



Association of
Independent
Museums

The AIM Guide to Improving Access to High-Quality Volunteering

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Contents

■	Introduction	03
■	What is High-Quality Volunteering?	05
■	Understanding the Barriers	07
■	Incentives to Volunteering	11
■	Case Study: Bowes Museum	15
■	Planning your Programme	17
■	Planning Activity	20
■	Co-Production Potential	23
■	Case Study: Signal Film and Media	27
■	Sustaining the Programme	30
■	Summary	33
■	Useful Resources	35
■	About the author	36

Introduction

“I really valued my time as a volunteer. The conversations I had with others, the feeling of purpose, the support of the museum staff: I gained so much from it. A greater insight and empathy into the situation of others. We were all in the same boat! There was definitely an element of ‘therapy’ and support throughout, and we all came through it feeling... just better. We still meet every month, still keep in touch with each other. Some of us even developed enough confidence to change our jobs!”

Museum Volunteer 2024

Volunteers make a significant operational and strategic contribution to the heritage sector. They bring skills, character, passion and ingenuity to our individual museums, and the sector as a whole. However, the volunteering landscape is changing and the traditional entry routes no longer work for many. This is noticeable across the charity sector, but museums are uniquely placed to meet these changes head on.

For individuals, the opportunity to become involved in well-run, high-quality volunteering schemes not only develops skills, but it connects them to their communities¹, builds confidence and grows their networks. Lives become enriched and wellbeing is improved through volunteering opportunities that are structured to support the individuals involved.

How is the volunteering landscape changing?

Research undertaken by the government in 2021/22 showed that “...34% of respondents (approximately 16 million people in England) had taken part in either formal or informal volunteering at least once a month. This is a decrease from rates in 2020/21 (41%) and is the lowest recorded by the Community Life Survey for this measure. In the same period, 55% (approximately 25 million people in England) had taken part in either formal or informal volunteering at least once in the last 12 months. This is lower than rates seen in 2020/21 (62%) and represents the lowest recorded by the CLS.”³

In 2023, the government announced the launch of a new fund that aimed to tackle the issue of chronic loneliness, and to encourage the growth of high-quality volunteering across England. The Know Your Neighbourhood Fund committed to spending up to £30million in 27 disadvantaged areas, £5million of which was earmarked for arts, culture and heritage activities.

“The challenging nature of the current socio-economic climate will leave many people looking for positive alternatives and raise the possibility of exploring new ways to create real change. There is an obvious role here for charities and voluntary organisations in building and advocating for a brighter future.”

**National Council for
Voluntary Organisations:
The Road Ahead 2024**²



AIM, as one of the grant delivery partners (alongside Libraries Connected and Creative Lives), launched the Connected Communities Fund that same year. The objectives of the fund were to help heritage organisations tackle chronic loneliness; develop and deliver high-quality volunteering; improve organisational relationships with local institutions and other partners engaged in similar work.

This success guide explores how to provide high-quality volunteering opportunities through museum and heritage-based programmes, delivering quality outputs that have a lasting impact. We will:

- Look at the definition of ‘high quality volunteering’ and what it means for your existing volunteer programme
- Help you select the partner organisations best placed to support your work
- Explore how to maintain those initiatives long-term
- Demonstrate the benefit to your own organisational resilience
- Provide case studies to demonstrate best practice.

With all strategic planning, we recommend working with your wider team to develop any initiative to improve access to high-quality volunteering. Use this guide as a starting point and work through the activities that are included to help you at this planning stage. Working this way strengthens the team and brings to the fore different lived experiences that can help support the planning, and ensures the entire organisation is operating towards achieving the same objective.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/major-fund-to-tackle-loneliness-and-boost-volunteering-in-disadvantaged-areas-launched>

² <https://www.ncvo.org.uk/news-and-insights/news-index/road-ahead-2024/?skip=true#payload-wrapper>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202122/community-life-survey-202122-volunteering-and-charitable-giving#:~:text=Those%20living%20in%20rural%20areas,at%20least%20once%20a%20month>



What is High-Quality Volunteering?

Image credit: Sunderland Culture



What is High-Quality Volunteering?

But what do we mean when we refer to “high-quality volunteering”? The use of the term is not to suggest that existing volunteering is without value! Rather, the term is used to mean a volunteering programme that has been consciously designed to overcome the barriers to volunteering, that provides an experience that is both thoughtful in its development and impactful in its delivery.

Thoughtful Development

Often existing volunteer programmes and roles have been developed in response to a need within the organisation. People are needed to steward exhibitions, staff the front desk, do the social media. These naturally develop on an ad hoc, reactive basis with little consideration as to who might fill that role and what they may get out of the experience.

