Introduction

‘Active citizenship’ has become an increasingly important measure of the health of society in the UK today, and a major contributor to social capital, defined as social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trust which arise from them. To be willing to participate in civic activity (if only to sign a petition), informally volunteer to help a neighbour or other citizen, or to formally give time to an organisation are all seen as positive contributions to the common good. Volunteering is a significant part of active citizenship and has been given high status by the government.

Volunteering has been described as ‘an important expression of citizenship and essential to democracy. It is the commitment of time and energy for the benefit of society and the community, and can take many forms. It is undertaken freely and by choice, without concern for financial gain! Because volunteers are active in all areas of life, all decision makers need to be volunteer-friendly and also volunteering-literate; that is, aware of ways that their actions and decisions may affect community and voluntary activity.’

There are four principles fundamental to volunteering:
- **Choice:** volunteering must be a choice freely made by each individual
- **Diversity:** volunteering should be open to all
- **Reciprocity:** volunteers offer their contribution unwaged but should benefit in other ways in return for their contribution to wider social objectives
- **Recognition:** explicit recognition of the value of what volunteers contribute to the organisation, to the community, to the social economy and to wider social objectives

Volunteers contribute to every facet of human life; if an activity is felt to be worthwhile, people will get involved in it as volunteers.

Two recent reports – *Giving Time, Getting Involved* a report of the Working Group on the Active Community (Warner Report, 1999), which sets out a strategy for promoting volunteering, and the *Report of the Policy Action Team on Community Self-Help* (PAT 9 Report, 1999) produced as part of the government’s neighbourhood renewal strategy – highlight the important of strengthening the volunteering infrastructure at national and local level. Both the Government and the voluntary and community sector agree that public funding should be invested in creating and maintaining a modern, dynamic volunteering infrastructure.

Volunteering is a substantial social investment that creates social capital and makes a major contribution to national production. The government has undertaken to examine how this is shown in national economic accounts and ensure that employment and economic policy is ‘active citizenship-friendly’. Some funding organisations, including HLF have recognised the economic value of volunteering by accepting volunteering as part of partnership funding requirements.

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The National Picture

The National Survey of Volunteering is currently the most comprehensive source of data on voluntary activity in Great Britain. The 1997 Survey (published by the Institute for Volunteering Research, 1998) provided a snapshot of participation in various types of volunteering activity:

- Around half of the UK’s adult population is involved in formal volunteering, giving on average 1.9 hours a week;
- 29% of the adult population, the equivalent of approximately 12 million people, volunteer at least once a month

And although most volunteering is done in the voluntary and community sector,
- 24% of volunteers were involved with public sector organisations

The 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey (Prime et al, 2002) provides more recent data:

- in the last 12 months 39% of people volunteered formally at least once in England and Wales (16.5m people);
- 26% of people volunteered at least once a month in England and Wales (11.2m people);
- The two most common volunteer tasks were raising/handling money (22%) and organising or helping to run an activity/event (21%);
- The three most common fields where volunteers are involved are sports/exercise (13%); children’s education/schools (12%) and hobbies/recreation/arts/social clubs (10%);
- People aged 35 to 49 were the most likely to be formal volunteers (44%); and those aged 65 and over were the least likely (32%);
- People identified the main barriers to formal volunteering as:
  - Lack of time and being too busy (33%)
  - Work commitments (20%)
  - Parenting, caring or family responsibilities (15%)
- People said that the incentive most likely to get them involved in formal volunteering in the future was a direct appeal for help (38%)

Archives ought to be fertile ground for the active involvement of volunteers. Over 75% of on-site users are aged 45 or more. The skills necessary to become a proficient user of archives are similar to those of a good cataloguer. Users and archivists share an enthusiasm for the material which crosses professional boundaries.

However we actually know relatively little about volunteers in archives. There has been very little research – much less than in, say, museums. The Institute for Volunteers Research conducted a study – Volunteers in the Cultural Sector – for Resource (Resource, 2002) which includes perhaps the most useful accessible data and information (see below).

Definitions

A ‘volunteer’ may be defined as anyone who carries out any task for an organisation in an unpaid capacity whether a trustee, a service provider or a fund raiser and whether or not they are called something other than “volunteers” such as “friends” or “stewards”. This also includes unpaid work on committees. The Voluntary and Community Research Section at the Home Office distinguishes between informal volunteering (helping an individual) and formal volunteering (helping an organisation).
Research

The *Volunteers in the Cultural Sector* research study was carried out in the summer of 2001 by the Institute for Volunteering Research and is based on 498 completed forms from organisations in the cultural sector. 124 of these were archive organisations although many key questions were answered by less than 90. The data is broken down by domain and by region – but the sample sizes are too small to make the regional analysis statistically significant.

Key findings:
- 69% of archives use volunteers (similar to librarians but far less than museums (92%))
- The most important reason for involving volunteers is “it allows us to do things we could not normally do” (88%), followed by “it promotes user involvement” (63%)
- The majority of archives (81%) had less than 20 volunteers
- 90% of volunteers in archives were aged 45 or more; 40% were aged 65 or more
- Only 2% of volunteers were Black or Asian; 6% had a disability
- On average each archives organisation receives 29 hours of help each week from its volunteers; this compared poorly with museums (71 hours) and libraries (50 hours)
- Although there were more than 12 ‘specific tasks’ identified as being completed by volunteers in archives, by far the most frequent was ‘description of records’ (91%), followed at some distance by ‘conservation and preservation’ (38%) and ‘research’ (38%)
- 43% of archives thought they had “enough” volunteers
- 43% of archives have someone specifically designated with managing volunteers
- Archives are not particularly proactive in attracting volunteers; 79% of archives said that volunteers approached them
- The principal reason given for not involving volunteers is that they are “too time consuming” (47% of archives who do not use volunteers said this) but there were a number of others, including quality of work not high enough, health and safety issues, lack of space and security and confidentiality issues. Most archives not using volunteers now have no plans to do so in the future
- When asked what is preventing organisations (from all three domains) from involving volunteers, the three most common reasons were nothing, not enough time, and, ‘job substitution’

The report concludes with a small number of case studies and interviews – including Cathrin Cassarchis, former Head of Public Affairs at The National Archives.

A review of volunteering research in the heritage sector (Holmes, 2002) reveals some of the key features of volunteering activity in museums, historic houses and similar organisations. Most of the findings are pertinent to archives (and of course many of the organisations surveyed will have archive collections with which volunteers have been involved) and reinforce the basic proposition in this paper – that volunteers are an under-used resource in archives and record offices.

Holmes was able to make – by analysing five studies published between 1997 and 1999 – a number of observations about volunteering in museums and heritage organisations. She was also able to draw some conclusions about the changing nature of volunteering by re-running (in 1998) a survey first conducted in 1984.

Her key findings include:
- Up to 83% of organisations use volunteers for ‘cataloguing and documentation’ (Holmes, 2002:12)
• 55% of museums used volunteers for ‘guiding and interpretation’ in 1998, compared with only 33% in 1984 (Holmes, 2002:12)
• 53% of museums used volunteers for ‘research’ in 1998, compared with only 16% in 1984 (Holmes, 2002:12)
• 43% of volunteers in museums were aged over 61 in 1998, compared with 20% in 1984 (Holmes, 2002:13)
• volunteers tend to be older, retired people with a high level of educational attainment and a high socio-economic status (Holmes, 2002:13)
• volunteers are motivated to first volunteer by their ‘interest in the subject’ and a desire to support the organisation. Volunteering in order to gain work experience as a route to employment has declined in importance over the last 20 years. (Holmes, 2002:15-17)
• social opportunities and the chance to do work they enjoy are more important to volunteers than work experience (Holmes, 2002:17-18)
• about half of the volunteers at heritage organisations were involved in other forms of volunteering work (Holmes, 2002:17)
• in 1984 48% of museum ‘invited’ volunteers; by 1998 this had risen 62%. (Holmes, 2002:19)
• in 1984 66% of museum managers regarded volunteers ‘time consuming’; by 1998 this has fallen to 42% (Holmes, 2002:21)
• in 1984 only 15% of museums thought that volunteers were a source of skills ‘rarely found in the modern world’; by 1998 this had risen to 69% (Holmes, 2002:21)

