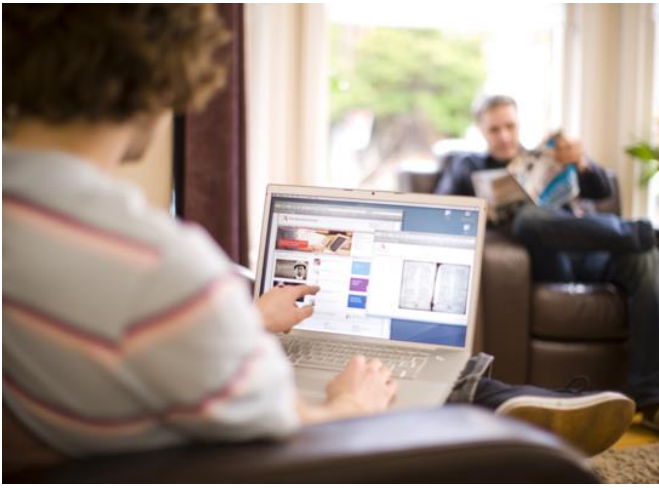


## Volunteering at The National Archives

### The National Archives' approach to user participation (revised April 2020)



Right: image from CO 1069 photographic collection, released as Africa Through A Lens

## Contents

### 1. Introduction

'[Volunteering is] any activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or someone (individuals or groups)...volunteering must be a choice freely made by each individual. This can include formal activity undertaken through public, private and voluntary organisations as well as informal community participation.'

#### ***Volunteering England***

'The hard work and commitment of our volunteers is one of our most precious resources and underpins much of the work that takes place here to make our treasured national collection of public records available to the widest possible audience'

#### ***Jeff James, Chief Executive and Keeper, The National Archives***

The National Archives has seen many changes in its history, but the primary function has always remained constant: to be the central repository for public records of England, Wales and the United Kingdom, and to provide access to the collection. This is articulated clearly in our four-year strategic plan for 2015-19 entitled *Archives Inspire*, which sets out our four major audiences as government, public, the wider archives sector, and the academic community, and which identifies digital as our biggest strategic challenge.

In recent years, The National Archives' focus has broadened to accommodate both the changing nature of the public record, which has expanded beyond paper and parchment to include multiple digital formats, and the growing expectations of its users, who expect to be able to conduct all of their business instantly and online. In 2016-17, we delivered 229 million records to our online users, and for every document delivered in our reading rooms at Kew, 388 were delivered online.

This evolving and expanding digital model presents an exciting opportunity for volunteers to collaborate with us in a virtual world, while also providing us with the challenges presented by digital exclusion. Our commitment to provide an increasing number of our services in a digital format reflects the government's own commitment to make digital delivery the default for public service provision. As outlined in this strategy, the volunteers who work on site at Kew are an integral part of our success story as an organisation. Over the last 30 years they have made an invaluable contribution to our work, helping to catalogue and conserve hundreds of thousands of records, in the process helping to ensure that these records remain accessible to future researchers. However, the changing nature of our work means that we need to examine how we work with all of our volunteers, and what we offer them.

As outlined in this strategy, the volunteers who work on site at Kew are an integral part of our success story as an organisation. Over the last 30 years they have made an invaluable contribution to our work, helping to catalogue and conserve hundreds of thousands of records, in the process helping to ensure that these records remain accessible to future researchers. However, the changing nature of our work means that we need to examine how we work with all of our volunteers, and what we offer them.

This strategy seeks to advance our understanding of the possibilities and potential benefits of working with volunteers in new and exciting ways, while adopting a more holistic and

coordinated approach to existing activities that are driven by and closely aligned to business priorities.

The wider notion of participation, combining traditional volunteering activities with virtual collaboration, reflects how we engage with volunteers now. We will continue to build new communities within our current stakeholder groups, while also reaching out to collaborate with a variety of audiences. We will extend our services and develop new approaches for providing access to our services and information. We will reach into new horizons by using collaborative digital channels, increasing the opportunities for users to interact with us.

We will continue to build new partnerships so we can share our audiences and experiences with other organisations that can, in turn, do the same for us. This includes working with networks of people or using third-party technology solutions to enable us to meet our core objectives, giving best value to all parties.

Finally, we will share our best practice guidance with the archive sector and beyond, including case studies and management approaches to enable others to learn from our experiences. By leading in this area The National Archives can continue to ensure a cohesive approach across the archive sector, showing archives how they can use communities and partnerships to shape, enrich and help deliver public services. We, in turn, can continue to learn from the sector and some of their successful projects involving volunteers, of which examples include:

Gloucestershire Archives – Gloucestershire Archives reduced the cataloguing backlog by utilising trained volunteers to ‘box list’ collections. Several groups have listed large collections in this way – typically building control files, architects plans and solicitors’ archives. The majority of this cataloguing will assist research for the new Victoria County History.

Staffordshire Record Office - in the Quarter Sessions project the volunteers quality check each other’s work with the Archivist undertaking a final quality control check before it is made live on the online catalogue – a method which could help other archives harness volunteer resource more effectively.

