

Working with Volunteers in Collection Care

A Renaissance London publication



Renaissance London is a strategic investment in museum development and public programmes, run in partnership by the London Museums Hub and MLA.

The London Museums Hub is one of nine regional Hubs tasked with developing accessible and innovative museum services in their regions.

The members of the London Museums Hub are:

- Museum of London (incl. Museum of London Docklands)
- Geffrye Museum
- Horniman Museum
- London Transport Museum

Introduction

There are great opportunities for museums to involve volunteers from all walks of life in the care of their collections – not just trained specialists, but those who are willing to learn new skills on-the-job. Museums can offer the general public the chance to get involved in a variety of important and exciting roles which will help staff to care for collections. This publication offers best practice in collection care and conservation volunteering. It provides an overview of the benefits of involving volunteers in these roles and guidance on how to set up a new volunteer programme or improve current ways of working. While the care of collections is called different things in different museums, the term ‘collection care’ is used throughout to include general collection care and conservation work, other than where a particular example is given.

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What are the benefits of having volunteers in collection care?

Museums involving volunteers in collection care roles are not usually dependent on volunteers, but volunteers can provide invaluable support for staff who have busy, often part-time jobs, helping with their workload and vastly increasing department productivity. The tasks assigned to volunteers are generally those which, due to constraints on staff time, would not otherwise get done, would be postponed, or would take much longer to complete. Without volunteer help, collections can remain static, without improvement and often hidden or difficult to locate.

Other benefits can include:

- Making the collections more accessible to the public
- Bringing the community into the museum and behind the scenes, bridging the gap between the museum and the visitor
- Volunteers learning new skills, developing specialist knowledge and other personal benefits, e.g. gaining confidence
- Making the working environment more sociable
- Involving colleagues from other departments in the set-up of projects, e.g. IT support in the creation of a collection database for volunteers to use
- The time volunteers contribute can count as in-kind support for externally-funded projects, to which some museums also attach a monetary value to emphasise its worth.

Why do members of the public want to volunteer in collection care?

Volunteers are motivated by being involved in the museum, working closely with staff and doing work they know is important.

Offers of help can come from people of all ages wishing to support their local museum and develop an interest or skill at the same time, for example:

- Students need to put theory into practice as part of their course work
- Graduates and post-graduates want to gain relevant work experience
- Local people who are subject enthusiasts might want to develop their interest while helping out
- Retired members of staff sometimes like to stay involved.

Others may simply have some free time to give to their community. Those who are most likely to volunteer regularly in collection care tend to be retired or semi-retired.

Some museums also involve young volunteers on work experience placements. These can be highly successful when those taking part have a genuine desire to find out about what happens in collection care, using placements to see if a career in museums might be for them. Placements work best when there is a structured programme of activities for only two or three volunteers at any one time and there is full support from staff and experienced volunteers. Often work experience volunteers return to help during holidays and some go on to study a museum-related course.

Some museums are running externally-funded and highly structured programmes with many volunteers managed by dedicated staff. They aim to use the collection care environment to provide members of the public with opportunities to gain work experience and develop personal and transferable skills.

IPSWICH MUSEUM

Ipswich Museum's Senior Conservation Officer ran a successful volunteer programme for local people over a number of years. Traditionally, around eight regular non-specialist volunteers offered a half to a full-day a week to the department, in addition to younger volunteers who attended during pre-arranged work experience placements and sometimes during school holidays.

Volunteers generally worked on projects that needed to be done, but for which there were no resources, e.g. photographing collections, building an object database, documenting collections, making inventories, checking accession numbers against the register, general cleaning and conservation work and storage projects. Some volunteers who did computer work were more experienced than staff. One young volunteer with Asperger's Syndrome attended with the help of his own supervisor and carried out a data entry project which was greatly enjoyed and highly successful.

The volunteers usually worked in the conservation laboratory or in the museum alongside the Conservation Officer who worked on his own projects, minimally supervising their work at the same time. Some work was done in the stores, especially if the objects were large. On average, there were three volunteers working to the Conservation Officer at any one time.