High quality volunteering is developed differently, looking at the experience from the perspective of the volunteer. It considers their additional commitments outside of the museum, and their own needs. These could be around access (physical, intellectual and sensory), isolation (new parents, recently bereaved), or economic vulnerability (young people, long term unemployed).

Thoughtful development means you are proactive in consultation and planning, you seek to identify and understand the barriers to, and requirements of, volunteering. It seeks solutions and ways to overcome these barriers before it begins recruitment.

Impactful Delivery

Some people naturally take to volunteering, falling in easily with team dynamics and confident in dealing with the public. Others find this very difficult, lacking both confidence and experience. This is particularly the case for those who have experienced chronic loneliness or social isolation.

For volunteering activity to work for non-volunteers, it needs to be delivered in a way that is supportive and inclusive, tailored to meet the needs of those taking part. New volunteers will find the process more beneficial and will be more likely to stay if they feel advocated for and understood throughout. Their experience should be one of becoming part of a team, becoming included and heard.

Impactful delivery means you are proactive in championing and advocating for new, vulnerable and diverse voices within your volunteering team. You listen to new volunteers and find innovative ways to amplify their voice and provide a positive experience.

By applying the twin aspects of thoughtful development and impactful delivery to the challenge of improving access to high-quality volunteering, we can develop volunteering programmes that are reflective of individual need.



Understanding the Barriers

Image credit: Ushaw Historic House Chapels & Gardens



Understanding the Barriers

In order to improve the access to high-quality volunteering, it is important to first understand the barriers. These are as complex and varied as volunteers themselves. A better understanding of these barriers and how to reduce their impact will bring greater success to any volunteering programme.

The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) named the following as the top five barriers to volunteering:

- Having to make an ongoing commitment before starting
- Increased work, study or caring responsibilities
- Not being invited to volunteer meant people felt uncertain of their welcome
- People were worried they had not got the right skills or experience to help
- They also worried that they would not fit in with other volunteers or staff.

They found that concerns about skills and worries about not fitting in ranked higher on the list of concerns for global majority and disabled non-volunteers than for white, able-bodied volunteers. Previous negative experiences were also a barrier for these groups.

The research showed that there is an appetite for volunteering but that traditional volunteering roles and marketing were not relevant to prospective volunteers; they did not ‘fit’ with how people could or would structure their time, and the routes in were not welcoming.

Let’s take a closer look at those barriers...

A. Making an ongoing commitment before starting

We have all seen that volunteer advert: “*must commit to one afternoon a week*”. Or perhaps, “*minimum shifts three hours a day, one day a month*”. Or even, “*must take an active role on the steering committee for twelve months*”.

These ‘traditional’ forms of volunteering commitment work well for those who have plenty of spare time, perhaps they have been able to retire and have limited caring or other responsibilities. They work less well for those who are still in full (or even part) time work or education, or for those who care for family members. For many involved in piecemeal, casual or zero-hours work, their hours can often be unreliable and structured commitment does not work with their existing responsibilities.

Museums should reflect the changing nature of society in all aspects of their operations and that includes volunteering. Instead of asking for an ongoing or regular commitment, why not look at how you structure volunteer roles currently. Is there the opportunity to split them or create a double-up system so you have flexibility and cover should someone need to cancel quickly?

How will you make people who cannot commit regularly feel a valued part of the team, even if their volunteering is less regular than others? This also feeds into your overall welcome of your volunteers.

B. Increased work, study or caring responsibilities

The calls on peoples' time outside of museums are myriad and complex. Someone may work several jobs or just one. They may be studying as well as working. They may be working and caring for a family member. It is no longer the case that we can assume people retire at 60 and immediately have oodles of spare time to fill.

This barrier is very similar to the one about *"making an ongoing commitment before starting"*. It is no longer practicable to expect people to make this kind of commitment up front. If your volunteering roles and structure do not reflect this huge shift in work/home culture, then it will be harder for you to attract new volunteers.

Consider how you can create 'bite-sized' volunteering opportunities, or ones that could be done from home. Who would these roles appeal to and how would you reach them?

C. Not being sure of a welcome

There is no doubt that it can be intimidating to walk into a room full of strangers, and this is even more so for people from global majorities, those with disabilities or who have a life-limiting condition. LGBTQ+ individuals can also feel unsure of a welcoming safe space. Consider this experience related during research for this toolkit:

"I really wanted to volunteer there but knew that I was expected to be on my feet for at least three hours at a time and there are some days when I'm in so much pain, I simply can't stand for more than an hour. So, I didn't bother getting in touch. Whenever I walk past, I see people running around inside having a great time and I feel sad each time that I'm not able to be part of it."

Or this experience:

"There just isn't anyone like me there. I had some bad experiences in the past summer, and it's made me really nervous about going into places where I can't be sure of the welcome. I'd rather stay at home and be safe than put myself at risk again,"

It is possible that, if those people had been invited to volunteer, the organisation would have made every effort to accommodate any mobility issues and to make them feel welcome and safe. Without the invitation, these individuals assumed that they would not fit in and the potential for them to become dedicated volunteers was lost.

Consider who is not volunteering for you and where you might find them. This could involve working with a community partner and going outside of the building to meet people on their own grounds, where they feel safest.

D. Worry they did not have the right skills or experience to help

There can be an assumption that volunteering in heritage means you need to have specialist knowledge, or a certain skillset. We have often heard "but I don't know how to do that" when all that is really required is enthusiasm!

Consider whether you make it clear that no previous experience is necessary. This should be more than a sentence at the end of your advert or social media post. Some museums do this really well by creating short videos of their existing volunteers talking about their experiences, or by getting them to write blogs. Someone who has been excluded from traditional schooling may be hard to reach and nervous of fitting in; how will you reach them, which organisations could help you overcome that barrier?

If you are attending any careers or volunteer fairs, or going out to community organisations, consider taking existing volunteers with you and asking them to speak about their experience. Personal stories will go a long way to overcoming that barrier.

E. Worry about not fitting in

This barrier aligns naturally with barrier C. – fear of not feeling welcome – and, as that did, relates back to how and where you recruit your volunteers.

Fear of 'not fitting in' is not uncommon in all areas of life, and its important for your organisation to demonstrate that everyone is welcome.

One young person we consulted for this toolkit, said “I was worried [the museum] would think I was too much trouble or that that others would think I was too weird, but I get so overwhelmed when there are too many people there. Luckily, the manager asked me if there was anything they could do to make me feel comfortable, and when I told her, they created these little ‘quiet zones’ around the building that I could go and relax in for a few minutes.

They told everyone about the zones and how they were for everyone but the ‘quiet’ rule had to be stuck to and that it was to help the whole team. They also buddied me up with another volunteer who struggled with the same thing, so we could support each other and not feel alone. They didn’t tell anyone we were struggling; they were really kind and discreet about it.”

Consider how you make potential volunteers feel part of the team and how you can accommodate differences in a way that respects the individual and creates workable solutions.



Incentives to Volunteering

Image credit: Museum of Cannock Chase



Incentives to Volunteering

The NCVO study also found that global majority non-volunteers and other individuals were more likely to consider volunteering that benefitted their career or job prospects. This suggests that there is a demand for structured, high-quality volunteering that leaves the individual with new, transferrable skills. The value of a quick and easy induction process was also appreciated.

Non-volunteers named several incentives that would make them more likely to consider volunteering. The top six included:

1. If I could be flexible with the time committed
2. If I could be flexible about the way I gave my unpaid time (e.g., do it from home etc)
3. If the process for getting involved was easier and quicker
4. If I knew about what opportunities to give unpaid help were available
5. If someone asked me to get involved
6. If I knew I could get any expenses paid.

Following the delivery of the AIM Connected Communities programme, we might also add:

7. If I felt supported and understood.

Let's take a closer look at these incentives.

1. If I had flexibility: the how, the where and the what

As we have seen, not everyone has the time or space to volunteer 'traditionally'. Those who would struggle with the standard three/four-hour shift might include parents, grandparents with caring responsibilities, people in full-time work or education, or those with disabilities (sensory, physical and intellectual). By not creating flexible roles, you miss out large sections of the population and risk people feeling volunteering is 'not for them'.

And what about 'out-of-hours'? Does all volunteering really need to take place on site between the hours of 10-4, Wednesday-Sunday (if those are your working hours)? Anything involving writing and research can be done at any time of the day and from anywhere. The more responsive to the pressures on volunteers you can be, the more will be able to volunteer, and the stronger your organisation will be.

For example, micro volunteering is flexible, doesn't necessarily involve being on site, allows for life outside the museum and appreciates the skills micro volunteers bring. Micro volunteering could include research, admin, collection care, insect trap monitoring and IDs, writing, social media, visitor data input and analysis, gardening, image banking, shared front of house duties. The only limitation is your organisation's imagination!

Should you consider creating more of a micro-volunteering culture, we recommend that you look at how you will foster that feeling of being part of a team. You may find it necessary to change some of the established patterns of working to prevent micro volunteers from slipping between the gaps of the myriad tasks and responsibilities of a regular volunteering programme, and it may be necessary to change some of the established patterns of working.

2. If it were easier and quicker to become involved

Take a few moments to review your induction process now. Consider how simple it currently is for someone to become a volunteer. Do they have to fill in a complicated form online or can they drop in for a quick chat without committing? Is your Volunteer Handbook dozens of pages long, or are there alternative ways of learning in place, short videos or a shadowing scheme, for example?

