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# **Keeping the doors open in an age of austerity? Qualitative analysis of stakeholder views on volunteers in public libraries**

## **Abstract**

English public libraries are increasingly adopting a hybrid approach to volunteer use, whereby volunteers plug the gaps created by reductions in paid staff, in response to local authority cuts arising from the Conservative government's austerity measures. This article builds on an initial phase of research reported in a previous article from 2015, which examined library service managers' views of volunteering in public libraries using a Delphi study method.

The second phase of research uses a case study method to investigate a variety of stakeholder views regarding public library volunteer use, using interviews, focus groups and surveys, thereby providing a complex picture of understandings and meanings. Results indicate that there is a clear mismatch of opinions relating to this phenomenon, in addition to a number of unintended consequences, directly attributable to the challenges identified.

Key consequences of volunteer use relate to social exclusion, reductions in service accountability and quality, and a blurring of the boundaries that exist within the library, causing tensions for all stakeholders. Formal and informal strategies for ensuring these consequences are minimized are vital for library professionals who may be managing these volunteers, and a carefully planned volunteer relationship management strategy is suggested, which underpins the volunteer use equation, ensuring a mutually beneficial arrangement for all. A series of key recommendations are discussed that may help to counter some of the challenges identified, and provide a possible way forward for library professionals having to deal with this complex situation.

## **Keywords**

Library professional, volunteering, public libraries, austerity, community capacity, volunteer relationship management, public service delivery

## **Introduction**

Public libraries are an important part of our civilised society, and indeed UNESCO stresses the vital role they play as ‘a living force for education, culture and information, and.... an essential agent for the fostering of peace and spiritual welfare through the minds of men and women’ (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1994). Moran (2013) supports this by arguing that they symbolize the essence of an inclusive and cohesive civil society, vital in our increasingly market driven environment.

‘A library in the middle of a community is a cross between an emergency exit, a life raft and a festival. They are cathedrals of the mind; hospitals of the soul; theme parks of the imagination. On a cold, rainy island, they are the only sheltered public spaces where you are not a consumer, but a citizen instead.....As the cuts kick in, protestors and lawyers are fighting for individual libraries like villagers pushing stranded whales back into the sea. A library is such a potent symbol of a town’s values: Each one closed down might as well be 6,000 stickers plastered over every available surface, reading. ‘WE CHOSE TO BECOME MORE STUPID AND DULL!’ ....Libraries that stayed open during the Blitz will be closed by budgets. A trillion small doors closing’ (Moran, 2013: 211).

This article builds on professional doctorate research originally discussed 3 years ago, investigating volunteer use in English public libraries. Phase One of this research involved the use of a Delphi study method in order to examine library service manager opinions within England. The second phase of this research focused more specifically on

the perspectives of the different stakeholders involved within library service provision: library managers (including some who had the role of volunteer coordinator), front-line library staff, volunteers and library users. Two case study public library services, both metropolitan boroughs based in the North East of England, were chosen in order to gain a variety of perspectives on the phenomenon. A qualitative approach using interviews, questionnaires and focus groups helped to garner a rich collection of data, which was subsequently analysed using constant comparative analysis.

This article reports on the findings from this second phase of research, and provides an overview of the multiple issues associated with volunteer use in public libraries, particularly in an age of austerity. In addition, the article offers suggestions as to how current public library practice and management regarding volunteers can be enhanced in order to create a mutually beneficial process for all those involved.

Since the phase one Delphi study research, the library landscape has altered dramatically, largely as a result of local and national government policy. Current figures examining volunteer use in public libraries, show a 100% increase in numbers in the 5 years leading up to 2013/14 (CIPFA, 2014), and nearly a quarter of all UK library jobs have disappeared in the past 6 years, balanced by recruitment of 15,500 volunteers in the same period, and closure of 343 libraries (Wainwright et al., 2016).

The external environment within which public libraries exist has substantially changed, such that economic austerity and localism have become the foundation stones for modern public service development, arising from predominantly ideological beliefs. McMenemy (2009: 1) has argued that there has been a shift towards a neo-liberal approach to public library service delivery, resulting in ‘the belief that ultimately the market and the individual within the market should have primacy’. The CEO of CILIP supports this thinking arguing that library cuts are not necessarily just ‘about money, it’s about ideology’ (Onwuemezi, 2015).

Localism and the Big Society were overriding themes of the 2010-2015 Coalition government, although the latter theme has been less prevalent as a guiding force more recently (Civil Exchange, 2015). The Big Society is about, ‘empowering communities, redistributing power and promoting a culture of volunteering’ (Kisby, 2010: p.484) whereby, ‘people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and the communities; a society in which the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control’ (The Conservative Party, 2010, cited in Museums Libraries and Archives Council, 2010a p.1).

The election of a Conservative majority government in 2015, has seen a continuation in public service reform, which Downey et al. (2010: 20) argue aims to ‘make major

financial savings and empower public service providers to find and deliver the solutions'. The recent discussion of a Shared Society suggests a re-invention of the Big Society on the part of the government, and although vague on what this means for public services, it expresses a continued focus on the role of the obligations of citizens as a key mechanism for enabling society to work (May, 2017).

Economic austerity has increasingly become a reality of public service funding, and research conducted by the Institute for Fiscal Studies reports that local authority spending per person reduced by 23.4% from 2009-10 to 2014-15 (Innes and Tetlow, 2015). The North East of England fared particularly badly, with 'the largest average cuts to spending per person' (Innes and Tetlow, 2015: 2), thereby suggesting that the cuts have fallen disproportionately on authorities that are most grant reliant, and have the highest levels of population growth and deprivation. In addition the North East of England has a larger proportion of areas that are deemed to be the most deprived in England (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2010).

It can be argued that public libraries have been an easy target for local authorities considering economic austerity, a point backed up by the Sieghart Review (Sieghart, 2014) which highlighted the lack of awareness on the part of decision makers regarding the value that public libraries have to a society. Harvey (2016: 18) concludes that 'new

ways of working will become ever more important over the coming years, as the funding environment becomes increasingly difficult....local government and central institutions alike will need to negotiate new relationships’.

## **Methodology**

This research emanated from an interpretivist paradigm, which is highly appropriate for research into libraries. Interpretivism is a broad term, ‘but can be encapsulated in concerns around how the social world is experienced and understood’ ((King and Horrocks, 2010: p.11) These resulting interpretations or meanings are ‘varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas’ (Cresswell, 2003: p.8).

Therefore a qualitative methodology was chosen, which arose naturally from the interpretivist paradigm (Pickard, 2013: p.13). A qualitative methodology means that ‘the inquirer often makes knowledge claims based primarily on constructivist perspectives, (i.e. the multiple meanings of individual experiences, meanings socially and historically constructed, with an intent of developing a theory or pattern)’ (Cresswell, 2003: p.18). ‘Theory (was then) developed from analysing empirical material or from studying a field or process’ (Flick, 2014: p.538) by means of a grounded theory approach. This allowed for the use of varied methods and data in order to understand more fully the complexity of stakeholder views regarding volunteer use (Flick, 2014).

The second phase of this research comprised qualitative analysis of two case study public library authorities based in the North East of England. Use of a case study approach was highly suitable, as it enabled an ‘in depth investigation of a phenomenon or situation from the perspective of all stakeholders involved’ (Pickard, 2007: 93). The case study authorities were identified based on previous contacts that had been developed during the initial Delphi study phase of research, and involved the purposeful selection of two English Metropolitan Boroughs that exhibited differing approaches to volunteer use, thereby maximising the potential for a variety of stakeholder viewpoints. Regarding the case study authorities selected (to be labelled LA1 and LA2), LA1 used volunteers for purely value-added purposes, whereas LA2, in addition to the traditional use of value-added volunteers, also had developed a small number of community managed libraries staffed entirely by volunteers. Both case study authorities were accessible to the researcher, and willing to allow access to the variety of stakeholders required for comprehensive enquiry to take place.

Figure 1 below details the characteristics of the case study authorities, particularly relating to key demographic data. Both authorities were Labour controlled, although LA1 has a greater overall proportion of Labour councillors, compared to LA2. LA2 was also a smaller authority in terms of size and population, and experienced much higher levels of multiple deprivation. It is worth noting that since carrying out the research, proposals to



reduce the number of libraries in LA1, and move libraries to community ownership has been announced.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Three types of data collection tools were utilised which were suited to the different groups of stakeholders targeted. Library users and front-line staff were surveyed using questionnaires, library managers were interviewed, and volunteers working in the libraries took part in a series of focus groups. The advantage of using multiple sources of evidence when conducting a case study is considered by Yin (2014: 121) who argues that ‘by developing convergent evidence, data triangulation helps to strengthen the construct validity of your (sic) case study’. It is important to note that the different stakeholder groups were questioned separately due to the sensitivities of current volunteer use, and it was felt that this approach might gain a more truthful picture of perspectives. Front-line staff were a particularly challenging group, who were limited in the time they could commit, in addition to being particularly uncomfortable about discussing volunteer use amongst their colleagues. Therefore, an anonymous survey with a mix of closed and open-ended questions was used, however many of the responses gained from the front-line staff survey mirrored themes that elicited from the library managers interviews.

### *Identifying the stakeholders*

Smith (2002) provides a useful conceptual model of the interrelationships that contribute to the volunteer experience within the heritage industry (see Figure 2). This model can also be applied to the library world, and was used as a basis by which to identify key stakeholder groups that would be investigated in this particular research.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

In this research the stakeholders were divided into the following 4 stakeholder groups:

- Library managers/volunteer co-ordinators: Professionally qualified librarians who managed the library service, had responsibility for staff management and oversight of policy and practice, and co-ordinated volunteers within the service. They provided an overview of the library at a policy level, and had a better understanding of the bigger picture.
- Front-line staff: Library assistants working on the front-line. They worked in a variety of user facing roles, with differing levels of responsibility.
- Volunteers: The groups of volunteers were predominantly 'value-added' in that they had been recruited to provide additional support for library staff, working in a variety of roles such as local history, the summer reading challenge, the readers at home service, and helping with events. However, there were also a small number of volunteers who ran their own library, and this group of people

took on roles that included all aspects of library work, previously done by paid for staff. Interestingly, some of these volunteers had previously had roles as value-added volunteers.

- Library users: Anyone who used the library service.

### ***Data collection***

The aim of phase two research therefore was to provide insight into how the different stakeholders perceived the phenomenon of volunteer use in their library service; particularly, their awareness of volunteers existing, and the roles and responsibilities that the volunteers had. In addition, volunteers' recruitment and management, and their value to the library service, together with benefits and problems related to their use, and future directions. The questions differed slightly according to the type of stakeholder, but this approach attempted to build a comprehensive picture of volunteer use from all perspectives.

Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with library managers, which included 'a set of prepared, mostly open-ended questions' (Flick, 2014: 197) and built upon the themes initially investigated in the Delphi study. This allowed flexibility on the part of the interviewer and respondent enabling relevant areas to be discussed, in addition to

other themes that spontaneously arose during the interaction (Corbetta, 2011: 270). Rubin (2012: 36) suggests that using a responsive interviewing approach with a flexible and relaxed style helps to establish 'a relationship of trust between the interviewer and interviewee that leads to more give-and-take in the conversation'. This strategy proved vital for this particular research, due to the political sensitivity of the situation, and the requirement to use library managers as gatekeepers, thereby enabling the researcher access to the other stakeholders required. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed fully by the researcher, then emailed to the interviewee for comment and amendment where appropriate.