Work experience schemes for young people also worked very well because only students who were genuinely keen to learn about museums and conservation took part and because numbers were limited to a maximum of three volunteers at a time. Students volunteered for two weeks, learning about simple conservation processes, taking photos and cataloguing. They completed their placement with a ten minute presentation to all staff. While these placements took a lot of supervision, staff, contractors and experienced volunteers helped out, which worked very well. The risk assessments for involving young volunteers were usually more detailed than those for projects for adults, but were also straightforward. The enthusiasm and positive attitude of the students was very impressive. Some became regular volunteers during holidays and some went on to study conservation and other related subjects, returning on further placements.

What kinds of tasks are suitable for volunteers?

There is a wide range of activities which volunteers can get involved in, including:

- Photographing collections
- Formatting images with Photoshop
- Documenting / cataloguing collections / making inventories
- Digitising collections
- Building object databases
- General data entry
- Producing bibliographies
- Checking accession numbers against the register
- Photocopying collections
- Scanning paper items
- Mount cutting
- Re-housing and boxing collections
- Sorting and storing collections
- Sewing on labels
- Costume repair
- Pest control, e.g. checking traps
- Taking light readings for insurance
- Basic cleaning and conservation of objects
- Maintaining specimens stored in spirit
- Paper conservation treatments
- Book-binding
- Itemising archaeological artefacts

Most collection care roles offer an interesting and exciting experience for volunteers. While some roles can be repetitive, often these can be done in a social environment working with other volunteers. It is important to explain the nature of the work to the potential volunteer to structure their expectations, but remember to explain the benefits as well!

Do volunteers need to have specialist skills?

The kinds of tasks and projects that volunteers work on will depend on their individual interests and abilities. Non-specialist volunteers do not normally work on highly technical tasks, e.g. cleaning or restoring very fragile objects. This is usually the responsibility of staff and volunteers often want to avoid the responsibility associated with this kind of work. However, some previously unskilled volunteers can become very experienced and even expert over time, so it may be appropriate to let certain volunteers carry out some technical work with supervision.

Most roles will require volunteers to have specific attributes, including: patience, concentration, attention to detail, the ability to work on their own and as part of a team, manual dexterity, sensitivity to handling fragile objects and an interest in museums. Some tasks will require good spoken and written English, and sometimes a particular skill is desirable because it saves time in training, for example familiarity with computers and different software packages.

HORNIMAN MUSEUM

The Horniman Museum has non-specialist volunteering opportunities in collections management, but not in conservation roles (other than conservation administration), where they only use specialists.

There was a need in the documentation section to sew labels onto around 3,000 textile items including costumes which needed to be accessioned and have numbers attached before moving to storage. Though staff were progressing the task gradually, it would have taken years to complete. The role was advertised through the Friends' organisation newsletter and two volunteers came forward who worked on the project together, which made it more enjoyable. Volunteers also help with packing objects: one unskilled volunteer with a keen interest in textiles worked with a specialist volunteer (a student) to package collections once they had been marked – this is a successful project which has lasted 18 months so far.

Last year, of 27 volunteers only 5 were non-specialists. The opportunities are heavily geared towards specialist volunteers because of the museum's needs and the nature of the roles and the number of staff available to train and supervise volunteers. However, the museum is about to take a very different approach to involving the general public in collection care volunteering. It has secured funds from the London Museums Hub to set up a new project providing training for volunteers. Under this programme, 60% of the volunteer intake will be non-specialist and will be people who are not in education, employment or training or who are long-term unemployed. Projects have been identified for teams of non-specialist volunteers to work on, rather than solitary, non-specialist roles. Planned projects include moving an archive into new storage and documenting and packing the arrow collection.

The museum's volunteer programme has developed very quickly. Two and a half years ago there were 34 volunteers involved on an ad hoc basis; this year there are 165. There is a full-time volunteer coordinator in post who creates role descriptions in collaboration with relevant staff and inducts volunteers to the museum, but specialist training and daily management is the responsibility of the various staff teams.

How do I find suitable volunteers?

Finding the right volunteers is important – for them and for you – so you should think carefully about your recruitment and selection process.

Collection care staff who will be supervising volunteers should always be involved in recruitment, since they are best placed to provide role descriptions and person specifications and to pick the people who will work as part of their team. Enlisting the help of the Human Resources Department is also a good idea: staff can advise on drafting role descriptions, help with interviewing, take references, provide general induction training and provide specific support to volunteers after appointment, e.g. the payment of expenses.

Volunteers can be recruited in a variety of ways, e.g. through Museum Friends' organisations, local Volunteer Centres and in the local press. You might think about organising an open day or taster sessions aimed specifically at collection care volunteers. Advertising for volunteers via the Museum's website is also a good idea. You can create web pages which clearly outline the work of the department, the different ways volunteers can get involved, what benefits there are and what is asked of volunteers in return. You can also provide role descriptions and application forms for volunteers to download from the website.

Being specific about the nature of the role will help people to think in advance about whether or not volunteering is for them, in turn helping to keep the administration of applications to the minimum. The information on the website must be supported by internal procedures: do not advertise posts if none are available, or if there is no mechanism for dealing with the applications you receive. If you cannot place a volunteer immediately, you might think about creating a waiting list of potential candidates for future reference.

You should also think about ways of reaching members of the public who may not realise there are opportunities to volunteer behind-the-scenes, or that these kinds of roles are available to non-specialists. This can be achieved by making your recruitment materials more widely available, or by liaising directly with specific community groups. You should also conduct an access audit of the spaces where volunteers will work and be clear about any restrictions and your ability to make special arrangements in advertising materials.



MUSEUM OF DOMESTIC DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE (MoDA)

MoDA has a long history of involving volunteers on a regular basis in the Conservation Department, helping with a wide range of tasks including: paper conservation, object documentation, sewing labels onto textile samples, general collection care, exhibition preparation and recent larger projects such as the re-housing of 300 designs.

The museum invites volunteers from the general public, museum Friends, members of local NADFAS groups and students on course placements, depending on the nature of the project. Non-specialist volunteers tend to get involved in short and long-term preventative conservation projects; specialist volunteers in short-term interventive conservation projects. Projects are identified by the department and then the most appropriate volunteers are approached.

The volunteers are trained and supervised by the Preventive Conservation Officer who is part-time. Volunteers work in the conservation studio and can only volunteer for a maximum of two days per week to allow staff some time in their week when they are not supervising volunteers. There are usually two volunteers working in the studio at any one time.

MoDA changed the way it involved volunteers, improving the volunteer experience and benefits to the museum. It moved from a position where volunteers came in on a regular basis to see what work might be available, to a project-based approach where specific, time-bound projects were created and offered to volunteers who might be interested in helping.

Staff in the conservation and collection care team were concerned that the museum was letting volunteers down because the approach to involving volunteers was mainly reactive; trying to find things for regular volunteers to do when they turned up. The volunteers were getting increasingly frustrated with their volunteering experience. Staff went on an MLA training session which suggested taking a project-based approach to involving volunteers. The museum decided that the volunteer programme should take a break while they constructed a work pattern which offered volunteers a list of projects that they could sign up to for a specific period of time if they were interested. This suited the lifestyles of many of the volunteers better since, as many of them were retired, they were away for long periods of time. Putting teams together on specific projects also meant that they could be completed efficiently and in a very short time.

Isn't managing volunteers going to take up all of my time?

The good management of volunteers should always take time. However, the time dedicated to supervising and supporting volunteers is usually outweighed by their contribution. Many collection care staff responsible for volunteers are part-time and still manage to involve volunteers in their team. Volunteer management also gets easier with experience.

There are lots of places to go to for practical advice and guidance on how to manage volunteers – a list of resources is given at the end of this publication.