Some clear trends may be observed. Over time volunteers have become older, and more motivated by the type of work and the social opportunities it brings, rather than work experience per se. Between the mid-1980s and the late 1990s the museums domain at least had developed a much more positive attitude to volunteers and the benefits of volunteering to organisations.

Holmes’ own research (she conducted detailed interviews with volunteers and others who were working at a range of different heritage sites) reinforced these conclusions and extended the boundaries of our understanding of the potential role of volunteers.

She found that while volunteers may be originally motivated to volunteer because of an interest in the subject and perhaps by a desire to support the organisation or institution, this will fairly quickly give way to motivations to remain a volunteer which focus on social opportunities and particularly the opportunity to interact with managers, staff, other volunteers and users. (Holmes 2002:207-8)

Most volunteers tend to be older people, and a significant proportion are retired. For some volunteers, retirement was an opportunity to pursue an existing interest in a new way and these individuals were effectively active visitors. For other volunteers, the activity offered an opportunity to replace lost elements from their working lives, such as social opportunities, a structure to the day and a chance to keep their minds active. (Holmes 2002:209)

Holmes explored the importance of the interaction between volunteers and visitors. She identified some important common ground: encounters take place between cultural peers (often); both parties are leisure-seeking; both parties are orientated towards mutual learning. (Holmes 2002:209). The implication is that if a site or object would benefit from personal interpretation or mediation, this is perhaps most effectively done between volunteer and user rather than professional and user. Holmes did however find that visitors were primarily interested in learning, while the volunteers were more concerned with enjoyable social interaction, although they enjoyed sharing information and hoped to learn from the visitors in return (Holmes 2002:214).
Whatever their original motivation, volunteers need to feel that they are engaged in an enjoyable leisure activity if they are to be retained. The characteristics that define an enjoyable leisure activity are: social interaction, new challenges, doing something worthwhile, feeling comfortable in one’s surroundings, being able to learn and doing something active (Holmes 2002:212). Holmes draws a number of helpful practical conclusions from her research (Holmes 2002: 215-217):

- For volunteers, volunteering is an enjoyable leisure activity
- There is a different psychological contract between volunteers and the organisation than between paid workers and the organisation
- This does not make them less reliable
- Volunteers’ motivations change over time – from subject interest to social opportunities and (less so) personal development opportunities – learning and being challenged
- Since subject interest in the most common draw for new volunteers, it would seem practical to target individuals who have already shown an interest
- New recruits might be targeted at retirement
- Managers must consider the social opportunities in the continuing motivation of volunteers
- Volunteers need to be trained to do their ‘job’; but interaction with visitors /users offers opportunities for them to add value through personal experience, knowledge and personality.

When considering the implications for archives one can see that opportunities to move beyond the ‘back room slave’ style of volunteering may be missed in most archive institutions.

These two reports are organisation-based. Many archive organisations are making excellent use of volunteers, not least of all the National Archives, where for example, volunteers help with events, cataloguing (the Friends of the PRO are cataloguing class WO 97 and several other series, and a more recently formed group – the National Archives Local History Research Group – are working on HO 47 documents.)

However, organisation-based studies miss an important and dynamic element of volunteering in the archives domain. The Federation of Family History Societies (FFHS) and local Family History Societies have been described to us as “the real players in this field”. The 1881 Census, for example, was - for over a decade - indexed by FFHS volunteers. Similar projects continue today, and the internet has “made an exponential difference to the capacity of volunteers to contribute on the family history front.”