Front-line staff perceptions were obtained using an online questionnaire. According to Pickard (2007: 183) a questionnaire is 'the single most popular data collection tool in any research', and it has the benefit of being 'a relatively cheap and quick way of obtaining information' (Bell, 1999: 14). Questions focused on similar areas to the library managers' questions but were less strategic in focus. Library users were also surveyed using a questionnaire, however this was administered in person by the researcher in order to ensure a higher response rate (Pickard, 2007: 199). It is important to note that both surveys had to be limited following requests from library managers, due to the sensitivities of the library environment during the research period; however, this did not greatly affect the ability of the researcher to obtain a variety of stakeholder perspectives.

Volunteers were questioned using four focus groups (two at each case study library authority), which covered similar areas to the other stakeholders. A focus group is defined by Barbour and Kitzinger (1999: 4) as, ‘any group discussion....as long as the researcher is actively encouraging of, and attentive to, the group interaction’. Using a focus group approach enabled the generation of discussion amongst the participants, helping to reveal meaning (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996: 18) and, ‘offering a wealth of opportunities for generating valuable insights’ (King and Horrocks, 2010: 78). It also helped to weed out extreme views, thereby providing checks and balances, whilst being low cost and rich in data (Flick, 2014). Similar to the interviews, focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher, then shared with stakeholders to ensure the accuracy of the information recorded.

### ***Data analysis***

Analysis of the questionnaire data was conducted using a combination of SNAP survey tools and Excel spreadsheets, whilst interview and focus group data was examined further using the constant comparative method (Strauss, 1987). Such analysis involved, ‘taking one piece of data and comparing it with all others that may be similar or different in order to develop conceptualizations of the possible relations between various pieces of data’ (Pickard, 2007: 241). By asking questions to make sense of the data, incidents were compared with other incidents to examine any similarities and differences (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

To assist with this analysis, concepts and themes were gathered from the raw data, using a process of coding, using ‘tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive of inferential information compiled during the study’ (Miles, 1984: p.56). This key component of grounded theory research was an important part of the research process (Flick, 2014: 402).

### **Phase Two findings**

This section of the article discusses the key findings from a triangulation of the results from the phase two research, drawing on the themes that arose following data analysis. Figure 3 below details the initial findings of the qualitative research, and shows the identifiable mismatch of opinions that existed regarding the use of volunteers in the case study libraries. There were a number of contested themes that arose, which will be considered in greater detail in the remainder of this article; relating to volunteer management and use, relationships, control and reward, and professionalism and quality. It was clear that such opinions were influenced by the setting in which the responses were gained, particularly the challenging macro and micro environment. In addition, there existed a complex relationship between the themes, exacerbated by associated enablers and barriers. The role of communication and trust as mechanisms by which to improve the volunteer experience were key components of what constituted successful volunteering, and appeared to be at the root of many of the issues raised.

[Insert Figure 3 here]

***Challenging environment: Urgent, reactive and untested?***

A key theme that emerged from the data related to stakeholder perceptions regarding the transitory nature of public libraries at present, with a move to a hybrid model of public service delivery, which relies on greater volunteer use and less paid staff. This fragile situation appears not only to have somewhat damaged the positive perceptions of volunteer use generally, but has also resulted in a lack of trust coming from all stakeholder groups, exacerbated by financial austerity measures in local authorities, in reaction to national government reductions in state spending. In addition, this situation was viewed by a variety of stakeholders as urgent, reactive and largely untested, resulting in inevitable resource challenges.

‘The ultimate challenge is one of resources, its financial; it is the budget situation we are in... the budget has been massively hit. We’ve so far managed without closing any libraries though we have reduced hours, we’ve also taken hits in the book fund over recent years, but we are now at a situation where there is nowhere else to go really’ (Library manager interview LA1).

Front-line library staff displayed a clear resistance to volunteers undertaking the work of paid staff (58%) and exhibited low morale within their responses, whilst volunteers

acknowledged that such developments had damaged previously good working relationships between paid staff and volunteers.

‘It is a minefield and it is a real shame that value-added volunteers are now probably a bit tainted after being in the service of museums, libraries and archives for years. Doing a really good job that often goes unvalued, it’s just a shame’ (Volunteer focus group LA2).

‘I do think the council is struggling to keep libraries open, and all the cuts that have been made, volunteers taking over are the future unfortunately’ (Volunteer focus group LA2).

These findings tally with those of Goulding (2006: 338) who argues that responses of public libraries to recent economic austerity measures have been largely reactive, and it was evident that stakeholders exhibited a clear cynicism regarding the use of volunteers, such that they increasingly viewed their use as primarily a cost cutting exercise (Pateman and Williment, 2013: 144).

The other part of this challenge relates to that of community capacity, and the difficulties disadvantaged communities face in providing sufficient numbers of willing and able volunteers, with suitable longevity (Arts Council England, 2013). This was a key concern arising from all stakeholders questioned, particularly as the increasing reliance on using volunteers was perceived as largely untested, and indeed, the capacity of the case study communities did appear to be lacking from the sample of library users questioned. When this group were asked directly about their desire to volunteer for their library, over three



quarters of respondents (76%) were negative. Reasons for this, predominantly related to parenting and caring responsibilities, health issues and lack of time, the latter of which Brodie et al. (2009: 31) suggest 'may be an easier more socially acceptable reason' for non-participation, masking other underlying reasons.

