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**Issues of quality and professionalism of library volunteers:
reporting from a qualitative case study**

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3 **Paper – Issues of quality and professionalism of library volunteers: reporting from a**
4 **qualitative case study**

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6 September 2015
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10 **Introduction**

11 This short paper examines the initial findings from the second phase of research for a
12 Professional Doctorate study exploring the challenges facing public libraries in the Big
13 Society¹, particularly focussing on the role of volunteers and issues surrounding their use.
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16 Phase two of this research, followed on from a phase one Delphi study (Casselden et al.,
17 2014). The Delphi study aimed to provide an overview of current opinion regarding
18 volunteer use amongst a selection of library managers throughout England. It also helped to
19 build links with library managers and determine possible case study participants for phase
20 two.
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23 Phase two of the research involved the analysis of two case study library authorities,
24 examining differing stakeholder perspectives of volunteer use. Both library authorities were
25 based in the North-East of England, and were Metropolitan Boroughs. As the North East
26 has a larger proportion of areas that are deemed to be the most deprived in England
27 (Communities and Local Government, 2010), this may or may not impact on the capacity of
28 volunteering efforts. The Institute for Fiscal Studies found that, in the North East of England,
29 Local Authority spending per person reduced 23.4% in the period 2009-10 to 2014-15 (Innes
30 and Tetlow, 2015), cuts having fallen disproportionately on those authorities which are grant
31 reliant, and have higher levels of deprivation and population growth.
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33

34 Of the case study authorities (labelled LA1 and LA2), LA1 used volunteers for purely value-
35 added purposes (to supplement and add value to work already carried out by paid library
36 staff), whereas LA2, in addition to the traditional use of value-added volunteers, also
37 engaged with the development of a small number of volunteer-run libraries, which replaced
38 staff, thereby reducing budgets.
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41 Stakeholders in the case studies were questioned using a variety of methods: Staff were
42 surveyed anonymously using an online questionnaire, eight library managers were
43 interviewed, library volunteers (both value-added, and those running their own library) were
44 questioned in four focus groups, and library users were surveyed using a researcher
45 administered questionnaire.
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48 The remainder of this paper will focus specifically on quality and professionalism with regard
49 to volunteer use in public libraries, and how this impacts on what increasingly has become a
50 hybrid model of delivery regarding 21st century public library provision.
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Perceptions about volunteers and quality

The first point to consider relates to the perceptions of library users considering the current state of public libraries, and their associated use of volunteers. Library users in the case study authorities displayed a lack of knowledge regarding who was or was not a library volunteer, and were uncertain as to how their use would change in the near future.

One of the key questions asked of the stakeholders was whether there was a difference between paid staff and volunteer workers. Library staff were unanimous in their opinion that there was a difference, whereas library users were less certain, with only 60% agreeing there was a difference. Nearly two thirds (60%) of library users were unsure whether there were volunteers working in their library service, with over a quarter (26%) of library users were not sure if they had ever been helped by a volunteer in their library. This clearly identifies that library users are not always aware of who is a volunteer and who is a paid member of staff, which has implications for their assessment of service quality and performance. As people are a key determinant in service quality experience (Parasuraman et al. 1985 in Bryson, 2006 p.321), this is a key factor to consider.

Over three quarters (77%) of staff questioned agreed that staff and volunteers could work in harmony alongside each other, library users were more positive about this aspect (89%). Most staff indicated that they thought there would be the same or increased use of volunteers in the future (92%), whereas library users were less sure about the future use of volunteers in libraries, with 57% considering a similar or increased number of volunteers. Almost a third of library users (29%) were unsure about what the future held for volunteer use in public libraries.

What does a library do?

There currently exists a challenging environment in the public library sector, with many libraries adopting a reactive approach (Goulding, 2006:338) to what has increasingly become a postcode lottery. It was evident from the case study research that there is a perceived lack of understanding concerning what a public library actually does, on the part of national and local policy makers:

“I think they (central government) don’t understand what libraries are, what libraries do, or the lives of people that use them.” (Library manager LA1)

“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 of something, just undervalues everything that a library is.” (Library manager LA1)

There was similar distrust of the volunteers that worked in the libraries, from certain staff members:

“You might get some very enthusiastic people, but I think it is more than having enthusiastic people, you need someone who understands what a library is.” (Library manager LA1)

Regarding the concept of a volunteer-run library, there was a concern that this lack of understanding could impact greatly on the final result,

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3 “to be honest, my feeling about volunteer run libraries, is that they aren’t libraries, they are
4 book exchanges. I’ve got a house full of books, but it is not a library, even if I lend my books
5 out to my friends and family or whatever, it still doesn’t make it a library.” (Library manager
6 LA1)
7

