

West Lothian councillors back growth of volunteer corps

West Lothian Council wants to build up its already active force of volunteers who can help staff provide services.

And councillors have backed plans to encourage more people to help others.

But there was a warning that the council should not “sleepwalk” to a situation where volunteers replace paid staff.

A meeting of the Council’s Executive agreed to the development of a corporate strategy to encourage volunteers to back up the work of council departments.

In a report to councillors Anti-Poverty Service manager Nahid Hanif said: “In a changing financial landscape with increased financial restraints and with services under increasing pressure, volunteering offers the opportunity for local people to become more involved in their own communities helping those in need to access council services; and helping the council to achieve its strategic priorities.

“It is clear from the work already being undertaken by volunteers that they bring a great deal of added value to the council offering, as well as gaining valuable skills, experience and enjoyment from their volunteer roles.

“There is evidence that multiple council services are keen to explore the added value and benefit that volunteers can bring

to their service and would appreciate a centralised process and approach. This added value and benefit for all would only be increased by agreeing the approach and planning for its roll out across the wider council.”

Volunteers have been a vital part of the delivery of the Anti-Poverty Service since 2010 and for this reason the service has been asked to develop a strategy that can be rolled out across the council.

There are 48 volunteers supporting the most vulnerable residents of West Lothian, often those from areas of highest deprivation. Volunteers bring a wide range of skills and experience which enhance the service and offer a fresh perspective on how we deliver our service.

The use of “experts by experience” where those who have lived experience of poverty or other issues has been recognised as particularly useful.

Officers said that, at a time when the Anti-Poverty Service is at its busiest, volunteers have time to give to customers to ensure a reactive, holistic, and empathetic service. Recent recruitment has also resulted in a much more diverse pool of volunteers who are more representative of the communities they serve.

While councillors were generally supportive of the development of a consistent approach to enhance the experience of volunteering it was acknowledged that there could be challenges ahead.

Councillor Pauline Stafford, the SNP deputy group leader cautioned: “The thing I’m concerned about is the references throughout the report to the financial constraints on the council. I think we risk giving the impression that we are gearing up to replace important council work which is currently carried out by paid trained staff who have got responsibilities that carry risk and the need for finely

balanced judgement.

“There is a risk that we are looking like we are moving to replace that with volunteers, especially with our recruitment freeze. I think we are seeing this in a review of the community centres at the moment.

“I don’t believe that we should be replacing the provision of universal public services. I know that’s not in the paper, and we have said that isn’t going to happen but in reality, I think that is the situation we might be sleepwalking into. We have seen it with food banks. They are now part of the fabric of society as an accepted thing and we no longer see them as the abomination they are.

“ I think we have to be very careful. We have all got examples of fantastic volunteers in our wards making a huge contribution to their communities and getting a lot back , but at no point should that be linked to the financial constraints and pressures.”

Councillor Susan Manion said: “This is a really good piece of work so thank you. The development actually helps on some issues that have been raised because it gives it a structure. Volunteers will bring not just capacity but a richness in experience to all departments.

Council leader Lawrence Fitzpatrick (pictured) said: “We have volunteers at the Advice Shop and we have people who give up their time to sit on parent councils and community councils. They inform policy and give us feedback which allows us to develop.”

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter