



Libraries use of volunteers

UNISON Members Concerns Regarding Proposed
Volunteer Programme

UNISON Barnet

UNISON Office,

Building 4, North London Business Park,

Oakleigh Road South,

London, N11 1NP

Telephone: 020 8359 2088

Fax: 020 8368 5985

Email: contactus@barnetunison.org.uk

www.barnetunison.me.uk

2011

Introduction:

In September 2010 consultation began on the Library Strategic Review. In Barnet UNISON's report submitted to the Cabinet meeting on 26 July 2011 we expressed concerns about the proposals to use volunteers in Barnet libraries. At the end of August 2011 management presented the details of the proposed volunteer programme to the trade unions and to service managers the following week. Since then Barnet UNISON has been consulting with its members on the proposals and the following questions and concerns have been raised. These have been put forward to libraries senior management and we await a response.

Of particular concern are:

- i) The creation of roles for volunteers that cover key functions of employed library staff and grounds maintenance staff.
- ii) Lack of consultation over changes to terms and conditions of library staff.
- iii) The implementation and ongoing costs of the volunteer programme, along with lack of financial analysis of said programme.
- iv) Increased workload for an ever decreasing workforce that will be placed on them as a result of having to train and supervise volunteers along with potential for high turnover and lack of consistency of volunteers.
- v) Fears of staff that they will lose their jobs to volunteers.
- vi) Fears that the excellent standard of Barnet Library service will decrease as volunteers are used to provide the services provided by experienced, professional staff whose posts are to be deleted.

Comments/Concerns from members

1. Barnet UNISON is very concerned about the prospect of volunteering in Barnet Libraries. Firstly, the level of involvement that these volunteers will have is far greater than we imagined. Our fear is that although it may be argued that with the 16 posts being lost in the next few years, libraries will need all the help they can get. However, we believe this will be the first step towards further job losses in Barnet libraries; and a de-professionalization of the service that Barnet residents know and love.
2. *That volunteers will bring "specialist skills, knowledge and experience" to the service;* Surely volunteers are volunteering in order to learn and *gain* experience from us? What brings these qualities to the service is the current library staff, who are regularly working on low numbers and have met every challenge that has been thrown at them, and endured a barrage of cuts over the years, while still providing an excellent service and working like Trojans to expand and improve the service we offer.
3. Staff will have to take time (that they do not have, even more so when more jobs are cut) in order to train these volunteers. We often struggle to give adequate time and attention to the numerous work experience and D of E people that we take on each year - how will we cope with the amount of volunteers that Barnet Libraries are taking on?
4. What about the cost to the library service? How much will the 'volunteer co-ordinator' earn? We assume this will be an ongoing cost. What are the admin costs of recruitment; and how much staff time will be taken up by this recruitment process - interviews, short listing, training and admin? Barnet UNISON imagines that there will be a fairly high turnover; and this process will have to be repeated on a regular basis. Libraries do not have the staff, time or resources.
5. Barnet UNISON thinks that it is very dangerous to start utilising volunteers in the way that is proposed, especially as it is 'uncharted waters' and has not been attempted before in Barnet. To get them so involved in core library work seems more than a bit risky.

For example...

a) Homework club assistant/under 5s activities assistant/young peoples event assistant/rhyme time/story time

Will parents be comfortable with their children being supervised by volunteers? Are they accountable if anything happens? Will they be involved and aware of risk assessments and safety issues? Will volunteers working with vulnerable groups have an enhanced CRB?

b) Event host

Helping serve refreshments is one thing; running an author event is another.

There is a possibility in the second phase that volunteers will be able to 'organise events' . If they are organising the events, surely they will also end up running them?

c) ICT helper/ICT buddy

We can't see why those who do ICT sessions need someone to hand out session materials; or to help run the sessions. In fact we feel this would be counter-productive and having two teachers may confuse students.

d) The idea of drop in sessions could work, but no matter how much ICT knowledge the volunteer has, they will probably have to keep asking library staff for help as the computer systems and public PCs do not work as home computers do and have restrictions on them. The Pledge bank ICT sessions haven't exactly been a success - it just shows people want library or college tutors not volunteers teaching them.