8 This lack of understanding is well considered by Pateman and Williment (2013:59) who
9 argue that although people think they know what a library is, ‘many (people) also have an
10 outdated and sometimes negative image of a boring institution filled with dusty books and
11 even dustier staff’. The recent Sieghart Review of Public libraries (Sieghart, 2014:4)
12 confirmed further the lack of understanding on the part of decision makers regarding the
13 value of a modern library service to a community.
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16 Professionalism

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18 Professionalism was a theme that arose primarily from library managers as a key concern.
19 The lack of public controversy resulting from using volunteers to run libraries was highlighted
20 as frustrating. When considering librarianship as a profession, an interesting parallel with
21 other professions was given by a number of library managers in order to highlight the lack of
22 logic with such use.
23
24

25 “In a way the transformation from a professionally run library to a volunteer library hasn’t
26 thrown up as much protest as just closing a library would. It’s not particularly controversial I
27 think – I think the community think it really is a good idea, and you know why wouldn’t they?
28 When you are faced with, ‘close a library or run it with volunteers’, then it does seem a better
29 option. You could do it with schools, we used to have a school in every village, again just
30 because people might know about Maths and English, it doesn’t mean that they are going to
31 teach children well and give a professional service?” (Library manager LA2)
32

33 It is worth noting that the volunteers, who were replacing paid staff at the volunteer-run
34 library, acknowledged the professional nature of paid staff and the lack of value placed on
35 their professional worth. However, there was a strong feeling amongst the volunteers
36 questioned that they took great pride in their working, often coming from professional
37 backgrounds themselves, albeit not in the library sector.
38

39 “Just because you volunteer, you’re not going to give a sloppy service – you are going to
40 give the same service.” (Volunteer LA2)
41

42 Delivering a good service, as opposed to a professional service may not necessarily be the
43 same thing; indeed a professional service may be something a volunteer can never achieve,
44 if they misunderstand what a professional library service actually is. Larson (1997) in
45 Goodall (2000) explores the notion of professionalism at a variety of levels. Such a
46 phenomenon enables a particular profession to maintain a status through limited entry, and
47 guards a particular area of knowledge by regulating and disciplining members. It also is
48 synonymous with competence, efficiency and effectiveness.
49
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52 As noted earlier, 60% of library users questioned in this research were unsure whether
53 volunteers were used in their library service. Such confusion obviously has a bearing on
54 perceptions of the quality of a service, and how that quality can be ensured in what has
55 become a hybrid model of service delivery.
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Service quality

Library managers raised concerns relating to the resultant service quality afforded through over-reliance on volunteers. "What is done isn't quite up to standard, you can't develop them in the same way, and they are not there as much. There is a massive difference in professional standards." (Library manager LA2)

It has already been identified that staff surveyed saw a clear difference between paid library workers and volunteers, key factors relating to knowledge and experience (39%) and training and qualifications (30%). They outlined problems with volunteer use relating to commitment and reliability (58%), accountability (31%) and confidentiality (31%), all of which impact on service standards and quality. This reflects library managers thoughts on the difference between the paid staff and volunteer workers. Library users also saw a difference, but this was less strongly felt (60%) partly due to uncertainty about who was a volunteer and who was not.

Volunteers also raised the notion of accountability as a key difference between themselves and paid staff, and the freedom that they had compared to staff, although they also acknowledged the fact that service agreements could help regulate their actions in spite of these freedoms.

Service quality can be affected by the type of people who volunteer, and the reasons why they choose to volunteer initially. Volunteers predominantly listed two types of reasons for volunteering, individual reasons, such as a love of books, or enhancing their CV; and more altruistic reasons, such as helping people, and for the good of society:

"You wouldn't volunteer if you didn't enjoy it." (Volunteer LA2)

Paine et al. (2010:25) discuss that there are a complex range of reasons for volunteering, and one can view volunteering through a series of lenses related to work, philanthropy, activism, leisure, care, participation and learning.

All volunteers questioned demonstrated a strong work ethic, often coming from professional roles, predominantly retired, and displaying a need to undertake a civic duty, often in multiple organisations. This no doubt enhanced service quality, although possibly provided challenging management for those library staff co-ordinating their efforts:

"You've got to do something rather than just sit here." (Volunteer LA1)

"We all feel passionately about it (the library) and about your local area as well." (Volunteer LA1)

Volunteers were predominantly library supporters, often having a strong past association with the library, and therefore having a pre-determined view as to what the library was:

"I've always wanted to do this since I was little. The first book I ever owned, I bought from the library. I come regularly to the central library, near where I lived. I've always wanted to do this, I always thought I would like it." (Volunteer LA2)