This is generally work driven by the volunteers themselves and especially in family history and the work of NADFAS. As another correspondent from the National Archives comments: “The really successful volunteer projects, such as Free BMD, and FreeCen, 1881, most Friends of the PRO projects and Manchester 1851 have all been invented and driven forward by the volunteers themselves, largely for their own purposes.”

The way forward
From the evidence that we have it is clear that although volunteers are commonly involved in archives offices (no research has been done on volunteering in records management) they are less engaged than in other parts of the museums, archives and libraries sector. There may be good reasons for this in many cases (generally about capacity – both staff to supervise and space to accommodate) but nevertheless they seem to be missing a great opportunity.

There is some evidence of scepticism, even hostility, about and towards volunteering in the archives domain. Some archivists fear that employment of volunteers might ‘dilute’ their professionalism. Others are concerned about maintaining standards or the time that volunteers can absorb. Volunteers are sometimes viewed as a resource that cannot be controlled and while capable of doing useful things is potentially a threat to the order of archives office. “The
essential point about volunteers is that they are just that – they work on projects where they suit themselves and which map on to their own interests …. I do not believe that people sitting in an office in London can influence the way volunteer projects work in any meaningful way …”

Our regional consultation sessions, however reveal a distinct enthusiasm for volunteering from among the users. Many are of course already volunteers but many more seem very keen to help.

The benefits of engaging volunteers (identified by the professional archivists) are broadly similar to those experienced in other volunteering contexts\(^3\).

- **Enabled work which would not otherwise be undertaken**
- **Draw on a wide range of skills**
- **Brings in the community**
- **Helps in social inclusion**
- **Plays a part in lifelong learning**

The motivations of volunteers themselves put a strong emphasis on the social opportunities which volunteering brings (Holmes, 2002).

Archives have a potentially highly skilled volunteer workforce to draw upon. The tendency for archival research to engage older and particularly retired people who pride themselves on the skills associated with an attention to detail creates a fertile recruitment ground for volunteers. Archives should be more proactive in recruiting.

Volunteers should not be confined simply to cataloguing or indexing. The volunteer usually needs social interaction and the archives manager should regard this as a partnership for mutual benefit, not simply one way. Volunteers have considerable potential for mediation between professionals and users, as Holmes suggests.

If archives are to make greater use of volunteers then they need to ensure that they have appropriate, clear management arrangements in place and recognise that volunteering is not largely an economic activity (unpaid work) but a leisure activity and should be prepared to make concessions in culture and practice accordingly.

There are plenty of publications which offer advice on how to successfully manage volunteers. We have reprinted one basic list of guidance points in Appendix 1. There is a huge quantity of advice published, on the web or in organisational practice which can be drawn upon. No wheels need be invented!

How are more people to be encouraged to volunteer in archives?

Perhaps the first step is to introduce a training programme for archivists who would like to either make greater use of volunteers or who wish to make better use of those that they have or wish to recruit and retain more effectively. It is clear that some professional archivists need to be convinced of the value of volunteers; others do not have the capacity to recruit or manage them. Is it possible that a second step might be to develop some sort of ‘volunteer agency’ for archives or work through the Regional Agencies for Museums, Archives and Libraries, or indeed through a national volunteering body? And what is the potential for developing the relationship between volunteers and ‘Friends’ organisations?

Bringing together volunteers – however active or inactive – into ‘support’ groups or association is always useful. They provide a focal point for ‘community action’ in support of archives and can be mobilised at times of need. Any route that can be taken to strengthen the linkages

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\(^3\) **Volunteers in the Cultural Sector**, Resource, 2002
between local archives and local communities should be explored. Volunteering is not simply not a way of providing cheap labour, it is a source of skills that can add value to the professional staff’s role, either in the search room or behind the scenes. Volunteering is a growing part of the government’s agenda too. Its contribution to citizenship makes it as much a part of the ‘archives and citizenship’ case as Freedom of Information and data protection, and in this context it might be more appropriate to view this issue as part of the Citizenship and Democracy arguments within the Task Force report.