The capacity of a local community to assert control over the volunteering effort can be directly related to the responses of local authorities to austerity measures. One of the case study library services (LA1) was a highly deprived ward (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2015), and therefore library managers interviewed identified their concerns concerning the perceived volunteering capacity of the local community, and the lack of technical expertise for those who came forward. It was interesting to note that some of the current volunteers questioned had indeed come from neighboring areas, where capacity was greater, in order to counter a lack of response from the immediate area. 'The local people round here, I don't think any regular customer came forward as a volunteer, we came from outside the area, to me that is as good a reasons as any for keeping it (the library) open' (Volunteer focus group LA2).

This raises the issue of social inclusion, and the representative nature of what is provided, particularly with regard to a library entirely run by volunteers. Those groups deemed at greater risk of social exclusion (such as black and ethnic minorities, people with

disabilities, people with long term illness, or lacking formal qualifications), are already under-represented compared to the population as a whole when considering participation rates in volunteering (Teasdale, 2008: 2). It was evident that many of the volunteers questioned were predominantly retired, exhibiting a strong work ethic and civic duty, with previous links to the library service, and one may argue that such a presence of the usual suspects may deter others from volunteering locally, and therefore work against the development of a fully inclusive library service (Smith, 2002). Although, this may not necessarily be a problem, Pateman and Williment (2013) warn that using volunteers to plug gaps in public library provision may result in social exclusion, in that the service is further polarised attracting users who are similar to the incumbent volunteers, thereby deterring those who feel that they don't belong to this group.

Pateman (1999: 9) considers the 'institutionalised classism' that arises from a predominance of middle classes in public library staffing in the past, together with the challenges this poses for social inclusion. Professional empathy is viewed as an 'important variable in the transaction between public library staff and users, and perhaps more so, in the case of providing services for excluded or disadvantaged groups' (Wilson and Birdi, 2008: 39). Whether sufficient professional empathy is prevalent in the volunteers questioned in this research is a concern. In addition, concerns related to the sustainability of such volunteering efforts were raised particularly by the library managers

interviewed, who considered issues at a more strategic level, and this is consistent with similar concerns raised by Sieghart (2014) in his recent review of the public library service.

### ***Misunderstandings – what do libraries do?***

The research indicated that misunderstandings exist at a variety of levels, and have worked to further disadvantage public libraries. Library managers and front-line staff expressed a clear concern that policy makers, both nationally and locally, appeared to be unclear as to the role of a public library service, in addition to the staff that worked within it. This point is also reinforced by the findings from the Sieghart Review of Public Libraries which argues ‘not enough decision makers at national or local level appear sufficiently aware of the remarkable and vital value that a good library service can offer modern communities’ (Sieghart, 2014: 4). Such misunderstandings undoubtedly affect the ability of libraries to gain financial support in the eyes of national and local government.

‘I really don’t think people understand the skills that librarians have, and to sort of make you another type of officer altogether, to gather payments from people or something, just undervalues everything that a library is’ (Library manager LA1).

‘We are still the butt of jokes in the media and the perception of our role needs to change. We are becoming an increasingly important resource as budgets are cut elsewhere’ (Front-line staff survey LA1).

Certainly, some library user responses displayed a lack of awareness regarding the role of a library professional, together with general confusion regarding volunteer use. Almost two thirds (60%) of library users were unaware that volunteers were used in their library, with a further 7% not being sure, and this lack of awareness is considered by Wandersman and Alderman (1993) to be a key concern. Library users did not appear to fully appreciate the complexity of a library worker’s job, and indicated misguided assumptions that it was akin to a shop assistant role (Pateman and Williment, 2013: 59).

The volunteers at the volunteer-run library felt many library users were often oblivious to their unpaid status. ‘Some people who come through the door, probably still don’t realise we are volunteers, there will be some who think we are library staff’ (Volunteer focus group LA2). This confusion, relating to the public’s perception of what a library is, and what roles its workers have, is identified by Pateman and Williment (2013) as a fundamental problem. ‘Everyone knows what a library is, but many people also have an outdated and sometimes negative image of a boring institution filled with dusty books and even dustier staff’ (Pateman and Williment, 2013: 59). As a result, policy and actions

may be skewed in favour of a particular view of a library service, and the library staff, which can be to the detriment of the wider profession.

All stakeholders considered that volunteers were not without cost, and this appeared to be another fundamental misunderstanding on the part of local and national government. CILIP (2012) supports this view, by challenging strategies that rely on volunteers for reducing public spending as flawed, and impacting on the quality of service delivery, as well as being unsustainable.

### ***Volunteer management and use – getting the balance right?***

Most library managers questioned acknowledged the change that volunteer use was undergoing, from that of being purely value added to a more mixed use, which included greater uptake of volunteers for primary service delivery (job substitution). There was a concern that this change in use had tarnished the relationship between the library service and its previously value-added volunteers, and was fraught with sensitivities. ‘It’s (volunteer use) become tinged lately, there’s not animosity towards them, but there’s definitely a few rumblings amongst staff’ (Library manager interview LA2).

Many respondents identified that effective volunteer use has potentially great benefits in terms of drawing on a wealth of skills and experience, in addition to enriching the

diversity of library workers (both paid and unpaid), but there was also strong agreement that it required careful management if it was to be successful.

A key theme that arose from stakeholders related to the 'line that should not be crossed'. Nearly 60% of library users thought that there was a clear difference between paid library staff and volunteers, the latter having a role which largely resulted from a passion or hobby, such as local history or a craft activity. Holmes (2004: 76) considers the challenges of formally managing what, can be viewed as a leisure activity, and the possible resistance that may ensue from efforts to enforce formal volunteer management policies.

