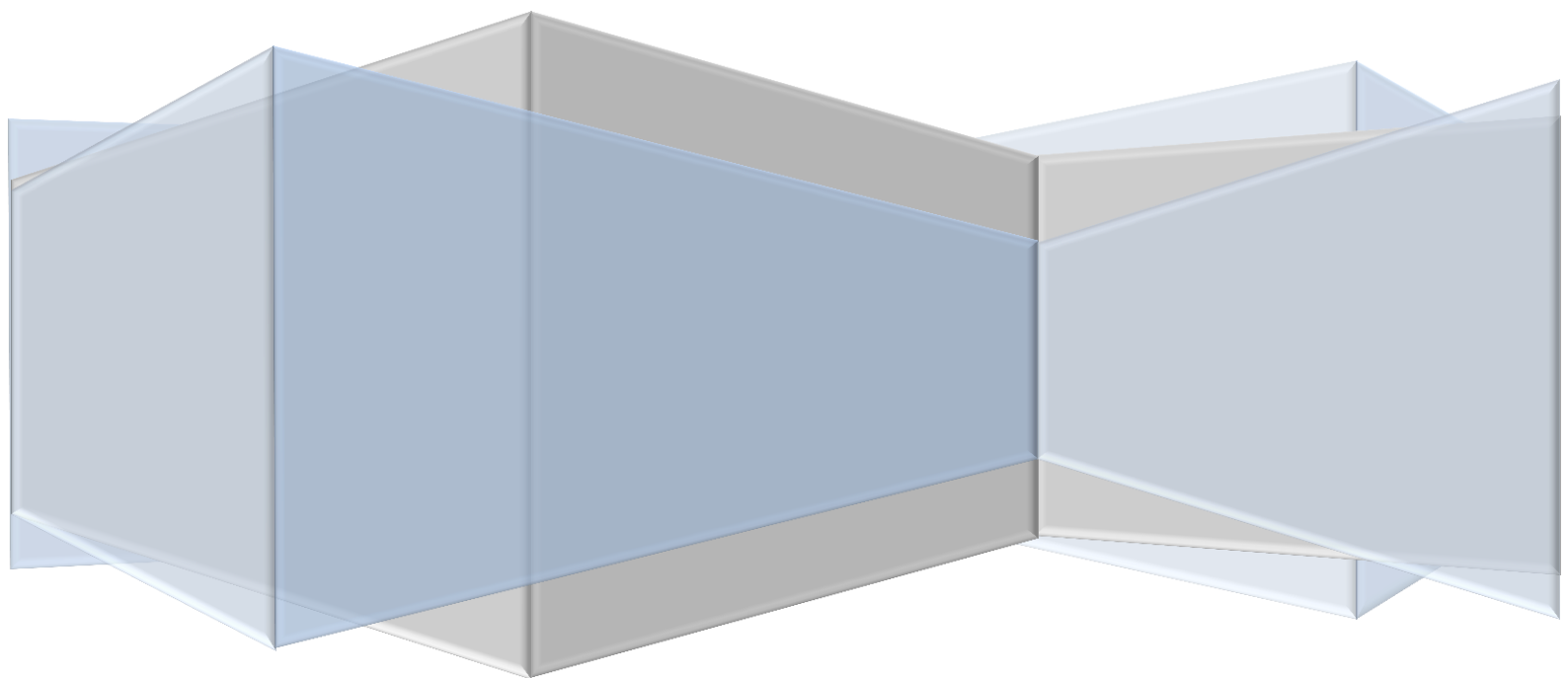# Archives & Records Association
UK & Ireland

Managing Volunteering in Archives: Report

Foreword and Extended Executive Summary

January 2014

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Archives and Records Association: Managing Volunteering in Archives

Report

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Foreword

Through its previous work in the area of volunteering, in particular through the awarding of the annual Volunteering Award, the Archives & Records Association has showcased many instances of good practice. However, there have been concerns raised about the role of volunteers, both within archives and in related domains such as museums and libraries, particularly around whether current financial constraints are influencing the role of volunteers. Therefore, earlier this year, ARA set out to commission research which would explore the rich variety of roles undertaken by volunteers within the archives sector in the UK and Ireland, and also try to consider whether external influences such as the economic climate and technological changes are influencing the role of volunteers within archive services.

ARA commissioned Caroline Williams to undertake this work and we are pleased to be able to present her research in report form to our members and other interested parties. This report supplements, reviews and updates the National Council on Archives 2009 report *Volunteering in Archives* but reflects a shift in emphasis*:* while in 2009 the report highlighted the experience of volunteers, this one considers in more depth how services manage these volunteers.

It is perhaps reassuring to note the overall picture the report presents. That whilst the use of volunteers in archives is increasing, this is occurring alongside improved approaches to volunteer management and appears to be more closely aligned with on-going community engagement by the sector than as a consequence of cost-cutting. Nevertheless ARA will continue to monitor developments in this area closely over the next few years.

