



SHARE Museums East
Effective Museums:
**Volunteer
Development
Programme
2011-2012**

 **SHARE Museums East**
a network of know how

Supporting excellence, resilience and
cooperative working in museums
in the East of England.



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**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



Participants in the Volunteer Development Programme.

Supporting museums in the East of England to plan and develop volunteer involvement

A Report by:

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Volunteering Development Adviser



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SHARE Museums East is the museum development programme for the East of England funded by Arts Council and managed by Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service.



Introduction

Volunteers are vital to the work and success of many museums. People volunteer for a variety of reasons but they are all a valuable part of the museum workforce. So that both sides gain the most benefit from this relationship museums need to actively manage, encourage and develop their volunteers.

The aim of the Volunteer Development Programme is to support museums to develop holistic approaches to recruiting, managing and involving volunteers by:

- encouraging participants to think about how they recruit and manage volunteers and how they might develop this to meet future needs
- supporting participants to identify and plan practical actions that they can take forward in their museum
- providing participants with a forum to share experiences and challenges and to learn from each other.

Museum participants attend 3 workshops based around a Volunteer Lifecycle Model which includes three main strands: planning for volunteering, selecting and retaining volunteers. Participants review their strengths and identify areas for improvement which form an action plan for their museum.

Participants are encouraged to attend in pairs from each to museum so that they can support each other to take the learning back to their organisation and implement the planned changes. They are invited to a further workshop three months later to share their successes and challenges and to update their action plans.

The programme was developed and piloted in 2010-11 with a further four programmes in Norfolk, Cambridgeshire, Suffolk and Hertfordshire/Essex in 2011-12. So far 26 museums have taken part including independent, volunteer-run, local authority and university museums. The evaluation of the programme shows that it has had a positive impact on individuals, museums and their visitors.

“I would like to say how valuable I believe this volunteer development programme has been in making a real difference to standards across the county. I think the course has been especially helpful bringing together such a wide range of museums to share their experiences, talk through ideas and solve problems together.”

Museums Partnership Officer,
Cambridgeshire Museums Advisory
Partnership

The programme forms part of the **SHARE Museums East** development programme for the East of England funded by Arts Council and managed by Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service, it was commissioned in partnership with county museum development officers. It was developed and facilitated by Linda Brandish, an experienced trainer in volunteer development.

This booklet provides an overview of the programme and its impact so far.



Approach to workshops

It is an important aspect of the programme that the workshops were not designed to tell participating museums how to manage their volunteers but to provide a forum that offered support and facilitated discussion so that everyone could share ideas about what good volunteer management looks like and feels like and how it might enable museums to implement exciting new plans and ideas.

Often in the day to day running of a museum participants had very little if any time to stop and think specifically about volunteers beyond who was in that day. A lot of museums felt guilty that they were not able to devote more time to volunteers to develop their skills and involve them in future planning.

It was acknowledged that museums now need to operate a stronger business focus in their management model and that volunteers are at the centre of this. Therefore gaining back more control over what volunteers do, and importantly, how they do it, is crucial if museums are to survive and compete in their local heritage sector, both for visitor numbers and for funding.

It is also important to note that most volunteers are fantastic. The time, skills and passion they offer is invaluable and museums do not want to undermine that or lose it. If they can channel that passion volunteers can help museums move forward, deliver their business plan, develop their visitor offer and engage more deeply with their community.

Well managed volunteers allow museums to do much more than just open the doors. They are a vital link to the community and can be their best ambassadors. Museums need to support and cherish the good ones and manage the not so good.