There was discussion from many volunteers regarding the 'saviour role' they had to play, in terms of keeping a library service running. The contradiction as to whether such volunteering efforts, particularly when running a previously closed library, naturally resulted in the de-professionalisation of the service was something that volunteers accepted was inevitably a by-product of their 'good deeds'. 'I've got mixed feelings about this really..... I've enjoyed doing this (volunteering in the library) and it's helping the library out, but I do also look at the other side and think, if it goes too far, it's doing people out of a paid job' (Volunteer focus group LA2).

### ***Relationships – mutually beneficial terms?***

A highly complex set of relationships existed, further intensified by the wider micro and macro environment conditions. The mutually beneficial relationship between volunteers and public libraries (predominantly from past value-added initiatives), was viewed as being challenged by new models of volunteer use. The findings show that although the relationship between volunteers, staff and the library service can work in a reciprocal way, there appears to be an increasing fragility to this relationship, and there existed concern about the continued quality of any library service provided.

One can view the relationship between volunteers and library service as similar to that of symbiotic parasitism, whereby both entities benefit from the relationship whilst, at the same time, preserving each other. This was particularly the case for the value-added volunteers questioned, who reported numerous benefits of being a volunteer, such as being able to borrow books, gaining vital work experience, establishing social contacts, and researching for a PhD.

‘One (value-added volunteer) is actually a researcher, and he is literally doing PhD level research, that we can benefit from, so that is almost not a volunteer situation, but it’s reciprocal in that he gets access to material, and he gives us what he finds’ (Library manager LA2).

However, there was often a delicate equilibrium to be maintained, with library managers suggesting that volunteer use often resulted in the library service needing to assert its authority, in order to ensure that priorities at the service level were met fully. 'It's great to have volunteers, but they are only useful, if they are actually doing what you want them to do' (Library manager LA1).

Smith (2002: 28) considers the vital importance of active volunteer management, warning that, 'task volunteers often lack the strategic understanding that puts individual decisions within the wider context'. As such, library managers viewed the importance of developing a volunteer management policy as key to ensuring that volunteers were effectively recruited, and used for the good of the library.

Front-line staff felt that volunteers and staff could work in harmony (77% of respondents), as did library users (89% of respondents). For the front-line staff survey, it is worth noting that most respondents were predominantly working with value-added volunteers, and commonly used a caveat that harmony would only exist if paid jobs were unthreatened. Whilst the library user responses clearly displayed a higher degree of positivity regarding this aspect, they also indicated a concern that volunteer use should not replace paid workers, and should be a mutually beneficial arrangement.



Trust was also a very important part of this relationship equation, with all stakeholders identifying it as a feature of volunteer management. For library managers, an undervaluing of the role of library staff nationally had resulted in low morale, and a spiraling lack of trust of volunteers.

‘I think front line staff are probably at an all-time low in morale, because they feel undervalued and are given the impression that libraries are not important, and that they are just another drain on government budgets. And that we’ve just been loafing around for years, whereas in reality we have been trimming back budgets for years’ (Library manager interview LA1).

This lack of trust was exhibited by some particularly polarised views of volunteers coming from the front-line staff survey, with nearly a third of respondents considering confidentiality as a key concern, and an observable lack of trust and respect from some respondents regarding the ability of volunteers, with one respondent writing, ‘pay peanuts, get monkeys’. This mirrors wider concerns that library staff are feeling as a result of volunteers increasingly taking on paid staff roles (May, 2013). Volunteers were also aware of such perceptions, and how this affected their ability to act autonomously. This lack of autonomy was a key issue experienced by the volunteers running their own library, who considered that such feelings had put up barriers in terms of co-operation with the wider library service.

‘We have to be a little bit careful, at least some of us feel this way. If we come across library staff, their response to us as volunteers could be anything. They could be thinking, oh the library shouldn’t be doing that, so I’m not going to be helpful. Or they might be thinking that’s it, they’re volunteers, so they don’t know anything anyway’ (Volunteer focus group LA2).

There appeared to be a strong link between trust and the resulting control of volunteers within the case study authorities. Library managers exhibited differing levels of trust of their volunteer groups, understanding that they were not a homogenous entity, with a variety of skills and abilities, and levels of experience. The importance of creating the right physical environment in order to foster acceptance from front-line staff working alongside value-added volunteers was viewed as vital, in addition to ensuring that relationships could improve over time with appropriate management. ‘I think there could be quite a lot of resistance (from staff) to new people (volunteers).....but it is quite a delicate balance’ (Library manager interview LA1).

Stakeholders also raised the importance of belonging and ownership as control facilitators. Volunteers who felt they ‘owned’ the service, appeared to have more of a stake in that service. A library manager discussing value-added volunteers identified, ‘it gives them a stake in the library service, I think that’s the other thing that it does. It makes it clear that it is their library service, not ours’ (Library manager interview LA1), and this

fact was evident from discussions with the volunteers running their own library (LA2). This group of volunteers additionally raised the importance of the autonomy that comes with such trust, together with an appreciation that any independence still required input from the library service, but this was often a difficult balance to achieve. 'It would be nice to have a happy medium of both more freedom, but still have the support.....but I don't think they (library service) would ever let go' (Volunteer focus group LA2).

There was a clear relationship between the length of volunteer service undertaken and the development of trust and loyalty, and resulting ownership perceived, arising from volunteer responses. However, the lack of a contractual employment obligation provided an additional challenge in terms of ensuring control and compliance. Front-line staff discussed a range of measures that could help to facilitate control, including effective communication and developing a sense of belonging, but it is interesting to note that most of the volunteers questioned already had a long-standing association with the library, and therefore additional bonds tying them to their roles. These additional bonds tended to be associated with the volunteer's social and political beliefs.

