

Volunteering in Cultural Services

“There is no “one type” of person as a volunteer”



**Report of Community Services & Culture Scrutiny Committee
Spring 2012**

1. Purpose of Report

The Community Services & Culture Scrutiny Committee undertook an in depth study into volunteering within Culture Services for Southend-on-Sea Borough Council. The Committee was supported in this work by a dedicated Project Team, comprising:

- Councillor Ann Holland (Chairman), Councillor Dr Blaine Robin (Vice Chairman), Councillors Stephen Ayles, Margaret Borton, Ann Chalk, Alan Crystall, Barry Godwin, Adam Jones and Chris Walker.
- Officer / partner support was provided by – Nick Harris, Sharon Wheeler and Fiona Abbott
- Facilitator – Brenda Cook, advisor, Centre for Public Scrutiny, utilising support from the ‘Ageing well’ programme.

The aim of this report is to share our findings from the review, inform working practices and make a series of recommendations for consistency of practice for the recruitment and retention of volunteers across the Council.

Our thanks go to all those who have been involved with the project, those who took the time to attend meetings, participate in events and respond to questionnaires. This input has helped to enrich the findings of the report and will help us to shape the future of volunteering within both Culture Services and across the Council.

2. Background

For many people becoming a volunteer is not a decision but something that happens quite by chance. From a simple offer of help at a school fête, shopping for a neighbour, washing the 5-a-side kit, a love of gardening or being a ‘listening ear’ to someone during a difficult time.

Every day millions of people in the UK are involved in voluntary work, but many more are needed. It is therefore imperative that we make sure we are doing all that we can to look after our existing volunteers and recruit new volunteers in a highly competitive market.

The Council has been using volunteers in Culture Services for many years; some of whom have given their time and commitment over decades. With the prominence of Big Society, coupled with 2011 being the European Year of Volunteering across the European Union, the Community Services & Culture Scrutiny Committee wanted to examine the experience of existing volunteers to ascertain:

- how the Council currently supports them,
- how the Council’s new and emerging volunteer policy can / will aid this process,
- how opportunities for volunteering are identified and advertised, and
- areas for improvement.

What is volunteering?

Volunteering can be both formal and informal. This review concentrated on the formal volunteering activities and opportunities for adults (aged 18+ years) within the Council's Culture Services.

Formal volunteering is any activity or work in the community where people chose to undertake a specific task for others without expecting or requiring payment.

A volunteer is a person who gives freely of his / her time, skills and experience without expectation of financial reward. Each volunteer has a valuable contribution to make to the organisation and plays a key role within the community.

A volunteer freely gives of his or her time with the primary aim of bringing benefit to the local community. Volunteering is distinct from, for example, work placements, secondments or community service where the primary driver is to obtain work experience, progress towards a qualification or legal or judicial obligation.

Why should we involve volunteers?

- We recognise that volunteers bring experience, skills, knowledge and a community understanding that is highly valuable. They add value to us as a Local Authority and can complement the skills of existing staff.
- Volunteering is an important expression of citizenship and a powerful force for change. Volunteers make a unique contribution to society and must be valued, supported and well managed.
- The volunteers we involve raise awareness of our services within their local community and may generate interest from other potential volunteers.
- Involving volunteers enables us to expand the services we can offer, increasing the breadth and richness of activities, services and support available to the local community.
- Volunteers act as a community conduit and help build links with associated groups and clients as well as contributing grassroots experience to our planning and communication.
- Volunteering is good for us! It has been shown to help improve health and well-being and provides opportunities for individuals to acquire skills and knowledge that can enhance career and employment prospects. Volunteering has the potential to create new social networks, reduce isolation and positively support people through retirement.
- Finally, volunteering has been shown to contribute around £23bn¹ to the UK economy.

¹ TUC A Charter for Strengthening Relations Between Paid Staff and Volunteers Dec 2009

3. What we did

The Project Team met on 5 occasions and considered a wealth of evidence, including data about current volunteers within Culture Services. The project team decided that the most effective way to gather current, qualitative evidence would be through holding a stakeholder event.

3.1 Stakeholder Event

Volunteers, scrutiny project team members, key partner organisations and Council officers were invited to a dedicated stakeholder event held on 10th November 2011². The event was opened by the Chairman, Councillor Ann Holland and facilitated by Brenda Cook MA, Consultant, Coach, & Facilitator and Expert Adviser for the Centre for Public Scrutiny.

At the event participants discussed and explored:

- The volunteer experience and the added value volunteers bring to the organisation and the community
- How the Council recruits, manages and retains volunteers
- Where Culture Services uses volunteers and what for
- Where could volunteering be developed
- What are the motivations for people wanting to volunteer specifically within Culture
- Are volunteers' motivations fully met by the reality of volunteering
- How does the Council's volunteer policy provide a framework for volunteers within Culture Services?
 - is it user friendly for staff managing volunteers?
 - does it give volunteers enough information so they know what to expect as a volunteer in Culture Services?

Volunteer Policy

At the event, the Council's new volunteer policy was presented.³ This was welcomed by our partners in the Voluntary Sector, commenting that it was both "robust and comprehensive" and an excellent signal of good practice for the wider community.

The policy did spark wider debates surrounding the mechanism in which the Council adopted / launched the policy and around the reimbursement of out of pocket expenses for volunteers. Members felt that there needed to be a launch of the policy and that it should be rolled out amongst existing volunteers.

Key points from the event regarding the policy were around the length of the policy, a desire for it to be kept as simple as possible, relevant to the role they

² Further information about the event – format, delegates etc is available on request. Event was attended by 30 people

³ Presented by Craig Jones, HR

are applying for and to be available in other formats. There was a general sense from the existing volunteers within the audience that they agreed in principle with the volunteer agreement but that it would need to be implemented in such a way that all volunteers were confident that they understood what they were signing.

The volunteer policy recommends that volunteers are reimbursed reasonable out of pocket expenses. It was recognised that not all volunteers choose to claim expenses and that some service areas indicated that they would struggle financially to reimburse expenses. In general, there was a lack of clarity on this area. The non-payment of expenses could become a barrier to attracting new volunteers, particularly at a time of high unemployment; this area needs to be clarified further and the implications of the Council adopting a particular policy stance understood.

Recruitment / Opportunities

Delegates undertook a recruitment exercise⁴ which was well received and served to illustrate the number of activities involved in the active recruitment and retention of volunteers. To do this properly and consistently can be time-consuming and could cause capacity issues in individual service areas, ultimately providing a barrier to recruitment. The introduction of the Council's volunteer policy should aid this process and provides the required framework. Flexibility is key, the policy and process should be adaptable to both the service needs and the specific volunteer policy.

The key messages around volunteering opportunities and recruitment were:

- Reinforce the message that volunteers are not a replacement for paid staff
- Promotion of Southend as a volunteering town, making use of existing branding "Volunteer-on-Sea"
- Volunteer champions / roving ambassadors / advocates
- Host a volunteer fayre in partnership with other organisations
- Take recruitment to places where people go (shopping centres etc)
- The need for a dedicated volunteering area on the Southend-on-Sea Borough Council website to promote and advertise opportunities.

Delegates were also able to view 3 short clips on YouTube⁵ from filming that took place as part of Reading Sight website project at Southend Library in July 2011.

⁴ With thanks to colleagues at the Volunteer Centre, SAVS for allowing us to use this exercise at the event

⁵ See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FvioiY9T88Q&feature=related> ;
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxoXMIj1CQ8&feature=related> ;
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nm1N_ydwbAQ&feature=related

The remainder of the event focused on gathering information and experiences from the point of view of a volunteer and that of a manager using volunteers.

