

How City of Bradford Museums and Galleries team transformed their volunteer experience and boosted team efficiency with vHelp

City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council is the local authority of the City of Bradford in West Yorkshire, England.

Bradford District is home to some of Yorkshire's most exciting museums and galleries. From the Baroque splendour of Cartwright Hall Art Gallery to the spectacular building of Keighley's Cliffe Castle Museum, there is always something new to do or see. Specialist museums like Bradford Industrial Museum and Bolling Hall Museum and Library bring the district's history and heritage to life through ever-changing displays.



Cartwright Hall Art gallery

The Challenge

For decades, volunteers supported the Museums team without a formal volunteering programme in place.

When the first lockdown started and all sites were closed, Sonja Kielty, the then newly appointed Volunteers Coordinator, took the time to build a strategy and develop a brand new, fit-for-purpose volunteer programme for the Museums and Galleries team.

Once sites started to reopen, one of the things that came to light from their Zoom conversations was that volunteers were having to travel between sites, and they couldn't easily get their expenses reimbursed. To make an expense claim, a volunteer would have to take a bus (or drive) to an off-site office, complete a paper expense claim form, find the administrator to submit the form to and be reimbursed in person.

Some administrators worked part-time, and they were not always there when the volunteer arrived to collect petty cash. It was a very poor user experience for volunteers.

As Sonja spoke to other volunteer managers, it became apparent that the issue of reimbursing volunteers was a common one, most organisations still used petty cash for volunteer expenses. A local organisation was using vHelp to reimburse their volunteer's expenses and they recommended vHelp to Sonja as a solution for volunteer expenses reimbursement.

Breaking internal barriers to change

After a demo with the vHelp team, Sonja was keen on adopting it, the challenge then was to convince the internal team at Bradford Council that vHelp was worth adopting and it would save the organisation time and money as well as supporting their volunteers.

As a part of the local authority, Sonja and her team had several layers of approval to start using new systems - like IT /information security and financial compliance. Sonja was faced with many meetings with colleagues from various departments where she had to explain to them, repeatedly, what vHelp was and why she needed it. She had to be quite assertive when making the case for technology to support volunteering and the recent lockdown experience and how volunteers rose to the challenge was a great point to use when discussing the need for change. She said:

'I get to know people and they start to feel more comfortable and settle in and that helps but it was also such a good thing to do. During lockdown, when so many things were done by volunteers in the city, we had 100s of people in vaccine centres, delivering food parcels etc. We had to find an easier way to pay their expenses so they could continue volunteering.'

The hardest part was the finance approval process, it was much longer than they expected; all the questioning and requirements were a bit daunting but once the finance team understood what it was and put the required safeguards in place, they were happy too.

Launching vHelp

Once vHelp received all the required approvals from the council launching was very straightforward. The organisation signed up to vHelp and stored their payment details, a process that takes less than five minutes. Once registered the team were able to invite their volunteers to use vHelp.

'We were implementing a more complex system at the same time, which needed involvement from infrastructure architecture and senior IT people but, for vHelp, we just had to create the account and invite our volunteers to join. We sent them a leaflet with instructions on how to submit an expense, and that was it.'

Sonja explained when vHelp was first launched, it took a few weeks for volunteers to engage but it has now taken off. The Museums and Galleries team has successfully recruited volunteers during and after lockdown, so now they have a bigger group of volunteers. Sonja explained how the change happened:

'They (volunteers) are sitting together over cups of tea and saying, 'Look it goes straight into the bank account'. It is great for them, especially now with the rise in petrol prices and some of our volunteers driving quite a long way to get to their site, they are confident that they can claim expenses, get reimbursed quickly and continue volunteering.'



Their volunteer workforce is diverse and vHelp is now working for most people. There is a volunteer in her 70s, who is now showing younger volunteers how to upload receipts and submit their claims on vHelp!

The Benefits

From a volunteer experience perspective, the expense claim process that used to take hours, including travelling to deliver forms and collect cash, now takes minutes. The volunteer then receives their money directly into their bank account. A volunteer said:

'It's quite a brilliant change from the old way of having to submit forms and having to chase up payroll because someone, somewhere has forgotten to tick a box. So easy to use!'

From the organisation's side, vHelp supported Sonja in making the review and expenses approval process centralised, so relevant colleagues approve expenses. The approval process now takes minutes, with no paper in sight and all the necessary audit trail and transaction reporting in place.

'The team administrators found it easy to pick up. Our business manager loves the reports I send her, she never has any questions.'

vHelp was part of a wider change programme that the Bradford Museums and galleries volunteering team fought for, putting in place a range of support for volunteers that just wasn't there before Covid. Volunteers now have a much better experience their contribution is visible and much more appreciated.

As the service became embedded it has now taken over from what was the 'petty cash' and paper forms in the volunteer team. As the council is trying to get rid of petty cash the Museums and Galleries team is now ahead of the game!