There are also a number of guidelines regarding working with collection care volunteers to minimise time and effort, including:

- **Don't involve too many volunteers at any one time.** Make sure the number of volunteers is manageable. Organise your rota to meet staff and volunteer needs. You can also structure the volunteers' schedule to make sure you have some 'volunteer-free' days in the week to concentrate on your own work, without the additional management responsibility.
- **Regularly set aside time with colleagues to review the department's needs and create a list of projects for volunteers to work on.** You can then think about what kinds of support you need and allocate volunteers on that basis. Some projects might require a specialist for a short period of time and so a student placement might be appropriate. Other projects might suit a group of volunteers for a fixed period, or an individual over a number of months. Each project should have an overall aim, timescale for completion, specific roles, regular time commitments and a schedule of specific days for volunteering. The alternative is that volunteers turn up regularly and staff attempt to find things for them to do. This can be demoralising for volunteers and time-consuming and frustrating for staff.

- **Collection care volunteers should work in the laboratory, alongside professionals carrying out their own work, so that staff can provide supervision and answer questions.** As many staff are tied to the laboratory, supervising volunteers this way can become part of their daily routine. Volunteers working at other sites, e.g. in the museum stores, should work in pairs or small teams, supporting each other and reporting back on progress as appropriate and with staff checking in on them from time-to-time. Some members of staff, e.g. Pest Control Officers, can be accompanied and supported on their rounds by volunteers.

- **Checking the work of volunteers is needed, but doesn't have to be too time consuming.** As well as becoming more experienced, over time volunteers also become more independent, requiring less supervision, and are capable and content to turn up and get on with designated tasks. Many projects are ongoing and so it is clear what needs to be done.

To help with volunteer management, it is reasonable to ask for a regular time commitment from your volunteers: many museums ask for between a half and a full-day per week. However, since volunteers can leave at any time and take their knowledge with them, you should not depend on a volunteer for a task – he or she cannot be the only person in the department who knows about a project and its progress.

You should also have regular reviews with volunteers to discuss project progress and to find out how they are feeling about their voluntary work – especially for volunteers working in long-term roles. If the management of volunteers or their work is to change, explain how it will affect individuals and keep them informed.

Regularly publicising the value of volunteers to the museum will help make volunteers feel valued and promote a positive volunteering culture. You should also arrange 'thank you' cards or events as appropriate.

Do I need to have a volunteering policy before I get started?

Ideally, you should have a volunteering policy in place before you start to involve volunteers. A policy provides staff and volunteers with important information about why volunteers are involved, the benefits to both the volunteer and the museum and the procedures that need to be followed to make sure the experience works for both parties. Volunteering England have information on developing a Volunteer Policy in their online Good Practice Bank and your local Volunteer Centre may also be able to give you support around developing one – see ‘Resources’ on page 15.

Sometimes volunteers are not suited to the role they have been allocated and in these situations it is important either to move them on or ask them to leave. This can be hard because volunteers sometimes get attached to their role and the museum. However, this aspect of management is not unique to collection care volunteers and a clear policy on what will happen in this scenario is important.

If you are setting up a volunteer programme for the first time, remember that you are on a learning curve and that time, patience and a willingness to take a trial-by-error approach will be needed in order to make it work.

What sort of training do I need to provide?

Some museums train volunteers before they start and others train on-the-job.

Ideally, volunteers will receive all their training before they start in their role, including:

- Full induction to the museum and the collection care department
- Information about general Health and Safety, including training in lifting, moving and carrying, appropriate attire, working with hazardous materials etc
- Specialist, role-specific training.

It is important that collection care staff always conduct the role-related training. Refresher courses should also be provided at regular intervals and volunteers may enjoy and benefit from the opportunity to attend internal or external relevant volunteering-related training. Training is time-consuming and is a wasted investment if a volunteer does not stay, so spending time to select the right volunteers is important.

The London Museums Hub provides free training courses for volunteers and its Volunteer Training Bank provides free access to the course materials for museums to run their own training – see ‘Resources’ on page 15.



What sorts of risks are involved and how do I manage them?

As with any form of volunteering, there are always some risks involved. The main areas of risk in the care of collections are volunteer safety, object damage and theft. Generally, volunteers themselves tend not to want to take risks.

