

Source URL: <http://www.e-volunteerism.com/quarterly/02octdec/blackadder3a>

---

[Volume III, Issue 1, October 2002](#)

[Feature Articles](#)

## **‘Shape Your Future’ – A Museum Helps Volunteers Help Themselves**

By [Lynn Blackadder](#)

*Six months before it opened in July 2002, the Imperial War Museum North embarked upon an ambitious community volunteering programme, working with over 100 local residents – many from disadvantaged backgrounds. Volunteers worked towards vocational qualifications in the Museum, building confidence, gaining experience and increasing employability.*

### **Context for the Imperial War Museum Volunteer Programme**

The Imperial War Museum North in Manchester is one of the UK’s newest museums <http://www.iwm.org.uk> [2]. It looks like it has just landed at Trafford Wharf from outer space – its three component parts representing the arenas of war: air, sea and land. Clad in aluminium, its architecture has no straight lines, and the oppressive atmosphere confuses and disorients visitors: an intentional context within which to browse exhibitions exploring people’s experiences of 20th century conflict.

Parts of Manchester have been designated areas in need of major economic and social regeneration by the Government. The Museum is central to some of the most deprived zones, and a high proportion of the local residents fall into the category of ‘disadvantaged’. Generally speaking, this means that these people have fewer opportunities than most of us. Specifically, individuals are considered to be excluded from society for a variety of reasons. They may be:

- Unemployed
- In danger of being excluded from education – particularly the young
- Lacking in basic skills, such as numeracy and literacy
- Out of social circulation, for example they are single parents or are retired
- Disillusioned with society, and with previous attempts by Government support agencies to help them

In the UK there is a welcome move away from treating people as belonging to a particular category such as those listed above. Government is promoting the attitude that people are individuals in their own right, with their own set of issues to deal with and overcome, and is encouraging educators and support agencies to take the same view. Following that lead, the Imperial War Museum North’s ‘Shape Your Future’ Volunteer Programme <http://www.iwm.org.uk/north/1001.html> [3] aimed to invite members of the local communities to volunteer in the Museum, and in return to receive free training and work experience.

### **An Ambitious Partnership Project**

The Programme’s major funder, the European Social Fund, stipulates that projects are delivered in partnership. So we worked with local Government agencies – the Learning and Skills Council and Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council – and a private funder, The Nationwide Foundation. The project was ambitious because it started six months before the new Museum was due to open, and its key

purpose was to use a new, high profile cultural venue to promote social inclusion. Members of the local communities were invited to support staff in front-of-house operational roles and, at the same time, work towards National Vocational Qualifications (more about these later) accredited by the fifth partner, the local Further Education College in neighbouring Salford. Volunteers from disadvantaged groups were targeted, as were older, more confident or semi-professional citizens who would be able to act as ambassadors for both their communities and the Museum and, equally important, promote and facilitate peer and intergenerational learning.

The Programme was a success, and a crucial set-up phase for the new seventeen-month continuation Programme – ‘Volunteer Plus’. We learned a lot along the way. A summary of the key findings was published in the IWM North’s report on the Programme and is included [here](#) [4]. The following provides just a few highlights of our experience of working with our particular group of volunteers.

## **The Benefits of Being Inclusive**

The Volunteer Programme was placed at the centre of the Museum’s ‘Learning and Access’ strategy, which aimed to evolve from exploring people’s first-hand experiences of conflict. Realising the importance of providing a good volunteering offer, the Museum wanted not only to place itself at the heart of its community, but also to give something back. What was offered was much more than free training and the chance to gain a new qualification. For many, it was an opportunity to step into a new world, and a different approach to promoting lifelong learning in their neighbourhood. And for everyone it was an opportunity that was safe, informal, supportive, understanding – a learning programme that was prepared to listen and make them part of what the Museum was about.

As with any large scale, and ambitious project, we weren’t able to meet every individual need, and we lost some volunteers along the way. No matter how hard we tried to tailor the Programme, some people didn’t want, or feel able, to stay. Among the reasons cited for leaving were: lack of confidence, apprehension about the training and the qualification, and competing personal commitments.

People from so-called disadvantaged groups very often have low self-esteem, lack confidence, and have underdeveloped interpersonal skills. They can be shy, nervous, and apprehensive. And people from these groups often perceive museums as being elitist, and inaccessible. However, as Manchester had been heavily bombed during the Blitz in World War II, many local residents had a story to tell, and there was a huge amount of personal local history that people wanted to share. Other, less personally involved volunteers were encouraged to participate in the Programme by social workers, friends or family. Overall, the Programme demonstrated the power of the Museum and its humanitarian subject matter to lure local residents, and how it could give them the opportunity to nurture community pride.

## **Overcoming Barriers**

There are many familiar barriers to successful volunteering: a lack of time, confidence, and personal funds (e.g., travel to the place of volunteering). But, from a management perspective, there are just as many, if not more, barriers to involving volunteers from disadvantaged backgrounds. As already mentioned, while we might think that people can be grouped together under a heading such as ‘excluded’, and that as a result they will all have the same needs, the opposite is true. We are all individuals with our own personal agendas, and over time the project established the best ways of working to meet specific needs. Some of these are given below.