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3 However, Library managers and staff were hesitant about relying on volunteers too heavily
4 for service delivery, and stressed the importance of considering their motives for
5 volunteering initially:
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7 “These sets of people (volunteers) don’t want any more from the situation. They’re not
8 looking for jobs, they’re not looking for experience, they’re just looking for something to do
9 one afternoon a week, or because they are interested.” (Library manager LA1)
10

11 In addition the capacity of the community to volunteer differed in the case study authorities
12 studied, and this can have an effect on the quality of volunteers recruited.
13

14 The following strategies were identified from respondents as helping to enhance the
15 volunteering experience and improve the quality of the library service offered. These related
16 to volunteer management and use, relationships, communication, control and accountability,
17 and rewards.
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19

20 **Volunteer management and use**

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22 All respondents questioned discussed the need for volunteer use to ‘not cross a line’, and its
23 potential sensitivity when used for taking on roles that were perceived as the fun additional
24 tasks that staff may have previously enjoyed doing. The requirement for volunteer tasks to
25 match their ability was expressed by library managers.
26

27 The role of active management, whereby strategies are employed by staff to ‘ensure
28 volunteers are managed in an explicit, developmental, supportive and appreciative way’
29 (Locke et al 2003 in Brodie et al., 2009:32), was of paramount importance in order to ensure
30 a sense of belonging and loyalty.
31
32

33 Staff and managers considered the hidden costs of volunteers, and the challenges of
34 managing of a group of people who were often difficult to say no to. However, they did
35 acknowledge that with successful volunteer management, there was an added benefit of
36 being able to more effectively plan and identify library service priorities.
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39 **Relationships**

40 Findings from the research established that although the relationship between volunteers
41 and the library service and staff could be reciprocal, it was at times fragile and challenged
42 existing power relations. The concept of symbiotic mutualism (Bungartz and Bates, 2015) is
43 an interesting parallel that can be considered, in that both sides appears to benefit from the
44 relationship whilst preserving each other. Maintaining an equilibrium was viewed as
45 important for ensuring service level priorities could be met:
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48 “It’s great to have volunteers, but they are only useful if they are actually doing what you
49 want them to do.” (Library manager LA2)
50

51 A volunteer hinted that such commitment has its limitations, “this is an enhancement to my
52 life, this is not my life.” (Volunteer LA1)
53
54

55 In addition the staff survey identified the dominance of certain groups of volunteers or ‘the
56 usual suspects’, and the exclusivity of particular social networks. This aligns with what
57 Musick and Wilson (2008) in Brodie et al. (2009:29) identify relating to volunteers mirroring
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3 the inequalities prevalent in wider society. The volunteers appeared on the whole to be
4 better resourced, more educated and had wider social networks within the case study
5 authority sample questioned.
6

7 However, the benefit of using volunteers was that it provided a link with the local community
8 and a wider group of contacts, albeit not necessarily from all social sectors.
9

10 **Communication**

11
12 All stakeholders discussed the importance of volunteers needing to see the bigger picture,
13 and understanding their role within the library service, for their involvement to be truly
14 successful. The clear communication of library service priorities to volunteers was
15 something Library managers saw as vital to avoid misunderstandings, as was the need to
16 communicate on a face to face basis, rather than simply using email.
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19 Volunteers also stressed the need to feel valued by the library service, through successful
20 communication.
21

22 “A lot of us have got university degrees, and have had good jobs. Sometimes we’re treated
23 a little bit.... I’m not saying we want them (qualifications) to be used, but sometimes a little
24 bit of appreciation?” (Volunteer LA2)
25

26 Working space was identified by all respondents as having a key role in relationship
27 development, and enabling volunteers to feel valued in addition to facilitating
28 communication. However the blurring of boundaries, particularly for staff, was perceived as
29 a source of potential confusion and not necessarily a good idea. Some staff considered that
30 they felt uncomfortable sharing workspace with a volunteer who was internal to the library
31 service, but external too, in that they were not a paid member of staff. The concept of a
32 volunteer who is internal, yet at the same time, external to the organisation, is a challenge
33 for those wishing to exert control of library workers.
34
35

36 **Control and accountability**

37
38 Control was an omnipresent theme that ran through many of the findings from this research.
39 The juxtaposition of controlling people who perceive their volunteering as a leisure activity, in
40 a work related manner is clearly evident.
41
42

43 Many volunteers exhibited hostility to the procedures introduced by the parent libraries
44 arguing “all these silly rules” (volunteer LA2) were not helpful to their effective functioning as
45 a volunteer run library. Pateman and Williment (2013:213) argue that there is a need for
46 libraries to change the balance of power such that there is a ‘philosophical and practical shift
47 from (a library) being a service provider for our communities to being a partner with our
48 communities.’
49