6. Barnet UNISON has less of a problem with, for instance, a volunteer delivering promotional materials through peoples doors. What concerns us is the sheer *scope* of volunteer opportunities that are being offered to the public. Volunteers will never be able to replace library staff, and we do not believe they are the solution to the Council's problems. The service needs more staff, and those staff need more training and opportunities. We hope that if/when volunteers are used they are not used as an excuse to further reduce the number of staff and librarians that the service has. We feel that over time that this would run libraries into the ground and destroy all the hard work that has been done to maintain a brilliant service.
7. Members have also heard that there is a program to upgrade existing RFID machines in some libraries and introduce them in the libraries that do not have them. Has the Council not learned that RFID technology is not a viable replacement for a member of staff? It may seem like a good idea but surely they must realise, RFID is great when it works, but we would estimate that 1 in 3 customers have to come to the desk due to a problem or technical error; for a payment or problem with the tag. It does not save staff time, and generates more work in terms of emptying and sorting return bins, changing receipts, dealing with errors, rebooting, frozen screens (this, and more are the experiences of staff working directly with RFID). **a)** If libraries have less staff, how are they meant to cope? **b)** How does this ensure better customer service? **c)** Why introduce more self service kiosks? It may sound like it makes sense, but trust staff working with it, it doesn't. And we don't think that Barnet's public like RFID quite as much as the Council thinks!
8. With the prospect of less staff over the coming years, libraries closing, volunteers coming into play and more machines replacing people (lets be honest this is what happened before and is what will happen now) – library staff are extremely fearful for their jobs, their future in libraries and the future of the library service as a whole in Barnet.

-
9. If a person has to have a support worker assist them in their volunteering, is their contribution going to be sufficient?
 10. The reward scheme for volunteers eg “regular Volunteer lunches”, is this an appropriate use of the Councils and Barnet Taxpayers money?
 11. The cost of the travel expenses same as for question 10.
 12. If the gardeners are not using Barnet equipment should they be allowed to use our electrical supply, as any equipment will not have been PAT tested?
 13. How are we going to ensure that they do not use hazardous chemicals or chemicals they are not licenced to use? (gardeners)
 14. Does the cessation of the Councils policy on volunteers mean that after that date they can encroach further on the JDs of employees?
 15. A general feeling of being overtaken by stealth
 16. Didn't management say volunteers would be complementary to staff, allowing library staff to provide the service while volunteers helped with the extras?
 17. Shelving certainly is a core task, and what will happen to evening shelvers?
 18. How can the £50,000 allocated to the volunteer program be justified when libraries are going to lose frontline staff? UNISON have been told that the new post of Volunteer co-ordinator will be cost approx £40,000 with on costs (role profile still being evaluated) plus £10,000 to cover all other volunteer expenses and costs. How exactly has this been costed?
 19. Barnet UNISON is deeply concerned with the role of shelver as this is the core function of LCSOs and Weekend/Evening assistants. We also disagree with the gardener role (do we not pay a maintenance contract to do this already?).
 20. UNISON members are very unhappy about the process of having volunteers working in libraries. This is not acceptable at all. They are distrustful of the whole process. Obviously with RFID in all the libraries, phone renewals going to a central number and volunteers trained up, staff are fearful for their jobs.
 21. There is no way that a volunteer should be doing shelving – staff are currently employed specially for this work, and having a volunteer doing gardening will put grounds maintenance staff out of work. It is especially bad that this is being put into action with no proper consultation with UNISON and staff. Some

UNISON members have said that the idea of having volunteers working in libraries is an insult to staff.

22. There is a view that plenty of volunteers will come forward because the job market is so tough at present, and a lot of people can't get paid work. They will see it as a way to get experience that will help them get paid work. So Barnet will be taking advantage of people who cannot get paid work. Why should people do these jobs without being paid?
23. There is the question of how reliable the volunteers will be and the amount of extra work they will create for staff. As one member has pointed out if they are creating a paid post for a volunteer co-ordinator then that is money that could be spent on libraries/books/librarians instead of being wasted on this co-ordinator job.
24. There is no mention of volunteers having to adhere to the corporate dress code; will this apply to them as well as to staff?
25. National Minimum Wage, UNISON's view is that:
- a) Paid employees should not be replaced by volunteers
 - b) Any volunteer performing work according to terms and hours laid down by your council could well be a 'worker' and eligible for at least the NMW.
26. There is no contractual obligation for library staff to work with, train or supervise volunteers. Therefore the current proposal constitutes a change to terms and conditions.
27. No Role Profile for Volunteer Shelves. One of the most contentious roles for volunteers. Why not?
28. In some Role Profiles – e.g. ICT Session Helper there is the phrase “Long term volunteers may be developed to run sessions in the absence of the staff member who normally delivers the session.” Running these sessions is currently in the Job Description of Adult Librarians. Is this not us training volunteers to take over our jobs?
29. Volunteer “Meeter and Greeter”. Not mentioned on the lists of examples in ppt presentation, but there is a Role Profile for it. Isn't this more erosion of the role of LCSOs? This is an important part of LCSOs' job description, just like shelving.

-
30. Isn't supervising the volunteers creating more workload for the Adults/Children's librarians and library managers than it actually saves by having the volunteers "help" at ICT Sessions, children's events, gardening etc.? Supervising volunteers constitutes a change to job descriptions and/or working conditions? Why hasn't there been any consultation?
31. In the "Volunteering in Barnet Libraries" document, point 3 says "Library Volunteer role profiles specifically describe the activities volunteers undertake, differentiating it from the role of paid staff." But many of the volunteer roles are already in staff job descriptions. How is this "differentiating"? If unpaid staff are going to be taking on work that is already in the job descriptions, then surely this constitutes a change to staff working conditions and there should be a proper staff consultation about this.
32. Won't creating the management role of Volunteer Co-ordinator take money away from paying for front-line staff? Why not just employ 2 more LCSOs? Explaining that there is no money for staff and then creating a new management role is insulting to those facing staff reductions in branches and branch closures.
33. We want written confirmation that volunteers will not ever be counted as bodies or included in the minimum staffing numbers for a building.
34. The present library management have not thought about unintended consequences. If we take on trust their good intentions, in a few years we may have different managers, or a manager higher up in the Council may decide that because we have volunteers they can make all the paid staff redundant. So the present management will have made a terrible decision that will have disastrous consequences for all of us.
35. Why haven't we been consulted? Why haven't these documents been circulated to all staff?
36. Why haven't the public been consulted? I'm fairly sure they would not support this.
37. We shouldn't be guinea pigs for Community Barnet's volunteers. There are many charitable organisations in Barnet that are struggling to survive because they don't have enough volunteers.
38. Data protection –will volunteers have to use Vubis and netloan as this presents a huge risk to personal data?

-
39. Reliability – if volunteers don't turn up to work, what happens? If we've booked people to see them as ICT buddies or if they are hosting an event for example and they don't turn up, this will cause major problems.
40. Safety – particularly in relation to children, Barnet UNISON feels this is unacceptable, and is sure many parents will agree and stop sending their children to events and schemes staffed by volunteers (especially under 5s!)
41. Cost – this is going to cost more than it would save through training, management and interview time.
42. Is the long term aim to replace staff with volunteers – they (management) should be honest with staff?
43. Quality of service – if volunteers are performing tasks previously done by qualified librarians and or experienced trained staff, the service will suffer. Surely the Council realise we are running an improving service on much less staff than we had 5 years ago. We can do it. We care about our service, and the huge range of things we now offer on a smaller staff show that. The new structure works – Librarians are running large amounts of events and activities, and LCSO's have branched out to offer previously Librarian led services.
44. Some members have past experience of working with volunteers, and their experience is that unless you are extremely lucky, the majority require a lot of supervision, they make a lot of mistakes (unintentionally) and they are unreliable. We can see their inclusion in the service being very problematical. It is likely they will create more work for staff.

Meet and Greet

45. RFID machines are complex and frequently malfunction – library staff are well trained/experienced to deal with this. The library service is working with old IT systems that require a lot of onsite maintenance, and more staff public interaction on this topic has to be very carefully handled on a daily basis.
46. The new structure was supposed to free staff from counters to floorwalk – which they now do. If a volunteer is going to do this plus shelving, possibly backroom tasks etc what does an LCSO do?
47. Are volunteers likely to have the expertise to floorwalk – book recommendations, ICT help, library hardware knowledge etc?

Event Hosting

48. Staff are at present timetabled to run events that they have organised – this makes perfect sense, and most have never experienced being refused this time (in reality a couple of hours at most). Even with staff cuts they would still be able to manage this easily. It's the organisation of events that takes time, not the hosting.

49. The view of one member is that 'I personally want to host an event I have organised. It is an opportunity for me to thank the participants and audience, network and make contacts for future events, get direct attendee feedback etc'.

Marketing

50. Money spent on volunteering would be better spent on finally establishing our facebook/twitter/blog pages that the service keeps being promised. This would guarantee high attendance at events. The service already has high attendance at events by the way!

51. Displays – are volunteers going to order the stock for these displays? It takes ½ hour tops to put a display up. Staff often do this while on counter/floorwalking duties.

Homework Centre

52. This is run by a qualified children's librarian and experienced staff. Are volunteers doing this going to be ex teachers – otherwise how are they qualified to give children the correct information, or even know how to work with children?

ICT help/buddying

53. Are they accountable for the information they help people find on the internet?
Eg: health info in particular?

Under 5's

54. Member quote 'I personally wouldn't take my child to an event at the library that had volunteers assisting, and I don't think I'd be alone there. I currently attend rhymetime and stay and play sessions that are either staffed by qualified library staff or children's centre staff. I feel confident that my son is safe, and that if he did have an accident or something worse should happen he would be attended to by accountable, well trained staff who have an affinity with children'.

55. In the interests of harmonious relations between volunteers and paid staff, volunteers should not be used to undertake the work of paid staff during industrial disputes.

56. As someone who has used volunteers successfully in my previous job, my only question relates to the libraries in which they will be placed. Having read the two documents that have been sent through, I am worried about the sites in

which volunteers will be placed, considering the overwhelming levels of negativity relating to the proposals. For this scheme to work, volunteers need to feel encouraged and supported, and will management ensure they place them in libraries which will do just that, or will they be allocated across the board? In which case, I fear the scheme will encounter problems, with staff that seem to view volunteers as people who are either incapable, or just out to steal their jobs (both ridiculous and short sighted views!).