The report outlines a number of recommendations; some for archive services and others addressed to ARA itself. ARA accepts the seven recommendations set out in the report for its consideration. A number of the recommendations chime with the proposed activities set out in the published 2012-14 'Volunteering in Archives' Action Plan. Where this is not already the case this Action Plan will be further refined to incorporate these recommendations.

On behalf of ARA I would like to thank all those who contributed to the survey on which the report findings are based.

Louise Ray, ARA Board Member and Convenor of the PSQG sub-committee on Volunteering
January 2014

Extended Executive Summary

In June 2013, as part of its 2012-14 'Volunteering in Archives Action Plan' the ARA's Public Services Quality Group (PSQG) Sub-Committee on Volunteering commissioned research to add to existing evidence of volunteering currently undertaken in archives in the UK and Ireland. The outcome would enable it to enhance existing guidance and support on the different volunteering opportunities, management models, activities and roles that services might adopt and adapt to their own circumstances.

An online survey, open 14 August – 11 September 2013, comprised 44 questions in four sections. The research evidence derived from 100 good quality responses has provided a robust and reliable indication of the broad numbers of volunteers that services engage with, their profile and characteristics, and the types of volunteering tasks and projects that they undertake. Services have also provided comprehensive information about their methods of volunteer management, and their approaches to issues of policy, training and the challenges that arise.

Findings and analysis:

Volunteering profiles

Volunteering is growing while profiles of volunteers are remaining fairly constant.

1. The overwhelming motivation of services for involving volunteers was that it enabled them to do things that normally they could not; very few do it because it 'saves money'. This reinforces the overall finding that volunteers are used to enhance existing provision, not to replace funded posts or services.
2. While most (65%) of services have up to 20 volunteers annually, a few (11%), mostly local authority or national bodies, hosted over 50 each. Volunteers are mainly hosted in generic placements associated with 'social' volunteering (59%) with a substantial minority undertaking specific placements (e.g. for experience necessary to access archives/records management/heritage professions), and evidence indicates that these are increasing slightly.
3. This profile aligns with the analysis of volunteers' age, most (59%) being over 55, with the next largest group (17%) in the 18-24 (student) age bracket. Diversity indicators were sought (ethnicity, disability) and it appears that the overall profile is not dissimilar to that in Ray's 2009 Report. Volunteers are loyal: in 48% services volunteers had been with them for 11 years or more.

Service management

The largest number of volunteers is hosted by local authority services. Overall volunteer management is developing systematically.

4. The majority of responses came from local authority services (45%), with a good number from specialist archives (27%), universities (15%) and national archives, libraries and museums (11%). 2 responses came from business archives. In terms of national responses, 14 were received from Scotland and the Islands, 9 from Wales, 77 from England.

5. Services' management of volunteers is developing, becoming clearly embedded as a 'business as usual' function. Increasing numbers (89%) have a volunteer policy; include volunteer activities in business plans (39%); and quantify volunteer contributions in financial terms (23%). A third had a specific person with responsibility for volunteers, with about half of these having 'Volunteer Co-ordinator' as a role title. Training and induction are undertaken routinely; formal evaluation and quality checking of work is common place.

6. Services still largely rely on informal methods of recruitment, such as word of mouth or being approached by volunteers, mainly as individuals, but also in groups to support specific projects. There is still a ready supply of volunteers: for many services (60%) the only constraint on recruiting is the lack of resources (space, staff time) for managing them.

7. There remain significant challenges for services in managing volunteers: for 95% its time-consuming nature is the greatest challenge; 82% find that the quality of work can be variable; 60% have issues with the overall resourcing of volunteering; 25% think the lack of a volunteer manager is a problem. Some have difficulty in recruiting volunteers with appropriate knowledge and skills, and others find that volunteers' expectations have increased. Some comments expressed anxiety over the 'intern' debate (the use of non-professionals to undertake professional roles).

8. Demonstrating the value of volunteering in funding applications has contributed to success, mainly with the Heritage Lottery Fund (22 services) but also the Welsh Government through its CyMAL: Museums Archives and Libraries Wales division and the National Cataloguing Grants Scheme.

Volunteer activities, tasks and projects

Detailed analysis of volunteering roles and activities provides a rich picture both of the contributions of volunteers and the context in which they are made, whether on- or off-site.

9. A huge majority of services engage volunteers in records description and cataloguing (93%), conservation and preservation (85%), and sorting and arranging records (74%), with about half using them for scanning and digitisation projects. These are heavily process-based activities. Overall, fewer appear to be engaged in the interpretation of archives or in the public profile of the service.

10. This provides an interesting insight: professional archivists worry about volunteers taking on 'professional' jobs, which include arrangement, description and preservation: however a large number of volunteers do this work, under supervision. It would seem that professionals in fact are more likely to reserve to themselves those aspects of work that directly interface with their users and stakeholders.

11. 93 specific projects were described by 47 services, some hosting between 2 and 4 projects each. Some projects were named and thematic, using archives drawn from more than one source (e.g. 'Paved with Living Colour' and 'Hens Tae Watch Oot Fur'). Others focused on the cataloguing of specific archive groups or fonds (e.g. Philip Larkin Letters) or series (e.g. Swindon Works engineering drawings) or on indexing and transcription. Many projects were conservation/ preservation-based: e.g. physically re-locating archives, surveying, cleaning, re-packaging.

Analysis of activities and projects highlights that:

12. Cataloguing, indexing and transcription of archive groups or series are instrumental in making accessible collections that would otherwise be neglected. This is the grass roots of archival work and it would be useful to quantify the added value of this activity to services' statistics. It is equally important to cite it as evidence of how communities of volunteers are interacting with professionals while giving back to their own and wider communities too.

13. Thematic projects are likely to focus on more cross-cutting approaches and agendas, and are therefore important in supporting strategic and partnership initiatives. These lend themselves to wide publicity and marketing and to some serious profile-raising for the services involved – and hence for the wider archival sector. Many of the 25 thematic projects, which arguably are the most outward-facing, were based in local authority services.

14. Projects that have a specific focus, and often a time limit can require different management techniques from open ended ones, for example managing finance and/or deadlines. As the project model for volunteering develops, so the ways in which volunteers and projects are handled is likely to evolve. The availability of guidance in support of this type of project would be useful.

Conclusions

Volunteering currently provides a substantial contribution to the development of the archive sector and to the accessibility of archival resources to the wider public. It appears that while the profile of volunteers themselves is remaining fairly constant when compared with Ray's findings in 2009, volunteering as an activity in archives is changing.

- The direction of travel is towards expansion both in terms of volunteer numbers and range of activities.
- There is an increasingly proactive and business-like approach to managing volunteers, with volunteers becoming a regular part of the archival community.
- There is evidence that some services are providing better support for volunteers, improved training, and wider opportunities and activities.
- Standards have risen in many areas of activity, with volunteers keen to enhance and develop their skills and experience, and policies (e.g. cataloguing) being adjusted to support their work.
- Volunteers contribute substantially to 'professional' work (e.g. cataloguing) albeit in generally carefully supervised environments and sometimes at a low process-based level.
- While challenges remain, the sector-wide evolution and expansion of volunteering provides the opportunity to develop standardised approaches to common issues and practices.

Recommendations

This data suggests the following recommendations be implemented in order to support the continuing evolution and expansion of volunteering.

Recommendations for services hosting volunteers:

1. Institute organisational frameworks for volunteering: e.g. develop volunteer policies, include volunteer contributions in business plans, adopt models for quantifying volunteer contributions, and implement volunteer/service agreements. Compliance with this recommendation fulfils the Accreditation Standard 1.6 Resources: Workforce.
2. Develop a proactive approach to volunteering: e.g. forward planning to ensure tasks/projects and the resources required are identified before volunteers are recruited.
3. Identify sources of support and/or finance: these may range from the person responsible for organisation-wide volunteering; to the ARA, Institute for Volunteering Research, Museums Association, HLF or National Cataloguing Grants Scheme.
4. Identify the appropriate status and role, and source appropriate training for volunteer supervisors/managers: e.g. in people management, project management, managing budgets, health and safety, legal issues, insurance, quality checking and evaluation, data gathering, and managing service and volunteer expectations.
5. Define volunteer recruitment processes and training: e.g. methods for widening the diversity of volunteers, identification of required knowledge and skills, appropriate training for identified tasks, volunteer agreements and induction.
6. Identify manageable ways of recording activity and experience: e.g. numbers and FTEs of volunteers; volunteer hours contributed weekly, monthly, annually; quantify volunteer contribution in financial terms using recognised models; understand volunteer experience; descriptions of work that would not otherwise have been done; use CIPFA statistics for local authority data.
7. In tandem, plan how such recorded data can be advantageously used: e.g. to enhance profile, influence funders and leaders, evidence better service delivery, use in marketing plans, improve use of volunteers, and their experiences and to reach out into different communities.

Recommendations for ARA:

1. Continue to monitor regularly the nature and management of volunteers and volunteering in archives being mindful of what is happening in allied sectors (e.g. museums and libraries) in order to maintain currency of knowledge and understanding.
2. Continue to make the annual Volunteering Award in order to encourage the development of quality volunteering in the sector (about 25% of survey respondents had entered for this).
3. Support The National Archives in its provision of advice to services seeking to involve volunteers in externally funded projects; in particular in ensuring recognition of volunteer contributions as in-kind support in HLF applications.
4. Encourage proactive alignment of volunteer management with Accreditation and Competencies initiatives, for example through recognition of standardised practice; enhancing CPD for professionals working with volunteers, and providing opportunities for recognition of volunteers' own skills where appropriate.
5. Continue to recommend standardised approaches to procedures and practices that facilitate more consistent methods and enable better strategic understanding of volunteer

management and activities and recommend these: e.g. volunteering policies, business planning, recruitment, volunteer agreements, and data gathering.

6. Develop and recommend models and standards (or identify existing ones) for data gathering: e.g. volunteer numbers, FTEs, hours contributed, activity contributions, measuring financial equivalence.

7. Identify where training might be offered in some of the procedures, practices and data gathering noted above and/or in other areas such as people management, project management, managing budgets, health and safety, legal issues, insurance, quality checking and evaluation, managing expectations.

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