50 This challenge between institutional power versus individual empowerment was a key theme
51 that emerged from the research:
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54 “You’ve got no real authority over volunteers, I mean you can put guidelines in place, but you
55 can’t bring to bear some of the pressures you can on paid staff. You’re not offering them
56 wages, you can’t make them stay, you have to ask nicely. You do have to always be aware
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3 that they are not employees, they are members of the public who are helping you, and they
4 can be a law unto themselves.” (Library manager LA1)

5
6 Volunteers who were questioned clearly understood the implications of such freedom, with
7 regards to accountability:
8

9 “They are accountable as employees (paid library staff), we are not. The council staff are
10 more accountable, we do have freedom because of that.” (Volunteer LA2)

11 12 **Rewards**

13
14 This research has reinforced the importance of building a volunteer community in the
15 absence of monetary reward, which is vital to create a sense of belonging, and enables
16 volunteers to see the bigger picture, from what they might initially perceive to be an
17 individually motivated act. Indeed, Smith (2002:17) argues that ‘being and feeling, part of a
18 team is an important reward for many volunteers’.

19
20
21 Most volunteers questioned demonstrated a keen loyalty to the parent library in addition to a
22 strong customer focus, and the view that there had to be a benefit for the volunteer if the
23 relationship was to succeed.
24

25 This perhaps reinforces the need for libraries to develop strategies to enable the retention of
26 volunteers, thereby fostering greater skills development, and loyalty to the parent library
27 service.
28

29 “You volunteer as an individual, but you end up being a volunteer group, it wouldn’t work
30 individually now, we need each other”. (Volunteer LA1)

31 32 **Conclusion**

33
34 In conclusion the quality and professionalism of library volunteers is perhaps only as good as
35 the volunteers who work in a particular library service. Many of the volunteers questioned
36 appeared passionate about their library, loyal to their service and professionally minded in
37 their approach, but all stakeholders acknowledged the challenges of controlling an entity
38 which has the freedoms to come and go as they please.
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41 The challenge that exists regarding the creation of a co-ordinated coherent and all-inclusive
42 effort, which is in keeping with service level priorities, is extensive. The juxtaposition of
43 institutional power versus individual empowerment is a delicate balance that requires careful
44 thought and planning.
45

46
47 The challenge of balancing institutional power and service priorities with the devolution to
48 individual empowerment, and community involvement is not easy. Pateman and Williment
49 (2013 p.213) argue this challenge in the equilibrium of power is key to ensuring that library
50 authorities make a “philosophical and practical shift from being a service provider for our
51 communities to being a partner with our communities” and as such become fully socially
52 inclusive.
53

54
55 A multiplicity of volunteer use models within public libraries exists within England at this time,
56 no doubt as a result of political, social and environmental decisions that vary across the
57 regions. This research has identified there are many challenges and concerns relating to
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3 ensuring quality and professionalism in such a hybrid environment and care must be taken
4 to ensure that checks and balances are in place to ensure that it is not to the detriment of the
5 public library user. The importance of well-resourced management of volunteers, and the
6 development of relationships amongst stakeholders through effective communication will
7 help to ensure a cohesive and focussed approach. The importance of control, accountability
8 and rewards has also been examined as key features that can enhance the experiences of
9 staff, volunteers, service users and the resulting library service.
10

11
12 **Key recommendations for library managers:**

- 13
- 14 • Libraries need to ensure active recruitment, selection and training of volunteers. The
15 latter will enable volunteers to understand their role and how it fits with wider service
16 standards
 - 17
 - 18 • Volunteers must be carefully matched to the roles they undertake
 - 19
 - 20 • Volunteer passion is important for managing the intrinsic rewards afforded through
21 volunteering
 - 22
 - 23 • Relationship building is vital between the different stakeholders of a hybrid library –
24 community, staff , volunteers and users
 - 25
 - 26 • Clear communication is vital – between all sets of stakeholders – facilitated by
27 workspace, and trust
 - 28
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 - 30 • The volunteer as a group rather than an individual is a key theme – with a sense of
31 belonging and ownership, will retain loyalty and help to ensure service quality
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 - 33 • Demonstrating appreciation of volunteering efforts is not to be ignored – intrinsic
34 and extrinsic rewards are important to ensure that volunteering efforts are rewarded,
35 and individuals feel valued.
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4 ⁱ The Big Society (initially the idea of Phillip Blond in Kisby (2010: 486) underpins much of the current coalition
5 Government's policy making. It essentially is a cultural change which relies on the self-sufficiency of people,
6 and has an agenda of social action, public service reform and community empowerment. According to
7 Cameron (2010), the role of the Government, in order to achieve the Big Society is to 'foster and support a
8 new culture of voluntarism, philanthropy, social action' CAMERON, D. (2010) *Transcript of a speech by the*
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