Consider how you might structure the process in a way that is not intimidating and that supports volunteers who struggle with the written word. A good way to do this might be to canvas your existing volunteers for their suggestions, or to approach an organisation from another sector. How do they structure their induction process and what could you take from it? One of the examples we saw from a wildlife charity combined a morning of shadowing and short films, with an online multiple choice 'quiz'. For those who were not comfortable with computers, the volunteer manager sat with them and paper options were also available.

3. If I knew about the opportunities

Quite often, when advertising volunteering roles, we use the tried and trusted methods: our own website and social media, perhaps a museums jobs website. Some museums advertise volunteering in their own building, or via a poster in the window. All of these methods rely on people knowing about you and your organisational structure in the first place. This is an extension of the "if we build it, they will come," a methodology that is not always effective.

Take a closer look at your local community. Are you near a business district? Flyer the businesses with opportunities for that micro volunteering we've looked at.

Near a school? Create something for the book bags, or ask the school if you can hire a table at the next fete. Focus on offering micro-volunteering and skills development. For secondary schools, the requirement is often for more structured work experience requirements but don't forget Duke of Edinburgh schemes and careers fairs.

What else is there around you in terms of charities seeking volunteers? Could you create a volunteering package with your local library for example, or religious house or hospital that allows you to share the costs and work involved in recruiting and supporting volunteers?

Hold volunteer mornings at weekends, not just during the week, and not just in your museum. Consider having a stall or renting a table at any local event or regular market. In reaching people who haven't previously considered volunteering, you need to venture out to the places they are, not wait for them to find you.

When advising museums on how to reach those they don't usually reach, we often offer this piece of advice: get out of your building. Our museums are wonderful places to be, and we understand why you might never want to leave them, but they are not the places you will find new volunteers!

Your new volunteers could be finishing education, or working on the other side of town, involved at your local hospital, or perhaps members of an organisation that isn't all about heritage. They may have been out of work for a while or recently had children and feel a bit lost. Perhaps they have only just moved to the area and don't know what's out there.

This is your call to action. Make a list of all the events coming up in your area: all the fetes, fairs, carnivals, open days, celebrations, etc. Where are the schools, the big employers, other community organisations, the village and community halls? Contact the organisers and ask for a table, a stand, a place on the noticeboard and start making your voice heard.

4. If someone had asked me...

How we communicate about our existing volunteers is hugely important in reaching potential new volunteers. Often, the focus on volunteers happens during national Volunteers Week and then fades somewhat into the background. Now is a good time to audit your social media and marketing around volunteering: how does it communicate the opportunities, the skills, the benefits for individuals? Short films for social media and your website are great ways of demonstrating that your volunteering programme is high-quality and open for all. These can also include direct appeals and links to contact forms, which will make the appeal feel direct and easy to act on.

Don't forget to research other organisations, not just museums, to better understand how they are positioning and promoting their volunteering programme. How is it reaching people? What does it contain that makes it appealing? Once you have all this information, you can plan and reach the people you don't already reach.

5. If I knew I could get any expenses paid

We appreciate that, for those of us with large volunteer schemes, paying expenses can soon mount up to a large budget line. However, it is important to think about the cost of volunteering from the volunteer's perspective: travel, time away from the house, wear and tear on clothing, bringing their own lunch. If they are volunteering for a day, do they have to pay for dog walkers or child/adult care? If it is a very cold building, do they have to buy thermal clothing to keep warm?

Consider the experience of one young person: *"I really wanted to volunteer – I'd like to work in a museum one day – but when I asked, they didn't say anything about money. By the time I've paid the bus fare and got my lunch, it's going to cost me a bit and it's money I'm saving for driving lessons. Around here, if you can't drive, you can't do anything, and my parents can't afford the lessons. I didn't bother in the end."*

Costs associated with volunteering can be a real barrier for people who don't come from comfortable backgrounds, or who don't have additional financial support. As we are asking for an investment of their time and effort, is only right to offer some remuneration. Create a pot for volunteer expenses, make the process of claiming easy and discreet (people shouldn't have to ask for a form).

Finally, make sure everyone knows that it is there to be claimed and how to claim it: doing so puts all volunteers on the same level. No one should be made to feel different simply for claiming legitimate expenses.

6. If I felt supported and understood

There can be many reasons why people can feel reluctant to volunteer: if they struggle with isolation or chronic loneliness, with long-term illness or disability, or have experienced exclusion. These factors can negatively impact their self-confidence, leaving them feeling vulnerable, shy or reluctant to risk not fitting in. Yet, these are exactly the people who would most benefit from volunteering, and who we should be making the most effort to reach.

Consider the culture of your organisation. Is it a place where people feel supported and understood? This needs to be a top-down approach and can be supplemented with appropriate training. Do new volunteers have a sponsor or 'buddy' within the existing team who can help them find their way into volunteering with confidence and ease?