Brodie et al. (2009) provide an excellent discussion as to why people choose to participate in volunteering, and consider the role an individual's previous life experiences has on their volunteering choices. Searle-Chatterjee (1999: 258) stresses that, 'the propensity

to radical activism is clearly established at an earlier date. It emerges from the intersection of socialisation within the family and personal life experience'. In addition Taylor et al. (2006: 129) identify the importance of 'shared views and common purpose in the volunteer-organisation relationship' for sustaining and securing long term volunteer involvement.

Indeed library managers acknowledged the challenges of controlling volunteers for the good of meeting library service priorities. They suggested the mutually beneficial relationship between volunteers and the library service had been compromised in the current austere environment, and that a volunteer's own agenda, together with their lack of a formal contract gave them an uncontrollable status. Closer supervision and clear communication were themes that arose from the research as possible ways to improve this challenge.

Relationships between volunteers was another issue for library managers, who considered the factions that existed between some of their existing volunteer groups, and the difficulties this could cause, when trying to deliver a cohesive service. 'They've (the volunteers) had arguments amongst themselves. I'm now very aware there are probably 3 distinct groups of people, and they come in at separate times, and they're not

communicating with each other even though they are working on the same project' (Library manager interview LA1).

### ***Control and reward***

Control, or lack of it, was an omnipresent theme relating to a number of facets, some already discussed in this article. This ranged from the lack of control a library service had regarding current austerity measures, and the capacity of a particular community to volunteer in order to plug gaps in service delivery, to ensuring that volunteers delivered wider service priorities, despite a lack of contractual obligation or payment. All volunteers questioned displayed a mix of selfish and altruistic reasons (Merrell, 2000: 34) for volunteering. As previously mentioned, the majority of volunteers were retired, middle class and well educated, often coming from a background of past library use, juggling a variety of similar roles in the third sector, as well as demonstrating a strong passion for civic duty.

Volunteers stated that their volunteering efforts were often the result of a variety of interest related reasons, something Nichols et al. (2015: 84) acknowledge as a key factor in initially deciding to volunteer. Their commitment to the library had evidently grown over time, such that a longer length of volunteer service appeared to generate feelings of ownership, and enhanced loyalty and trust. This supports Bussell and Forbes (2007)

premise that the building of trust is a key part of effective volunteer management. However, the increased longevity of volunteer service can challenge a library, in terms of the agenda that drives a volunteer to keep working, and the difficulty of managing someone who has no employment contract and may be in for only a few hours each week. One library manager summed this up by commenting their management was considerably more challenging than paid staff. 'Volunteers are...tricky to handle. It's more difficult than staff' (Library manager interview LA1).

Front-line staff also warned of the dangers of volunteers taking over, and this contrasted with opinions of the volunteers who discussed the challenges faced by sometimes knowing more than the staff, or feeling restricted by what they could do due to a raft of 'silly rules'.

'I think it should be more that the council should appreciate our volunteering more..... all these silly rules, you can do this, or rather you can't do this and you can't do that!.... And it's frustrating because you think, we're trying to help you out and you're just putting up more and more hurdles, well not even hurdles, because they're not even letting us jump over something. It's like a brick wall around us, it is what you are here for, you are giving up your time, but you can only do this and that's it' (Volunteer focus group LA2).

Wilson (2012: 195) observes 'it is widely understood that volunteers and staff are not only co-dependent but also have conflicting interests', and this creates tensions in the

hybrid delivery of a library service. Holmes (2004) views volunteering from two distinct paradigms, an economic model and a leisure model. If volunteers seek a leisure experience, 'then it would be expected that volunteers may be hostile to efforts to introduce procedures that treat them more like unpaid employees' (Arnett, German and Hunt 2003 in Bussell and Forbes, 2007: 2).

The value of intangible rewards in volunteer management, particularly related to social belonging, is viewed by many as crucial for successful control of volunteers, and those questioned in this research identified the importance of growing together as a social group, in order to ensure commitment and belonging. 'You volunteer as an individual, but you end up being a volunteer group, it wouldn't work individually now, we need each other' (Volunteer focus group LA1).

### *Professionalism – ensuring the quality and accountability of a library service*

Professionalism relates to competence, efficiency and effectiveness, and the assurance of high standards that can be facilitated through limited entry to a profession, coupled with the guarding of knowledge through formalities (Goodall, 2000). The misunderstandings relating to librarianship as a profession, discussed earlier in this article, have clearly had an impact on the ways in which volunteers been used to plug the gap in staffing underfunded library services more recently.

There were certainly contradictions between how staff perceived the ability of volunteers in their library service, as opposed to how the volunteers viewed themselves. Front-line staff detailed a number of key issues with volunteer use relating to commitment and reliability (58%), knowledge and experience (39%), accountability (31%), and confidentiality (31%). Mirroring these concerns, library managers discussed the challenges of managing such a diverse set of people, particularly those who are volunteering predominantly for leisure reasons. 'But those sets of people don't want any more from the situation, they're not looking for jobs, they're not looking for experience, they're just looking for something to do one afternoon a week, or because they are interested' (Library manager interview LA1).



However, many of the volunteers questioned evidently displayed a strong work ethic and defended their ability to work in a professional manner, whilst acknowledging the fact that not being contractually obliged meant they had more freedoms than a paid member of staff. 'One of the differences is they are accountable as employees, we are not. The council staff are more accountable. ....we do have freedom because of that , but we are still constrained by the service agreement' (Volunteer focus group LA2). In addition, viewing volunteering efforts through a work lens may 'reduce the nature of this value to productive outputs only and the wider, more holistic benefits of volunteering can be lost' (Paine et al., 2010: 26).

