

MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

AGENDA ITEM 8b

28 APRIL 2015

<p>REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY TASK AND FINISH GROUP - VOLUNTEERS</p>

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1. To present the interim findings of the Scrutiny Task and Finish Group following its examination of volunteers in Middlesbrough Council.

BACKGROUND

2. In 2013, The Local Government Chronicle estimated that about a quarter of the adult population was involved in volunteering on a formal basis. In recent years, principally as a result of public sector budget reductions, the number of volunteers in local government, including Middlesbrough Council, has increased.
3. The task and finish group sought to examine the use of volunteers in Middlesbrough Council and the impact on the authority's services. In order to provide a focus for its work, the group concentrated on two Council service areas - ie libraries and the museums service. However, it is acknowledged that the use of volunteers is widespread across the authority's services.

MEMBERSHIP AND FINDINGS

4. The task and finish group comprised Councillors J Walker and N Walker. The group investigated this topic over four informal meetings held between 1 December 2014 and 19 March 2015. Members also undertook visits to Middlesbrough libraries and the Captain Cook Birthplace Museum to speak to volunteers.
5. The task and finish group's findings are set out below.

Background and Current Position

6. Members met with the Council's Liaison Officer, Economic Development Culture and Communities. The following points were highlighted.
7. Middlesbrough Council does not have an agreed volunteer strategy, although the current approach is to maximise opportunities for volunteers. A Volunteers Register is maintained, that lists all Council volunteers, whether active or not. Inclusion on the register ensures that volunteers are insured for work undertaken on Council land.

8. For insurance purposes, volunteers must be a minimum of 12 years old. While there is no upper age limit, any insurance payments relating to volunteers over 70 are automatically halved. Also, such volunteers are required to sign a disclaimer to acknowledge that their age means that they are not personally insured by the Council.
9. In order to encourage volunteers and simplify the application process, the relevant form has been reduced in size/simplified. Volunteers for libraries were previously required to complete the Council's full employment application form. It was considered that this may have deterred potential volunteers.
10. Applications can also be made online, via the Council's website. Applicants are required to provide details of two referees. In addition, disclosure and barring service (DBS) checks are made on applicants where required, with the Council paying the necessary fee.
11. The website has a page to promote volunteering in the authority and the wide-ranging opportunities that are available. The website indicates that Middlesbrough Council is keen to welcome people who want to help others and highlights that volunteering can provide rewarding opportunities that can make a real difference to peoples' lives and local communities. It can help people to feel they are making a difference, while providing an opportunity to gain important skills and experiences, as well as making friends.
12. The Council's volunteering leaflet, which is also available online, highlights the benefits of volunteering; promotes opportunities that are available; and advises that people can volunteer without committing to a regular role by joining the Casual Volunteer Register.
13. Members were also advised that the *Do It* website (www.do-it.org) is a national database of volunteering opportunities, listing thousands of positions. More locally, volunteering opportunities are also promoted by Middlesbrough Voluntary Development Agency (MVDA), Teesside University, through press releases and in community hubs.
14. The Task and Finish Group sought information on the current number and range of volunteers in Middlesbrough Council and the service areas concerned. Information was submitted as follows (as at 1 December 2014):

Registrars	1
0-19	30
Community learning	32
Social care	14
Sport & Leisure	6
Museums	23
Boro becks	27
Libraries	45
Parks	17
Parks friends groups	51
Community Regeneration	205
Young volunteers (age 12-18)	13
Casual volunteers	42
Graduate volunteers	2
Myplace (adults)	12
Economic Development	1

FAST	2
Teenage pregnancy	1
Transitions	2
Volunteer team	2
Youth Offending Service	16
Family resource	7
Archives	56
Sensory support	1
Mima	3
Arts & events	5
Transporter Bridge	1
Ayresome Industries	1
Golf course	1
Specialist services	1
Shopmobility	1
Rights of Way	4
TOTAL	625