## **Recruitment – Gaining People’s Trust**

Because it’s essential to pitch your volunteering offer at the right level, we adopted a two-pronged approach. We courted those support agencies that were already working with our target groups, and directly marketed – via posters and adverts – to those groups ourselves. Support agency contacts were able to explain to their clients what the Programme was all about, the process for involvement, what they

would gain, and how their volunteering would affect their state benefits (unfortunately, still a grey area for many benefits agencies – and hence volunteers – in the UK). This ‘referral’ method provided an easier access route for those less likely to apply to an advert. But the second, more direct method was also successful. All of the literature produced for the Programme had to be accessible, and initially we asked potential volunteers to ‘register their interest’, rather than formally apply.

## **Meeting Volunteers Half Way**

During informal interviews, we tried to work out individual motivations for joining the Programme. Deciding that honesty was the most productive policy for both parties, we were very open about the fact that, whilst this Programme was being developed mainly to meet their needs, we only wanted committed people joining us. Also, we explained that the Programme was new to us as well; it was an experiment with which we needed their help. We would explore together how a museum environment might engage and support local residents with specific training needs. Along the way, we sought feedback from the volunteers on the Programme’s materials and processes, which helped us continually improve. Volunteers were invited onto the Programme Steering Group which comprised representatives of all the Partners – an opportunity which they relished and helped them develop improved communication and interpersonal skills. Throughout the Programme there was substantial commitment by staff and key partners, demonstrated by the very intense personal support (often out of working hours) given to some more needy volunteers.

## **Working Towards Qualifications**

NVQs – National Vocational Qualifications – are training courses which allow students to gain academic credit for work experience. By demonstrating competence in areas such as welcoming visitors, health and safety, security of exhibitions, etc., the student gathers evidence for a portfolio which is then assessed. NVQs are available in various industries and at various levels. Our volunteers worked towards NVQ Level 2 in Cultural Heritage, a qualification on a level with national exams taken by school children around the age of 16 in the UK. It is work-based and therefore practical, and it allows people with low literacy levels to qualify by using methods of recording their experiences such as 1:1 interviews, role-play, or taking pictures or video footage. The practical and personal skills gained in NVQ 2 operational roles are easily transferable, particularly within service delivery industries agencies such as culture and tourism.

The volunteers were inducted onto the NVQ Programme during various sessions run by the Museum and Salford College staff. At this point, they began to learn about the specific knowledge of the various units. And, as the Museum prepared to open, the volunteers were also involved in a series of ‘soft openings’ – special events and private views. In these roles, they supported security and information staff, as well as helping exhibition interpreters. Museum staff were pleased to be helped by a trained and enthusiastic local team of volunteers. The positive, open, and top-down supported volunteer culture meant that staff understood exactly why and how volunteers were being involved, and therefore didn’t feel that their jobs were threatened – generally a major factor for any museum trying to integrate volunteers with an existing paid team.

## **Making a Difference**

During the year we engaged over 100 local residents in the Programme, about half of whom worked towards the NVQ qualification. Being part of the Programme has helped some volunteers gain employment, or move on to further education opportunities. Others have visibly changed before our eyes, growing in confidence as a result of their involvement and exposure to new learning and work experience. The new Programme continues to involve existing volunteers as well as engage new ones. Progression routes and ongoing support are essential to sustaining the work already done, as well as volunteer motivation. We hope that, going forward, many of our original volunteers will help recruit and support new people as they come on board. We also want to involve other museums in the Manchester

area so they can learn from our experiences, and give volunteers the opportunity to experience placements in different venues.

## **Conclusion: Museums as Agents for Social and Economic Change**

In the UK there is still some (albeit subsiding) controversy around whether museums should be agents for social change. The 'Shape Your Future' Programme was an appropriate vision for Imperial War Museum North, and an empowering – even life-changing – one for many volunteers. Whilst resource intensive programmes of this size won't be either appropriate or manageable for many museums, Imperial War Museum North is breaking ground for a new league of twenty-first century museums. Not only does it bring new visitors – and therefore new money – into the community (thereby improving the economy), but it provides an alternative and empathetic mechanism for people with specific social needs to explore how to help themselves in a cultural context.

### ***e-Volunteerism: The Electronic Journal of the Volunteerism Community***

Copyright: 2000-2011

ISSN: 1531-3794

[Energize](#), Inc., 5450 Wissahickon Ave., C-13, Philadelphia PA 19144

Phone: 215-438-8342, Fax: 215-438-0434, [info@energizeinc.com](mailto:info@energizeinc.com)

Energize's *Free* Website: <http://www.energizeinc.com>

Online Bookstore: <http://www.energizeinc.com/bkstore.html>

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.e-volunteerism.com/quarterly/02octdec/blackadder3a>

#### **Links:**

[1] <http://www.e-volunteerism.com/javascript:;>

[2] <http://www.iwm.org.uk>

[3] <http://www.iwm.org.uk/north/1001.html>

[4] <http://www.e-volunteerism.com/blackaddera3afulla.html?xfsid=506e69206606765aa8b8611f90503d5b>