### ***The role of communication – a tool for gaining acceptance and cohesion***

One can argue that communication, if carried out correctly, can serve as the 'glue' to enable a cohesive approach to volunteer use, and help legitimate the increased use of volunteers in a library service. All respondents viewed communication, at a service level, as a key determining factor for gaining acceptance from paid staff and library users when justifying increased volunteer use. The importance of volunteers not being viewed as a threat to paid staff roles, and not crossing a line in terms of what they would do, was considered vital for library managers and volunteers. Library managers stressed that clear communication with front-line staff enabled better understanding, and acceptance of

volunteer use. This was even more important given the current state of staff emotions relating to this issue, whereby they are feeling particularly vulnerable.

‘You do have to have it clear what the expectations are, what volunteers will do, what they won’t be asked to do. And you have to have it there for the staff as well, because they have to know that you are not bringing in unpaid replacements by the back door, I think.....when we started getting volunteers in to do other things, there was a bit of concern, which is quite natural. When you’re getting self-issue, self-service machines in as well, you have got to be clear what you are doing, to what end’ (Library manager LA1).

A finding that arose from all stakeholders related to the opposing states of volunteer autonomy versus support and guidance. The importance for library managers of having clear volunteer guidelines, and local management in assisting with the furtherance of key corporate priorities was often perceived as a stifling factor on the part of volunteers, especially those running their own library (LA2). After having run the library independently, they felt constrained in terms of the powers that they had, and they considered the lack of communication from the parent library authority as frustrating and unhelpful. Whereas library managers, felt such control was vital to ensure accountability. ‘So yes, they (volunteers) do require a lot closer supervision, because really they are not accountable’ (Library manager LA2).

In addition, communication helped to signal to volunteers that their efforts were appreciated, in addition to improving their cohesion as a group between themselves and with the wider service and its paid staff. 'We don't have to be doing this, we're doing this, not out of the kindness of our hearts; obviously we want to do it, but appreciation would be nice' (Volunteer focus group LA1).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion the second phase of this research has provided further evidence that public library volunteer use is moving from a value-added role, in keeping with the dominant paradigm, to a staff replacement role more akin with the civil society and leisure paradigms of volunteering (Lyons, 1998, cited in Rochester et al., 2009). There appears to be an increasing mixed delivery approach to public library services, with greater reliance on volunteers. Such a swift and dramatic change has not been without tension and challenge, and there are understandably many concerns arising from the stakeholders as a result.

One could argue that this research has helped to further illustrate the culture shift that is happening within libraries, and public services more generally, towards the concept of co-production (Bovaird, 2007: : 847) , or what Mulgan (2012) in Clarence and Gabriel (2014: 21) calls the relational state model. Hence, public services no longer do something

*to*, or *for* the community, but rather work *with* the community as a regular long-term relationship, where the balance of power has shifted away from the state. Co-production was already a key part of past professionally driven community engagement initiatives; however, current developments are perhaps influenced more greatly by a desire to reduce budgets. Any move towards co-production of public services requires well-informed, coordinated citizens for maximum success, together with much discussion, planning and support, which does not appear to be fully in existence at present.

There is much library professional concern relating to an apparent lack of understanding on the part of politicians and the wider community regarding what a library service is, and what the staff employed actually do. There is a worry that such ignorance is driving policy decisions, both nationally and regionally, and filtering down to volunteer quality in individual libraries.

The community capacity to provide for such volunteering is not uniform, and clearly links to the demographic constitution of a particular authority. Both authorities investigated had issues regarding such capacity in areas of their community.

### *Unintended consequences*

There are a number of unintended consequences that arise from this situation: These include social exclusion, reduced accountability and quality of service, and a blurring of boundaries that destabilises the functioning of harmonious working relationships within the library, and these will be discussed briefly.

***Social exclusion.*** The research identified that volunteers came from particular sections of the local community, and were predominantly retired, middle-class and well educated. There is a concern that their presence may deter other members of the community, thereby creating an exclusive, rather than inclusive service. Further research is proposed that examines this phenomenon more carefully, and considers whether the existence of these ‘usual suspects’, is perceived as a barrier by other potential volunteers, and library non-users.

***Accountability and quality of service.*** The very nature of a volunteer means that they have the potential to be less accountable than a paid member of library staff. The research uncovered doubts from a variety of stakeholders regarding the ability of volunteers to consistently deliver a high quality, fully accountable library service. The Leadership for Libraries Taskforce (2016) recently suggested the use of a voluntary accreditation scheme for library services, whereby they ensure that delivery of their service adheres to an ‘expectation set’ assessed by outcome. In addition the The National Council for

Voluntary Organisations (2017) has created a volunteer standard in order to benchmark the quality of volunteer management within an organisation using volunteers.

There appears to be a lack of clarity as to how increased volunteer use would actually work in practice, and whether this would achieve adequate control of what is essentially an uncontrollable force. It was evident that stakeholder perspectives regarding the library service were influenced greatly by the role that they had within the service, and their perception of whether they felt they were an insider or outsider to the library as an institution.

Many of the volunteers questioned had come to the library initially through a desire to further a leisure interest, and this did not always sit well with wider library service priorities. Some staff discussed the emergence of parasitic rather than mutually beneficial relationship between the library service and volunteers, which worked to the detriment of the library service.

***Blurred boundaries.*** There was a challenge relating to the perceived boundaries between library staff and volunteers working together in a library service. This has certainly become more sensitive in the current context, and the importance of building positive relationships between all stakeholders is crucial for ensuring a suitable balance of power, and harmonious working relationships.

### *Ways forward*

It is clear that within a hybrid library environment a mix of mechanisms, both formal and informal, are required such that volunteers become a positive asset for the service. These mechanisms require sufficient time, money and planning in order to ensure that they are appropriately targeted, and meet wider service priorities.

