example arrange a promotional activity, or undertake a time-limited project.

The reasons why people volunteer are as complex and diverse as the people who volunteer, and their range of motivations and required satisfactions need to be acknowledged. The reasons include a mix of both personal gain and altruism:

- Non-financial;
- Gain skills and experience;
- Use existing skills;
- Develop self-confidence;
- Make new friends;
- Help others;
- See a need in the community;
- Connected to existing paid work;
- Had spare time.

Role of volunteers

All the voluntary agencies consulted believed that there were no roles that a volunteer could not undertake in terms of skills, expertise and time commitment. However there is an issue about the amount of responsibility one can and should give to a volunteer. One voluntary agency reflected: *"We work on the notion that volunteers can do anything and everything – this is not talking about volunteers taking over the world and what paid staff do, but that volunteers are members of the public with skills, background and expertise"*. Authorities and organizations need to be encouraged away from the notion that volunteers are second best, and suitable roles for volunteers will depend on mating their skills to the Authority's requirements. Within the consultation with staff, authorities and staff should be encouraged to explore the untapped skills of volunteers. However – a note of caution, authorities need to be sure that by working with volunteers, they are not being perceived as offering a second rate service to sectors of the community and consequently marginalizing some service areas.

Volunteers in the context of social inclusion

In order to work with volunteers as part of the strategy to address social exclusion, local authority services need to consider which groups they intend to target. These target groups can include:

- Young people;
- Older people;
- Unemployed;
- Disabled people;
- People from black and other ethnic minority groups;
- Refugees.

Once that has been decided, the services need to consider the specific target group volunteers' perceptions of barriers such as:

- Image and culture of volunteering;

- Practical barriers to volunteering such as not being able to finance voluntary work;
- Need to persuade volunteers that volunteering is worthwhile and has demonstrable values to individuals in the target group;
- Remove the barriers to information about volunteering and help people get started;
- Remove the barriers to the lack of awareness of voluntary opportunities.

All the identified barriers need to be addressed in the context of the authority's or service's policy on volunteering and their implementation of that policy, especially with regard to recruitment, retention, training and supervision.

In addressing the barriers the service should consider highlighting:

- Personal benefits of volunteering;
- Demonstrate a commitment to equal opportunities;
- Ensure retention of volunteers by ensuring the tasks match the individual volunteer, they pay out of pocket expenses and provide necessary training and support.

Benefits of working with volunteers

To conclude, working with volunteers not only benefits the organisation, but the individual and community as well.

Volunteers make a varied contribution to society, they offer a way of involving the community in the library, and bringing the library to the community. This contributes to the feeling of community ownership. The service is able to take advantage of the large pool of existing knowledge and skills. It also helps foster partnership working.

On an individual level it is a way of developing social contacts, putting back into society, building skills, knowledge and experience. On a societal level it can enhance active citizenship and social cohesion.

By offering opportunities to expand individual skills, training and experience, the volunteering opportunity can contribute to improving the employability of individuals and in a small way help contribute to the economic prosperity of the community.

Lastly it enables libraries to expand their existing services, provide extra services, and pilot new services (which could in turn become part of the core service).

References

[i] Cabinet Office (1999) *Giving time, getting involved: A strategy report by the Working Group on the Active Community*, London, HMSO

[ii] Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2001) *Libraries, museums, galleries and archives for all: Co-operating across the sectors to tackle social exclusion,* London, HMSO

[iii] Department for Culture, Media and Sport (1999) *Libraries for all: Social inclusion for public libraries. Policy guidance for Local Authorities in England*, London, HMSO

[iv] Cookman, N, Haynes, D and Streatfield, D (2000) *The use of volunteers in public libraries*, London, The Library Association