In most cases, the benefits of having the volunteer involved heavily outweigh the risks and these can be easily managed in the following ways:

- **Always make sure volunteers work either under supervision and/or in pairs, taking their breaks together and that inexperienced volunteers are never left on their own.** You can also allocate a skilled volunteer to support and mentor unskilled volunteers.
- **Always provide training.** This should happen before the volunteer starts if possible and organise regular refresher courses.
- **Ask volunteers to let you know if they have any health issues that might affect their volunteering.** Volunteers should make you aware of any issues so you can make special arrangements if possible.
- **Make sure there are telephones or radios in rooms where volunteers are working so that they can communicate with staff at all times.**
- **Make sure the museum has insurance cover for volunteers.** Generally, no special insurance arrangements have to be made to cover the work of volunteers. However you should check with your insurers that your public and employer liability insurance policies specifically state that volunteers are covered.
- **Provide and ask for constructive feedback so that volunteering can improve and continue to be safe.**
- **Conduct a risk assessment for each role, task or project, involving the volunteer as appropriate.** Create and computerise a generic and straightforward form. Think about any additional risks for young people and vulnerable adults and seek advice and support from your Human Resources Department. A sample Risk Management Check List is provided on page 14.

You will not be able to CRB check volunteers working in collection care unless they have access to fire arms. Any volunteers working with children and vulnerable adults in a ‘regulated activity’ as defined by the Independent Safeguarding Authority will need to be registered with the ISA (more information is available from the ISA and their website address is given in ‘Resources’ on page 15).

You should be aware that some members of staff may be concerned about the possibility of volunteers taking paid jobs, but having a clear policy on this and enlisting the support of staff in the creation of volunteer roles will help put fears to rest. Volunteering England and the Trade Unions Council have developed a Charter setting out a series of principles for employers to follow to encourage a good working relationship between volunteers, employers and paid staff. This can be found on Volunteering England’s website – see ‘Resources’ on page 15.

SAMPLE: COLLECTION CARE RISK MANAGEMENT CHECK LIST				
VOLUNTEER ROLE:				
Area of risk	Risk (H/M/L)	Control	Date to be achieved	Risk manager
HEALTH AND SAFETY – WORKING ENVIRONMENT				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low lighting – danger of bumping into / tripping over unseen obstacles • Moveable ladders – safe use • Stairs – danger while transporting objects • Moveable racks – danger of trapping people in between • Unstably stored objects / boxes – danger in retrieval • Injury from lifting and moving heavy objects and boxes • Injury from / damage to poor quality boxes 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteers are trained to lift and move objects safely • Volunteers spend time familiarising themselves with the environment • Portable light provided • Volunteers work in pairs and support each other or volunteers are appropriately supervised • Adequate storage materials are provided 		
HEALTH AND SAFETY – WORKING WITH COLLECTIONS				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inhalation of harmful materials: lead, dusts, pesticides, other chemicals • Injury from sharp tools, e.g. guillotine, scalpels, staples 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteers are trained to use specialist equipment • Volunteers wear gloves, masks and aprons • Volunteers are supervised in the use of hazardous materials until sufficiently experienced 		
OBJECT HANDLING				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk of damage to objects 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteers are trained to work with objects • Volunteers do not work with fragile objects • Volunteers are supervised 		
SECURITY OF COLLECTIONS				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk of theft 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteers trained to be alert to the possibility of theft • Random personnel checks policy – staff and volunteers 		

Resources

- **Volunteering England** www.volunteering.org.uk
Volunteering England offers an array of services designed to help and support everyone who works with volunteers.
- **London Museums Hub Volunteer Training Bank:** www.mla.gov.uk/what/programmes/renaissance/regions/london/News_and_Resources/volunteer_training_bank
- **Local Volunteer Centres** can give you support around developing a volunteer programme. You can find them here: <http://www.volunteering.org.uk/WhatWeDo/Local+and+Regional/VolunteerCentreFinderGoogle>
- **Independent Safeguarding Authority** www.isa.gov.org.uk
- **Criminal Records Bureau** www.crb.homeoffice.gov.uk

Thanks

The London Museums Hub would like to thank the following for contributing to the research for this publication:

- Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture (MoDA)
- Ipswich Museum
- Royal Academy of Music
- National Museums Scotland
- Horniman Museum
- University Museum of Zoology Cambridge
- National Motor Museum
- Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery
- Department of Archaeological Collections and Archive, LAARC, Museum of London



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