In terms of formal mechanisms, the research identified that recruitment, selection and training of volunteers, together with a visible volunteer policy are important ways to ensure that public libraries get the best out of this resource, thereby matching skills to provision. Library staff who manage volunteers would also benefit from additional skills development in areas such as volunteer training, relationship building, partnership working and leadership skills to ensure the successful integration of volunteers. Such initiatives are not without cost, and investment is essential to support volunteer development and ensure a quality, user centred service. Indeed, many library schools now include an element of volunteer management within their librarianship modules, such as Northumbria University and Manchester Metropolitan University.

Volunteers too require adequate training to enable them to appreciate the bigger picture, and ensure that they embrace public library culture, helping to build understanding and loyalty. Training in aspects such as customer service, the role of a library, and community

engagement can serve to enhance their offer, and in addition to providing a binding mechanism such that they feel part of the wider organisation.

Informal mechanisms are equally as important in the volunteer management equation, as they underpin the more formal mechanisms, and act as a psychological contract with the library (Taylor et al., 2006). This research discovered that ownership, trust and mutual understanding were all key factors, which contributed positively to the volunteer experience. Such simple aspects had a considerable effect on how people felt about their working environment, their role, and what contribution they were making to the library service. These mechanisms over time will help to build loyalty, thereby ensuring a more stable library environment, and greater cohesion.

Use of shared spaces for working, autonomy and partnership working may serve to enhance the situation, in addition to clear and open communication, which seeks to bind further the linkages between the stakeholders.

It is therefore suggested that the application of a volunteer relationship management (VRM) strategy, which seeks to build and improve further relationships between volunteers and the more formal parts of a library service, is an important way to improve loyalty and work for the good of library service priorities and the wider community.



### ***Recommendations for good practice***

1. The key to successful volunteer use is to establish a mutually beneficial relationship between the library service and volunteer that benefits both actors, in addition to serving individual local community requirements. Therefore, no one size fits all approach that can be adopted, and success variables will need to be tailored to each library service.
2. Mechanisms that help to develop respect and understanding amongst all stakeholders are very important to the smooth functioning of a high quality library service: In such a politically sensitive area, it is vital that individuals have a dialogue that values the importance of paid staff *and* volunteers.
3. Relationship building between all stakeholders, particularly paid staff and volunteers, volunteers and library users, and between the volunteers themselves is important to enhance understanding and cohesion. This means managers need to find ways of ensuring that all library workers, paid or unpaid, understand the role they play in delivering a cohesive library service, in addition to the bigger picture.
4. It is essential that a volunteer is viewed as part of a larger team delivering the service (whether they be paid or unpaid), rather than just an individual. This helps

build a sense of belonging, thereby enhancing ownership and loyalty, which positively benefits the library service in the longer term.

5. Communication is vital to the smooth functioning of a volunteering effort. Face-to-face communication with fellow volunteers, staff and the wider library service is the primary mechanism required to counter misunderstandings and encourage cohesion, in addition to the use of other communication tools.
6. Misunderstandings damage stakeholder cohesion; hence, there is a need to ensure transparency across the whole library service, with the creation of clear lines of communication, such that all stakeholders understand their role, and know where the boundaries lie.
7. Physical library space has an important role to play in building relationships. Separating volunteers from paid staff can further reinforce divisions, but placing the two groups together can result in an unnecessary burden on paid staff, and challenge what may be a sensitive situation. Making sure that the volunteers and paid staff have the time and space to come together as a team is important.
8. Effective volunteer management and clear roles/responsibilities can help to counter misunderstandings, and ensure a professional approach. An initial induction of volunteers so that they are clear of their role, and how this fits with the wider service priorities, is vital to a successful start. It is also important to have a workplace structure that facilitates the management and support of

volunteers, in order to enable all stakeholders to appreciate how they fit together in the wider service provision. Matching a person's traits to a volunteer role is crucial in order to ensure that volunteers work well in the role that they have, yet also work well as part of a wider team (formalised recruitment and selection similar to organisations such as the Citizen's Advice Bureaux may assist this process).

9. Volunteers require training to ensure they fully understand their role, service expectations and standards, in addition to the bigger picture. This costs money, and takes time, but helps to ensure a quality of service delivery.
10. Library staff managing volunteers require the appropriate skills that will enable them to get the best out of their volunteers. Many library staff qualified at a time when volunteers were used for value-added roles, in a less intensive manner. It is recommended that library staff receive additional training so that their skill set is appropriate for supporting the current hybrid service delivery. Key areas of focus being partnership working, intrinsic reward management and project delivery.
11. Customer focus is a key mechanism for ensuring volunteers deliver a service that is of a sufficient standard, and it is suggested that they receive adequate training to ensure they understand and apply the concept.
12. A positive outlook regarding volunteer use in public libraries is an important success variable for all stakeholders. Therefore, it is important to publicise the

benefits of such partnerships with all stakeholders including the wider user community, in order to deal with potential misunderstandings and resistance.

13. The development of volunteer relationship management (VRM) strategies using a range of techniques and technologies is vital to ensure a library service that matches wider service priorities.

Increased use of volunteers in public library services is inevitable given current political and economic developments, and therefore it is important that librarians utilise this unpredictable, yet often extremely valuable resource with care and caution. The role of CILIP in advocating the importance of well trained, professional library staff, and how this relates to a high quality, socially inclusive public library service is perhaps key in helping to support local strategies for using volunteers, and countering the misguided association with the shop assistant role (Pateman and Williment, 2013) which has fueled current policy developments. Increased use of volunteers may not be a panacea, but perhaps it offers a pragmatic way forward in what is likely to remain a particularly challenging public library landscape.

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