Look at how you currently communicate with your existing volunteers. Speak to them individually and ask for their opinion on the systems in place. This will help you better understand how your current processes work for the people on the receiving end.

These conversations will help you cultivate a workplace culture where individuals feel their needs are understood and supported.

Key takeaway

Your volunteer programmes are there to be invested in. These incentives are not optional 'nice' things to offer, they are integral systems that lead to greater wellbeing and reduced isolation for the individual, as well as improved health and resilience for the organisation. They should be planned and incorporated with as much care and consideration as you do your collections work.



Case Study: Bowes Museum

Image credit: Bowes Museum



Case Study: Bowes Museum

In 2023, the Bowes Museum successfully applied to AIM's first round of Connected Communities to create high-quality volunteering experiences and support students to access them. They worked with a local secondary school, Teesdale School and Sixth Form to identify students to take part in the programme, and to co-produce new roles. We talked to Jess White, Co-production Volunteer Manager to find out more.

What was the focus of your project and why was this important to your organisation?

Our focus was to pilot a Young Volunteers programme, using co-production to co-curate high-quality volunteering experiences in partnership with Teesdale School and Sixth Form.

It was important for us to involve the wider Museum staff teams, (who prior to this project, may not have had as much experience in engaging with young people) and to test this idea – the Young Volunteers as a programme – whether it would be something we could build on, replicate, share or scale up. The other important aspect to this project was the desire to develop a positive working relationship with Teesdale School and Sixth Form.

Why did you choose to work this/these particular audiences?

We wanted to work with young people in particular, because the majority of our volunteers at The Bowes Museum are aged 65+. We want young people to know that the Museum is for them and that they can see themselves reflected at the Museum. It was also important for us to partner with Teesdale School and Sixth Form, the local secondary school in Barnard Castle, which prior to this project, we have not really had a relationship with for some time.

What have you learnt by running this programme?

As the project lead, I think the key take away for me is: *Priming* – getting the Young Volunteers primed, constantly getting them to be thinking whilst they were with us, could they imagine doing this? Is this something they would like to do as a volunteer? Also, for the Museum staff, getting them to think: okay, after this programme finishes, how am I going to keep those young people engaged? How am I going to continue that relationship with my team of Young Volunteers?

What would you have done differently?

In hindsight, I would have liked us to have supported the school to enable one member of staff to have been able to attend all of the Young Volunteer sessions, so they could follow the transformational impact of the Young Volunteers programme from start to finish, because I know it has been transformational for those young people. I know it has, because I have had young people tell me they want a job at the Museum now, because I have seen these young people stand up in a room full of people and present, when I know when they started this would never have thought they could do that.

Any other comments?

It has been a JOYOUS project!



Planning your Programme

Image credit: National Trust, Peckover House & Gardens



Planning your Programme

A review and planning phase will help you better understand what will work and how, before you begin implementing any changes. It is more effective, where possible, to consider the programme as a whole, not as separate processes. This holistic approach will lead to a volunteering programme that is cohesive and structured to support everyone, including your delivery team.

A. Audit the Existing

Managing volunteers is a complex aspect of a successful museum service, requiring empathy, sensitivity and time.

If you don't have a structured volunteering process in place or haven't reviewed your volunteer process recently, take time now to map out the journey. Define how you currently communicate your volunteer opportunities, how new volunteers are introduced, everything down to the process of supporting someone leaving volunteering.

This process allows you to better visualise the current volunteer experience. Given everything you now understand about barriers and incentives from this guide, how do you think the existing process works to fit modern volunteering patterns? Where is extra support needed? Where are the gaps or complications?

B. Capacity

A high-quality volunteering programme will require the focused efforts of your whole team and, depending on the size of the programme, a dedicated volunteer manager. Before you begin implementing any changes, we would advise allocating responsibility for aspects of the programme. Does everyone understand the purpose; are the support systems in place; has the appropriate training been undertaken by those involved?

If you are the volunteer manager, be aware that delivering a programme of this sort will take more of your time than previous iterations. Where can you place this within your existing responsibilities? Where will you need additional resources and support?

C. Point of Contact

Having a main point of contact to manage the volunteering process will help your volunteers to feel supported. This will help to remove some of the barriers and fear of fitting in that prevents many from taking up volunteering. It will also make it easier for people of different backgrounds to become volunteers on your projects.

This is a good time to consider the benefits of a buddy or sponsor system. This 'buddy' will show the new volunteer the ropes, introduce them to others and teach them about the role they are fulfilling. They will also be a point of contact if the volunteer is struggling, so you will need to make sure the person selected has the right skills and training to support vulnerable people.

For a new volunteer, particularly one who hasn't volunteered in a museum before, it's a lot less intimidating to have someone that they are partnered with regularly until they feel settled in.