The Table below highlights the [key findings](#):

Topic Area	Volunteer:	Manager:
Motivations	Be of use / give something back/ make a difference. Passion for the subject area Gain experience – help with employment prospects Try something new	Satisfaction & reward – working with a variety of people Creating a sense of team, e.g. social events
Expectations	Self fulfillment, social interaction, inspire others, honest engagement Role must have purpose Clear communication & feedback	Skills & commitment Reliability Communication Enthusiasm Representative for the service / Council Recognition of volunteer contribution
Challenges	(Finding)Time Flexibility Physical location of role (transport issues) Staff willingness to work alongside volunteers Training Job satisfaction	Being clear & focused on the role and sticking to it Providing a positive experience for the volunteer Time to support the volunteer properly Keeping authority & striking a balance whilst creating a fun & interesting atmosphere Cost – involving & supporting volunteers Dealing with ‘difficult’ behaviour
Barriers	Wary of CRB checks Relationship with paid staff ‘them & us’ situations Bureaucratic processes Confidence Views on job substitution Unrecognised skills	Cost - recruitment, training, management, expenses Workforce agreement Capacity to manage volunteers Funding

A useful diagram exploring the issues is attached at **Annex 1**.

3.2 Focus Group

A further focus group took place with some volunteers in January 2012. Again with support from Brenda Cook, this explored in more depth the volunteer experience and the added value that volunteers bring to the organisation, the community and to the volunteer themselves⁶.

The volunteers who attended this session expressed their general satisfaction with their volunteering activity and had both been undertaking the role for many years. One of the volunteers came across the opportunity by chance; i.e. on a regular visit to the Beecroft Art Gallery, they were approached and asked. The other, responded to an advertisement in a local paper. At the beginning of their placements, flexibility around time commitments was important; one was working as a supply teacher and felt that she would be able to accommodate the volunteer commitment (one morning a month) with existing commitments. The other person was newly retired and again the time commitment required fitted in with their circumstances.

The main attraction to volunteering for the Beecroft Art Gallery was their interest in art; both were already frequent visitors to the Gallery and the opportunity was an extension of their existing interests, allowing them to see art, meet other people and talk about a topic they enjoyed.

Neither of the volunteers felt involved with the way the service was delivered and did not get any specific information directly aimed at them, and relied upon information leaflets for the general public to inform them on current and forthcoming exhibitions.

Having volunteered at the Beecroft Art Gallery for many years, both volunteers advised that they may be able to offer more of their time to the Gallery and would be happy to be approached by staff if other volunteers were unable to make their allotted slot and needed cover. Both also advised that if there were more opportunities for the volunteers to meet and get to know each other, they could exchange contact details and arrange 'cover' between them without having to bother the staff, who they appreciated were very busy.

Both volunteers were keen that their volunteering role allowed them to do something worthwhile and have a purpose; if they felt they were not being useful or that they were taking the place of paid staff; they would be more likely to stop volunteering for the service.

Both volunteers provided useful suggestions on how the service could attract more volunteers; they felt that any recruitment should clearly specify the role

⁶ We explored their motivation for wanting to volunteer specifically within Culture; (planned or 'fell into'); the main benefits of volunteering (what keeps them coming back); what would make volunteering more attractive (how get new volunteers); their views on the new Council policy; what may make them less likely to volunteer; whether feel 'part of the service'; how they get information about the organisation; whether get regular supervision (opportunities for feedback).

the volunteer would undertake rather than being vague. They both felt that often, people need to be 'prompted' into action and that by tapping into their interests there were better chances of successfully recruiting more people.

Neither of the volunteers were aware of the Council's new volunteer policy. Their first impressions were that it seemed daunting and too bureaucratic for them and would have put them off from applying / becoming a volunteer. They both felt the policy was disproportionate to the role they play and the amount of time they give each month (3 hours a month). They did appreciate that for certain roles, some of the checks (e.g. Criminal Records Bureau) would be appropriate. They appreciated the 'informality' of their roles and did not want a more formal structure introduced, such as regular supervision / feedback sessions with a member of staff. The idea of the 'volunteer agreement' was more warmly received and may be something that both volunteers could sign up to.

Both volunteers reiterated several times through the event how much they enjoyed their experience with the Beecroft Art Gallery and the support they received from the staff, who always made them welcome.

3.3 Demographic Profile of volunteers

The demographic profile of the current volunteers within Culture was also looked into in depth in order to help us gain a better understanding of who they are.

A survey was sent out to 70 volunteers from the home library service / Museums service, who were asked to provide the following information – frequency of volunteering; whether volunteer for any other service / organisation; reasons for volunteering / motivation and what could make the experience of volunteering better.

The response rate was excellent – for the home library service, the response rate was 91% and for the museums service it was 68%, giving an overall response rate 74.3%.

Key findings from the survey were:

- 71% of respondents are aged 70 or above
- 73% are female
- 87% are white British
- 4% have a registered disability
- 10% have caring responsibilities
- 33% also volunteer for other organisations
- Length of time volunteering for the Council ranged from 2 years to over 35 years

The majority of volunteers took the opportunity to express their satisfaction with their role and indicated they have had a positive experience. When asked

to provide suggestions on how to make their experience better, those who provided a response generally identified areas that would improve the service they were delivering to the benefit of the end user / wider community rather than themselves. These comments, along with areas for improvement, will be shared with both the Home Library Service and the Museums Service to enable them to make improvements where possible.

See **Annex 2 & 3** for some further information.

3.4 Home Library Service Reading Group Visit

Following a suggestion from Simon Wallace, Community & Diversity Manager, Southend Libraries, 2 Members of the Project Team were able to meet with housebound readers belonging to the Home Library Service Reading Group, which meets at Kent Elms Library on 10th January 2012.

This enabled Members to meet several customers and also speak to a library volunteer who assists the “Dial-a-Read” book group. The volunteer has been involved for about 3 years and her involvement enables this group to happen for a wider range of people. It is doubtful that the group would continue in its current form without the assistance of the volunteer due to the health circumstances of the readers.⁷

4 Conclusions and what we can do next

Volunteering in Cultural Services is well established with lots of evidence of exceptional practice in supporting volunteers. From a service perspective the impact of volunteering is positive and it is recognised that some services would struggle to continue without the involvement of volunteers, e.g. home library service.

It makes economic, social environmental and moral sense for our volunteers to be members of our local community and for us to build a mutually beneficial relationship with our community neighbours. This is where we feel the Council’s Members have a vital role to play; as community leaders they are well placed to direct their ward members to opportunities for volunteering within their local community.

It is important that we ensure that the Council’s policies and procedures are flexible to support the different volunteer opportunities that exist within Culture Services and allowing them to successfully compete within the highly competitive market for volunteers. The policy needs to be adaptable to take account of short term volunteers and one-off volunteers; one size does not fit all. We believe that our volunteers should be properly recruited, trained,

⁷ For further information contact Simon Wallace - librarycommunityteam@southend.gov.uk
Follow Southend Libraries on Twitter <http://twitter.com/southendlibrary>
Sign up to our Facebook page <http://www.facebook.com/southendlibraries>

supported and protected; our service users also need to be similarly protected.

Volunteering is an activity that is undertaken as an act of freewill, without concern for financial gain. At the same time it is best practice for volunteers to be reimbursed for their out of pocket expenses. Such payments should be clearly identified and documented to avoid any suggestion arising that they represent pay which may affect benefit entitlement or breach conditions under which asylum seekers are allowed to remain in the country. The reimbursement of expenses is good practice and avoids discrimination against people on low incomes, or for example, disabled people who may have to use taxis. The volunteer does have the right to decline reimbursement of expenses; however, it needs to be clear that they can be claimed.

Volunteers make a huge contribution to Culture Services for no financial gain and it is entirely appropriate that we should tell them how much we value them. For volunteers, being valued also means being respected for their contribution and involved in the life and work of the organisation. Consistently, research⁸ makes it clear that being thanked at the end of the day, while seemingly a small thing, helps volunteers feel appreciated.

Where resources allow, a celebratory annual event should be hosted to formally thank our volunteers. We heard how the possibility for informal networks within the volunteers could enable volunteers be self supporting in certain situations.