Heritage Heroes - quality control was undertaken when data was copied from a crowdsourcing platform into the collection management system, leading to some useful learning for the sector around digital quality control mechanisms.

Other case studies can be found on our website [here](#) and as part of [A Year in Archives 2017](#)

## **2. Our current approach**

The National Archives has worked with volunteers for many years. We have delivered a number of on-site and offsite projects that have successfully opened up access to our unique record collection.

A user participation governance board formed from different business areas across The National Archives has been in place since 2012 and has developed our existing user participation strategy. The steering group actively seeks specialist advice and guidance from outside The National Archives as appropriate, including The National Archives’ User Advisory Group, which was established to provide an opportunity for our users to get involved in planning and decision-making processes.

We use volunteers in a variety of ways but primarily in supporting our preservation and cataloguing tasks

For example, onsite we work with over 130 volunteers. They have helped us enrich our Catalogue, Discovery, and enhance descriptions in over twenty series of records in the past five years; the following collections provide examples of this:

- Catalogued by full name of individual, rank and regiment some 218,245 officers serving in the British Army during the First World War in record series WO 374 and WO 389
- Expanded descriptions to record full details of ship name, ship number, voyage details of some 2,155 Merchant Navy Ships' Logs compiled between 1857 and 1972 in BT 165
- Created catalogue entries to record full details of 41,170 officers and men serving in the Royal Artillery between 1755 and 1917 in WO 69

We have also used onsite volunteers to support the expertise of our Conservationists. For example, last year, volunteers in the Collection Care department completed a survey of our eight million photographs. They learned how to identify different photographic processes as well as the reasons that photographs tend to develop a silver sheen, turn yellow or fade, and how these effects can be prevented through cooler and drier storage conditions. The information gathered has given us a better understanding of the scale of the photographic collection, as well as the different processes and storage materials it includes and the photographs' condition. This information is now being used to formulate scientific research topics, improve housing and perform conservation treatment.

In recent years our onsite volunteer offer has included supporting Business as Usual activities, such as providing tours of the Keepers' Gallery, providing additional support to our Library team and helping to resource our contribution to *London Open House* on 16 September 2017 and our *Archives at Night* evenings.

Our offsite opportunities for volunteers has again mainly been around opening access to our unique record collection. We have collaborated with the National Maritime Museum and the Crew List Index Project (CLIP) in recent years on two naval projects, the project to transcribe by name all Merchant Navy crew lists and agreements in the year 1915, and the Royal Navy Lives at Sea Project. Such projects enable us to engage with several hundred volunteers who are unable to easily visit the National Archives to support our onsite volunteering programme.

Further details about these projects and others, together with the experiences of volunteers working on them can be found in our dedicated [volunteering pages](#) on our website.

### **3. A new approach**

#### **3.1 Improve flexibility**

The volunteer landscape is changing at a national level. Just over 14 million people volunteered in 2015-16, 100,000 of whom gave time within the culture sector. Volunteers are requesting small bite-sized volunteering opportunities, more convenience to decide when and where they volunteer

and the option to make it easier to get started. These are just a few of the requirements of the modern day volunteer.

Whilst this means challenges, it also gives us opportunities to develop new ways to engage a wider audience than before – to find new ways to share, discuss alternatives, and prepare ourselves to think differently. As we continue to champion best practice in the development of heritage volunteering across the UK, we also need to adapt to the changing needs of a fast-paced society.

Volunteering could and should be a part of our transformation into an audience-first organisation. As we expand and diversify our audiences, so we should also be expanding and diversifying our volunteer base. To do this we need to change our attitude to volunteers, embracing the value that they can bring and recognising the benefits that we can in turn give to them.

We know that volunteering is key to how both new and existing audiences want to engage with us. In a recent audience survey, just 1% of our existing customers told us that they currently volunteer for us; 9% told us that they would be interested in volunteering for us (with another 20% unsure), while 27% of respondents in total told us that they already volunteer for other institutions.

This trend is reflected across the Sector, with volunteering in archives taking a back seat to other cultural institutions. The 2016-17 Taking Part survey revealed that 32.9% of adults have done voluntary work at least once in the last 12 months, of which 10.9% had volunteered in at least one of the DCMS sectors. Of those that had done any type of voluntary work though, only 0.6% had volunteered in the archives sector.

There are some great examples across the cultural sector of institutions working with volunteers in new ways, most notably the MuseumMakers project at Wardown House in Luton. They have recognised that more people are willing to volunteer their time, but that they have less time to give – their tiered ‘challenge’ programme reflects this change and offers opportunities for individuals, communities and other groups to give their time to support the museum. In the five years that the programme has been running, they have recruited over 1,300 volunteers, around 200 of whom regularly take part in their volunteer challenges. Volunteers are recruited and managed through a web platform that helps match challenges to volunteers, asking new recruits to state their skills and interests. This platform (VolunteerMakers) is now being made available to other museums and institutions around the country.