Another strength of this system is that it provides continuity for those who struggle with change. Having one person as their main contact who they can turn to for support and advice, will have a positive impact on their experience.

D. Safeguarding

The planning process is a good time to make sure your policies and procedures are up to date, particularly your safeguarding policy. By improving access to high-quality volunteering, you could very well be supporting people who are extremely vulnerable. Use this time to check the policy, run through the procedures and refresh everyone's training to make sure both the new volunteers and the existing team are supported and safe throughout. There are many safeguarding policy templates available online, such as this one by the NSPCC learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/templates/example-safeguarding-policy-statement

E. Training

Developing a volunteering programme that supports a wider range of people can expose your existing team to situations they have not experienced previously. They could, for example, be co-volunteering with vulnerable people who need additional support. Whilst it should not be beholden on volunteers to be in situations where they are uncomfortable, we have found that appropriate training goes a long way to supporting everyone. In this planning phase, consider the potential needs of any new volunteers and the existing skills and understanding in your existing team. If you will be partnering with a local charity, do they offer training that you can invest in for the whole team?

One museum we researched arranged for the provision of training from several sources, including RNIB, a deaf educator, the head of an autism support charity and a mental health practitioner. This training was free for all volunteers in order to improve their skills, confidence and understanding. It had the additional impact of making potential volunteers feel welcomed and supported.

Where can training be used to support the changes you need to make to your volunteer programme, in turn supporting your volunteers?



Planning Activity

Image credit: Ushaw Historic House Chapels & Gardens



Planning Activity

The following Theory of Change activity is designed to help you in this planning stage, using carefully chosen questions as prompts to guide you. This template has been developed with small to medium sized museums in mind, with a small team of staff, supported by a larger team of volunteers. You can adapt the questions to suit your own organisation.

Always do activities like this with your team. The most successful projects are the ones where the whole team has been invested in its success and that only happens when they've been involved in the planning.

Remember that as a tool, the Theory of Change is only as good as the use you make of it, as a review tool and a delivery tracker. If the final destination is a metaphorical filing cabinet, never to be seen or referred to again, it is ineffective.



Planning Activity

Start here	Lay the groundwork	Touchstone The essence of the work	Methods/tools/environment	Implementation	Future view What's your end goal?
Include the results from the volunteer programme audit	Internal - Do the team (staff, volunteers) understand and support changes to the programme? - How will this affect the organisation? - Do you have the capacity (mental, time, physical, etc)? - Do you have the funds?	Why do you want to create these volunteering opportunities? Who are they being developed for?	SENSE CHECK: Think about environment, tools, goals and the nature of the volunteers you want to recruit. What training and resources will the team need to support the project?	Internal needs: Identify your critical path, how are you going to address the internal and external needs you have identified?	Make sure your objectives are SMART- Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timebound.
	External (communities, experts, contractors) - Have you carried out any consultation? - Can you identify the potential volunteers you want to reach? - Which local organisations would be the best partners for this?			External needs:	



Co-Production Potential

Image credit: Sunderland Culture



Co-Production Potential

Choosing the right partner to support the high-quality volunteering work you want to develop can significantly increase the success of the programme. The right partner should have a deep understanding and practical experience of developing and delivering high-quality volunteering. They will be open to collaborative working, to sharing their experience and supportive of what you want to achieve.

For the partner organisation, working with you can bring numerous benefits including extended reach of their activities, wider community advocacy and new experiences for their participants.

Building a relationship with a community partner will take time and should be approached with a mutual respect and understanding of time scales and capacity for commitment. For successful partnership working, we recommend:

- Starting the conversations early – don't underestimate how long it can take to get a partner organisation on board
- Being clear about what you want to achieve
- Establishing each other's boundaries and role requirements at the start
- Setting up a partnership agreement so both parties understand the extent of their involvement, the timescales and the costs
- Meeting regularly throughout planning and delivery to review progress
- Approaching delivery in a flexible and adaptive manner for the best results.

Remember that working in this collaborative way means that you are both approaching the project as equal partners, with skills, experience and knowledge that can benefit participants. It's worth looking at the Charity Commission's website for useful templates for a partnership agreement.

Once you have developed that relationship of mutual trust and responsibility, use it to carry out a consultation with the audience they support. This should be done in a setting the participants are comfortable in and familiar with (i.e. not the museum). Plan a fun activity, a talk, a workshop, whatever the partner organisation recommends, and include an opportunity for feedback during the session.

Example 1: a town-based small museum with three staff members and forty volunteers wanted to create volunteering opportunities that would appeal to students from the newly formed technical college. They arranged with the college to attend some career development sessions with the students that were informal but helped the museum understand:

- Why they didn't already volunteer,
- What students were looking for in a volunteering role
- What the participants' perception of the museum was
- How students saw the ideal volunteer role fitting into their day-to-day life.