15. It was explained that, in terms of age profile, a high proportion of Council volunteers are older or retired. However, there have been, and are, a number of younger volunteers, such as unemployed graduates/school leavers, who have volunteered in order to gain work experience.
16. National Performance Indicator 6 (PI6) was previously used to measure 'participation in regular volunteering' across the town. As Middlesbrough was not reaching target levels, the Volunteer Action Group, involving agencies such as Middlesbrough Voluntary Development Agency (MVDA), Teesside University and the emergency services, was established to promote/encourage town-wide volunteering opportunities and examine the position. This has produced positive benefits such as improving volunteer numbers across the town and reviewing systems.
17. It is now widely recognised that the use of volunteers can be of great benefit and enhance Council service provision. Volunteers can be used as a means of support for match funding bids and are now included on staffing structures.
18. In recent years, the authority's Liaison Officer has updated/re-written Council volunteer policies and procedures and has regularised the position concerning the recording of volunteer details and positions. Also, all managers have been informed of the process concerning the recruitment of volunteers and the need for all to be included on the Volunteer Register. Training is also available for managers. Previously, the process was more ad-hoc across the authority, with details of volunteers/volunteer positions not always being accurately recorded.
19. Members heard that there have been sensitivities around the use of volunteers in some service areas. Staff have, understandably, expressed concerns that, in times of Council budget reductions, volunteers could be used to replace paid staff. It was explained that volunteers are not used instead of paid staff. They have, however, been used to enhance service provision and ensure that a service that would otherwise be closed/removed can be maintained. For example, some libraries would have closed without the use of volunteers to assist paid Council staff. Some services are therefore now reliant on volunteers.

Meetings with volunteers

20. The task and finish group visited the following locations to speak to Council volunteers:

- Hemlington Library
- Marton Library
- Captain Cook Birthplace Museum

21. The following points were highlighted during Members' discussions with the volunteers:

- The use of volunteers has worked well in both the libraries and museum services - staff and volunteers work in partnership. Staff understand that the use of volunteers has averted closures and welcome the enthusiasm and commitment of the volunteers.
- The volunteers advised that they have been made to feel welcome and get on well with permanent staff.
- Libraries in particular have been a great success for volunteers. So much so that volunteers may not be able to work as many hours as they might like.
- In museums, volunteers generally work on one day each week, with hours varying depending on the volunteer/location. In libraries, volunteers may work one session in a fortnight.
- In the case of libraries, volunteers indicated that serving in the library in their own community was an important factor.
- In Hemlington, there was already a lot of community involvement in the library, which has continued following introduction of the volunteers. In the case of Marton Library, introduction of the volunteers has resulted in new events and activities, including establishment of the Friends of Marton Library group.
- Support and training is provided so that, wherever possible, volunteers can work in areas of their choice.
- Information technology can be an issue with some volunteers - some have left for this reason.
- In addition to older volunteers, some young volunteers were supplied at Hemlington Library through the local Linx Project. However, this is no longer the case.
- Commitment can be an issue in the case of younger volunteers. However, the libraries service is keen to encourage more younger volunteers - eg in areas such as storytelling during school visits. Middlesbrough College has been approached with a view to engaging trainee teachers.
- Volunteers are generally happy with the duties that they undertake and are not generally seeking additional responsibilities or further training. For example, one volunteer advised Members that they would not wish to be responsible for keys/alarms/locking a building. It was confirmed, however, that additional training or additional responsibilities could be made available if volunteers wished.
- The volunteers have been pleased to attend the 'get togethers' that have been arranged so that volunteers, who generally all work on different days from one another, can meet each other. These have been arranged twice a year in the libraries service.

- In the case of libraries, the use of volunteers has made the difference between libraries closing and staying open. In contrast, in the museums service, volunteers are used to enhance a service that is run by existing staff.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

22. Possible conclusions and recommendations arising from the task and finish group's investigation will be discussed at the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

23. The task and finish group would like to acknowledge the hard work and commitment of the Council's volunteers and thank them, and relevant Council officers, for their assistance with this work. The assistance of the following is greatly appreciated:

- Sharon Barker - Liaison Officer, Economic Development Culture & Communities.
- Diane Fleet - Development and Operations Manager, Economic Development Culture & Communities.
- Gill Harrison - Manager - Rainbow Centre Library.
- Darren Wilson - Senior Museum Assistant, Neighbourhoods and Communities.
- Volunteers at Hemlington and Marton Libraries and Captain Cook Birthplace Museum.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

24. There were no background papers used in preparing this report.

COUNCILLOR NICKY WALKER

SCRUTINY TASK AND FINISH GROUP - VOLUNTEERS

Contact Officer:

Alan Crawford
Scrutiny Support Officer
Legal & Democratic Services
Telephone: 01642 729707 (direct line)

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