To support this approach we will:

- Attract more remote volunteers by working collaboratively with our commercial partners to identify collections for cataloguing using online tools (e.g. use the on-line transcription tool supplied by [FamilySearch](#) develop platform pages on our website similar to Ancestry’s World archives project)
- Work across the Archives Sector to develop an overarching online platform for volunteering opportunities across the archives community, similar in design to VolunteerMakers

- Publish on our website our current onsite offer of volunteering activities to enable volunteers the flexibility to dip in and out of projects and to enable as necessary the scaling up some existing smaller projects)
- Review some of the restrictions to onsite volunteering, e.g. insisting on security clearance for many projects and minimum levels of commitment.

### **3.2 Build a more diverse range of volunteers**

Traditionally, our volunteers, although committed and enthusiastic, are of a similar demographic. In the 2017 Volunteer Survey, 77% of respondents identified themselves as being over the age of 55. Although this reduced from 84% in the 2016 survey, there is still a significant underrepresentation from lower age groups and ethnicities other than white, (91% of respondents identified themselves as white in the 2017 survey, up from 88% in 2016).

Our supply of volunteers currently exceeds the demand for them. Yet, we continue to experience budgetary constraints so we do need to think differently about how we value volunteers across our business and what we can offer volunteers across all of our audience areas: government, public, the wider archives sector, and the academic community, by promoting a clearer volunteer package.

We also need to clearly recognise the positive impact that a successful volunteer programme could have for the organisation and our audience development strategy. Revamping our volunteering programme could be an ideal way for us to take existing audiences with us on our transformation.

We must think more creatively about how volunteers could help us deliver our strategic objectives, set out in *Archives Inspire*, particularly public programming and engagement activities. We need to embrace the positive benefits of using volunteers and recognise their skills, knowledge and expertise where there is a shortfall onsite.

We must also challenge those parts of the organisation that do not positively embrace volunteering, and make the option of considering using volunteers a priority when considering resources to manage our objectives, going forward.

To support this approach we will:

- Promote a more diverse volunteer profile in terms of both age and ethnicity by offering a broader programme of activities
- Based on research with communities, identify projects to both attract volunteers from different ethnic backgrounds and to promote records of social inclusion

### **3.3 Put volunteers first**

We will need to continue to put volunteers at the heart of our business ensuring they feel part of the fabric and feel valued and respected for their contributions. We need to act upon feedback in annual volunteer surveys and give more thought to who we are asking to volunteer for us,

and what benefits volunteering for us could bring them – will we help them develop key skills, for example

We need to celebrate the successes of our volunteering programme through participating in annual volunteer award schemes and through promotion and recruitment activities in National Volunteers week, and as part of our business as usual events through dedicated website pages and our What's On Programme (e.g. talks, blogs, etc.).

We must have the wellbeing of our volunteers at the very heart of what we do, in the same way we do for our staff and we need to share and promote our values with them – people, possibilities and integrity.

We must ensure volunteers have the opportunity to see the bigger picture and to have their say through internal and external forums both formally and informally and allow them to understand fully opportunities for them to develop their skills and knowledge by seeing our extensive programme of volunteering activities for them to consider.

We need to ensure volunteers form a key part of our social structure and communicate to them effectively and share openly with them our future plans and strategic goals.

To support this approach we will:

- Continue to value volunteers as a key component of our onsite stakeholders, ensuring their voice is heard at various forums, including the User Participation Board and User Advisory Group
- Commit to building an intranet platform for onsite volunteers, specific to volunteer needs and essential for effective communication
- Continue to embrace championing volunteer successes through publicity onsite (TALK, Narnia, document displays, annual award schemes, etc.) and externally (web blogs, What's On events, articles for external publications, newsletter, etc.)

### **3.4 Extending volunteering to all parts of our business**

We need to ensure volunteering is represented across our audience segments by maintaining an accurate volunteer skills audit so we are aware of how they can support us and how they would be prepared to volunteer for us, and why they would want to.

To achieve this, we need to consider how a new-look volunteering programme for The National Archives could be adopted across the wider archives sector – what lessons could local archives learn from our experiences? How could we, as sector leader, help them develop their own volunteer programmes? How could volunteering for archives help provide archivists of the future with the right skills and experience?

With established volunteers already in place, we will consult staff and potential new volunteers, test out our ideas and pilot new ways of working through:

- Continuing to promote positive ways in which the sector can benefit from volunteering – e.g. *Volunteer Cataloguing in Archives* looks at the role volunteers can play in archival cataloguing - providing case studies and practical advice.
- Championing volunteer successes to an internal audience (e.g. through National Volunteers Week, 1-7 June) to promote the positive contributions of volunteers.
- Supporting staff to identify volunteering opportunities, equipping them to supervise and develop volunteers and manage associated projects.
- Undertaking a skills audit – understanding and developing volunteers' knowledge and skills thereby aiding recruitment to future projects.
- Embracing volunteering across all directorates and audience areas (government, public, archives sector, academia) to maximise opportunities to both recruit and utilise a diverse range of volunteers.

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