The Positive and Negative Impact of Using Volunteers in Public Libraries

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1.0 Introduction

'Volunteers have long supported and provided highly valuable additional support, working alongside qualified and paid staff, and they should be acknowledged and valued for this role. They should also be given appropriate role descriptions, training and management. CILIP is opposed to job substitution where paid professional and support roles are directly replaced with either volunteers or untrained administrative posts to save money....If this happens services will suffer and will be unsustainable. What remains would be a library service unable to serve the community comprehensively, support people's information needs or provide everyone with the opportunity for learning and development.' (1)

The following essay is a discussion on the impact of using volunteers in Public Libraries. It will focus on the experiences of Library Professionals and Volunteers; and consider the overall effect of Volunteers on the Public Library Service.

Public Libraries are a vital resource, and according to the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, are a statutory requirement (2). Public Libraries are a centre for communities; a place for lifelong learning; and a sanctuary for the vulnerable, including the elderly, mentally disabled and homeless. Libraries improve accessibility to information; help to develop literacy and information literacy; and are a catalyst for social empowerment and social mobility:

> '...A strong public library service is the foundation of a literate and inclusive society and a competitive knowledge economy.' (3)

There has been a change in the way many Public Libraries are being run. Cuts to funding have forced some Libraries to reduce their paid staff and introduce unpaid workers, resulting in a significant increase in volunteers in some areas: 'paid library staff fell by 5.3% from 18,028 to 17,064, volunteer numbers rose by 7.5% to 44,501.' (4)

2.0 The Librarian as Volunteer Manager

Managing a sizeable cohort of volunteers is a complex undertaking, and there are many aspects of management that need to be taken into consideration. These include: the challenges faced in training volunteers with little or no experience of library work; the varying reliability of volunteers (some can only commit to a few hours a week, or less, and they are often unable to commit to a regular shift pattern); and the effect volunteers have on staff morale, including staff who have seen colleagues made redundant, and who are being required to train volunteers who have replaced paid staff.

According to a 2017 review of UK Public Libraries, the top 4 challenges of using volunteers were as follows:

1. 82% The time investment that is needed to manage and support volunteers
2. 62% The time investment needed to recruit volunteers
3. 62% The level of commitment among volunteers
4. 58% The time needed to train new / casual users on systems (5)

The Government's 'Good Practice Toolkit' also reflects the need for constant and considered management of volunteers:

- a volunteer policy needs to be in place
- volunteer roles need to be agreed
- volunteers will require training for their roles
- volunteers require ongoing access to professional advice
- resources are needed to manage the volunteer roles (6)

After discussions with several Librarians and Library Managers, many examples of Volunteer Management responsibilities were highlighted. These included 'coming up with volunteer opportunities; writing role descriptions; creating & managing advertising; drafting Service Level agreements; obtaining references; DBS checks for certain roles; maintaining records; training; holding regular meetings; and hosting volunteer thank you events' (7)

The Volunteer Manager role is almost always performed in addition to an existing Librarian or Library Manager role. For example, Maria Bernal, who is the part-time Librarian and Volunteer Manager at Woodberry Down Volunteer-run Library (London Borough of Hackney), is also the Librarian at Homerton Library. Similarly, Sophia Richards, the Community Librarian for Children, Families, Learning and Outreach at North Somerset Council, also manages the Volunteer

programme in North Somerset (8). Inevitably, Librarians taking on these new responsibilities and often large numbers of volunteers, are frequently overworked and under a huge amount of pressure: '...We're open 39 hours a week. I had 5 part time staff, now I have one full time member of staff and 102 volunteers...most of whom volunteer for only 2 hours once a week...It's non-stop training and very tiring teaching 3 new people with minimal IT skills how to do frontline library work in 2 hour slot...the time it takes to train, the extra hours staff are putting in (unpaid, we don't get overtime) just so we can keep on top of our admin and line management responsibilities is exhausting.' (9)

