

Annual briefing to the Royal Observer
Corps Association at their reunion.

Buxton Sat 22 October 2016

Once again it is time to brief you on the activities of the Royal Observer Corps Benevolent Fund after another year of operation to bring relief to former members of the Corps that are in need, hardship or distress.

It has been a year not only of making grants to beneficiaries but also of running an outreach programme to reach those former members, unlike those here today but in the wider community, that may have forgotten about – or are unaware – of their eligibility to call on *their* benevolent fund.

This has been a growing challenge given the ever-expanding length of time since the stand-down of the ROC.

It's now 25 years since the main body of the Corps was stood down and over 20 years since its absolute closure. However, it's a much longer period since the re-organisation of Civil Defence that saw the release of many members in 1968. Forty-eight years since, say, a thirty-year-old was released in 1968 from the ROC after 5 years' service to the Crown. That individual would now be 78 and left the Corps, perhaps finding another body to join, and to get on with his or her life and over the years, forgetting about their time in the ROC.

The Corps disappeared, the Cold War ended and the world has changed. But in that time one thing remained constant, one organisation that still operates and has done so since it was first formed over 70 years ago in 1945. And that ladies and gentlemen, is the Royal Observer Corps Benevolent Fund.

But as I referred to a moment ago, operating the ROCBF is not without its challenges. Our outreach programme is a solid and beneficial activity that we are committed to, and I shall brief you this morning on our work in that area, as well as advising you about our other charitable activities over 2015 and into this year. And, give an indication of the way that the future for the Fund is being considered by the Trustees.

Firstly to deal with our results for 2015, which were detailed in our last annual report and accounts which are available for all to see on our website – which, as you all know – is found at www.rocbf.org.uk The website is an area where there has been a lot of development over the last year or so, and I'll go on to deal with that in more detail shortly.

But first, what of assistance and grants? Our primary objective...

The fund received income for the last complete year, 2015, of £28,891; mostly from investments. Charitable expenditure amounted to £55,199. This was significantly in excess of income and reflects the increased value of our grants (increased by almost £18k over the year). This reflects a similar volume of grants made in 2014, but with a significantly higher value.

During the financial year ended 31 December 2015, we disbursed £39,283 in grant aid against 31 successful applications for assistance. There were also another six successful applications that rolled into this year for grant payment. That covers last year, what of our grant activities so far this year – we have dealt with some 40+ cases and distributed over £43k and rising and we may hit £50k, which would be the highest total since 2010.

Now to mention Outreach

The Trustees are pleased that various outreach activities conducted over the past few years have continued to give the ROCBF a higher profile. This is helping to maintain the level of our benevolent activity. However, while we are enjoying a raised profile it is of concern that the number of cases has not seen significant growth. However, it is growing. We have seen over many years that there is not always correlation between volume and value of grants. Overall case numbers are counter intuitive with such a potentially large constituency of former members of the Corps, and their dependants. We recognise however, that there is a diminishing pool of potential cases with the passing of time and the increasing age of eligible people. It is also recognised that some of the eligible base of membership, perhaps having left the Corps at a relatively young age in the 60's and 70's, may have forgotten about, or not be aware, of their entitlement, as I referred to earlier.

In an effort to reach out to those, and others, it was decided to reinvigorate PR activities to raise the profile of the charity to drive people to our website. The Trustees recognised that professional help would be needed, along with a modern and accessible website. Accordingly, it was agreed to relaunch our website and launch more effective social media platforms. Digital marketing campaigns (currently seen by over 16k people) have been used as these are targeted and more cost effective and better value for money than traditional press advertising and nailing another poster to a tree! It is planned for this *Push for Profile* to run over the next two years. These activities come with a modest cost, but the clear aim is to generate a better case flow. It is felt that all effort has to be made to make *all* former members of the Corps aware of their eligibility to call on us if they are in need.

Recognising this, the Trustees held a workshop on Outreach as part of their annual meetings in May and November last year, establishing a rolling strategy and setting an appropriate budget.

A mention now of some of our outreach activities over 2015 and into this year.

We are not alone! The Trustees made an honorarium payment of £350, to the ROC Association Heritage Committee (ROCAHC). This was to help meet costs incurred in promoting the ROCBF as part of their activities through to the end of 2015. This was also extended into this year in recognition of the professional and convincing 'performance' they give to the public at various events, which last year included the Royal International Air Tattoo.

The RAF Charitable Trust (Wg Cdr D Stubbs PDM RAF) and their concert tour in 2015 featured the ROC march 'Skywatch' in all their programmes, which also helped to raise the charity's profile.

As you all know last year was the 75th anniversary of the BoB. It was also the 'Final' laying up of the Sovereign's Banner of the Royal Observer Corps at St Clement Danes, the RAF

Church, in London – which many here today were at. Those two very significant events in the history of the ROC helped to raise the Corps' profile. The ROCBF benefitted in turn.

We used all that activity to re-launch the website and significant Social media developments. We have a very good Facebook presence and there is now a new ROCBF YouTube channel, featuring some videos made at Cleethorpes in the summer

I'd like to make specific mention here, and express appreciation for the co-operation and help of the ROCA Heritage Team and their Armed Forces Day stand in Cleethorpes. They, (and the Red Arrows!) provided a very professional and convincing backdrop to our activities that day – as indeed they do at many other events during the year. We value their contribution hugely and I would like to say a big thank-you to Edwina and her team.

Other developments and activities in 2016 included new case studies on our website which many of you (?) will have seen. We need more. They are a powerful outreach tool. Do let us know if you have any further case study ideas.

The ROCBF continues to be an active member of the Confederation of Service Charities (Cobseo) and this is also helping to raise our profile in that sector.

I hope also today, to encourage all members to become more effective ambassadors for the ROCBF and support the ROCA Benevolent Fund Liaison Officers' network, which is now being coordinated by your chairman John Sharpe – Thank you John.

That covers last year and our activities into this. We have so far dealt this year with some 35 cases and distributed £43,000 (and rising) in grants as I mentioned earlier, and we are as busy as ever for a band of 8 volunteer trustees...

But what of the future?

It's known that the ROCBF will not last forever – as indeed, will none of us!

There is a dwindling band of former members as we all age. Arrangements have been made so that ROCBF does not become a moribund charity that still may have residual funds but no more former members of the ROC. That day will come.

Any remaining funds will pass to the RAFBF for the relief of hardship, need or distress of former members of the Royal Air Force. That was approved by the Charity Commission in 2007.

Managing the charity has become more complex over the past 20 years since HQROC disappeared. The Trustees now have to consider how best it can be managed into the future as we are all, bar two, well past retirement age.

Terry Giles has been wonderful as our long-serving Secretary. A role that has at times been the equivalent of a full-time job. He is now due to retire, over the next two years from an increasingly complex role. The idea of a part-time paid servant was explored but that is not practicable as the administration of the administrator would still need to be managed.

With Terry's standing down we need alternative arrangements that will see the Fund, and its casework handling, into the future...

Accordingly, we are in discussions with the RAFBF to see if the operation of the ROCBF can be managed by them while still preserving the identity, objectives and ethos of the ROCBF until such time as we are all no more.

It is a pragmatic approach that will allow for the Fund to be applied in the way always intended when first set up by the Royal Observer Corps - an organisation that served to support the Royal Air Force. The ROCBF is now seeking the further support of the RAFBF beyond the considerable help that they have always provided since our inception.

Talks continue but one thing remains clear. The funds of the ROCBF will still be there for the former members of the ROC that need help. The motto 'Forewarned is Forearmed' has never seemed more apt.

Ladies & gentlemen, thank you very much for your attention.

CH

Oct '16