5 Our Recommendations

The following recommendations link to the agreed project plan and the proposed outcomes of the project and are made to enhance the and further develop the invaluable role of volunteering within Cultural Services

Cabinet is recommended to agree the following conclusions:

1	<p>The development of the Council Volunteering Policy is welcomed and the Council adopt the Policy subject to the following conditions:</p> <p>(a) Recruitment process - that a lighter touch version of the current application form is produced in liaison with relevant business areas.</p> <p><i>Comments:</i> <i>The Policy should enhance and support the existing provision in Culture. The paperwork for volunteers needs to be 'lighter touch', more user friendly / less bureaucratic and provide clarification as to why certain information is required and to identify the basic (or core) information needed for non sensitive roles.</i></p> <p><i>The Council Policy needs to balance the need to collect sufficient information to make an informed decision about person's suitability for a role with the type of volunteering</i></p>
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⁸ For life – not just Volunteers' Week, Mark Restall, July 2003

	<p>role & the extent to which the individual will be volunteering with SBC (time input).</p> <p>(b) Consultation on the Policy is required with the wider community, including existing volunteers.</p> <p><i>Comment:</i> There needs to be end user engagement of an amended policy prior to full roll out.</p>
2	<p>That prior to recruiting Volunteers, the business area will need to ensure it has made sufficient budgetary provision for the role and this has been made clear to both parties prior to placement: this includes, but is not limited to the payment of expenses.</p>
3.	<p>That the Corporate Director ACS work towards establishing a named officer with responsibility for Volunteering in Culture.</p> <p><i>Comment:</i> It is envisaged that this role will also encourage volunteering in the community in areas aligned to Culture.</p>
4	<p>Recognition & reward of volunteers – that the officer responsible for volunteering seek to ensure greater uniformity of practice across Culture.</p> <p><i>Comments:</i> Where resources allow, a celebratory annual event should be hosted to formally thank our volunteers. Consult with our volunteers on the kind of event they would like but it might be an Afternoon Tea or a social event.</p>
5	<p>That consideration be given to developing a ‘cultural wide’ event similar to that already in place in Library Services.</p>
6	<p>That the role of elected members as ‘volunteer champions’ needs to be developed.</p> <p><i>Comment:</i> As community leaders, Members are ideally placed to direct their constituents to volunteering opportunities in response to local issues.</p>
7	<p>That volunteering opportunities need to be promoted and advertised widely, using a range of methods.</p> <p><i>Comments:</i> There needs to be range of options to advertise volunteering, need to be specific about volunteering opportunity, what it entails & time commitment involved. Consider using the SBC website to promote volunteering opportunities – should be prominent and easy to navigate to the section on website re volunteering opportunities – also include links to Volunteer Centre (SAVS). The benefits of Volunteering could be promoted as an active choice for acquiring skills and opportunities for social interactions.</p>
8	<p>That Culture Services recruit a diverse range of volunteers from within the local community.</p> <p><i>Comment:</i> A high proportion of existing long term, regular volunteers are from a certain age bracket, gender and ethnic background.</p>
9	<p>That the Culture Services report back to scrutiny in 12 months on progress in implementing the recommendations.</p>

Annex 1
'mapping of suggestions' - stakeholder event



Volunteering in Cultural Services – Questionnaire Responses Summary

Overall issued 65 letters, with a potential response rate of 70, received 52 responses giving an overall response rate of 74.3%.

Home Library Service:

Issued 49 letters which included 5 husband & wife volunteer couples – potential for 54 responses to be received.
Received a total of 41 responses from HLS volunteers – response rate 90.7%.

Gender	Male			Female	
	14			27	
Age Range	50's	60's	70's	80's	Not stated
	6	8	25	1	1
Registered disability	Yes			No	
	2			39	
Ethnicity	White British	White Irish	White European	Scottish	Not stated
	36	1	1	1	2
Caring Responsibilities	Yes			No	
	5			36	
Volunteering for other organisations:	Yes			No	
	16			25	
Length of time volunteering for the service	Minimum: 2 years, Maximum : 35+ years				
Frequency of volunteering	Majority once a fortnight, 3 people once a month, 1 person once a week and several also provide Relief cover as required.				

The volunteers were also asked to provide us with information regarding their reasons for volunteering for the service and also if there were any improvements that the Council could make that would enhance their volunteer experience.

Museums Service – Beecroft Art Gallery:

16 letters issued – 11 responses received; response rate 68.75%.

Gender	All female				
Age Range	60's	70's	80's	90's	Not stated
	1	6	2	1	1
Registered disability	Yes			No	
	0			11	
Ethnicity	White British			Not stated	
	9			2	
Caring Responsibilities	Yes			No	
	0			11	
Volunteering for other organisations:	Yes			No	
	1			10	
Length of time volunteering for the service	Minimum: 5 years, Maximum : 10 years				
Frequency of volunteering	Once a month (1/2 day)				

See **Annex 3** for suggestions for improvements provided by these volunteers⁹.

⁹ individual response for reasons are available on request.

Suggestions for improvement – some comments received from volunteers¹⁰

Home Library Service:

Q Is there anything else the Council could do that would make your experience of volunteering with the Home Library Service better?

- ❖ Keeping us up to date with any changes with our clients on our regular routes, i.e. Sickness, death
- ❖ Can't think of anything - I enjoy it!
- ❖ Car park space at the library when selecting or refreshing books
- ❖ No, I have received excellent support. It would be good if they could encourage more young people.
- ❖ No, except a larger volume of books at the small libraries.
- ❖ Perhaps a rotation of books between libraries would make selecting materials for our customers easier?
- ❖ More counselling!
- ❖ No - HLS volunteers are brilliantly supported, organised & valued
- ❖ With the high level of youth unemployment currently, we should encourage young people to do voluntary work. It looks good on their CV and just might help to expand their view on work generally.
- ❖ A new car!!
- ❖ Help us all to make known this service to the general public. So many people have never heard of it & then have been thrilled to be able to use it.
- ❖ Recognition e.g. At STARS awards. Involvement in planning & delivering new initiatives. A volunteer co-ordinator. Payment of expenses at the nationally agreed rate.
- ❖ No. Ought to have higher profile in local paper & radio.
- ❖ We don't really reach enough people. I do 25 - 35 for meals on wheeler but about 5 for Books on wheels!
- ❖ Advertising so people who are housebound will feel less cut off, also for more volunteers as people do enjoy our visits.

¹⁰ All comments have been shared with service managers

- ❖ No. Simon Wallace and staff at Kent Elms & Westcliff branches have always sought to be helpful and positive.
- ❖ They do a very good job at present - especially the Library Service.
- ❖ Provide parking at Leigh Library for volunteers to load books into their cars.
- ❖ Library staff always very helpful. Cannot think of any improvement at the present time.

Museums Service:

Q Is there anything else the Council could do that would make your experience of volunteering with the Museum Service better?

- ❖ No thank you. I have decided not to volunteer in the future because of my age, so please take my name off your mailing list
- ❖ Build the new Art Gallery / Museum on the Cliffs as proposed
- ❖ A better bus service from the Highlands (Leigh) area
- ❖ No, the experience is enjoyable and the staff supportive and friendly.
- ❖ No, but could we perhaps issue info in the forms of maps / guides to our parks & the museums for people who come from as far away as Kent and Clacton
- ❖ No, I don't think so, all the staff at the Beecroft are so very nice, I always enjoy me time there. P.S. I did have the honour of meeting Cllr Ann Holland about 2 years ago in January as she was with us at a tree planting ceremony at one of the parks, for survivors of the Holocaust, and although my dear husband had passed away he did survive Auschwitz. What a lovely lady.
- ❖ Either build the new museum or repair the poor old Beecroft before it slides gracefully into the sea! (with us inside it!)
- ❖ No - all staff are very pleasant and make me a cup of coffee - what more could I want?
- ❖ I can't think of anything.

For further information about this report please contact:

Fiona Abbott
Project coordinator
Democratic Services
Support Services Directorate
PO Box 6
Civic Centre
Victoria Avenue
Southend-on-Sea
Essex
SS2 6ER

01702 215104

www.southend.gov.uk

fionaabbott@southend.gov.uk