As a result of the process, the museum team then developed a new volunteering model that allowed students to volunteer flexibly, to self-determine their tasks (within reason) and to access structured training that supported their career and personal development.

Example 2: a rural museum has recently moved to a more volunteer-led operational model. To make this successful, it needed to appeal to people in the local community but had never attempted this initiative before. Working in partnership with the nearest volunteer centre, they ran a ‘roadshow’ in the nearby village halls that:

- Helped build the museum’s relationship with the local communities
- Helped participants to understand what volunteering would involve
- Helped the museum understand what the barriers were to volunteering and how to reduce their impact
- Helped the museum understand what sort of roles people were looking for.

The roadshow led to increased interest from the community, particularly new parents who were looking for a chance to learn new skills and develop relationships in a setting that was accommodating of their parenting commitments.

In both examples, those initial conversations with the community partner yielded valuable information that helped the museum structure their high-quality volunteering programming around participant needs. It helped them to build up from their previously non-existent relationships with communities and developed their understanding of how to structure a volunteering programme that met the needs of the potential new volunteers as well as the museum.

The following planning activity has been chosen to support you in planning the co-production element of your project, from the initial conversations to the post-delivery meeting.

What group of people are you hoping to create volunteering opportunities for?				
Where can you find them? E.g. schools, support groups, local charities?	What are their needs?			
	What are you offering them?			
	How many places can you support?	How frequently do you anticipate their taking part?	What do they get in return?	How can you support the relationship?



Case Study: Signal Film and Media

Image credit: Signal Film & Media



Case Study: Signal Film and Media

Jo Day, Operations Manager and Project Producer (Heritage) at Signal Film & Media on their project, 'Connecting Communities through the Sankey Photographic Collection'.

What is the focus of your project and why is this important to your organisation?

This project builds on the success and learning of our 'Seeing the North with Sankey' project (2019-2022, funded by NLHF), which revealed not only the quality and richness of the collection of 15,000 glass plate negatives and postcards but its huge potential as a dynamic engagement tool. Volunteering sat at the heart of the project and its success.

Why did you choose to work with these particular audiences?

The Connected Communities Project has seen us engage and support people most in need across our community.

Activities have been designed in close collaboration with grassroots partners working with those most likely to experience loneliness locally - Furness Multicultural Forum (working with refugees, minorities), Mind in Furness (mental health) and Vision Support. These are organisations we already had links with and who also have captive audiences that we could reach out to, in the timeframe of the project.

What have you learnt by running this programme?

We have been offering numerous workshops in photography, digital media and textile craft, using the Sankey Archive as inspiration. When our photography workshops with our Mind Group finished after a four-week block, we started the same workshops with the Furness Multicultural Forum, however the Mind participants kept coming back for workshops and we were happy to accommodate them.

Some members have gone on to buy their own cameras and now meet up in their own time to photograph together. Due to this enthusiasm and positive change in people that attended we have now set up a monthly Camera Club based at Mind in Furness to continue their journey and we are having an exhibition of their work curated by themselves this December.

"As a neurodiverse person it's very difficult for me to feel like I belong or to connect with people, and from day dot when I first stepped into the building, everything was so inviting, everything was accommodating for my needs and you helped me learn at a pace I could do. Everybody was so friendly and it was just everything you would want for a neurodiverse adult to come into and go 'We just accept you no matter how weird or wonderful you are. Come in, take a seat, take some pictures.' And then to connect that along with the Sankey Archive, with these pictures where I live but from a completely different age, it was a dream come true for me. It really was."

Quote from Alex, a Mind in Furness participant.

The Textile Craft workshop had similar success. The works produced during these workshops were displayed in the gallery alongside work by a professional artist as part of an exhibition and the participants described their experience as "great", "interesting" and "fun". One participant said "it was cool to be part of a gallery".

Has this informed your approach to working with different communities, and if so how?

In order to accommodate as many people as we can, we have offered different types of workshops for different amounts of time. Workshops for the Furness Multicultural Forum have been ad hoc as we found the people attending their facility are more transient and we were getting different people at each workshop.

We have started working with warm hubs to offer digital skills workshops which will also be run as drop-in sessions. Mind in Furness participants have been consistent with their attendance at our workshops so we have been able to make that a more regular programme. To keep our volunteers engaged we have started a regular Wednesday afternoon session where they are producing podcasts and writing a newspaper as well as supporting us in all our workshops.



Sustaining the Programme

Image credit: Bowes Museum



Sustaining the Programme

As we have seen throughout the toolkit, high quality volunteering programmes can be radically different to your pre-existing schemes, and this can bring an associated need for increased resources and funding.

Moreover, the shift towards high quality volunteering should be seen as a long-term project. To make changes this extensive with only a short-term goal in mind could cause confusion amongst your existing volunteers and resentment within the new as they suddenly find their programme withdrawn.