Volunteering will not solve all the problems of the archives world. It is not a substitute for adequate numbers of properly travel and paid professionals. But neither is it a threat. It adds value to what archivists do and the services they supply; and it is part of a wider case for developing citizenship in the community, and the Archives Task Force is invited to consider recommendations around this important issue.

Resource
May 2003
APPENDIX 1: MANAGEMENT OF VOLUNTEERS

(Taken from Volunteering: a Code of Good Practice, Compact on relations between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector in England, Compact Working Group)

The following is a good practice checklist. You should note that these are basic summary points, with further practical guidance available from other sources. They apply to organisations where paid members of staff manage volunteers, not to community groups.

a  prior to recruitment, be clear about why you want/need a volunteer;
b  provide the volunteer with a clear role/task description, identifying anticipated requirement/s of the organisation;
c  provide the volunteer with an initial induction and training programme;
d  provide the volunteer with appropriate line management;
e  add volunteers to organisation charts. Encourage volunteers to participate in the organisation’s wider decision-making process;
f  monitor and acknowledge the contribution that volunteers make to the organisation, to the wider public, to funders and to other volunteers;
g  ask the volunteer what they seek from their placement and share with the volunteer what you want. Remember that any placement should be by mutual consent;
h  always offer to reimburse out-of-pocket expenses. These normally include travel and lunch. Where a placement is away from home, this might also include accommodation and a subsistence allowance;
i  ensure that Health and Safety standards are in place and applied equally to all employees (and volunteers). Insurance policies should be extended to cover volunteers;
j  provide opportunities for volunteers to acquire or develop new or existing skills and assist volunteers who want to gain accreditation towards recognised qualifications;
k  volunteers should not be recruited to fill the place of paid staff. This could be perceived as exploitation of the volunteer and deprival of someone’s livelihood;
l  ensure that the work and contribution of the volunteer adds quality and value to the organisation’s aims and objectives;
m  ensure that Equal Opportunities and/or diversity policies are in place and applied equally to volunteers. Examine the organisation’s ways of working for anything that may pose a barrier for some members;
n  encourage and promote a diverse range of employees at all levels. This will help volunteers of different ethnic groups, ages, disabilities, etc, feel welcome; and
o  in order to attract volunteers from groups that the organisation has previously failed to reach, it may be helpful to approach those groups/people directly to establish what would make volunteering with the organisation more appealing to them.
WHAT EMPLOYERS SHOULD DO

(Taken from Volunteering: a Code of Good Practice, Compact on relations between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector in England, Compact Working Group)

A well managed volunteering programme or set of activities can deliver benefit to the community and also to the volunteer in terms of personal satisfaction. It can also be an excellent tool for training and developing staff. The following are points for employers to consider:

a  aim to establish flexible working practices and adopt ‘time-off’ policies for volunteering in line with leave policies, public duties and family responsibilities. Such flexibility may range from a few hours a month to longer-term secondments;

b  think about establishing an employee-volunteering scheme. Provide guidelines on what resources the organisation will provide e.g. use of accommodation/facilities, match-funding, time-off in lieu and secondments, to assist employees who volunteer;

c  seek to identify volunteering activities compatible with the organisation’s aims. Develop links and relationships with voluntary and community groups, and overseas development agencies; and

d  ensure that voluntary and community activity is incorporated into staff development and human resource policies, and that it is valued and recognised.

All of the major Government Departments have signed up to the Prime Minister’s Active Communities Challenge for employers to give their employees the equivalent of a day's paid time to volunteer. The Government is encouraging employers from all sectors of society to similarly make a commitment to this challenge.