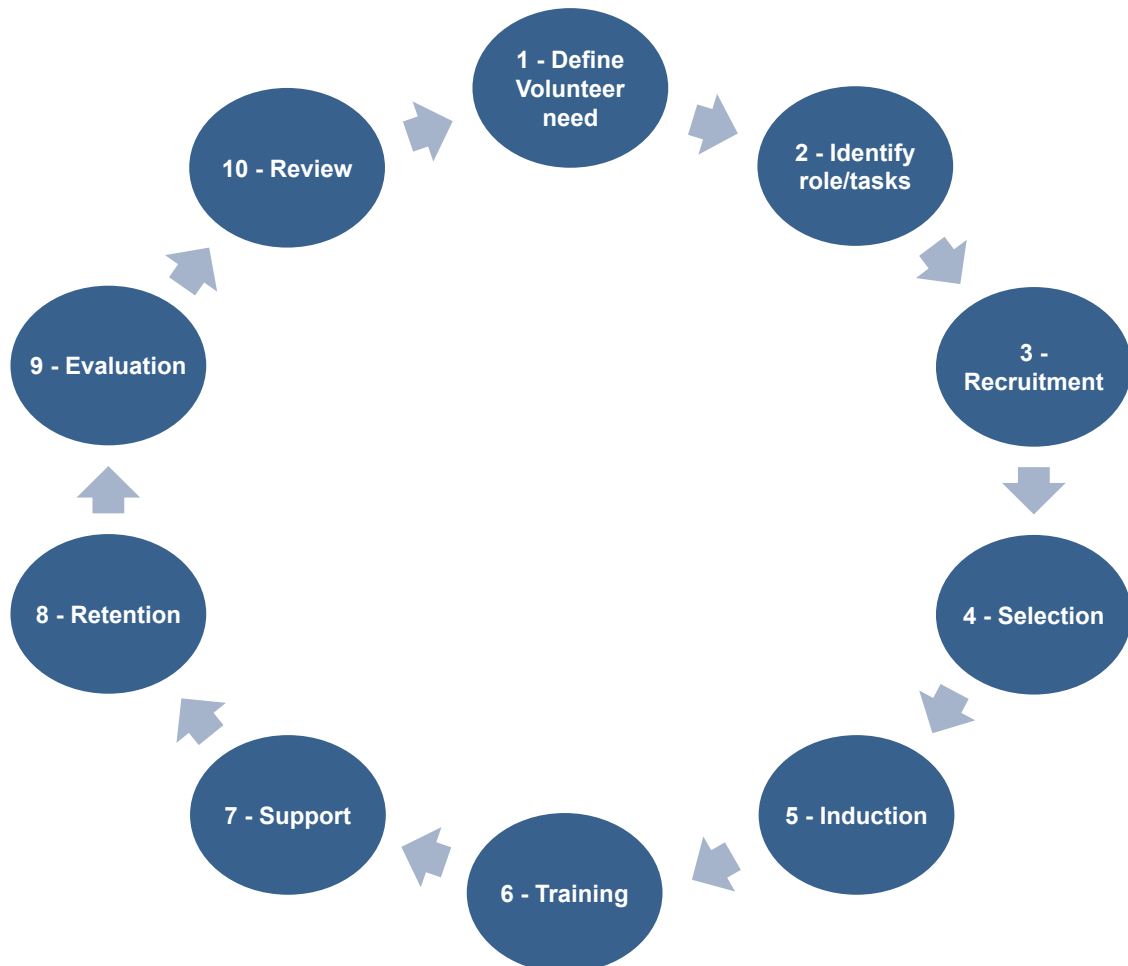
Many museums were also keen to look at how they can introduce a greater diversity to volunteering acknowledging that this could impact positively on visitors and the local community.

It was also acknowledged that many participants in the programme have taken on a co-ordinating role at their museum, whether paid or unpaid, without having formal people management skills and in some cases without the expectation that they would be line managers of an often very diverse group of volunteers. Volunteers of widely varying ages (14 – 92 at least) and backgrounds bring with them a varied assortment of attitudes, skills and expectations.

The background experience of participants was varied: a mix of volunteers and paid staff, from a wide variety of organisations including small volunteer-led museums to larger local authority museums. This mix provided a good basis for sharing and discussion.



The Volunteer Lifecycle Diagram



Why use the lifecycle model?

The lifecycle model is not comprehensive but provides a logical framework for thinking and planning for the main issues and stages of volunteer involvement: planning, recruiting and retaining volunteers. Each section allowed the museums to address the most important issues arising plus good governance, audience development, volunteer experience and community engagement. By thinking in this way it's perhaps easier to include and integrate volunteers and volunteering much more into the everyday running of the museum and future plans.

The model breaks down the overall, possibly daunting task of reviewing and updating a volunteer strategy into 'bite sized chunks'.

Participants discussed and acknowledged that volunteer management impacts on every area of a museum's work and is therefore a fundamental part of their role.



The Volunteer Lifecycle: planning for volunteering

The workshops started by exploring one of the basic concepts that underpin volunteering strategy, and affects the experience volunteers have and ultimately impacts on the visitor experience, taking time out to plan.

Why plan?

Museums are often short staffed and very busy and almost all the participating museums agreed that they often gratefully 'grab' anyone who expresses an interest in becoming a volunteer without too much planning or process. The priority is often having the right number of people to enable the museum to open. It was acknowledged that this sometimes led to having volunteers who were not always able to work in the way museum staff wanted or to adapt easily to change.

Planning can start by asking just two main questions.

- Why do we want to involve volunteers in our museum?
- What do we want them to do?

Traditionally the answers might have been;

So that we can open and to stop visitors touching exhibits

However most participants felt that museums had moved on from this and that they needed their volunteers to interact more with all visitors, to encourage them to enjoy the exhibits and leave them with a desire to return.

Planning for volunteering has also become a focus for museums seeking to renew or obtain Accreditation which requires a basic level of volunteer management processes and documentation.

Setting a vision

Each museum was asked to come up with a vision that defined volunteering for them. Just a sentence or two that could be understood by, and shared with, other staff and volunteers and against which all future plans could be tested to ensure that volunteering and the impact on volunteers are always considered.

The simplest was:

'Volunteers are at the heart of what we do'

Few words but powerful and showing a clear focus.

With a vision to work to and an idea of why they wanted to involve volunteers, the museums were then able to move on and identify the roles they needed to create and fill to deliver their plans and importantly what skills would they need and what type of person might they be looking for.



The Volunteer Lifecycle: selecting volunteers

You can select volunteers and it's ok to say no if you don't have a vacancy or someone is unsuitable.

Once you feel confident with this it becomes easier.

Many museums felt a little uncomfortable with this at first and were worried that they don't get enough applicants to be 'fussy' however group discussions on some of the issues that arise if you 'grab' and do not have a robust selection process alleviated most worries.

“Enquiries from potential volunteers are now more focussed and they are more aware of what is expected from them.”

“I now feel more in control, proactively utilising volunteer time rather than being managed by them.”

Role profiles

Participants discussed the reasons why it's important to set out clearly who you need, what you want them to do and what you expect from them. There was some initial worry that volunteers would not accept such a 'business-like approach' The group was asked to discuss what might happen if they did not clearly manage expectations at the outset.

Several participants shared examples of issues arising such as volunteers not understanding what attitudes were expected, the range and responsibilities of the role they were undertaking and when they were expected to turn up.

“More staff are now supervising volunteers – not just me!”

Advertising roles outside of the museum was new to many participants. They were asked to think about how this could be done and shared experiences and thoughts as to how they might do this in the future.

Trustee roles in particular caused a lot of discussion and a general agreement that wider advertising of these roles could attract the more diverse range of specialist skills that are needed to ensure each business area is represented.

“New posters and leaflets allowed us to advertise in different communities enabling us to increase the number and diversity of our volunteers.”

Application forms existed in most museums but nearly all agreed that they needed to look at this again to ensure relevance and to check that they were used consistently for every applicant. Participants looked at sample forms and those museums who had recently revised their volunteer literature kindly agreed to share their work with others via the SHARE Museums East website.

References

There was some consternation that asking for references would not be tolerated by volunteers and cause extra work. Museums who already ask for references shared their thoughts: they want to know more about who is volunteering and needed another opinion as to suitability, especially where the role involved working with children or vulnerable adults. They saw it as a means of reassurance similar to safeguarding checks/CRB.

The groups were also keen to discuss the potential fallibility of such measures but agreed that they could only do so much and could see that in the event of a problem they could prove that they had tried to limit potential risk.

“The recruitment process is now a lot more professional.”



Interviews

In almost every museum a discussion is held with potential volunteers although it is seldom called an interview. The group were encouraged to think about what questions they might want to ask and how they might bring consistency to this part of the selection process. Some ideas were:

- have more than 1 interviewer
- involve volunteers in interviews
- offer a trial volunteer session
- ask consistent questions
- make and keep written notes of interviews.

Selection

Most museums had never declined a volunteer offer. Some felt that museums have a duty to encourage volunteer participation and should find a role for all.

Where this arose the groups were asked to consider the implications of taking all comers and to discuss the popular premise 'volunteers are free'. A few museums started off supporting this premise and some lively debates were held.

Identified costs included:

- Training time
- Tea/coffee and especially biscuits and cake
- Travel expenses
- Equipment
- Dealing with volunteer issues.

It became clear to most that the budget implications of having volunteers are considerable and that selecting the right person for the right role was crucial. There was however also an acceptance that some museums wanted to include volunteers from the local community who may not always totally fit their defined criteria and that this could be accommodated in a well thought out volunteering strategy.

“We have changed the recruitment process to include an application form, role descriptions, interviews, induction and a volunteer agreement.”



The Volunteer Lifecycle – retaining volunteers

This is perhaps the best part of the lifecycle as once a museum has the right number of volunteers with the right attitude and skills it can achieve a huge amount.

It's easy to focus on getting the volunteer and not so much on keeping them and allowing them to develop and contribute fully to museum life.

“We have asked all volunteers to suggest ways of improving the museum.”

Most participants admitted that they felt they could provide more in the way of induction and developmental training for volunteers. The most common reasons for this not always happening at present were:

- It takes up too much staff time
- It takes up too much volunteer time
- Access to training
- Lack of money
- No time to really think about it and plan
- Lack of realisation re Health & Safety requirements

“Introducing a volunteer forum has improved communication and helped empower and involve our volunteers.”

Induction is crucial as it's the best time to impart organisational culture and set expectations. Participants were asked to think about what should be included and agreed that if a proper induction did not take place there were the following dangers:

- H&S requirements are not met
- Safety of staff, volunteers and visitors is compromised

- Security of the collection is compromised
- Volunteer does not feel comfortable and included
- Knowledge gaps may be filled with incorrect information
- Volunteer will not fully understand the role
- Volunteer will not fully understand the aims and culture of the museum
- Visitor experience will be compromised
- Volunteer cannot act as a good ambassador

Training

Many of the points identified by participants for induction are also relevant to a lack of, or inadequate, training. By contrast relevant training can hugely support and enhance the work of staff and allow much more progress towards achieving the plans of the museum. It is also welcomed by volunteers who are keen to learn new skills and demonstrate them in the right environment.

Participants identified that, especially in the current economic climate, skills learned as a volunteer can often be transferred easily to the external job market. Therefore more volunteers are coming forward who may not always be looking for the same type or length of long term volunteering experience as in the past. Some interesting discussions were had around this and some of the following comments, both for and against should be shared:

- I don't have time for short term volunteers
- Museums have a social duty to help in the current job market
- People who don't stay long won't fit in
- Short term volunteers with good skills are fantastic for specific time defined projects – we get a good job done and they have something valuable to put on their CV.

“We have now got the skills, knowledge and facilities to know how best to recruit volunteers and most importantly maintain their interest.”



Reward is a difficult area as many museums simply do not have sufficient funds for day to day costs. However it is crucial to budget for volunteering. A well written business plan that incorporates how a museum volunteering strategy can support and enhance the work of paid staff, or in the case of volunteer led museums enable it to exist, will highlight that money spent on volunteering is money well spent.

Most participating museums could not afford to reimburse volunteer travel costs but all tried to offer social events. Some good examples of low or no cost reward were suggested:

- Access to behind the scenes areas and artefacts
- Learning sessions
- Long service badges/certificates
- Visits to other museums to “fact find”
- Birthday and Christmas cards
- Bring your own food socials
- A museum display to thank volunteers and showcase what they have achieved.

It was acknowledged that one of the best forms of reward is actually the most simple – to welcome volunteers at the start of their session and to say thank you at the end. Volunteers do understand that money is tight and to simply understand that their contribution is valued and where they fit in is often enough reward. Everyone agreed that cake and good biscuits are essential and if you can only afford one thing this is probably it.

A discussion also identified that in the current economic climate volunteers may be looking for different forms of reward:

- CV enhancement
- Work experience
- New skills
- Support to return to work following illness.



Impact of the programme

All participants were asked to provide feedback at the end of the programme based on the impact of the programme in the following areas:

- Changes they had been able to make within their museum
- The impact of the programme on, themselves, the museum and their visitors.

The feedback was overwhelmingly positive and reflected the commitment and hard work they had put into attending the programme and keeping up with the challenges they set themselves at the end of each session.

The benefits of participation seemed to touch every area of museum life and to really put volunteering at the heart of each museum with a positive effect on workforce capabilities (paid and volunteer), visitor engagement and enjoyment, empowerment to effect change, integrity, professionalism and reputation in the local community. It also supported Accreditation by highlighting good practice, suggesting processes and encouraging planning.

One of the highlights for me as the facilitator was to see how participants grew in confidence throughout the sessions as their understanding of volunteering grew and they felt more supported and empowered to make the changes needed.

The quotes that follow reflect some of that positivity:

“This programme has given me the confidence and knowledge to understand best practice in volunteer recruitment and management.”

“The programme offered a good networking opportunity, giving the chance to share experiences and advice.”

“the programme has set a precedence for forward thinking/planning and provided the tools to act up these plans.”

“supports me when introducing ideas to the committee.”

“visitors seem happier with our new front of house roles.”

“we can offer increased scope and quality of visitor activities.”

“it’s a catalyst for change.”

“improves the council’s heritage offer.”

“better understanding of other museums’ work across the region and realise we all have similar challenges with volunteers.”

“this has made staff more aware of the importance of volunteers and what we could potentially achieve.”

“an excellent opportunity to meet others and make big changes.”

“helped promote a good working relationship with our friends group.”

“helped me adopt a new forward thinking approach.”

“visitors will benefit from more focussed and informed volunteers.”

“we offered training to volunteers in delivering Reminiscence for well-being and we have now doubled the members of our Community Outreach team (which includes a town councillor) to cope with the demand for this service.”

“Those who have undertaken the programme and are submitting Accreditation returns are finding it is a great help when looking at the section referring to the workforce and appropriate procedures.”

Museum Development Officer



Resources

www.museumsassociation.org/museum-practice/volunteers – articles and case studies on managing museum volunteers

www.sharemuseumseast.org.uk – SHARE website – has volunteering documents created by museums in the East of England

www.do-it.org.uk – used by volunteer centres and other charities to advertise volunteer vacancies

www.direct.gov.uk – Home and Community – has sections on volunteering and being a trustee

www.volunteering.org.uk – Volunteering England - fantastic resource for anything volunteer related including sample documents

www.charityjob.co.uk and

www.thirdsector.co.uk – both advertise paid and voluntary roles within the charity sector. Good for role profiles and how to word volunteer vacancies, especially Trustee roles where specific skills are essential.

Charity websites – have a look at what they have produced for their volunteers or potential volunteers especially adverts, role profiles and application forms.

Local volunteer centres – a local resource for advertising volunteer vacancies, training and support

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