If it is your goal to increase access to high quality volunteering, and to improve organisational resilience as a result, then it is important to address the issue of programme sustainability at the planning stage.

The questions below have been devised to prompt team thinking around this. It is advisable to work through the questions as a team and add any further questions you think are relevant. Limit the questions to no more than five to start with: you can always revisit this further down the planning stage and add more if necessary.

a. Can any new volunteering programme be factored into our regular volunteer programming?

Consider here if you have the physical space to accommodate it, the supporting staff and/or volunteers. How does it fit within the matrix of your existing volunteering programme? Does it have senior management or board support and the budget allocation for it?

It is better to establish capacity at the start; this will prevent any over-ambitious promises overwhelming the delivery and support teams!

b. Who will have responsibility for maintaining the programme?

Good volunteer management takes time, attention and thoughtfulness. It is not easy to squeeze this into the five minutes 'spare' time you may have during your standard working week.

We do not recommend overloading individual team members as this is setting them up to fail. If this will be your responsibility, consider where you can delegate other tasks to free up your time.

c. How will this be funded in the long-term?

High-quality volunteer programmes do have associated costs and it can be difficult to get continuation funding from a grant provider. Consider how this programme will be supported in the future. By using the evaluation findings to inform your advocacy, can you approach local businesses for sponsorship, or hold fundraising drives? Can you and the community partner share some of the costs?

It may be worth considering a one-off annual event where all the money raised goes directly to supporting the programme. Volunteers Week in June is a good opportunity to showcase the programme and its impact, and an Impact Statement⁵ is a great advocacy tool.

When fundraising, always be clear on how the money will be used and the nature of the benefit to participants. For further fundraising advice, see the AIM Successful Fundraising at Museums Success Guide⁶.

d. What will the programme look like in 12-months' time?

All successful programmes shift and adapt in response to feedback from participants and partner organisations. You may not be able to sustain the programme at its initial level but could it be scaled back in order to continue? Use evaluation to establish what worked and what didn't, where you are best to focus your energies and resources in sustaining it and what can be put to one side until you have more funding to support it.

⁵ <https://www.theglasshouse.co.uk/social-impact-reports>

⁶ <https://aim-museums.co.uk/resources/successful-fundraising-at-museums/>



Summary

Image credit: Museum of Cannock Chase



Summary

Some of our most rewarding work in museums has been with volunteers and yet, one of the comments we most frequently hear in our research is “it’s so hard to get volunteers now.” There’s no denying that it can be, but perhaps that is because we are working within volunteer programmes that no longer fit your communities. Certainly, the research is showing that there is still an appetite for volunteering, but that our programmes need to adapt to reach those people.

“Volunteering is a powerful force for change in the world...”⁷

A healthy volunteering network not only supports sectoral and individual organisational resilience, but it leads to happier, more connected communities. When we are proactive in developing programmes that support a wider range of people in volunteering, we create real, lasting positive change.

⁷ <https://www.visionforvolunteering.org.uk/about-the-vision>

A final word on the impact our programmes have should, obviously, be from a volunteer:

“I really enjoyed learning more about the collection, sharing this with others, talking to them. I had thought that my interest would be limited but I loved everything and my curiosity kept growing. I also made friends with the other volunteers on the way, which has made me feel part of something. It’s so hard to make friends as an adult, but I have! It’s made such a difference to my life, I can’t tell you.”



Useful Resources

visionforvolunteering.org.uk/the-vision

heritagevolunteeringgroup.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Creating-Capacity-Final-2021.pdf

heritagevolunteeringgroup.org.uk/case-studies

gov.uk/government/publications/a-connected-society-a-strategy-for-tackling-loneliness

gov.uk/government/publications/promoting-equity-diversity-and-inclusion-in-volunteering/promoting-equity-diversity-and-inclusion-in-volunteering

ncvo.org.uk/news-and-insights/news-index/key-findings-from-time-well-spent-2023

gov.uk/guidance/about-the-know-your-neighbourhood-fund



About the Author

Tonia Collett worked on the Connected Communities programme as project support officer and legacy manager. She has been on management teams of museums in the West Midlands, including the Coffin Works and, latterly, Tudor House Museum in Worcester. There she increased visitor numbers and income diversity before developing and delivering a joint capital works and site-wide reinterpretation project, funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

A freelance consultant since 2021, she specialises in organisational health - offering practical guidance to support boards and museums – interpretation development, fundraising, ‘greening’ your museum and volunteer programme development. A certified Carbon Literacy for Museums trainer, her clients have included AIM, Museum Development Midlands, the National Football Museum, Wolverhampton Arts and Culture and Hundred Heroines.

Tonia’s focus is on practical, holistic support that is tailored to the size of your museum and the capacity of your team.

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