When a Library relies on volunteers, consistent availability and reliability can be an issue. As volunteers do not have a contract in the same way a paid worker does, their attendance is not an obligation. This can lead to casual and sometimes erratic attendance, which can disrupt and put pressure on the rest of the workforce; as well as leading to valuable community group activities being cancelled, the library closing early, and the integrity of the service being damaged, '...volunteers typically are less bound to follow regular schedules or to work for extended periods of time...Limited, irregular schedules are ill suited for tasks needing frequent attention.' (10)

3.0 The Positive Effects of Volunteering: Social Empowerment and Social Mobility

Many volunteers are used in Community Outreach and Engagement roles, supporting paid staff and promoting the Library Service. Examples of these volunteer roles include: assistance with the Summer Reading Challenge; IT and Digital Literacy sessions; reading groups; and the Home Library Service for users who are unable to visit the Library due to a disability or ill health (11). As well as a desire to assist the Community, there can be many other reasons people volunteer. These can include volunteering as a way to improve self-confidence or sociability; to gain experience before applying for a paid position; or as a way of gradually integrating back into the workforce. Volunteering can have a positive effect on volunteers with learning difficulties; mental health issues; those dealing with loneliness, bereavement, social isolation and social anxiety; those dealing with unemployment and the struggle to find work or return to work; and those with extended periods of illness which have impacted on their confidence, self-esteem and motivation.

Interviewer: 'Have you had any positive feedback from volunteers on the voluntary work they do?

Community Librarian: 'I suppose the most obvious is those who have gone on to secure employment. One of the volunteers with autism secured a full time position with BT and couldn't thank us enough for giving him an opportunity to have an up to date CV and a reference. A volunteer who had been a social services manager had been claiming sickness following complications after childbirth. She hadn't been in employment for over 12 years and had significant anxiety issues. I worked with her, slowly re-introducing her to the safe library environment...Eventually she became a volunteer and developed the confidence to attend a counselling course. She is now working part-time in that field. (12)

4.0 Volunteers and Motivation

'Volunteers are fearful they will lose their libraries, so rather than be faced with that, people think of volunteering…I can understand...but they should never have been in the position to have to make that decision...Volunteers have a brilliant role to play in boosting capacity and outreach but they shouldn't be compelled to take over running the service.' (13)

Volunteers come from different professional or non-professional backgrounds, frequently with little or no experience of managing a Library. The view of the Library as a cultural hub and centre of the community, motivates volunteers to keep the service running; often with limited resources, shorter opening hours and few or no professionally trained Library staff.
As mentioned previously, reliance on volunteers can be problematic for several reasons; and motivation is a particularly powerful influence on reliability and retention. The initial determination to 'save' a Library may be an 'intrinsic motivation,' built on a strong and focused desire to keep the Library open; and the idea that this is a positive and important act. Initially, volunteers may feel that they are taking control and managing change effectively.
This action is also a result of an 'extrinsic motivation' and 'external pressures' upon the volunteer or voluntary group, caused by the potential closure of the Library.
Volunteering must be 'a choice freely made by an individual...both the volunteer and the organisation that the volunteer works with should benefit from the relationship; and the contribution of volunteers should be recognised.' (14)

The initial motivation of the volunteer to make a difference or improve the situation may decrease, when external pressures become increasingly evident and their free choice as a volunteer becomes more of an obligation or 'social coercion.' (15) External pressure may also come from volunteers having to take on more work than they were initially able to, and outside their capabilities. Untrained volunteers may not be able to cope with increased and unattainable expectations and workload. As a result, demotivation could occur as follows:

1. The reduction in paid professional Library staff could result in a lack of support and training for volunteers
2. This constraint on volunteer training and development could then result in volunteers feeling isolated or unable to fully assist Library Users
3. A lack of training and consequent limited understanding of information resources, could result in lower levels of self-confidence in volunteers; leading to frustration and disappointment that they are unable to fulfill the role
4. Frustration and negative feedback from library users, unable to receive the information or services they require, could result in a volunteer feeling that they are no longer in control
5. As a result of this lack of control, a volunteer may develop a negative association with the workplace and volunteer role. Volunteers may feel anxious, defiant, and demotivated; ultimately leading to amotivation and them leaving the volunteer position (16)

It is important to provide volunteers with consistent and thorough training and support, as well as a variety of tasks that suit their individual skills and experience '...having managed volunteers myself, I'm very aware that you have to make sure people are happy, stimulated, befriended and given a cup of tea and a chance to sit down and chat. Also, if they're there for the long term, they need some autonomy over a task (this has to be appropriate for their level of ability), and a chance to change up tasks and routines when they get bored (or they'll get burned out)' (17)

Paid and unpaid staff require professional and personal development, including positive and constructive feedback and staff appraisal. If a volunteer does not receive consistent feedback and encouragement, they may feel undervalued. Similarly, if a working environment is hostile, isolating, apathetic, or not stimulating for a worker or volunteer, there will be little or no incentive to achieve goals. Problems may also occur when the paid workforce feel undermined or threatened by the increased use of volunteers. With many paid professionals losing their jobs or

facing redundancy, there is a definite sense of unease, and sometimes a lack of respect or understanding from both paid staff and volunteers:

> '...without a doubt, many of the volunteers do not value nor respect our experience....It's obvious that most of the volunteers don't really know or understand what public library staff do. They aren't intending to start a career in libraries, they haven't spent a lot of time thinking about it in the same way an applicant for a job vacancy would.' (18)

5.0 Diversity: The Effect on Service

Interviewer: Do you think Equality and Diversity are fairly represented in Libraries that rely on volunteers?

Library Manager, Wirral: NO! The vast majority of our volunteers are elderly, white & middle-class/ retired teachers, engineers etc. (19)

Community Librarian, Conwy County Borough Council: 'My experience is that I haven't seen someone from an ethnic minority, with a disability or anybody under the age of 60 volunteering. The simple answer therefore is no! However, I don't think libraries are doing enough to attract these groups anyway and our users remain older retired and white and those with young children. That's leaves a huge part of the population!' (20)

Another issue with Volunteer recruitment, is the lack of equality and diversity amongst volunteers recruited. This lack of equality and diversity can have an impact on the relationship between the volunteer and Library user; and the quality of the service provided. The less diverse the workforce, the less diverse the range of knowledge; experience and understanding of different cultures; attitudes; beliefs; and lifestyles. A lack of diversity, coupled with little or no understanding of information literacy, may ultimately lead to a biased or limited information service provision. Volunteers may be unaware of appropriate data protection laws and copyright, for example; and be unaware of the most efficient, accurate and ethical ways of finding information, such as using the most current databases to search for medical information. Volunteers may also have little or no experience of how to manage the needs of a user with specific learning needs, a disability, or mental illness. It is important for a Public Library to employ professional staff to maintain as balanced and fair a service as possible, '...public librarians should provide expert assistance and advice to users as a public service without prejudice against persons and without a hidden motive of staff affecting search results...public

librarians have an obligation to protect and promote the rights of every individual to have free and equal access to sources of information without discrimination.' (21)

6.0 The Librarian Identity: Deprofessionalisation

'What the profession needs to be vigilant of and something that should be challenged is appointing candidates to post as 'librarian' or equivalent without qualification or the need to pursue one. Regardless of the rights or wrongs of volunteer libraries it is the responsibility of all of us in the profession to uphold the integrity of what it means to be a qualified librarian. Anything else fundamentally undermines the concept of professional Librarianship' (22)

Library volunteer roles are sometimes given titles with a professional association, for example 'Marketing Assistant', Library Ambassador' and 'Library Events Facilitator,' which suggest a more serious position, with greater responsibility; and may result in an increased level of commitment from the volunteer. The language used can be encouraging for Volunteers, but problematic in its confusion with professional roles. Job titles used on the 'Volunteering Wales' website, for example, include 'Assistant Librarian' and Library Administrator.' The requirement for the 'Assistant Librarian' role requests that the volunteer has 'no particular skills, and training will be given.' The role involves 'talking to the public and using the computer to log books in and out.' (23) Language and role descriptions like this, are in danger of undermining the view of the Library Professional. Many people who have worked as a Librarian or are working towards a professional role, have extensive practical experience, training, knowledge and skills - the Librarian role is far more complex and exhaustive than this simplified job description suggests. Deprofessionalisation is hugely problematic, and volunteers are rarely able to take the place of a trained information professional '...The shift towards volunteer-run libraries also promotes the misconception that being a librarian is not a profession. Working in a library isn't just about flicking a date stamp about and re-shelving a few books...' (24)

Some Public Libraries do not believe in the importance or necessity of qualified Library staff, and the retail customer service model is often favoured over the knowledge and professionalism of a Librarian '...Being a qualified librarian is desirable, but not essential for front line staff. Also, a colleague was telling me recently that *"…CILIP's own research shows than only 46% of those polled think that librarians provide trustworthy information. This does put librarians in the top 5 professional nationally, but at the same time it's not a full endorsement either"...'* (25). It was interesting to hear that the Idea Store do not use volunteers, believing that '...services are

lessened by the use of volunteers, so Idea Store do not take on volunteers to do the work of professional, trained staff.' (26) There appears to be an awareness of the current situation, where volunteers have been frequently replacing professional staff; but one cannot help but feel that management is missing out on valuable expertise, knowledge and service development potential by not employing qualified Librarians.

7.0 Conclusion

> 'We, as members of the public, deserve better. We deserve (and are legally entitled to) a library service that delivers not only books but is a free public access point to information. We deserve someone qualified in knowledge and information management who is best able to provide that service – and that's a real librarian.' (27)

The general view amongst Library Professionals and many users, seems to indicate that replacing paid professional staff with volunteers will result in a lower quality service provision. Volunteers should, where possible, only be used to support experienced, qualified staff. Volunteers are a positive addition to a workforce, when used to support certain activities, but should not be relied on to run a Library service '...experience would suggest that the most effective use of volunteers is to support paid staff in delivering specific activities (storytimes, job clubs, reading schemes, etc.), rather than taking on the day-to-day logistics of running a library' (28). Personal experience of using (or attempting to use) a volunteer-run Library, has been problematic and disappointing, with the Library in question frequently closing early, or being unable to open due to lack of volunteer availability. For users reliant on accessing resources, including computers and internet access, this can be greatly inhibiting and frustrating. The impression created, is one of an inefficient Library Service - a service that is unreliable and non-functioning. Ultimately, the user may be forced to look elsewhere for information and resources; and the trust in the service is reduced. Reduction in paid professional staff and reliance on volunteers, also has an impact on the availability and discovery of accurate and balanced information sources; and there may be issues with volunteers' inexperience with intercultural competences and diversity.

Volunteers can be used in a positive and effective way, and volunteering can have a positive impact on those who volunteer. In a Public Library context however, volunteers need to be

managed carefully. Where possible, they need to support and not undermine professional paid staff; and they need to be offered regular training, support and feedback.

Volunteers should not be expected to take on the responsibility and workload of experienced, trained Information Professionals. There should be a clear distinction between the role of a volunteer in supporting the Library service, and representing it entirely. Evidence shows that volunteer-run libraries are not sustainable, and cannot run in an efficient, freely accessible and wholly ethical manner. Leadership and management from paid professionals is essential in maintaining the standard of a Public Library service. Without paid information professionals working as true representatives of the service, perception of Public Libraries will be further degraded and the public may lose an important resource capable of empowering and mobilising individuals and communities.

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