

REPORT TO: Employment Learning and Skills and
Community PPB

DATE: 5th June 2013

REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director Children & Enterprise

PORTFOLIO: Children, Young People and Families

SUBJECT: Read On – Volunteer Readers’ Project

WARDS: All

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

The purpose of the report is to inform Members that the Council’s Employment, Learning & Skills Division has launched its Volunteer Readers’ Project for 2013. The report provides Members with information on the origins of the project and on progress to date.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS: That

- (1) Members note the contents of the report;
- (2) Members welcome the launch of the Read On Volunteer Readers’ Project

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Background to the Read On Volunteer Readers’ Project

- 3.1 Despite the millions spent on the National Skills for Life Strategy over the past 10 years, the latest Skills for Life survey (2011) shows that the number of adults at Entry 1 level or below has actually increased from 3.4% in 2003 to 5% in 2011. When converting qualifications to school attainment points, Entry 1 level is worth 10 points, which compares to 16 points for GCSE Grade G (the lowest GCSE pass), whilst below Entry 1 level will include those who cannot read. Appropriate provision to support adults in Halton who have Entry 1 or below level literacy skills was an identified gap, with public funding focused on Levels 1 and above. The Read On Volunteers project is meeting this identified need in the borough.
- 3.2 A pilot Volunteer Readers’ project and a piece of action research in 2012 tracked learner progress and volunteer development. The current programme is based on the findings of both. Both the 2012 and 2013 projects are managed by Louise Faint, the Adult & Family Learning Manager within the Employment, Learning & Skills Division.

The different elements of the Read On Volunteer Readers' Project

- 3.3 The 2013 project commenced with a press release in the local paper in September 2012 outlining the project and calling for volunteers. A briefing session for 12 people who expressed an interest in volunteering was held on 25th October 2012 to outline the requirements/purpose of the project. This was followed by 4 twilight sessions (over 4 weeks) for the volunteers beginning 15th November. All 12 volunteers attended all sessions, which was an excellent outcome.
- 3.4 Volunteers were then interviewed on a one to one basis by the Adult & Family Learning Manager to determine whether any of the training needed recapping or whether they had any concerns about working with a learner.
- 3.5 Participants were identified to take part in the project through 2 sources. Firstly, referrals came from Work Programme advisors who had identified clients with literacy issues; secondly, adult learners who accessed the Skills for Life Assessment service who were assessed as having pre Entry literacy skills were referred to the Adult & Family Learning Manager.
- 3.6 Learners were then interviewed to ensure their suitability for the project – referrals with moderate/severe learning difficulties could not be considered suitable due to the specialist nature of the support they would require. It is not considered ethical to expect a volunteer without training to meet the needs of these learners. However, learners with mild difficulties such as dyslexia, dyspraxia etc could be supported.
- 3.7 The next stage of the project was for the volunteers and learners to be paired up according to interests, available times/dates, and preference for Runcorn or Widnes meetings. All 'pairings' were encouraged to meet for the volunteer sessions in one of Halton's libraries or another public place.
- 3.8 The project has been supported through a positive partnership arrangement with Halton's Library Service, which has bought the relevant text books (10 @ £35 each) and created a new 'volunteer' category for library tickets, which entitles volunteers to free printing and free photocopying. This arrangement has been welcomed and highlights the synergies between the Adult Learning service and Libraries.
- 3.9 Volunteers are given 1:1 support by the Adult & Family Learning Manager. This is offered in 2 ways; through email on an ongoing basis and in catch up meetings. In addition, there are opportunities for the volunteers to network and share good practice every half term

Next Steps

- 3.9 The majority of volunteers have met with their learners at least twice by the end of January 2013. The meetings will continue and the project will run for a further 5 months initially. After this time learner progress will be assessed and the learners / volunteers will be advised on a suitable next step or will set further learning goals for an additional period of time.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 Success of the project will provide all learning providers within the borough with a referral route for learners with reading difficulties.
- 4.2 Work Programme advisers supporting non-reading customers will be have a meaningful referral route of support.
- 4.3 Links could be made to the Inspiring Families programme as research illustrates the correlation between low levels of literacy and numeracy and a range of adverse social and educational factors: unemployment, lack of further education and training, having large families early in life, separation and divorce, physical and mental health problems, and low participation in public activities.

5.0 OTHER IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The project enables the council to offer good quality volunteering opportunities to residents able to offer a high level of service; 7 of the current volunteers are ex professionals in teaching or training.
- 5.2 Success of the project will support the Division during Ofsted inspections as it demonstrates that learning opportunities offered by the team are high quality, inclusive, value for money and related to the organisations strategic priorities.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

6.1 Children and Young People in Halton

Development of parent reading skills will enable parents to become reading role models to their children and will boost parents' involvement in their children's learning. It can also encourage parents to connect with schools and participate in other, non-threatening learning opportunities available in the borough such as Family Learning in schools and Children's Centres. Recent data analysis by the children's data service has shown a positive correlation between family learning and children's attainment (report available upon request).

6.2 Employment, Learning and Skills in Halton

Many non-readers taking part in the project are out of work and have participated in previous 'back to work' initiatives that have required them to attend courses and other learning activities. Without the ability to read these activities are meaningless. This project now offers non-readers an opportunity to progress their skills and move further towards the workplace.

6.3 A Healthy Halton

None

6.4 A Safer Halton

None

6.5 Halton's Urban Renewal

None

6.6 Corporate Effectiveness and Business Efficiency

The use of skilled volunteers to support an activity not ordinarily provided through other means increases the effectiveness of the organisation, supports council priorities and increases value for money.

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

7.1 HR have confirmed that volunteers no longer require a CRB check.

8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

8.1 Non-reading adults can often present with a learning difficulty. Whilst the project can effectively work with adults experiencing mild learning difficulties such as dyslexia and dyspraxia it is not considered ethical to expect untrained or inexperienced volunteers to work with more severe learning difficulties that require more specialist support.

9.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

None under the meaning of the Act